

Religious Education Under Fire

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The first two decades of the present century saw the emergence of religious education as one of the major movements of American Protestantism. After World War I, the idea of a "teaching church" swept the country. The Boston University School of Religious Education enrollment increased from 105 in 1918 to 607 in 1928. Departments of religious education have been organized in nearly all the major denominations. Colleges, universities and seminaries have added departments of religious education. Like most things American, Protestantism organized itself for religious education work in a big way.

Like every other complex movement, this educational awakening of the church was the result of many different factors. Among those factors must be included new developments in sociology, psychology, educational philosophy; the critical historical methods employed in the study of the Bible; the dominance of the scientific method in religion; and the evolutionary view of life and God. A complete analysis reveals the facts that it was also the fruit of a new mode of religious life and thought. This new outlook is usually called liberal Christianity—a movement which seeks nothing short of a complete reconstruction of Christianity.

That a discontent with traditional Christianity ensued is readily evident to those who have "ears to hear, and eyes to see." In 1913, J. T. Shotwell opened a series of lectures with these words: "We are in the midst of a reli-

gious revolution! The old regime of immemorial belief and custom is vanishing before our eyes. Faiths so old that they come to us from the prehistoric world are yielding to the discoveries of yesterday." Charles A. Ellwood stated in 1923: "Like all other institutions, religion is in a revolution." J. Gresham Machen felt the elements of change in the religious world, which change he deplored. ". . . the present time is a time of conflict. The great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology." An objective observation reveals the tendency in American liberal theology to use many traditional terms, but with new meaning. The terms "salvation," "sin," "redemption," and "regeneration" have a different content for liberal and evangelical Christianity.

Liberalism is a new type of Christianity. As such it has some definite pronouncements and a distinctive position on: the Bible, the religious life, creed, worship, man, and Jesus Christ.

The Bible is viewed as the product of a social process which negates revelation. The method of Biblical study, for liberalism, is that of a critical historical approach and it accepts without equivocation (in the classroom, if not in the pulpit) the results of scientific enquiry. Thus, the Bible loses its authoritative voice and is not viewed

by liberals as the Word of God. This explains why so much of the church school literature is non-biblical.

The religious life is viewed in terms of a growth process. The "growth" concept in religious education was largely the result of one man, Horace Bushnell. In the middle of the 19th century Bushnell wrote his book, *Christian Nurture*, in which he sternly criticized the practice of revivalistic churches in their insistence upon a conscious emotional experience, and maintained "that the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as otherwise." This book was the strong influence which turned the attention of the churches away from an emphasis on evangelical conversion to a growth emphasis. Here lies one of the *main* causes for the alarming decline in church school attendance during the past few years. Liberal religious education stands condemned in the presence of its failure to convert its pupils!

Liberalism is in its essential nature a progressive movement, always changing, always in flux; its conclusions are never fixed or static; it has no unalterable "deposit of faith" to teach. It does not desire uniformity of opinion. The religious life is viewed largely as a social interpretation rather than metaphysical. The interest is directed more in social welfare than in "saving souls." There is a labored effort at maintaining a minimum of absolutes and a conscious effort to promulgate a maximum tentativeness. The lack of any supernaturalism is conspicuous. For the liberal religious educator, the center of interest is elsewhere. Hence, religious teachers have seen more clearly what *not* to do than *what* to teach or *how* to teach. Most liberal exponents have been so preoccupied with ultimate aims of a redeemed social order, that they have failed to concern themselves with some immediate objectives, namely, provid-

ing the learner with spiritual capital with which to do spiritual business. Liberal religious educators have justly earned the criticism of failing to give the children of the church schools an adequate Christian faith.

Although it is not so prevalent as it once was among liberal adherents, it is still true that for liberal religious educators, creed is relegated to a subordinate position, if not to the dark ages! The interest is directed toward an inquiry into the "life of Jesus." In failing to properly indoctrinate the learner, liberal religious education has made possible the onslaught in its ranks of the sect-type churches, Roman Catholicism and the esoteric religion of Christian Science. It is a tragic fact that in the period when the major Protestant churches lost the most members, the above named groups increased in membership. Again, liberal religious education stands condemned for its tragic failure to perpetuate historic evangelical truths.

No idea of evangelical faith was more offensive to the 19th century liberals than the idea of human depravity. Of course, the idea of the sinfulness of man was totally incompatible with Bushnell's goodness of man. The predominant emphasis was "a sunny view of man." The basic element in Channing's theology is the doctrine of man's inherent divinity. In his discourse, "Likeness to God," 1828, he states: "In Christianity I meet perpetual testimonies to the divinity of human nature." Since man has within him the seeds of divinity, all he needs to do is unfold, develop and grow more like God. The mere mentioning of names such as Niebuhr, Barth and Lewis is sufficient to show that something of significant importance is happening in regard to the refutation of the "goodness of man" concept. This is but one of the many resurgences in America of basic theological concepts

that most liberals supposed they had left behind for good.

Liberalism has Jesus Christ on its hands, and it doesn't know what to do with him. But make up its mind it must and will! And when liberalism has made up its mind about a Christology, it is duty bound to express its statements in language that the man of the street will clearly understand and not be fooled. Liberal religious education will have to choose to have its mind made up at this point by a Channing, a Bushnell, a Parker, and a Fosdick, or by a St. Paul, a Luther, and a Wesley. And in that choice lies the doom or the glory of religious education.

The premise with which Protestant liberals have sought to interpret the nature of Jesus is very different from that of earlier Christian thinkers. Dr. Fosdick in his book, *The Modern Use of the Bible*, states this contrast clearly. "They started with the certainty that Jesus came from the divine realm and then wondered how he could be truly man; we start from the certainty that he was genuinely man and then wonder in what sense he can be God." It is in this reversal of certainty that liberal theologians cut the nerve center of a dynamic historic Christology. In other words, the real Jesus for liberalism is a twentieth century modernist! Liberal religious education stands condemned for its failure to give to the Protestant church schools a virile, all-saving, atoning Christ. The sand is fast running out of the glass of time and reli-

gious educators had better hurry up and answer this question in plain, simple words: "Is Jesus Son of God or is He a mere child of his culture?" In that answer lies much of the destiny of religious education. Sometime or another, the cleavage with Unitarianism will have to be made.

We are facing what is believed by many to be the most serious crisis that Christianity has had to confront. Much of contemporary American life is characterized by educated heathenism and cultured paganism. Ours is a heathenism, not of the jungles, but of college and university campus. Ours is a paganism, not of backward peoples, but of smartness and with a veneer of culture. Modern America sins with finesse and refuses to admit that he sins. Our age pursues its evil ways with an Emily Post finesse. Add to this the overwhelming social issues precipitated by modern industrialism and one need not be a prophet to predict that sweeping, radical changes must occur within the thought life and objectives of liberal Protestantism, or else Christianity will be relegated to a subordinate status within western civilization. Whether we will have two types of Christianity—liberal and evangelical—or one type, is no longer a debate taking place in classrooms only. The issue is very definite and so important that it is argued in the presence of the laity. And herein lies the optimistic belief that evangelical Christianity will win in the contest.