

4. The Liberal Christian looks at himself

ONE of the recent developments of research in the area of biology has been the study of social organizations among the animals, and particularly among the fowls. Some of the social scientists have been studying, for example, how long it takes a group of fowl to form a social organization. As I recall the findings, only eighteen to twenty-four hours elapse before a group of chickens hitherto unacquainted with each other form a tightly structured social organization, a flock.

The social organization turns out to be a rigid hierarchy. At the top is one chief hen who by dint of pecking the other hens has established her prestige: she is able to peck any other hen and none other dares peck back. Immediately beneath her in pecking rank will be three or four hens who are second in command; they have established their power and "right" to peck all the other hens in the yard except Number One. And then gradually the hierarchy broadens out to *hoi polloi*, the common hens, who may be pecked by any of the hens in the higher echelons but may not peck back. Food and other privileges become accessible in accord with these rankings. This hierarchy is called a "pecking order."

A hierarchy of this sort is to be found also among other animals. Among horses, for example, there are "kicking orders." Squirrels, monkeys, and even cows establish comparable pyramids of authority. And we all know that something similar is to be found among human beings, a social organization in which authority is centralized at the top and in which some kind of patterned obedience is required of others.

Liberal Christianity, in its religious and social articulation, might be defined as a protest against pecking orders. It began in the modern world as a protest against ecclesiastical and political pecking orders. Protest in the economic sphere also soon appeared. One of the principal sources of Liberal Christianity is what is today called the Left Wing of the Reformation or, as Professor George Williams calls it, the Radical Reformation, a composite movement that in part originated as a protest against the authoritarian organization of the churches that were ruled from the top down. Another source is the Enlightenment with its demand for individual, rational self-determination. (Subsequently, Romanticism emphasized individualism still more, and uncovered something deeper than reason — intuition and feeling.)

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In interpreting the character and source of Liberal Christianity in this way, I presuppose that in order fully to understand any religious movement — and indeed, any secular ideological movement — one must include the answer to the question: What consequences do the ideas held by the group have in the sphere of action? A belief is effective when men are prepared to act in accordance with it. "By their fruits shall ye know them." We are accustomed to apply this pragmatic test to the behavior of *individuals*. The test may be applied also to group behavior, and specifically to religious movements. We can extend the test to religious groups by raising the question: What difference do the ideas of the religious movement make in social organization? What kind of social organization do the "believers" prefer? How do they want authority articulated? Do they favor a pecking order or some other kind of "association"?

Although there are other tests of meaning, this pragmatic test is revealing when applied to theological doctrines. We determine in part the meaning of belief in God or in Christ as held by any group, by answering the question: What does the believer in God want changed in the society around him? And what does he want retained? The questions raised by this pragmatic sociological method do not imply that a belief that claims to be an index to the way of salvation will provide important perspectives for all aspects of life and thus also for institutional structures. It is not appropriate to interpret religious ideas in terms of their effect upon the individual as an isolated entity. In fact, such an entity is a myth. Everything must be understood in terms of its relations, and so also the human individual. One determines the meaning of a religious idea, then, by examining its implications for individuals in their relatedness, that is, for their institutions, family, church, state, economy, and voluntary associations.

Let us take an example. Belief in God for a Roman Catholic involves belief in the church allegedly established by that God through Christ and Peter; it involves belief in the infallibility of the Pope, the "Vicar of Christ." One who denies the belief in papal infallibility also denies the true God (from the Roman point of view). Moreover, the word "God" here denotes a superhuman reality supporting the hierarchy of the cosmos; it carries with it belief in the church as a sacred hierarchy.

The same pragmatic method of interpreting the meaning of religious ideas can be applied to other branches of Christianity. It can be employed also in interpreting non-Christian religions. We do not understand what a Muslim believes if we have become familiar only with his conception of God as an isolated entity, for the God sanctions certain types of relatedness — between man and God, between man and man. We have to discover how the Muslim believes that in

the name of God the Muslim society should be organized or should be changed. A doctrine of God that has no bearing upon social organization is to that degree irrelevant in face of man's search for meaning in his relations with others. Accordingly, the believer in a doctrine of God which has no institutional implications would have to say that whether the Nazis, the Communists, or the Vatican were in control of society is a matter of indifference in his religious belief. In any conflict between ideologies, this sort of believer would himself be a matter of indifference. He would belong to any master who could gain control.

In this connection we should observe an illusion that is entertained by some people who believe themselves to be favorable to piety. We sometimes hear it said that the problems of society would take care of themselves if people would only return to belief in God. People making statements such as this often overlook the fact that beliefs about God vary greatly and that the social-institutional implications vary accordingly. In the early centuries of the modern era, internecine wars were fought over religion. In these struggles, people on *all* sides believed in God. But the conceptions entertained of the character of God and of God's demands upon men in society were vastly different. The God of the Left Wing of the Reformation was different from the God of the Right Wing; moreover, conceptions varied widely in the Left Wing and the Right Wing. Likewise, the Left and the Right Wing of the Reformation were opposed to Roman Catholicism. Today we cannot in any strict sense assert that Protestants and Roman Catholics worship the same God. If they did, they would share the same or similar perspectives on the organization of church and society.

Liberal Christianity, as we have noted, has its roots partially in the Radical Reformation. The Radical Wing in England — the Independents, the Friends, and the shapers of congregational polity, for example — rejected the notion that the cosmos is a hierarchy and that society must be organized on the pattern of hierarchy controlled by priest and monarch. They insisted that the state should not use coercion in matters of religious belief and that the ecclesiastical authorities should not interfere in the political order. Accordingly, proponents of the Radical Wing demanded the separation of church and state. They offered various theological defenses for this position. A typical anti-hierarchical view appealed to the belief in the freedom of the spirit: "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth." The Radical Wing also insisted that the church is a layman's church; it is not to be controlled by the clergy. Every child of God has his own individual conscience, for the Holy Spirit is available to every child of God. As applied to church order, this view has been called the principle of radical laicism. Indeed, the Friends have held that there should be no

"hireling priestcraft." Every layman is a clergyman. In various ways the Radical Wing found a sanction in the New Testament for their conception of the Holy Spirit and of church organization.

In the Radical Reformation one finds also the view that religious fellowship does not require uniformity of belief. A religious fellowship should rather be the place where the members, respecting each other in mutual confidence, will hear from each other and will test what the Holy Spirit prompts; thus the fellowship, and also each member of the fellowship, is to be enriched. As Rufus M. Jones says in *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth*, "There is something more in each individual than there would be if he were operating in isolation. He becomes in a real sense *over-individual*, and transcends himself through the life of others." In this fellowship, a minority position was to be protected in the very name of the Holy Spirit. According to this view, God works in history where free consensus appears under the great Taskmaster's eye. Thus the sanction for the maintenance of freedom was held to be a covenant between the people and God. The idea of the covenanted fellowship with a high degree of local autonomy is the essence of what is called congregational polity.

Out of these ideas and others like them, political democracy was born. Basic to this whole development was the demand for co-archy in place of hierarchy. This demand was first applied to the church and then also to the state. Thus some proponents of the Radical Wing considered their free church to be a model for a democratic state. The political conceptions were drawn *by analogy* from the conception of the free church. What were originally elements of a doctrine of the church appeared now as ingredients of a political theory: the consent of the governed, the demand for universal suffrage, the rule of law over the executive, the principle of the loyal opposition. The conception of the democratic society, then, is in part a descendent of the conception of the free church.

In the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, new influences affected the emerging Liberal Christianity. Here a vigorous anti-traditionalism, a belief in the perfectibility of man and in human progress, in freedom of inquiry, and in the test of reason were characteristic emphases.

From these sources, Liberal Christianity gained its major thrust. In face of the traditional pecking orders, liberalism developed its characteristic feature, namely, the conviction that human beings should be liberated, indeed should liberate themselves, from the shackles that impede religious, political and economic freedom and which impede the appearance of a rational and voluntary piety and of equality and justice for all. Here we can discern vigorous reformist

(and even utopian) elements that were already strong in certain branches of the Radical Wing.

There are, of course, other ways in which Liberal Christianity's origin and development could be described. One could, for example, stress liberalism's confidence in man and his capacities. Here one would need to expound its protest against the doctrine of total depravity. One could stress its promotion of tolerance. Here one would need to recall its thrust against sectarianism, its demand for universality, a demand that has engendered a new attitude of sympathy and openness toward other religions. Or one could bring to the fore its passion for rationality and rational discrimination. Here one would recall its battle against rigid and arbitrary traditionalism and against obscurantism, a battle that has brought historical understanding of the tradition and especially of the sacred literature. Here one would stress also its eager encouragement and appropriation of the values of culture and science. All of these things have belonged to Liberal Christianity. In earlier days before the outlook had lost some of its luminous glow, they were summed up in the magic symbol "progress." A concurrent theological symbol was "progressive revelation."

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But Liberal Christianity has its blemishes. These blemishes have appeared not merely because its performance has fallen short of its intentions. Some of its blemishes have issued from its character. One must add, however, that criticisms of Liberal Christianity have come not only from hostile critics. They have been made also by the liberals themselves. Indeed, in our undertaking here to hold the mirror up so that the Liberal Christian may look at himself critically, we aim to vindicate the method of liberalism. Liberalism lives partly from its criticism of itself.

Before we consider some of the criticisms of Liberal Christianity, we should note certain ambiguities that attach to its definition. These ambiguities arise from the fact that a tension inevitably develops within Liberal Christianity and within liberalism in general. This tension is an aspect of the morphology of ideas and of social movements. Alfred North Whitehead has pointed out that when we examine the intellectual agencies that function in the adventures of ideas, we find a rough division into two types, one of general ideas, the other of highly specialized notions. As an example of a general idea he cites the ancient ideal of the intellectual and moral grandeur of the human soul; as an example of a highly specialized notion he cites the ideals of early Christianity. The distinction is pertinent for

an understanding of the tensions and ambiguities within liberalism and within Liberal Christianity.

An analogous distinction may be made between the general idea of liberalism and the more highly specialized notions of liberalism worked out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Liberalism's "general idea" has been to promote the liberation of men from tyranny, provincialism, and arbitrariness, and thus to contribute to the meaningful fulfillment of human existence. This aspect of liberalism we may call its progressive element: it is critical of the status quo, and seeks new paths of fulfillment. A "specialized notion" of liberalism has developed during the last two centuries, namely a doctrine of pre-established harmony coupled with the laissez-faire theory of society. Under the conditions of early capitalism, this doctrine was vindicated in economic progress, but beginning a century ago, progressive liberalism became critical of this "specialized notion." From the point of view of progressive liberalism, the laissez-faire society was producing new pecking orders that frustrated both equality and justice. Accordingly, the more general idea of liberalism has come into conflict with a specialized version of it. Progressive liberalism has criticized laissez-faire liberalism as closely bound up with the narrow interests of the middle class, and also with their dogma of political nonintervention in the economic sphere. Progressive liberals have protested against the status quo that was defended by laissez-faire liberals. In support of the crescent labor movement they demanded a more responsible society — a political intervention for the sake of the disinherited. So great has been the tension between the general and the specialized forms of liberalism that the strategies of progressive liberalism (working in the direction of the welfare state) have become almost the opposite of those of laissez-faire liberalism. We see, then, that there is an ambiguity in the meaning of the word *liberalism*, and that it is the consequence of a tension between two related versions of liberalism. Indeed, the ambiguities are even more complex than we have indicated. New tensions and ambiguities have appeared in recent years as progressive liberalism has moved on to become critical of an exclusive devotion to the pattern of the welfare state. Here progressive and laissez-faire liberalism have moved nearer to each other. Thus the ambiguities in terminology continue to appear.

But there are still other ambiguities to be taken into account. Liberal Christianity is not identical with liberalism considered either as a generalized or as a specialized notion. Liberal Christianity is explicitly oriented to the ultimate resources of human existence and meaning discerned in the Old and the New Testaments and in Christian experience. At the same time, Liberal Christianity has been associated with several kinds of liberalism both generalized and

specialized. Indeed, because of its intentional entanglement in the secular order (in contrast to orthodoxies that claim to remain aloof), Liberal Christianity is never in its actuality easily to be distinguished from one or another of these forms of liberalism, except perhaps in terms of its ultimate orientation. Accordingly, Liberal Christianity has aimed to be critical of these forms of liberalism. The relationships of creative involvement and of critical tension are roughly analogous to those which Paul Tillich takes into account in his conception of the "Protestant principle," a principle that is creative but that also brings under judgment every actualization of Protestantism. Thus Liberal Christianity may be understood as a continuing dialogue not only between these and alternative non-liberal outlooks. The very persistence of these dialogues is indispensable for the viability of Liberal Christianity. But it also gives an inner tension and an ambiguity of direction to any Liberal Christianity or any liberalism that is not single-mindedly and piously driving towards self-destruction.

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In order to consider some of the criticisms of Liberal Christianity I want to employ a somewhat pedestrian analogy. Every viable social movement or philosophy requires several dimensions, for it must have body — amplitude of form or shape. In short, it must have the dimensions of depth, breadth, and length. I shall interpret the criticisms of Liberal Christianity in terms of these dimensions.

First, then, we shall speak of depth. Liberal Christianity, in the initial forms emanating from the Radical Reformation, placed great emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the view that the whole of life — not merely the inner life, not merely the life of the individual, but the whole of life including social institutions — is to be brought under obedience to the righteous, sovereign God and in response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We have noticed already how these conceptions, as articulated by the Radical Reformation and by the Enlightenment and Romanticism involved the rejection of the hierarchy of being and of the traditional church and society based upon this hierarchy of being.

In the nineteenth century there appeared new conceptions of historical development and new knowledge at the hands of the sciences. The earlier ideas of progress were merged with the idea of natural and the social evolution. Here the Liberal Christians made a laudable effort to take seriously the new insights emanating from Darwinian biology and from other historical research. The Bible was subjected to a new criticism. Previously the idea of miracle had been

rejected. Now the history of religion and society was seen to be in constant evolution. Partly from this insight came one of the great accomplishments of modern times — the higher criticisms of the sacred literature.

At the same time, however, a misreading of the Gospel ensued, and with it the loss of depth in the religious interpretation of God, man, and history. The conception of God became purely immanent, man was believed to be gradually becoming better and better as God unfolded himself in evolving humanity, and history was viewed as the arena of unilinear progress. Enlightenment conceptions of man as a rational being and the Neo-Darwinian view of human evolution "onward and upward forever" were alleged to be implicit in the New Testament. These ideas, seen in succession, were taken to be evidences of "progressive revelation."

Father George Tyrrell, the Catholic modernist of a generation ago, indicated cryptically the error in this modernization of the Gospel when he said that the Liberal Christian looks down the deep well of higher criticism, sees his own image, and calls it Jesus. This particular form of modernization of the Gospel was not only objectively false, it issued in a reduction of tension between the Gospel and "the world," between the Gospel and the natural man. The overweening confidence in the natural propensities of human nature and in the upward grain of history was a superficial view, and it could not be maintained before the facts of life.

Much has happened to call in question this optimism about man and history. In our century of re-barbarization and of the mass man we have witnessed a dissolution of values and the appearance of great collective demonries, the nihilism that Nietzsche predicted. Progress is now seen not to take place in the moral and spiritual realm merely through inheritance. Each generation and each person must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of man and must in changed circumstance give new relevance to moral and spiritual values. This renewal does not take place in the manner of technical progress — with each succeeding generation standing on the shoulders of previous achievement. It requires a realistic appraisal of man's foibles and a life of continuing humility and repentance. At the depths of human nature there are potential divine resources, but there are also ever-powerful forces working for perversion and destruction. In the New Testament view, the Kingdom of God brings man under judgment; it is not sanction for what Thoreau called "improved means with unimproved ends." Albert Schweitzer, near the beginning of the present century, showed the wide distance between certain modern conceptions of progress and the New Testament conception of the Kingdom of God. Since his time and particularly through the New Testament studies of Rudolf Otto, contemporary Liberal Christians

have discovered new depths in the Biblical teachings regarding history and the Kingdom of God. The tragic dimensions of history were missed by those Liberal Christians who interpreted history as unilinear progress. The appreciation of the depth of perversity, as well as of the resources available to men, lies beyond the purview of the "modern" doctrines of progress.

A corresponding loss of depth is to be observed in a related aspect of Liberal Christianity as it has come to us from the nineteenth century. Under the influence of utilitarianism and also of Kantianism, Liberal Christianity in wide sectors has tended to identify religion with the good life. Here we have the thinning out of Liberal Christianity into moralism. Other forces, to be sure, were operative in Liberal Christian thought — for example, the heritage from Schleiermacher which emphasized the transmoral character of religion and specifically of the Christian religion. But from Kant and also from the "practical" bourgeoisie, many Liberal Christians have learned to reduce religion to the observance of ethical precepts. Thus again the depth dimension was lost. Moralism replaced the deeper relatedness to the divine source of and judgment upon our moral "values." In the old Liberal Christianity, Jesus was viewed as primarily a moral teacher and model. Thus the divine ground and source of meaning as disclosed by Jesus and the Old Testament prophets were lost sight of. The protest against the Christ of the creeds was a justifiable protest against a dehumanized Christ, and it was also a justifiable attempt to give Christianity a new ethical relevance. But the ignoring of the problems dealt with in Biblical theology and in Christology could only lead to a narrowing of sensitivity. This reduction is to be observed also in the interpretation of Jesus' parables as primarily ethical parables, whereas modern liberal scholarship has reminded us that they point to the more-than-human resources of human existence, to the Kingdom of God "that grows of itself" and not ultimately by human divising. Here again the writings of the Liberal Christian scholar, Rudolf Otto, have been of signal importance.

Something further must be said regarding the loss of the depth dimension consequent upon the waning of interest in theology. In addition to the influence of forces already mentioned, this tendency has been promoted by scientism, an illiberal imperialism of method. It has been promoted also by the implausible conceptions of God that have been entertained not only by the orthodox but also by merely traditionalist Liberal Christians. Whatever the cause and whatever the justifications of these tendencies may be, the outcome in some circles of Liberal Christianity has been deplorable. A whole range of perennial problems for the religious consciousness has been

ignored. In effect some Liberal Christians have said in response to those concerned with theological inquiry, "We must tell you that you are dealing with pseudo-problems. You are an orthodox Christian, perhaps without knowing it. Liberal Christianity has emancipated itself from concern with these pseudo-problems." The paucity of thought and of piety here is blatantly evident today in the lack of a theological interpretation of the great social issues. This kind of "religion" is neither liberal nor Christian. It is a superficial provincial backwash of "progress," impotent to deal intellectually and responsibly with the deeper, ultimate issues of life. Happily, there are countervailing tendencies among Liberal Christians, hinted at in our previous incidental references to certain Liberal Christian leaders.

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In some respects we have already anticipated the discussion of the dimension of breadth. One of the characteristic features of Liberal Christianity has been its intention to maintain familiarity with and participation in the best thought and practice of the secular world. This feature of Liberal Christianity has roots not only in the idea that Christian faith is more than a repetition of traditional words and practices. It is rooted also in the conviction that God's truth is by no means restricted (if granted) to those who praise His name. This conviction is not of recent vintage among Liberal Christians. We now know, as we did not a generation ago, that the relation between religion and science two and three centuries ago was not one of mere hostility ("warfare" was John Draper's description in his long-familiar book). The Protestants, and particularly the liberals, long ago defended and protected scientists whose findings were at first blush believed to be inimical to Christian faith or to Biblical revelation. The methods and findings of the natural and the cultural sciences are of concern to the Liberal Christian. For him these methods and findings must take their place within the integrity of knowledge. Moreover, literature, the fine arts, and philosophy offer him interpretations and criticisms of life which contribute to self-understanding and must be evaluated. They are media through which the meaning of existence and the frustration of this meaning are clarified and interpreted in their interrelatedness. The Liberal Christian holds that he can better gain a sense of the full import of his faith by confronting the insights and questionings that are provided by these disciplines. In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold stated this aspect of the Liberal Christian outlook when he said that he who knows only his Bible does not know even his Bible. Shailer Mathews two generations ago shocked some of the pious among his contemporaries by editing a book on *The Contributions of Science to Religion*. The

dialogue with these disciplines is necessary if Liberal Christianity is not to become arbitrary, obscurantist, and irrelevant. It is necessary also if the interplay between Liberal Christianity and the generalized and the specialized ideas of liberalism is to be fruitful in the changing historical situation.

But breadth has its hazards. It may be misinterpreted to mean the acceptance of a little bit of this and the rejection of a little bit of that, and with little sense of the whole. "Breadth" of this sort may be tantamount to irresponsibility with respect to religious belief; it may prevent the achievement of integrity. To many people the attraction of Liberal Christianity has been its openness, its tolerance, its freedom. But these qualities can spell the loss of character.

This loss of character in the pursuit of breadth is the more threatening in a society where change is rapid, where there is a multiplicity of norms, where the mass media of communication exert pressures that constitute a form of psychic violence. Within the churches themselves one can encounter a bewildering variety of outlooks. Freud and Jung, Adam Smith and Marx, Schweitzer and Toynbee, Whitehead and Russell, are only a few of the names that may be cited to exemplify the variety of motifs that receive a hearing. One could mention other motifs that have a less distinguished character. These motifs, taken together without some explicit abiding unities, can lead to confusion — interesting confusion perhaps, but confusion nevertheless.

There is nothing more debilitating than sheer variety — a synonym for chaos. Carlyle once said of Tennyson that he was always carrying a bit of chaos around in his pocket turning it into cosmos. Properly understood, Liberal Christianity is not an invitation to fissiparous freedom or to trivialized freedom. It seeks orderliness of mind, and it seeks it in and through fellowship. That is, it seeks consensus. This does not mean that it seeks fixed creedal uniformity. But it seeks a center; indeed, it is worthy of respect only when it lives from this center.

This center is not jeopardized by variety alone. The greater threat to the maintenance or the achievement of a center is accommodation to the idols of nationalism, race, and class. Liberal Christianity in Germany during the period of the Third Reich possessed very feeble powers of resistance. Indeed, many of the "German Christians" and even many of the members of the German Faith Movement were former religious liberals who found in Hitler a prophet of "progressive revelation." To be sure, many of the orthodox Protestants had managed to be irrelevant, if not cooperative, in face of the rise of Nazism. Moreover, millions of Roman Catholics also capitulated to Hitler. Shortly after Hitler's assumption of power and at a time when he sorely needed any scrap of respectability available, the Vatican

made a concordat with him. Certain features of the Vatican concordat with Mussolini are still valid in Italy today. The collaboration of many "Liberal Christians" with Hitlerism has made Liberal Christians all over the world newly aware of the necessity of a center along with breadth; indeed, of a center for the breadth. Without this centripetal power, or (to change the figure) without this root, the fruits become a wilding destructive growth.

For Liberal *Christianity* the center is in a faith that finds its classic expression in the Old Testament prophets and in the being, the character, and the mission of Jesus. In that faith we find the generating spirit and the norm of norms for Liberal Christianity. This faith is a response to the sustaining, creative, judging, transforming power that gives rise to a community of love and justice. As we have indicated earlier, it was a special articulation of this faith which initially brought to birth those elements of the Radical Reformation out of which Liberal Christianity and democracy emerged. Without this faith, breadth can become chaos and dark night.

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This brings us to the third dimension, the dimension of length. If the first dimension is depth — a vertical — dimension pointing to the divine ground, and if the second dimension is a horizontal one referring to the surrounding milieu, then the third is also horizontal; it is the time-dimension. One of the distinctive features of Liberal Christianity has been its futuristic emphasis, an emphasis that is found in both the Old and the New Testament and also in the heretical sects of the Middle Ages and of the Left Wing of the Reformation. Liberal Christianity has not been oriented to the past as such, and to tradition. The Bible and the later eschatological movements have served it as a stimulus to continuing renewal. Indeed, we are indebted in part to Liberal Christianity for the modern historical consciousness, a consciousness that has made the modern man aware of the inevitability of change, of the necessity to be critical of the past and the present, and aware also of the possibilities of the future.

But there are hazards in the time-dimension, too. We have already noted the hazard of entertaining false hopes for the future. We must now observe that a sense of the differences between past and present has in some liberal circles issued in an uncritical anti-traditionalism. This anti-traditionalism serves always as a threat to Liberal Christianity's maintaining its historical rootage. It tempts it into a provincialism in time. I can illustrate this danger from a recent occurrence. Not long ago I attended in a liberal church a meeting at which a denominational representative gave an address on religious education. In the spirit of what calls itself "progressive education,"

he outlined a curriculum in which the emphasis rested upon training the children for living in the present; all of the material recommended for presentation to the children was of contemporary vintage. Nothing even of the modern background of Christianity in general, or of Liberal Christianity, was mentioned. During the discussion that followed his address one of the parents in the audience said, "I am puzzled by your exclusive emphasis on the present and the future. I have been in the habit of supposing that religious education in a liberal church should include a critical appreciation of our past and also a critical appreciation of the Bible." The "religious educator" replied, "I don't mean to say that the Bible has to be excluded. If you want it in the curriculum, I don't see why you should be prevented. We believe in freedom in the liberal church." This cavalier attitude toward the experience of the past, and specifically toward the Bible, can only result in organized religious illiteracy. This kind of illiteracy goes under the name of modernity, but it is simply a form of provincialism and even of rootlessness. It is a provincialism that is very similar to the corresponding provincialism of certain kinds of orthodoxy. The rigid orthodox person of Fundamentalist persuasion holds that all we need to know is between the covers of an ancient book. The "emancipated" liberal seems to hold that we live only in and on the present and for the future. Both of these forms of rigidity are provincial and dogmatic. Fortunately, higher education for the most part is less provincial.

Nothing significant in human history is achieved except through longstanding continuities. This principle is as valid in the sphere of religion as in the realms of science, politics, and art. In the sphere of religion particularly, the loss of the time-dimension can carry with it the loss also of the depth dimension.

The decisive, substantial features of Liberal Christianity are Christian and Biblical, and the characteristically modern religious elements of Liberal Christianity shall always have been in the Left Wing of the Reformation (though one may rightly question whether the Left Wing as such may be properly considered as definitively normative). Liberal Christianity cannot retain its own character when it severs itself from these roots. A sociological consideration here is almost equally decisive. Without a vital continuing frame of reference, no social movement can make a significant difference for its own constituency or in its impact on the world. One finds in the Bible and in the theological and devotional literature of the Christian tradition the concepts and the structures, the concerns and the insights, that are indispensable for any critical religious interpretation of the meaning of *our* historical existence and also for the maintenance of those sensitivities that can transcend and be critical of civilization. Indeed, this orientation alone is reliable for main-

taining a critical attitude toward Liberal Christianity itself and its fellow-travelers, and toward the general ideas and institutions and the specialized notions and institutions of Liberalism.

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These criticisms and evaluations of Liberal Christianity do not take into account all important aspects of the movement. For example, the attacks upon Liberal Christianity and upon liberalism in general which have been coming from the so-called New Conservatism or from the more "radical" types of social philosophy, have not been reported. Nor have Liberal Christianity's various attitudes toward non-Christian religions been dealt with. But the types of criticism presented here have been sufficiently influential to have made some Liberal Christians feel uncomfortable under the label of "liberalism." In some quarters, indeed, Liberal Christians now call themselves "Neo-Liberals." Concurrently with these developments the movement loosely called Neo-Orthodoxy has appeared. Actually, there are certain affinities between Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy. Indeed, the significant dialogue going on today in this area is not between the old-fashioned liberals and the old-fashioned orthodox; it is between the Neo-Liberals and the Neo-Orthodox.

In the context of these dialogues, I have here emphasized that Liberal Christianity degenerates when the depth dimension is lost sight of or disappears, that it is not to be identified with any merely ethical outlook but is concerned also with the divine ground for ethics and for the criticism of ethics, that breadth cannot be salutary for Liberal Christianity if the latter does not possess a center-stance, that the substance and character of Liberal Christianity are to be understood for the most part in the context of Biblical faith and Christian experience, and that these latter are to be given relevance today only through a continuing openness to criticism and through a continuing effort to give clarity and new formulation to the faith in face of the contemporary situation. Presupposed throughout is the view that the Liberal Christian in criticizing himself aims to confront anew the ultimate demands and to be open to the more-than-human resources that no human tradition or devising can claim to originate or control.

In face of these demands and resources Liberal Christianity must be judged not only in terms of its intellectual depth and breadth and historical consciousness. It must be judged also by the kind of people it produces. And it must be judged by its consequences in relation to the struggle against pecking orders and to the struggle for a community of freedom and justice and love.

These criteria of depth, breadth and length must be understood under the axiom, "By their fruits shall you know them." A decisive test is the consequence in individual behavior and also in group behavior. Depth, breadth and length belong to the integrity of the individual; they impinge also upon the common life. The questions remain, How do these qualities make a difference in face of the pecking orders — in face of the demonic forces and structures of our time? How do they affect our attitudes and actions in the institutional sphere, in the church, the political order, the economic order? The pragmatic theory of meaning in these spheres raises the question, What do we want to remain unchanged there, and what do we want changed in our institutional patterns? What do we work for?

When we look at contemporary society and remember that the Radical Reformation began as a protest against oppression and as an effort in the direction of a new society, we recognize that the Reformation must continue. I need not spell this out here. Instead, I will ask you to take the pulse of a segment of our society today.

A short time ago a black physician in Chicago told me that his regular nightly duty is to treat some black child in the ghetto who has been bitten by a rodent. Recently he responded to an emergency call late at night. The younger of two small girls had been bitten in her sleep. When the doctor tried to give first aid to the younger sister, she was still so frightened that he could not persuade her to stand still to receive the antiseptic and a bandage. She would not quiet down. Finally, the older sister shouted, "Sally, if you don't be quiet, and let the doctor fix you, we'll put you back in the room where the rat is."

A melodramatic episode it is, and grotesque. But it provides a clue to what is meant if we say that at this late date in modern "progress" we still live in tyrannous pecking orders — enhanced by rats. Yes, depth, breadth and length are still in the Valley of Decision.