

# Why Liberal?

THE EDITOR

*"In an inner build-up of which the average American is scarcely or not at all aware, Calvinism evolved into an optimist Christianity, with theology open to the interpretative changes of science and language, and with predestination watched by the human will, Grace manifest in works. There coil the springs of American virtue: fortitude with hope."—G. A. Borgese, "Six Kings," Atlantic, September 1939.*

Some time ago I was visiting a philosopher in Germany whom we Americans consider to be one of the most distinguished representatives of what is left there of the liberal tradition, the tradition which claims such men as Harnack, Troeltsch, and Otto. During the course of our conversation I casually referred to my host as a liberal. He immediately demurred, saying, "Please do not call me a liberal. That word is taboo here. And besides, I am not a liberal." Certain allowances must, of course, be made for the fact that the word "liberal" has had a slightly different meaning among the Germans than among us. Yet, this man had just been speaking to me of his favorable interest in the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom.

It is not alone in Germany and among the Nazis that we find this contempt for the word "liberal." In America as well as in Germany the word has become a sort of whipping post for those who would give histrionic evidence of having achieved an alleged spiritual maturity. Some years ago two stalwart liberals, even John Bennett and Walter Marshall Horton, attracted wide attention by discussing, a little prematurely perhaps, what would come "after liberalism." Today it is difficult to find a magazine "in the vanguard" which does not contain some assertion (in a tone of finality) concerning the demise of liberalism.

If liberalism is dead, why should any of us be willing to exert ourselves on behalf of the liberal church? And is not a *Journal of Liberal Religion* at this late date merely a sign of "cultural lag"? Of the reported decease of liberalism we want to speak at length. But with regard to that question-begging epithet "cultural lag" it is sufficient to say that even the sociologists have scrapped

it, for the user of it implies that he is familiar with *the* cultural norm by which a lag is measured. Presumably what is meant by those who apply the term to liberalism is that liberals today are by means of artificial respiration attempting to maintain life in a corpse, that is, the critics are pleading for prompt burial, and, we might add, without a coroner's certificate.

For if liberalism is dead, then, we say: Long live liberalism. As will be seen, we would not venture to continue the paraphrase by asserting that liberalism can do no wrong. But we do affirm that the royal lineage is not dead and will not die. Having once got into the world, the liberal spirit will blow where it listeth. It may, along with the scientific spirit, be driven under ground but only in appearance. We remember that Christianity has from time to time been reported dead; and those who have wished to be a little more cautious have assured us that its days are numbered. In the nineteenth century when the idea of progress was glorified as the faith once for all delivered, we were told that "the religion of the future" would leave Christianity behind. Yet even today many people persist in avowing critical allegiance to Christianity. Indeed, there is irresistible evidence that the Christian religion is now waxing rather than waning. It must be remembered, however, that many of the faithful admit the validity of certain of the charges that have been brought against Christianity. How is this to be explained? Obviously, by observing that the loyal Christian of this sort believes he is retaining the essence of Christianity and relinquishing only its accidents.

This question concerning the essence of Christianity is, in the technical sense, a modern one. In the form with which we are familiar, the question is little more than a century old. It is one of the fruits of the scientific spirit. But it has been posed in an acute and importunate fashion many times before. One need mention only the names of Paul, Marcion, Augustine, Abelard, Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Ritschl to indicate the wide variety of approaches and answers to the question, What is the essence of Christianity? Each of these names is a symbol of a period when Christianity was at a crisis and a turning point. The question repeatedly has been that of determining whether a given element in Christianity was a foundation stone or merely a vestigial

organ. But all along, those who have served to keep alive the one holy catholic church have acted on the principle, Christianity is dead, Long live Christianity.

Now, we do not wish to confuse the situation by bringing in metaphysical swim-bladders in the form of essences or by arguing from analogy that liberalism's course will precisely resemble that of Christianity. The point rather is that liberalism may, like Christianity, also have its apostolic age and acute secularization, its reformation and renaissance, its loss and (we should hope also) its recovery of proletarian interest. And as it passes through these or other phases, the question will ever be posed, What is the essence of liberalism? And so it is today.

In order to answer this question we must, of course, have the courage not to over-simplify. A vital liberalism has within it tensions, struggle, a dialectic if you will. Indeed, it will be the aim of this *Journal of Liberal Religion* to help make explicit and operative these necessary and salutary tensions. With a self-denying ordinance which disclaims finality or authoritativeness, we venture the following characterization of the essential elements of liberalism.

First, liberalism holds that nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself, as an actuality, is patient of this limitation. At best, even our symbols of communication are only referends and do not "capsule" reality. Stating this principle in religious terms, we may say that liberalism presupposes that revelation is continuous in word, in deed, and in nature, that it is not sealed, and that it points always beyond itself. Not only is significant novelty both possible and manifest, but also significance is itself inchoate and subject to inner tensions of peril and opportunity, of self-assertion and dependence.

Second, liberalism holds that "all relations between men ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion." Obviously, this principle cannot be advocated in any strict or absolute sense. (As will be stated presently, it presupposes moral obligation; moreover, it is in fact operative in institutions which maintain continuity in one way or another with those of a previous epoch and order.) Education, for example, may be compulsory within the liberal state, if not in the liberal church. All respon-

sible liberals recognize the necessity for restrictions on individual freedom. Moreover, they recognize that "persuasion" can be perverted into a camouflage for duress. This second principle, like the others, can be stated in religious terms in various ways. For the sake of brevity, we venture the statement familiar to religious liberals: All men are children of one Father. The implication intended here is that the liberal method of free inquiry is the *conditio sine qua non* of both the fullest apprehension of the divine and the preservation of the human dignity which comes from our being children of one Father.

Third, being an ethical procedure, that is, purporting to be significant for human behavior, liberalism involves the moral obligation to direct one's efforts towards the establishment of democratic community. A full definition of the term "community" need not be attempted here. It involves, of course, a common life which gives rise to the expression of the manifold, creative impulses of the human spirit, an expression which presupposes a cooperative life impelled by the motives of love and justice. The statement of this principle in religious terms implies the other principles here adumbrated, and especially the fourth one. It will suffice to say here that the moral obligation which makes for community rests upon the divine imperative which demands mutuality as a condition of existence itself as well as of love and justice. And this it is also which makes the rôle of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism.

Fourth, liberalism holds that the resources (human and divine) which are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This does not necessarily involve immediate optimism. In religious terms this principle may be stated thus: The divine element in reality both demands and *supports* mutuality. Thus the ground of hope is in the prevenient and the actual grace of God.

We may now return to the previous question, Why liberal? And we answer: Because confidence in the principles of liberalism is the only effective resistant to ultimate scepticism and despair on the one side and to blasphemous claims to authority and suppressions of criticism on the other. These are the enemies of the human spirit whose dangers are threatening today. There-

fore, it is at these points that the efforts of liberals must be concentrated. And of the two dangers it appears to us that totalitarianism is the lesser. To be sure, some authoritarians assert that the liberal who will not accept a single, divinely inspired book or a divinely instituted church or state is deluded by his *own* pride and conceit. But, from the liberal point of view, the most pretentious pride of all is that of the man who thinks himself capable of recognizing infallibility, for he must himself claim to be infallible in order to identify infallibility.

Far the more powerful and subtle enemy of liberalism, however, is scepticism. Authoritarianism, totalitarianism, fascism today grow for the most part out of a scepticism with regard to the actuality of truth and the possibility of man's finding it, a scepticism which also despairs of man's bettering the human condition. Thus the Barthian sceptic "takes the leap." Any one who knows the younger generation of Barthians in Europe knows that they are tired sceptics. The very violence of their assertiveness bespeaks an inner uncertainty and a compensation in the form of pseudo-certitude. There is nothing a jelly fish wants so much as a rock. Scepticism is the real foundation of their pretentious claims to divine authority, the avowed foundations being ingeniously supported by the superstructure.

But in the American scene the scepticism which yearns for authority is not the imminent danger. Not yet, at least. It is rather an indifference to moral values, a cynical anti-intellectualism, a sophisticated "failure of nerve." Honesty and courage are accounted expensive luxuries inimical to "good fellowship" and "good business." For evidence of this relaxing of morale we need not search far on any side. Many people are too weary even to feel moral indignation at the corruption of contemporary municipal politics, at the treatment of the Chinese by Japan, and at the "neutral" American policy which makes this treatment possible. We read with well-fed equanimity of the slaughterous "peace-loving" penetration of China and Austria and Czecho-Slovakia.

But in certain circles there is something more subtly destructive than this weakening of moral fibre. As already suggested, it manifests itself in religious groups as irrationalism. In sophisticated, "intellectual" circles it masquerades as a discovery of "the

myth of the thinking man," to use a phrase of Thurman Arnold's. It is the triumph of relativism in knowledge, ethics, and esthetics. It must be recognized, however, that this relativism has also an economic basis. Mr. Malcolm Cowley has been writing of late in the *New Republic* concerning the "end of the Reasoning Man," an end that has been achieved through the discovery that "much of" what the old-fashioned liberal, John Stuart Mill, wrote "revealed unconscious motivations . . ., or was the result of previous conditioning, or represented attitudes and frames of reference proper to his own class of highly trained administrators selected from the British bourgeoisie." Mr. Cowley uses the phrase "the end of Reasoning Man" a little loosely, for he recognizes that the domain of reason has been extended and the concept of freedom has been enlarged by the new light emanating from the psychologists and sociologists who have disclosed the inner and outer conditioning factors of human thought and desire. At all events, it is in the new relativism which Mr. Cowley has so well depicted that we find the mother of our most sophisticated scepticism.

We see, therefore, that liberalism stands in a middle ground between two excesses, each of which is a threat to man's humanity. Thus it is a safeguard against those who on the one side appeal to an unconditioned heteronomous authority transcending all relativism and against those who on the other side say that thinking is a laryngeal itch twitching up from the unconscious and providing only an index of one's class and vested interests. In short, liberalism is the unrelenting critic of all who say that since thinking is an illusion, let us take what suits us.

It is this sort of scepticism which the (today admittedly sobered) confidence of liberalism must cure. If this confidence is unwarranted, then none of the escapes offered by the cultured despisers of religious liberalism will be able to save us, and even if they should be able to help in the effecting of this cure, it would be because they too in the end rely upon the same human nature and the same divine resources which have been our help in ages past. It would be because they too share in the ultimate optimism of the liberal faith, an optimism which in our civilization is the heritage from Christianity.