

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

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What is a liberal religion?

By Iain Brown

The word 'liberal', like the word 'love', is one of those seductive, often misleading, yet potentially wonderful words that should never be used carelessly and always be listened to very carefully.

When I was a student of psychology I designed and carried out a research project on Dogmatism. After the second world war and the defeat of Nazism, a number of social psychologists, many of them Jewish, tried to find a measure that would identify the kind of people who ran the Fascist state. So they conceived of the idea of what they called the Authoritarian Personality and found ways of measuring it. This was alleged to be the kind of person who sought a leader, followed them largely without question, discriminated sharply between an ingroup of people who were acceptable and an outgroup who were barely human and responded with rigid hostility to all arguments or information that might change their beliefs. It is all largely forgotten now but at that time a Hungarian American called Rokeach improved on this concept to take in the rigidity of the left, of the communists, as well as that of the right, the fascists and he produced a measuring scale to identify it. Well, I could think of nothing more dogmatic than a West Highland Free Church minister so I thought I would test this measuring instrument out and I toured the West Highlands with a friend calling on ministers of the Free Church and inducing them to take this measuring scale. True to form, they answered every question in the scale with long quotations from scripture and doctrine from the Westminster Confession and, no doubt other icons such as Foxes Book of Martyrs. The Dogmatism scale just could not measure them. They were right off it.

Actually I did use the scale on people in Glasgow and successfully demonstrated that there was a connection between dogmatism and levels of anxiety. The most dogmatic people had lower levels of background anxiety, presumably because they had succeeded in finding certainty among all their anxious uncertainties. I came to call dogmatism crystallised anxiety. Anyway I wrote to Rokeach sending him a copy of my research and my records of attempts to measure the dogmatism of Free Kirk ministers and he wrote back offering me a place on his doctoral course in Michigan. But I felt unable to take it up because I had already pledged myself to a post in the Department of Psychological Medicine in the University here. So a liberal religion to me is not about what you believe but about how you hold these beliefs, rigidly and discriminatingly or loosely and tolerantly and accepting of new ones.

One of the people who examined most closely what the word 'liberal' meant when we speak of a liberal religion was James Luther Adams (1901-1994), an American Unitarian theologian who worked mainly in the period between the first and second world wars but also well into the cold war. He spent some time in Nazi Germany between the wars and was the contemporary of famous German theologians such as Barth, Bultman, Schweitzer and Niebuhr. He brought to the USA the existentialist philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, a man who enlightened a whole generation of existentialists, including me in my undergraduate days in the 1950s when his book 'The Courage to Be' was an inspiration alongside Jean Paul Sartre. Adams was the most influential theologian of the American Unitarian Universalists. Like so many liberal theologians he came from a background of extreme literal fundamentalism, believing every word of the Bible was true and expecting the second coming of the Christ according to the interpretations of the book of Revelation. And again, like so many of us, he moved first to an atheist scientific humanism and then to liberal

Christianity. So he became a Unitarian Universalist minister at age 26 and an academic theologian at 36. For twelve years he was Professor of Christian Ethics at Harvard Divinity School – and, if you were a careerist, I suppose you cannot go much further than that in his particular business! But he was never just an academic. He was involved in Trade Union concerns, in liberal democratic politics. His year in Nazi Germany convinced him that a vaguely mystical liberal faith was useless without the willingness to become involved in action. He was so constantly involved in voluntary organisations of political significance, of religious endeavour and of direct community care that he never wrote down much of what he taught except in short articles and sermons. It was largely left to his students and followers to piece together the fragments and publish the books.

Adams saw our participation in voluntary organisations (of which a church is only one) as the chief means by which beneficial social change has been effected throughout history. He thought that through participation in voluntary groups humanity may respond at all times to what he called the “community forming power” of God’s love, present in and available to every human heart and mind. One of his favourite sayings, a paraphrase of scripture, was about groups - ‘By their groups shall ye know them’.

The following is very slightly adapted from James Luther Adams (ed Max L. Stackhouse)(1976) On Being Human Religiously. Chapter one, Guiding Principles for a Free Faith, pp 13-14

“To be sure, the word ‘God’ is so heavily laden with unacceptable connotations that it is, for many people, scarcely usable without confusion. Among liberals no formulation is definitive and mandatory. It may, in the present context, be replaced by the phrase ‘that which ultimately concerns humanity’ or ‘that in which we should place our confidence’.

God (in that sense of ‘that which ultimately concerns humanity’ or ‘that in which we should place our confidence’) is the inescapable commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence. It is inescapable for no one can live without coming to terms with it. It is commanding for it provides the

structure and process through which existence is maintained and by which any meaningful achievement is realised. Indeed every meaning in life is related to this commanding meaning, which no one can manipulate and which stands beyond every merely personal preference or whim. It is transforming, for it breaks through any given achievement, it invades any mind or heart open to it, luring it on to richer or more relevant achievement; it is a self surpassing reality. God is the reality that works upon us and through us and in accord with which we can discern truth, beauty or goodness. It is that reality which works in nature, history and thought and under certain conditions creates human good in human community. Where these conditions are not met, human good, as sure as the night follows the day, will be frustrated or perverted. True freedom and individual or social health will be impaired.

This reality that is dependable and in which we may place our confidence is, then, not humanity. Nor is it a mere projection of human wishes. It is a working reality that every person is destined to live with. In that sense we are not free; we are not free to work without the sustaining commanding reality. “

As I said in my opening words, the word ‘liberal’ is a slightly tricky one. We must be careful to distinguish between economic liberalism, liberal Christianity and liberal religion in general.

So let us take economic liberalism first in the hope of putting this notion aside like an irritating confusion so that later we can concentrate on religious liberalism.

The confusion arises because under the name and banner of ‘economic liberalism’ some of the least liberal ideas are now being promoted and the least liberal actions and lack of action are now being fostered today, especially in the United States of America.

The general Ideas of liberalism have their deepest roots in classical civilisation, especially Athenian culture of ancient Greece but the more

important roots are more recent in the European Enlightenment to which Scotland, especially Edinburgh, contributed so much. Its core idea is the reliance on what Locke and Paine in England and Jefferson in America called the intellectual and moral grandeur of the individual human soul. As Adams points out, "Persons were laws unto themselves and the purpose of government was to protect them – persons and their property. In the individual resides the final appeal. Nothing can overrule the individual: the individual is sovereign." From a twenty first century viewpoint, this involves an elevated, even rosy spectacled, view of human kind in it's purity and God-like inspiration stemming from the workings of the Holy spirit and from that of God within which largely ignored humanity's capacity for the kind of individual and organised cruelty and destructiveness that emerged so obviously in the twentieth century and led Freud to suggest that a major force and source of energy in the human mind was what he called 'Thanatos' after the ancient Greek word for death and the death wish. The core of liberalism in general is about liberation from tyranny, provincialism and arbitrariness and contributing to the meaningful fulfilment of human existence and the evolution and progress of mankind. It is the 'liberte, egalite, fraternite' of the French revolution transmitted through an enlightened scientific humanism and a prosperous and educated middle class that in late Edwardian times believed in "onward and upward forever". It was called progressivism and some of its adherents believed in the ultimate perfection of human nature. But in our sin-, atonement- and redemption-free church we have not solved the problem of the dark side of human nature, of evil to give it its traditional name, nor will we.

Economic liberalism with Adam Smith, of Kirkcaldy and the University of Glasgow, took this shallow optimistic view of human nature and believed that all you had to do for the well being of all was to free the markets and the individual entrepreneurs. We saw great prosperity but, before Socialism, we saw rampant heartless exploitation of the weak and more recently the free market, which British and Americans fervently believe in,

has brought us yet another economic catastrophe born of unchecked greed.

Liberal Christianity is different again. James Luther Adams sees it as springing from what he calls the “The Radical Reformation” and the “Left Wing of the Reformation”. It was a protest against the top down, authoritarianism of the churches, against even some of the mainstream protestant ones. What Adams call the Left Wing of the Reformation rejected the notion of hierarchy, demanded the separation of church and state and appealed to belief in the freedom of the spirit – “The Spirit bloweth where it listeth” – to create new forms of community. The various extremes of the Puritan revolution in seventeenth century England are better examples of that radical left than the Church of Scotland and the Lutheran churches which both got into bed with the landowning aristocracy almost immediately they grew up. The Quakers are the very far left in that respect, dispensing with ministers and emphasising the priesthood of all believers and we Unitarians are only a little further right than them, perhaps drifting leftward of necessity in hard times. For the left wing of the reformation, Adams points out, the church ‘is a lay church not controlled by “officials”. Every child of God has the guidance of conscience, for the Holy Spirit is available to every child of God.’ In this fellowship, strictly of equals, there was a covenant between people and under God. ‘Variety was seen as the law of creation, truth to emerge in the battle of ideas among free persons in free communities.’ And Adams and several other scholars argue that political liberal democracy was developed in the English speaking world, by analogy from the new forms of community pioneered by the radical Christian church. Historically, protests against ecclesiastical hierarchies led to protests against economic and political hierarchies.

So now let us move from a superficial overview of liberal Christianity to addressing the idea of a liberal religion in general.

In his essay, "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith" Adams outlines what he calls the "Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism".

The first is what he calls 'the principle that "revelation" is continuous.'

Profound meaning, spiritual insight, is never finally captured and thus nothing is exempt from criticism and change. As he writes, "The words we use in communication do not encapsulate reality. Events of word deed and nature are never sealed. They always point beyond themselves."

I well remember reading the bloodcurdling words at the end of the book of Revelation threatening any one who altered this Bible, the complete and final word of God. The Islamic majority has the same attitude to the Koran although up until about the twelfth century CE the Shia did admit of further revelations. But after that almost complete stasis set in. Interestingly the Catholic form of Christianity does allow of new revelation through the succession of the saints and even in the Papal encyclicals. But those protestant Christians who are less bound to scripture and emphasis the workings of the Holy Spirit, notably the Quakers, are the best example of a religion allowing of continuous revelation.

The second 'Smooth Stone of Liberalism' is what Adams calls the principle that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion. He admits that some things, like education, have to be compulsory and, at least within the state, there have to be some restrictions on individual freedom. There are also, of course, some forms of 'persuasion' that are really coercion. But, for Adams, a truly liberal church, religion or community rests mainly on free choice. Hierarchies of priests in any community are the enemy of free enquiry which is the necessary condition for the fullest apprehension of truth of justice. Of course such a liberal religion is never going to provide seemingly infallible guidance and Adams provides a neat thought which I will quote to you directly. "Orthodox mentors," he writes, "will claim that this is the reason that we need a divine guide in a book or a church doctrine. Further they

sometimes tell us that the mortal sin of the liberal is the unwillingness to submit to divine authority and that this unwillingness grows out of intellectual pride. What the orthodox overlooks, however, is that the most pretentious pride of all is that of those who think themselves capable of recognising infallibility, for they must themselves claim to be infallible in order to identify the infallible.”

The third of Adam’s Smooth Stones of a liberal religion is, he says, the moral obligation to direct one’s efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community – not just on the small scale of a church but also on the large scale of a nation or the global village. And here he sees a role for what he calls the prophet, similar to the prophets of the Old Testament who were the guardians of the values of justice and compassion and scorned wealth and personal safety to ensure that they prevail. I think that we may today add that the Jesus of history spoke out for, and probably lost his life for, the values of justice and compassion. For Adams “The commanding, maintaining transforming power can at least for a time be bottled up in dead words or frozen institutions or be perverted by wilful people abusing their freedom to restrict that of others.” Often it is the very people who are the most zealous and active in the cause of the community or the church who are the source of the most potent risk to the freedom of the others. As Adams puts it, *“The most subtly destructive forces in the social life are where the individual’s egotism fights under the camouflage of the good of the nation, the race, the church or the class. (emphasis mine)* This is precisely the reason for the need of the redemptive transforming power. Indeed, the ‘pious’ are often most in need of the transformation.” Again he writes that the community of justice and love is not some ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world. “Freedom, justice and love require a body as well as a spirit. We do not live by spirit alone. A purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion; it is one that exempts its believer from surrender to the sustaining transforming reality

that demands the community of justice and love. This sham spirituality, far more than materialism, is the great enemy of religion.”

The fourth of Adam’s Smooth Stones of a Liberal Religion is what he calls ‘form and power. “This requires the power of organisation and the organisation of power.” He writes, “The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms. No one can properly put faith in merely individual virtue, even though that is a prerequisite for societal virtues. The faith of the liberal must express itself in societal forms, in the forms of education, in economic and social organization, in political organization. Without these, freedom and justice in community are impossible.” So the greater good lies not just with individuals but especially with good forms of organization. Again “The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions (social, economic and political) of the common life. A faith in the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality is one that tries to shape history.” And I would add “Even at the local time-bound level of here today in our small world.”

“The creation of justice in community requires the organization of power. Through the organization of power, liberated persons tie into history; otherwise they cannot achieve freedom in history. Injustice in community is a form of power, an abuse of power, and justice is an exercise of just and lawful institutional power.

Crucially he writes that “the kind of freedom that expresses itself only within the family and within the narrow confines of one's daily work is not the faith of liberals. It is as lopsided as the other kind of freedom that tries to express itself only in larger public affairs and forgets that the health of the body politic depends upon the health and faith of its individual members. At best it creates and expresses cloistered virtues of loyalty, honesty and diligence. This kind of faith can be oblivious of the injustices of the domestic, economic, and political orders; it can be

a form of assistance to the powers of evil in public life and consequently also in the private life.” So for Adams a liberal faith must be socially and politically active.

Finally, Adam's fifth Smooth Stone of a Liberal Faith is an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism. It is the optimism that takes the short term set-backs and the buffeting on the chin. It is a kind of resilience. As Adams writes “A realistic appraisal of our behavior, personal and institutional, and a life of continuing humility and renewal are demanded, for there are ever-present forces in us working for perversion and destruction. Still, there is something in the genuine liberal perspective that, while recognizing this tragic nature of the human condition, continues to live with a dynamic hope.” He thinks this is exemplified in the Hebrew prophets who were social reformers in their times. He sees it in the Jesus of history and in many other reforming thinkers and social activists since. He writes, “The litmus test of all prophetic religion is that in response to the primary question of whether history has a meaning and a direction or not, they all answer, finally, Yea.” So the shallow progressivism of Edwardian historical philosophy with its belief in the perfectibility of human nature and “ever upwards and onwards”, temporarily forgetting the inherent cruelty and destructiveness of human nature, is replaced with a battered but unbeaten realism. As Adams writes, “This is the issue that cuts through all others. It cuts through the ranks of those who believe in God as well as through the ranks of the unbelievers. The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice, looking towards the ultimate victory in the promise and the fulfillment of grace. Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation.”

I CALL THAT CHURCH FREE

I call that church free which enters into a covenant with the ultimate source of existence

That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,

That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom, that yearns to belong to the church universal;

It is open to insight and conscience from every source: it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listethand maketh all things new.

James Luther Adams