

THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL THEOLOGY

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PART III: LIVING IN THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE: POSTMODERNITY AND LIBERAL RELIGIOUS FAITH

Assuming, then, that it makes sense to speak of the postmodern, what difference do these conditions make to religious practices and activities?¹

How can I live faithfully in the spirit of the postmodern age? What possibilities are opened up, and what new challenges do I face? What might it mean to say today that I am a religious or theological liberal? Is such a stance even possible? As Lyon says, what difference does postmodernity make for faith?

I put these questions in the first person because I want, in the third of this series of papers, to engage in a more personal reflection. In a sense, I want to test myself – to push myself to risk making some commitments that have long been calling to me, but that for some reason I have been resisting. Indeed, one of my personal inquiries is: to what extent has my liberalism contributed to my resistance? I have noted

¹ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 41.

earlier that liberal openness tends to produce an identity crisis that can lead to relatively weak faith commitments. This is of course a general claim, based on my own observations of the liberal religious tradition as a whole. But I now want to ask the more specific and personal question: Is this same thing happening to me? And if so, are the two related? Might liberalism's tentative tendencies somehow be reflected in my own faith? Or might it be the other way around? Perhaps it was my own tentativeness around faith, my own caution, that drew me in the first place to religious liberalism, and especially to Unitarian Universalism. And if this is so, might my present sense of deepening faith commitment be related to my increasingly deep identity with the Quaker tradition?

I doubt that I can yet answer these questions. But my sense of my own faith movement is real. There is a certain comfort, a certain relief, in not being asked to make too deep a commitment. But there is also a certain emptiness, a sense of disappointment. I find that I increasingly want to be pushed. My personal "search for truth and meaning" can no longer be just mine alone. My searching needs the guidance of a faith community, and not simply a passive tolerance that passes for support.

So what am I looking for? Well, I am clear that I want a deeper, more grounded faith stance. I want to be able to articulate, to myself and to others, just what that stance consists of, and to do this without embarrassment or judgment. Yet there is a dilemma here: If postmodernity helps open the possibility, even the longing, for this deeper stance, as I believe it does, it also dissolves some of the familiar tools I might once have used to construct it. Under modern ways of thinking, I could have tried to find a firm foundation (to quote the old familiar hymn), and I could have expected that my foundation would be shared by others – indeed, by all others, or at least all properly enlightened others. I could have tried to get my faith “right,” believing that there was such a thing. But in postmodernity, there is no “right” to get. As Sharon Welch reminds us, we need to learn to live with ambiguity.

Yet I am discovering a wonderful paradox here. While postmodernity eliminates the possibility of certainty, of finally finding that elusive foundation, it simultaneously invites a deeper commitment to a particular faith stance – a stance that I can, and must, choose. By

giving up my need to get it right, I can accept the place my heart is telling me I need to go. I can recognize that my need to be right, or at least not to be judged to be wrong, was a way to maintain control – to believe, in the established liberal-modern way, that I had (or should have) all the best ideas, and that I could (or should) do it all myself.

Postmodernity bursts that bubble. It is disorienting, but also freeing, often dizzyingly so. (Somehow I am sensing that the liberal-modern self was not really as free as we like to think. But I'm not sure at the moment where to go with this.) The challenge for me now is to accept the freedom to let go of old hesitations. My fear, of course, is that I'll simply free-fall. Yet I know that my real risk is not free-falling, but never really letting go. Letting go takes faith, even if we sometimes have trouble saying just what that faith is in.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to explore the ways these personal questions play out for me in three dimensions of faith: (1) finding a grounding for social critique and the prophetic voice; (2) coming to an understanding of the role of religious community; and (3) opening a more holistic approach to theology. While these reflections

are deeply personal, I hope they will also strike responsive chords in others.

Finding a Basis for Critique

Lyon states the problem well. The central dilemma of postmodernity, he claims, is how “to find authentic post-foundational starting points for social criticism. ... It is hard to see how any (post)modern society can in any sense become a desirable habitat without coming to terms with this.”² For me, the search for a basis for critique is simultaneously a search for a faith stance. There is more to faith than critique, of course, and critique will often involve social analysis and other such tools. But faith is central. It is what tells me where the analysis leads. Thus, I am unabashedly using my inquiry around critique as a way into the larger question of faith.

So, where do I look? Since I have gone to the trouble of discussing four different theological responses to postmodernity in the previous paper, perhaps I should start there. I can say right off that the clever but content-less language games of many radical postmodernists don't help.

² David Lyon, *Postmodernity* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 80.

In a world without meaning, a world reduced to play, critique seems, well, rude. And alternative bases for critique are often hard to come by in these approaches. As Lakeland says, the radical postmodern approach “simply replace[s] ethics with either aesthetics or irony.”³ Or with manners. Sharon Welch disturbingly hints at this possibility. In the midst of a rich discussion that leads her to claim that there are no foundations or principles for moral action, she says, “My aim is to provide a tonic; when it is no longer possible to be self-righteous, even in our caring, let us try to be decent.”⁴ This, it seems to me, is a disturbingly thin basis for ethics. Lyon reminds us that “the very term ‘critique’ loses its salience when there is no position from which to assess, evaluate, judge.”⁵ The issues we face are more serious than this approach seems to allow. Welch does, of course, take them seriously; there is much more actual moral content to her work than she sometimes wants to acknowledge. I’ll comment further on Welch’s work below.

³ Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 25.

⁴ Sharon D. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 132.

⁵ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 22.

On the surface, the “late modern” or pragmatic theological approach would seem to provide some better options for ethical grounding, especially for a liberal. After all, despite the loss of progress and the decentering of the autonomous subject, many late moderns continue to affirm the basic moral values that emerged out of the Enlightenment. Yet the question is not so simple. For one thing, the collapse of foundations, especially when tied to the issues of class and hidden power structures, makes these values uncertain. For another, many of the most important values of modernity were, in effect, procedural or negative values, such as the right of participation (democracy), the right to fair process, and freedom from arbitrary state interference. These are important values, and they do offer a process-oriented basis for critique. As Lakeland notes, many late moderns “seek to keep some version of the ethical project of modernity live in a philosophical world beyond foundations--perhaps through some weak or procedural foundationalism (like the ‘discourse’ ethics of Habermas), or some ‘moderate pragmatism’ that holds out for a notion of truth while

admitting a plurality of moral perspectives.”⁶ This “procedural foundationalism,” as Lakeland calls it, is not without value; indeed, my own work on Habermas has convinced me that there is more here than Lakeland recognizes. But discourse ethics, as much as it may offer for philosophical discourse and democratic theory, feels inadequate as the basis for a deep faith grounding for critique.

Finally, at least for liberals, turning back to a premodern perspective would seem to be uninviting. According to Lakeland, these countermoderns “embrace a myth of decline and fall in calling for a return either to an authoritarian religious ethics, or, in more sophisticated manner, to an Aristotelian ethic of virtue.”⁷

⁶ Lakeland, 26.

⁷ Ibid.