

## Discussion Questions for [\*After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism\*](#):

Nancy McDonald Ladd

1. In her introduction, Nancy McDonald Ladd uses the word “we” often in reference to both her own cohort of Generation X religiously liberal ministers and religious liberals as a whole, the majority of whom are white, middle-class, and politically progressive. Does this “we” include you? How is the “we” of liberal religion already bigger than those majority identities?
2. On pages 17 and 18, Ladd lists some of the forces that undercut the utopian New Harmony experiment and continue to “hinder the courageous and authentic development of liberal religious community today.” How have you experienced these “corrupting influences” at work in progressive movement spaces or liberal congregational life? What steps have you or your community taken to address them?
3. In chapter two, Ladd writes, “The time has come to shift away from benevolent paternalism of the sort that fundraises for the people at the margins . . . and toward a willingness to listen and respond to the people who have been historically cast out.” In your own context/s, have you experienced this benevolence *for* marginalized people? How/when has your community successfully moved to listening and responding *to* such communities, and when have you moved even beyond that to align yourself with, or even supportively follow the leadership of, marginalized people? If you hold a marginalized identity, how has your progressive community fought alongside, instead of for you? How has it failed to do so?
4. In chapter 3, Ladd argues that the stories we tell about human nature shape both our thinking and our actions. If, as she says, the story of the modern era in liberal religion is one of “democratic advancement and unceasing economic opportunity for people who have already experienced generations of the same,” what are the key components of a new story that hews closer to your values and the values of your community?
5. In Chapter 4, Ladd describes her grandmother’s experience in the mid-century liberal church as alienating to her working-class identity. As she writes, “It was a place where decent, struggling people performed their well-being for each other so effectively that one who lived just a little more obviously on the margins of wealth and power could not find a home among them.” The performance of perfection is framed in this chapter as a choice that has a very real cost to progressive religious communities. How does your community perform respectability for each other? How have you worked to break free from that? How do we curate our self-presentation not only in community but online and in justice-oriented movement spaces?

6. In chapter five Ladd notes, “The power and possibility of liberal religion cannot be realized in the learned man’s quiet study. It can only be realized in the circumstances of the relationships we are willing to cultivate.” Is it possible for you to live a liberal religious life in isolation? Do you find that you relate more to progressive religious ideas or to progressive religious people?
7. Chapter six has some fairly dense theology in it but ultimately it’s trying to get at some new and evolving understandings of human nature. Ladd states, “We are indeed powerful. And we are interconnected. And we are responsible for our own damn choices, including the ones that cause deep harm.” What is your doctrine of human nature, your “theological anthropology”? How does that perspective shape your life and your spirituality?
8. Chapter seven invites us to consider spiritual practices of conversion and self-examination. As Ladd writes, “Martin Luther believed that all of life should be a consistent and always refreshed practice of metanoia. He thought that we should continually experience a change of heart. We should always be busy being reformed.” How do you feel about this call to be personally transformed/reformed? Does a push toward atonement seem important to you, or off putting? Could it be both?
9. Chapter eight looks at liturgy and asks us to think critically about worship as a “celebration” each Sunday. Have you experienced worship that invited you to deeply consider brokenness—either your own or that of the world? How did that experience shift your thinking or your spirit?
10. Near the end of the book Ladd posits that, “Hope is the possibility, not the inevitability, of a better way.” Do you think there is hope after optimism? The text argues that this hope is built through authentic relationship with the self, the community, and the holy. How do you build hope in a broken and complex world?