

[1975. In *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*. Howard Vos, Charles Pfeiffer and John Rea, eds. Chicago: Moody Press.]

**LIBERALISM.** Liberalism or, as it is more popularly called, modernism is a system of religion which, rejecting the Bible as the infallible Word of God and disparaging objective, intellectual truth, is based on subjective, emotional, personal experience.

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was its founder. He held that the ideas of creation, miracles, the virgin birth, etc., are scientifically untenable, and that therefore religion should be reconstructed so as not to lose the allegiance of educated people.

Pietism had already prepared the way by its rejection of intellectual theology in favor of emotional experience. Whereas the reformers had held that Christian experience is the result of belief based on reasonable evidences- he that cometh to God must (first) believe that He is- Schleiermacher denied the necessity of a verbal revelation that gives knowledge, and removed the need of grace by asserting that religion is essentially a matter of feeling. Religion is not necessary because everyone has an innate capacity for religion. These feelings are natural, and by them man realizes his inherent possibilities.

In Schleiermacher's system, the particular doctrines of his dogmatics are obtained by analyzing one's feelings. Feelings of course are subjective; they do not reflect the objective character of the environment, but rather they reflect the inner feelings of the person experiencing them. Dogmatics to him, therefore, was not a knowledge of God but a description of one's emotions. Thus for biblical or systematic theology Schleiermacher substituted the psychology of religious experience.

Philosophically Schleiermacher was a sort of pantheist. But to maintain his reputation as the preeminent Christian preacher in Germany, he disguised his actual views as much as possible and used conservative language.

A later important development of liberalism is found in Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889). Even more convinced than Schleiermacher that the Bible is scientifically and historically in error, he sought to preserve the essential kernel of Christianity by discarding its husks. Science and biblical criticism, he held, deal with facts. They are objective. They state things that are. But religion consists exclusively in value-judgments. In talking about the Godhead of Christ, the predicate Godhead or Deity may be retained,

but only as expressive of the revelatory worth of Christ, i.e., His religious value. To say that Christ is God is not an intellectual proposition referring to the essence or nature of Christ, but a subjective, emotional evaluation of the term Christ as applied to the worshiper's experience. Likewise the term miracle expresses the religious value of an event but says nothing as to its scientific status. Thus orthodox terms can be retained without retaining their ordinary meaning. Religion is all value and no facts; science is all facts and no value; therefore neither can disturb the other.

Since according to these views religion develops out of a natural human capacity, the biblical doctrine of the total depravity of man was replaced by that of man's essential goodness. As a result Herbert Spencer wrote on the evanescence of evil, and churchmen urged the politicians to build the kingdom of God on earth by means of socialism and pacificism. The pervasive theme of many sermons soon became the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.

These ideas spread to America. Popular modernism in the 1920's produced such results as Harry Emerson Fosdick's attack on the virgin birth; his sermons on "The Peril of Worshipping Jesus" and "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"; and the Auburn Affirmation, a document signed by more than 1,200 Presbyterian ministers who repudiated the truthfulness of the Bible and declared that the virgin birth, the atonement, and the resurrection are unessential to Christianity. These followed more profound men like Walter Rauschenbusch of Rochester Theological Seminary, who in 1907 published his influential work on *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. These sociological emphases led to a disinterest in heaven (later and more crudely: pie in the sky) and in God. The term God was of course retained but H.N. Wieman of the University of Chicago defined God as "that character of events to which man must adjust himself in order to attain the greatest goods and avoid the greatest ills." God therefore is a part or aspect of the world.

Humanists have accused the liberals of inconsistency and dishonesty in their use of orthodox terminology and have urged them to espouse naturalism openly.

The liberal hope of ushering in the kingdom of God by socialism was shaken in Europe by World War I. World War II then weakened American optimism. And no one should now fail to see that socialism, either Hitler's national socialism or communism's international socialism, or any form of "big government," serves only to give greater

scope to human depravity. Man needs to be guided not by emotions or subjective value-judgments, but by an objective divine message. He needs not the development of inherent natural capacities, but a supernatural regeneration. He basically needs not economic and political action, but the theology of salvation from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ.

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