

Grounding liberal theology

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There's a wrong idea out there, an idea that is doing the Church a lot of harm, an idea that is poisoning the serious discussion that we need to be having. It's the idea that religious liberals are somehow intellectually loose and sloppy, that they have been issued basically the same guns as conservatives but they don't stick to them. They're weak; they're seduced away from their religious principles by the pressures of the world. The clear kerygma of the faith is diluted in them. They're not serious about religion. Thus liberals succumb to the pressure of secular society and permit remarriage after divorce; they succumb to the pressure of secular feminism and ordain women to the priesthood; they succumb to the pressure of gay liberation and bless homosexual unions. There are no hard edges in their brains, only sloppy porridge; they are wishy-washy, namby-pamby, easygoing, chasing whatever is the secular flavour of the month. They bend one way and another as the secular wind blows. Instead of leading the Church to baptize civil society, they allow civil society to baptize the Church. The flesh, in them, governs the spirit. And so on.

No doubt there are some religious liberals of whom this characterization, or some part of it, is an accurate portrayal. But, as a broad sweep, it is surely wrong and unfair. It is wrong because it confuses sloppiness with subtlety, laxity with breadth, lightness with comprehensiveness. I want to think with you about this confusion, to set the record straight, and – along the way – to lay a few foundation stones for liberal theology.

A good place to start is with the Oriental Orthodox churches. No one would for a moment describe the Orthodox as easygoing or lacking in religious seriousness: they are, rather, relentlessly, even tiresomely attentive to small points of doctrine and discipline. They consider baptism by sprinkling to be invalid; they consider unleavened bread at the eucharist to border on sacrilege. Their stepped lenten fasts are governed by very exacting rules: no meat, then no fish, then no cheese until all you are allowed to eat, in the depth of penitence, is shrimp and caviar. They are, in what has become the pejorative connotation of the word, religious about these observances, religious about religion. And yet, in the midst of all this, they permit remarriage after divorce – only once, and according to a penitential rite, but still they permit it. How can this be? Surely nothing could be less ambiguous than Christ's injunction with respect to marriage: what God hath joined together let not man put asunder. How is it that a group that is so religious about things can be so surprisingly lax about divorce?

The answer is that they are not lax at all; they are subtle. They have a principle called *economy*, οἰκονομία -- perhaps best translated 'management'. According to this principle the Church has a duty to manage things – a duty imposed in the granting of the keys of the kingdom – and to manage things in the way that will most favour the wider salvation of souls and the coming of the kingdom. Now the Church's economy, in orthodox theology, comes in two forms, called 'economy according to strictness' and 'economy according to leniency'. As this language evolved the term 'economy' came to stand for economy according to leniency, the opposite principle being called simply strictness (ἀγκρίσεια). So, one

might think, we catch the Orthodox bending the rules after all. Yes, and no. Here I quote from a very high authority, the Wikipedia entry on economy in the orthodox church:

It is important to observe that when economy is correctly used and applied (that is, as a modification in the application of the usual rule) such correct application of economy itself is *one of the rules*. Thus, if one speaks of "bending", "suspending", "dispensing with", "relaxing" the usual rule, one should bear in mind that such descriptions could be misleading, since the correct use of economy is always done in accordance with the rule of Christ, and never contrary to it. This brings up the general principle that in the Church all canons and laws exist in subjection to the rule of Christ -- that is to say, his commandments, teachings, and precepts.

In other words, the principle of economy is one according to which the higher rule takes precedence over the lower rule, the deeper law over the surface regulation. It is not the abandonment of rules, but the principled adjustment of regulations to the deeper commandment from which they flow and which they are meant to help enact. Note, especially, that the adjustment is a *principled* one: it follows rules. Note, moreover, that this is not a version of 'anything goes' – and that in two ways. First, we are not talking about individual orthodox Christians making these adjustments; it is the institutional Church that makes them – whether in the person of the bishop or in a higher council. Second, the case must always be made that the relaxation of a given regulation is mandated by a higher rule. This is not sloppy, wishy-washy stuff; it is subtle perhaps, but it is hard-edged.

In the accounts I have read of the Canadian church's decision to permit remarriage after divorce, the ultimate motivation was the thought that, in society as it stood, this change would in fact promote the ideal of Christian marriage. Whether it has in fact done so, I cannot judge. But certainly, the reasoning was very much like that of Orthodox *economy*: adjust the surface rule so that it really does subserve and promote the deeper principle. Have stronger loyalty to deep principles than to surface enactments. Adjust discipline to doctrine.

This activity of adjusting the lower rule to the higher, the surface regulation to the deeper principle, is of course what much of the life of the civil law is about: government regulations, enactments of various sorts, are constantly being challenged for allegedly contravening a more fundamental principle, the constitution or the Charter of Rights. It would surely be grotesque to allege that in hearing and deciding these cases, our courts of appeal or our supreme courts are systematically sloppy, wishy-washy, anything-goes sorts of institutions. It may be that occasionally they make wrong decisions, of course; but the activity itself of adjustment, of *economy*, is not wishy-washy or unserious or unprincipled – quite the contrary: it demands the attention of the most senior, the most proven judges in the land. The practice of *economy*, which is characteristic of liberal theology, is the most exacting of disciplines.

Have you noticed, by the way, that the noun 'liberal' just automatically attracts the adjective 'wishy-washy'. People aren't just liberals; if they are liberals they are 'wishy-washy liberals', and nobody bats an eye. I want us to bat our eyes about this automatic and unfair attraction of that adjective to that noun. (There are other cases of this automatic attraction of adjectives in the intellectual realm: convention is always mere convention, academics are always ivory-tower academics, arab states are always oil-rich arab states, etc.) Let's be liberals, but not wishy-washy ones. That is to say: let us be subtle and let us be serious.

And let us reflect for a moment on this word 'liberal'. I wonder if you know the meaning of the phrase 'liberal arts'. I often ask my students what the liberal arts are and why they are called 'liberal', and the answer I get is of the following sort. The liberal arts are things like literature and history and philosophy and political science; they are called liberal because they are sort of soft subjects; there isn't a lot of objective right-and-wrong to them; pretty well anything you say can be argued for; they're soft because they don't involve hard things like mathematics. And then I surprise them by saying that all that is completely wrong. In the classical and mediaeval world there were seven liberal arts: logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Of the seven at least five are, essentially, pure mathematics: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy (=visible geometry), music (=audible arithmetic), logic. Grammar and rhetoric may not be mathematical, but they are very hard-edged. So the meaning of 'liberal', classically, is not at all 'soft and mushy'. Why, then, are these subjects called liberal? The answer, which may surprise you, is that they are called liberal because they are studies suitable to the *liberi*, the free citizens, who have the leisure for such enquiries. Other studies are called 'servile' – the proper subjects for slaves. I want to suggest to you that, although, when it comes to religion, we distinguish liberal and conservative, it would be better to cast the distinction as that between liberal and servile. My meaning will emerge as we go on.

I'd like to start by being honest. I'd like to give you an account of where I stand with respect to religious belief and adherence. I'm not a priest or a theologian, of course, but a layman and a philosopher, and that fact no doubt has bearing on how I see things. On the other hand, we are a synodical Church, one which gives more voice to laypeople than most other catholic churches, so perhaps my lay state does not simply place me outside this discussion. I've been an Anglican for four decades, having converted in my late teens from a Roman Catholic upbringing. I found the Anglican church to be a huge breath of fresh air. My parishes have been Trinity College chapel and St Mary Magdalene's in Toronto, St John's in Peterborough, Magdalen College chapel in Oxford, St Matthew's and later St Bartholomew's in Ottawa, this parish and Huron College chapel here in London. In my Oxford years I flirted closely with the Orthodox church, and for perhaps two of those years the Sunday liturgy I regularly attended was Orthodox. But apart from that enriching interlude I would say that over those four decades I have been not just an Anglican, but an active and enthusiastic Anglican. (Parenthetically I have to say, however, that the fracas of the last few years has considerably eroded my devotion; I'm still an Anglican, but a much less enthusiastic one. Perhaps this sag will pass.)

So let me do a little bit of philosophy with you, a little bit of epistemology. It seems to me fairly obvious that in different fields of human enquiry, different degrees of what might be called objective certainty are available. What I have in mind is that, for example, in mathematics there is a very high degree of certainty attaching to the proposition that in any right angled triangle the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. This proposition, Pythagoras' theorem, was proved long ago, and, as long as we are working in Euclidean space, we have no reason to doubt it. If we move from mathematics to talk about the ordinary things of the everyday world, then I think we may encounter a somewhat lesser degree of certainty. If I smell coffee, well, it is likely that there is coffee brewing somewhere nearby, but I *may* be mistaken. (I can't be mistaken that I am having a coffee-like smell sensation, but I may be mistaken in my inference that there really

is coffee there.) If we move to the realm of science, then we encounter a range of degrees of certainty; some hypotheses are extremely well confirmed – such as the heliocentric theory; others are quite well confirmed – such as the theory of evolution; yet others are not well confirmed at all – such as the hypothesis that there is water on Mars. Come now to the field of ethics; here, it seems to me that in any interesting case there is not much objective certainty available: it isn't certain that abortion is wrong in all circumstances, or that vegetarianism is the right choice for human beings. Finally, in the field of religion, there is, in my view, the least certainty of all: what objective certainty attaches to claims about the procession of the Holy Ghost, the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, predestination and resistible grace, the nature of Holy Writ? The realm of the transcendent is – precisely – transcendent: we can know it only through a glass, darkly. For the things of God, we grope.

Let me set this out in a table:

Field	Objective Certainty
Mathematics	5
Ordinary world claims	4
Science	1-4
Ethics	2
Religion	1

Here I'm rating certainty on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest. I think that this picture is broadly correct. Now the problem arises when we realize that in addition to what I have called objective certainty, we need to think also about *subjective* certainty, that is the degree of certainty people actually feel and proclaim about their beliefs in these various fields of enquiry.

In mathematics, most people I think feel an appropriate degree of certainty about the propositions they consider; similarly in ordinary world claims, and in science – though in science this varies according to the hypothesis. I don't mean to deny that in each of these cases there are people who are outliers, that is deep skeptics about the daily world or enthusiasts for some of science's less mainstream hypotheses. I talk generally here.

The problem, though, appears when we come to religion. In religion, it seems to me, it is a very common thing for people's *subjective* certainty about religious propositions to be very high, when the objective certainty is surely very low. Blood has been shed over the Petrine primacy, over the *filioque* clause, over the predestination, over the real presence. People become very certain indeed about propositions that, in themselves, have very low objective certainty; they become quite willing to kill in defense of religious propositions.

Field	Objective Certainty	Subjective Certainty
Mathematics	5	5
Ordinary world claims	4	4
Science	1-4	1-4
Ethics	2	2

Religion	1	5
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Indeed, I would go so far as to say that *religion is that field of human enquiry in which people's subjective certainty of belief most outstrips the objective certainty of the propositions in which they believe*. This fact is, in itself, remarkable; it is something that we should think carefully about. At any rate, I think that it is one mark of the religious liberal to be anxious to adjust his or her subjective certainty to the objective certainty that applies to the case. One should be tentative about religious propositions.

Does this mean that religious liberals are skeptics? Does it mean that they don't really believe anything firmly? I think that the answer here is that it depends what you mean by 'believe'.

On one understanding, a belief is simply a proposition that one takes to be true, and that one thinks everyone else should take to be true. Cardinal Newman in his book *The Grammar of Assent* made a case for holding beliefs that go well beyond the evidence, and even for holding to be true propositions that one does not even understand. Beliefs on this view are items about which one is rock-solid certain, even if their evidence is slim or one does not understand them. One assents to them and from then on they are in the arsenal; they don't need to be thought about any more. I think that the religious liberal wants to avoid this kind of belief. (This picture is exemplified by a story that is told of the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, who was converted to catholicism at the time of his marriage. He went to Farm Street for instruction from the Jesuits; his instructor was puzzled by the fact that Waugh was very impatient with the long explorations of, inquiries into, justifications for, the various items that he would have to profess as a Catholic. Waugh just wanted to be told what he would have to believe, and he would believe it. Spare the rigamarole.)

But there is another sense of belief illustrated in the case of hypotheses in the field of science. If I believe that the speed of light cannot be exceeded, what does that mean? I think it means that I accept that as a working hypothesis; I assume it in my own work in physics; I work with it unless and until it is disconfirmed. It is a programmatic belief, one which guides my other work. I make use of it, I think about it, I fit it together with other pieces. I don't put it in the arsenal in a way that puts it beyond question; I put it there for the time being; I work with it.

It seems to me that this sort of belief – programmatic belief – is the sort of belief that is characteristic of religious liberals. As Christians, more especially as Anglicans, we belong to a fine, long, rich tradition of answers to basic questions about life, of attitudes to the created world around us and to other people; that tradition is a loose assemblage of beliefs, and these beliefs are programmatic; they guide us. Like the scientist we are prepared, constantly, to consider and reconsider them, to fit them together with other ingredients in our array of knowledge. We may well be firmly committed to the Christian, or the Anglican, tradition of answers; we may have confidence that these are good attitudes with which to be working, good attitudes to guide our lives.

What I am suggesting here is that religious liberals are distinguished by the fact that, epistemologically, they don't rest. That is, they are always working over their religious ideas,

exploring their meaning, fitting them together this way and that, seeing them in confrontation with ideas presented by other sources than religious ones. They don't, like many conservatives, try to build an impregnable edifice of certainties (subjective certainties); they are more honest about the evidence and more tentative about their religious beliefs. But they are, many of them, supremely faithful. That is to say: they keep at the work, the sifting, the considering and reconsidering, the exploration. They are faithful, but their minds are open.

They are honest, too, about acknowledging that this collection of ideas that we call Christian, or even Anglican, doctrine is a fairly leaky thing. There really is no solid and settled collection of doctrines – and certainly no solid and settled group of interpretations of doctrines – that are the necessary and sufficient conditions of Christianity. Just this week I was looking with some of my theology students at the six radically different understandings that have been current of the central Christian idea of 'salvation'. Think about it. First there is the simple mythological idea about salvation from the fires of hell. Second there is the Orthodox idea of salvation as becoming God, or at any rate (according to the Antiochine version) becoming Godlike. Third there is the Protestant idea of salvation as righteousness in the sight of God. Fourth, there is the idea of salvation as achieving authentic human existence, an idea found in the theologians of the existentialist school – Tillich, McQuarrie and others. Fifth, there is the social gospel of Leonardo Boff, which understands salvation as deliverance from exploitation and poverty. Sixth, there is the early idea, which lived well into the renaissance, that salvation is a rescuing from demonic possession, subjection to evil spirits, safety from the incursions of incubi and succubi, and so forth. What a shock it is to realize that so central a Christian idea as that of salvation has been understood in such deeply different ways! A liberal is honest about this diversity of interpretation.

Let me, then, start to pull this discussion together and try to give a more organized characterization of the religious liberal as I see him or her. I set it out in six contrasts.

A religious liberal:

i) is a *liber*, a free citizen, who studies these questions with deep interest, but with independence; such free citizens see themselves as being in lively and ongoing conversation with God, lively and ongoing interaction with the transcendent; part of what is drawn in to the interaction is knowledge gained from other, extrareligious sources. A conservative religious thinker, by contrast, is servile, a slave to dicta emerging from the tradition – dicta which may end up in contradiction.

ii) has depth in understanding the tradition, acknowledging that some principles are more fundamental than others, and consequently sees the need for ongoing discussion and negotiation between different parts of the tradition. A conservative theologian, by contrast, tends to a certain flatness, a certain recipe-book understanding of the scriptures, for example: he or she presupposes that all is settled, nothing needs negotiation or discussion.

iii) recognizes that ideas about the realm of the transcendent have low objective certainty, and consequently adopts an attitude of humility about them; such ideas, belonging to a long and rich tradition, are treated with respect and reverence, but they are not beyond question, they are not immune to conversation with other ideas. A conservative religious person, by

contrast, allows his or her subjective certainty about religious propositions to zoom off the map of consonance with the evidence.

iv) understands a religious tradition as programmatic, that is, as proposing a set of attitudes and behaviours as best for life; this program is recommended, essentially, by its long and rich tradition, its long success in sustaining good people who have clearly improved the world. A conservative, by contrast, understands religious knowledge not as programmatic but as secured, fixed, static; the question whether a tradition has improved the world is irrelevant.

v) understands that the ideas composing a religious tradition are not a tidy boxed set, but in fact have admitted different interpretations, widely – wildly – different interpretations. A conservative religious thinker, by contrast, tries to hide from this diversity of interpretation.

vi) is a tireless lover of, and worker with, the tradition, never taking anything as utterly settled and clear, always exploring, always churning, always probing. A conservative theologian, by contrast, takes it that no exploratory work needs to be done: all is settled, all is secure.

Let me conclude with this proposal. Let's stop opposing liberal and conservative, and set the opposition instead as one between liberal and servile. Let us not be servile, living in narrow confines of expectation and possibility, constraining our god-given intellects with ill-understood shibboleths. Let us rather be liberal; let us be confident interlocutors with the divine; let us be subtle; let us be comprehensive; let us use the complex minds that God has given us; let us be tireless in exploration; but let us be humble in the knowledge that there is always further to go.

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