

Writings

"The Faith That Is Ours"

Sermon by

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"THE FAITH THAT IS OURS"

Unitarianism and Reform Judaism both spring from the same source. Both religious expressions were born in a time when men were striding away from particularism towards universalism. Both were born in the early history of America when the flame of democracy was still white hot, and both reflect the religious faith which undergirds the basic principles of early American democracy. Towards the end of the 19th century liberal religions, such as ours, were overshadowed by the growth of fundamentalist and evangelical religious groups, and only in recent years has it seemed that the liberal faith is gaining in America. Were Benjamin Franklin alive today, he might very well say that he was pleased to see that ours was "a rising sun and not a setting sun."

Let us consider the basic distinctions between the liberal faith which is ours and the fundamentalist faith, to which most Americans cling. First of all, the fundamentalist faith is anchored in the past. It contends that once upon a time a great miracle occurred which we are asked to accept as the greatest miracle of all time, and if we don't accept that miracle, we are considered to be irreligious. For fundamentalists, the future is anchored in and predetermined by the miraculous event of the past.

The very nature of the fundamentalist faith is to be exclusive. It prides itself on the belief that the adherents of the faith are chosen and especially blessed. It claims that unless men will accept the dominance of the special miracle of the past, they will be excluded from the promised rewards to come.

Frequently, the fundamentalist faith will go beyond mere exclusiveness and teach that the unbelievers will receive a perversely delicious punishment that is usually described in terms of eternal roasting.

The fundamentalist is pre-occupied with the evil nature of man and dwells upon the sinfulness of humans. He

speaks little, or not at all, of man's ability to grow and develop.

Similarly, the fundamentalist tends to minimize the role of ethical conduct in religion, and he emphasizes the significance of certain closely defined dogmas or rituals.

Finally, the fundamentalist, whether he be Christian or Jew, believes that salvation will be attained under the leadership of a charismatic or miraculous individual, endowed with special powers by the divine. This Savior may be called the Messiah or something similar.

Liberal religions such as ours oppose the fundamentalist faith on each of these points. We teach first that our faith must be anchored not in the past but in the present. It is anathema to us that the future is predetermined by events of the past. It is the essence of our faith that the future is open, and that it will be substantially determined by what we do in the present.

Secondly we eschew exclusivism. Our goal is not to obtain special rewards for ourselves, but to include all men in our striving for a better world. To put it another way, we might say that the liberal believes that all men must get to heaven or it will be a very lonely place indeed.

The liberal religionist is not concerned with punishing the non-believer. While we invite all men to believe with us, we would account our faith of little value if it taught us to be intolerant of others who believed differently. We are vitally concerned with the individual's right to believe as he chooses. We contend not that we are chosen but that we have the right to choose.

Unlike the fundamentalist, we as liberals accent man's ability to change and to grow rather than his essential sinfulness. For us, religion has no value unless it is based on man's ability to grow in

godliness. For this reason, we emphasize ethical conduct as the supreme evidence of religiosity, and we minimize the significance of mystically conceived dogma.

Finally, the liberal religionist opposes the concept of the Messiah on the grounds that the world will be saved not by one individual, but by large numbers of men who have developed an understanding of their role in perfecting the world.

While I am proud to be a proponent of a liberal faith, and while I believe it to be vastly superior to any fundamentalist expression, I, nevertheless, see at least two real pitfalls awaiting our members. The first of these pitfalls is that a liberal religionist may be led to conclude that his religion is only a religion of the intellect. While our kind of faith seems to follow a rational progression, the fact remains that there is no greater mystique than that which leads us to contend that men will manage to build a peaceful and just world. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that it takes less of a "leap of faith" to accept the proposition of the responsibility of man than it does to believe that someday a divine Messiah will save us. To believe in the Messiah requires only a belief that God can do anything he wants when he has the mind to do so. To believe that hundreds of millions of men can work together by design on a continuing basis requires a projection of limitless faith which can only arise from the deepest well-springs. Only the person who is conscious of the divine flowing through his own being can dare to assume that endless millions of other men will recognize the universal roots that bind them together. This is the grandest of all mystiques, and it is not defensible on rationalist grounds. This is a truth that we intuit: our positing of this kind of goal reflects an efferencing idealism that is not based on past experience. The mystique of the liberal religionist is the most fantastic in a way, and it demands of its adherents the greatest amount of work and dedication. If we don't

try to fulfill our projection of the messianic day, with all our hearts and with all our souls, then we know that it will not come to pass. Since we claim that we are the agents of the divine on earth, our faith does not give us room to weezele out of responsibility. Our faith is at once mystique and commitment, or it has no meaning whatsoever. The fundamentalist relies only on his faith in God, we rely not only on God but also on our faith in ourselves and on our faith in millions of other human beings. The fundamentalist might very well point to us as the greatest dreamers of all. We might very well be accused of relying on the greater miracles. The person who affirms the liberal faith must recognize that he is the bearer of a faith resting on two pillars, reason and mystique, and he must understand that unless he himself works arduously for the messianic day, his faith is a delusion and a snare.

The second pitfall that awaits the liberal religionist is the possibility that he will be led to believe that his individual or personal religion is more significant than his identification with the group. So often have we heard people say, "I believe in the golden rule. That's my religion. Why do I need to pray or meet with the group?" Frequently have we heard people say, "I pray alone in my home or when I am at the seashore or when I am in the forest. God is everywhere. Why do I need to pray in the church or synagogue?" It is difficult to contend with this supreme individualist, because much of what he says is very true. God is everywhere, not only in the church or synagogue, and living according to the golden rule is vitally important, but is this the totality of the religious life? I think not. The value of group worship lies in the word "group." There are many things that people can do together that they cannot do as isolated individuals. If we posit a messianic day to be realized by millions of people working together, we must understand that we can work towards that goal only as a part of an increasingly growing group. How-

ever self-sufficient a man may seem, if he does not work with the group towards the messianic goal, he obstructs the attainment of that goal. The ideal group is a loosely coordinated society, encouraging the greatest amount of freedom for its members, but the individual needs the protection of societal laws and mores. To live alone in this imperfect world, when the messianic ideal is understood by only a few, is to encourage anarchy and irresponsibility.

The truth is that the liberal religions have the task of undertaking the greatest missionary activity. We are not so many in number that we can afford the luxury of members who consider themselves "already saved" and "above the multitude." Those who are above the crowd are also beyond the task. The so-called emancipated and unattached liberal lives in a vacuum. He is worse than the fundamentalist who awaits a miraculous salvation, for the liberal knows that the future depends upon him and upon the other individuals to whom he must link himself.

In recent months we have witnessed the first steps towards the liberalizing of the Catholic Church. That trend must continue, for in this scientific age, the only religious expression which can be respected by educated people is a universalistic religion which is freed of servitude to the past and which requires ethical responsibility from its members. Slowly but surely the liberal faith must gain adherents from the fundamentalist religions in the years ahead. When finally they turn to us and say, in the words of the prophet Zecharian, "We have heard that God is with you. Let us go with you," when finally they come to us and say, "Show us the path, and we will follow," let us hope that we will know the way clearly enough to be able to lead.

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