

## Permanent Characteristics of Liberal Religion

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

No Date

Most of our problems are pretty much a question of baggage. One of my ancestors in the year 1769 found the town of Ipswich rather too stable and fixed in its habits and customs to suit him. In the spring of that year, equipped with an ax, a gun, a bag of seed-corn and a few other necessities, this young man mounted his horse and started for the frontier of Maine. He selected a tract of land, planted his seeds, and built a cabin. Having finished the preliminary tasks he returned to Ipswich for a brief visit. In the late summer again he set forth for the new land of promise. With him went his bride. Into an unsettled region for hard work, plain living and dangers, but, withal, into a life of wholesome creative effort with its manifold joys and sorrows, they were going. They carried very little baggage.

Some twenty years or more ago a remote section of Berkshire County was invaded by a New York man of affairs. His standing in financial and sporting circles had been achieved, not by any constructive effort, but by shrewd and often questionable methods of plundering. From various farmers he bought some 14,000 acres of farm and woodland. He established a great game preserve, built great stables and houses. Into this quiet and remote spot that had known little more of human life than the hard toil of farmers and wood cutters, he brought luxury, extravagance, and wantonness. The fever lasted but a few years.

Four or five years ago a member of this family came to the great house on his honeymoon. Great preparations were made for this honeymoon in the hills, both at Berkshire, and as I recall it, in the divorce courts. The Sunday papers took due notice.

Since then only the passing stranger visits the place. Last spring just as the {??} and the {??} were breaking

through last year's covering of leaves, I walked over the mountain, along the neglected roads of the estate. The houses and stables, exposed now both to the weather and inquiring man, I examined. Doors broken in; windows opened; furniture, shades scattered about. Everything told the story of neglect and decay. More money had been expended here than most families have during an entire lifetime. The whole thing seemed to symbolize a great tragedy. The old N.Y. telephone directory, the sensual novels, the stock ticker, the gaudy, and grandiose appearance of everything, even the fireplace, told the tale of a tragic failure in judging life's values. They had vast loads of baggage.

Leaving these crumbling buildings behind I continued my walk past deserted and decaying farm houses until at last I came to the little cemetery where rested the toilers who once lived and labored here. The cemetery was neglected, the marble slabs were falling; many of the graves had caved in. Here and there a lilac bush bore witness to human sorrow and affection. These falling stones, and the deserted farm houses were all that remained of those who had once lived, labored and loved among these beautiful but exacting hills. These had but little baggage, but they were creators.

The two pictures, covering roughly the span of the nation's life and the cemetery, suggest more than I care to point out, or ever wish to imply. But the deserted mansion in the hills, with all its implications, may bear witness to a genuine impulse that feels the failure and limitations of much that has been and still is characteristic of our modern life. It may betray a blind, and unintelligent but yet real desire for real values, an undefined need of getting free from superfluous baggage.

For we have accumulated so much baggage of every kind and description that we are no longer masters of the baggage, but have become its bond-servants. We go where the baggage bids us to, and when the baggage bids us refrain, we refrain. We have built us great states to protect us in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but these states have brought us to the verge of anarchy and bankruptcy. To clothe, feed and shelter ourselves, we have built a great industrial system, but while its wheels stand

idle, we lack adequate food, proper shelter, and sufficient clothing. We have built a great religious system to deliver us from a fear of the Universe we live in, but it has bound us to form and dogma, and strife without giving the truth that may make us free. On top of each of these systems, to remedy their limitations and shortcomings, but [sic] [we] have built system after system, until to use a figure borrowed from industry, our productivity staggers under its load of overhead charges and expense. We are overburdened with baggage, and we chafe under the load.

Hence the unrest of the times. The turbulent revolutionary spirit reminds us that a passion for freedom and life still exists, a passion, let it be remembered, that has left many stately mansions with all their contents to rot on mountains and hillsides of history. This passion, at times terrible and remorseless in its destructiveness, and often gloriously heroic in its upbuilding, is pressing us to examine our baggage, to decide what we need; to discard what enslaves us, and to take up our journey to a new land of promise.

"Shoulder your deeds, my son."

Such are the stern commands of our decade. In no uncertain tones are they issued. The clash of armies, the rise and fall of nations, the overthrow of empires, the collapse of religions, the conflict of classes. No one is exempt, and the pressure is terrific. The great war which began in a quarrel over baggage, is ending in a passionate and terrific revolution whose master spirit is a determination to cast aside superfluous baggage, that men may again become masters of their burdens. For years men have noted the increasing sultriness of our social atmosphere, the storm clouds gather on the horizon. The storm has broken, the first terrific gusts of wind and rain have swept over us but neither is the full fury of the storm spent, nor have we begun to appraise the extent of the devastation. The situation presses upon us for insight, judgement and action.

To some it spells a terrible and more {???) fear. To others it is an unclouded promise of the reign of justice, and peace that beckons us forward. To many a great hope,

not without changes, calls from the future. But no one questions the statement that the times need whatever of wisdom and sound method each may have to offer. No one questions the general statement that each will contribute very largely in terms of his natural predispositions and limitations. The legislator will suggest legislation both sensible and foolish. The militarist will call for the use of force. The industrialist will urge the starting of the wheels of industry. The banker will insist on the reestablishment of credit. The devotee of authority in religion will call for a return to the age of faith, and obedience. The reformers will press each his own particular interest.

Then there are those to whom comes a stern call to spend and be spent in in some unrequited labor as bold adventurers in unexplored regions. "Get you no gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses; no wallet for your journey; neither two coats, nor shoes, nor staff,"<sup>1</sup> said Jesus to his disciples. Thus equipped with only a great passion many will go forth. They will be stern, harsh, uncompromising, perhaps fanatical. Some will be wrong, and some will be right. Some will find only sand. Others will pan out fine gold. How we love such in history, and how we shun them in life. But I sometimes think we shun them just because we secretly love them the more for their very abandonment, their sheer ability "to forget themselves into immortality" as Wendell Phillips phrased it.<sup>2</sup> God knows we could not live if all the world were like them, but what would life become were it not for this "legion of the last ones, this cohort of the damned." In them the salt has not lost its savor, nor the vinegar its acidity. Neither has the spirit become enchained. "He wist that his face shown."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) was a prominent abolitionist, also a crusader for women's rights and the rights of indigenous people. This expression, "to forget themselves into immortality," is from a letter he wrote to the National Anti-Slavery Standard, April 27, 1867, and describes the editor of an abolitionist newspaper, Elijah P. Lovejoy, who was murdered outside his place of business by a pro-slavery mob in Alton Illinois.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus, 34:29.

Following along in the trail of these bold adventurers, come those of a more social disposition, who see clearly the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night<sup>4</sup> that leads them forward. But they check the speed of their travel that they may have company along the way, and, perchance, transform the unblazoned trail into a pathway.

I suppose that I idealize the facts, but I like to picture those Pilgrims of the Forest, who with Thomas Hooker, set out from Newtown's {???) to make a new settlement in Connecticut.<sup>5</sup> In my imagination I see them journeying through the forest, the strong determined men, and the valiant women, the sturdy children, the herd of cattle. Especially do I recall that the frail Mrs. Hooker was carried the entire journey on a litter. Often I imagine myself lurking about the campfire at night, eavesdropping upon them. I hear them talk over the day's journey, discuss their difficulties, joking and bantering. I watch them settling down for the night, the posting of the sentinels, the guards for the cattle, preparations for sleep. As the campfire burned low, I have heard the men talking of their purposes. I have heard them talk about the foundations of authority being laid in the free consent of the people. I have heard them say that the choice of public magistrates belongs to the people by God's own ordinance. Many other things, both interesting and uninteresting I have heard in my eavesdropping.

Sometimes I have gleaned suggestions concerning the place and task of liberal religion in the economy of human society, suggestions both as to the necessary baggage that belongs to the equipment of liberal religion, for its

---

<sup>4</sup> Exodus, 13:21

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hooker (1586-1647) was an early settler in New England. Originally he arrived in Boston, but moved to Newtown (subsequently named Cambridge) where he became pastor of the Church of Christ at Cambridge. Owing to his disagreement with John Cotton over the right to vote—following Cotton's leadership in Massachusetts Colony, voting was then limited to individuals who had been formally admitted to the church after a formal interview—Hooker and Samuel Stone (1602-1663) led about 100 followers to Connecticut to establish the settlement of Hartford (named after Stone's birthplace, Hertford, England).

urgent tasks of critical times, as well as those extra comforts and luxuries that liberal religion may enjoy in more peaceful times without seriously effecting its moral fiber.

Among these pilgrims of the forest, as among their spiritual kinsmen everywhere, there seems to have been a very strong grip upon reality. You may call it commonsense. You may call it a sense of the practical nature of things, or what you like, the fact remains that this power of keen observation, this searching insight into things as they are, this grip upon reality is a marked characteristic of such liberals. No pretensions to infallibility, no finality of judgements, no errors of interpretations are claimed for them, but just a wholesome sense of reality. They use their eyes, their ears, their minds. Of course this characterization is not confined to those groups and people where the phrase liberal religion is used. In fact if there is any one characteristic that differentiates the modern world from the medieval it is this tendency to a strong grip on reality. The vast strides that have been made in the systematic observation of nature in the field of the natural sciences, the gleanings of scientific knowledge, and its application to arts and industries, all these bespeak the increase, both in scope and intensity, of the emphasis on this sense of reality.

While this movement has by no means achieved its fully recognized place, yet it has developed far enough to make safe two generalizations. One is in the nature of a fact, and the other a moral value.

The first is that social developments, both political, industrial, and religious, grow out of forces already operating in life. Whether one's interpretation of life be in terms of mechanical materialism, or theistic idealism, or whatever may be our language for expressing ultimate things, we have come pretty much to the conclusion that there is no power without the process that interferes, either to bring order out of chaos, or to throw a monkey-wrench into the wheels. We no longer look unto the heavens to watch for the intervention of an absentee landlord, or the coming of a messiah from the clouds with a new heaven and a new earth ready-made. If we have any grasp at all on

the meaning of modern knowledge, we must assume that forces operating within the process are the forces that will carry us from the past, through the present into the future. The idea of growth, evolution has definitely replaced the idea of both creation and intervention. The increasing sense of reality, characteristic of modern thought, seems to have clearly established this generalization.

But the generalization, based on the vast facts gained by scientific investigations has been made possible through the faithful observations and results obtained by following what has come to be called the method of science. The doctrine of free inquiry for which the protestant reformers contended in the limited field of religious controversy has been growing in importance and application until it has become the established and accepted method of enlightenment. Even propagandists have to bow their knee to the method of science, and cloth their material in the garb of scientific investigations.

This leads to the second generalization, moral in its nature. Free inquiry, is not merely a doctrine, or a right. It has become a fundamental moral principle. It is applicable not only to pure science, and applied science, but also to history, past and current, to social and industrial problems, to political and religious problems. Freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, have become social values than which no other is more important. Faithfulness in inquiry, clarity in thought, and candor in expression have become individual moral values than which no other is more needed at the present time.

With the broad aspects of modern thought in which this sense of reality has become so established, liberal religion is on its real home ground. It recognizes the principle of evolutionary growth, through the operation of immanent forces. It recognizes the moral value involved in the method of free inquiry, and candid expression.

This is a permanent characteristic of liberal religion, a characteristic that differentiates it from all forms of authority religion, whether the authority be openly recognized or secretly followed.

But it is apparent that powerful influences are at work today, seeking to curtail the scope of free inquiry, and freedom of utterance. It is not yet clear how serious has been the damage wrought by the war upon this principle of freedom. Whether it is merely a phase of hysteria, or strong re-entrenchment of the method of the dictum of authority, time only can disclose. In either case the very primary assumption of liberal religion is at stake. To contribute to the reinstatement of this method of freedom both by the candor of utterance, and the worth of the thing said, will be no small task in the years that are before us. Such a contribution will be priceless. Here science, education, political and social reform stand on common ground with liberal religion.

#### Moral Purpose<sup>6</sup>

~~A more distinguishing characteristic of liberal religion is hardly more than an extension of the sense of reality. It is the perception of a moral purpose at the very heart of the universal forces. I know full well that vast numbers of men and women who boast of their commonsense, their strong grip on reality, their adherence to values of modern thought, pass by on the other side of the road, when the concept of moral purpose is mentioned. I recall an address which I heard Dr. Oster deliver at Harvard. Speaking as a man of science, upon the evidences of immortality, he said that the only forces that he could see operating in human life were the primary impulses to get, and beget. I have heard keen practical businessmen say substantially the same thing. So have all of us, and will continue so to hear. I have also heard of great philosophers and scientists make~~

---

<sup>6</sup> At this point, this essay, which clearly was never finished—at least this manuscript was not a finished manuscript—becomes more incomplete, unfinished. The paragraph beginning here after the “Moral Purpose” heading is mostly crossed out. But the cross-out stops mid-sentence and the paragraph continues not crossed out. But then it ends mid-sentence. Then there is a break in pagination—seemingly a missing page (page 19)—and on the start of the next page a new attempt at “Moral Purpose.” This second version takes a very different approach than that taken in the first version. It too is incomplete and ends mid-sentence.

the same general observation. Nations even have staked their destiny on the faith that there is no validity to the claims of moral values, and moral purposes in the Universe. But the trouble is with their powers of observation. The sense of reality is not keen enough. They may see things, and read facts, but they do not see behind the things, and know not the meaning of facts. Of course they cannot see that

### Moral Purpose

While liberal religion shares with all those to whom the general point of view of modern thought is natural, this sense of reality, there is a second characteristic which appears to a less inclusive group. As we view with enquiring minds the processes of human life, we are confronted with many searching questions, and an equal variety of answers. We see natural law easily enough. We can understand something of the operation of gravitation. We have learned much about the manifestations of electricity, and even of life. We can trace our way through historical documents, and gain some idea of what has taken place. We can trace the evolution of religious ideals, customs, and thoughts. But in the background is always the haunting, yet evasive question, as to the meaning of it all. "Blind chance," says my friend. Just plain machine movement, with no particular meaning. Two elemental forces, "to get, and to beget," account for all things. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." All these boast of their sense of reality. They see only what the {???. They see force. They see passion. They see conflict, blood, war {???. and plunder. These things all men see.

But many see all these things, and something more. Sebastian Castellio,<sup>7</sup> one of the less conspicuous, but not the less real prophets of the reformation, in describing the life of a Christian,

I cannot do violence to my conscience for fear of disobeying Christ. I must be saved or lost by my own personal faith, not by that of another. I ask

---

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563) was a French theologian, an early proponent of religious toleration and freedom of conscience and thought.

you, whether Christ, who forgave those who went astray, and commanded his followers to forgive until seventy times seven, Christ, who is the final judge of us all, if He were here, would command a person like that to be killed! Oh Christ creator, and King of the World, dost thou see, and approve these things? Hast thou become a totally different person from what thou wert? When thou wert on Earth, nothing could be more gentle, and kind, more ready to suffer injuries. Thou wert like a sheep dumb before the shearers. Beaten, spit upon, marked, crowned with thorns, crucified between thieves, thou didn't pray for those who injured the. Hast thou changed to this? Art thou now so cruel and contrary to thyself? Dost thou command that those who do not understand thy ordinances and commandments as those over us require, should be drowned, or drawn and quartered, and burned at the stake?<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the medieval language that he uses, we understand the full point of his inquiry. Do moral values have a standing in the Universe? Are they simply vague sentimental effusions of weak men, who cover their losses in the struggle for existence by enthroning in the Universe their selfish whinings, and their sentimentalism? Or do moral values, moral standards, moral purposes appear in the thoughts of men, because, in a process of evaluation, they represent the surviving qualities best adapted to the Universe we live in. Are men who deny the validity of the claim of moral values to a place in the Universe, possessed of a keener sense of reality, than those who see moral values, moral order, and moral purpose operating everywhere, and with an unerring {???) in all the relationships of human life. Who is right?

Here liberal religion may make a distinctive and genuine contribution to the thought and conduct of the times. The

---

<sup>8</sup> From the Preface of the French edition of *De Haereticis an Sint Persequendi, etc.* 1554. This was an argument for toleration with contributions by Luther, Erasmus, Sebastian Franck and others. The Preface bore the name "Marinus Bellius," but was written by Sebastian Castellio.

heart of the Universe is moral. The essence of life is moral. Moral values rise above force, passion, states and church. The great passion that controls all passions is moral. If we can see this<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Here the manuscript ends mid-sentence.