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THE FIVE SMOOTH STONES OF LIBERALISM

I.

Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that "revelation" is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself, as an actuality, is patient of this limitation. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents and do not capsule reality. Events of word, deed, and nature are not sealed. They point always beyond themselves. Not only is significant novelty both possible and manifest, but also significance is itself inchoate and subject to inner tensions of peril and opportunity.

The ground for this first tenet is the human dependence for being and freedom upon a creative power and upon processes not ultimately of our own making. The liberal's ultimate faith is not in himself. We find ourselves to be historical beings, living in nature and history, and having freedom in nature and history. The forms that nature and history take possess a certain given, fateful character, and yet they are also fraught with meaningful possibilities. Within this framework, humanity finds something dependable and also many things that are not dependable. One thing that is dependable is the order of nature and of history that the sciences are able to describe with varying degrees of precision.

How long the order of nature will continue to support human life is beyond the ken of our science. Possibly our earth and our sun will one day cool off and freeze, or they may dissipate or explode. Moreover, everyone is condemned to what we call death. Whether beyond this death there is a new life is a matter of faith, of a faith that trusts reality as we have known it. Like one of old we may say to this universe and its ruling power, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Whatever the destiny of the planet or of the individual life, a sustaining meaning is discernable and commanding in the here and now. Anyone who denies this denies that there is anything worth taking seriously or even worth talking about. Every blade of grass, every work of art, every scientific endeavor, every striving for righteousness bears witness to this meaning. Indeed, every frustration or perversion of truth, beauty, or goodness also bears this witness, as the shadow points round to the sun.

One way of characterizing this meaning is to say that through it God is active or in the process of self-fulfillment in nature and history. To be sure, the word "God" is so heavily laden

with unacceptable connotations that it is for many people scarcely usable without confusion. It is therefore well for us to indicate briefly what the word signifies here. In considering this definition, however, the reader should remember that among liberals, no formulation is definitive and mandatory. Indeed, the word “God” 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 (or that in which we may have faith) is the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence. It is inescapable, for no one can live without somehow coming to terms with it. It is commanding, for it provides the structure or the process through which existence is maintained and by which any meaningful achievement is realized. 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 and 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 this sense, we are not free; we are not free to work without sustaining, commanding reality. We are free only to obstruct it or to conform to the conditions it demands for growth. This reality, is, then, no human contrivance; it is a reality without which no human good can be realized and without which growth of meaning is impossible. Theists and religious humanists find common ground here. They differ in defining the context in which human existence and human good are understood. The liberal’s faith, therefore, is a faith in the giver of being and freedom. Dignity derives from the fact that we participate in the being and freedom of this reality.

But we not only participate in divinely given being and freedom; through the abuse of freedom we also pervert and frustrate them. We distort or petrify the forms of creation and freedom. Hence we cannot properly place our confidence in our own creations; we must depend upon a transforming reality that breaks through encrusted forms of life and thought to create new forms. We put our faith in a creative reality that is re-creative. Revelation is continuous.

II.

The second major principle of religious liberalism is that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion. Obviously, this principle

cannot be advocated in any strict or absolute sense. Education, for example, may be compulsory within the liberal state, if not in the liberal church. All responsible liberals recognize the necessity for certain restrictions on individual freedom. They also recognize that “persuasion” can be perverted into a camouflage for duress. Nevertheless, free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics cannot be liberal.

Some time ago there was a good bit of excitement about the study of social organizations among birds. Scientists studying how long it takes a group of fowl to form a social organization reported that within eighteen to twenty-four hours, a group of chickens hitherto unacquainted with each other formed a tightly structured social organization—a rigid hierarchy of pecking rights. Liberalism, in its social articulation, might be defined as a protest against “pecking orders.”

This second principle, like the others, can be stated in religious terms in various ways. Historically, the more profound forms of liberalism began in the modern world as a protest against ecclesiastical pecking orders. Protest against political and economic pecking orders soon followed. This protest often found its sanction in the basic theological assertion that all are children of one God, by which is meant that all persons by nature potentially share in the deepest meanings of existence, all have the capacity for discovering or responding to “saving truth,” and all are responsible for selecting and putting into action the right means and ends of cooperation for the fulfillment of human destiny. These religious affirmations are thus the basis of the liberal’s belief that the method of free inquiry is the necessary condition for the preservation of human dignity. This method of free inquiry and persuasion is the only one consistent with both the dignity and the limitations of human nature, and it is the method that yields the maximum of discovery and criticism.

Now it should be clear that if some people wish infallible guidance in religion, they are not going to find it in liberal religion. Of course, orthodox mentors will claim that this the reason 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 this: the most pretentious pride of all is that of those who think themselves capable of recognizing infallibility, for they must themselves claim to be infallible in order to identify the infallible.

In contrast, the liberal seeks in the words of the prophets, in the deeds of saintly men and women, and in the growing knowledge of nature and human nature provided by science meanings that evoke the free loyalty and conviction of people exposed to them in open discourse

III.

Third, religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the

establishment of a just and loving community. It is this which make the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism.

A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members, it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or a party – to a self-made God. That way lies the grinding rut and tyranny of the superpatriot line, the Nuremberg line, and the Moscow line, different though these lines are from each other in their fear and obstruction of freedom. To try to manipulate or domesticate the integrity of freedom is to rely upon the unreliable—an attempt that ends in reliance upon unjust arbitrary power and upon unjust arbitrary counsels. Sooner or later the arbitrary confronts either stagnation from within or eruption from both without the within. The stars in their courses fight against it.

This faith in the freedom that creates the just community is the faith of the Old Testament prophets. They repudiated the idea that the meaning of life is to be achieved either by exclusive devotion to ritual or by devotion to blood and soil, or by self-serving piety. The “holy” thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice. Injustice brings judgment and suffering in its train; it is tolerated only at the peril of stability and meaning.

Again and again in the history of our civilization this prophetic idea of the purpose of God in history comes to new birth. Jesus deepened and extended that idea when he proclaimed that the reign of God is at hand. The reign of god, the reign of sustaining, commanding, transforming reality is the reign of love, a love that fulfills and goes beyond justice, a love that cares for the fullest personal good of all. This love is not something that is ultimately created by us or that is even at our disposal. It seizes and transforms life, bringing us into a new kind of community that provides new channels for love and new structures for justice.

Jesus uses the figure of the seed to describe this power. The power of God is like a seed that grows of itself if we will use our freedom to meet the conditions for its growth. It is not only a principle by which life may be guided; it is also a power that transforms life. It is a power we may trust to heal the wounds of the common life and to engender sharing in community. This is the power the Christian calls the forgiving, redemptive power of God, a power everyone may know and experience whether or not these words are used to describe it. It is the power that leads to integrity of personal life, to the struggle for justice in social-institutional life, and to a creative tension between them.

Not that it demands no wounds. It drew Jesus up Golgotha to a cross. Thus Jesus was not only a martyr dying for his convictions, but also the incarnation of the affirmative power of love transforming life, even in death, and creating a transforming community, a fellowship yielding to

the tides of the spirit.

The commanding, sustaining, transforming power can, at least for a time, be bottled up in dead words or in frozen institutions. The sustaining, transforming reality can be perverted by willful people's abusing their freedom, into a power that up to a point supports evil—yet, if we could not so abuse our freedom, we would not be free.

In history and in the human heart there are, then, destructive as well as creative powers. These destructive powers are manifest in the social as well as in the individual life, although they are most subtly destructive in the social life where the individual's egotism fights under the camouflage of the good of the nation, the race, the church, or the class. These destructive impulses (thoroughly familiar to the psychologist if not to their victims) seem veritably to possess people, blinding them, inciting them to greed, damaging the holy gifts God provides. This is precisely the reason for the need of the redemptive, transforming power. Indeed, the "pious" are often most in need of transformation.

The community of justice and love is not an ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world. It is one that takes shape in nature and history, one that requires the achievement of freedom with respect to material resources as well as with respect to spiritual resources. Indeed, the one kind of freedom is not fully authentic without the other. 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.

IV.

Now, anything that exists effectively in history must have form. And the creation of a form requires power. It requires not only the power of thought but also the power of organization and the organization of power. Thus we are led to the fourth element of liberalism: we deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation. There is no such thing as goodness as such; except in a limited sense, there is no such thing as a good person as such. There is the good husband, the good wife, the good worker, the good employer, the good layperson, the good citizen. 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.

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. Any other faith is thoroughly undependable; it is also, in the end, impotent. It is not a faith that molds history. It is a faith that enables history to crush humanity. Its ministry prepares people to adjust to the crushing by focusing on, and salving, the personal experiences of hurt.

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.

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.

V.

Finally, liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism. In our century we have seen the rebarbarization of the masses, we have witnessed a widespread dissolution of values, and we have seen the appearance of great collective demonries. Progress is now seen not to take place through inheritance; each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values. 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.

Perhaps nothing exemplifies this better than the twentieth-century experience of war. To be sure, there are many liberals who deny that war reveals anything fundamental about human nature and possibility. There are those for whom war is only an anachronism, a temporary aberration not to be taken seriously as a comment on human possibility. Still others would ignore war as a revealer of the human because they consider it one of those calamities, one of those accidents that comes from without, like earthquakes and storms, or from exterior political and economic machinations; as such it neither confirms nor challenges their view of the human condition. But war is a relentless revealer. It presents the human powers of aspirations as dramatically as does peace. Indeed, it reveals that the humanity of conflict is essentially the same as the humanity of "peace"; but in war the humanity that is almost hidden in times of peace, the

homo absconditus, comes into fuller view.

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, with the optative mood as one of its voices. It is a mood that derives ultimately from the ancient prophets and from the white-hot heart of the New Testament. No reputable scholar today would deny that Christianity was in its origin an eschatological religion. The recognition of this fact has become a source of embarrassment to many liberals. Yet liberalism denies to its peril that it was brought into being by people who, like the prophets and the eschatologist of Nazareth, turned from retrospect to prospect.

The optative mood alone offers only a truncated and, in the end, frustrated conjugation; the full paradigm demands the penitential and imperative moods as well. It demands also the declarative mood that speaks of the resources of fulfillment. This fuller paradigm, governed by the optative mood, has taken many forms in the thought of the West. Paul with his joyous faith in redemption, Augustine with his vision of the City of God, Joachim of Fiore with his hope of a new era—the reign of the Spirit—Lessing with his expectation of a third era, Channing with his prophecy of a new spiritual freedom, Marx with his battling for a new humanity, all speak in the optative mood without neglecting the realistic and the tragic. They utter their faiths in differing accents, although each as something to learn from the others, and all are severely critical of much around them. But all sense that at the depths of human nature and at the boundaries of what we are, there are potential resources that can prevent a retreat to nihilism.

Thus, each of these thinkers passes the litmus test of all prophetic religion. In response to the primary question of whether history has a meaning and a demanded direction or not, they all answer, finally, Yea. 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 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.

Thus, with all the realism and toughmindedness that can be mustered, the genuine liberal finally can hear and join the Hallelujah Chorus—intellectual integrity, social relevance, amplitude of perspective, and the spirit of true liberation offer no less.

