

# THE BAR·BROTHEL-SLUM BIT

## NOTES ON LIBERAL SELF·HATRED

ROBERT B. TAPP

"More of genuine religion exists in bars and brothels than in our liberal churches!" When a well-known Unitarian Universalist seminary official said this in my presence recently, I first thought it was just an attention-catching sermon gambit. Upon discovering that he was soberly serious, I suppressed my momentary reflection on the methodology and sampling behind his researches and realized that I was face-to-face with a current mood among some liberals that was distinguished here only by its terse frankness. Another seminary official recently castigated our churches for losing contact with "the unwashed, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the poor, and the deviate" and becoming exclusive, middle-class clubs.

At least two of our seminaries are now revising their courses of study for future ministers to include broader exposure to the slums of metropolis.. In itself, this is probably long overdue. What becomes puzzling is some of the stated rationale for the change. Two distinct ideas are coupled here that can only lead to confusion. While we might eventually want to link them together, we should surely be aware of what we are doing.

To do something *to, for* or *about* any neglected social group is an ancient and hallowed religious urge. Methodists work on drunkards, the Salvation Army handles skid-row, the Sev'enth-Day Adventists home-in on cancer-anxious smokers. I am not necessarily endorsing these missions, or their motives and methods, but simply reminding liberals that a mission to the slums would not be a very new or even very daring enterprise in our Western society.

The mood I sense and am trying to describe goes far beyond this-

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in fact so far beyond that it almost appears to reject the notion of a "mission" and become an attempt to search for the lost liberal soul. As such, it becomes a new odyssey, a new "passage to India." The men I have quoted, and their colleagues, seem to be saying that liberals need the slums more than the slums need liberals! Not what we can do to them but what they can do for us. Some positive religious experiences and contributions exist there which are absent, (were they always?) from our churches. Somehow, at the lower levels and along the outer fringes of our society, profound life-and religious-realities await us, and we must become inclusive enough to make room for them. Indeed, the very organization and structure of our present churches would need to be shaken up if we decided to take seriously this "vitality .."

Let me call this emerging liberal mood the bar-brothel-slum bit. To

understand it, we must look at the larger American religious scene. In many ways, our men are simply mirroring the current Protestant fad. We are all participant in a vast population shift. First, out-migration from rural and farm areas swelled our cities and essentially destroyed the small-town reference base of American Protestantism. During this same period, however, newer immigrants from Europe were building the base for Catholic power in the cities. Frustrated by this, and frightened by subsequent movements of Southern Negroes into their cities, Protestants have consistently fled to the suburbs. This decimated their inner-city churches almost before they had learned to use them effectively. The social gospel struggled during this period, a monument to the sensitivity of the reforming few, but suburbanization won. Instead of a few large churches, dominated by men, the Protestant reality became many smaller suburban churches, dominated by wives and responsive to local and middle-class needs.

Gibson Winter, a sensitive and sophisticated sociologist of religion, has termed this the "suburban captivity of the churches" and labors valiantly to commit Protestants (and suburbanized Catholics) to a new responsibility for the whole city and the whole society.

Much of main-stream Protestant leadership (ministers and denominational officials) would agree with Winter's analysis and would share his basic assumption that the church must reshape and improve the larger society. In part this agreement reflects the fact that

former divisions between "liberals" and "fundamentalists" have disappeared. The solvent for the arguments of the 1920's has been a return to a more orthodox Protestant theology. The Billy Grahams have moved somewhat leftward, theologically speaking, and the Reinhold Niebuhrs have moved a bit to the right. While many differences remain, there is a growing ideological unity within Protestant circles based upon a common concern for Biblical thinking. This "new theology" has played a major role in the development of a "new social gospel." Within main-stream Protestant elites and major denominational officialdoms, there is a large consensus -less radical than the social gospel of the 1930's, but also less divisive theologically.

The striking fact about today's Protestantism as a whole, however, is the great gulf between pulpit and pew. Laymen are not buying the new theology, and find it out of contact with their genuinely this-worldly concerns. Nor are they buying the new social gospel, which upsets the gentility and irrelevance that they demand from their churches on this level. Across the land, ministers who supported Johnson are being attacked by their Goldwater laymen, and strong civil rights activity continues to cost many a minister his pulpit. Occasional tensions between minister and congregation are, of course, an old story. The new element is the growing theological-social consensus among ministers which thus far has failed to evoke a similar and supporting consensus among Protestant church members.

Given the situation, the new Protestant mood becomes more understandable, and one can sympathize with those who deplore the suburban isolation of the ordinary layman and the resultant country-club atmosphere of his churches. One can even sympathize with the judgment that the institutional form of present churches is now outdated and their present pattern of ministry is doomed to irrelevancy. The spokesmen for this new critique are reaching for "new forms" of ministry and new styles of "servant churchmanship." Insofar as they steer clear of what we have called the bar-brothel-slum bit, some fascinating experiments will emerge.

This growing crisis within Protestant churches comes into sharpest focus in the Civil Rights movement. A fair, but statistically insignificant, number of mainstream ministers and laymen have, of course, been involved for years in the struggle for racial equality. Serious and widespread involvement of churchmen and churches, however, has occurred only in the last few years. Apart from this tragic tardiness in accepting a challenge to the Christian conscience, the significant thing here is the hostile counterreaction still very much alive in Protestant churches. No single item better illustrates what we have termed the gap between pulpit and pew. Even now, when one might say that history is thrusting greatness upon the churches, we have to admit that reluctance and resistance remain.

This delayed Protestant reaction to America's color problem has had the cumulative effect of leaving the

church unprepared and impotent (and therefore voiceless) in the face of automation or our growing brutality in Viet Nam and the Caribbean. This bankruptcy occurs not only on the action front, but also on the idea front. Actions can, after all, be mobilized in a crisis if you know what you want to do. In this instance, Protestantism is trying so desperately to atone for its past sins of neglect that it has committed all its troops to a single front. Without questioning the importance of the battle, one must note the battles shaping up on other fronts.

Insofar as the preceding characterization of Protestant problems make sense, so do the frenzied and despairing reassessments of the nature and function of the church. What concerns me here is whether estimates and rethinkings along these lines are also necessary within the liberal churches, or whether they are even appropriate there. And, of utmost importance, if the new mood, the bar-brothel-slum bit, is not appropriate to Unitarian and Universalist churches - how do we explain its presence there, and what do we do about it?

The suburban liberal church or fellowship, as far as I can tell, really bears little significant resemblance to its mainstream Protestant neighbors. Naturally there will be exceptions to the portrait here, but the attempt is to describe the expansive sector of our movement which will increasingly characterize "us" if we continue our present growth rate. With broad strokes, certain unique features can be sketched.

Social action is not a "whether"

issue. Much debate occurs over *which* resolution to back or which course of action to pursue, but almost no one can be found to argue that the church ought not be involved in social-ethical issues. We need not try to decide whether liberal churches create or simply attract persons with these commitments - the fact is that they are sustained in such churches.

Religious liberals are highly involved in power and education lobbies - Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood Association, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and the like. While there are no reliable figures available, it would seem that an abnormally high percentage of the members of these groups come from liberal churches. More important to the generalization we are making, an abnormally high percentage of the members of the average liberal church are involved in such change groups. Many would-be members sense this value-homogeneity and find it attractive.

The typical liberal church is not estranged or alienated from the intellectual life of our culture. This has its drawbacks, to be sure, as seen in the vocabulary and content of sermon, pronouncement, and discussion. But these apparently speak to the members and give a good profile of the style of these members. Liberal religion has oriented itself to the modern truth-generator - the university. This close attachment to changing truths is an excellent safeguard against the usual tensions between younger and older generations.

This common cognitive base provides a platform for all which recognizes both continuity and change.

The communication-gap between pulpit and pew is a small one. The common educational background and value orientation we have noted lifts the congregation to the level of the minister. The absence of sacramentalism and clericalism fosters communication, and the net effect is highly creative equality with continual opportunities for feed-back. The "common worship" in these churches is indeed common in the sense of being shared and understood.

The various social unities just noted within the liberal church reflect a supporting structure that has received far too little attention - the implicit ideological-theological unity. One can easily be misled by superficial signs of an apparent theological pluralism, as in the so-called humanist-theist controversy. Much more central is a doctrine of man - and here liberals have maintained much continuity and agreement. Man is capable of freedom, they all would say, and functions best as he seeks it. His potential for goodness is grounded in his struggle for freedom. Man has also a real potential for evil, but this emerges only when he operates out of a fear of freedom and a lack of trust in freedom's saving powers. Progress is the increase of freedom, of man's power to inquire, understand, and act. Ultimately we are saved (Le., led to fulfillment) by knowledge, which presupposes freedom and predisposes our behavior. We are so constituted or evolved as to be

capable of achieving that which we need. We therefore trust man - not simply as he is, but as he is continually becoming.

If this portrait be valid - if religious liberals are action-oriented, community-involved, intellectually attuned and in communication, and possessed of a unifying doctrine of man - then we must say that they are *in* but not *of* suburbia. The liberal church differs sharply from the suburban Protestant churches, and the various remedies being carefully compounded for mainstream Protestantism will provide a dubious therapy at best for liberalism.

How explain, then, the bar-brothel-slum bit when it appears among liberals? One clue might be found in the psychological concept of "self-hatred." Kurt Lewin used this to explain how some Jews become anti-Semitic: the insecure member of a minority group, not being sure who he is, may begin to see himself in terms of the negative attitudes held by the majority group regarding his group. Once he thinks and feels this way about himself, he moves as far away from the center of his own group and toward the edge of the, majority group as the latter will permit.

With some modifications, this may help explain the curious liberal mood we are discussing. Particularly in the case of persons whose organizational affiliation is Unitarian or Universalist but whose emotional and theological identification is with Protestantism. The growing irrelevancy of modern Protestantism creates problems for these Protestant-type liberals. Not finding enough security in their

Protestantism, they turn to the self-critical, negative image of its failures and try to draw their strength there. For this marginal religious liberal, Protestantism appeared to be a majority group, but as he moves toward it, he discovers it has become a psychological minority group. In his dual allegiance, the marginal liberal transfers the Protestant self-hatred back onto his own liberal group.

Lewin also suggested that the minority group, in its need for acceptance, will pick its own leadership from persons standing at its "periphery," i.e., persons closer to the desired majority group. This has certainly been true of Unitarians and Universalists on many occasions.. Feeling themselves to be a minority, they have been selected leaders from their conservative periphery rather than their liberal center. In the past, such leaders have proved useful buffers and mediators, despite the fact that they typically distrusted the liberalism at the center of their own group. Such persons moved toward the Protestant majority group and tended to view their own group through critical Protestant eyes. This was "simple" self-hatred, and our denominational history affords many examples.

Today, however, the situation has become vastly more complicated. The Protestant avant-garde has a minority-group interpretation of its own group, and the Protestant-type liberal leader is involved in a very ambiguous kind of self-hatred. Is it too much to hope that two negatives will somehow make a positive and that this kind of liberal will be led back in-

to a more realistic assessment of his own movement's center? Or that liberalism will assert its own central integrity as the best contribution it can make to mankind's religious future?

The second explanatory clue we offer to explain the bar-brothel-slum mood among liberals turns out to be equally complex. Alongside of self-hatred, I would place "guilt-become-romanticism." Let us start by assuming that our common and pervasive human response to poverty, illiteracy, and pain is the feeling of acute distress. To some extent we are sympathizing (i.e., feeling *with*) those in pain, to some extent we are imaginatively identifying ("there but for the grace of God go I"). In any event, we become ill at ease and look for explanations. Some once found these in laws of nature or market-place, or in notions of an inexorable divine Providence or Fate. Others, however, lessened their onlooking distress by a curious, almost envious, romantic interpretation that discovered highly-desirable qualities among the downtrodden. This was the "noble savage" theme. Interestingly enough, it is never proposed by the "savages" themselves (who, after all, know better) but it has often been capitalized upon by the "professional" savages to achieve their own betterment (they, too, have an envy pattern, and it is a much more functional one).

In our days of affluence and technology, a new element enters this picture. We know - down deep, and for the first time in history - that the slum is neither inevitable nor necessary. We mount

a "war on poverty" with a sense of realism, when men in earlier centuries would have seen it as a futile and wasteful tilt against the windmills of fate. But, precisely because these things are no longer the necessary evils they once were, we now begin to feel guilty in their presence! This new guilt may lead us back into some of the old romantic illusions.

The element of romanticism or primitivism here is an old story. It is hard to refute since it is held on emotional, rather than rational grounds. Contrast the middle-class fantasies about "healthy" lower-class sexuality (cf. any D. H. Lawrence novel) with the depressing facts of the matter as uncovered by Kinsey and other investigators.

What we can do, perhaps, when faced with this kind of romanticism ("Slum-dwellers and prostitutes *really* have more dignity than suburbanites"; "Urban renewal destroys the 'character' of our quaint cities.") is to make clear that it is basically a way of patronizing people. To tell the underdog that he is *really* an upperdog-without-knowing-it is to fail to hear his insistent plea that he *is* an underdog and that it *does* hurt. Above all, it is to weaken the motivation to escape his present hell that is the real meaning of his pain.

What to do with the guilt element found in this mood? Reduce it in the only effective way that guilt can ever be reduced - by removing its causes. Our society is poised for a many-fronted attack upon the degrading by-products of urban, industrial living. Is not our responsibility here to continue to listen for cries of human distress,

succor the victims, analyze the causes, channel the guilt of non-victims into constructive actions that will remove the causes and thus effectively salvage present and future victims?

Let me now relate this to future directions for religious liberalism by recalling the initial distinction between doing something *for* victims and claiming to discover positive insights *from* victims-as-victims. If the liberal church is a human community involved in seeking and celebrating those values that expand the quality of life, it is a community that requires widespread and constant communication. Having no fixed truths to purveyor defend, it survives only by constant discussion, reflection, and testing. For this reason, we are doomed to a kind of selectivity and self-selectivity, ev'en though we would exclude no man. Those who come to us for packaged or easy religious answers must necessarily drift away disappointed. Those who are content with present society, who have no "lover's quarrel with the world," will fail to find solace. Those consumed by hatred of the past and present, who covet any kind of change for its

own sake, will not remain long. Liberalism is only for those who can live on the, creative razor's edge between seeking and celebrating. If we are to feel guilty about the state of religious liberalism, it should be because we are failing to reach such persons and involve them in our churches.

No greater mistake would be made than to call this a "middle-class movement" as a means of reproach. It is rather a movement committed to the intelligent reconstruction of society and enrichment of the possibilities of life. That Western society develops and cultivates these qualifications primarily within its middle-classes is a fact, not a fault. The genius of religious liberalism is not what it has to offer to m'en but what it can encourage men to do *with* men. Our primary goal should be to enlarge the community of persons who share this vision and work at it. Such a policy is neither exclusivist nor dogmatically equalitarian. If we are to resist the tendencies to self-hatred or romanticism, we must cultivate an organizational realism that is both hard and wise.

