

The Call for a New Liberal Religious Reformation

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Liberal religion is in crisis! It always has been and always will be, for crisis is part of the essence of liberalism as a place between extremism and complacency. But our current crisis-nature is nonetheless distinct.

Rather than standing against the hypermodern hubris of our North American individualism, liberal religion is entrenched within this same ethos. Rather than mediating the religious and political extremes in our world, we are paralyzed by our own internal divisions and do not have a theologically purposive vision with which to move beyond them. Instead of witnessing to the constructive increase of justice, love, and wisdom through interfaith community, our public footprint is much too small and we seem to be a register of the world's religious and moral conflicts rather than a constructive example.

Our crisis is a tragic one, for it turns on an ironic reversal through which our strength, genius, and virtue has become our weakness, our arrogance, and our tragic flaw. As a result, we are failing our historic and contemporary prophetic tasks.

To move beyond our tragic condition, liberal religion needs to reimagine a public theology that is historically faithful and culturally relevant. And doing this depends upon heeding the summons to a New Reformation. For as the powerful hierarchy of the medieval Roman Catholic Church had become dysfunctional, unfaithful to its purpose, so also have we.

Our commitments to the freedom of conscience and conviction, having taken an inward self-absorbed turn, now cut us off from the formative histories upon which a culturally engaged religious liberalism depends. Our critiques of orthodoxy now undermine fidelity to a purpose beyond individual spiritual preferences. Our tolerance of differences has become diffusive rather than inclusive and now prevents us from making the judgments that justice and mercy demand. As the 16th century Reformation began as a protest from within the church, so also we must begin with some inward examination.

Most of all, we need to face our loss of theological literacy. We liberals have forsaken the meaningful depths of theological myth and symbol and dismissed the wisdom of our theological genealogy. Mixed with an ethos of fractious individualism, this loss of literacy has led to a situation in which UUism means almost nothing without significant qualification.

As examples of this, witness the increase of our hyphenated spiritual identifications and the more frequent use of multiple-choice questionnaires for ministerial candidates. Or witness the status of our communities as religious halfway houses. Our tradition has become theologically disenfranchised rather than theologically emboldened. Heeding the call to a New Reformation and reversing our tragic fortune through a public theology depends upon recovering our liberal religious theological literacy. But what is this literacy and to what might its recovery lead?

Liberal theological literacy is nothing overly abstract and ought not to be limited to seminarians and their teachers. Liberal theological literacy is a way of listening to one's life, which, because all lives are knotted together with other lives, is also a way of listening to all of life. Liberal religious theological literacy is listening to life's depths in all its forms and expressions.

What is listened for is what moves life and makes it possible. What can be heard within these depths are the sounds of life's worth and its vulnerability.

Liberal theological literacy is a way of listening in which our experiences of life's deep value and our binding commitments always remain open to one another. This is what commitment to the openness of revelation entails. Life's fecundity ensures that the tasks of discerning and living faithfully in relation to what ultimately matters are never exhausted. Experiences in the world, commitments to the true and good, and the symbols we use to communicate these commitments endlessly inform one another.

For the theologically literate religious liberal, convictions are never closed to potential revision in the light of the ongoing revelations of experience and knowledge. Liberal theological literacy, then, is organic and holistic. And it is of religious significance for liberals because it is central to the ongoing moral and spiritual project of living a good life responsibly with and for others.

While many of us seek to live lives of faith and wisdom, and understand this to be of paramount human significance, our capacity to share this with and for one another and with the broader world has become neutralized. Recovering our theological literacy demands work in several spaces—within our individual lives, our congregations, and our broader association.

As a part of our individual journeys in liberal faith, we need to become reacquainted with the history of our tradition and to look again to the wisdom of all of our sources. In doing this, we will train our theological ears to hear the past, present, and future of life in all its fullness and in all of its symbolic expressions.

In our congregations, our missions should be service- rather than maintenance-oriented. To be a more genuinely liberal church we must enact a mission of service

to the worth of life, a mission that far exceeds our needs as individual spiritual seekers and compels us to stretch beyond our bourgeois comfort.

In our larger association, we should more explicitly investigate the theological bases of our principles and sources of inspiration. We should provide the material and immaterial support upon which creative theological work depends.

If liberal religion wants to stand up to the moral and religious tasks of the present, then as individuals, as congregations, and as an association we need to commit our talents, energies, and resources to the recovery of theological literacy. Unless we heed this call for a New Reformation, our tradition may be on its way to a tragic denouement.

Finally, to what might a New Reformation lead? What might a recovery of theological literacy allow us to hear? The sound in my ears is tuned to a historically faithfully, culturally prophetic public theology. I hear the “the mute cry” of a public theology in which theism and humanism join in a common spirit of service to the Spirit of Life. Beholden to this Spirit, this public theology prophetically denounces the caricatures of the divine and of religious life that fracture the world and our own movement.

This public theology marches to the beat of several drummers. It marches to the beat of a humanistic critique of idolatrous concern only with the supramundane, and so marches with a theism qualified by our common responsibilities to one another and to the natural-historical patterns upon which all life depends. It also marches to the beat of a theistic critique of the constriction of value to humans alone—a potential that, if left unchecked, is especially dangerous in a time of all life’s increasing vulnerability.

Heard as a theistic humanism or a humanistic theism, the accents can and should be variously articulated in order to speak to the Spirit of Life’s own variations, this Reformatory public theology may be able to speak a new liberal word and to mobilize a new liberal religious way.

In service to the Spirit of Life, symbol of the universal expressions of the holy unity of life’s worth, and in prophetic resistance to all that degrades life, this public theology may lead liberal religion to respond to the world’s new demands for the increase of justice, love, and wisdom.

The task and promise of this public theology is not to present to the world a vision of universal religion, for to aspire to such is to conspire against the distinctive spirit of different faiths. Rather, the promise of this public theology is to provide a language and to embolden ways of life that honor the most humane and life-giving

dimensions of different religions while not forfeiting the prophetic task of rejecting what is inhumane and life-degrading.

As the work of recovering theological literacy needs to take place at several levels, so also this public theology will bear diverse fruits. Individual religious liberals will be able, finally, to share with the world what liberal faith means and where it comes from. Individuals may even discover a passion to evangelize religious liberalism. Theologically emboldened, assured of our prophetic identity, we may be led to the holy work of incarnating the Spirit of Life, bringing it to presence within the broader circle of life.

Within our congregations, we may move from being “almost churches” to utmost churches. We may discover ways to move beyond our present divisions, committed anew to serve the divine within and beyond our walls. And finally, our association and liberal religion more broadly may discover that the world is not only ready, but also aching to hear what we have heard of our responsibilities to life’s vulnerable worth.

The world needs a liberal religion of prophetic service to life’s goodness and of prophetic resistance to life’s degradation. The world needs a liberal religion that is more inclusive and less diffusive, a liberal religion that has theologically integrated its own fullness as a way more fully to honor the integrity of other traditions. The world needs a liberal religion that forms theologically prophetic citizens for a global world. Our densely religious, ideologically polarized world needs the public presence of a mediating liberal religious third way, a way between a vacuous secular consumerism on the one hand, and a militant religious conservatism on the other.

Another way of understanding all of this is through the imagery of twilight.¹ As a crisis is a turning point, so also twilight signals a time between times; as crisis is ambiguous, so is twilight. The situation of liberal religion and of the larger world is like this; we inhabit a morally hazy time. Will we as liberal religionists hear the summons to a New Reformation and lead the world into a new day, or will this time be one that precedes our nightfall?

¹ I borrow the symbolism of “twilight” from the work of theological ethicist William Schweiker. See *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: A Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).