

- This organization for religious freedom has a vital and meaningful message to people who are influenced by reason, scientific ideas, and humane sentiments.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS FACE A NEW AGE

"The genius of the Unitarian movement has been its power to adapt the vocabulary and practices of a religion whose roots are sunk deep into the past to new knowledge, new conditions, and new situations... There can be little doubt of the need in the modern world for some organized expression of the liberal spirit in religion. In a time when revolution and chaos are everywhere threatening, when ideals are again forming an alliance with tyranny and dogmatism, when intellectual confusion and social discontent are blindly trying to fight their way out of situations where only the problem-solving temper of mind can be of real help, when a fresh birth of the nationalistic spirit is everywhere offering its spurious comfort to tired and discouraged people

— in a time like ours there is imperative need for a religious fellowship that will bring order and hope and confidence to men of the liberal tradition."

Now the surprising thing about this statement is that despite its contemporary ring — its reference to revolution and chaos, to intellectual confusion and resurgent nationalism — despite all this, it was written more than thirty years ago. It comes from the introduction to the report of the Commission of Appraisal established by the American Unitarian Association, a report which became the cornerstone of the whole new thrust of our religious fellowship in the past generation.

Here are a few more lines from that report of the Commission of Appraisal published in 1936. "For

more than a hundred years," the Commission said, "the liberal churches of America have stood and fought for religious freedom, by which they have meant chiefly the right of each individual to think out his own religious beliefs and the right of each congregation to choose its own forms of worship and church policy. The struggle has been largely against the authority of creeds and of ecclesiastical traditions, and the principal methods employed have been preaching and teaching, based upon faith in the power of human reason to work out all the problems of human life, provided it were liberated from ignorance, prejudice, and dogmatism. Today liberal churches find themselves facing a very different world, in which different conditions impose the necessity for a new formulation of basic purposes, principles, and methods. What is needed in the world of 1936 is an association of free churches that will stand and fight for the central philosophy and values of liberal religion, as set over against any philosophy that denies the

spiritual nature of man, making him merely the product and plaything of a material universe in which only blind chance and ruthless force have sway."

This was written in 1936. The "different conditions" which the Commission believed required "a new formulation of basic purposes, principles, and methods," — these new conditions included the rising menace of political authoritarianism in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, both of which were at that very time engaged in helping another dictator — Francisco Franco — crush the incipient democracy in Spain. They included the great depression, in whose many Americans succumbed to the blandishments of Father Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith, who blamed all our troubles on the Jews or the Negroes or the people with funny foreign-sounding names. They included the tragic failure of traditional laissez-faire economic ideas to prevent or to cure the depression itself and the evident need to find new ways of massive governmental intervention in the economy, ways

that would relieve the intolerable consequences of the depression while still embodying the attitudes and processes of democracy. The basic philosophic issue, the Commission asserted, was that "between those who affirm and those who deny the possibility of so adapting the traditional democratic processes as to make them effectively applicable to the problems confronting modern society . . . Many intelligent and thoughtful students of history," the report goes on, "have come to the conclusion that democracy carries within itself the seeds of its own inevitable corruption and death. The tide is today strongly moving in the direction of arbitrary and absolute authority; and, if the democratic processes are to be saved from something very like obliteration, there must be prompt and vigorous action. It is high time for those who believe in democracy to take their stand and organize their forces aggressively. In that struggle religion has a part to play that may well be decisive; for . . . religion can supply the basic ideas and the inex-

haustible driving-force of emotion and will that are necessary to meet on equal terms the forces now arrayed against democracy, provided it be religion that is itself consistent with the principles of liberalism."

That was the way things looked to a group of highly perceptive and committed Unitarians in 1936.. And I must say that as I read their words, I find myself compelled to repeat over and over again the old French observation that the more things change, the more they remain the same. So much of what they said sounds directly applicable to our own situation today.

Yet surely the circumstances which seemed so compelling to the Commission in 1936 have changed even more dramatically in the generation since then than in the generation before. If "different conditions" required "a new formulation of basic purposes, principles, and methods" in 1936, how much more must that be true today. There is no dearth of voices these days compelling our attention to

precisely this necessity for adaptation to changing circumstances if we wish our kind of churches to remain relevant — to use the favorite and much overused term of the moment. Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Bartlett, for example, in the title of their new book, insist that Unitarian Universalism now faces its "Moment of Truth," in which the full implications of our traditional commitment to freedom, to innovation, and to individual dignity must at last be recognized and confronted. Through a plethora of study commissions, special committees and individual pronouncements we have been struggling for some time to catch the elusive qualities which make our new situation different and to adjust our programs to meet these new conditions. We are revising our religious education program for children, our worship materials, our denominational structure, our theological education — almost any aspect of our common life of which one might think. And the cry is always the same: the old structures will not do, the old ways

of doing things are no longer relevant, what was pioneering in the 1940's is "old hat" on the eve of the seventies. I'm not so sure that any of the things we have come up with as bold new approaches are really any better — or in some cases even as good — as what they propose to replace; but at least there is an enormous restiveness in our religious household these days — a restiveness parallel to that in society at large — in the search for new and more satisfying forms and structures, for a "new formulation of basic purposes, principles, and methods.

Some there are who think that we are so stuck in the morass of inherited attitudes and methods that nothing short of a complete overhaul will suffice. These are the same people who are likely to see our social institutions at large as hopelessly trapped in guarding the status quo and in need of revolutionary change if the promise of the new age just over the horizon is to be fulfilled.

Now I happen to stand in point of age almost exactly half way between the

young man who insists on "an unequivocal commitment to revolutionary transformation of our society" and the older minister who is "more concerned with the inner weather than with the outer circumstances of man." It would be very easy to say that it's all a matter of age, that it's characteristic for the young to be impetuous and for their elders to be more cautious. It would, I say, be easy to offer this explanation; yet I believe that in this instance it would be absolutely mistaken. For the real issue, it seems to me, has nothing to do with age; rather, it is the question of whether one affirms or denies "the possibility of so adapting the traditional democratic processes as to make them effectively applicable to the problems confronting modern society." It is a question of how seriously one takes "the liberal spirit in religion."

Even to put it in these terms at once suggests that "the liberal spirit" is more a matter of attitudes than of program, more related to man's inner weather than to his outer circumstances. And

so I come down myself on the side of the man whose primary concern lies in this direction.

I admire the moral enthusiasm of the other, his zeal for good works; but I fear his revolutionary fervor. For like many revolutionaries he has large blind spots, so that he sees the injustices and evils of our society writ large, yet sees not at all the ways in which that society functions to protect individual freedom and to enhance the cause of social justice. And I fear that he does not take seriously enough the logic by which the revolution that began with "liberty, equality, and fraternity" ended with the guillotine.

I am afraid of revolutionaries, I say, who see everything far more clearly than the facts warrant, who have ready solutions to the ills that plague us. I fear the radicals of the Right who think they can cure social disorder by single-minded commitment to what they call "law and order." And I fear equally those radicals of the left who think they

can overcome the alienation of so many people through what they call "participatory democracy." And I fear especially all those who would assume what the older minister called total responsibility for the world. For however lofty the motivation that inspires it, such assumption of total responsibility cloaks a drive for power which is all the more dangerous when it is unrecognized.

Moreover — and this is very important — concentration on alleged total solutions is apt to lead one to overlook the little things near at hand which really could make things better, steps that could produce noticeable improvement even though they would surely not solve the whole problem.

Now all this is surely not to say that we live in the best of all possible societies, that everything is progressing as well as it possibly can, and the course of wisdom and morality alike is therefore to sit back and let nature take its course. Not this at all. If we are to be true to "the liberal spirit in religion," we must be always

open to the need for change, for continuing adaptation to new circumstances, new conditions. We often speak of our new age as revolutionary, but I think that if we are careful with the use of words it is not revolutionary at all! rather, it is a wholly new situation which is the product of revolutions but is not itself a revolution. It is, one writer suggests, "a situation that is characterized by a hitherto unknown acceleration in the course of events and by a growing estrangement from the traditional patterns of life and thought. Historical changes are taking place today with a speed that only a short time ago would have seemed incredible. These changes and developments are, however, not a revolution in the course of history, but an acceleration of historical events." This writer, in fact, invented a new word to describe this phenomenon: he calls it "rapidation."

Now this, it seems to me, is what the liberal spirit means: not unswerving loyalty to old and inherited forms, nor yet an overturning of the old every few

years as evidence of our ability to "hang loose," but rather the ability "to adapt the vocabulary and practices of a religion whose roots

are sunk deep into the past to new knowledge, new conditions, and new situations." — *by Rev. Max D. Gaebler, S. T. D. in the CLF letter.*

SILENCE

Silence is the most impregnable defense and the most subtle form of attack. — *Cornelio T. Villareal*