

EDITORIAL

The Christian Values of 'Liberalism'

Just a little over a century ago, Pope Pius IX brought a comprehensive attack on contemporary culture to a resounding close with a condemnation of the following proposition: 'The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself to, and agree with, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization' (*Syllabus errorum* [1864], no. 80). This reckless defiance of the *Zeitgeist* has won for its author a secure place in the demonology of the modern world. Naturally enough, the prophets of modernity have read it as a clinching proof of the inability of Roman Catholicism to recognize the humane values of the new age. Less naturally, perhaps, Protestants have often joined in the critical chorus – possibly on the questionable assumption that any stick is good enough to beat so wrong-headed a pope with. It took the wit of Karl Barth to observe that, from a radically Protestant point of view, 'Pio Nono' was open to criticism, not as an extravagant antiliberal, but as an indirect promoter of liberalism. Commenting on the saying attributed to Pius, 'I am tradition,' Barth wrote:

... the dictum of Pius IX contains in itself all theological and ecclesiastical liberalism – as its opposite, but only the dialectical opposite, which can be changed into it. And conversely, it is not basically impossible that theological liberalism should lead to a recognition that all Christian tradition and authority is comprised in a single individual. (*Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 572)

In so far as the pope was unequivocally opposed to liberalism, however, Barth – at any rate, the Barth of the *Römerbrief* – would evidently be ready to stand beside him.

Christianity [he wrote in 1921] does not set its mind on *high things*. It is uneasy when it hears men speaking loudly and with confidence about 'creative evolution'; when it marks their plans for perfecting the development of pure and applied science, of art, of morals and of religion, of physical and spiritual health, of welfare and of well-being. Christianity is unhappy when men boast of the glories of marriage and of family life, of Church and State, and of Society. Christianity does not busy itself to support and underpin those many ideals by which men are deeply moved – individualism, collectivism, nationalism, internationalism, humanitarianism, ecclesiasticism ... Finding truth more in 'No' than in 'Yes,' Christianity recommends men to *condescend to things that are lowly*. Seeing men balanced midway between earth and heaven, and perceiving the insecurity of their position, it finds itself unable to place serious confidence in the permanence of any of these human *high places*, in the importance of any of these 'important' things, or in the value of any of these 'values.' Christianity perceives men moving, it is true, but moving to deprivation. (*The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 462f.)

It would be hard to express the rejection of 'progress, liberalism, and modern civilization' more decisively and forcefully.

Whether it is used in a theological or in a political context, 'liberalism' is an ambiguous term. Nonetheless, it is easy enough to identify the target at which our authors were aiming – the Weltanschauung which, in their judgment, was the mortal enemy of faith. They both meant to wound modern man in his metaphysical pride: his claim to total autonomy in the exercise of his reason and to unconditional self-determination in the practical decisions of his life; his complacent confidence in human progress as the law of historical existence. Each in his own way sought to confront 'liberal' man with the ultimate claim of God, Creator and Saviour – the transcendent mystery revealed to humble believers.

As we look back from the vantage-point of the late 1960s, we may well wonder why ecclesiastics and theologians devoted so much hostile attention to liberalism. Barth himself speaks of 'that stage of complete inward dissolution which [modern culture] had entered in the second half of the [nineteenth] century' (*Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 570). In 1864, the year of the *Syllabus*, Karl Marx was within three years of publishing the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Friedrich Nietzsche was commencing his university studies at Bonn, and Sigmund Freud was an eight-year-old boy in Vienna. Modern secular man was thus well on the way to demolishing his own liberal self-image, without benefit of theological explosives. Under the circumstances, was the relentless and prolonged theological attack on liberalism, which we have been sampling, really necessary?

A more fundamental question now presents itself: Was liberalism really as bad as many churchmen painted it? Its defects are obvious. Liberal philosophy obscured man's dependence on the holy God. Liberal politicians often failed to incarnate their piety towards man in general in effective concern for men in particular. But surely liberalism, at its best, embodied at least two notable Christian values. On the one hand, its philosophy inculcated respect for that creature who, according to Christian theology, uniquely commands respect because he is made in the divine image. On the other hand, its politics, in rejecting the right of any man to wield arbitrary power over other men, expressed a truly Christian sense of every man's creaturely limitations. These fundamental values are sorely missed in our own culture, with its widespread philosophy of animality and politics of self-assertion. May it not be a present task of Christian theologians to recall a forgetful world to the genuine virtues of classical liberalism?

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