

MODERN LIBERALISM

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A Chicago newspaper once reported the holding of a convention of "Liberal Physicians" at one of the smaller cities in the interior of Illinois. There was no account of the proceedings by which one could ascertain the principles and methods of the organization, nor were there illustrations to show what manner of men the delegates were. Unfortunately, the latter omission left a reader's fancy free to conjure up a picture of the company glib and pretentious "smart Alecks," dispersed among pompous white-whiskered "old doctors" wearing white ties and frock coats, and all vociferously declaiming against the "regulars" of whatever school. It was not a pleasing picture, and doubtless it was wholly unjust, but the reader, a clergyman in one of the denominations popularly classed as "liberal," shuddered to think how the announcement of a congress of liberals in religion might correspondingly impress his fellow-Christians. The designation is bad enough in itself because of its impertinent and insulting implication that all persons not formally included under the category are illiberal, but the comparison with "liberal physicians" deepens one's disgust at the term. If the adjective mean open minded, free from prejudice, and equally ready to discard the false notwithstanding its antiquity, or to accept the true despite its novelty, then indeed the appellation is honorable; but by the same token it is impudent to make of it a party name as if all other physicians or clergymen than those bearing the title were besotted with prejudice, stupid and ignorant conformists in thought and practice. Yet, whether we like it or not, the fact is that there is a certain type of religious thinking now often called Modernism but formerly called Modern Liberalism, which the editors of the *American Journal of Theology* wish the present article briefly to describe and criticize.

The first characteristic, then, of this Modern Liberalism is its

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free attitude toward traditionalism whether in cult or in creed. Occasionally this freedom has an air of bumptious defiance, as if the mere fact that a belief has been long held and still widely prevails were prima facie evidence against it, but this is rapidly disappearing along with the bullying of tradition to which it was a not unnatural counterpart. The prolonged and extensive currency of a belief may create some presumption in its favor—how much, only careful consideration in each particular case can determine—but the Liberal holds that the worth of a tradition as well as the intrinsic credibility of a belief are matters about which his own deliberate and informed judgment is decisive, for him. If it be objected that, to be specific, for one individual thus to set himself up against the consistent voice of the church through many ages is ridiculous self-conceit, the Liberal bows to the rebuke but stands his ground nevertheless. There is a vast amount of loose and irresponsible Liberalism, but the only sort which deserves serious notice is that which, fully appreciating the risk of error, does its utmost to prepare itself for a decision by disciplining and informing the mind, cultivating and enlightening the conscience, and, having done all, stands, calmly resolved to take that risk and prepared to accept the consequences of a decision thoughtfully made after due consideration. Sincerely respecting the past but positively refusing to be under its domination, the Liberal deems no belief or rite too sacred for investigation, or for rejection if it commend not itself to his intelligence and moral sense. That others do not feel toward it as he does is no concern of his—he would neither belittle their intelligence nor criticize their consciences—but to his own Master he standeth or falleth, and he is confident he shall be made to stand. In loyalty to a holy form one may sin against the Holy Spirit.

So understood, Liberalism in religion is of a piece with contemporary life in many of its social and intellectual phases. It was instructive to watch the behavior of scientific men when, a few years ago, discoveries in radio-activity threatened the doctrine of the conservation of energy. A belief which had long been a fundamental principle, apparently as firmly established as the everlasting hills, was called in question, yet no doughty champion appeared to defend dogmatically the faith once delivered unto

The
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science or to point triumphantly to scientific achievements of the past as pragmatic proof of the doctrine. Similarly, social and political institutions which have behind them more than a century of prosperous national life are today denounced as worthless, outworn relics of a transcended period and fit only for the scrap-heap. Everywhere the spirit of inquiry asserts, not its right alone, but its duty to examine. The dead hand must loose its lethal grasp, contemporary judgments and verdicts of history are alike subject to the recall, tradition must justify itself to the present generation if it is to be perpetuated. That there is danger in all this may go without saying, but there is promise in it too, and in religion the Liberal accepts the hazard in hope and faith.

So far the description has been largely negative—although not entirely so, since freedom from tradition is only the reverse aspect of a positive freedom to truth—and might seem to accredit the charge often repeated in ignorance or malice that Liberalism is wholly negative in character. In its positive aspect, however, Liberalism is distinguished by an absorbing passion for unity—unity of the mind in itself and with the whole being of man including the feelings and the will, and unity in a world-view of which the unity of man in his completeness gives indications and approximations. It is undoubtedly true that Liberalism has laid especial stress upon mental unity and hence has exposed itself to the charge of over-intellectualism, but this is an illegitimate restriction of its fundamental principle the remedy for which lies only in extension and not at all in the resort to anti-intellectualism. That the intellect does not exhaust the man is thoroughly true; Liberalism is deeply indebted to those who emphasize the fact, but is convinced nevertheless that the intellect is an important and honorable part of man to be discredited only at gravest peril. Hence Liberalism seeks to be at one with "the modern mind" which, altogether apart from the specific contributions made to it as the result of scientific and historical study, may best be described in terms of process and attitude. Liberalism holds that science, art, and religion represent three different but not contradictory aspects of reality, and that since reality is one, the three aspects, each valid for its own purpose, will be found to harmonize in a complete world-view. Accordingly,

Power of
intellect

the aim of Liberalism is to attain unity in thought and in experience, but it will never consent to the flouting of science and history in the interest of any religious belief however ancient, or any religious experience, however sacred. It acknowledges differences in process and attitude but will not tolerate contradictions. God is one, and man is becoming what he essentially is, one; this is the positive active principle of Liberalism. Hence Modern Liberalism is usually inspired by some form of monistic idealism. Theologically this appears as the doctrine of the divine immanence. God is the unified and unifying background of all phenomena and all experience, ultimate, organic reality. In the light of this notion, many, perhaps most, theological doctrines are surprisingly transformed. Revelation arises in the soul wherein God dwells; it is not offered to the senses by a God who, being without, and separate, can communicate with man only through external agencies. Salvation is an inward process by which the divine in man works itself free, not an outward event supernaturally effected. The history of man is the story of the gradual and often interrupted manifestation of the divine in man, and Christ is a prophetic personality in whom the divine in the human finds clear exhibition, thus suggesting the goal of personality toward which humanity moves by the power of the same spirit. Naturally this doctrine concerning Christ has been of prime significance and has given to much modern liberalism its Christo-centric character. From this point of view, Christ as the embodiment of the divine ideal of humanity is divine because it is a divine ideal which he incarnates, and he is also thoroughly human because it is the ideal of the human which he embodies. Hence he reveals equally God to man and man to himself. Moreover, since it is impossible that man should surpass in wisdom or goodness the ideal of God concerning him, it has been argued that all that man can know of God is comprehended in Christ so that to man Christ is God and God is Christ. Thus out of the philosophical principle of monistic idealism, theologically interpreted as the immanence of God and the divine-human Christ, almost all the particular doctrines of Modern Liberalism have been logically developed.

Obviously many of the traditional doctrines of Christianity are

Jesus Christ
reveals God
to human kind
and human kind
to itself.

repugnant to such a habit of mind and are definitely rejected while others viewed from a different angle are appreciably modified. Because of faith in the spirit universally inhabiting humanity, the "soul of man naturally Christian" is emphasized anew and the distinction between natural and revealed religion like that between the natural and the supernatural tends to disappear. Consequently, the other religions of the world win appreciative recognition and friendly study, and differences within Christianity are more genially viewed. Hence there is a magnanimity about Modern Liberalism at its best which is more agreeable than the old-time fierce and aggressive dogmatism. It has a gracious and winning mien and its theology is generous and kindly. That it represents a distinct advance in Christian thinking may be freely conceded, but our present duty is criticism rather than appreciation and therefore we must raise the question whether in the system thus briefly outlined there are not faults and deficiencies which point the way of further advance.

These criticisms are of two kinds: some are polemic, directed against it by opponents; and others are dialectic, arising from its own creative principle confronted by urgent problems of thought and experience. Of these criticisms, the latter are plainly by far the more significant, but at present the polemic criticisms are so trenchant and boastful that they enforce consideration, especially as they present a somewhat novel issue. The adversaries of Liberalism think that it has been trapped in a salient where the only alternatives are unconditional surrender or complete annihilation. Briefly put, the situation is this: Liberalism has made constant and consistent appeal to Jesus, presenting him as Divinity's real and humanity's ideal, identifying pure Christianity with the religion of Jesus himself which it has sought to reproduce and propagate. From the doctrines and practices of the historic church it has appealed to the Jesus of history and from one point of view its appeal has been wholly successful. That the Man of Nazareth said nothing about the cardinal doctrines of traditional Christianity is now pretty generally admitted; but having made its appeal to the Jesus of history it is now triumphantly proclaimed that Liberalism must take the full consequences of that appeal. If it be granted

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that the Synoptic Gospels alone give us true information concerning him, provided indeed he ever existed, the Jesus whom they disclose is not a Greek Logos but a Jewish Messiah of the apocalyptic sort, quite incompetent to fill the place which Liberalism has accorded him. Therefore Liberalism is imperiously challenged either to relinquish its Jesus, with all that logically must follow such a surrender, or to transfer its allegiance to the Christ of tradition vouched for by the testimony of the church on the one hand and by the mystical experience of the individual on the other. The scholars who have discovered an apocalyptic Jesus are supposed to have given Liberalism its *coup de grâce*. It may be well to observe in passing that scholars are not entirely agreed with regard to this view of Jesus, at least as a full statement of his personality or teaching, and that critics of Liberalism who press this dilemma are committing themselves to a theory as to Jesus which may be turned against them with most disastrous consequences. More than once in theological controversy, to win an engagement has been to lose a campaign, and he that dug a pit for his brother has himself fallen therein. But acknowledging the alternatives as presented, is Liberalism doomed?

In any event, the Liberal has no inclination to return to traditional Christianity, still less to the church which anathematized his departure and now arrogantly commands or patronizingly invites his submission. As he appealed to history in the case of Christ, so he appealed long ago in that of the church, and for him both verdicts will be decisive. The historic continuity of which so much is pompously said he knows to be more fanciful than real; the developing Christology of the first three centuries he knows to be quite other than a development from the historic Jesus guided by the spirit of Christ—how pathetic the notion seems to one who knows the facts!—and if the Christ whom he is asked to accept is one whose progressive revelation is in the historic church viewed as his continued and growing body, then the Liberal familiar with the history of the church can only say that for such a Christ he has neither love nor honor. If Jesus be not the divine ideal of humanity perfectly manifest in the flesh, then Liberalism will find that ideal in the growing hopes of humanity animated and guided by the

indwelling spirit. It really matters very little whether or no that ideal has found full expression yet in any single individual; it certainly found large and inspiring expression in the historic Jesus whose very limitations bring him even closer to our hearts. Therefore the Liberal may feel all the nearer to the Jesus whose apocalyptic hopes were vain but whose love of God and man was not thereby diminished. That this is incompatible with religious certainty and finality, the Liberal is perfectly well aware, but he is not thereby disturbed, for he has definitely renounced that expectation in preference for the open way toward a flying goal to pursue which is man's supreme glory as it is his only possibility of life. There are indeed many to whom this mental attitude is totally incomprehensible, but the Liberal deems it their misfortune and meets their reproaches with pity, their pity with amusement. When he is told that certainty is to be found only in the church he is not in the least impressed, for positive certainty is no part of his desire or expectation. And as for the sacramental view which usually accompanies the ecclesiastical, that to the Liberal is sheer magic and superstition. Let there be no misunderstanding at this point. The Liberal is not in the least dismayed by the arrogant challenge of his adversaries: the way which they warn him he must henceforth take unless he return to the church is no unfamiliar path; it is only the continuation of the way he has long trodden with inward satisfaction, and he sees no reason why he should not still pursue it. If the verdict of New Testament scholarship obliges him to change his view of Jesus, he will do so, with regret it may be, but without reluctance or fear. If the name Christian be denied him, he will be neither angry, nor frightened into submission, but will go on his way calmly without the church if he be not welcomed within it, committing himself to Him that judgeth righteously. What should be made quite plain is that the Liberal is only amused by the challenge proudly hurled at him. If Jesus was not the sort of man he has thought him, he is quite ready to think him the sort of man history shows him to have been. Certainly he would far rather have the Jewish apocalyptic Messiah with all his limitations than the ecclesiastical Christ with delusive promises of certainty and finality, never to be expected of a growing mind in a growing world.

The mystical appeal is far more winning than the ecclesiastical to the modern Liberal, for his very concept of unity inclines him to the mystical side. But his answer here can be given in a few words. He believes in God, the Spirit, whom he sees neither reason nor need to call "the essential Christ." Jesus was a person and the principle of his life was no essential Christ but the spirit of God in which spirit he also would live and work, and with this the world of the mystic opens to the Liberal. Indeed his very mysticism strengthens his Liberalism, for mysticism teaches direct access to the Eternal and hence is contrary to sacerdotalism and ecclesiasticism, and men who never so much as heard of Christ have found God.

Turning now to the criticism of Liberalism from within, to which its own creative principle gives rise, we must seriously raise the question whether it can bear the weight of the tragedies of human experience. Does not its amiable faith in inherent goodness appear but ghastly mockery when confronted by the facts of life? Believing in the immanent God, it must seriously consider what sort of God it is that nature reveals. If God is in all, then he must be in tornado and earthquake as well as in the serene heavens and the smiling earth. If he is in the ripening crops, he must be likewise in the devastating tempest which brings famine to thousands. We cannot be so enamored of the loveliness of nature as to be blind to its terrible aspects. And what of human sin? Here more than anywhere else the weakness of Modern Liberalism shows itself. It may be conceded that traditional theology made too much of sin, but surely that was better than to make light of it. The prophetic curse is against those who call evil good no less than against those who call good evil, and if a Jesus rebukes the doctrine of original sin, a Judas similarly condemns that of original righteousness. To a serious thinker, Modern Liberalism often seems too jocund for life as it actually is. A chubby-faced, prosperous young parson, just married to a rich and doting wife, regretted the disappearance from his parish of a poor woman whose large family of children had been the mainstay of his Sunday school, but her explanation was to the point: Is *he* the sort of man to preach to a poor widow woman with eight children? A religious doctrine which cannot bear the weight

Mysticism
as openness
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Can Liberalism
bear the
weight of
tragedy?

of the heart-breaking disasters of life will prove a broken reed
piercing the hand of him who leans upon it. Every fall is a fall
 upward—tell that to a man who by his sin has fallen from a position
 of honor and power into deep and damning disgrace. If all's right
with the world, something is wrong with man's moral sense. It is
 said that once Carlyle took Emerson through the worst streets of
 London asking at each new scene of squalor and vice: Will you
 believe in the devil, now, man? We would not have Modern
Liberalism return to a belief in the devil—that is too easy a solution
of the problem—but it must deal more justly with the crushing
tragedies of life, with evil and with sin, if it is to command the
respect of candid and thoughtful men. The saviors of the world
have always been and always will be men of sorrows and acquainted
with grief.

This means—and here we pass to a second criticism—that
Modern Liberalism will have to revise its favorite concept of unity. ✓
 At present, monistic idealism is very much under the weather
 philosophically, and a theological system akin to it must suffer
 correspondingly. Into the debate which it is carrying on with
 pluralism or pragmatism, it is not for us here to enter, but it may
 be said that the ideal of unity seems too deeply rooted in the
 human mind for quick and easy eradication although the antago-
 nistic arguments make strong moral and human appeal. Perhaps
what is precious in monism may be saved, and the criticism of its
opponents met, by a better definition of unity. Unity conceived
 in terms of mechanism has yielded to the organic concept, and it
 remains to abandon unity construed logically in behalf of unity
interpreted in terms of purpose. It is against logical unity which
 permits no contradictions or inconsistencies, and against mechanical
 unity which forbids possibilities and knows only of necessity, that
 pragmatism and pluralism inveigh, and justly. But unity con-
ceived as purpose not only admits of contradictions and possibilities
but would even seem to require them, since otherwise purpose
 would have no possible significance, no sphere of operation. Pur-
 pose exists because something, as it now is, is not as it should be,
 and its fulfilment means the bringing of these contradictions into
 harmony with the ideal which the purpose makes effective. If then

*Purpose-driven
 unity offers
 hope to a broken
 world.*

monism be taken purposefully, the principle of divine immanence will mean, not that absolute goodness is now manifest in all, but that in and through all is a power which makes for righteousness, a purpose toward the good, even the perfect. That such a view of unity will introduce changes into the statement of particular doctrines is certain, but our present interest lies not in tracing these effects but rather in emphasizing the necessity and importance of the change from logic to purpose as translating the concept of unity. It has become a commonplace to say that ideas are secondary as compared with the interests they serve and the purposes they fulfil which are primary. This being so, it follows that the unity which consists in the objective articulation of separate ideas is superficial as compared with the unity produced by the comprehension of their several aims within a large inclusive purpose. The real unity of ideas is to be found only in the synthesis of their respective purposes in purpose; it is inner and not outward, subjective and not objective.

A third criticism must be passed upon Modern Liberalism, less searching and more superficial than the two already made but perhaps more important with reference to its chance of wide acceptance. So far it has been too often an endeavor to adapt old phrases and usages to fit the religious life of today, whereas the urgent need is to aid that religious life in creating its own forms of expression. The motive for this attempt is clear and from one point of view praiseworthy. Language which has been employed for many generations to express the deeper life of man becomes saturated with religious feeling and hence sacred, with the sacredness of the experience which it relates, and moving, through its rich and powerful inheritance of association. To give up the verbal form seems like renouncing the reality which originally fashioned it. But Protestantism has bravely insisted that the Bible must be rendered into the vernacular, and it must now face the necessity of translating the sacred page of the soul into contemporary speech at whatever hazard or cost. That it is not quite willing to do this is only too painfully evident. One distinguished clergyman said not long ago that all the great words of theology had changed their meanings within his lifetime, but he failed to inform us as to their

Need for a
new language
and new
symbols

present meaning. Indeed, readers of current theological literature must often wish that every writer were obliged to furnish a glossary in order that his teaching might be fully intelligible. To those already within the church, novel teachings are somewhat commended by ancient forms of expression, but upon those who are without, the effect is irritation and confusion. Until theological writers are willing to cast aside their patched and baggy terminology—the race set before us is not a sack-race—they can hardly expect a sympathetic hearing from thoughtful men. And in addition, looseness and vagueness of utterance inevitably react upon thought. A smear of words and a smouch of ideas are reciprocally related. The supreme need of Modern Liberalism, so far as wide appreciation goes, is for definite, precise thinking and direct, plain speaking. Unhappily, however, it tends, for the moment, to fall in with current anti-intellectualism and rather glories in its obscurity and vagueness. But while it is true that words are only “thrown out” at objects too vast for exact definition, they should at least be thrown with an eye single to the object, and with accuracy of aim, and while the intellect is only a single phase of our complex and manifold human nature it is certainly a phase, and one not to be disdained. That the mystery is incomprehensible is no excuse for unintelligible statements concerning it—patient silence were better. The oracular speech of current theology arises from mental confusion which it still further deepens, and thus widens the gulf between itself and the real religious life of today which is already beginning to express itself after its own fashion and not in bygone modes. No one can fail to be impressed with the fact that there is now a large amount of extra-confessional and extra-ecclesiastical religious life which does not and apparently will not run into the traditional molds. Modern Liberalism is reaching out toward men of this sort and marvels that it seems to reach in vain. It may be that its only hope of success lies in so complete and sympathetic an identification with the new religious spirit already moving in the hearts of technically irreligious men as to become capable of interpreting that life in forms appropriate and intelligible to itself.

Need is for
plain speak

and for a
new language
and new
social form

Secularism
a new form