

A Doctrine for **Our** Times

by *Robert B. Tapp*

We live in a world changing so fast that most of us were already out-of-date when we left school. We live in the midst of a liberal church changing faster than we can comprehend or guide it. It is a rare scanner of the signs of these times who can discern the difference between midnight and morning, or even assure us that day inevitably follows night.

Many among us have succumbed to that peculiar malady of our epoch - the anxiety over not being anxious. As Gilbert Murray said of the late Romans and as Sidney Hook said of the late New Dealers, we have experienced a failure of nerve. Few things will be more puzzling to our future historians than the eagerness with which many in our liberal camp have listened to what "they" (Tillich, the Niebuhrs, Barth, Brunner, *et al.*) have been saying about "us" - not only listened, as all of us should, but *agreed!* When did you last hear, or preach, a sermon about liberalism's "loss of a dimension of depth"? Or about "ontological shock"? Or about the recovery of a sense of "human sinfulness"? Or about "the existential" - that blessed barbarism which has replaced our former adjectives "real" and "true"?

Please don't misunderstand me. I *believe* in sin. And I think the closest example of it is the failure of our liberal officialdom and seminaries in recent decades to preserve a lively theological sophistication about our theological traditions and the history of liberalism. Only such a gross sin could have left so many of us so unprepared to distinguish between the winds of doctrine and the hot airs that buffet us. But a corporate confession of this sin does not require us to return to some neo-Protestant confessionalism.

In fact, I suspect that quite the reverse will be the case. The brief for modern man, which we helped to write, is a pretty good one. Our problems, on second look, seem more to stem from a lack of modernity than from a surfeit.

I, for one, am still something of an optimist about the human estate. I still find a basic goodness in the human animal - a goodness which is not meaningfully qualified or negated by references to a "fall," even a mythical one. I am also forced to trace a progress in human history which undergirds a realistic optimism. Nor do I find my adopted ancestors *really* talking about any automatic escalator to eternity.

Finally, and more central to the faith of our fathers, I still find it more useful to speak of human reason than of any other functioning of our being. How else shall we discuss our feelings of truth and beauty and goodness but by reason? These matters do not, as some would say, defy discussion. Our community, our church, is grounded in just such communication.

Even as a non-Freudian, I am jarred to hear Freud impregnated in defense of irrationalism. Of course there are irrational elements in our experience of ourselves and, seemingly, of our cosmos. But to comprehend them, to understand them, perhaps even to control them - how else but by reason?

And time, it would seem, is on our side. Never in history has a small movement, which ours surely is, had so many powerful allies. Every new breakthrough in the sciences underscores our faith in the reach of reason. Every new schoolchild is a harbinger of a larger harvest of the developed human mind. Every advance in welfare-statelsm, even under tyrannical auspices, moves another group of our brothers closer to what Professor Karl Deutsch has called the "take-off point" - the point at which men are sufficiently freed from the pressures of their environment to impress their own wills upon it.

With such allies, how can we lose? Time and history are on our side. But Strontium-gO, I must remind myself, is also in the race. My vision is not of what will be, but of what may be. Are there not, however, good evidences that ordinary people, given some information, are often wiser than their statesmen - or at least than their generals and admirals?

What is the vision? An exciting new world, even if not necessarily a brave one. Religious liberals are called, not to save it from itself, but to guide it into being fully itself. And their

allies will be many. Our danger is not that we will be too far in the van, but that we will be passed by. Nothing is so irrelevant as outmoded fact, warmed over and served up as today's faith. A religious liberal who is still wedded to yesterday's truths has become orthodox without knowing it. I recently listened in on a conversation between a young psychiatrist, who was sympathetically exploring some aspects of extrasensory perception and faith healing, and one of our theological professors, who was knowingly the scoffer in the name of "science."

We can lose our relevance to these times, not by being wrong, but by being insufficiently and inadequately right. Our times are moving, and they are moving in general directions that historic liberalism has pointed. To stay on the crest of a wave, one must paddle - with wisdom and with skill.

The price of relevance is neither more members nor more friends. Our major needs can be discussed under three headings:

I -- We need an *adequate theological sensitivity*. Contrary to much of what may be heard about us, even within our own circles, liberalism is not the obverse of orthodoxy. Rather, we differ in our starting points. We begin with an assessment of man and his potential. While this is not necessarily the opposite of "God's mighty acts," we have found it a more fruitful approach.

If we have been correct in this approach, then supernaturalism is ruled out. However, liberal theologizing has been grounded in both naturalistic and idealistic philosophies, and these remain as present options. Regardless of the approach, the liberal concern from Socrates to our times has ultimately been with excellence (*arete*) in the whole human animal. Perhaps theology might even be called a science, from this point of view, in its attempt to conceptualize *both* what has been and what is coming to be. We might even call the interplay of these two approaches - that based on the recognized characteristics of man, and that based on his emergent tendencies - *agapics*, using a Greek root for "love" that was prominent in early Christian times. The hypothesis of agapics is that altruistic love is a *fact*, that it func-

tions creatively in human development, and even in evolution. Agapics can thus describe the whole man, functioning fully, much as the physician's concept "health" describes both the present state of the body and its general tendency of development.

If we come at the matter this way, we shall avoid two pitfalls. We shall not be denying that empirical, rational inquiry can deal with human goods and values. In today's scene, this is no small accomplishment. On the other hand, and equally important, we shall avoid expecting our scientists and technicians to *produce* values through research. Values are made by men, are relevant as they reshape life and inquiry, and are open to useful study only when they do just that.

2 -- Our second need is now apparent. If the shaping and achieving of those values that fulfill human potentialities is at the center of liberal theology, then the church has a clear function quite apart from purely intellectual pursuits. It is the laboratory in which these values are sought, tested and nourished. Thus a prime need is a more profound worship - that is, *a deepening of the relationship between belief and practice.*

Worship, as most of us understand it, is that mode of experience in which the whole of our being responds to the claims of reality upon us. This can happen both in our solitude and in our group life. Yet our actual behavior on this level is embarrassingly haphazard and shallow. Whether we proclaim brotherhood or integrity or dignity or democracy, the gap between theory and behavior is glaring.

Most of us would agree that the process of being intrigued and jolted and remade by these values involves a form of worship. But how many of us are genuinely intrigued, or jolted or remade? If the worship is to be valid, all the richness of mind and emotion must be stirred. To this end, we must utilize all the arts (including the ultimate art of sensing what is central.)

The fact that the psychology of religion has uncovered so much that is unhealthy or undesirable among church members further underscores this crucial relationship between belief and practice. Can a liberal church, which rejects trivial and pathological beliefs and holds to the profoundly simple belief in

creative love, prove that such love can be developed by education? And, of supreme importance, can it prove that the liberal church is the best vehicle for such education?

To do so, we must heed more carefully all that the psychotherapists have discovered in their attempts to bring alienated persons back into contact. We must study most closely the phenomenon of resistance, which plays such a central part in so much of genuinely religious experience. It may be that the most desirable values are also the hardest to obtain and that this very fact makes their claims upon us so threatening. Peter was neither the first nor the last to say, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." The line between humility and timidity is a fine one.

Most of us, most of the time, are exceedingly ambivalent about our central values. Let us accept this, as a start. Then let us go on to create and inhabit those structures which can move us beyond vacillation and rationalization into more integral living. The church can be such a structure when it lives under constant criticism, from without and within. The problem is to know what we really want to achieve in terms of human potentialities. The answers will never be fixed, nor will the goals; but we can gain the vision to see directions and next steps.

3-- This leads to the final need - the need for an *adequate social ethic*. There are still disadvantaged persons and groups in our society, and any sensitive religious group must be responsive to the demands of justice. But we must distinguish carefully between the work done and the work to be done. Our support of racial integration, for instance, is for all practical purposes unanimous. No new theories seem necessary, simply the persistent and persuasive application of what we already know. One might almost say that brotherhood is in America today a legal, economic and educational problem: ethical pioneering is no longer called for.

This is true of many of the old "causes." There is no sadder sight than alleged liberals trying in our day to assume the radical postures of the 1930s. Nor must we neglect the lessons of the last two decades and succumb to the easy tendency to focus on the environment, while ignoring the individuals who make up such

a large part of it. The tired and bitter reformer, whose being betrays his program, needs a psychiatrist more than he needs a pulpit.

An adequate social ethic in our day will address itself to the *advantaged* groups. It will jar their complacency and confusion about themselves. What *are* the effects of an economy of consumption? What are the moral privileges (and pitfalls) of the age of affluence? For what does less - and less tedious - work free us? How does one find meaning in a lengthened life span, if a short life has already been boring and uncreative? In a large society, where power is depersonalized and organizations proliferate, how can the individual hope to see some of his values incorporated into the massive realities? Most puzzling of all, how can reason operate to check the drift into a war that no one wants and whose outcome will be genetically disastrous, quite apart from any short-term political results?

None of these questions is wholly new. Certainly none has received serious consideration, or achieved even minimal clarification, in our liberal community. Yet these are some of today's issues; and we must face these issues and weave them into our interpretation of the potentialities of human society. For such a venture, no lines can be drawn between our religious and our secular neighbors. These are questions where fact and value merge and, therefore, where all dogmatism is predoomed to fail.

In outlining our needs in the areas of theological thinking, practical implementation and ethical sensitivity, I have actually been calling for a new doctrine of the liberal church. That we now lack such a doctrine should be apparent to all. That no one can authoritatively hand us such a doctrine should be equally clear. That cooperative inquiry might lead us into a greater consensus and therefore a greater effectiveness is but a hope. It seems, however, to be a hope that reasonable men may and must reasonably entertain.