

Crisis-Tragedy-Promise I: A Diagnosis of Contemporary Religious Liberalism

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I. The Crisis of Religious Liberalism

Religious liberalism is in crisis! And this is because we have become, as our last great theologian, James Luther Adams, warned that we might, conformed to a liberalism that is dead.¹ This religious liberalism is a religion of methodical negativism rather than of positive substance, more brittle shell than yolk. Thus it is that when pressed from the outside for an account of the character of the object or the central concerns of religious liberalism, many religious liberals find it difficult to provide a coherent response. We have become practically unnamable because it is so hard to point to the organizing positive principle of our faith.² When we find naming ourselves so challenging, let alone when we cannot name ourselves for others, we are in crisis.

One reason for this crisis is that contemporary religious liberalism is being drawn from the shores of its missional cultural significance by the deadly undertow of an especially acute form of amnesia, a conception of freedom that has become forgetful of its conditions and purposes. What has been forgotten, as another great liberal thinker put this, is that liberal religion's methodical commitments to freedom of conscience, conviction, and of the search for truth "does not exclude order or the giving of oneself to something that transcends the self."³ But this insight can be extended. Not only does the idea of freedom not exclude the giving of oneself to something beyond the self, its constructive, enriching, transformative potential utterly depends on commitment to a purpose other than its own increase. When freedom means only freedom *from* constraint rather than freedom *for* some purpose, eventually the exercise of freedom cuts off the branch it is sitting upon. Freedom of this sort constantly narrows its significance by closing in upon itself. To have the transformative cultural impact we hope for, then, liberal religion needs to transform its methodically negative understanding of freedom by recovering a common sense of purposive commitment.

For freedom is a relational concept, meaningless apart from context and irresponsible apart from an aim beyond itself. A purposeless freedom is a dangerous mirage, one that mirrors the terminal insubstantiality of contemporary religious liberalism. Concern alone for the increase of freedom without regard for its creative purpose sets the stage, minimally, for the madness of restless boredom, and more insidiously, for naked will to power. The crisis of contemporary religious liberalism is that it is culturally homeless; it has no seat at the table of our time's most pressing moral conversations. And this is in large measure because our methodically negative commitment to freedom from a binding substantive commitment has made it nearly impossible for us to gather together a formidable public voice.⁴

But as James Luther Adams also persistently admonished, intrinsic within religious liberalism is a self-reflexive, transformative spirit.⁵ This spirit is gathered from the creative potential of several of our most basic ideational underpinnings. It has been and is being practiced by a small cadre of religious liberals, and if more broadly

resuscitated, could lead to our revitalization.⁶ Our historical consciousness has the potential to lead us to self-critical transformation through recognition of the provisional nature of our ways of thinking and being, to a reassessment of our historical resources. Our commitment to empirical consciousness can provide us with a way to register the state of our thinking and faith as a religious movement, as well as the world situation. And our concern with the ethical beyond the doctrinal could provide us with the properly practical focus needed to move forward from our present theological inconsistency and cultural irrelevance toward consistency and relevance. If more genuinely embraced, and revised for a new time, these ideas could inject liberal religion with a revitalizing pulse.

This self-reflexive spirit of transformation is one of the defining characteristics of our tradition. By way of it religious liberalism can be understood as a living movement. It drives an insistent effort always to live more justly and faithfully and fuels an aspiration always to seek new knowledge about the world and ourselves in order that we can better understand our responsibilities within it. This spirit is one of the reasons many of us claim and defend liberalism. And yet for various deep reasons to be analyzed in this article, the current ethos of religious liberalism is deadening, and the pulse of our animating spirit is hard to find.⁷ The time is ripe within and beyond our movement to renew this spirit. Rather than being the transformative tradition we could be, that some of our most faithful thinkers have called us to be and that the world needs us to be, we have become conformists to ways of thinking and being that are terminal. In light of this, a new formation of our presently latent but historically potent transformative pulse is required.

Toward this purpose, this article will first explore contemporary religious liberalism through analogy to the logic of tragedy. I intend to make the case that, like the heroic figures in classical tragedy, the virtues of religious liberalism have become, through hubris and contextual blindness, our tragic flaws. Thus in this first section my purpose is to underline, by way of a tragic heuristic, the pressures within religious liberalism that make renewal an imperative. This will prepare the way to suggest, more constructively, the ambiguous promise of a liberal religious public theology. The development of such a theological perspective is urgently demanded in order to prevail against our movement's tragic pattern and to become the religious movement that the world cries out for. And yet, as I will explain, meeting this demand is also going to be more difficult now than ever before. Inserted between these two discussions, in order to bring to relief the link between them, I will venture an allegorical interpretation of the biblical story of Jacob wrestling the holy. I aim with this allegory, on one hand, to illustrate the tasks of a liberal religious theology in general, and on the other, to describe the anxiety of religious liberalism's relation to its historical and theological inheritances. In other words, my intent with this allegory is to clarify and familiarize my narrative of the tragedy and promise of liberal religion by inserting an already familiar narrative within it.

The primary intent of this article is to agitate for renewed thinking about the contemporary condition and responsibilities of liberal religion. I also plan to follow this initial probative, diagnostic article with a second that is more constructive. In the article to follow this, I will suggest the contours of a public theological vision upon which to base renewal.⁸ Whether or not these articles in combination initiate a theological reanimation of religious liberalism, at the very least a little agitation and provocation should creatively resonate with a tradition of faith that prizes acts of subversion.

II. Liberal Religious Tragedy

In exploring the crisis of religious liberalism, it may be helpful to consider the ways in which liberal religion has become, in a very classic sense of this term, a tragic tradition. As the virtues of tragic heroes contain the seed of their own reversal of fortune, similarly, the virtues of liberal religion have become, through an ironic combination of insight and blindness, the tragic flaws of religious liberals. Consider *Oedipus Rex*, the classic Sophoclean play about Oedipus, the riddle-solving hero whose downfall emerges between the virtue of his wisdom and his mistaken sense of his identity. Actually the son of the king and queen of Thebes, Laius and Iocasta, Oedipus believes he is the son of the king and queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope. Blind to his true identity, returning from a victorious solution to the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus slays his father Laius, marries his mother Iocasta, and becomes ruler of the city of Thebes. When the blind seer Teiresias reveals the true identity of Oedipus, Oedipus gouges out his eyes, physically replicating his existential blindness and signaling the way in which the wisdom of insight can also tragically become the source of blindness.

In the case of Oedipus, and in other classic tragedies, insight is partner to blindness. The mutual reinforcement of insight and blindness in religious liberalism is ironic when one considers our historic theological roots. For our tragic reversal is informed significantly by commitments to historical consciousness and experience as the critical and relativizing filters of all theological claims and to a pragmatic concern for the provisional practical adequacy of ideas rather than their truth status. The irony here is that these insights would seem to provide religious liberalism with some very helpful methodological checks against blind overattachment to any historically specific worldview, especially one that claims to be historicist.

Possible reasons for the tragically reversed effects of this liberal theological methodology—in other words, reasons that religious liberalism is not on any one's cultural radar apart from liberal religionists themselves, and this in spite of the fact that we self-identify as a culturally engaged movement of faith—may be that our historicism is not historicist enough, we do not recognize the moral gravity of our historical moment or our responsibilities within it; our empiricism is not sufficiently empirical, the rule of experience has become, through atomization, a communal stumbling block; and our pragmatism is not adequately pragmatic, the conception of the practical to which we have become subservient is intolerably inward. To say this is to say, in keeping with the logic of tragedy, that these methodological commitments have become ineffective through distorting calcification, through a prideful commitment to them as a matter of course rather than as a matter of historical, empirical, and pragmatic significance. And to the extent that this is the case, the insight of liberal religion's constitutive theological core—more regulative, procedural, and methodological than doctrinal or creedal—is blindly undermining the cultural potential of liberal religion. I will examine this in more depth further along. But for now I would like briefly to describe the situation to which religious liberalism has become blind.

Religious liberalism is blind to the fact that our cultural-historic situation, this moment in time, is one that is ripe for the potential wisdom of religious liberals. Ours is

an ambiguous time of world compression. Through a variety of interconnected global economic, technological, cultural, and religious patterns, ours is a time in which the world appears to consciousness, more intensely than at any other time, as a single space.⁹ The world seems to be shrinking. High-speed transportation and communication technologies, for example, shrink geographic and interpersonal distances. And correlated to this perception of global compression are a dilation of consciousness and an increasing sense of moral ambiguity. As the world seems more and more a single space, a compressed world, so its constitutive diversity rushes in upon consciousness, expanding the horizons of our awareness of the world's cultural variety. With this increased awareness of diversity, confidence in the sufficiency of our own cultural, moral, and political ways of thinking and being is shattered. This can lead to a healthy self-criticism, but it can also generate moral uncertainty and even paralysis.

Thus the phenomenon of globalization is dialectical, referring to the mutually shaping influences of an ambiguous objective world situation and the subjective vertigo of moral consciousness.¹⁰ The moral ambiguity of globalization is as evident when we look out onto the world scene as when we look within ourselves. The hypermodern, globalizing world is massively religious rather than, as sociologists of religion hypothesized decades ago, increasingly secular.¹¹ The world is riddled with eruptions of violence and terror rather than with the increase of peace, as once envisioned by the mid-twentieth-century denizens of political internationalization and later post-Cold War theorists of "the end of history."¹² The world is torn by increasing gaps of wealth, against the intentions of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO to structure a world with a more even economic playing field. And the world is ecologically traumatized, in spite of the meliorative attempts of many international environmental treaties.

This profound moral ambiguity is only further complicated by the extension of human power, by the increasing range of the consequences of human acts. The increase of human power is not in itself morally bad, for power can be used for benevolent as well as malevolent purposes. Power itself is not morally bad, but it is always morally complexifying. In a world that is profoundly interdependent, the moral impacts of power's exertion are magnified, spiraling in multiple directions, leading in many cases to unforeseen effects.¹³ In a globalizing time, every individual is linked to every other and all places are interlinked. Given the extension of human efficacy amidst global dynamics, then, acts have consequences far beyond their local origin, and many of these are difficult if not impossible fully to anticipate. And so moral vertigo attends the ambiguity of the world situation and the lengthened arm of human power. We are dizzy with the swirl of global complexity and the ambiguous unfolding of constructive new global possibilities and potential disasters.

Perhaps most important of all for religious liberals, globalization yields the moral and political problem of proximity to differences.¹⁴ This is something that we know well within our movement, as the proliferation of hyphenated, particularized spiritual identities continues to multiply and to frustrate communal cohesion. The differences I have in mind are those between and among cultures, religions, and ideologies, differences between and among particular moral worldviews, particular accounts of the nature and significance of human beings, particular narratives of the direction and purposes of history and the values of nature. The problem forced by proximity is how we ought to be in relation to these differences and how we can arbitrate between them.

Evaluative judgment and moral arbitration are demanded because differences in moral vision matter, even as these differences unsettle our individual and collective moral confidence in the capacity to make such judgments. Different moral visions influence different ways of being and acting in the world and impact not only private identity and local situations but set into motion socially, ecologically, morally, and politically consequential chains of effects.

Given global dynamics and their ambiguous potential for both colossally destructive and constructive outcomes, and given our moral vertigo, this time is one of high moral stakes that presents us all, and religious liberals especially, with a high calling of moral clarification and responsibility. In suggesting as I did just above that liberal religion fails to register the fact of globalization I do not mean that individual religious liberals are unaware of the degree to which we all live, move, and have our being in this present set of circumstances. Clearly there are many individual liberal religionists engaged in various social and political justice projects, many related specifically to the phenomenon of globalization. Rather, I mean that religious liberalism, as a whole, is blind to its peculiar moral responsibility in a time of globalization to the extent that it fails to nourish the communal and ecclesiological conditions that need to be attended for this responsibility to be met. The hard work of isolated individuals is of immense value. But the best affirmation and support that could be offered for such contributions would be that of mobilizing the whole of liberal religion to recognize its specific call to responsibility. This is a crucially important point, because the intracommunal conditions necessary to meeting the moral demand for communal mobilization are compromised by liberal religion's internal theological fragmentation and the resulting absence of a demonstrable public theological vision.

Thus the paralysis of the prophetic tasks of religious liberalism has deep sources. Interpreting these requires a return to the liberal theological core of liberal religion. I indicated earlier that this theological core is more methodological or programmatic than doctrinal. But this is not to say that this core is not substantive. For the methodological program of liberal theology reflects a set of deeply held normative commitments. Though religious liberalism may not be rooted in specific theological doctrines, it is rooted in epistemological and moral dogmas. Religious liberalism does not begin from theological affirmations, creeds, or doctrines, but from normative epistemological and anthropological bases. Put differently, religious liberalism is committed to ways of thinking that reflect ways of being in the world that are held to be descriptively accurate and morally commendatory. I would like now critically to examine the nature of these commitments and their effects in relation to a tragic logic.

The virtues of religious liberalism, on their way to becoming our tragic flaws, include a high esteem for the autonomous self-determining capacities of individuals, respect for the freedom of conscience and conviction, and the tolerance of cultural and religious diversity. These virtues have their historical origins in good reasons. Esteem for autonomy grew from rebellion against the self-justifying authoritarian abuses of religious traditionalism, a needed and positive response to movements in the political and theological history of the Western world that had become exploitative and diminished individual integrity and robbed individuals of agency. Affirmation of the freedom of conscience and conviction was a response to the overbearing surveillance

of orthodoxy, and tolerance emerged as a justified revulsion at interreligious violence, sectarianism, and the myopia of absolutist intolerance.

My argument is that these virtues are on the verge of becoming our tragic flaws, to the extent that, ironically, we think too much of them. These commitments, not only justified within but also morally demanded by the historical situation in which they arose, have become, through their overextension, destructive in our own. Another way of saying this, in the idiom of the tragic, is that hubris pervades and distorts these potential excellences of religious liberalism. For one, the privileging of autonomy, originating in a situation that warranted it, has in our time, and as a result of dogmatic and ahistorical attachment, led to a number of pernicious effects. It has led to the entrenchment of theological and spiritual egoism, to an increasingly rampant, socially fragmenting individualism, and to the ascendancy of a discourse of rights over responsibilities, responsibilities upon which the maintenance of the goods that rights are meant to protect depend. In short, the privileging of autonomy can and is dissolving the ties that bind liberal religious community. In addition to this, freedom of conscience and conviction has morphed beyond its original purposes into an overly zealous antitraditionalism.¹⁵ The original good of freedom of conscience and conviction with respect to the legitimate affronts of traditionalism seems to have become an ossified prejudice against traditions as such, a prejudice that now impedes understanding liberal religion itself as a tradition of traditions and the political and moral possibilities that could result from witnessing to the creative possibilities of intertraditional life.

And finally, the constructive intent of liberal religious tolerance has flattened out into a blanket assumption that all religious traditions are functionally equivalent.¹⁶ Flattened in this way, our so-called “tolerance” of religious difference liquidates the vitality of particular religious traditions. Thus tolerance becomes destructive. It fuels religious syncretism, a reductive marketplace approach to religions that appropriates them as mere lifestyle accessories. Insofar as this commodifies religions, such syncretism is complicit with a colonial-consumerist ideology that in many of its other manifestations liberal religionists are wont to reject. Though religious liberals are of course not concerned with territorial expansion or economic exploitation, the functional homogenization of religious particularities reflects a violent colonization of distinctive cultural and religious traditions for their service to liberal religious spiritual self-improvement.

For these reasons, among others, the prophetic social justice impact of religious liberalism is tragically neutralized. Religious liberalism is simply not on the cultural radar; it's not on anyone's radar except that of religious liberals. And this is precisely because some of our greatest strengths, taken to radical conclusion and made ends-in-themselves, become self-undermining. This parallels the pattern of tragedy. Virtues become flaws when forgetful of their purposes and context. And so the neutralization of religious liberalism, through the flaw of overprideful attachment to its virtues, an ironically ahistoricist hubris, is its tragic reversal of fortune. The edge and impact of religious liberalism's prophetic interreligious vision of the increase of compassion, justice, and understanding is dulled by the self-incurred vitiation of its potential authority. And thus religious liberalism has become performatively contradictory and culturally anemic. The net result of this, or the denouement of liberal religion's tragic pattern, is that our movement at present seems to be an index of the world's religious and

ideological conflicts rather than what it aspires to and needs to be—a movement containing the creative resources upon which global religious, social, and ecological justice depend.

And this fact, that we seem to be an index of the world's religious conflicts, is also wherein lies the greatest promise of religious liberalism. For we are a laboratory of the cultural complexity of global dynamics, we are pluralism in concentrate, a crucible of the moral dilemmas of proximity to difference. The promise of our movement is not to save the world, but prophetically to give witness to the creative possibility of living constructively together not in spite but by way of our internal religious, moral, and ideological diversity. Fulfillment of this promise, however, depends upon moving beyond our present tragic pattern.

Retrieval of our virtues from the tragic grip depends upon the development of a liberal religious public theology. Yet as I will argue shortly, while such a public theology is urgently required in order for us to fulfill our promise, it is also the case that the contemporary ethos of religious liberalism makes meeting this urgent task more difficult than ever before. Before moving into a thicker description of this urgency and difficulty, I would like to explore a narrative image as a suggestive way to envision the history and future tasks of a liberal religious theology.

III. Allegorical Interlude

As mentioned in my introduction, I will offer here an allegorical interpretation of the biblical story of Jacob's wrestling of the holy. I am emphatically not offering a vignette in biblical criticism. I intend only to consider this story as an aid to understanding liberal theology's history and present and future tasks for the purpose of preparing the way for a discussion of the urgent difficulty of developing a liberal religious public theology.

Jacob's story is a story of deception, inheritance, covenant, and the irony of blessing. Jacob's wrestling of the divine is not isolated to a single night or event, but is an ongoing crisis. For a complicated tangle of reason and unreason, in partnership with his mother Rebekah, Jacob deceives his father Isaac in order to steal his brother Esau's blessing. Successfully deceptive, he flees and sleeps his first night with a stone for a pillow. During this night he dreams that God confirms the blessing he has just stolen, and covenants to worship God if God will protect him. During his journey he eventually falls in love with Rachel, daughter of Laban, his mother's brother. Jacob covenants with Laban to serve him for seven years in return for marrying Rachel. But the deceiver is deceived when Jacob is tricked into sleeping with Rachel's older sister Leah before he can marry the younger Rachel. Jacob and Rachel and Leah eventually prosper, Leah bearing six sons and Rachel bearing one, the favored Joseph. Jacob decides he wants to move his family and attempts to leave Laban. But Laban and his sons pursue him, for Jacob's prosperity has become a valuable asset to them. Jacob and Laban resolve their dispute by covenanting not to interfere with one another on the understanding that God will watch over them both, holding each accountable to this resolve. Moving along, anticipating Esau's anger, Jacob sends gifts ahead of him to his brother. In a night of fear, dreading his brother's twenty-two years' still-hot anger, likely ashamed of his deceit, Jacob spends a night alone wrestling the divine. During this night of wrestling,

Jacob seeks the blessing of the name of the holy, is wounded and yet endures, and is himself renamed as Israel, as “one who struggles with God and humans and prevails.” After this night, Esau receives him back happily.

With this summary in hand, I would like now to draw some speculative parallels to the theological history and promise of religious liberalism.¹⁷ It is important first of all to ask what blessings Jacob seeks and to understand the significance of the blessing he receives. Jacob seeks first to satisfy his own self-interest. He seeks his brother’s inheritance and a wife. He receives both, first by deceiving his father and later by being deceived himself. But these blessings are relativized by a further unsought one, a night alone with the holy. During this night, anxious about his inheritance, after many years of separation from the brother from whom he stole this inheritance, Jacob seeks the name and identity of the holy. But he doesn’t receive this. Instead, he receives a wound, his own name, and reunion with his brother.

There are suggestive connections between this story and our own. For one, the story of Jacob reminds us that the theological enterprise in general, and thus liberal theology’s as well, is always undertaken in a state of anxiety of influence.¹⁸ For all the talk about the divine being shaped by previous talk of the divine, all theology is tradition-shaped, influenced by inheritance, even when one’s relation to the tradition or inheritance is tenuous—as with Jacob’s stolen inheritance, as with religious liberalism’s own uneasy relation to its historic Christian origins. The intractable fact of inherited influence, however, does not entail that all theology is reiterative. The anxiety of theology is due in large measure to the fact that it is always shaped by and shaping of an inheritance, that it can be inventive even while it is inevitably undertaken in a partial blindness to historical influences.

Another significant insight suggested by this allegory is that theological work is also always existential work. That is to say that theological inquiry, like Jacob’s night of wrestling, identifies the inquirer more directly than the inquired about. Theology is also always autological, theo-logos is a discursive life-practice that names us more immediately than the divine. And yet, extending the allegory of Jacob into the longer biblical story of Israel’s peculiar relation with Yahweh, there is a further paradox here. For though the theological inquirer is named more immediately than the holy that is inquired about, the holy is not left utterly mysterious. For the story of Jacob and the longer story of Israel, which is an extension of the crisis of inheritance, covenant, and the ironies of blessing, show that the presence of the divine is mediated existentially.¹⁹ Through finitude something of the infinite is recognized, through human presence something of the hidden is revealed, and through woundedness in an embattled embrace a restorative source and aim is discovered.

The allegory of Jacob reminds us that liberal religion draws from the inheritance of a long tradition of Jewish and Christian thinking about, and life in response to, the holy. Our relation to this inheritance, like Jacob’s to his own, is a complex relation. Is it rightly ours? Do we still claim it? Has it been stolen, will it be squandered, or will it be reinvested? Will we restore our relation to it, as Jacob’s relation to his brother was restored, through the laboriously anxious existential work of theology? Like Jacob, there is a weight of inheritance upon liberal religion, but unlike Jacob, liberal religion has not wrestled its way through the anxiety of its influence. And this is related to another parallel.

As Jacob wrestled at night, so too religious liberalism has been feeling its way through darkness, apart from the lights of ecclesial authority and doctrinal Christian orthodoxy. For one of our other traditional influences is that of the Enlightenment quest for reason's liberation from the influence of religious tradition. But the quest to be liberated from bondage to the distortions of "traditionalism"—by which I mean traditions of thinking that overextend their authority—has been supplanted by an at least equally distorting bondage to the fallacy that there is such a thing as an Archimedean point, universally accessible and credible to all reasonable beings, from which to leverage critiques of traditions, including religious traditions. The historical effects of this fallacy have been described well by the late German hermeneutical philosopher Hans George Gadamer as a "prejudice against prejudice."²⁰ By this Gadamer refers to the automatic suspicion of the influence of traditions on thinking, a suspicion governed by a commitment to the Enlightenment ideals of objective knowledge, the detached knower, and the hegemony of explanatory methods in contrast to humanistic interpretive approaches to historical and cultural understanding.

As these ideals have worked through culture and history these last couple hundred of years, they have become ideologically reified. That is, they have become darkening rather than enlightening to the extent that they have come to be understood as omniscient. At the core of this ideology is the spectre of an independent, untraditioned, historically and politically unfettered inquiring subject who can stand apart from her own investigations and come to objective certainty regarding her conclusions. This enshrining of autonomy leads to the shunning of tradition as that which one needs to be liberated from in order to understand the world. Profoundly missed by this way of thinking is the degree to which all thinking is prejudiced and that even the Enlightenment dream of reason constitutes one tradition among others. Thinking apart from tradition is impossible. Without prejudice thought cannot get moving. And a prejudice against prejudice paradoxically impoverishes the liberal religious project of thinking critically through both the constructive possibilities and the limitations of its own traditions of influence.

And finally, like Jacob, I would like to suggest that religious liberalism has been named through its darkness. We have not received what we most directly sought, an objectively rational and timeless perspective on the permanent core of transient forms of human religiosity. But perhaps, like Jacob, we have received something altogether more precious: the possibility of a new beginning through recognition of our embeddedness in a tragic pattern and the potential through this recognition to reanimate our inheritances for a new time. Like Jacob on the night before he returned to his brother, it is time for us to revitalize our self-reflexive spirit, to examine our conscience through reconsideration of our origins in order to assess the integrity of our existence and to move forward, internally reconciled, into a new day. Like Jacob, our crisis is not isolated to a single moment. The anxiety of religious liberalism has always been magnified by eruptive historical moments—the Reformation, Enlightenment, and now our own hypermodern time of globalization. Like other eruptive moments in history, our own present is a time for rethinking our anxious relation to our inherited traditions in order constructively to move forward, in order to get reoriented amidst the hazy configurations of a rapidly changing world.

IV. The Promise of Liberal Religion

The present internal disarray of religious liberalism and the dizzying complexity of the contemporary world situation require recovery of a positive theological vision, one that answers the question of our cultural purpose. However, as urgent as the retrieval of a public liberal theology may be, it is also more difficult now than ever before.

The identity of religious liberalism as a culturally prophetic, justice-seeking religious movement is presently caught between two pointy horns of a dilemma. One of the horns of this dilemma is that while the intelligibility and authority of religious liberalism's historically prophetic critique of culture depends upon a supporting communal normative framework, our contemporary ethos of atomistic individualism undermines this possibility.²¹ In fact, as sociologist Robert Bellah suggested several years ago, religious liberalism in many ways reflects the decadent individualism of contemporary North American society rather than standing as a constructive alternative to it.²² As he keenly noted, our so-called dissenting tradition, in this light, appears rather conformist.

The other horn of the dilemma is that even if the sharp individualism of the first horn could somehow be blunted, in the form of a revised social or relational anthropology, our understandings of the autonomy of conscience and conviction intrinsically frustrate any and all attempts to establish a binding covenantal vision with moral depth and rigor. This is the case to the degree that the enormous privilege granted to what I earlier described as a particularly negative understanding of freedom, shaped fundamentally by a commitment to mutual noninterference, necessarily destabilizes any and all efforts to theorize, let alone to embody, a communal vision of the good and the right.²³ The future cultural significance of the historic prophetic justice orientation of religious liberalism, not to mention its intrinsic moral and theological coherence, makes passage between these horns the imperative of our time.

The stakes are high! For the current state of our movement reflects, in miniature, external crises facing political liberalism in our time. As political liberalism can be critiqued for privileging individual choice over communal responsibility, similarly, the cultural relevance of religious liberalism is neutralized by a rampant moral and spiritual egoism that militates against efforts to present to the larger world a vision and practice of responsibility to the common good. As political liberalism can be challenged for neglecting the structures of social life, a neglect that is self-undermining to the extent that individuals cannot genuinely flourish apart from institutions mediating between the colossi of state and market, similarly, the primacy granted by religious liberals to the autonomy of conscience and reason depletes the intellectual and social energy requisite to the maintenance of liberal religious community. And as political liberalism can be chastised for devolving into a bureaucratized set of technical procedures, only instrumentally good insofar as they conduce to the private interests of discreet individuals, similarly, religious liberalism seems to be on the way to devolving from a religious-ethical movement into a loose aggregate of atomic selves whose primary interests reduce to self-improvement and the desire not to give offense.

These parallels to political liberalism bring to view a picture of contemporary religious liberalism as fundamentally inadequate in a time in which the forces of extremism, religious and nationalistic, are on the rise and demand prophetic

denouncement. For a religious liberalism that is overly individualistic, that neglects the vision and practices of common life, that is more concerned with the etiquette of political correctness than with constructive political discourse and engagement—and which undermines itself further by refusing to articulate a robust theological and moral vision—is no match for global cultural and political movements that are massive in numerical constitution, socially organized, publicly engaged, and zealously assured of their moral identity.²⁴

Required of religious liberalism, in light of this, are the tasks of retrieving our transformative spirit and a renewed thinking about our presently self-defeating moral, theological, and ecclesiological commitments. And so I intended a very precise sense of the term “crisis” when, in my introduction, I characterized religious liberalism as a tradition in “crisis.” As a tradition in crisis, contemporary religious liberalism is in a state of passage and turning. Either religious liberalism will remain impaled on the horns I just described, and devolve yet further into cultural irrelevance, or it will extricate itself by undertaking the difficult task of recovering its bearings and reforming itself into the movement of responsible faith that the moral, political, and cultural pressures of our time demand. In what immediately follows, as a prelude to my next article’s constructive probing, I will discuss the urgency and difficulty of developing a public liberal theology in some more detail.

The task of developing a public theology for religious liberalism is more urgent in our time for reasons already mentioned. First, the self-reflexive spirit of liberal religion is in need of resuscitation. This ongoing identity and relevance of liberal religion as a culturally prophetic movement depends on this. The catch is that a prophetic vision depends upon a sustaining communal moral framework, one in which individuals are mutually bound and enlarged through commitment to a common vision of the good and the right, a vision that can simultaneously transcend and integrates individual interests. In theological terms, such a communal moral framework is described as a covenant. The capacity of a prophetic message to speak beyond a particular community to a broader situation depends upon the weight of a whole community and the tradition behind it, a weight that is magnified by the character of its covenant and resolute commitment to it. And so the intelligibility and authority of a prophetic voice are conditional on a covenantal vision that simultaneously emerges from within but that also transcends its particular location.

And thus religious liberalism, if it is to recover a coherent, relevant, intelligible, and authoritative prophetic stance toward the broader culture, in the form of a constructive public theology, requires enlarging ourselves through obedience to a moral and religious vision that is historically faithful and of contemporary relevance. For survival and identity purposes alone, articulating and enacting such a public liberal theology is a tradition-internal imperative. But there are more important reasons for the urgency of this task, and these concern the outward cultural and historical responsibility of religious liberalism. I indicated earlier that the phenomenon of globalization is highly ambiguous. In general I hold to this. And yet though the full slate of impacts is indeterminate, there are a determinable number of effects of globalization that demand denouncement.²⁵

But part of the point of this article is that a rehearsal of the moral issues of globalization is not what is primarily demanded by a renewal of religious liberalism.

Liberal religionists are expert at identifying moral issues. What is missing is a cohesive vision upon which to develop a public theology through which to engage these issues in the broader culture. If religious liberalism aims to leverage cultural impact on the contemporary situation, it needs to develop a positive moral and theological vision that will allow it to enter into public discourse with the wedge of a slate of reasons for its positions on issues, a wedge that will then open a space for compelling public engagement. I would like now to consider why this urgent need is more difficult to satisfy than ever before.

As with the urgency of this need, so also does the difficulty of responsibly meeting it turn on internal and external problematics. One external reason for the difficulty here is that religious liberalism is complicit with a colonial syndrome at the core of some of the pernicious dynamics of globalization. Our dominant individualism and our privatizing of value commitments holds sway over responsibility to public goods and disenfranchises concerted broad-scale critique of destructive global economic and political patterns. These patterns are destructive to the extent that they fuel the increase of economic disparities, entrench or normalize disregard for ecological trauma by treating the natural environment as an economic externality, and displace political channels and political agency by economic patterns of transaction and consumerist identity.

There is irony here. For classical political liberalism, originally conceived as, among other things, an affirmation of political participation, has led, in its recent conjunction with the spread of global capitalism and commitment to the increase of economic freedom as the precondition for liberal democracy, to the dissolution of political agency. One of the external reasons militating against development of a public liberal theology, then, is that the political mechanics necessary to such a development have been consumed by the economic. Put differently, the political has been colonized by the economic. Thus, as a prerequisite to the articulation of a public theology, which is an intrinsically political project, we need to challenge the present tendency among many liberals to reduce theological claims to commodified tokens of personal identity.

Another external source of difficulty for the establishment of a public theology is the increasing moral and religious diversity in the public sphere. The problem is not diversity as such, but the superficial character of much liberal thinking about it. On the one hand, liberal democratic society affirms the inclusion of diverse perspectives in political discourse, and yet as a regulative framework rather than what political philosopher John Rawls refers to as a comprehensive moral doctrine, liberalism does not contain a substantive set of standards with which to arbitrate the deep conflicts, sometimes (and increasingly!) violent, between and among diverse perspectives.²⁶ The difficulty of developing a public theology in many ways parallels the moral paradox of liberal democracy that while it is based fundamentally on an affirmation of the right to freedom of conscience, by way of this affirmation it becomes difficult to make the judgments that sometimes need to be made for its own survival. In other words, within a world of other competing political alternatives, democratic liberalism does not contain within itself the means of its own justification. It provides a procedural forum for debate within its compass, but even this is normatively minimalistic. This minimalism works against the construction of a comprehensive moral vision with which to evaluate

competing moral visions, let alone to offer a substantive moral justification for itself within the larger world of diverse political visions.²⁷

This leads, finally, and in connection to my earlier comment that religious liberalism is in many ways a microcosm of the state of liberalism more broadly, to thoughts on the sources internal to our tradition that frustrate the development of a public theology. As with liberal democratic society more broadly, religious liberalism is a manifestly pluralistic tradition. This is, for some, part of the appeal of our tradition. And yet, as with liberal democratic society in general, our diversity at the moment seems to be less enriching and constructively generative than incoherent and fractious. Again, I hold that this incoherence and fractiousness is partly the result of the failure to provide a coherent vision of communal purpose to which diverse voices are held accountable and in reference to which their most constructive contributions can be made. Religious liberalism at the moment seems to be, instead of a site of creative diversity, a shambles of diversity in which highly particularized identities and spiritual affiliations find it nearly impossible to speak to and learn from one another. There is no common discourse among liberal religionists, or if there is, it is transparently thin and invisible to many within and beyond our ranks.

Religious liberalism is failing its commitment to the potential constructive good of religious diversity by trying to be all things to all people. This is self-defeating in that automatically granting legitimacy to a perspective, theological or otherwise, simply because it is one that is held and voice is given to it, assumes that all perspectives are functionally the same. We are crashing our own so-called celebration of diversity because of our tendency to flatten truly diverse religious ways of being and knowing the world as merely different ways of talking about the same thing, or perhaps worse, as aestheticized lifestyle options. But a true appreciation for diversity begins from a different assumption, that these differences truly matter because they embody distinct forms of religious life, and these difference may be so thick as to be incommensurable. One result of the idea that diversity itself is a primary good, rather than a good that conduces to the higher purpose of differentiated interfaith dialogue, is that the real contribution of distinct religious, theological, and ethnic perspectives to the broader movement of religious liberalism can be compromised. Given this, the purpose of religious liberalism to present a model to the world of the constructive potential of genuine interfaith life, through a public theology that recognizes without riding roughshod over the true diversity of different faith traditions, is frustrated from the point of its present conceptual origins.

Most of all, the difficulty of developing a public liberal theology turns on a loss of theological literacy within religious liberalism. This theological illiteracy, with its multiple roots, philosophical and institutional, is in my judgment one of the primary sources of our presently tragic ethos. A recovery of theological literacy is one crucial step toward articulating and embodying a public theology for religious liberalism. It is not an end, but a means. Regaining theological literacy is crucial to the work, like Jacob's, of anxiously wrestling through our dual inheritances of Christianity and the Enlightenment. And the end served by this means is an engaging representation of our movement as a tradition that is both faithful to its historical purposes and relevant to the contemporary cultural situation. With the diagnostic stage now set, it remains to clarify how a public theology

may emerge through a recovery of theological literacy and the outcomes to which it may lead.

¹ See James Luther Adams, "The Liberalism that is Dead," *The Journal of Liberal Religion* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1940).

² Having said this, I concur with the recent statement of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal that "Nothing is more characteristic of Unitarian Universalists than a diversity of self-naming." [See *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (May 2005), 70].

³ John F. Hayward, *Existentialism and Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1962), 6. That I have cited Hayward and Adams, thinkers from the past generation, indicates that the sense of the turbulence of liberal religion is hardly new. Indeed, as I will suggest further along, part of the character of liberal religion is to be in constant crisis. But the persistence of crisis does not mean that its character and its stakes are always the same. I hope to show that there are peculiar pressures on religious liberalism today and that these are to some extent the result of our tragic failure to meet the particular contemporary responsibilities of liberal religion.

⁴ Sometimes it is joked that liberal religionists are an especially chatty group. But in the broader public sphere, liberal religion seems at best only to be clearing its throat! This article is in large measure about the causes of this. One possible reason for this, to be discussed further along, is the thick congestion of diversity within our body. Church consultant Michael Durall writes along these lines, "How many times have we heard of UU churches in conflict, with arguments among the deists, theists, humanists, atheists, agnostics, Christians, pagans, and a plethora of other interest groups; all wishing to have their points of view upheld, with some unyielding in their views? These are churches that attempt to serve members' needs. Such congregations are unable to move forward toward a larger purpose for being" [*The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era* (Tulsa, Okla.: Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2004), 28.] The point of Durall's insight is not that churches ought not to be concerned with meeting needs of parishioners, but that churches should not be concerned primarily with this because the church's larger purpose is beyond itself. But my point in drawing attention to this quote is not simply to reiterate that liberal religious congregations are sometimes in conflict. This is hardly a surprise given that they are human institutions. My purpose in citing Durall here is to underscore that the peculiar character of liberal religious conflict is at least partly rooted in the diverse spiritual affiliations of liberal religionists. Without an overarching primary language, what I will later describe as a covenantal public theology, these differences make it hard to speak to one another, and our interior communication breakdown leads to our collective public laryngitis.

⁵ Adams speaks of this in many ways and in many places. For just one concentrated expression, see "Why Liberal?" *The Journal of Liberal Religion* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1939).

⁶ I am thinking here of, for example, the theological writings of Sharon Welch, Paul Rasor, and Anthony Pinn, and of the evolutionary evangelists Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow. I also have in mind the creative thinking about "church" evident in the ministry and writings of Rev. Dr. Matt Tittle and in the work of Michael Durall, and about

what I think of as the missional ministries of Rev. Robert Hardies (All Souls, Washington, D.C.) and Rev. Dr. Galen Guengrich (All Souls, New York, N.Y.).

⁷ The UUA Commission on Appraisal document *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* undertakes the crucial first step of picturing this problem, and it provides religious liberals with a rich trove of insight. Left conspicuously unresolved is what UUs share in common theologically other than talk about having “faith” of some kind. Another way of saying this is that in *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* there is a great deal of predication about the faith of UUs, but the subject of this predication remains radically unthematized. Noting this is of course not so much a critique of the Commission’s documentary work as it is a critique of what is documented, the theological diffusion of contemporary UUism.

⁸ It should go without saying that constructive work in religious liberalism and in any other tradition is never undertaken in isolation and never finalized. Thus, the public theology toward which this article is preparing is one that I would like simply to invite other religious liberals to consider. It is a work that is “on the way,” as is the case with all constructive work.

⁹ Any adequate theorization of our contemporary moment should note the historical precedent for many of the economic, cultural, and religious dynamics contributing to what we think of today as “globalization.” Patterns of globalization extend way back in human history. But it is certainly fair to say that these patterns have recently been accelerating, and that the effects of this acceleration are thus to some extent historically novel. For a helpful deep historical perspective on globalization, see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Melange* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). The notion of the world as a singular space is explored by sociologist of religion Roland Robertson. See specifically “Religion and Globalization: An Introduction,” in Roland Robertson and William R. Garrett, eds., *Religion and Global Order: Religion and the Political Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), ix.

¹⁰ For sociologist Manfred Steger, as specified in his very helpful book *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), “globalization” refers to the contemporary acceleration of global economic, cultural, and political flows and “globality” refers to the correlate condition of consciousness.

¹¹ In referring to our time as one that is “hypermodern,” my view is that many of the characteristics of our age are, as sociologist Anthony Giddens puts this, the “consequences of modernity.” In other words, to the extent that “post” implies a rupture between “the modern” and the present, I find the already opaque concept of the “postmodern” problematic. See Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹² Recall Francis Fukuyama’s thesis in his much-debated book *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Interestingly, Fukuyama has recently published a book in which he critiques and distances himself from some of the foreign relations policies to which his ideas have been linked. See *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹³ As just one illustration, think “acid rain.”

¹⁴ On the notion of “proximity” as a contemporary moral challenge, see William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

¹⁵ One cause of this is what I like to think of as our Enlightenment hangover. Manifest ideologically as a critical stance toward the idea of “tradition” as such, this hangover occludes recognition of the degree to which all thinking is traditioned. Part of the resistance to traditions is also related to a false conflation of “tradition” and “dogmatism.” But, as Hayward wisely suggested a generation ago, “traditions are not dogmas in and of themselves; they are simply our native religious language.” As learning a new language requires fluency with a primary language, “The real value of this language [of a tradition] in comparison to alternatives can best be estimated only after we have learned to speak it well.” See *Existentialism and Religious Liberalism*, 107.

¹⁶ I have long believed that one of the problems with the concept of “tolerance” is its negative connotation. When I think of “tolerating” something I think of “putting up” with something that simply must be endured. For all of religious liberalism’s concern with the goods of diversity, I have been struck for some time by the paternalism ironically built into the idea of “tolerance.”

¹⁷ It is important to note here, given the earlier discussion of the tragic pattern in contemporary religious liberalism, ways in which the biblical allusion and the tragic are similar and different. The most fundamental difference of course is that Jacob’s crisis is with a personalistic and agential model of transcendence rather than, as with the heroes of classical tragedy, the impersonality of fate or necessity. This difference is hardly incidental, but, in keeping with the suggestive nature of the parallels to which I want to draw attention, it is helpful to note what the biblical and the tragic share in common. Both the tragic and the biblical signal the sense that human life is an engagement not only along horizontal lines of existential, social, and historical interaction, but also with the vertical, with a transcendent reality that is the condition and ground of all existence. Though eluding reason fully to pin down, the clutch of this reality is nonetheless inescapable. It is the primary condition and conditioning source of human meaning, acting upon us from beyond as well as through the horizontal lines of existential struggle and historical social interactions.

¹⁸ My use of the concept “anxiety of influence” alludes to literary theorist Harold Bloom’s book by the same name, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). In acknowledging this allusion, however, I do not at all mean to reinforce Bloom’s patricidal theory of the relation between poets and their strongest influences, and certainly not to what such implies with respect to the issues at hand in this article.

¹⁹ This is not to say that the presence of the divine is *only* mediated existentially. For of course the whole of the biblical adventure narrates the presence of the holy in history, nature, and community as well.

²⁰ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed. (New York: Continuum, 1999), originally published as *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960).

²¹ On the communal preconditions of prophetic discourse’s authority and intelligibility, see political philosopher Michael Walzer’s *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. chap. 3.

²² Robert Bellah, "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective," UUA General Assembly, Rochester, N.Y., June 27, 1998 (text downloaded from online document *Fulfilling the Promise: A Recovenanting Process for the 21st Century*, UUA General Assembly Handbook: <http://www.uua.org/archive/promise/handbook/bellah.html>).

²³ For the classic account of the differences between positive and negative freedom, see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

²⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt's recent book discusses the inadequacy of the para-ecclesial, diffuse organizational structure of the "spiritual left" in relation to the focused organization of the Christian Right. See *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

²⁵ Among these is the fact that even while total global wealth may be on the increase, the gap between the poor and the wealthy is widening. Now, some argue that the increase of total wealth is also raising the lowest level of the economic strata, and so the poorest in the world are less poor than before the unfettering of markets, the deregulation of trade, and the liberation of finance, the hallmark commitments of neoliberalism and the antecedent Bretton Woods strategies. Regardless of the point that this argument demands some further evidential support, it is still not a valid moral counterpoint to critiques of the uneven moral effects of global capitalism. For the fact of an increasing gap between rich and poor, even if total wealth may be increasing, is itself a moral problem. For anyone with a conscience, the gap is the problem!

²⁶ See Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1971) and the later commentarial *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Michael Sandel is one among the many insightful interpreters of this moral paradox of Rawlsian political liberalism. See especially *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁷ I hope this is needless to say, but my comments here are not at all meant to undermine what I take to be the moral good of liberal democracy as a political form of life. I am simply pointing to a paradox within liberal democracy that parallels a tension within religious liberalism—that of simultaneously affirming the good of diversity but of having little in the way of a transprocedural moral standard that would support the sometimes moral necessity of making judgments among rival moral conceptions of life.