

Jason A. Springs

Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology, AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), x + 234 pp.

Reviewed by Mike Higton, Durham University, United Kingdom

Jason Springs's book, a reworking of his doctoral dissertation, provides a useful and readable addition to the still fairly small literature on Hans Frei. He repeats neither the kind of developmental account that I offered in *Christ, Providence and History* (Continuum, 2004) nor the exploration of the place of Frei's thought in its theological and historical context that Paul DeHart offers in *The Trial of the Witnesses* (Blackwell, 2006). Rather, he tests the coherence and implications of Frei's work taken as a whole while sorting through and criticizing a number of misreadings. Both Springs's clarifications and his critiques are best understood as contributions to the North American debates about theological method that Frei's work helped fuel. This is a world in which the most pressing questions are those about the relation between theology and philosophy; the foundationalist or nonfoundationalist, realist or antirealist character of the theological enterprise; the relationship between theology and ethnographic description of Christian practice; and so on. Springs therefore highlights Frei's uses of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, Erich Auerbach, and Clifford Geertz and makes use of the more recent pragmatist philosophy of Robert Brandom to help "clarify and sharpen" (21) Frei's ideas. This is a plausible way in to Frei's work, even if it is only one of the lenses through which one might view him, and the Frei who emerges from Springs's pen is Frei the proponent of postliberalism more than Frei the intellectual historian, Frei the interpreter of Scripture, or Frei the doctrinal theologian.

Springs begins by exploring Frei's early work on history-likeness as a literary feature of the Gospels. He sets out the Christological conclusions that Frei drew from the realistic reading that he believed such a feature demands. Springs's second chapter reexamines that early work and identifies within it hints of Frei's later "cultural-linguistic" concern with the reading practices of the Christian community. Springs rightly shows that any simplistic account of a "turn" or "break" in Frei's work will not do and that Frei's early work already displays significant "cultural-linguistic" concerns—though he perhaps underplays the extent to which those concerns do not frame Frei's project in the 1960s and 1970s in the way that they came to in the 1980s. At the beginning of the next chapter, Springs speaks of "Frei's decreased reliance upon the genre 'realistic narrative' as

a technical category for the Gospel narratives . . . [and] his increasingly explicit articulation of the church as a social organism"; a fuller account of Frei's work might need to attend in more detail to this decrease and increase, as well as to the deep continuities that Springs exposes.

In the third chapter, Springs distinguishes between Frei and Lindbeck—arguing that Frei was far less heavily invested than his colleague in any account of a unitary Christian worldview (or "comprehensive interpretive scheme") and its supposed assimilative or absorptive powers. Springs nicely teases out the ways in which Frei treats such ideas with a light touch, refusing to turn away from repeated attention to the irreducibly particular person Jesus of Nazareth in favor of some scheme or framework of belief and practice within which the significance of that person has supposedly been captured. Springs's description of Frei's light touch is well done and salutary—though it is possible that Lindbeck's own grasp on his supposed "theory of religion" was also rather lighter, and governed more thoroughly by his ecumenical concerns, than Springs's account allows.

The fourth chapter provides a useful clarification of Frei's work in areas where he has frequently been misunderstood. It explains how serious Frei always was about the truthful reference of the Gospel narratives—despite the bizarrely resilient claims to the contrary that abound in the literature. Springs also explains how carefully Frei read Barth and neatly refutes the accusation that Frei's Barth was a species of ethnographer, intent simply on providing accurate descriptions of Christian habits of speech and action.

The fifth chapter explores the precise place in Frei's work of his growing "cultural-linguistic" interest in the habits of Christian speech and action, and it addresses the accusation that a cultural-linguistic approach must reduce theology's ambition until it becomes simply the description of a static logic already internal to such speech and action. As Springs says, with enjoyable understatement, "The accusation that Frei takes as his object some clear, distinct, and stable set of shared rules purportedly underpinning all the material differences in Christian practices . . . and awaiting to be discerned and catalogued turns out to be less than persuasive upon closer examination" (119).

To this point, Springs's book has been a clear, helpful, and thorough examination of Frei's work but has largely worked as a restatement and development of lines of interpretation already to be found elsewhere in the literature. The remaining three chapters, however, and especially the final two, do rather more than this. They draw on the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars and especially Robert Brandom to push beyond accurate *description* of Frei's work and into a project of *refinement* and *extension*. These chapters are not a work of independent constructive theology as such—they still function as attempts to make sense of Frei—but more

clearly than the earlier chapters they show Springs judiciously deciding how best one might take Frei's unfinished and sometimes ambiguous ideas and make of them a platform on which others can build.

Chapter 6 is transitional in this regard: Springs shows that Frei's account of ad hoc apologetics does not imply a casual or reluctant approach to the connections between Christian and other discourses. He rightly argues that, for Frei, Christians "are positively obligated by God's call to engage actively in matters public" (136–37). He shows that Frei regarded such engagement as serious, urgent, and demanding. He draws upon Sellars and others to explain the logic of such engagement, and he ends up providing a convincing account of ad hoc apologetics as "a complex and multifaceted affair" that "is likely better understood as a genre of engagements" within which there will be serious attentiveness on the part of Christians to their interlocutors, a freely accepted risk of being changed in unanticipated ways, and a hope for deepened and altered self-understanding, as well as a desire to understand one's interlocutors "in reference to God's revelation in Christ" (137).

The final two chapters take the work of refinement and extension further. They sort out in detail—and, I think, convincingly—the relationship between two apparently contrasting aspects of Frei's work. On one side stands Frei's cultural-linguistic concern with the ways in which Scripture is read within the practices of the Christian community. In the 1980s in particular Frei appeared to insist that these practices should not be governed by hermeneutical standards external to the community, including by any supposedly neutral accounts of the objective features of the scriptural text. On the other side stands Frei's concern with the objectivity of Scripture's referent. He remained insistent that the Gospels render a Jesus who stands over against the Christian community as its lord and judge. Springs demonstrates not only that there is no contradiction here but that there is no real tension: objectivity *always* appears within particular practices. A telephone directory yields telephone numbers to its readers only when read within a weave of communal practices that have a history to them and that are susceptible to (probably rather dull) ethnographic description—yet that does not mean that the numbers it yields are at the whim of its readers. Just so: the sense of the Scriptures in which Frei was interested, and for which he claimed theological centrality, only appears within a certain weave of reading practices, but that weave genuinely allows encounter with a Christ-centred objectivity—and it is a weave open and flexible enough to be changed by the encounter. In other words, these are reading practices by means of which the life of the community—including its habits of reading—can be exposed to real judgment. And the Christian community finds itself called to account in this way neither because it has arrogated to itself the freedom to decide upon its own standards nor because it has ended up with these standards by accident,

but because this is where the history of its obedience to its Lord has led it, in the power of the Spirit. Its reading in this way is a central form that its ongoing obedience takes.

Springs's careful and intelligent account therefore succeeds in its major ambition: it demonstrates how it is that Frei's work as a whole does indeed cohere, whatever shifts of emphasis and approach might have shaped it. The cultural-linguistic Frei and the Frei of the Gospels' realistic objectivity are one and the same.



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