

## OUTLINE OF LIBERAL FUNDAMENTALS

BY CURTIS W. REESE

**L**IBERAL religion can never formulate a statement of faith that will possess any authority other than that inhering in its conformity to observed and experienced facts, its essential reasonableness, and its evident human worth. Indeed, liberals in religion are so diverse in origin and so multiple in method that to find and state their common fundamentals is a very difficult task. Nevertheless, I am convinced that deep below the ordinary formulations of the faith of the liberal religious movements there are certain fundamentals which are the source of whatever power the current formulations possess. The discovery of these fundamentals is prerequisite to a united liberal movement.

If, as I believe, these fundamentals are also the foundation of social idealism and progress, then the discovery and statement of them is doubly desirable. If liberal religion is in fact basically at one with accurate knowledge, humanistic aspirations, and technical skill, then liberal religion has everything to gain by reformulating its faith in a way that will sharply demark it from the vain repetitions of the older creeds and place it squarely on the side of thorough-going realistic modernism.

To me the liberal fundamentals appear to be: (1) the authority of evidence; (2) the supremacy of intelligence; (3) the validity of freedom; (4) the leadership of the competent, and (5) the commonwealth of man. Let us see what these fundamentals involve.

### I. THE AUTHORITY OF EVIDENCE

Man has always tended to rely on authority of one sort or another. With some authority has rested in various externals—as oracles, seers, teachers, institutions, books, creeds, and the like. With others authority has been internal—as conscience, inner light,

sense of ought, pure reason, etc. But the tendency has been more and more to rely on evidence; that is, facts reasonably interpreted. Throughout practical life the authority of evidence is very generally accepted. Throughout the world of science evidence is the sole authority. Jurisprudence presupposes loyalty to evidence.

Religious beliefs for the most part have been founded not on carefully weighed evidence but on uncriticized desire, ecstatic experience, and false logic. Authoritarian creeds usually consist primarily of pronouncements in regard to things unknown if not unknowable, and secondarily with man's conduct in view of the primary pronouncements. But thus far there is not a shred of competent evidence in regard to the nature and purpose of ultimate reality. Hence, a conduct-creed based on such pronouncements is a house of straw on shifting sand. Only man's sound instincts have saved him from the utter scandal of committing his body as well as his soul to such precarious dwellings. A healthy nature has saved many a man from the logical consequences of his formal professions.

So unfounded in point of evidence are the authoritarian systems of religion that in my judgment they may well be left out of account in the new formulations. We do not need a paraphrase of Calvinism—an anemic counterfeit of ontology—but a new departure that will depart as far from creeds of the pre-scientific age as can be justified by the evidence at hand.

The genuine liberal in religion, as elsewhere, is willing to follow the evidence wherever its reasonable interpretation may lead. He makes no reservations. There are no forbidden fields. Though the evidence slay him, yet will he follow it, firm in the belief that fact is better than fiction, that truth is better than error, that the uneasy struggle for knowledge is better than the peace that passeth understanding.

## II. THE SUPREMACY OF INTELLIGENCE

Closely related to the authority of evidence is the supremacy of intelligence. The function of evidence is to reveal the truth. The function of intelligence is to control conduct in harmony with the desirable possibilities revealed by the truth.

The acceptance of the supremacy of intelligence has far reaching consequences. It means a break with the age-long habit of conformity to precedent. It means also a skeptical attitude towards

one's own bias, intuition, and pure reason. Intelligence accepts the testimony of the fathers, the history of institutions, and systems of logic as evidence of what has been, but not as authority for what should be. Intelligence is intolerant both of purely external authority—including precedent as such, and of purely internal authority—including bias, intuition, and pure reason. But intelligence gives due consideration to all that which when critically considered properly bears on any proposed conduct.

Intelligence applied to any given problem involves: (1) the collation of all pertinent facts; (2) fair weighing and ordering of the facts; (3) definite understanding of a goal that is both desirable and possible in view of the facts, and (4) the technical skill to enlist and direct all available forces in the achievement of the desired goal. This is human engineering.

How different is this method of intelligence from that ordinarily in operation! Ordinarily we "catch an idea," "jump at conclusions," "take chances," and "revel in mystical intoxication." It is not too much to say that with the exception of a few noble ventures the human race has never yet tried to apply intelligence to its problem of conquering the world and of living an abundant life.

Suppose we studied the race problem as thoroughly as an architect plans a steel structure; suppose we attacked the problem of education as comprehensively as an international banking house surveys the resources and needs of the people it serves; suppose we set about production and distribution with the exactness of the mathematicians who measure and weigh the stars; and, while we are supposing, let us try to imagine what could be done for human justice and happiness if the government of the world were a science instead of a system of conflicting ambitions. As a matter of fact the present state of exact knowledge gives reasonable ground for the fervent hope that we shall yet intelligently control our social destiny.

### III. THE NECESSITY OF FREEDOM

Freedom is a much-abused term. It is frequently used indiscriminately as a synonym of caprice and license. Without entering here into the interminable discussion of freedom vs. determinism, suffice it to say that beyond all actions growing out of inherent trends and environmental pressure there is a wide realm in which the exercise of freedom is not only possible but necessary to noble

conduct. In this realm we throw artificial human restrictions about freedom at the peril of all that is finest in personality.

Freedom from hampering human restrictions is prerequisite to effective and creditable conduct. It should be the definite policy of all institutions—state, school, church, home—to restrict social inhibitions and compulsions to the lowest possible minimum consistent with the public welfare. No man is at his best save when he is free.

Thus far in history it has been found safe and wise to enlarge the boundaries of human freedom. Patriarchs, barons, kings, and priests have all been shorn of authority without any of the predicted catastrophies resulting. Slaves have been freed, suffrage has been extended, bills of right have been achieved, constitutions have been made responsive to the public will, and still the social structure holds together. Indeed the very life of organized society now seems to depend more and more on the free action of free peoples. The trend of current social evolution seems to be definitely in the direction of greater freedom for all people.

Liberals encourage the free interplay of free minds and the general extension of the realm of free behavior.

#### IV. THE LEADERSHIP OF THE COMPETENT

A superficial understanding of democracy has caused many people to arrive at the conclusion that democracy discounts leadership and depends primarily on the spontaneous popular will. This conclusion is found to be erroneous when we understand that true democracy is not primarily a method but a spirit, a goal, a gospel.

The liberal insists that with democracy, as well as with life in general, competent leadership is a matter of first importance. The great mass of the people will follow some sort of leadership. In the absence of competent leadership (and sometimes in spite of it) they will follow demagogues and charletans. One of the greatest curses today is the prevalence of incompetent but magnetic public figures. A striking presence covers a mass of incompetence. The funeral of many statesmanlike proposals has been preached by incompetent but volitive opponents.

We must learn to distinguish between spurious and genuine leadership. That is to say we must learn to examine for ourselves the basal facts at issue and the reasoning processes of our leaders. It is, of course, not possible for all of us to familiarize ourselves with

all details of the subjects presented for consideration; but we can and should know enough general principles to distinguish between the experts and the fakers, between mature judgments and airy romance.

We must not only distinguish competent experts but we must learn to use them in the social as well as in the physical sciences. We examine the credentials of an engineer before we employ him to construct a bridge or a dam. Why should we take chances on the men we select to enact and administer our laws? When social situations need adjusting we should employ experts just as we do in tunneling a mountain. Until we form this habit we are children directed by impulse and led by fancy. The day the world begins consciously to depend on the consensus of opinion of competent socially-minded commissions then will begin the manhood of humanity.

## V. THE COMMONWEALTH OF MAN

Any worth-while order must be based on the verified conviction of the supreme worth of human personality, of the world-wide community of interest, and of the practicability and necessity of the human direction of social progress. Any worth-while religion must have human life as its object, loyalty to human life as its content, the enhancement of human life as its aim, and the fulfilment of human life as its supreme test of values. All other considerations whether of an other-worldly or of a materialistic character are of secondary importance. At the fiery altar of human life must be tested every idea, every symbol, and every institution.

The building of a commonwealth of man necessitates the conscious dependence of the race on the human control of human destiny on this planet, subject always to the possibilities inherent in the natural order. The technique of such control involves many factors which must be experimentally worked out through the years but the indispensable minimum requirements are: (1) universal education; (2) social guarantees, and (3) world organization.

Only an educated people can establish and maintain a commonwealth. (a) Educational standards must be raised; (b) educational opportunities universalized; (c) compulsory education revised upward; (d) the technique of determining potential qualities devel-

oped, and (e) persons showing unusual potentialities afforded the utmost opportunity they are capable of using.

At best, the risks of life are many and great. No man can stand alone. Mutual aid is a factor of the utmost importance. A new world order wherein human life shall be the first concern requires not only equality of opportunity, not only co-operation in the use of opportunity, but also social guarantees against the ill effects of misfortune. Mankind must unite to beat back from the doorsteps of the world the terrors of accident and unemployment, of improvidence and sickness, of old age and death. Chance almsgiving and organized philanthropy are plainly inadequate. The necessity of a comprehensive plan of social insurance, involving dignified and equitable preventive and redemptive methods, is increasingly evident. Whether social guarantees should be administered through private and fraternal concerns publicly controlled, or through governmental agencies, or both, is a matter of expediency. The thing of chief concern is the recognition and application of interdependence as the law of social life.

Manifestly, the world must be managed co-operatively. The peoples and the nations are intertwined and are forever inseparable. No nation or people can prosper permanently at the cost of any other nation or people. All the world goes up or down together. We are made one by the economic interests of every land, by the bonds of knowledge and literature, by a thousand necessities of peaceful and happy living, and by the holy stream of blood that courses through all mankind. Wise men will accept the world-wide community of interest as a fact and good men will rejoice in its truth.