

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers Deists, Liberals and Fundamentalists

HEROES 10: SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS

In our last article we saw how rationalists in the Enlightenment elevated human reason to the point of absurdity.¹ They encouraged scepticism; a commitment to staying uncommitted



to any reality beyond immediate sight and touch, so the 'inner candle of reason,' rejecting any authority higher than the self, could shine no further than arm's length.

Yet Western science retained the vestiges of the Christian worldview, and was immensely successful. Newton described the regularities of the universe with astonishingly accurate equations; although a believer in a law-giver behind the laws, others saw the creator as a convenient hypothesis. Voltaire said that 'if God did not exist, we would have to invent him'.² Thus God was reduced to an absentee landlord. He was used to explain an ordered universe, an architect rather than the living God who reveals himself in history, and makes his home with humans.³

Deism: *belief in a god who created the world but has since remained uninvolved in it*

'Not that I call into question the existence of a supreme being; on the contrary it seems to me that the greatest degree of probability is in favour of this belief. Nonetheless, it is a theoretical truth of little practical value.'⁴ It was only a small step from a convenient fiction to an unnecessary one, and deism soon descended into naturalism within a couple of generations.

Naturalism: *the view of the world that takes account only of natural elements and forces, excluding the supernatural or spiritual*

'The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.' (Carl Sagan)⁵

Sadly, this bias continued into the 19th century, and corrupted theology. Liberalism was the result. It was a broad movement, but at its heart was a rejection of the central claims of historic Christianity: that the transcendent, supernatural, creator has revealed himself in history as the God-man Jesus, to rescue us from the penalty of sin and death. But no heresy is original, merely recycled. Liberalism was a return to the Arianism of the fourth century AD⁶ (Jesus was just a man), leading inevitably to the Pelagianism of the fifth⁷ (we do not need rescuing by grace). Liberalism is a broad stream of thought with many tributaries, but let's follow some of the themes.

a loss of confidence

Liberals said that even if you are convinced of the resurrection, you cannot argue with mathematical certainty, to dogma about Christ's deity. They said that you cannot cross the 'broad and ugly ditch'⁸ from the particulars of history to universal truths. Their project, like the builders of Babel, was to construct systems of thought from man's perspective up, excluding any higher authority.

reason over revelation

Immanuel Kant sounded more humble when he asserted that we are like blind men unequipped to perceive spiritual reality. But his book title *Religion*



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*Within the Limits of Reason Alone*⁹ reveals a typical bias: God was limited to what we find easy to understand on our terms. He must be an



unknowable mystery if we cannot prove him beyond doubt. Revelation in particular was rejected out of hand. The Bible was inspired only in the sense that a poem is inspired: beautiful or skillfully written.

Enlightenment thinkers

claimed godlike knowledge, or that what they did not know was not worth knowing. Self-satisfied agnosticism was their legacy. Hence despite great scientific advances, some prefer to call the age of the 'Enlightenment' the 'Endarkenment'.

'What can be asserted without proof can be dismissed without proof' (Christopher Hitchens).¹⁰

embarrassment about supernatural

Material explanations had been so powerful in science that theologians distanced themselves from supernatural explanations, which they deemed mythological. They questioned the authorship and dating of the Bible using new literary techniques of 'higher criticism', embarking on a quest for the historical Jesus,¹¹ behind the creeds and supposedly-corrupted Bible texts. Miracles were explained away as natural events: Jesus' walk on water was merely an optical illusion; feeding five thousand was only a 'miracle' in the sense that the crowd learned to share their picnics. Touching, but hardly supernatural.

feeling over facts, action over doctrine

Reason was separated from faith, which must be

subjective as it cannot be derived from reason alone. If we cannot access the real Jesus of history, at least we have the Jesus of faith and religious feeling. Schleiermacher¹² said that 'true religion is a sense and taste for the infinite,' a feeling of dependence on the divine, and a deeper 'god consciousness'. It is said that people today have warm feelings for Jesus, but hate the church, with its far-fetched doctrines such as the virgin birth. Instead we should concentrate on what unites us: common spirituality and the brotherhood of man. Just follow the Golden Rule (treat others as you would like to be treated), which they imagine is the essence of Jesus' teaching. Historic Christianity was substituted by moralism and sentimental wishful thinking. Have you seen this on campus?

Jesus: human example, not redeemer

So Jesus was no longer the second person of the pre-existent Trinity,¹³ to whom every knee must bow.¹⁴ Instead he was the fairest flower of humanity, and the cross merely an example of selflessness. They airbrushed out Jesus' own words about the seriousness of sin, the reality of judgment, and our desperate need for rescue, not just a role model. Jesus taught that sin was not simply weakness, ignorance or lack of 'god consciousness,' but the chasm between God and man due to rebellion and outright hostility.¹⁵ He warned of the horror of banishment from God, the gnashing of teeth and the fire that would never be quenched.¹⁶ He spoke uncompromisingly about the need to trust his atoning work on the cross as the only way back to God.¹⁷ Why do you think people prefer a role model to a redeemer?

Liberal theology summarised:
'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'¹⁸

optimism: man's nature and progress

A cardinal feature of this era was optimism about human nature, encouraged by material progress from science and technology. The Liberal church was 'busily engaged in an impossible task: calling the righteous to repentance'.¹⁹ As a result Kierkegaard's prophecy came true: 'Take away the distressed conscience and you may as well turn churches into dance halls. The anguished conscience understands Christianity.'²⁰ But at the time Liberals taught that sin was a sickness of society, which needed the 'social gospel'. Christianity was 'not a matter of getting individuals into heaven, but of transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven.'²¹ This faith in human progress was left hanging from barbed wire in the two world wars that followed.

Christian fundamentals, toxic branding

Liberal: *progressive, broadminded, unprejudiced, generous*

Unfortunately, those who rejected Liberalism have an image problem. The opposing adjectives to Liberal would be illiberal or intolerant. Even worse, they chose a word that became a toxic brand in the 20th century. A group of pastors and theologians in 1910 wrote a series of pamphlets

called *The Fundamentals*²² in defence of historic Christianity. Hero contributors included CT Studd (English cricketer, missionary and founder of WEC), Benjamin Warfield (Princeton theologian and champion of the inspiration of Scripture), James Orr (Scottish professor of church history), JC Ryle (Liverpool bishop concerned for the working class) and Charles Spurgeon's son.

A common criticism of Fundamentalism is a literal approach to Scripture. But not even the most extreme Fundamentalist has been entirely literal: none has ever believed that milk and honey literally flow down the streets of the Promised Land! So it is a question of which texts should be understood figuratively rather than whether any should be. Another accusation is that they are anti-science. But interestingly, the original authors such as Warfield and Orr were content with theistic evolution. All the same, Fundamentalism has become synonymous with militant narrow-mindedness, however little that applied to these authors, and even less to Jesus. But which fundamentals would you defend today?

It is curious that just as the Liberals were dismantling biblical faith in the West, in the name of Christianity, some of our greatest heroes were planting vibrant new churches abroad. The implosion of church at home coincided with an explosion of mission overseas. As a result the church's centre of gravity shifted from West to South in the 20th century. It is to these heroes of mission that we turn next. ■

- <http://bit.ly/UsHmtW>
- Voltaire: *Épître à l'Auteur du Livre des Trois Imposteurs* (1770-11-10)
- John 14:23
- La Mettrie 1709-51, quoted in Sire JW. *The Universe Next Door*. IVP, 2010
- <http://bit.ly/UPWFle>
- <http://bit.ly/UxDjyO>
- <http://bit.ly/Vv7ndp>
- Lessing GE. *Lessing's Theological Writings*. Stanford University Press, 1956:51-55
- Kant I. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Harper Torchbooks, 1960
- <http://bit.ly/dfztim>
- David Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* was an early example. Others include Thomas Jefferson's edited 'Bible', Bultmann and the Jesus Seminar
- Schleiermacher
- John 1:1
- Philippians 2:10
- Luke 15:12, John 8:34
- Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, Luke 13:28
- Matthew 7:23, John 3:13, 6:53, 14:5
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- Machen JG. *Christianity and Liberalism*. Eerdmans, 1923:58
- Kierkegaard S. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Indiana University Press, 1975:3.63
- Rauschenbusch W. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*. Harpers Lee, 1907:54
- <http://bit.ly/ea3NWm>