

The Making of a Liberal

Sunday Evening Social

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It is wonderful to see you and to be with you again. I was delighted with the first social gathering – it was electric – hugs and tears and laughter: a great combination! As I indicated then, I was a bit embarrassed that so many came to hear my story, but then realized that was what was advertised so you came anyway. Then Tom Hammond clarified the situation for me when he assured me that the reason this community gathers is not because of the address but rather to meet one another – and I know he was teasing me, but he was also correct. Being together with such a community is a rich experience worth enduring sermons poor and poorer.

Some of you have told me you know my story and the first presentation didn't bring anything new. Let me say I know some of you know my story well, but my decision to go over it again was not to tell it one more time but to tell it for the first time from the place to which I've come and the present understanding I have.

My story, as all of our stories, is particular but in the particular there lies the universal and it is the universal aspects that interest me – not just for myself, but for all of us. I hope my reflection can be a catalyst for you to reflect on your own story, bringing to awareness where you are and why you are where you are.

To live with awareness and intentionality is a great gift – awareness of why we are passionate about some questions, why we react strongly in some situations, why some things simply don't touch us or move us.

The process about which I'm speaking involves increasingly bringing to consciousness that vast underground sea of the unconscious. I'm no expert here but I know that there are depths in us that erupt or seep through, fashioning our attitudes and determining our actions. The more I am aware of how I act and react in any given situation, the more I will live with self-understanding and self-knowledge.

Why am I moved, or not, by religious experience; why am I a Christian – a conservative Christian or a liberal Christian; why am I a Republican or Democrat;

why do I feel as I do about Israel, the Middle East – Iraq, Iran, Hamas, Palestinians, and so on...

It is with such questions in mind, with such a search, that I go over my story from the present perspective. And I do so for my own understanding but, more importantly here, to trigger a similar process in you, because such a process renders great riches and enhances our lives.

The fascinating question for me revolves around the relationship of my early nurture and my educational experience. As I reported last week, high academic achievement throughout my schooling, yet, at age 25, I was not an educated person in terms of critical thinking and critical analysis.

What would I have gained from a more open nurturing? Yet, when my system broke, I never felt adrift from God, rudderless, or despondent. When the dogmatic structure imploded, was it the deep nurturing that enabled me to stand amidst the failed system?

And how about you? Have you mapped your journey?

Not everyone experiences a crisis of faith and identity but I did – a total swing from absolutism to critical rationality and provisionalism. That is where I find myself at this point in my life – knowing my values, beliefs, commitments are choices I make without absolute certainty and without verifiable proofs. I hope in my third presentation to detail some of the fundamental choices I have made and the fundamental trust with which I live.

But let me pick up the story where I left off in my first presentation: I have settled in the Netherlands enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Leiden under the direction of Professor Hendrikus Berkhof.

As I have indicated, a recent re-reading of Gary Dorrien's *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, Vol. II, brought me to a sharp awareness that I had never studied or been aware of the theological development in this country and yet it was a remarkable tradition. I had, however, studied in depth the liberal development in Europe. That development looks to Friedrich Schleiermacher as the Father of the Liberal Theological movement.

The orthodox Christian faith was seriously challenged in the late 18th century. The rise of the natural sciences employing the scientific method of empirical investigation and the rise of historical consciousness in the 19th century were the major challenges to the dogmatic structure of Christian faith, both in its Catholic and Protestant expressions. The culture of the European universities were not at all sympathetic to religion and, specifically, not to Christian faith.

Schleiermacher, at age 29 in 1797, wrote *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*, a title that speaks volumes. He was part of the cultural elite but felt

totally isolated from his contemporaries. His “Speeches” were his attempt to give expression to his own deepest truth. In the first speech he acknowledges no authority beyond his own thought and experience.

Why then, as I am fully conscious that in all I have to say to you I entirely belie my profession, should I not acknowledge it like any other accident? Its prepossessions shall in no way hinder us. Neither in asking nor in answering shall the limits it holds sacred be valid between us. As a man I speak to you of the sacred secrets of mankind according to my views – of what was in me as with youthful enthusiasm I sought the unknown, of what since then I have thought and experienced, of the innermost springs of my being which shall forever remain for me the highest, however I be moved by fear. Nor is it done from any caprice or accident. Rather it is the pure necessity of my nature; it is a divine call; it is that which determines my position in the world and makes me what I am. Wherefore, even if it were neither fitting nor prudent to speak of religion, there is something which compels me and represses with its heavenly power all those small considerations

Let me be clear. As I arrived in Leiden at age 32, I was nowhere near the wisdom and insight of Schleiermacher. My foundations were crumbling and my systematic theological scheme was faltering but I was not yet able to diagnose my dilemma. Even so, I begin with Schleiermacher because I now realize that the task he set for himself was precisely what I have been engaged in for over 30 years – for me a long, arduous journey toward freedom – the freedom to wonder, critique and change. It was right here in Spring Lake that this drama took place during the years 1971 to 2004.

I remember vividly my return here in 1971. I was not sure I had anything to preach or if I could lead the worship service. I had been in Europe for four years, having preached twice: once in The Hague and once in Antwerp. I chose a dissertation subject that was just breaking with most of the work in German philosophical theology that was heavy indeed but the focus – the question of whether there are traces of God’s action within history that were discernible – was my question. The discussion centered in the resurrection of Jesus – a subject that had not been seriously considered in German theology for over a century. I was full of that discussion and had written the first chapter when I felt it necessary to return to the States to check on my children who had left with their mother on July 1, 1970. My whole domestic situation at the time would take a chapter to portray and was not insignificant to my eventual theological movement but would take me from my purpose in this presentation. In sum, I returned here, not knowing whether I could find my voice to lead the Spring Lake congregation but I did insist, “Give me Jesus and the resurrection and the rest is negotiable.”

What Schleiermacher was consciously about as the 18th century closed, I was about also, but without the clarity with which he sought to ground his faith in a new mode and bring Christian faith to fresh expression. In a series, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, C. W. Christian writes the volume *Friedrich Schleiermacher*. He sets the historical context for Schleiermacher's work.

The question confronting Schleiermacher and nineteenth-century theology was whether it was any longer possible to restore the vitality of Christian faith and to provide a basis for a vigorous and creative future. The double crisis of scientific empiricism and relativizing historicism seemed to tear away the foundations on which traditional Christianity had stood. Claude Welch has expressed the two absolutely urgent questions which confronted the generation of Schleiermacher; namely, whether theology is any longer possible in the modern world, and, even if it is, whether a *Christian* theology is possible. Schleiermacher's work as a theologian can be understood in large measure as a response to these questions.

If the rehabilitation of faith and theology was to be more than doctrinaire, several specific demands faced the one who assumed the task. First, he must find a new authority for faith, since the traditional appeal to church authority and Scripture seemed no longer sufficient. Second, he must demonstrate how the work of theology is to be done in the changed, intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the modern world. Finally, he must show what an adequate theology – one which is at the same time truly modern and genuinely Christian – has to say. Thus the theological quest of Schleiermacher is threefold: it is (1) a search for authority, (2) a reconstruction of theological method, and (3) a reformulation of the content of religious faith in general and of the Christian faith in particular.

That concise summary of Schleiermacher's task is possible when one looks in retrospect from the end to the beginning – something I am now attempting for myself. While at the time of my European experience I did not have such clarity, one thing I knew for certain: the authority with which I had based my Christian faith to that point was broken. I knew the view of Scripture that sees it as an inerrant, infallible revelation from God, mediated by the Spirit through human instrumentality, was no longer a tenable article of faith for me.

Thus I did know in personal experience that I needed a new authority. It is understandable that those who go through a faith crisis most often come face-to-face with the matter of authority. As Gary Dorrien writes in the first volume of his trilogy *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion*:

The idea of liberal theology is nearly three centuries old. *In essence, it is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority.* Since the eighteenth century, liberal Christian thinkers have argued that religion should be modern and

progressive and that the meaning of Christianity should be interpreted from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience.

For the most part we are born into a faith, whether Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and all the myriad of religious expressions. That is the way it has been in traditional societies. With the advent of modernity in the West, that has broken down, eroded by the rise of critical rationality. The empirical method of the natural sciences and the rise of historical thinking in the 19th century have caused us to question the received tradition handed down. Still, we begin at heart in the religious understanding and posture into which we are born, for the most part.

But then, for some of us, questions arise. For Schleiermacher, as the 18th century closed, the whole elite cultural milieu was hostile to religion as a phase in human development that was passing before the triumphant march of human rationality. For me, it was simply questions that I could no longer suppress, spawned by pastoral experience and continuing study and reflection. I began to realize how many pat answers were really learned responses that were not rooted in reason, tried and tested, but simply what the narrow confines of my conservative tradition taught. And the wider my exposure to other traditions and communities, the more it was apparent that the whole structure of faith and practice was arbitrary, constructed at some point in the past, given the mantle of divine authority and passed along as absolute truth.

One of the unexpected gifts of my experience in The Netherlands was worshiping at the American Church in The Hague as well as the Dutch Hervormde Kerk. The Hague had about 4000 Americans, many of them southern oil folk who worked the North Sea. Those for whom a church community and worship was important gathered on Sunday, coming from all points on the Protestant spectrum. A good number of Southern Baptists with big red-covered floppy Bibles, High Church Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and even some Dutch folk wanting to practice their English.

For me this was a marvelous introduction to ecumenical Christian community. All the respective forms were used. If an Episcopal baby was to be baptized, the Episcopal liturgy was used, if Presbyterian, the Presbyterian liturgy and practice was followed, and so on. When the Eucharist was celebrated, one could go forward, kneel and receive the sacrament at the rail or wait in the pew for the elements to be passed. The congregation from various backgrounds found community in a foreign land and celebrated their mutual Christian faith by means of their respective traditions.

I've often reflected on that experience as the seed bed for my return here and our name change from the First Reformed Church to Christ Community Church four months later. Once let loose in such a rich ecumenical experience, I wanted us to become more than a Reformed congregation. In June 1971, we took our first step

out of the narrow confines of a particular parochial institutional affiliation, opening up to the whole spectrum of Christian institutional alignments.

The point I'm making here is that what for me once was the divinely ordered institutional form and structure, as expressed in the Reformed Church in America, was now understood as one historically conditioned institutional form and structure – relative to its time and place of origin. This all seems so elementary, such recognition seems so obvious to me now, but it was not always so. It was a process of exposure and experience beyond the narrow confines of my early exclusive experience in the Reformed church with its heavy Dutch ethnicity, piety, and doctrinal teaching.

But the breaking out of church forms and structures was child's play compared with the theological struggle that lay ahead of me. It was the engagement with the theological formulation of my Christian faith that brought me to Europe and, again, the question of authority was the first item that needed to be dealt with. Slowly, painfully, I was moving from a Reformed Christian with the mantra "Soli Scriptura" – by Scripture alone – to a liberal posture that approached the Bible critically, understanding it in terms of the historical context in which it arose and recognizing that it was not a book of one unified theme, consistent from Genesis to Revelation, but a vast collection of writings covering centuries of variegated human experience and spiritual insight, wisdom and historical experience.

Where does one find authority? Why do I believe this rather than that? How does one arbitrate between conflicting claims of the respective faith traditions? Huge questions! And, reading in *The Christian Century* the report of the annual synods of the respective denominations, one is aware that these respective bodies have not yet come to consensus on the authority question.

As I said above, I was on the way to a liberal posture. Let me attempt to put "liberal" in the context in which I use it. I cannot trace the history of the liberal movement as it issued from Schleiermacher in Europe or as it developed in the American liberal tradition, but I hope I can enable you to see the liberal posture, not as a movement with its own set of religious insights and doctrinal formulations, but rather as a *method*, a set of mind as one approaches all questions.

I find it interesting that in our present religious and political discourse the liberal label is looked on as negative. There is an election Tuesday and the campaign literature that has come to our house finds the candidates touting their conservative credentials; a liberal doesn't stand a chance in our region. Yet the *Oxford Encyclopedia English Dictionary* defines "liberal" as "giving freely, generous, not sparing; open-minded, not prejudiced; not literal (of interpretation); for general broadening of the mind, regarding many traditional beliefs as dispensable, invalidated by modern thought, or liable to change."

Sounds pretty good to me. Why would not everyone want to be liberal? Well, perhaps because the liberal movement also became codified with its own set of beliefs; it became liberalism marked by its own creedal formulations. This discussion would lead us astray from my purpose which is to see the liberal approach, not as a well-formulated set of beliefs, but as a method. This was insisted on by one of the Chicago School Theologians, Shailer Matthews (born 1863). He wrote *The Faith of Modernism*, using the term “modernism” in a positive sense although it was used as a derogatory description of those liberal thinkers who were trying to find an expression of Christian faith in light of modern knowledge. As Dorrien describes Matthew’s work,

The mainline churches were trapped in stupid debates over outmoded literal dogmas while the world went to hell.... “There are two social minds at work in our world,” he observed. “The one seeks to reassert the past; the other seeks by new methods to gain efficiency.” The first was a futile reaction against modernity, but the second could not succeed without progressive Christian guidance and support. (Vol. II, p. 205).

...The key difference was its scientific character. Matthews argued that modernism was not a new theology or philosophy. It was essentially a method, not a creed...it was “the use of scientific, historical, social method in understanding and applying evangelical Christianity to the needs of living persons.” Modernism had no confessions, it did not vote in conventions, and it did not enforce belief by coercion...Dogmatic Christianity is based on doctrinal conformity through group authority; modern Christianity begins with the religious movement that gave rise to doctrine and interprets the movement through the use of critical methodologies. Modernists are Christians “who accept the result of scientific research as data with which to think religiously.” (Vol. II, p. 206).

Dorrien has been most helpful to me in defining liberal theology. In the Introduction to Volume I, he writes,

The intellectual giants of nineteenth-century theological liberalism were German theologians and philosophers, but the questions that gave rise to this tradition were not unique to German academics: Is it possible to be a faithful Christian without believing that God willed the annihilation of nearly the entire human race in a great flood, or that God commanded the genocidal extermination of the ancient enemies of Israel, or that God demanded the literal sacrifice of his Son as a substitutionary legal payment for sin? Is it a good or true form of Christianity that teaches the doctrines of double predestination and biblical inerrancy? Can Christianity claim to be religiously true if the bible contains myths and historical errors? Is there a progressive Christian “third way” between the authority-based

orthodoxies of traditional Christianity and the spiritless materialism of modern atheism or deism?...

The liberal tradition of theology that flowed out of the enlightenment established the methods and laid the enduring conceptual foundations of modern critical theological scholarship by appealing to the authority of critical rationality and religious experience.

In accord with my concept of it as a movement that began in the late eighteenth century, I define liberal theology primarily by its original character as a mediating Christian movement. Liberal Christian theology is a tradition that derives from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Protestant attempt to reconceptualize the meaning of traditional Christian teaching in the light of modern knowledge and modern ethical values. It is not revolutionary but reformist in spirit and substance. *Fundamentally it is the idea of a genuine Christianity not based on external authority. Liberal theology seeks to reinterpret the symbols of traditional Christianity in a way that creates a progressive religious alternative to atheistic rationalism and to theologies based on external authority.*

Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the natural and social sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its favoring of moral concepts of atonement; and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people. (Vol. I, pp. xiii-xxii).

In the second volume, Dorrien defines liberal theology's essence.

The essential idea of liberal theology is that all claims to truth, in theology as in other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority. Christian scripture may be recognized as spiritually authoritative within Christian experience, but its word does not settle or establish truth claims about matters of fact. In the nineteenth century this idea was imagined and developed by a relative handful of American religious thinkers, until 1880's, when it became a movement... (Vol. II, p. 1).

References:

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