

## Editor's Note

"In the last analysis . . . liberalism, if it is to be effective in the arena of competing world-views today, must know pretty definitely what its convictions are and expect at least its own adherents to take them seriously. Only in this way can it offer more than a 'search for the truth' and confront persons with a 'call,' a demand, which comes to them with compulsion and urgency." ("The Liberalism That is Dead," *Journal of Liberal Religion* I (Winter 1940), 39)

These words by the late James Luther Adams, the editor of the original *Journal of Liberal Religion*, express the ongoing struggle and challenge for renewal inherent in the liberal religious project. His words could be our words for today. And yet the ground beneath our feet has shifted. Liberal religion is a venerable endeavor, but the world in which it is lived out today is very different even from that of a generation ago. The world we live in today has been profoundly shaped by the advance of technology, our current economic and political realities, and the development of critical theory and postmodernist thought, to name just a few. In light of the situation in which we find ourselves today, if liberal religion is going to have the power to change lives and exert a redemptive influence on culture, the tradition must be reconstructed and renewed.

As Adams' words express, this is not a new challenge for liberalism, but rather an enduring one. The essential tenets of the liberal tradition--that truths are not given once and for all, that human constructions are always temporal, that the reality to which we aspire always lies beyond our ability to lay hold of it--necessitates such continuing reconstruction. Nevertheless, the challenge stands before us, those who are the inheritors of this tradition if we are to carry it forward.

What role will liberalism play in the world of tomorrow? Our world is changing rapidly--in particular, the power that we wield as a human species today far exceeds our ability to come to terms with its intended or unintended effects. The question is this: as we move into this new century, what role will our faith play in determining the kind of future that we will create for ourselves? Will the liberal faith speak only to a small group of private individuals? Or will it be the source of a humane and redeeming vision of the fulfillment of human life and creation in relationship with God?

In order for liberal religion to articulate for such a vision for today, a two-fold task lies before us.

First, liberalism must attend to its own intellectual foundations. Recent intellectual developments have severely challenged the easy optimism of Enlightenment liberalism, and religious liberals have not adequately addressed these

challenges. In the face of an intellectual climate that has simultaneously questioned rationalistic liberalism and theological affirmations in general, liberals may be tempted to turn their back on the intellectual life. I believe that this would be a mistake in that by doing so we ensure our own irrelevance. Our challenge is to transform the intellectual context in which our work takes place--not to reject the insights of modern knowledge, but rather to assert the relevance and efficacy of the liberal faith and to do the hard work of making that assertion intellectually tenable.

Second, in order to be effective, liberalism must come to terms with power. Liberals tend to distrust power, and perhaps we do this for good reason. Yet power in itself is neutral--power is exercised on behalf of liberation as well as on behalf of coercion. In order for liberalism to realize its vision, it needs both theological power (that is, theological convictions that make a compelling claim upon us to shape our lives according to these convictions) and social power (the ability to bring these convictions into the public sphere).

*The Journal of Liberal Religion* is a small contribution to this reconstructive task. Through it Meadville Lombard Theological School seeks to generate dialogue and draw attention to significant work that is being done in liberal religious circles in order to strengthen and renew this tradition. The current issue, our third in this online format, represents a variety of contributions to the work of carrying the liberal tradition forward. The editors offer these essays under the heading of "Renewing Liberal Religious Traditions for Today," and we welcome your responses, suggestions, submissions, and feedback.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this issue of the JLR to two significant figures in liberal religious thought that have died in the past months: Professor Charles Hartshorne--process philosopher, naturalistic theologian, and ornithologist; and the Reverend Professor George Huntston Williams--church historian, Radical Reformation scholar, and ecumenist. The challenge of their legacy lies bright before us. May we who endeavor to carry the liberal tradition forward be worthy of this inheritance.