

# Liberales Theologie heute Liberal Theology Today

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# Meeting the Spiritual Needs of Contemporary Society

## The Promise of Liberal Theology

MARILYN G. PIETY

Many people today describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” That is understandable, because religion has come to have a bad name, first because it appears to involve a rejection of the modern scientific worldview, and second, because organized, or institutional, religion has often betrayed basic humanistic and ethical principles. I believe human beings are inherently spiritual and that the divorce of spirituality from religion while good in that it at least respects the spiritual aspect of human nature also impoverishes spirituality in that it deprives it of a language in which to express itself. There is a spiritual hunger, I believe, in contemporary society that I will argue only liberal theology can adequately satisfy.

### 1. The Need for Meaning

Human beings are often thought of as a synthesis of mind and body. There is another way of looking at human beings, however. It is also possible to view them as a synthesis of mind, body, and spirit. This triadic view of the person probably owes something to Plato, who proposed in the *Republic* that the psyche comprised three parts: a desiring part, a spirited part, and a rational part. Both the desiring part and the spirited part were prone to getting out of hand, according to Plato, and hence needed to be kept in line by the rational part. Harmony was achieved in an individual psyche when reason ruled over the irrational parts.

Most people today would probably agree with that. We have a different view of reason now, however, than Plato did. Most people today are inclined to associate reason with what philosophers call “ratiocination,” or the ability to make comparisons and calculations. The rational part of the soul according to Plato was concerned with much more than calculation. Reason, for Plato, sought something higher than a truth that could be captured in mere mathematical relations. The ultimate goal of reason was to understand what Plato called “The Good.” Only once one had attained insight into this, Plato thought, could one truly understand anything.

To put it in contemporary terms, “the Good” could be thought of as the meaning of life, not in the existential sense of a particular meaning one chooses to give

his or her life, but in the larger sense of “meaning” that sees it as tied to some kind of transcendent source of all that is. There may be no such source, of course, and hence no non-arbitrary meaning to be derived from it. The existence of such a source cannot be proven. Neither, however, can it be disproven, and this glass-half-full perspective, if one wants to call it that, is important because whether there is such a source or not, it is clear that there is something in people that is drawn toward the idea of it. For Plato, it is reason that draws us to it. We might be tempted today to say it is emotion rather than reason. But the need is there, even if it expresses itself to varying degrees in various individuals. It is, as Isaiah Berlin famously said of the impression we have that we are free, something of which we cannot rid ourselves, hence it deserves to be taken seriously.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Definitions

There is no universally-agreed upon definition of “spirituality.” The best source to turn to for information concerning the popular understanding of such terms is Wikipedia. Wikipedia describes “spirituality” as “a quest for an ultimate/sacred meaning, transcending the base/material aspects of life, and/or a sense of awe/wonderment and reverence toward the universe.”<sup>2</sup> This is a good definition because it is broad and not explicitly religious, so it can accommodate people who like to think of themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” What is essential to spirituality, I think, is not adherence to some specific creed, but the sense of awe, wonder and “reverence toward the universe.”

So what does religion have to do with this, apart from the obvious fact that it was originally the primary vehicle, or means, through which this awe, wonder, and reverence were expressed? The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that it is at least as difficult to define “religion” as it is to define “spirituality,” and possibly even more difficult given the enormous variety of religions that exist today.

Wikipedia defines “religion” as “a cultural system of behaviors and practices, world views, sacred texts, holy places, ethics, and societal organization that relate humanity to what an anthropologist has called ‘an order of existence.’ Different religions,” it continues, “may or may not contain various elements, ranging from the ‘divine,’ ‘sacred things,’ ‘faith,’ a ‘supernatural being or supernatural beings,’ or ‘some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life.’”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BERLIN, ISAIAH, *Historical Inevitability*, in: *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford 1969. Reprinted in Henry Hardy/Roger Hausheer (Ed.), *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, New York 1998, 119–190, here 119.

<sup>2</sup> WIKIPEDIA, last accessed 27 January 2019.

<sup>3</sup> WIKIPEDIA, last accessed 27 January 2019.



That is a lot. It is more an anthropologist's or sociologist's definition of religion, however, than a theologian's definition. William James, with the reductionist spirit typical of philosophers, asserts that religion says essentially two things. First, it says "that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word," and second, "that we are better off even now if we believe [the] first affirmation to be true."<sup>4</sup>

That's perhaps too little. Ritual, tradition, and an enduring narrative that represents a way of conceiving what James calls "the more eternal things" would generally be considered to be essential to religion. The difficulty is that these elements can sometimes take on an exaggerated significance so that they appear to become ends in themselves rather than merely a means of helping individuals connect to transcendent truth.

This is where liberal theology comes in. Wikipedia, interestingly, does not have an entry for "liberal theology," but only for "liberal Christianity," which it explains at the beginning of the entry is "also known as liberal theology."<sup>5</sup> This approach to religion, it explains, "covers diverse philosophically and biblically informed religious movements and ideas," and is primarily "a method of biblical hermeneutics, an undogmatic method of understanding God through the use of scripture by applying the same modern hermeneutics used to understand any ancient writings, symbols, and scriptures."<sup>6</sup> It is possible, of course, to give a much more detailed definition of "liberal theology." What is important for the purposes of this argument, however, is the characterization of liberal theology as "undogmatic." It is this lack of dogmatism, combined with a commitment to using rational methods to enquire into the nature of transcendent truth, that enables liberal theology to prevent the means religions traditionally use for helping people connect with transcendent truth from becoming ends in themselves.

### 3. Fundamentalism and Institutional Religion

When I teach philosophy of religion, I emphasize to my students the important difference between religion and religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism is inflexibly dogmatic. It posits absolute authority in what it claims are sacred texts and fails to acknowledge that the understanding of *any* text requires interpretation and that this gives such understanding an ineliminably subjective element. Religious fundamentalists also typically insist on an unquestioning acceptance of the reality of supernatural phenomena, or phenomena that are not

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<sup>4</sup> JAMES, WILLIAM, *The Will to Believe*, in: *The New World* 5 (1896), X.

<sup>5</sup> WIKIPEDIA, last accessed 27 January 2019.

<sup>6</sup> WIKIPEDIA, last accessed 27 January 2019.

merely inexplicable according to our present scientific understanding of the universe, but essentially inexplicable according to *any* such understanding. The significance attributed to such phenomena makes fundamentalism look a lot like superstition and hence the modern scientific mind rebels against it. It is religious fundamentalism, I argue, that is the primary object of attacks against religion such as those launched by the so called “new atheists.”<sup>7</sup>

Fundamentalism is not the only problem with religion, though. Institutions are always concerned to perpetuate themselves. They thus tend to take on lives of their own, lives that often have only the faintest resemblance to the ideas that were their original animating principles. Such has often, sadly, been the case with organized religion. I am reminded, when I think of religion in its institutional form, of a remark the actress Mae West made about marriage: “Marriage is a fine institution,” she said, “but I’m not ready for an institution.”<sup>8</sup>

I think many people feel similarly about their spirituality. They are not ready to commit it to an institution. Institutions are inherently conformist. Something in people rebels against the idea of surrendering their awe, wonder, and reverence toward the universe to what is effectively a committee that will determine for them precisely how those feelings should be understood, and will dictate to them the meaning they seek from life without knowing anything about them as individuals.

The surrender of what is most sacred in a person to the clutches of a committee would be bad enough in itself, but when one adds to this that no religion in history, despite whatever claims it might make to the contrary, is completely benign, the suggestion becomes, for many, downright offensive.

Rufus Jones lamented in his book *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers*, what he saw as a “a serious loss of interest” in organized religion. “It is treated as negligible,” he observed, by a great many “thoroughly good” people.<sup>9</sup> And yet, he continued,

the rank and file of people are keenly interested as soon as a famous writer, or a prominent person in any field, tells about his personal religion. It is always “good copy.” Any fresh note on the old subject is hailed with enthusiasm. Any person who shakes himself free from convention and breaks faith with a straightforward and sincere interpretation of practical religion gets all the hearing he wants.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The primary figures of this movement are generally considered to be SAM HARRIS, the author of *The End of Faith*, New York City 2004, RICHARD DAWKINS, the author of *The God Delusion*, London 2006, DANIEL DENNETT, the author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, London 2006, and CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, the author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York City 2007.

<sup>8</sup> This remark appears in the movie *I’m No Angel* from 1933.

<sup>9</sup> JONES, RUFUS M., *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers*, London 1927, 2.

<sup>10</sup> JONES, *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers*, 2.

Jones wrote that back in 1927, but it could have been written yesterday and that is likely part of the reason that *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers* has been reprinted many times, most recently in 2007.

Writers such as Marilynne Robinson and Kathleen Norris are frequently interviewed about their faith and how it informs their work.<sup>11</sup> Elaine Pagels' books on Gnosticism are bestsellers.<sup>12</sup> Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*,<sup>13</sup> Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements*,<sup>14</sup> and Michael A Singer's *the Untethered Soul*<sup>15</sup> are all bestsellers. Most telling perhaps in this trend away from organized religion but toward spirituality are Tom Stella's *A Faith Worth Believing: Finding a New Life Beyond the Rules of Religion*,<sup>16</sup> and Frank Schaeffer's *Patience Within: Faith for People Who Don't Like Religion*.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Genuine Religion or Religion According to Liberal Theology

Despite the antipathy expressed toward religion people have not entirely abandoned it. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is that religions, because of their narrative dimension, give people a vocabulary with which to *express* their awe, wonder, and reverence toward the universe. Different religions are, in a way, like different languages, different languages that, when understood properly, appear, finally, to be talking about essentially the same things, those "more eternal things," to go back to the phrasing of James.

According to the religious mystics interviewed in the documentary "With One Voice,"<sup>18</sup> all religions have essentially the same message: God is Love. And all require the same type of relationship to this truth. Søren Kierkegaard, in speaking about this relationship, says that there is a "how" that brings the "what" along with it. That is, how one relates to his conception of transcendent truth determines the truth to which he relates. "If someone living in the midst of Christianity," he observes,

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, THORPE, VANESSA, Marilynne Robinson: "I don't have an ideal reader in mind", in: *The Guardian*, Sunday 25 February 2018, and ABERNATHY, BOB, Kathleen Norris Interview, in: PBS's *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, 13 March 2009.

<sup>12</sup> PAGELS, ELAINE, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York City 1979 and, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, New York City 2003.

<sup>13</sup> TOLLE, ECKHART, *The Power of Now*, Vancouver 2004.

<sup>14</sup> RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *The Four Agreements*, San Rafael 1997.

<sup>15</sup> SINGER, MICHAEL A., *The Untethered Soul*, Oakland 2007.

<sup>16</sup> STELLA, TOM, *A Faith Worth Believing: Finding a New Life Beyond the Rules of Religion*, New York 2011.

<sup>17</sup> SCHAEFFER, FRANK, *Patience Within: Faith for People Who Don't Like Religion*, Boston 2009.

<sup>18</sup> See *With one Voice* (Alive Mind, 2010) by director Eric Temple, available at <http://www.withonvoicedocumentary.org/index.htm> (last accessed 27 January 2019).

enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol – where then is there more truth? *The one prays truly to God* though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.<sup>19</sup>

It is “idol worship” in this sense, I believe, that puts people off of religion. People can smell the hypocrisy of disingenuous religiousness. And if people are loathe to surrender what is most sacred in themselves to a committee, how much more resistant are they to do this when they perceive the committee in question as comprised largely, if not entirely, of hypocrites?

Yet even the person who, in Kierkegaard’s example, prays “truly to God,” has an image on which to focus his passion. That is, he has what philosophers would call a conceptual framework within which his awe, wonder, and reverence toward the universe can be given a meaningful, and to a certain extent, even communicable shape.

What religion does, I believe, among other things, is give one, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, a place to pray, to express one’s awe, wonder, and reverence toward the universe, or as religious people like to say, toward “creation.” No conceptual framework, no religious vocabulary, no narrative will, of course, be entirely adequate for expressing transcendent truths. That is what it means for something to be “transcendent.” And yet even the negative theologians, with all their talk about what God is not, cannot stop talking about God.

Religions do more, however, than give people a place to pray and a vocabulary with which to do that. They give people a sense of community, and by that I do not mean that they will not have to worry about being alone on a Friday evening or Sunday morning. By “community,” I do not mean a community of physical bodies, but of like-minded, awe-struck, reverent strivers. To read the *Psalms*, the *Gospels*, the works of thinkers such as Origen, Philo of Alexandria, Avicenna, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, and Martin Buber, to name just a few of the great minds who have struggled throughout history to understand transcendent truth, to read these thinkers makes one feel, suddenly, part of a much larger striving than one’s own, individual, search for meaning. That is not merely comforting; it is awe inspiring.

This spiritual community is not restricted to thinkers of the past, but includes individuals in the present. Even people who do not regularly attend religious services often form their own little communities of similarly oriented religious people and read the works of contemporary believers. People are inherently social, just as they are inherently spiritual; hence, their need for spiritual sustenance extends beyond the feeling of belonging to an abstract community. I asserted just

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<sup>19</sup> KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay, Cambridge 2009, 169, emphasis added.

now that when I said religions give people a sense of community, I did not mean a community of physical bodies. Belonging to just any group is not enough to satisfy the human hunger for spiritual companionship. Nor is escaping into the world of the thoughts of like-minded awe-struck, reverent strivers. People also need to be a part of a concrete vital community of such strivers.

Religion does not merely give people a sense of community. It also gives people a sense of permanence. The world, at least since the Enlightenment, changes so quickly that it is sometimes disorienting. People often find themselves longing for something that will give them a sense of permanence. Part of religion's attempt to do this is somewhat comical. Catholic clerical garb, for example, is conspicuously medieval in style. This seems true, actually, of nearly all, if not actually all, religions that have clerical garb. If it is not medieval, then it tends to hark back to the period of the religion's founding. Religions resist changing their fashions, and their dogmas, because change is something in which they engage only reluctantly. They are attempting to express *eternal* things and sometimes become confused about where, exactly, the emphasis is to be placed.

And yet religions *do* change, and this fact is what saves them. Sometimes the change is an expression of hypocrisy, but not always. Sometimes religions change not because their adherents are hypocrites, but, as liberal theology makes clear, because they are honestly searching for an adequate understanding of transcendent truth. Even people who believe passionately in the reality of divine revelation rarely insist that such revelations effect transformations of the people who experience them so that from that point forward they become direct conduits of messages from the beyond. Even people so fortunate as to experience "inspiration" in the technical sense are charged with the very human task of translating that experience into terms that are communicable to others, and this is always done imperfectly, because we are imperfect beings.

## 5. Religion as Spiritual Therapy

"Absolute truth," writes Georg W.F. Hegel in a foreword to a book by one of his students entitled *Religion in its Internal Relation to Systematic Knowledge*,

Absolute truth, when it appears, passes over into temporal configuration, and into its external conditions, associations, and circumstances. In this way it has already surrounded itself with a multiplicity of local, historical, and other positive material. [...] this manifestation of truth belongs to its eternal nature itself, which is inseparable from it to such a degree that this separation would destroy it by degrading its content to any empty abstraction.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> HEGEL, GEORG W.F., Foreword to Friedrich Wilhelm Henrich's, *Religion in its Internal Relation to Systematic Knowledge* (excerpt), in: Eric v. d. Luft (Ed.), *God, Evil, and Ethics: A Primer in the Philosophy of Religion*, Syracuse 2004, 59–74, here 62.

That is the problem, I fear, with spirituality when it is divorced from religion. It risks becoming an empty abstraction. There is no question that what Hegel refers to as the “local” and “historical” circumstances in which religions attempt their expressions of transcendent truth may sometimes actually impede that expression. Not all Christians in the time of slavery, for example, recognized black people as their “neighbors.” If the transcendent truth that all religions attempt to express is that God, or the creative force of the universe, is love, then religions have a lot to answer for.

The problem is, religious people are still people and far from infallible, even those who, as I observed above, are occasionally genuinely inspired. Even if not *all* white people who liked to think of themselves as Christians in the nineteenth century recognized black people as equal to themselves, Christianity was a fundamental force in the abolitionist movement.

Many people today hope to escape the pitfalls of religion by divorcing spirituality from it. But even people who are merely spiritual and not religious are still people and equally fallible as such. Merely “spiritual” people are not necessarily either better people or happier people than religious people.

“Not only Christianity with its symbols of salvation,” writes Carl Jung, “but all religions, including the primitive with their magical rituals, are forms of psychotherapy which treat and heal the suffering soul.”<sup>21</sup> Institutional religions may have many elements with limited therapeutic value, but empty abstractions, I would argue, have no therapeutic value *at all*.

There are many, I’m sure, who would protest that they are not suffering souls, but few whose protestations to that effect would be honest. One of the perennial truths of human existence is that, as Thoreau observed, most people “live lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>22</sup>

To return to Plato, again, this truth of human experience is captured, I believe, in the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. According to Plato, we are all chained to this darkness and cannot escape from it without the help of others who have escaped before us. One can look at religion as an attempt to create communities of people who are helping one another escape the darkness to which the rest of humanity appears confined.

## 6. Conclusion

The pervasiveness of the human need for spiritual enlightenment, or of the need to connect with the transcendent, is undoubtedly the reason new religions spring up. Unfortunately, many of these new religions are really no better than the old

<sup>21</sup> JUNG, CARL G., *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, London 1966, 16.

<sup>22</sup> THOREAU, HENRY DAVID, *Walden and Other Writings*, New York City 1992, 8.

religions in terms of their tendency toward dogmatism and hypocrisy, tendencies that run counter to the nature of human beings as both rational and moral creatures. Such religions create cognitive dissonance in the minds of their adherents that eventually causes many to leave the religion, sometimes to form yet another new religion and other times to renounce religion entirely.

It is important to understand, however, that “religion” is not synonymous with rigidity and dogmatism. Liberal theology makes that clear. It allows people to continue to engage with the rituals, traditions, and narratives of religion without feeling they have to sacrifice their rationality or their consciences. Liberal theology provides a place, in a metaphorical sense, again, where “the more eternal things” do not merely have a home, but where they are also given a shape. No matter how obscured that shape may sometimes be by the accretions of human frailty, it is still there for those who wish to see it. That is precisely what liberal theology does. It attempts to give form to our understanding of transcendent truth, even if that truth can be glimpsed, now, only darkly.

Every age, it seems, likes to claim for itself more desperate straits than all earlier ages. There is no question, however, that we are having to confront some ugly truths today that many of us who are more progressively minded, and perhaps too sheltered, thought we had left behind. “Where,” asks Jung, “are the answers to the spiritual needs and troubles of a new epoch?”<sup>23</sup>

Where indeed? Perhaps in that place that is not a place in a literal sense, a place to which the liberal theology endeavors to help guide us.

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<sup>23</sup> JUNG, *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, 196.