

Adult Forum: The Future of Liberal Christianity  
St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California  
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The forum was organized as a dialogue between Max and me, yet to be fully engaged with the participants in the Forum. I began the Forum with some background on the significance of my work on the Bellah Legacy Project, which informs my thinking on the topic, "Why is liberal Christianity on the decline?" I mentioned that Bellah came to St. John's to lead an Adult Forum in the 1980s. Also in 1987, The Pacific Coast Theological Society held their meeting at St. John's on the topic of "Religion and Theology in the Work of Robert Bellah." I also, mentioned my work in trying to establish an endowed Lectureship at the GTU to honor Bellah. I said Bellah was relevant to the topic of the Forum because he analyzed how in the modern world with increasing individualism, people in the West now saw themselves as "spiritual not religious."

During the worship service before the Forum, I announced the topic: "Is liberal Christianity on the decline or not? What is the evidence for either position? Also, we will speculate on what this discussion might mean for the future of St. John's. Come prepared to join Max and me in discussing this topic. We want your view, and you can be sure Max and I will have something to say." It is important to state how the Sunday Bulletin announced the Forum. I had not seen the Bulletin until I attended church that morning. In a sense it was a cogent answer to the question I highlighted. But for the Forum I still wanted to back up and address the question that I promoted.

The official title Pastor Max gave the event was: "A Faithful and Nourishing Church in an Age of Secularism." The Bulletin stated: "The Dr. Harlan Stelmach and Pastor Max will share a discussion with us about how we can be thinking people, learning and benefitting from modern advances, and at the same time be open to mystery, transcendence and grace. When it is harder and harder and harder to 'believe' and 'Join,' how might we meet God and unite in common mission, faithful to Jesus Christ?"

The answer embedded in the announcement is: Be a nourishing church, open to mystery, transcendence and grace united in a common mission. That is, focus on practice not belief. This of course is what I affirm, and it is what I learned from Bellah and Pastor Max. Now to try to capture the actual discussion and expand on it with more resources on the topic.

My pre-Forum outline in my notebook provided the structure for what I said in the Forum. I will summarize my notes for this recap of the Forum. On the one hand the answer is yes that liberal Christianity is declining in terms of weekly attendance and membership overall. The assumption behind this judgment is that size is the most important measure. The question also raises how "liberal" Christianity is defined. In general terms we are talking about the "ecumenical" wing of Christianity. This is characterized by a more open and pluralistic and non-exclusive view of Christianity that is "progressive" on social issues granting greater voice and solidarity with marginalized groups. This has both a Protestant and Catholic presence in Christianity. For

Protestants it has roots in the social gospel movement and for Catholics the roots are in Vatican II and Liberation Theology.

If we take a different approach to analyze the strength of these liberal formations in Christianity, we might come to a different judgment. Though less in numbers these viewpoints have been consolidated in smaller churches but now with churches with a clearer and committed message. A good example is the recent vote by the United Methodist Church which voted by acclamation to include gays and lesbians as pastors and to affirm same sex marriage. In the past this position could not be affirmed when the denomination was larger in size. The debates on these issues in the past contributed to many Methodist churches decision to leave the denomination. Now smaller but with a united voice, the Methodist Church can be seen as in sync with the majority of residents in the United States. Will this new understanding make the church stronger and lead to a more influential church that might even grow? We shall see.

After my opening comments, we asked our fellow church members to weigh in on whether or not liberal Christianity was in decline. They also engaged Pastor Max and me throughout the discussion on some of the major themes that we introduced. The vast majority agreed that liberal Christianity, at least in terms of size, was in decline. They were less certain, but more hopeful that liberal Christianity could be stronger today given its more consolidated agreement on a more open theology, doctrine and progressive commitments. Some of the viewpoints offered by the group were:

- Yes, in decline but our important message is not well heard or communicated.
- I left the Catholic Church which focused more on doctrine and restricted requirements. St John's welcomes all.
- I am not sure what it means to be "spiritual and not religious."
- In our world today there is too much emphasis on one's individual identity.
- Though simplified, Jesus was a liberal and St. Paul was the conservative. Jesus was about meaning and faith; Paul about more converts and growth.
- I have difficulty with talking about being "saved."
- Growth in and of itself is not bad but it how we grow that is important.
- Of course, our tradition values the worth of each individual, we are in "God's image."
- We need to embrace a view of the individualism that understands that there is something more beyond us that can lead to community and social solidarity.
- We need to acknowledge that money plays a big role in our society to be able to have resources to be more influential. But money could also be a false hope.

There were other comments that were offered but this at least gives one the flavor of the issues that were important to the participants, which allowed Max and me to add comments that might be helpful to understand the nature of religious practice in our modern world and what might be our response to this analysis as a Church, particularly given that some kind of individualism is here to stay. Further, one could argue that the decline of liberal Christianity and religion in general is related to individualism and what

many have defined as secularism, where non-religious views are more dominant. Where to start?

Understanding individualism might be a good place to start. I rely mainly on the work of Robert Bellah and those associated with his ideas to think about this issue. Bellah, spent over 30 years as a sociologist of religion at UC Berkeley, also assuming teaching duties at the Graduate Theological Union. His national best seller, *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, with his co-authors, Richard Madsen, Steve Tipton, Bill Sullivan and Ann Swidler, identified two major strands of individualism in the US, “expressive Individualism” and “utilitarian Individualism,” both of which when in excess are problematic. The two individualism shared what has become a main defining feature in the modern world helping to produce a decline in a commitment to community and social solidarity: ***the location of authority is invested only in the individual.*** I cannot over highlight this point. A further consequence was a rebellion against institutions that defined and monitored an individual’s commitments and values. In traditional societies the individual had little or no independent authority. In a positive sense almost all the liberation/identity movements could be seen in this light, from civil rights, feminism and gender rights. Our important “human rights” tradition fits into this trend. We affirm the general historical and cultural evolutionary gains in this story. In effect we are all individualists in the modern world. Yet there is a dark side to these gains.

Bellah and his colleagues have pointed out that this shift in authority becomes a problem when it is the only or main story to be told about how we understand ourselves and our world. Our own Protestant tradition has played a major role in fostering individualism. The sacredness of the individual conscience in most of the reformation rebellions enshrine this notion. On the one hand it gets captured and nurtured today by what Bellah has identified as “expressive Individualism,” largely represented by the Romantic ages’ reaction to a kind of “enlightenment fundamentalism,” where “reason,” science and rationality ruled the day in intellectual circles. For the culture in general it demanded acquiescence in daily life to new inventions and technology to which they always had a love and hate relationship. We know these romantics in American literature which still resonate with us, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson and Poe. With these writers we also see a heavy skepticism about institutions and outside authority.

On the other hand, we see the emergence of “utilitarian individualism.” In this case it was given authority from the enlightenment rationalism. Utilitarian individualists focus on whatever it takes to be successful. Things, people, education, relationships are prized by how much they serve their own private advancements. They like to win as an end itself. This created a shift from public *goods* to private *interests*. The economic system of capitalism where one can compete (and manipulate) for their own advantage via the market is what one supports. Instrumentalism defines one’s commitment and approach. These two individualisms have largely defined us in the United States. Both are rebellions against outside institutional authorities. One stressing the emotion of the heart. The other embracing an impersonal domain of the market where *individuals* compete. Again, there is much good that has accrued from these stories we tell about ourselves. However, there have been negative consequences when these stories or

myths alone define us. Is there an alternative story or myth to which we might appeal in the United States, to complement or mitigate the negative aspects of these individualisms?

Bellah, et. al. suggests two other functioning traditions, “civic republicanism” and “biblical religion.” However, these have largely been relegated to the sidelines. They exist, but only in a diminished capacity as secondary myths. On the political side these are our institutions of the rule of law and our commitment to civic dialogue. On the religious side, this is embedded in our Christian and Jewish heritage that support social justice and the moral dimension of life. The Jewish/Christian religious tradition in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been extended to the other religious traditions via our constitutional commitment to the first amendment, enshrining the free expression of religion in the context of the “non-establishment” clause, where there can be no state sanctioned religion. Though today the commitment to this version of the first amendment has either been questioned or interpreted to try to advance the establishment of religious authority of one tradition: Christianity. However, it is clear that authority in these two alternative stories does not just reside in the individual, it is a collectively and community-oriented effort. Therefore, Christian nationalism is actually turning back the clock to a traditional society with civic institutions telling an individual how to think. Ironically this is a self-contradiction, using individualism to promote a non-individual solution. More on this later.

But back to the trajectory of the modern world not the *reaction* to this world by the religious right. Therefore, without a healthy counter myth to individualism, Bellah and his colleagues analyze the consequence to be what they call “radical individualism.” Both expressive and utilitarian Individualism have what he calls a psychologically impossible stance. We cannot live in the existential or practical reality of relying just on ourselves alone. Bellah adds this observation: “It is quite true that we are all children of specific parents, born in a particular locality, inheritors of those group histories, and citizens of this nation. All of these things tell us who we are in important ways.” However, and here is the key point in the modern world: “But we live in a society that encourages us to cut free from the past, to define our own selves, to choose the groups with which we wish to identify. No tradition and no community in the United States is above criticism, and the test of the criticism is usually the degree to which the community or tradition helps the individual to find fulfillment. So, we live somewhere between the empty self and the constituted self.”

That is, we live somewhere between the two traditions of individualism of the *private* self and the two *public* traditions of civic republicanism and biblical grounding. The first is an “empty self” and the second is a “constituted self.” Bellah notes that the “empty self” is an analytic concept and not a “concrete reality.” Why? He and his colleagues explain: “It is theoretically imaginable but performatively impossible.” They also posit that the “constituted self” is also an analytic concept,” Each self has a goal that is not reachable. Why is this important? If acknowledged, we have to realize that we are always dependent on others in a world that is interdependent.

Yet the basic point remains that our private and public selves are in conflict and ambiguously played out, especially when ***individual authority*** remains the dominant

stance, regardless of one's political or social world view. In other writings Bellah wanted to advocate for "moral individualism", an understanding of the self that constitutes both a focus on the rights of the individual but also affirms that individual rights are sustained in a vibrant and healthy commitment to civic virtues and community, the common good. Again, this is difficult when the ontology of the self is often construed as "pre-social." We think we are born with the birth right to construct our identity out of whole cloth or maybe find this identity in a narrow definition of "our tribe." How did we get here? Pastor Max offered his favorite religious historian, David Hollinger, as providing some answers. Hollinger is a professor at UC Berkeley.

But first Max recounted his readings from other Pastors about the decline of the liberal churches and what to do about it. He reacted to one Pastor who said he did not want to be a pastor to a dying church. In an emphatic response Max confirmed his commitment to the liberal/ecumenical churches, regardless of their declining size. For Max there is always important ministry to be done regardless of size. Humans react to gestures of grace that are offered by pastors. Max told a story of visiting a dying person and helping them through their pain, just after reading about the other pastor wanting to give up on the church. In effect, no institution is "dying" if can respond to human pain and grief.

Max felt that Hollinger's historical analyses of the "decline" in numbers, within what Hollinger refers to as the "ecumenical" churches, give us food for thought to understand our current situation. In simplified form, the ecumenical Protestant church began its biggest decline because the children of those in our generation decided not to continue church attendance. Why? In one sense our generation was successful in inculcating our values of diversity, pluralism and openness to all traditions into the American culture, by way of secular organizations and laws supporting human rights and social justice. We supported our children's involvement in the liberation movements and organizations devoted to implement these values in the secular world. These were non-profit organizations that could focus on these issues as their primary concern, from climate change to gender rights. Thus, the need for the liberal church became less important if these organizations promoted the same values, particularly if the liberal churches focused more on social ethics than spiritual wholeness. The article by Hollinger, "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity," is well worth reading. Hollinger has a book length treatment of the same issues, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History*.

Hollinger's thesis also treats how the divide between the liberal and conservative churches arose. As the liberal churches began to advocate for a more multi-cultural world and became open supporters of liberation movements, they left behind many in the pews who were not ready to address this shift. Through institutions such as the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, this agenda was expanded to include self-criticism for the role Churches played in supporting racism, sexism, nationalism, and colonialism. In simple terms, the liberal churches left open space for the conservative churches to define their brand of Christianity, both in the US and in the mission field. Where once liberal Christianity played a big role in promoting American exceptionalism, they recanted and the religious right, picked up the themes of



the “Christian Nation,” “family values” and traditional sexuality. These themes were used to consolidate the conservative churches. The liberal/progressive churches often dismissed these views as backward and vilified their positions.

We see this dynamic being played out today in our culture wars. The irony is that the religious right is now ascendent in the public arena, defining the meaning of Christianity for the so-called non-religious world. The media, for various reasons, commercial self-interest or a modernist anti-religious stance, is usually not sophisticated in religious history. Of course, these factors play into publicizing right or left-wing weirdness. People seem to like what is sensational whether they agree with it or not. Covering of these sells! The media does not go deep into the consequences of highlighting the sensational, thus reinforcing the divisions by giving irresponsible views a platform.

However, leaving the story at this level, makes us believe that as a nation this is the right way to define our divisions. There is a profound division in our culture, but it is not the one promoted for their own gain by the religious right, that is God-fearing people vs. left-wing secular or religious radicals. And again, the mass media gives airtime to this narrative. The liberal churches, let this story be the defining story by often either belittling or dismissing the conservatives as ignorant.

However, if we step back and look at the situation through the lens of individualism, all Americans are formed by the same cultural evolution with the focus on the individual. *Where the big divide exists is how individuals respond to a complex and evolving modern world. So, when authority is vested in the individual conscience there is no larger functioning myth to mitigate against individual interests.* A larger civic myth of community or social solidarity gets lost and drowned out in this context. What makes this more complex is that if we were to go deeper into the pervasiveness of individualism, we would have to admit that we are all swimming in the same cultural waters. If this is understood, we would have to admit that we are part of the problem and that we might have to also admit that the other side has a point or at least deserve our respect or empathy. What were/are the forces that have defined our modern world that have created this vast ocean commonality and what is in this water that we all drink?

One of the big drivers of what is seen as secularism in the modern world is “differentiation.” Like evolution in general, “complexity” is what we now have in social, political and cultural institutions. To be more precise, to deal with the complexity we have specialization in our spheres of life. Max Weber, the great German sociologist has given us a general theory about our modern world. In the modern world we have distinct spheres of life, religious, political, economic, aesthetic and erotic. The religious sphere according to Weber is now just one of many spheres in which we live. In general, we moderns have applauded this trend. Our commitment to the so-called “the separation of church and state,” has evolved from the changes we now see in the modern world. This was not always so.

With religion relegated, at least institutionally, we see one of the reasons for our so-called secular world. We have to remember, there are good reasons why we wanted to contain the influence of religion, at least the predominance of one religion over others. There have been abuses and particularly today we see the resurgence of theocratic

nationalism. Philip Gorski, a former student of Bellahs, now teaching at Yale, in a recent chapter in a book edited by Bellah's co-authors, *Challenging Modernity*, suggests that with differentiation, religion has lost its monopoly on the sacred. Individuals can now choose their own "salvation" whether in entertainment, sex, money or other spheres of life that Weber identified. Each of these spheres is open to be influenced by the other spheres. He suggests that religion is the most permeable sphere and can be dominated by politics for example. The result of this fact is what he calls "fragmentation" not just differentiation. There is in fact not less "religion" but an opportunity for many "religions" where individuals find, if not meaning, at least some source of identity, commitment a kind of salvation, whether healthy or not. Therefore, not only is the religion sphere colonized by other spheres but for the modern individual it is only one option among many spheres. This forces the individual to choose and make existential decisions about his or her world. This is a challenging time for individuals in this "candy shop" type of world.

Again, we do applaud the advances that this specialization has produced, particularly with science and education. Each operating with a degree of authority and independence. Of course these are analytical categories, in our lived existential world the various spheres get blurred, and one sphere may come to dominate and "corrupt" one of the other spheres. An example is when our economic sphere often commodifies our relationships and activity in other spheres. We seem to monetize everything, and our language gives testimony to the influence of the economic sphere. The use of the concept the "bottom line" in normal parlance is a good example. Yes, we do complain about money having too much influence in our political sphere. Money also has a big role to play in all the spheres. Going back to our various kinds of individualism, utilitarian individualism aids and abets this trend while it further reinforces an empty individualism.

Another factor driving the focus on the individual alongside differentiation, is what Weber called "disenchantment," or "world rejecting." Philip Gorski gives us a quick way to grasp what Weber meant.

"Then heaven and earth were split apart, and society was divided into various spheres and all the magic in the world rose to heaven, and all that was left on earth was bare rationality." This Gorski said, this is the historical narrative on which most contemporary theories of secularism are built. There were/are several consequences of world denial becoming a dominant reality in the West. If all that is left for us on earth is defined by "rationality" Weber predicted a bleak existence with no magic or mystery, or even as a source for meaning. He called this the "iron cage" of modernity. We are caged in by this narrow view of what is important and possible. As a complement, or maybe because rationality is king, with the authority on earth now vested in the individual we would have, according to Weber, warring "religions," no one religion is dominant we choose our world view, or as has often been said, we choose no religion. On surveys today the category of "nones" has grown exponentially, from 7% ten years ago to 40% today. Are all the "nones" truly secular?

Psychologically humans seem to not be able to live in a totally rational world. The radical individualism's "empty self" that Bellah talks about cannot be tolerated in real life.

Mystery or awe seems to break through. Or we create our own escapes from the heartless world by surrogate comforts, money, prestige, entertainment, sports, romance, sex or virtual reality. So, far from living in a world with a decline of religion, Gorski suggests there is a “surfeit” of religions, they are everywhere, fostered by individualism of all types. The religious sphere is porous. New “religions” abound. “Fragmentation” is a better characterization of our cultural and religious landscape than just differentiation, or world denial, according to Gorski. Yes, out of this reality, social solidarity and a common community is almost impossible. A major obstacle for our collective lives.

Galen Watts a Canadian social scientist in his book, *The Spiritual Turn: The Religion of the Heart and the Making of Romantic Liberal Democracy*, acknowledges Gorski’s characterization of the fragmentation of our world as a reality. He is part of a new generation of Bellah informed scholars. However, he suggests that there is the emergence of a new myth that has the potential to go beyond fragmentation, a new metanarrative that actually informs all the spheres that Gorski identifies. This reality has been largely either ignored or dismissed for commentators have focused too much on institutional religion. What is interesting, is that the notion that “I am spiritual not religious” is in fact a *non-reactionary* response to the dominant differentiation-disenchantment-individualism -secularism (DDIS )narrative. It is an attempt to move on with the realities of the modern world. Is it a positive response that will also produce solidarity? He thinks so. This group of “spiritual” individuals and organizations find it more comfortable to live with the ambiguity of the modern world. Yes, they craft an individual response but not in a negative way. They see the opportunity to make these decisions in a non-exclusive way.

Watts identifies ten characteristics of the religion of the heart. These are “logically interrelated tenants, which together form a coherent *cultural structure* upon which distinct *discourses* are erected, organized, and made meaningful. They are the following:”

1. Experimental Epistemology
2. Immanence of God or the Superempirical
3. Benevolent God or Universe
4. Redemptive Self as Theodicy
5. Self-Realization as Teleology
6. Self-Ethic (Voice from Within)
7. Virtue is Natural
8. Sacralization of Individual Liberty
9. Mind-Body Spirit Connection
10. Methodological Individualism

It would take a longer document to spell out the details of these elements and to understand Watts’ own critique of each of these elements. For now, I just want to bring to our attention Watts’ thesis, which I have great sympathy as a product, promoter and critic of the 1960’s. The reality is that we have been greatly influenced by the cultural



revolutions of the 1960s. The wing of our culture that embraces diversity and pluralism and a kind of individualism that understands that the individual can only flourish in a vital and supportive community and with institutions committed to it. If one person is harmed all are harmed. These are religious values that became rooted in many liberation movements and voluntary organizations focusing on climate change and social justice. We now see these efforts characterized as “Woke.” This is an amorphous position that largely is against anything that has a taint of the 1960s. How has this anti woke movement become so powerful and what is at the heart of its adherents?

We can see the emergence of the religious right, in various forms of evangelicalism and fundamentalism as a *reactionary* response to the (DDIS)narrative. It is reactionary because this group wants to turn back to a “golden age” when certainty and cultural norms were defined by a clear and narrow set of religious and cultural values. This was a time when we had “organic” communities that were understood to have a well-defined and a “comfortable” setting for the individual, choice was not necessary. Michele Goldberg in her op-ed column characterized the difference between “*gemeinschaft*” as opposed to “*gesellschaft*.” “‘*Gemeinschaft*’ to contrast the values with those of liberal modernity... describes a culture based on “kinship, blood relationship, feudal ties, social hierarchy, deference, honor, and friendship, whereas *Gesellschaft* refers to a social world that is atomized, calculating and legalistic.” *Gesellschaft* is our complex society, pluralistic and in need of bureaucratic institutions and individual decision making to navigate this complexity. Currently, Trump and his surrogates are even using the term *gemeinschaft* to describe their vision. We can see nationalism and a call for a Christian Nation to be arising out of this dynamic. Global wars and famine and violence are stoking mass immigrations, upsetting countries used to a more homogeneous culture such as Scandinavia. All of these anti-immigrant movements are on first instinct nativistic and *reactionary*.

What should be our response to these reactionary impulses and movements? I want to suggest that we need to be more understanding and more generous in our views and relationship to individuals still caught in a negative response to modernity. It is important not to vilify them or treat them as ignorant. There are violent and intransigent elements, but the vast majority are struggling to make sense of their world and are “seekers” like all of us.

Of course this will also take greater self-understanding from the religious right. They have to come to grips that they are no less individualistic than other moderns. They are formed by the modern era and show similar tendencies. Within the evangelical community there is little consensus. It has split into multiple factions all declaring their primacy. There is also an over-emphasis on individual freedom over against outside control, like government, at least on the issues they are concerned with. As it turns out, solidarity is as much an issue with this reactionary group as it is for the moderns. Fragmentation is also the norm. Even though they talk about *gemeinschaft*, the reality is that they are really tied to the modern world’s trend toward individualism and *gesellschaft*. In fact, institutionally evangelical churches are on the decline. Most who define themselves as evangelical do not attend or contribute to these churches. “Evangelical has become a political rather than a religious identity. Their false consciousness needs to be addressed.

What is the response when we have a more complete understanding of right's reactionary position and the moderns' religion of the heart shift to a general feel of spirituality? Specifically, what is St. John's Presbyterian Church's response? If our goal is to heal and spread grace to all, what do we do?

I offer a four-step process,

1. Identify our own false consciousness where it exists
2. Be understanding of the reactionary response as an "understandable" a response
3. Acknowledge that the "spiritual not religious" moderns are legitimate religious seekers too, like us
4. Craft a message that tries to connect with the right and the left, that communicates we feel their pain and joy and want to be part of a process that opens up a chance for mutual understanding and eventual solidarity.
5. Develop a cogent view of "moral individualism." This would be an individualism that focuses on the gains that produced by individualism but ties itself to an awareness that a vibrant individualism only succeeds in the context of a healthy communal context that supports individual choice/interest but not at the expense of public goods.

How to do this? The next Forum will focus on this.

Add something about the successes of Woke that created the backlash...

