

TOWARD A NEW LIBERAL THEOLOGY

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If it is to meet the needs of modern man, religious liberalism must effectively link knowledge and values. When this is properly done, religion may fulfill man's highest hopes in ways that have never been possible before. Western man is now entering a new stage of social evolution, which should and can become available to all mankind in the foreseeable future.

Previous cultures have had to adjust to the stark fact that grinding physical toil by most of the members of a society was unable to produce enough food and goods for everyone. Degrading poverty for the many and an almost equally degrading wealth for the few were accepted as inevitable. Religions typically lived with the situation by promising men another, better "world" or by teaching them to cultivate their "souls," which were said to be separate from their bodies and unaffected by their physical circumstances.

Scientifically, technologically, and economically, this is no longer true. If the traditional religions have lost their relevance and power to guide human actions, it is not because they have retained some particular doctrines or failed to communicate. Rather have they failed to recognize, embrace and thus deserve the right to guide into maturity this new stage of world history which increasing numbers of men look upon and see as good.

To ask religious liberalism for a new linking of knowledge and values is both to relate it to previous traditional religions and to point to

its unique opportunity in the modern age. By "knowledge" we mean preeminently the knowledge that flows from the sciences—a vast and growing network of concepts that enable us to understand our experiences and, within limits, to predict and control future experiences. When modern man says "I know. . .," he refers to such concepts which he can share with all other men, and which all other men can, in principle, verify for themselves. Scientific knowledge is essentially universal and public. While the words and mathematical symbols in which it is expressed may be extremely difficult, it is never the private monopoly of any group or religion.

This knowledge is about "reality," which is in man and surrounds him. While each of us personally experiences it, none of us, and none of our religions, should speak of "special ways" of knowing reality, or of "special realities" which can only be known by certain men. Reality is one and our knowledge of it is never fixed or final or absolute.

Earlier religions have spoken of knowledge through reason, through common sense, through sense perception, as well as through their contemporary sciences. At one time most Jews and Christians, for instance, "knew" that our earth was a flat surface at the center of the universe. When a better scientific picture emerged, many religious persons had difficulty accepting it because they were confused as to the sources of reliable knowledge.

Even greater difficulties have resulted from the traditional religious terms of faith and belief. When men say "I believe. . .," they sometimes finish the sentence with a vague, tentative assertion ("I believe that there is progress"). More often, faith-sentences refer to that which is held absolutely, beyond any possible evidence or refutation ("I believe in the resurrection of the body").

The greatest difficulty for modern man comes at just this point. He is told that knowledge alone is not enough for his salvation or highest goal; that he must add "faith" to it. Yet those things he is asked to believe, or the reasons he is asked to believe them (authority, tradition), seem incredible or irrelevant. If the things he is asked to believe really do describe reality, then they are properly knowledge and not faith. If they are matters of knowledge, they do not need any religious sanction nor does any religion have an inside track to them. The tremendous increase of scientific knowledge in our time has made belief-statements unnecessary as well as confusing.

Our proposal is that liberal religion should make no claims to knowledge apart from the sciences, that it should have no need for supplementary, belief-type statements; and that it should instead focus upon the real religious issue—guiding human behavior. This is the meaning of our call to link knowledge and values.

By "values," we mean ways of responding and acting that men hold to be good and desirable. Virtue, or values, or good works have, for

traditional Christianity, usually been secondary matters. Right belief was the primary thing. Far more religious persecution has occurred over matters of opinion than over matters of ethics. Liberal Christianity, liberal Judaism, and secular humanism—whose heirs we are—all agreed in making ethics the central matter of religion.

We move beyond our predecessors by seeing values for what they are—choices made by human beings from among many possible options. We do not claim to get our values from scientific knowledge, nor do we contend that they are somehow related to any objects of “faith” or realms of “non-scientific reality.”

Values, in this sense, are thoroughly natural. Their source is no more puzzling than is the source of knowledge: both flow from the creative imagination of man interacting with his universe. To call a sunset “beautiful” is to say much more about oneself than it is to describe a state of solar refraction. Yet it is a description of a self-state that we can and should make. Nor is it a trivial matter if a number of us concur in such a statement. This agreement will not advance astronomy but it is important for humanity!

This interactive matrix which stimulates man’s creativity is, of course, a comprehensively universal—and expanding—matrix, including the whole postulatable cosmos, our fellow animals, especially our fellowmen along with the cultures they have created, and our own very personal and very complicated “inner” environment.

When man says “I value. . .,” he means “I choose and cherish. . .” He is describing the whole process by which his decisions about action are made and sustained. Values, thus understood, are more fragile than many have supposed; they come with no cosmic guarantees. Nor can they simply be discovered and accumulated, as is the case with knowledge. Values require a constant nurture. If they are to survive their discoverers, they must be built into the lives of men and cultures.

This is why every human society has had a religion: to choose and cherish its values. When the values become irrelevant (as in other-worldly religions), the religion withers. When the values are inherently destructive (as in Nazism), the society becomes pathological. Since values are many and often conflict with each other, a viable religion must have some overall goal to guide the selection and ranking of its values. The goal of modern religious liberalism is *the expansion of the quality of life, for the individual and for society*. Such a goal can speak directly to modern men and be related to their own experiences. It presupposes that they both desire and are experiencing an expansion of the *quantity* of life—the so-called “material” side: health, leisure, abundance, longevity. We have direct awareness of our experiences of *quality*, even when we are unprepared to give sharp philosophical definition to them. We experience meanings, we sense our growing abilities for appreciation, we realize wider understanding, we recognize increases of sensitivity. All of these will be readily agreed to contribute to the quality

of our lives. We are equally aware that the individual and his society each contribute to this expansion of quality; his new discoveries are potentially shareable by his neighbors, and the measure of the neighbors' richness is in some sense *his* possession and starting point.

Our formulation, the expansion of the quality of life, puts into words what we see as the core goal of modern religious liberalism. It would also seem to be a good statement of what is central for many liberal churches and individuals. While distinguishing us from most traditional religions, it takes account of the unorganized, often even unnamed, religiousness felt by many modern men.

What we are calling modern religious liberalism is obviously much larger than the Unitarian Universalist Association or the churches that comprise it. Nevertheless, this Association remains the most effective potential spokesman for a vital religion for modern man. Insofar as it can revive a deeper religious commitment among its member churches, this potential may be achieved. This will involve a much more honest facing of the meaning of religious pluralism within the Association. The healthy form of pluralism obtains when our commitment to democracy keeps us from ever being tempted to achieve consensus by coercion. Pluralism can become pathological, however, when it leads us to avoid seeking common goals and action in the name of an alleged "respect" for differences. Without on-going discussion, differences can never even be discovered, let alone faced and resolved. Our democratic structures and traditions must be continually tested and used, not sentimentalized about!

SIX VALUE-PAIRS

Modern religion must be centrally concerned with values, involving men in discovery, dialogue, and community which enables them to choose more wisely from among the alternative courses of action that life involves. Of equal concern to a church is the process of cherishing those values that are chosen—deepening our commitment, strengthening our motivation, refining our understanding. Choosing and cherishing values is always more than an intellectual process. Our whole beings are involved, including our sense of sharing in a community of fellow-valuers. All the arts of man properly enter into this, supporting values in a number of verbal and non-verbal ways. No other human institution has yet been devised to do this as effectively, for as many people of as many ages and backgrounds, as the church. Should such an institution ever arise, we will no doubt quickly (and rightly) call it a "church."

Let us move to more specific examples of the values chosen and cherished by religious liberalism. When we use them, we describe the way we intend to act as well as our intention to become ready and able so to act. If we commit ourselves to the value "love," we mean that we intend to love, to act in a loving manner rather than in alternative ways. The values in our list, which seem to be of the highest importance

for religious liberalism, fall into pairs. This is not because of any "either/or" quality. It is simply the case that no value stands alone in any of our actions, and some values are more closely related than others. In our pairings, the expansion of one value necessarily calls for the expansion of the other, and the two affect each other as they grow.

1. *Curiosity and Awe.* These values are closely related to our knowing, one stimulating it and the other accompanying it. Philosophy, according to Socrates, begins in "wonder." And so do science and religion. How to develop this curiosity, how to keep ourselves opening doors and looking for new pathways—this has been a typical liberal theme. We have perhaps been less concerned to develop an appropriate response to the vastness and intricacy of the cosmos. To use a spatial metaphor: when we push out the horizons of our knowledge, we expand the circumference.

However we choose to visualize it, we are confronted with an increasingly knowable orderliness that does far more than give us a sense of our human power. We understand at the same time more fully the limits and channels within which our desires must operate. We may never be certain whether this order is really a characteristic of the universe itself or simply a characteristic of the mental-conceptual equipment we use in knowing the universe. Even if only the latter, however, order is a reality for *our* part of the universe.

What we mean by "the sacred" and "reverence" is related to this pair of values. When we lose sight of them, science can become simply a seedbed of future technology, and our action within the universe then descends to a kind of cosmic rape rather than the exalted love affair that these values should elicit.

2. *Reason and Truth.* That quality within us which either perceives or imposes the order of nature is reason. For modern men, this is no fixed mental category that finds truths apart from experience. Instead it is the best term we have to describe our most appropriate ways of thinking and speaking about experience. There are no "laws of thought," but we continually search for more fruitful ways of linking our experiences together and relating them to those of others. When those ways enable us to return to the common ground of our experience with better prediction and understanding, we call them reasonable.

Reasoning is a searching, but we must remember that past reasoning has accumulated vast stores of knowledge. This we call truth. Until disproved, it has a special status, and we act in specially respectful ways toward it. In religious language, these two values become "seeking" and "celebrating." The religious liberal is indeed committed to ongoing inquiry, but he contemplates with a kind of joy the results of inquiry. This seeking and celebrating is as germane to ethical and artistic values as it is to scientific knowledge.

3. *Freedom and Responsibility.* Whatever else freedom may involve,

it means that we are not totally bound by instinct and habit. Within a range of options, choices are made. In traditional societies many of those choices are made collectively and are seldom subject to revision. A more open society moves away from behavior-absolutes because of its experiences with social change and its awareness of the changing contexts of men's actions.

Our concern is to move the centers of freedom from societies to individuals. This is an extremely complicated thing. Only to a limited extent can people be "given" freedom. To the unprepared person, freedom is a frightening thing. To realize our value, therefore, we shall find ourselves exploring the seeming paradox that freedom depends upon discipline. The trained pianist is far freer to produce new and varied chords than is the beginner. In other words, freedom increases as our ability to envisage more alternatives increases.

For this reason, we can speak of responsibility as necessarily related to freedom. It is not that freedom is dangerous unless people use it "responsibly," or that freedom without responsibility is "license." Rather is it a mistake to view "rebellion" as freedom. To rebel is to move away from some particular thing. This may often be necessary, but it should not be confused with freedom. Once the rebel has established his new position (which was partly determined by his old position), he is probably in a better position to move toward actual freedom.

To see a wide number of alternatives and be able to select therefrom is both freedom and responsibility since the alternatives will involve people and things and consequences. The trust in freedom that has characterized religious liberalism is by no means misplaced or naive.

4. *Self-exploration and Self-fulfillment.* Freedom finds its real justification in the expansion of the selves that achieve it. For want of a better term, we are calling those ventures that open up our human potentials "self-exploration." These ventures are trans-moral and we must work hard to free the explorations of the self from cultural and theological inhibitions. To uncover one's own possibility for a range of feelings cannot occur without freedom from the need to censor feelings. We need not necessarily engage in external behavior in order to experience certain feelings (we may experience our homicidal feelings, for instance, without acting out an impulse to murder!).

When the full range of our feeling-potential is set in a context of reflectiveness, self-fulfillment occurs. We would not be too far wrong in describing a fulfilled self as a self with "good taste," connoting the development of evaluations and categories that can only appear with wide exposure and reflection.

On the religious levels, these values correspond to a "respect for individual dignity" and a genuine acceptance of the "pluralism" that emerges from the growing uniquenesses of free individuals. To simply tolerate these is not enough; we must welcome and cherish them.

5. *Love and Justice.* Exploration and fulfillment occur primarily within individuals (although with obvious social implications). The reverse is the case with love and justice. These are inter-personal and social but, equally obviously, have individual implications. Love is sometimes defined as the urge to find reunion where separation has occurred. This is true, but it also must include the quest for genuinely new union. Justice is the quality that intelligence brings to this urge to unite and be united. It is the way we try to make things joinable (i.e. lovable). Justice is also the way we try to give a social semi-permanence to values we have achieved in the past in order that love, which is more spontaneous and less reflective, might operate more readily and fully.

Love, in this sense, means drawing into one's own self the experiences of other selves. But it also means drawing selves nearer to each other even though full incorporation could not occur without the destruction of selfhood. Justice is finding ways of achieving this blend of union and separated integrity.

6. *Creativity and Beauty.* These values are somewhat parallel to reason and truth, yet they describe a great range of our experiences. Creativity is the search for the "not-yet" and beauty is the quality of the "already" that resulted from yesterday's creativity.

This final pair of values is perhaps the most inclusive of all, and with little distortion we could group all the other pairs under them. The virtue, after all, of any discussion of values is not that it leads us to a once-for-all precision and finality, but that, at different points in the discussion for different persons, it opens fresh vistas for action. However religious liberalism chooses to name or describe its values, they must never lose this tentative, expansive, and evocative quality. In pointing out the centrality of value-discourse in liberal religious thought, and of value-behavior in liberal religious living, we are trying to do just this.

The religious liberalism we are describing is in no sense anti-intellectual. To be concerned for values is to be involved in a continuing process of weighing, choosing, and rejecting. Our values are not arbitrary or chosen by any kind of blind leaps. We choose them by exploring their outcomes and their relation to other values. Values are inseparably related to desired ends. This discovery is a moral discourse that will become most effective in the kind of church community we are commending.

Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, is not directly related to these values. Quite obviously, science can only study reality ("what-ever is"). But religion and human values, as they operate within our lives, are a real part of this reality which must be studied. Science is the way we know reality, religion is the way we expand it!