

THE NEW LIBERALISM

BY CURTIS W. REESE

HISTORICALLY, the basic content of religious liberalism is spiritual freedom. Out of this basic content has come the conviction of the supremacy of reason, of the primary worth of character, and of the immediate success of man to spiritual sources. Always religious liberalism has tended to replace alleged divine revelation and commands with human opinions and judgments; to develop the individual attitude in religion; and to identify righteousness with life. The method of religious liberalism has always been that of reflection, not that of authority. Liberalism has insisted on the essentially natural character of religion.

Believing that religion is best promoted in the presence of live issues, and that every age must achieve its own faith, liberalism has been willing to hazard its affirmations in an open field where the contestants strive for only the greatest service possible. And this experience has led liberalism not only to free religion from extraneous accretions, but also to think of religion primarily as conscious committal and loyalty to worthwhile causes and goals. Formerly, liberalism emphasized chiefly emancipation and freedom; now it emphasizes also committal and loyalty.

Liberalism has had to face, even more than have other forms of religion, the age-old philosophical question, "why"? That is, to what purpose—to what end—do we live? In answer to this question liberalism proclaims as the end and aim of religion, and of life, free and positive personality, loyally and intelligently associated, and cosmically related.

If liberalism can be reduced to a single statement, I think this is it: Conscious committal and loyalty to worthwhile causes and goals in order that free and positive personality may be developed, intelligently associated, and cosmically related.

Let us see where this leads.

I

The liberal is not satisfied with a religious experience acquired chiefly through confession, repentance and divine communion, and terminating in a heaven of subject existence. He is not willing to accept the promise of a distant estate of doubtful character and location in lieu of concrete worths and measurable values here and now. He believes that whatever the future may be or hold for him is essentially the outcome of his own spiritual achievements. Hence, he demands that his personality be free and self-directive.

The liberal is not satisfied with purely material ends. In his swing away from mystic union with entities of doubtful existence he does not plunge into the abyss of gross material satisfactions. He may go from one of these extremes to the other, but if so, it is only for a while. In the long run, he hangs tenaciously to the conviction that fundamentally his nature is spiritual—that a spiritual self adjusts and guides and controls.

The liberal is not satisfied with freedom alone. Emancipated from superstition and prejudice, he may lead a care-free and easy existence for a while, but soon the essentially positive nature of personality becomes assertive, and the liberal knows that positive committals and loyalty are essential to the full expression of himself.

The center of spiritual gravity is shifted from objective and supernatural forms to individual man. This is not the denial of the existence of significant and objective worths, but only the removal of the seat of authority from an indefinite something somewhere, to a definite self known to be native to human existence. This is not a hasty conclusion reached by the liberal. It is the plainly observable trend of history. The lesson of long experience of the race is that of the primary importance of human initiative and self-direction. Whatever contribution may be made by authority and coercion—of one person over another, of society over the individual, or of cosmic processes over personal experience—the greatest contribution of authority and coercion is to make themselves unnecessary.

The outstanding characteristic of modern liberalism, and indeed of all modern thinking, is the evaluation of personality as the thing of supreme worth. Hence, liberalism now affirms in terms unmistakable that institutions are only the tentative and temporary expressions of personality, that they are frequently outgrown and must, like the hull of the chrysalis, be burst asunder and left only to mark an epoch past. Institutions—religious, capitalistic, socialistic, or

what not—must now stand or fall as they are able or unable to serve effectively and efficiently in the building of free and positive human souls.

Let us now turn to another phase of the content of present-day religious liberalism.

II

Present-day liberals see the essentially interdependent nature of human beings; that the fulfillment of the individual self requires orderly, purposeful association with other selves. This thought finds expression in various terms: Brotherhood, solidarity, mutuality, reciprocity, fraternity, community. For a long time, prophets, poets and statesmen have proclaimed the ambition of the race to be linked together for mutual service; and now biology and social science agree that there is and can be no complete self-realization aside from co-operation with other selves.

Ideally this is the heart of Christianity. The organic unity of the race is found in the teachings of Christianity. Jesus, at his best, thought and spoke in world-terms. Human solidarity is the heart of the labor movement. This finds expression in the motto: "An injury to one is an injury to all." The red flag is meant to be symbolic of the blood of the race. The latest and best type of statesmanship thinks in world terms. We are now becoming accustomed to world issues, programs and achievements.

Religious liberalism constantly aims to promote the widest possible human comradeship and the closest possible human fellowship. And this aim is underwritten by the knowledge that co-operation and not competition is the dominant factor in the growth of the race.

In the most intimate of human relationships, the home, we know no complete satisfaction apart from the good of those whom we love. Notions of the exact character of this relationship, laws defining its social responsibilities may and do and should change with changing time; but always the race finds deep and abiding satisfaction in the solidarity of what we call the home. We now know that the positive sentiments and other hard facts of the solidarity of the home belong essentially to other social relationships. In industry we are trying as never before, and with a measure of success, to reorganize on the basis of community of interest. So with other relationships. The old notion that the individual experiencing good can be an isolated individual has gone forever.

The legacy from the best prophets of the past is a conception of

a united world. The coming order is a world order. And any religion that hesitates to proclaim this gospel is neither an heir of the prophets of the past nor the parent of the achievement of the future.

The cohesive principle in the achievement of this human world order is radical good-will. This leads to the new competition, competition in the rendering of the greatest service. The pride of the old professions—law, medicine, ministry—is in the rendering of the greatest service. The spirit of the old professions must be fused into the social order from bottom to top—from the corner grocery to the League of Nations.

Liberals think of democracy not only as freedom and equality of opportunity but also as mutual assistance in the use of freedom and opportunity. To take one class off the shoulder of another class is not enough. All people must work shoulder to shoulder.

Radical good-will alone does not satisfy modern liberalism. Now comes the demand on good-will, to develop a technique for making itself effective in the world of hard facts. Social science is still in its infancy. There is room for and need of creative statesmanship in the reorganization of human relationships. How to secure food, shelter, and clothes without losing one's soul is a pressing problem. At last humanity has rebelled against a state of affairs that requires the forfeiture of the soul in order to acquire a rag, a shack, and a loaf of bread. In the solution of the problems involved in the rescue of the soul from the clutch of mammon are causes worthy of committal and loyalty. Liberalism declares that the church needs to understand the economic expression of brotherhood, and that everybody needs to understand the spiritual significance of economic co-operation. The next step in world progress is the proper co-ordination of economic forces with intellectual, moral, and spiritual forces.

III

In the past, the basic content of most religions has been that of the submission of persons to supernatural agencies, and the consequent appropriation of worths. In these systems of religion man was worthwhile because he participated in or was possessed by supernatural agencies. In virtue of this relation man received a supply of finished goods. In these systems men got their rights, powers, and goods by servile tenure. This monarchic view of religion rose to its noblest height in the expression, "Thy will be done."

The realm of the divine is now subject to investigation. Here, as elsewhere, the scientific method is being applied. Here regulated

observation and experiment may result in new theological discoveries, and so liberalism must remain undogmatic in regard to God. The theology of Augustine and that of Channing, the theology of Billy Sunday, and that of H. G. Wells, might all be found utterly inadequate without consequent injury to the religion of the liberal. Liberalism is building a religion that would not be shaken even if the thought of God were outgrown.

Nevertheless, the liberal recognizes and zealously proclaims the fact that purposive and powerful cosmic processes are operative, and that increasingly man is able to co-operate with them and in a measure control them. What these processes be styled is of but little importance. Some call them cosmic processes, others call them God. In life there is wisdom beyond our present power fully to comprehend. This is seen in the amoeba as it adjusts its structure for the attainment of the ends desired; in the living protoplasmic cells on the ends of the rootlets of bean and of wheat, both apparently identical, the one refusing the flint, the other receiving it; in the co-operative colony of the sponge and the daisy, the bee and the wolf; in the marvellous neural arrangement of man.

To the ancients the contemplation of cosmic events led to the theory of direct supernatural operation or to that of the use of natural forces by supernatural agencies. But to an increasing number of serious thinkers and to an innumerable host of liberals everywhere the contemplation of cosmic events has given way to regulated observation of and experiment with cosmic processes; and this has led to conscious co-operation with and partial control of cosmic processes. The ancients bowed before the unknown; the modern man attempts to understand the unknown. Supernatural agencies and laws are giving way to natural modes and processes. With this must go much of the nomenclature and many of the forms of worship of the religions of the world; and in their place liberalism must institute a liturgy lyrical and modern, inspirational and creative, reverential and socially useful.

Liberalism understands spirituality to be man at his best, sane in mind, healthy in body, dynamic in personality; honestly facing the hardest facts, conquering and not fleeing from his gravest troubles; committed to the most worthwhile causes, loyal to the best ideals; ever hoping, striving, and achieving. To know one's self as inherently worthwhile, actually to find fullest self-expression in the widest human service and consciously to become a co-worker with cosmic processes is spiritual experience deep and abiding.