

BEYOND LIBERALISM

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I.

My younger brother lives five minutes from Disneyland, which means he is five minutes from the Crystal Cathedral of Robert Shuler. On a recent New Year's visit to the Rose Bowl - parade and game - we chose to use the Sunday to experience live the Shuler spectacular. Naturally enough my real estate broker brother wanted to know how his preacher brother rated Shuler. I repeatedly changed the subject.

On the following Thursday, as we were driving around Orange County, I initiated the subject. "Bob," I said, for that is also my brother's name, "you asked what I thought of Bob Shuler. What I want to point out is - there are two very different understandings of the gospel, and therefore two different understandings of the nature of the church.

One: sees religious faith as a way of life designed for achievement within the system. It affirms the social economic and political establishment. Religion is the tool for survival and success.

The other: sees biblical faith as calling into question the system itself. Faithfulness to the gospel puts the believer in a counter-cultural stance. Not picking and choosing specific evils - seen as contrary to the ideals of the society - and correcting them. Rather calling for a transformation - total, to the roots - of the society itself.

Robert Shuler is past master at the first. He has no equal as the exponent of religion as the way to make the system work to the benefit of the individual adherent.

But his Crystal Cathedral would collapse around his ears, if he ever accepted and attempted to preach the second.

The Project of God (a synonym for the Kingdom I learned from Brazilians) was the content of Jesus' preaching. (Mark 1.14) "Jesus came. . . proclaiming the Gospel of God: 'The time has come; the kingdom of God is upon you; repent, and believe the Gospel.'"

The threat to Methodism comes not from a conservative swing, TV preachers nor immoral minorities. It comes from neo-liberals - a term which, I believe, generally describes our present leadership, local and denominational, lay and clergy.

I call these persons neo-liberals, because in the time when God needed authentic liberals they were conservatives.

In the quadrennium (1968-72) when I chaired the Structure Commission I went to one of the early meetings of the Executive Committee of Good News. I made it clear I was not there to evaluate the movement. Rather the Commission wanted to ask every caucus, as well as the official agencies, one question: how can the structure of this church be altered so that you will believe you are being heard at all levels?

After the meeting a group, friends of many years, wanted to talk informally. They wanted to get across to me - a person perceived as a liberal - that they were not conservatives, not fundamentalists, not segregationists, not war mongers, not in favor of economic injustice. I understood what they were saying. Most persons and groups labeled conservative are in fact neo-liberals. This is clear in Reagan rhetoric and in his dealings with his own constituency.

Let me repeat my principal thesis - and rephrase it: Our concern should not be for the threat from the right, but the threat from the middle.

This is the single most important truth which seven years in Latin America has taught me. The renewal so deeply desired by United Methodists is possible - but only if we all can learn to go beyond liberalism - "Beyond Liberalism To Radical Spirituality."

My ministry of a life-time fell into place, with crystal clarity, one day last year through the testimony of a Brazilian Methodist friend, Ely Cesar is New Testament professor and Academic Dean at the Methodist University in Piracicaba, Brazil. This university is the prime example, unique so far as I know, of a Methodist educational institution which designs itself in terms of a gospel of radical spirituality.

Ely was visiting us in Atlanta. We were making preparations for him to complete his doctorate at Emory beginning this fall. Through the help of Ted Runyon he gave a lecture to the student body. I expected it to be on liberation hermeneutics, the bible from the perspective of the oppressed poor. It was - but was much more. It was a testimony of his own spiritual pilgrimage. He had begun his doctorate in Switzerland, in classical, liberal hermeneutics. Before its completion he returned to Brazil. "In the ten years which followed," he said, "I discovered Brazil. I discovered, for the first time, my country. The oppression of poverty had always been there, but I hadn't seen it. Through that I discovered the bible. It was only when I got beyond liberalism I was able to see the radical spirituality of the bible. And that is the struggle taking place in this moment in The Methodist Church of Brazil."

I so passionately want this group to hear what is being said, because in you and in this understanding is the hope for renewal in our church. I ask your indulgence for repeated personal references, because I know, from experience, how difficult it is for people like us to move beyond liberalism.

I have been able to achieve a certain openness to learning from Latin America because of my U.S. pastoral experience. Especially the Evanston years. This Latin American struggle to move beyond liberalism to radical spirituality was what the Evanston struggle was all about.

There I was fortunate to inherit the liberal tradition of Ernest Fremont Tittle and Harold Bosley. I also inherited the opposition of many of their supporters. A reversal not to be expected. What some of them could not understand was that classical 1940 liberalism became reactionary in the radical 60s and 70s.

For example, one of the issues to stir the community was the school board superintendent, Gregory Coffin. Before he was employed the board had approved a computer-designed desegregation plan. Greg was hired to put it into effect.

In no time there were calls for his dismissal. A slate was offered for board membership of persons committed to firing him. Whereas in normal school board elections about 900 persons voted, that year 25,000 went to the polls. He was dismissed. As he said to me, what the people who favored integrating the schools didn't realize was that integration is more than body count. It means a radical reformation of administration, curriculum, teaching methods and every phase of community life. Besides, he remarked, it didn't help when they discovered I'm a cousin of Bill Coffin's!

Before the election a reporter from a Chicago daily came to see me. He was writing a five part series on the Evanston school board struggle. His childhood was in Chicago. He always wanted his father to move the family to Evanston because of its image as a liberal suburb. Now he wanted to check out a perception he had developed out of over 40 interviews. He sensed a defensiveness on the part of many, especially the old line citizens. Was he reading it right? I assured him he was, and that I had confronted the same pattern in First Church long enough so I thought I understood it.

Referring to his childhood image of Evanston as a liberal community - what he was uncovering now, among those who were proud of that civic image, was a confusion because every issue of the 60s and 70s found them on the conservative horn of the dilemma. They had an uneasy feeling they were being disloyal to their community and its 1940 liberal commitments.

The struggle then in Evanston, now in Latin America and in the immediate future in United Methodism is to get beyond classical liberalism to biblical radical spirituality.

What does that mean?

II.

1. The first and primary difference between liberalism and radical spirituality I have already stated: liberalism affirms the system and calls it to consistency with its ideals. Radical spirituality calls for its total transformation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a classical liberal, trained at Methodism's fount of liberalism, Boston University. He did not call for an overthrow of U.S. political and economic structures. Simply that they open up to all U.S. citizens.

That is not what the Christians in the Central American revolution are committed to.

What would it mean for us to go beyond liberalism to radical spirituality - commitment to making the U.S. a Marxist country? No.

It means we will turn to the oppressed poor of the earth and ask them to teach us the bible. Our first task is to uncover the ways, subtle and sacred, in which our bible study is linked to the capitalist ideology, and its siamese twin, the doctrine of national security.

I hesitate to illustrate this, because I doubt my ability to be clear, but 'fools rush in. . .' So here goes: the current movement for a nuclear freeze has for anyone with Latin American sensibilities the smell of bourgeois liberalism. Let me hasten to say I affirm it, but much more. It is not radical enough - not radical at all. That is, it doesn't go to the roots of the evil. The arguments are in terms of how crisp we will be burned by Russian bombs dropped near where we live.

What we are called to, instead, is to see that if the disarmament movement were to succeed we'd all be bankrupt. Capitalism's nature demands expansion of its war industry until all industries become war industries.

To provide this expansion the number of persons sacrificed through starvation and exploitation must increase. Until now it has been possible to hide those persons in the unknown territory of the Third World. No longer can the doctrine of national security keep large segments of the population within our borders from paying the price of starvation.

2. Related to this is the second difference: liberalism, like conservatism, is individualistic. Radical spirituality is communal.

The first result of a new understanding of scripture will be a radical redefinition of evangelism. Evangelism aimed at individualistic transformation worked when this country was

a wilderness and pioneers lived on a lonely frontier. It is unfaithful to continue wilderness evangelism after the wilderness has disappeared.

Cuban Christians testify that the transformation of their society has freed them to be Christian. To help you understand this I recommend a future publication by Orbis of The Church and Socialism by Sergio Arce, Rector of the Union Theological Seminary in Matanzas. A Christian and a revolutionary socialist he includes a chapter which answers the question, "Why Am I A Christian?"

I wish we had time for me to give his entire answer. One quotation will help us hear what he says:

I am a Christian because, through the Cuban revolutionary and socialist experience, I have . . . been able to rid my status as a Christian of the intrinsic, explicit, and insurmountable contradiction represented by the attempt to be one in the midst of a capitalist society. . . .

To be a Christian in a socialist society is a relatively easy matter. . . . When an entire people rise up against the institutionalized injustice, and strive by all possible means to establish a new society wherein more just relations will prevail among all its members, it is relatively easy for us to be Christians. . . .

3. Liberalism is rationalistic. Radical spirituality is incarnational.

The chief strategy of liberals is passing resolutions. The guiding principle is to state logically, clearly the Christian position on a subject and then appeal to the good-will and good sense of a majority of the body to affirm it. It is the elitist confidence in rationalism.

My perception is that this is the current problem of the National Council of Churches. Out of a proud past of liberal leadership it continues to pass resolutions based on an appeal to rational believers in an irrational world. The NCC has a short memory. Its most glorious moment was when instead of voting more resolutions on race, it voted to join the civil rights struggle. Evangelism is stepping off the side walk curb into the street.

There is risk in this. Not the risk of being regarded by the cabinet as 'controversial,' but the risk of being wrong. Christian commitment must be to social projects which are always ambiguous. It results in allies who are hard to defend against our critics. That is why Luther backed off when the peasants took him seriously and revolted. The result is we inherited a bourgeois Reformation. Let us debate whether or not

Wesley did the same.

Intellectuals value correctness. In human affairs that produces paralysis. The National Council has just been advised by a consulting firm to include 'both sides' in its resolutions.

The reason so many conservatives are now neo-liberals is because after the time of struggle it is easier to see which side is winning.

Jose Comblin, Chile, The Church and the National Security State, says

The truth of Christian theology does not depend on its formal faithfulness to the Christian language, but on its attitude in the major debate. The wrong theology is a silent theology about the chief problems of the moment.

Incarnation and radical spirituality are never neat.

4. The result of the liberal stance is defeat in the face of the principalities and powers - and therefore frustration. Any Christian witness based on the assumption the system is basically good, and only needs a correction, will inevitably end in disillusionment. Radical spirituality understands the meaning of the cross - defeat - and resurrection - a new creation, not tinkering with the old.

When the SDS came to Chicago to protest the Vietnam War two of them came to the Methodist ministers of Evanston and asked permission to sleep in our churches. They had just split into two factions - Weathermen and Progressives. They assured us they were not Weatherman.

On Wednesday of the week, I was in New York and received a call from one of the pastors. They were meeting to decide whether to withdraw the invitation. It was now clear they were Weathermen. My reaction was that we had opened to them because of who we thought we were, not because of who we thought they were.

One other church in the Chicago area had housed them, until Wednesday. The Unitarians at the University of Chicago put them out because they had been deceived.

Some weeks later we were reflecting on the experience. Charles Peterson, pastor of one of our churches, said, "Of course the Unitarians gave up. Their problem is they have no theology of the cross." It's the problem of the liberal. Latin America today can help us go beyond it.

III.

THE FUTURE OF THE METHODIST THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

"Salvation, Justice and The Theological Task"

Sections I & II of this paper are offered to the Work Group out of a concrete context: Methodists of the North Georgia Annual Conference meeting to organize a chapter of The Methodist Federation For Social Action. These two sections attempt to confront them with the implications of their commitments in the larger context of Latin American realities.

Section III raises the 'Wesley question' by attempting to tie the arguments in Sections I & II to some parts of SANCTIFICATION AND LIBERATION. In this way, questions are put on the agenda of the Work Group rather than proposing interpretations of Wesley.

1. Is Wesley relevant? If so, how?

In May 1977 I experienced two events which puts the question into sharp focus. The first day of that month I attended May Day celebrations in Havana. More than 100,000 Cubans passed in review in front of Fidel Castro and the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

Later in the same month I attended the Central Methodist Church, Havana, as a few faithful Cuban Methodists celebrated Aldersgate Sunday.

Who has the most to offer the future of Cuban people?

Is Wesley only an 18th century Britisher? Why should the Third World shape its ideology according to his theology?

In 19th century London Karl Marx issued the Communist Manifesto. A foreign time and a foreign place, obviously, do not explain the unacceptability of an ideology - or a theology?

Reflections on this question from SANCTIFICATION AND LIBERATION--

Runyon: "When Wesley is approached from the vantage point of liberation theologies, and especially from the perspective of the Marxist critique, his theology not only can be freed from the confines of pietistic individualism, it can counteract that individualism and offer resources for the responsible rethinking of theology in a time when both neo-Reformation and liberal models no longer suffice. . . Only a theology that is transformationist can do justice to the Christian doctrine of sanctification and to the quality of salvation which that doctrine seeks to express." (47-48)

Miguez: "For us in the third world at least, Methodism as a social force is part of history--and in some ways part of the history of our domination and exploitation. The future belongs, under God, to the people--whether Methodists or Reformed or Catholic. . . Whatever symbols, ideas, and representations will lead them in their struggle for liberation cannot be brought from outside (least of all from a foreign history), but must be begotten in the womb of the oppressed peoples." (60)

2. Was Wesley a liberal? Or, is Wesleyan sanctification radical spirituality?

Reflections on the four characteristic differences stated in Sections I & II.

(1). Does Wesley affirm the system or call for its total transformation?

Miguez: "Wesley was unable to see the structural nature of the social problems with which he was trying to grapple. . . when he attempts to find causes and remedies, he remains totally within the premises of the mercantilist system and completely unaware of the structural causes of the crisis." (58-59)

Kent: "Wesley opposed the American Revolution as a breach of the divine order revealed in the Bible. . . For Wesley, the ancien regime adequately contained, or was contained in, the divine order, and as long as men were politically free to become sanctified, further change hardly mattered." (89)

(2) In Wesley is salvation individualistic or communal?

Miguez: "Wesley's anthropology seems to me incurably individualistic. This criticism may appear arbitrary in the light of his repeated assertions concerning the social character of the Christian life, his insistence on 'a social holiness,' his indictment of 'a solitary religion,' . . . I believe, that for Wesley, society is not an anthropological concept, but simply a convenient arrangement for the growth of the individual." (55)

Davies: "Wesley said that he knew of no holiness that was not social holiness, but we must not take this to mean that it was a holiness devoted to changing the social order; Wesley's holiness was social in the narrow sense that it related to personal relations with other people, especially those in the fellowship of believers." (80)

(3). Is Wesleyan theology rationalistic or incarnational?

Kent: ". . . holiness--far from being the definable state of consciousness Wesley took it to be. . . is a constant improvisation of charity out of ignorance and against the conditioning odds. Here, liberation, understood as the kind of self-awareness that is central to both black theology and feminist theology, seems to be a more hopeful guide than are scholastic revivals of sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century doctrines of sanctification." (101)

Cone: "Black worship. . . is primarily a happening in the lives of the people. . . the actualization of the story of salvation as experienced in the lives of oppressed black people . . . When the meaning of sanctification is formed in the social context of an oppressed community struggling for liberation, it is difficult to separate the experience of holiness from the spiritual empowerment to change the existing societal arrangements." (187-189)

(4). What is the basis for hope in Wesleyan holiness? In the face of the principalities and powers, is it able to go beyond the cross to resurrection, 'a new earth, the home of justice?'

Kirkpatrick: "Dussel points to the source of our hope. 'The process of liberation itself is the only thing which will make it possible for the oppressor to undergo a real conversion. Hence only the underdeveloped nations of the world can enable the affluent nations to discover a new, more human model of human life.' . . . Spiritual poverty is not to 'spiritualize' material poverty-- a device of colonizers. It is to be poor in spirit-- to be those poor who are blessed 'because the Kingdom of God has begun,' as Gustavo Gutierrez says." (221)

Dickson: "The pattern of evangelism employed in the early days of Methodist missions in Ghana contained . . . the tendency to link the Christian message of new life to the necessity that the converts separate themselves from their traditional life. . . (Another contradiction) was the tension between the spiritual and the secular felt by the missionaries--a dichotomy unknown in African culture." (196)

Cone: "If death is the ultimate power, and life has no future beyond this world, then the heads of the state who control the military are ruling in the place of God. They have the future in their hands and the oppressed can be made to obey the law of injustice. But if the oppressed, while living in history, can see beyond it; if they can visualize an eschatological future beyond this world, then the 'sign of the oppressed creature,' to use Marx's phrase, can become a revolutionary cry of rebellion against the established order. It is this revolutionary cry that is granted in the resurrection of Jesus." (190-191)

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Finally, permit me one more personal word. When I got to Cuba in 1977, I found that I had been quoted in the mid 60s by the President of the Ecumenical Council in a foreword to addresses by Sergio Arce on The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society. Neither Arce nor Ceballos knew me and at that point I had never heard of them. But Ceballos quoted from a sermon I had preached at St. Mark, Atlanta. How he got onto it I'll never know and he doesn't either.

In any case, I said it then, and I believe it today: "Our first obligation is to recognize a revolution when we see it."

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