

The Liberalism That Is Dead

THE EDITOR

Within the past two decades it has become a fad to criticize liberalism. Consequently, many liberals, in order to get a little peace, have resorted to the familiar method of sleeping on their good ear and exposing only the deaf one. But no alert liberal will, merely because of the fad, relinquish his duty to be critical concerning liberalism. Indeed, the criticism of liberalism from the *inside* is a necessity. It is the indispensable prerequisite to liberalism's fulfilment of its own mission and purpose.

When we speak of the liberalism that is dead we do so in the name, not of orthodoxy, but of the liberal principle itself—that nothing finite can be perfect or exempt from criticism. As liberals we assume that liberalism, like any other movement, can remain alive only through constant self-criticism, only through “coming to itself,” through repentance and “return.” Only where there is a sincere recognition of incompleteness and failure, only there are the spirit of liberalism and true religion to be found. Hence, the liberal expects to hear over and over again: Liberalism is dead, Long live liberalism. Indeed, the essence of liberalism can live only where “the liberalism that is dead” is identified and where the life that makes all things new is appropriated.

This life may be found, of course, within the traditions of liberalism itself; but liberalism has no monopoly upon the fount of life. Indeed, the clearest springs may be so far up in the mountains that our little systems and labels would appear artificial there, if not actually impertinent. The transcendent belongs to no party and it perennially eludes domestication. But this does not mean that we are helpless. We can at least prepare for the kingdom, if we cannot usher it in. And we have it on good authority that the preparation comes through repentance.

According to our reading of the history of liberalism the enervating elements in it, the elements which constitute the liberalism that is dead, are not the mere “accidents” of liberalism, having nothing to do with its essence. They are rather perversions of the very essence of liberalism. This we shall attempt to make clear, in the course of our analysis, by recalling the principles of liberalism which we ventured to set forth in the editorial of the previous issue.

Liberalism, it was said, depends first on the principle that revelation is continuous. This principle has served as the basis of the liberal criticism of authoritarian orthodoxies and has also made accessible to the liberals the new and broadening insights that have come from the study of other religions and from the employment of the scientific method. But all has not been pure gain. The expansive, assimilative tendency of liberalism which has enriched it has also flattened it out into a vague, indefinite *omnium gatherum* of watered-down truths selected at random from the various religious traditions and secular movements which have happened to elicit attention. The belief in the so-called “wider view” which transcends all particular traditions has in many cases resulted only in an amorphous, mystical secularism and has produced a liberalism which possesses no indigenous tradition, literature, or language. It has even detached many people from Christianity, the one tradition which they have some capacity for knowing from the inside. Consequently, though much of contemporary liberalism is cosmopolitan and comprehensive (and we should hope it will continue to be so), it is at the same time rootless and lacking in that concentration which alone can give it distinction and character. For this reason, it is difficult for many people to see what difference it makes to be a liberal. No particular body of religious literature, no religious language is recognized as characteristic of religious liberalism; and no set of disciplines is generally considered to be incumbent upon the adherent of our faith.

We are making no plea here for uniformity or for a faith once for all delivered, but rather a plea for a religious liberalism which, though permitting and encouraging variety and breadth, will acquire a precise character, a cutting edge of its own. In the last analysis, this means that liberalism, if it is to be effective in the arena of competing world-views today, must know pretty definitely what its convictions are and expect at least its own adherents to take them seriously. Only in this way can it offer more than a “search for the truth” and confront men with a “call,” a demand, which comes to them with compulsion and urgency. We conclude, then, that the liberalism which is dead is the liberalism for which *all* religions are true and for which no *particular* religion is operative. This is what our orthodox critics have in mind

when they say that the liberal for whom everything is revelation is one for whom nothing is revelation.

Second, we have said that religious liberalism holds that "all relations between men ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion." Here again we have a principle without which religion (or society or politics) cannot be liberal. Yet, here too we have a principle which is very easily perverted into a justification for mere variety. Historically, this principle of liberalism has taken the form of confidence in the independent and individual conscience, coupled with what was really a belief in a "pre-established harmony." Hence, there developed a deeper regard for the microcosm than for the community. Specialization and rugged individualism became the order of the day. Industrial society was divided between chaos and monopoly. Life was broken up into compartments and the modern mind became a receptacle of repellent particles. The religious community became a tower of Babel and the liberal laity (generally) became almost as illiterate in matters religious as the laity of those authoritarian churches in which a man's understanding of his faith can be held by proxy and in which only the priest is familiar with the deposit of faith. All of these tendencies are perversions but also fruits of the doctrines of Francis Bacon, Adam Smith, and the young Schleiermacher.

Obviously, a liberalism which is alive cannot be hostile to the variety that enriches, but the variety that makes only for provincialism and fissiparous individualism is merely the prelude to disillusionment and to a yearning for authoritarianism as a respite from isolation and futility. The void which atomistic individualism creates is inevitably filled by the fury of an uncritical mass-mindedness. In short, the liberalism of mere individualism is not only dead, it is also the breeder of unholy desires for the efficiency of the ant-hill.

Thirdly, we have said that liberalism involves the moral obligation to direct one's efforts towards the establishment of democratic community. The perversion of this aspect of liberalism is due, more than to anything else, to the "acute secularization" of the ideal. The pseudo-liberal does not renounce the democratic faith; he simply considers democracy to be practically achieved (for

the middle class) and he only bemoans the decline of rugged individualism. Probably the point at which this deadening sort of liberalism most effectively blunts the force of prophetically religious liberalism is in its theory of liberal thought, what we shall call its theory of the immaculate conception of ideas. This is the belief that the liberal possesses a rational faculty by means of which he searches for truth and secures a "detached" view of the world, life, and God.

As a matter of fact, however, the average liberal's thought processes, "rational" though they be, are largely conditioned by his social status. He sees what it is to his interest to see. The sharecropper out of sight is out of mind. The most radical criticisms of this liberal doctrine of the immaculate conception of ideas have come to us perhaps from Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. For Nietzsche the body (and the will to power) is the big reason and the mind (the little reason) is its instrument. For Freud, the reason is the tool of the subconscious libido, and for Marx the intellectual efforts of the liberal provide only an ideological smoke-screen whereby he conceals his real (economic) interests. The liberalism which is not aware of these criticisms of "liberalistic" thinking is dead. It is only living on the accrued interest of successful manipulation.

Of course, the Nietzschean, or Freudian, or Marxian cannot accept his own theory without qualifications. Otherwise, he would simply replace the doctrine of the immaculate conception of ideas by the doctrine of the total depravity of thought, not excluding his own. The liberal is thus not called upon to surrender the validity of all thought and reason. But the religious liberalism which is to live will have to produce a moral and intellectual force which can ferret out and oppose the kind of "liberalistic thinking" which by specious appeal to the rights of the individual (and by comfortable neglect of his duties) obstructs the growth of democratic community.

Fourthly, we have said that liberalism holds that the resources (human and divine) which are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. Indeed, we have argued that the orthodox really share this view with the liberals. But what with the liberal's confidence in freedom

of inquiry and in the "detached" reason, liberalism has perverted this optimism into an unwarranted reliance upon education, that is, education without conversion, without commitment. Yet, education which does not affect the will as well as the mind, only gives the power-seeking, unregenerate will a greater efficiency. The liberalism that is dead is the liberalism that does not call for decision, that does not see that the divine spark in man rises into flame only through the recognition of the need for a change of heart, a change which produces a scepticism concerning one's own self-sufficiency and innate divinity. The liberalism that is alive is the liberalism that changes men and reveals to them the distance between man and God, giving them, in the words of George Tyrrell, an ultimate optimism, but an optimism based upon an immediate pessimism.