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The Uses of the Recent History of Liberal Christianity

What is Liberal Christianity?

Those individuals and groups within churches or outwith them who are willing to call themselves Liberal or Progressive Christians are a very varied collection. They can be viewed or described along several different dimensions. Or perhaps calling these dimensions several spectra is a better word for describing the scatter of differences between Liberal Christians. Along just one possible spectrum, that from realists to fantasists, for example, at one end they encompass people as diverse as Don Cupitt, a leading Non Realist who dispenses with the myths of salvation and the Judeo-Christian God, probably with all myths altogether and has now left the Anglican Church. It is unlikely that he would ever call himself a Christian again. Then they include people like Bishop Spong, still in the church, but one who can write that he often whinces to be associated with it. Towards the other end of that scale from realist to fantasist, this immense spectrum culminates in some Progressive Christian groups who take the view that Christian scriptures are best taken as poetry and myth around which people are encouraged to elaborate their own additional fantasies which are expected to encapsulate and express their own inner truths – rather as Carl Jung's patients were expected to develop their own myths of transformation as they recovered.

Other dimensions of difference include a range from a relatively static unidirectional view of existence and of man's relationship with the spiritual, as among the Christian Existentialists. They still tend to see

their God's relationship with mankind as not changing much but the dimension extends through various shades of opinion to, at the other opposite end, the Process Theologians who prefer a dynamic understanding of God, the Universe and Existence and see the relationship between God and Man as reciprocal with the external Ultimate and its manifestations within man changing all the time, rather as the Quakers see the Holy Spirit working within us. It is often very difficult to discern what it is that all these varieties of Liberal Christianity have in common with each other and even what makes them different not only from Conservative Christians but also from atheists and humanists.

The difference between Liberal and Conservative Christians seems to lie not only in beliefs and creeds that they hold or do not hold but particularly in how they hold them. Conservatives tend to rely on a single source of knowledge and authority from the past but liberals juggle several sources of knowledge and authority. For them no source of knowledge is granted absolute veto power over any other. Instead, the various items delivered by distinct sources of knowledge are each recognized and negotiated against each other. The result is not one source of knowledge exerting itself in the fashion of a martinet against the others, but rather a compromise and artful coordination of the various sources of knowledge into a single perspective.

Ever since the days of Schleiermacher, the widely acknowledged father of Liberal theology, Liberals have required of their clusters of beliefs that they must in consonance with the discoveries of science and history. Other characteristics of Liberal and Progressive groups were their affirmation of a Christian tradition but accompanied by a sincere respect for other faiths. They also tended to take on ecological and

environmental concerns which had not previously been a part of Christian concerns. Of course, they are all rooted in a Christian civilisation and all spring from the Christian churches. But so are the many atheists and humanists too. So what makes Liberal Christians collectively like each other and unlike atheists and humanists?

Liberal Christian Focus on the Jesus figure

It may seem too obvious to suggest that the unifying yet distinguishing characteristic of Liberal Christianities is their focus on the person, real or imagined, of Jesus yet with an open-mindedness and openness to change relative to the Bible-bound Conservatives.

So, what might be the value, today and for the future, of the history of a Liberal Christianity focussed on the person of Jesus?

If the most prominent distinguishing feature of Liberal Christianity is its focus on the person of Jesus, then what is the meaning, value and relevance of the person of Jesus for people living in the early twenty first century? If human nature is as family oriented and tribal as the psychological Attachment Theory of the pioneer Bowlby and the evolutionary Social Biology of the likes of E O Wilson together join in suggesting, then a major concern of all humanity is internal harmony within the family, work group or tribe and any system of moral education needs to address that. We also know that young people tend to model themselves on, or imitate, chosen elders who may not always, but often are, within the immediate human environment. The developmental psychologists seem to demonstrate that this Imitation Learning (which we share at least with the higher apes and with many more species further down the phylogenetic scale) is mostly deeply imprinted on us through concrete real life examples in the years up to about ages seven

to ten. As the Jesuits notoriously are reported to have said, "Give me a child up to the age seven and I have him for life". In the age range seven to around twelve or thirteen we become increasingly able for abstract thinking. We become increasingly more able to isolate, define and apply abstract values (or as my Calvinist grandparents used to say, "Christian Principles"). These abstract values once freed from the concrete examples of childhood and of our early moral education can be applied to an increasingly wide range of situations not even imagined before. This transition from concrete people and situations, from a world of stories, to abstract values takes place to varying degrees in each of us and it need not depend on any systematic moral education, although it is aided by such a systematic approach.

All cultures have figures or icons which personify the values it is thought desirable to develop in their members, heroes, saints and others, mostly human but often seen as part or even wholly God and worshipped as such. Jesus is the supreme such icon for most Western peoples, just as Mohammed is for more Middle Eastern peoples and the Buddha and the Lord Krishna are for whole civilisations further East.

The Jesus figure is the personification of most of the values of our civilisation. His figure is an excellent medium through which those values can be systematically instilled, especially in childhood. But, of course, his figure is far from being the only source of them in the world. Most of them are shared with the values of the other great religio-cultural systems of the world, the Muslims, the Buddhists, et cetera, and they are overwhelmingly mostly directed towards the maintenance of internal harmonious living within the tribe. Often, the ways in which they have been applied have been disgracefully limited to relations within the family or tribe, totally neglecting or excluding their application to human

relations outside the family or tribe or between tribes or nations.. This can result in what I have labelled as 'Corsican Ethics'. In Corsican ethics you are loyal, well-controlled, compassionate and loving in all ways toward the members of your own family or tribe - and you can do anything you like to anyone outside it. There are many versions of this throughout the world, the ways in which European Christians treated Jews and the Jews treated them, being an excellent example. Bio-social research seems to demonstrate that those species that have the best internal co-operation and can work and fight well together have the biological advantage over internally divided and conflicted groups. As E O Wilson has shown, this applies all the way up the phylogenetic scale from insects to man. Most of the so-called Christian values, for example of justice, love and compassion are also taught in other civilisations through the media of other iconic figures such as the Buddha and some of these figures, like our Christ figure, are also worshipped. At least since the Enlightenment and largely from the Renaissance, the Humanists have also recognised, taught and valued these common values too, but in a more abstract form, more closely related to ancient Greek than ancient Hebrew ways of thinking. But, especially since the Enlightenment, the values of truth, effectiveness, verifiability and reliability have become more important than ever before. These are not so much the values of the Jesus of history as primarily the values of science and technology. Some examples of the newer values are: Does this particular statement here or this evidence stand up to the most critical scrutiny we can give it? Does this device, apparatus, machine or procedure do what it purports to do reliably? From the Enlightenment onwards, Liberal Christianity has increasingly absorbed and elevated the importance of these scientific and humanist values and, as we shall see, applied them to the evolving picture of the iconic figure of Jesus himself.

The ancient Jesus figure and the tradition emanating from him, although sharing values with the rest of the world, has its own unique pattern of emphasis on particular values, its own hierarchy of their importance. The emphasis of the value of inclusiveness is nowhere in world religions more strongly stated than in Jesus's dining with prostitutes and taxmen and, of course, in his parable of the Good Samaritan. That value of inclusiveness has often been disgracefully neglected and ignored in practice within the Christian tradition, but it is at least prominent in theory whereas it is often almost absent from some other traditions. Respect for strangers outside the tribe is prominently illustrated in the story of the Samaritan, again to a degree unusual (as far as my limited learning will take me) in other hierarchies of values in other religio-cultural traditions and in the shrinking global village of today this emphasis is increasingly needed and will have increasing importance. Finally, but not exhaustively, the Christian tradition gives great, but not unique, importance to forgiveness, reconciliation and love.

Christian values, personified in relatively concrete form in the figure of Jesus, and however inadequately and unsystematically taught and lived out, have dominated and pervaded our Western civilisation to the extent that in a present-day humane democracy they are exemplified in our justice and especially in our welfare systems. There is an important sense in which Christianity has "won". In our tolerant and humane society we are saturated in those values and there is little new about them. The heroes and martyrs who won the battles often seem far in the past while we concentrate on the problems that haunt our times, problems of peace, of scarce resources and of environmental degradation which may yet call for some drastic revisions in our hierarchy of values.

Our Liberal Christian inheritance also includes an institution which at least tries to create loving communities and to promote love, namely the Unitarian Church both locally and nationally. This institution may be dying, as are virtually all Liberal Christian institutions, but it is nevertheless a valuable inheritance which, with a breath of the spirit, can still potentially be flamed into greater life yet. Along with a traditional form of worship, the Unitarian Church also keeps on producing hymns that not only Liberal Christians, but also those who may be on a developing trajectory right out of Christianity altogether, can sing without massively uncomfortable suspensions of disbelief. Crucially, this allows a diverse range of people to worship, each in their own way and yet together in community.

The Influence of the Enlightenment on Liberal Christian Values

As the Enlightenment values of truth and the testing of evidence spread within the Christian churches the long history of the quest for the historical Jesus developed, slowly at first with rejection of the miracles, to a crescendo between the late nineteenth nineties and the early two thousands with the progress of the Jesus Seminars.

The Liberal Christian exegesis of nearly three centuries since the first rejections of the veracity of the miracles and continuing through Schweitzer's Quest for the Historical Jesus has cut the Liberal Christian Churches adrift on a stormy sea in ways in which those still clinging to the life rafts are still only becoming aware of. But it is an invaluable legacy. Despite the obvious and sometimes poignant nostalgia, amounting almost to mourning, of the likes of Cupitt and Spong for the old certainties and the old common understandings, these Liberal Christians have courageously addressed their changed world. Beyond

them, for all of us there is a loss of ease with our wider cultural inheritance. We are now further away from the Christian music of the likes of Bach and Handel, which sometimes begins to look like from a distant almost medieval world. Alain de Botton has beautifully pointed out, we are no longer comfortably at home with much of the best in our civilisation, often because it implies a meaning of that word 'God' that we can no longer accept .

As the various likely profiles of Jesus were being discussed in the early 2000s, so too, the conceptions of God, old and new, were often being reshaped. The standard scriptural Old Testament view, the staple diet of the Christian Centuries, had been of a Hebrew patriarchal sky God of savage cruelty and arbitrary capriciousness, absurdly and erratically interrupted by a God of love who sent his only son as a savage sacrificial substitute to show his love for mankind in some kind of paradoxical inconsistency of character. This began to be increasingly questioned among Liberal Christians and even rejected and it gave way to a fascinating pantheon of alternatives.

Thus the Liberal Christians of our more recent history freed us from much of the constraining past. And they built the springboard from which we launch out into the virtually sign-less and trackless future. At first Unitarians were in the very vanguard. Emerson, Channing and the American Transcendentalists began the move to establish the authority of the conscience of the individual and in the UK in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, James Martineau completed it. But then the lead passed to Albert Schweitzer with his book, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus' and his careful investigation of the sanity of Jesus in terms of Western psychiatry. By the nineteen sixties Rudolf Bultmann was pursuing his task of demythologising scripture and the

Existentialism of Paul Tillich was a focus of much bold and creative thought about the traditional themes and concerns of Western Christianity. With the exception of Peter Hawkins chapter on Post-Modernism and Religion in Chryssides' Unitarian Perspectives, I am not aware that British Unitarians had any part, even as trenchant commentators on the creativity of these leaders of perception and thought. No British Unitarian, as far as I know, was a participant in the iconic Jesus Seminars. Was that because all their intellectual effort was engaged in averting their decline? Or was it because money was needed to take part in the seminars or because only an international reputation brought an invitation to them? Yet non-Unitarians like Karen Armstrong and even our own Scottish Archbishop Richard Holloway were at least participants, if not leaders.

In America, although there seem to have been no scholars in the vanguard of New Testament Studies, at least among the Unitarian Universalists, people like James Luther Adams and Scotty McLennan and Paul Razor were, and still are, writing inspiring work.

So today we live in a very different understanding of individual existence between birth and death, of the universe and of man's place within it. No longer does 'The Grand Narrative' of heaven, hell and redemption provide a framework within which human life had meaning. Two major much younger interpretations of a dynamic and changing life situation dominate twenty first century thinking. Darwin's theory of Evolution colours much of our thinking and the discovery of the changing climate becomes increasingly to impinge on our comfortable assumption of the Lordship of all creation as taught in the Old Testament. Each of these paradigms force us to move into new ways of understanding the human

situation and brings with them new emphases within the old ethics and new awarenesses of the mystery of life and death.

Two Features of Changing Post Modern Thinking

Even more importantly, even as we are faced with this situation, the old assumptions of liberal thinking in general on which Unitarianism was built at the height of its power in the nineteenth century, have been breaking down in an intriguing new chaos called 'Post-Modern Thinking'.

The disappearing boundaries of the self and developments in the philosophy of language are fully addressed by American writers such as Paul Ricoeur and Scotty McLennan but not by any writers that I know in the Unitarian Church in the UK, even by the bolder thinkers on the more humanistic wing.

The old liberal emphasis on the rugged individualism of the free-thinking man has given way in post modern thinking to a new emphasis of the individual as shaped by his upbringing and surrounding culture to a far greater degree. It is a line of thought which has been addressed recently by more than one preacher here in Glasgow where we have heard talk of the "net-work self", of "our universal interconnectedness" and of "the self in community". For me, it goes back to the developing psychology of the self of the nineteen forties and especially to a line of American thinking among social psychologists. It is in contrast to the emphasis on the individual and the uniqueness of personality that held the dominant position in the thinking at the height of liberal Christian thinking, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century when Unitarianism was at its high-tide.

The other major characteristic of post-modern thinking is its emphasis on the philosophy of language. Personally, I would contend that there are

many forms of spirituality but one of the most important is that identified by a gentleman called Otto more than a century ago. (that was his second name) He wrote of an experience, much commoner than most would think, which he saw as the core of all religion. This was/is the experience of awe and reverence, of the presence greater than the experiencing self which was beyond normal sensory awareness and he thought indicated the existence of a mysterious unknown and unknowable power. You might, in my view, call this a kind of mysticism but it is not necessarily the kind of mysticism which conveys a feeling of peace and unity with all creation. It can be concentrated on a place, on an object, on a tree or on a mountain. It brings about a total absorption of conscious attention rather close to that brought out by a magnificent piece of music or a piece of visual art with many levels of thought set in train.

This experience of the numinous, as he called it, was present in many forms of religion from the most sophisticated absorption in the soaring choral music of the Anglican cathedrals to the simple awareness of a divine presence in spring or a tree of unorganised animists. Most of this service has been about offering experiences of the numinous in which we can partake.

There is nothing much new experience as the core of spirituality but what is new is the linking of it with a newer philosophy of language. To put it crudely according to the followers of Wittgenstein and according to what I used to know within Social Psychology as the Wharfian Hypothesis “You do not own your language. Your language owns you.” Another way of describing this view is to say that our thinking is railroaded by our language, even by our language of mathematics, if we happen to be a trained mathematician: we find it hard to think of things

that we do not have the language for: when we meet something entirely new we drag our language pool for words to describe it and, where possible, we fit it into the range of concepts we already have words for and in so doing classify it within our cultural world. The point is that when the person reared in the Christian culture has his or her numinous experience, they think of it as the presence of God but when the animist in Indonesia or the Cameroons has the same experience they classify it in their cultural world as a place with mysterious powers or with a resident spirit, such as a dryad in a spring or a spirit in a tree. In such a way our culture and especially our language shapes our thinking, even as the Wharfians might say, railroads it.

So our rugged Unitarian individualism, changed greatly as it may be from our nineteenth century liberalism, is less our own creation than we like to think.