

The Fresh Air of Theological Liberalism

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Theological liberalism is more a habit of mind than an explicit school of Christian thought. It accepts that Christian believing is a matter of exploration, response to experience, interpretative capability and coming to the best judgement of what can be said at any one time within the historical constraints operating at any one time. It is happier with notions of 'glimpsing' Christian truth than with 'dogmatic knowing' by revelation. The closest companions of liberalism are reason and imagination. Hence it considers faith to be a (universal) human quality which, in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's stimulating phraseology, enables us 'to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension'.¹ Liberalism accepts that faith is a voluntary activity of the human heart and mind and therefore is able to grant human reason its own relative autonomy in the investigation of the world and the human condition. Inductive enquiry through the humanities, social sciences and the natural sciences is a friend and not a foe of genuine faith.

In many respects, Christian thinkers have absorbed much of what theological liberalism stands for. The critical spirit has become second nature: we are no longer obliged to accept beliefs simply on the basis of ecclesiastical authority. However, this is not to say that authority does not have a place in any disciplined faith that seeks understanding; it is simply that belief must commend itself according to its own inner dynamism and congruence with what we know of reality by other means. Perhaps the best example of the absorption of critical thinking is biblical criticism. Apart from the literalists (fundamentalists), no Christian theologian now approaches the Bible as verbatim 'the word of God'. Or in the field of Christian ethics, mainstream churches and theologians have long benefited from the liberal disposition in the latter's association with modern movements for democracy, human rights and emancipation of many kinds.

However, despite these agreements, why is it that liberalism has become a taboo word in theological circles? From being a virtue that served the humane cause of reasonableness in the Christian enterprise, how is it that liberalism is now considered to be either, at best, a quaint left-over from a former era that had lost its way or, at worst, a sign of satanic power that infiltrates the sacred realm of holy church? Part of the answer to this stems from critiques that have pointed out liberalism's shortcomings, and part derives from the tide of dogged conservatism that has been ideologically opposed to liberalism since its inception.

Let me now mention three strands within the critique of the liberal outlook, before turning to extol liberalism's abiding achievements. First, liberalism has been associated with the rationalism of the Enlightenment period in European history, an outlook that considered the universe to be a closed system and in principle capable of all-encompassing explanation. Following the autonomy of reason in this fashion would lead to the redundancy and then even the demise of God, which is what some nineteenth century philosophers eventually pronounced. It also tends towards a dualistic split between mind and body, thus creating the philosophical conditions for the human neglect of the flesh and the domination of nature. Or, from a different perspective, liberalism is sometimes accused of being a pastime of the middle classes, who seem more often preoccupied with interpreting reality than with transforming it (as Karl Marx complained about Christianity's dalliance with the bourgeoisie). More recently, some philosophers have said that we are shaped in essence by language and as language cannot escape its history the assumption of liberalism that we are not hidebound by our history is naïve.

My own view is that these accusations generally overplay their hand. But they reveal why liberalism is treated suspiciously. Let me briefly comment on each objection in turn:

- 1) It is true that critical thinking cannot lead us to a total understanding of the whole of reality. Liberalism at its best, however, has the more modest aim of reflecting on how all our ideas and beliefs about God, human destiny and the nature of the world are limited by many factors. A quick glance at Christian history shows this to be the case. Beliefs have changed, shifted and developed according to the knowledge and assumptions of particular periods. For liberals, this is a virtue and not something to agonise over.
- 2) It is true that liberalism has mainly been allied to the educated classes and those classes who first benefited from modern democracy. If liberal theology offers no critique of the status quo in society and church then indeed it is lamentable as a Christian outlook. However, the liberal principle of critical humane understanding is surely an aid and not a hindrance to transformation. As it is, much transformation has come about through the application of critical thinking. I have already mentioned the example of democracy and human rights. In this sense, liberalism has the potential to be the servant of our liberation. (I say this whilst also admiring the critique of oppressive structures in society that has emanated from Christian orthodoxy at its best. In this respect, liberation theology has made its impact and is to be learned from).
- 3) It is true that Christian theology and experience are imbued with a range of given language – creation, salvation, incarnation etc. However, it seems less clear that language actually determines every aspect of our experience. Christian language has identified and named many kinds of Christian experience down the centuries and proved itself to be malleable according to factors of cultural context and interpretation. Tradition has shaped who we are, but tradition could easily be written as a history of innovation rather than imprisonment.

Turning now to a positive statement, let me conclude by highlighting a number of areas in Christian belief and practice where theological liberalism creates a different climate. The first is a frank recognition that the traditional theological scheme which was wedded to a pre-scientific understanding has largely broken down. So the tracing of human origins and destiny as ‘Creation - Fall - Divine Rescue - Consummation’ no longer fits our experience of history or human freedom. Any literal interpretation of biblical history has long been under the superannuation hammer ever since the rise of historical criticism and new knowledge deriving from evolutionary and cosmological theory in the sciences. In general terms, many are inclined now to interpret the ways of God with the world less through a divine interventionist framework than through an analysis of theological thinking as symbolic and interpretative. We live continually in God’s hidden presence which itself is a space of freedom and invitation to a life of self-giving compassion and divine discontent with the structures of violence and domination that destroy the fabric of creation.

My second area for theological liberalism is that it gives a positive welcome to knowledge, insight and value that arise from other disciplines of human enquiry. Perhaps the foremost discipline that has made an impact in this regard is historical enquiry. Liberals have been keen to approach biblical texts and historic milestones such as creeds in terms of the cultural context of their origins. Gospels and Creeds did not arrive ready-made but were the product of many influences. This lends a certain air of inventiveness to our Christian past and opens up possibilities for revision, development and reconfiguration in Christian understanding in the present. In short, faith becomes a dynamic enterprise. Christian beliefs are not there simply to be repeated for the sake of it but are to be lived in and through. If they no longer command intellectual or moral respect then they should be reinterpreted or quietly jettisoned. Who now thinks of the doctrine of the atonement, for example, as a blood sacrifice to appease a wrathful God? Again, liberalism has changed our perceptions. For many Christians today the cross of Jesus stands more as a parable of how God is with the world - bearing its violence, rejection and pain - than as atonement in any usual sense.

My third area perhaps touches more sensitive ground. How do liberal minded clergy and leaders of Christian worship approach their craft when so much of the language of worship seems redolent of the old interventionist framework and a pre-liberal spirit? Part of the answer here must be that we should approach the language of worship more in the spirit of poetry than as theological treatise. It is often the case that the thrust of liturgical worship runs against the grain of this perspective, something that remains true even of recent liturgical developments. However, the liberal kinship with imagination ought to assist us in moving away from liturgy as educational in a didactic sense to liturgy as educational in an evocative sense. In worship we come before the mystery of God not before the mystery of theological propositions! It is lamentable, to me at any rate, that there is still insufficient emphasis in liturgy on a transformative role for Christian commitment *now*.

My final area where liberalism has helped to create a different climate is in the field of interfaith relations and theology of religions. Liberal theology rejects the notion of Christian exclusivism and superiority as inappropriate and perhaps even harmful for the new plural age that is already dawning. A new theology of dialogue is currently being forged on the anvil of new friendships and new appreciations of the spirituality alive within other religious traditions. Some have even said that the encounter between Christianity and other religions is set to change the theological map (of Christians and of others) beyond all recognition. Traditional Christian absolutism, which interprets Christ as the final saviour of the world, sits uneasily with the parity between religions that is assumed in dialogue and this is the real rub of the challenge of pluralism. Religious studies is healing us of our stereotyped views *about* other religions; the ethical principle of respect in relationships with our neighbours is demanding that we learn *from* other religions; dialogue opens the door to further 'critical communion' *with* other religions - critical because dialogue does not mean that anything goes in interreligious dialogue. And self-criticism matters above all else.

In sum, theological liberalism rejoices in the provisional. There is a congruence between the mysterious nature of divine reality itself, the vulnerability of faith as a mode of human discernment, reliance on ways of knowing which stress the imagination, metaphor and perspective, and the readiness to revise Christian understanding. Christian believing can never be a settled affair, and that's good.

ⁱ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 12.