

Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads

A Sermon by

Rev. John H. Dietrich

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Presented and Amended

by

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[This morning I will offer another reworking of one of John Dietrich's sermons. This will be the fourth of my famous predecessor's sermons that I've delivered since I began occasionally doing so in January. Unlike the others, which have seemed as relevant today, if not more so, than when Dietrich gave them himself close to a century ago, today's homage to his genius, "Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads," might feel a bit out of place, not because it isn't still relevant, but because its relevance doesn't hold the same weight for us today that it did when he first delivered the message in 1924. I hope to rectify this underestimation of its relevance during my own follow-up sermon next week, "Liberal Religion at Another Cross-Roads."

The point of Dietrich's message 99 years ago was that liberal religion, although grounded in the tolerance birthed during the Renaissance, had not yet fully embraced science and that it needed to do so if Unitarianism was to thrive. That was a century ago and I would say our religion still hasn't done so and, sadly, has become even less likely to do so today than it was then. This is the tragedy of today's sermon, that Dietrich's vision not only failed to come true, but that fewer of us now have the religious enthusiasm for science that our Unitarian forerunners had. Dietrich's religious sentiment toward science is expressed in the following sentence, which I have chosen to omit from today's sermon, so listen carefully now: "Let us appeal to men as fervently and with as absolute a faith as of old prompted prayer to God; and the slumbering power that lies down deep in us all will arise, and loosened from its bonds go forth to recreate the world." Have you ever anybody talk like that about science before?

It is easy to understand this sentiment coming from Dietrich, whose first Unitarian ministry was here in Spokane between 1911 and 1916. He came here after having been convicted of heresy and defrocked by the Dutch Reform Church. It was here, among the founders of our Spokane congregation, that he first gained the freedom to think for himself and to discover and develop a more rational approach to religion; here, where our church's original bylaws, written in 1888, stated, "The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion," and its, "First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy."¹ This was the feeling and hope back then, that human society was advancing towards a more intelligent and rational society. Imagine how disappointed they would be if they knew how far off the mark they were.

¹ McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

Dietrich became known as the Father of Religious Humanism and was an original signer of the Humanist Manifesto. But we should be cautious about turning science into a religion by replacing belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent deity with an all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present approach to discovering truth. Science is not perfect. On the contrary, it has sometimes been terribly flawed and has led to some terrible and regrettable mistakes and consequences. Sometime after Dietrich gave his sermon, we entered into the Nuclear Arms race. In fact, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki began on this very date, August 6th, 78 years ago. Some of the technologies that science helped birth have led to the extreme warming of our planet. And, most recently, it appears, the global pandemic we just went through began in a Chinese laboratory where scientist were studying the Corona virus responsible.

In the past, including during Dietrich's day, bad science was used to confirm and justify racial prejudice and disparities among people. In fact, another entire section I'm leaving out this morning, illustrates this point with just one sentence, "[Science is] increasingly demonstrating the facts of human variability, of diversity of inherited potentialities, of the superiority of some stocks and races over others." Although science and reason are important tools for us religious liberals, they are not authoritative idols to be revered. More recent advances in science have since helped us understand race itself is a baseless myth.

As usual, I've had to omit much of Dietrich's sermon because his are generally twice as long as mine, which many feel are already long enough. Fortunately, Dietrich often gives a wealth of evidence and illustrations that can easily be thinned out without losing any of his context or main points.

Finally, notice how often he uses terms like "religious liberals" and "liberal religion" to describe Unitarianism. Never does he mention "covenant" or refer to ours as a "covenantal religion," as some are now calling it. And, keep in mind, it wasn't until the 1960's that Unitarians stopped using the phrases Fatherhood of God and Brother of Man to describe our principles, and that Dietrich's preaching and ministry was a major cause of the 20th century schism in Unitarianism known as the Humanist Debate. TE]

[In 1910] George Tyrell's book, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, [was posthumously published, about the need for Christianity to modernize its thinking. Tyrell was excommunicated in 1906 for this heresy, and died three years later in 1909,] and since then Christianity does not seem to have moved a foot. It is still standing at the crossroads, wavering and uncertain, halting in its choice. Tyrell, devout priest that he was, died with despair in his heart. He believed that Rome alone could affect the necessary reconstruction of Christianity; but he did not expect to see her do it. He saw the church as if in the hands of greedy officials who exploited her. His last dim hope was in revolution—an uprising within the bosom of Rome herself ... The fact is that Christianity stands today midway in the raging torrent of modern thought and life—not daring to go back for fear of meeting a traitor's death at the hands of disappointed humanity; Nor daring to go forward for fear of being submerged amid the complex problems, criticisms, movements and currents, which go to make up the dumb-foundering whole that we call modern life.

Now this instable situation has been caused by the advancement of modern science which has revealed truths that make the Christian doctrines entirely untenable. And this voice of science urges the modern church to come out of that road where she may walk hand in hand with physical science as a comrade in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. On the other hand, tradition demands that the church retain her authority in matters of truth and refuse to surrender her right to dictate in all affairs of conduct. This latter attitude of course is made ridiculous by the fact that science has removed entirely the basis of her whole structure of theology. All her doctrines and her whole scheme of salvation are built upon the mythical fall of man; and if the fall of man is mythical and unscientific, how can the doctrine built upon it be upheld? So it becomes more and more evident that the Christian churches must entirely renounce their preposterous claim to exclusive truth and infallible authority, and be content to take their place beside the other religions which they have despised as purely natural growths ... In the conflict of modern ideas, the church stands helpless. It is not so much that the church has gone back as that the world has gone forward. She reminds one of the hen who had hatched and brought up ducklings, who was struck with consternation when her foster children took to the water. Like the adventurous ducklings the world has gone forward to wider visions and nobler enterprises, while the decrepit mother church limps along the shore collecting the shells of her ancient creeds to preserve in her ecclesiastical museum. Unless the Christian Church can convert herself and be born again, her doom is certain.

Now the religious liberal stands ready to applaud such statements in regard to the orthodox Christian churches; but never for a moment realizes that liberal religion may also be at a crossroads and that her future depends entirely upon the direction in which she travels ... And the thing that causes these crises in her career is precisely the same as that which causes the dilemma in the orthodox church—namely, the problem of accepting or rejecting the purely scientific method in contrast with the traditional method. The liberal church has gone a long way on the road toward the acceptance of the results of modern science as the basis of her religion; and yet she has not gone the full distance, with the result that she stands wavering before two roads—one leading on to a full and free acceptance of scientific results, the other to a strange admixture of science with tradition and sentiment. In order to understand what I mean, let us look for just a moment at the beginnings of the liberal movement and religion and its relation to the scientific movement.

It is rather generally believed that liberal religion is the result in the religious world of the scientific movement; and that religious liberalism means the application to religion of the scientific attitude of mind; but this is not quite true. The movement and religion which we call liberal, and the movement in education which we call scientific have had different origins. Religious liberalism in the modern sense rose out of the humanitarianism and broader tolerance of the Reformation, and out of the more critical intellectual spirit which came with the revolt against tradition. It therefore has an intellectual kinship with the scientific movement; but in the main the earlier leaders of religious liberalism proceeded to their conclusions by a more critical examination of the basis of Christian faith than had previously been applied, gradually discarding those elements of the faith which were shocking to the moral sense and were intellectually naive. Such a reconstruction of religious faith could scarcely be called scientific, for very little new data bearing

upon religious problems was brought forward or considered. For liberalism as for orthodoxy, the Christian and Hebrew scriptures remained the principal source of inspiration and vindication ...

I.

The scientific movement is considerably more ancient than Christianity itself, arising out of the intellectual flowering of ancient Greece, yet had an intermittent and apparently precarious career. For long ages various factors conspired to delay its advance. The Christian Church itself was an important factor in this delay. In no age preceding our own did it occupy the attention of more than a minute fraction of the population, and its meaning and promise were grasped by few. With the Renaissance, scientific studies were again pursued with increasing enthusiasm. Slowly this movement gathered momentum and reached out to claim the service of a widening circle of devotees, until in the 19th century it came into its own. Its method and spirit are now part and parcel of every worthy human endeavor.

Now this spirit was developed almost exclusively outside the church, and for centuries had no influence whatsoever upon religious thinking. It was anathematized without a hearing. Even the Reformation leaders knew it not. Nor did the early liberals reach out to it for support. In the 19th century, however ... with its increasing spread in every realm of thought, religious liberalism began to find in it a worthy and influential ally. To the aid of religious liberalism, the scientific movement brought a wealth of new data—a whole new cosmogony, new views of nature, new promises for human development. The liberal churches have largely welcomed that scientific material finding therein a justification for many of their previous conclusions. An extensive process of incorporation of this new data into the life of the liberal church is in progress. It has been well said that every theology rests upon a cosmology, every view of God upon a concept of nature. And it is inevitable that the newer and more scientific views of nature and of humanity should profoundly affect the thinking of liberal religious men and women.

Now I have said that religious liberalism in the Christian Church has reached its present position by methods which are logical and rationalistic, but not entirely scientific in the true sense of that word: for the logical and critical examination of inherited Christian beliefs with the gradual removal of primitive and unethical elements is one thing; whereas an untrammelled and uncompromising search for religious truth in the light of the newer science and of comparative religions and psychological study is quite another ... The liberal churches are today in a state of unstable equilibrium. From them the old bases of faith are shaken or discredited, yet often they retain a strong emotional bias in the direction of Christian practices and phraseology. Can they be both Christian and scientific? Is the reform of ancient dogma taking too radical a trend. And should a halt be called; or shall they go forward without fear in an earnest search for newer and truer and firmer faces for religious faith?

II.

And this is what I mean by liberal religion at the crossroads. It is not a question of issue between any two definite doctrines, such as theism and humanism; it is rather the issue between two definite methods of approach and study—are we to hold on to the apron strings of Christianity

with one hand while we reach out with the other for such truths as seem compatible with our interpretation of Christianity, or shall we cut loose entirely from our old ports and sail out boldly into the unknown seas, grasping at every truth available whether or not it can be made fit into our old system of thought? ... The present religious dilemma is due not primarily to new points of conflict between traditional religious views and the results of science; but to the increasing body of people who have come to accept the scientific approach to the study of truth. To these, religion can no longer claim any privileges or exemptions. Its doctrines, its history, its sacred books, its customs, must all be submitted to the same impartial type of investigation and study as we employ in other human interests.

Now this liberal religion thus far has not done. It still clings to a kind of modified Christianity, which recognizes a personal God, who is our father in heaven, and which looks upon Jesus as the supreme revelation of this heavenly father ... Nowhere is this better shown than in the liberal religious attitude towards prayer. Liberals no longer pray for temporal things, that is for rain or fair weather, for food or shelter, except occasionally by a slip of the tongue; but they continue to pray for spiritual blessings, for the kingdom of god; prayer for the latter is just as unscientific as prayer for the former. If cause and effect rules in one realm it rules in every realm. Rain does not come except as there are certain conditions in the atmosphere; Likewise, truth, justice, and the reign of right do not come except as there are certain conditions in the human mind, certain widespread dispositions in human society ... To call upon a personal being in the skies to accomplish things in this world is to repudiate the very fundamental thought of science ...

III.

... As they pray without any deep belief in prayer, so they own Jesus as master without any serious conception of the illogical implication of such a belief. Liberals everywhere deny the deity of Jesus, they insist that he was born as we were born, that he was made of the same common clay as the rest of humanity; but they place him on a pinnacle as the greatest teacher and the most sublime revelation of the good that has ever lived. They feel that there is something of unusual authority attached to his words, and that if they can quote him in defense of an argument, it is greatly strengthened ... [that] the one salvation for our modern society is a universal application of the ethics of Jesus to modern life. Mr. Glenn Frank [the controversial President of the University of Wisconsin] declares that the ethics of Jesus is sufficient to meet all the moral needs of our time, and he would make them the very basis of a new liberalism ...

However sincerely undertaken, such a movement cannot claim the dignity of a scientific search for truth. It assumes the unique supremacy of Jesus and of his moral and religious excellence ... Surely it is a false procedure to start with the assumption that any system of ethics is perfect, that nothing may be subtracted from or added to it ... In the first place, scientific procedure is all against the giving of allegiance to the individual teacher, in the sense in which Mr. Frank would have given allegiance to Jesus. We find no counterpart to such a policy in the scientific world. There is no back to Darwin or back to Newton movement in science. The scientific movement as a whole far transcends their individual achievements. They exemplified a spirit indeed, but they did not create it. And I believe that Jesus should be viewed in the same light. He exemplified a spirit, he did not

create it. The progress of religious liberalism as far transcends his individual contribution as biology transcends Darwin and astronomy Newton. And I am too thorough-going an evolutionist to listen to any enthusiasm to the assertion of any unique virtue in Jesus, which places him 2,000 years ago at the top of human achievement. I believe that his moral excellence has been equaled many times, if not excelled, just as I am certain that his intellectual grasp of life and of nature, remarkable indeed for his day, has been very far surpassed by our general progress in intelligence since his time ...

IV.

... The weightiest criticism which a scientific world can lay against Jesus and his contemporaries is their absolute lack of that intellectual principle which is the very breath of life in the scientific movement—the principle of critical examination and analysis of the facts of nature and the construction of mental concepts upon the basis of such study. This is not a criticism of their honesty or integrity, but only of their judgment. It does, of course, raise the question of their authority for a scientific age. If the liberal church is to adopt the scientific method, it cannot fail to recognize this consequence.

I am personally convinced that the scientific spirit is a more precious element in the modern world than is the so-called spirit of Jesus. The latter term means different things to different people ... Probably most liberals of the type I am speaking about would insist that the best definition of this spirit is to be found in the two commandments attributed to Jesus, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength" and, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This conviction often finds expression in the statement that we believe in the *fatherhood of god* and *the brotherhood of man*. Such thinking has long been current coin among the religious liberals ...

Yet one is lost who attempts solutions on the basis of an undivided loyalty to some ethical maxims of 2,000 years ago ... I think it is fair to say that all present attempts at the solution of social and moral problems on the basis of some preconceived ethical systems, however venerable, must be adjudged less worthy than our modern mind requires. If the liberal churches are to choose the simpler and easier road of traditional Christian morality, they may retain a certain amount of respectability in the eyes of the orthodox; but they will increasingly lose the allegiance of thinking men and will finally go out with their orthodox brethren in the exodus of Christianity, which some of us believe cannot long be delayed.

V.

There is the other and more difficult alternative—the way of the scientific method and spirit applied unceasingly in the religious and ethical field. The adoption and application of this method will provide that indispensable intellectual foundation, upon which the surer faith of humanity can be built. And let me say that the adoption of such a method is consistent with the most earnest cultivation of the more poetic and symbolic elements of religion ... [For] there is no worthier passion than the passion for truth.

What would be the result of the adoption of such a scientific program in our liberal church? In the first place we would then submit our every inherited belief to a more critical examination than we have yet dared to give it. We have eliminated from our thinking many of those elements of traditional Christianity which are shocking to the moral sense or intellectually naive. The trinitarian theology and the miracles, the virgin birth and the vicarious atonement, have for us long since fallen into a well-deserved oblivion. But there remains a group of concepts which we have not so carefully scrutinized, and which we will find it increasingly difficult to maintain in a scientific world ...

For instance, many of us are still thinking in terms of a paternalistic conception of deity ... The scientific case against the "Fatherhood of God" symbolism is becoming rather crushing, and that it cannot stand much longer in the liberal religions. The many cases in which individuals have to suffer without conceivable reason; or in which great and unusual calamities befall multitudes and deal suffering and destruction to good and bad alike, forces us to give up the idea that we are under the protection of an external and beneficent providence. I shall not attempt this morning to develop any alternative scientific philosophy of theism ... I will venture, however, to predict that we shall be more and more constrained by the progress of scientific thinking to relinquish that whole body of concepts which cluster about what we often call the "personal God" idea. We are beginning to realize that this notion, like the fatherhood idea, is altogether inadequate as a description of these tremendous and eternal forces and movements which our scientific knowledge now permits us to behold.

As I drove home the other evening, I noticed that the minister's subject for this morning in a certain church was "Jesus Christ is still the hope of the world." I am convinced that the liberal movement in religion comes nearer being the hope of the world; and I want to see it go on to greater successes than it has yet achieved. I believe that it has within it the power of illuminating the minds and directing the will of mankind. I see it as the religious counterpart of the great scientific movement, adding inspiration and power to that movement ... Not only would the choosing of this road make liberal religion a power in the direction of the world, but it would save the liberal church itself. I am firmly convinced that the slow growth of the Unitarian church, whose life I have studied with much interest during the last decade, is not due as some think to our radicalism, but rather to our conservatism—our refusal to throw off entirely the chains of tradition and go the whole limit, our skirting of the shores of orthodoxy in place of boldly launching forth into the unknown deep, beyond whose horizons like continents which we may possess if we will. I do not mean that we shall there at once discover the ultimate philosophy; but I do believe that we shall attain a greater consistency and a greater power.