

FOR THE MODERN LIBERAL: IS THEOLOGY POSSIBLE? CAN SCIENCE REPLACE IT?

by *Bernard E. Meland*

This symposium has convened to discuss two questions: "Is Theology Possible in the Liberal Church?" and "Can Science Replace Theology?" The fact that you have asked a theologian outside the Unitarian community to address himself to these questions suggests at the outset that, while you mean to have these questions discussed in a way that speaks to your own situation, you intend also to have them looked at in the wider setting of contemporary liberal thought.

A. IS THEOLOGY POSSIBLE?

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The moment the question is asked—"Is theology possible?"—we are confronted with the ambiguity of the term "theology." It is quite possible that the very mention of it will suggest various things to many of you—things like the proverbial black cat in a dark closet, or the stern, sallow-faced cleric in monk's clothing, or something equally esoteric or "out of this world."

But even when we have excluded the more obviously bizarre expressions of this historic term, the problem of defining the area of discussion in response to this question persists. For among critical scholars in this field there are sharp differences in judgment as to what the discipline undertakes to do.

It would be convenient if we could just fall back on the dictionary definition and say, "theology is the science of God and his relation to the world." But the problem here is that this does not describe what most theologians are doing; or at best it only remotely describes it. One would meet with the same difficulty in dealing with philosophy and

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other disciplines. For the gap between those who decide upon the common usage of terms and the scholars who practice the discipline is wide indeed.

It is possible that some of you would settle for a phrase like "some rationality for our beliefs" or "some rationale for our faith." These are fairly easy to come by, but one may not be employing theology in coming to such a statement. And one need not do so. One can draw upon the store of knowledge available to one in philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. Simply formulating a working rationale of this sort need not involve one in theology, though of course it may do so.

Theology calls to mind an ethos of sensibilities, a mythos of faith, or a communal witness of faith that demands explication, clarification, and continual re-presentation by succeeding generations within a given cultural orbit of human experience. Theology is peculiarly historical in character, more so than philosophy or science. In this respect it is more like the arts and the literary lore of a people, in that it is more or less expressive of a tradition, or of a medley of traditions, voicing what is distilled from "the triumph of hope over experience," to use Gamaliel Bradford's phrase. This theological voice tends to be heard both at a critical level of inquiry and at wholly uncritical levels of religious zeal, which is what adds to the confusion of its historic utterances. The discerning person, concerned to find his way through this maze of theological reflection and affirmation, needs to be selective without becoming unresponsive to the elemental demands that often speak more readily out of uncritical utterances of faith than out of sophisticated systems of theology.

In any case, theology represents a depth of inquiry into what ultimately claims us, a depth not necessarily of cognitive inquiry but of existential or experiential inquiry; a mode of inquiry motivated not so much by a concern for comprehension as by a concern with apprehension. There is an issue of ultimacy and destiny in theological inquiry which sees man in his creatural relationships, in his relationship to God, to other men, and to himself; in his dependence as well as in his independence; in his intentions and in his pretensions; in his limitations along with his possibilities; in his relation to resources of grace as well as in his relation to sources of judgment.

Theology is a probing of our human circumstance in the belief that there is something more from which we have come and possibly a More into which we ultimately go, or find rest from our labors.

Theology confronts the enigma of existence and the absurdities of

experience along with its joys and fulfilments with a stubborn and persistent demand for this sense of triumph of hope over experience.

FROM LIBERALISM TO POST-LIBERALISM

But if we are to deal realistically with this question—"Is theology possible in the liberal church?"—we need also to look candidly at the status and meaning of the liberal church in the religious ethos of the present age. Let us state bluntly at the outset, then, that among many religious thinkers these days, the word "liberal" is a muted term. In fact, there is no surer way to court disfavor, or dismissal as a serious contender among theologians today, than to speak of oneself as a liberal. And this is not simply because theology has become conservative or neo-orthodox but because in the minds of many of our younger, creative theological minds, liberalism itself is suspected of having become a kind of orthodoxy, defending a status quo that reached its zenith in the 1920's, harboring presuppositions that can best find support in nineteenth-century or earlier science and philosophy, rather than in the fundamental notions provided by a relativity science, modern metaphysics, or language analysis.

Convinced that liberalism in religious thought antedates all the critical ferment that has influenced the philosophical and theological thinking of the past three decades or more, these younger theologians have taken to calling their own thought "post-liberal theology." Now this phrase in itself is interesting. They didn't need to coin that caption. If their intentions were to desert the critical and scholarly traditions that informed liberal religion for three hundred years, or to reverse its course of inquiry, they would have used other language. They avoided language that might suggest a turning back toward a more traditional mode of thought precisely because their direction was forward, however much they may appear to have recovered or repossessed the insights of a past legacy or to have resurrected terms that had long lain dormant, interred in the liturgy of an orthodox cultic faith. The resources that have informed their thinking are not in the past; they are resources that spring from modern streams of inquiry in the cultural disciplines that have become conversant with the technical demands of this technological society or with dimensions of experience and history evoked by studies of the unconscious, by depth psychology, the metaphysics of internal relations, relativity, an open-ended view of history, not to speak of the new understanding of eschatology and revelatory events.

"Post-liberal," in its current usage, implies a persisting and recon-

ceived liberal ethos of thought that has assumed a new stage of critical inquiry. It is liberalism reborn, regenerated, and radically revised.

Let me comment a moment on this matter of a new stage of critical inquiry. I have argued through the years that the modern period dating from the seventeenth century through the first decade of the present century constituted the initial stage of the modern consciousness. There were marked variations within this period, so sharp, in fact, that they were set apart as three distinct phases of the modern period: the rationalist, the romanticist, and the modernist eras. Yet, on closer examination, one finds that a common, unifying vision of the mind informed their imagery and thought: one that was initiated and fashioned by René Descartes and Isaac Newton. This vision of the mind provided a sense of an orderly universe, a conception of man as being essentially rational and ideally motivated, and a conception of reason that was attuned to the task of deciphering the laws of nature and of man. This controlling vision of the first stage of the modern consciousness reached its summit in the decade immediately following the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). And the working out of its evolutionary scheme is what occupied the disciplined and creative minds of the modernist era in sociology, psychology, anthropology, biology, as well as the historical and scientific study of religion. The nineteenth century, which reached into the present century through the twenties, marked the culmination of the first stage of the modern consciousness.

The new stage of the modern consciousness dates from the closing decade of the nineteenth century and the opening decade of the twentieth. For this was the period when radium was discovered by the Curies; when Albert Einstein's theories of relativity were formulated, which launched the revolution in physics presaging the atomic bomb and this incredible new age of nuclear science, technology, and space exploration. It was the beginning of the era of the new mathematics, of studies in the unconscious, of important critiques of Immanuel Kant's transcendental ego and of Hegelian idealism, leading to William James's and Henri Bergson's radical empiricism. It was a period when new documents were discovered in Old Testament studies, throwing fresh light on the notion of eschatology, which, when combined with Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), launched critical studies in theology that were to bring to a close certain claims of liberal theology centered in the ethical teaching of Jesus and based upon the accessibility of the historical Jesus. It was a time when studies in emergent evolution appeared, introducing a new phase of the evo-

lutionary story and a different way of envisaging its occurrence in the development of natural structures. It was a time when concern with phenomenological research developed under Husserl, giving rise to new ways of studying the history of religions. With the publication of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), liberal religious thought was presented with a new way of understanding the transcendent: as numinous events, a procedure related to studies in emergent evolution, yet a distinct development within a wholly different philosophical framework.

I cite all these seemingly unrelated, innovating occurrences of this period at the turn of the century as having one outcome: namely, a radical break in the monolithic, mechanistic, positivistic imagery of nineteenth-century thought, which had become the summit view embracing the scientific, philosophic, and religious developments since the seventeenth century.

This break in imagery of thought is so decisive as to imply that no disciplined inquiry could proceed thereafter in quite the same way. Furthermore, no presuppositions of the previous periods, which had guided and controlled reflections upon man, nature, or God, were adequate to the new vision of science and to the new image of human experience that followed from these innovations. It was, in every sense of the word, a revolution in fundamental notions that radically altered the world view of modern man.

It is my judgment that the liberal voice, even in its so-called post-liberal version, has yet to speak fully and adequately within this new imagery of thought. Because the liberal initially recoiled from these new dimensions of thought expressed in relativity, experiences of depth, or what William James called the "More" and what Bergson claimed eludes precision in thought, many liberal religious thinkers dismissed them, or at least shied away from them, as being a menacing symptom of irrationalism.

This fear was understandable; but, in retrospect, it was regrettable, for it enabled a more aggressive reactionary mood to express itself in an open rejection of the liberal era in all its aspects.

And the result of this turn of events was, to say the least, ironical. For, on the one hand, these reactionary minds embraced many of the significantly new fundamental notions of the modern consciousness. On the other hand, those who conceived of themselves as liberal religious thinkers tended more and more to react defensively, lest the sense of an orderly universe, bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century science and a positivistic philosophy, should be sacrificed.

Being committed to stable notions of rationality and coherence that

square more readily with the Newtonian view of absolute space and nineteenth-century dogma of orderliness than with the open-ended view of a relativistic and pluralistic sphere of spatial existence, many liberals found themselves caught in the embarrassment of creating out of this legacy of thought a liberal orthodoxy.

It is true that the reactionary theologies that embraced these newer notions integrated them with notions of an earlier theological age. This is a phenomenon that has tended to occur wherever a renescent effort has erupted in history. Arnold Toynbee, in speaking of stages in the Renaissance, made the telling observation that, in any period of renaissance, three things will occur: there will be a surging ahead in the direction that innovation beckons simultaneous with a vehement rejection of the period immediately antecedent to it, but at the same time there will occur a reaching far back into an earlier history for precedents and norms by which to guide or justify its innovating ventures.

In retrospect, one can see this rhythm of reaction and renewal occurring in the Renaissance of the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. The exciting discovery and exploration of natural man was accompanied by a measured rejection of late medieval tenets and by a reaching back to early Greek influences, particularly to Plato. This was exemplified in the sculpture and painting of Michelangelo, as well as in the Renaissance humanists and Platonists. It would be interesting to apply Toynbee's thesis to the theological renaissance of recent years as exemplified in Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann, though one would see another version of this reaction and renewal in process theology stemming from the earlier influences of William James and Bergson.

One might argue, on this basis, that if the new stage of the modern consciousness did initiate a twentieth-century renaissance, liberalism was fated to be rejected in its historical nineteenth-century image. And, on the same basis, one might argue that the present post-liberal theology, in a sense a reaction against the Barthian-Tillichian era, can be expected to revive directives reminiscent of historical liberalism. The frequent mention of the empirical demands upon theology among the modern secularists in theology, the forthright manner of embracing the pragmatic method in a book like Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*,¹ or John Cobb's bold offering of *A Christian Natural Theology*² would seem to suggest that another renaissance is upon us in which the liberal ethos may be given a second chance to embrace this new stage of the modern consciousness and thus assume a responsibility it once rejected

and fulfil an opportunity that "once hovered near and then departed." What was forfeited might then be reclaimed.

You will see, then, the direction of my argument in response to the question, "Is theology possible?"

If the liberal church chooses to persist within an image of thought informed by what I have called the first stage of the modern consciousness, the answer may have to be that not only is theology not possible in the context of the liberal church, it is probably not even necessary. For what characterized liberal thought during the modernist era of the nineteenth century and after was its concern to change theological notions into the terms and meanings of other cultural disciplines.

If, on the other hand, the liberal church becomes aware that a post-liberal renaissance is imminent and that a new demand is upon it to give thought to the theological dimension of experience, and of its own task, it may find that theology will be made both possible and exciting.

I happen to be one who believes this to be true and who responds with zest for the task it envisages.

THE FUNCTION OF THEOLOGY IN THE LIBERAL CHURCH

Let me comment briefly on the function of theology in the liberal church.

First, theology can provide a continuing and persistent criticism of the liberal church's religious life and reflection, its preaching and public utterances. I have always held that, despite the discomfort of having critics around, any art form, or creative community, will achieve greater stature under the constant stimulus of a tradition of criticism. Religion is no different in this respect. The reason we have experienced so much debauchery of the human spirit in the religious life among American Protestants is that the virus of anti-intellectualism infected it early in its history, resulting in a form of piety that has proven offensive to any person of taste and discriminating judgment.

But the liberal movement, though it sought to correct this historical tendency, did so only to the extent of reasserting a rational criterion of faith. In almost every other aspect of human creativity and response, liberal Protestants remained as immune to the wider cultural graces of the human spirit and to the rigors of the elemental dimension of life as their pietistic forebears.

And they developed one more deficiency. One of the glaring limitations of the liberal churches I have known has been their relative smugness. In the main, they have been self-congratulating societies confirmed both in what they believe and in what they disbelieve. And

this self-assurance, with its indifference to wonder and self-criticism, in liberal religion has generated a kind of dogmatism in reverse. This self-assurance in liberalism often arises out of the narrow span of human history and experience which liberals consider to be normative and relevant to their purposes. There is dissonance of a kind among them, but mostly that which arises from individual differences in their midst. They do not expose their witness to the wide front of history or to the judgment of the larger witness of the community of faith within the culture. In their sophisticated outlook they have readily dismissed the larger portion of that community as being obsolescent or unlearned. This leaves them fairly secure or insulated from whatever criticism or judgment might come from such sources summoning them to a more elemental measure of our humanity and creaturehood.

Now theology, when it penetrates to the basic level of our human existence, serves to break through the façade of our sophistications and to evoke elemental feelings and apprehensions appropriate to our common humanity. In my judgment, nothing is more needed in modern sophisticated society than a summoning to what ultimately claims us—if only as a countertheme to what presently claims us, if only as a way of evoking deeper sentiments and the consolation of judgment to give greater stature to our idealizations, our veneration, and our purposes.

With the present explosion in the demand for civil rights around the world, the very notion of our elemental, primordial humanity has become a modern headline. I will admit that the announcement that the new vogue among men and women alike is to wear a ring in one's nose is going a bit far. And this is clearly the wrong way to recover our elemental stance. But I must insist that the stature of this new age of faith in this post-liberal era does depend on our being able to recapture a sense of creaturely feeling, even as we pursue whatever degree of intelligibility is available to us. Becoming a child again, within our age of maturity, is but a way of reaffirming our full humanity with all the sensibilities, apprehensions, and capacities for joy and sorrow appropriate to the human spirit. Without this childlike capacity in our mature, intellectual pursuits, the intellect becomes brittle and unyielding; it may even become acrid and arrogant. Intellectualism has frequently been accused of draining the human spirit of its vital juices, which express the common joys and sorrows of humanity. This caricature is all too true. One function of theology in the liberal church, as I see it, is to quicken this dimension of religious sensibility among

sophisticated, modern, intellectuals, to enable them to participate more fully in our common humanity.

Second, theology can provide both a focus and a cultural context to our religious thinking. Now here I touch upon a sensitive spot in our Protestant history and more particularly in our liberal religious history. For in speaking of the focus and cultural context of faith, I mean to point to the underlying and formative mythos of our Western culture, which is as old as Scripture and as contemporary as our present-day sensibilities, values, and modes of thought.

I cannot go into the history of religious liberalism that led it to disavow this basic cultural mythos of faith in Western history, contenting itself with a rationalistic and ethical reductionism. Apart from the truncation of its own religious outlook, this disavowal led to relinquishing the whole cultural dimension of faith to traditional expressions of Judaism and Christianity, where it assumed a cultic form, becoming congealed into a religious orthodoxy.

There never has existed in Western Christianity a liberal rendering of this Judaic-Christian mythos. Cultural anthropology has vaguely hinted at its meaning, but, as is the habit of sociological and anthropological studies of religion, it has been more articulate about this phenomenon in non-Western cultures than in our own. To my mind, much of the thinness of religious sensibility in religious liberalism, now reflected in secularizing movements in theology and the churches, stems from this forfeiture of concern with the cultural mythos that carries into present history the deep-lying, elemental response of man as creature, evoking a sense of wonder and openness to the depth of realities that contain us and hold us in existence. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who frequently addressed himself to the cultural despisers of religion, valiantly recalled his contemporaries to this dimension of their humanity. Rudolf Otto attempted to revive this *sensus numinous* within the ethos of liberal theology; and Paul Tillich sought to reformulate it in his existentialist theology based on a critical phenomenology. Yet, significant and moving as Otto's formulation was, it did not state this elemental basis of our Christianity in terms that really evoked a liberal response to it. Possibly no one in our era came closer to doing so among sophisticated minds of our time than Tillich. His theology of ultimate concern seemed to speak to many of the secular community at this very level of their elemental humanity. But an adequate liberal formulation of it has not yet been achieved. This remains a challenge to post-liberal theologians. Our liberal faith will be sorely lacking in depth and insistence until it is made available.

The temptation among earnest young religious thinkers of our day, impressed with the significant advances in modern science, will be to settle for a manageable religious naturalism and to proceed, as the modernists of an earlier age, to cast their religious notions into the idiom of modern-day science.

At this point, I share the misgivings of William James, who more and more appears to me to have been one of our major American prophets.

A WIDER HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A theology of the liberal church requires a historical as well as a contemporary dimension, but it should be a historical outreach that includes the whole of our Western history, not just a few centuries dating from the Enlightenment. The fact that the liberal church has been content to restrict its history to the narrow strand of rationalistic religious thought of the past three hundred years has rendered it just a sect among others, whereas it could discover itself to be a dimension or perspective of religious faith inclusive of our whole cultural history.

This restrictive image of itself stems principally from two characteristics of the liberal outlook. One is its conviction that everything that antedates the age of rationalism is traditional and thus unacceptable to the critical, enlightened mind; the other is its strategy of thought, following from this assumption.

In assuming that the whole of Western religious history antedating the Enlightenment is bogged down in a traditional mode of thought, that it offers no occasion for reinterpretation or reconception, liberal religion relinquishes the cultural past to Roman Catholicism and to Protestant and Jewish orthodoxy. This is a costly sacrifice. For not only is liberal religion deprived of historical roots, but the historic past of the culture is deprived of the reinterpretation that only a liberal perspective can bring to it, or, to speak more precisely, that only a reading of history, sensitive to its liberating turns of thought and experience, can disclose within it. In relinquishing the culture's past to traditionally oriented forms of faith, liberal religion has left unnoted, unmemorialized, and unsung the muted expressions of the Judaic and Christian witness throughout its early history that deviated from the rule of orthodoxy or that challenged it before its ruling consensus was formed and firmly established. Liberal religion, in being bent only upon contemporary concerns of the culture, has left the past only partially interpreted; and thus the present with which it is concerned, being unreceptive to the past it knows, is itself partial, deficient in resources generated by maturity, by seasoned experience, and by structures of creativ-

ity, which, as Alfred North Whitehead once said, only the past can bequeath to the present.

But the restrictive image of liberal religion, as we saw, stems also from the strategy of thought which follows from this conception of the past. The prevailing strategy of liberal thinking through the years has been one of reductionism, or selectivism: in a way the liberal has been dominated by the pattern of orthodox systems more than has been realized. For liberals have been content to select from these systems what, in their judgment, has seemed reasonable or relevant to modern sensibilities. This has had the effect of making liberal religion a truncated version of the Western legacy of faith or a rationalistic sect in one of the remote corners of this Judaic-Christian heritage.

All human existence takes place within a particularized orbit of meaning. An orbit of meaning is determined by the cultural history. Now the point of this analysis is to say that liberal religion, like various expressions of orthodoxy within the West, bears the markings of our cultural history and, in turn, has access to the resources of its purview as a community of faith. Yet, in my judgment, liberal religion has not adequately acknowledged this cultural heritage, either as a resource or as a limitation, upon its mode of religious response. It has presumed to be transcultural, or even anticultural, in this sense of relinquishing all historical antecedents as simply traditional and obsolescent. Liberal religion has been content with being peripheral or even superficial as long as it could be relieved of any sense of dependence upon or adherence to any historical orbit of meaning.

As a theologian I wish to challenge this choice and to argue that a theology of the liberal church in any full-orbed sense is not possible so long as it disavows, or remains dissociated from, the communal witness of faith that is deeply laid within the cultural orbit of meaning that forms its ethos of thought and that has given rise to its controlling mythos. A religious rationale, based simply on contemporary science or philosophy, is not a theology. If this is all the liberal church demands, it can achieve this without a theology. A theology, fully attuned to the resources of faith, generated within the cultural orbit of meaning, is an organic growth, a story of this human venture, a pageantry of human joy and sorrow, despair and defeat, accompanied by themes of hope and redemption. Theology is the delineation of a communal witness to what is ultimate in the midst of our immediacies, to what is creative and redemptive in the face of the defeating and disillusioning events of our experience.

Now there are narrow and restrictive ways of speaking of that com-

munal witness, and there are liberating ways of doing so. There are rigidly cultural ways of defining and celebrating this heritage of faith, and there are flexible, creative intercultural ways of doing so. I am convinced that the only theology that is appropriate to the liberal church is a theology of culture—a theology that lifts up this story of our life as being a cultural mythos, the spiritual seedbed and persisting psychical thrust of our deepest and most sensitive attainments of the human spirit registering our response to what ultimately claims us as creatures of the Creative Passage underlying and carrying forward all existence.

This is a theology that the liberal church has yet to create, but it will do so only when it ceases to be but a critical footnote to orthodoxy or simply a contemporary religious commentary on scientific findings. It will do so when it attains maturity as a participant in the hard-earned legacy of the human spirit that has given to Western peoples its particular offering of faith—an offering not to contradict or to suppress other cultural witnesses of faith but to add to their offerings, to enrich the dissonance of religious experience and discovery, and to contribute to the dialogue and critical exchange between the faiths of men in their encounter with one another as human beings.

B. CAN SCIENCE REPLACE THEOLOGY?

NATURE AND SCRIPTURE

Looking now at the second question which this symposium is to discuss, "Can Science Replace Theology?" the immediate and obvious answer is that science *has* replaced theology in a number of instances during the past three hundred years. To seventeenth-century rationalists, the God of Newton's universe loomed as a mighty and majestic figure, commanding the esteem of all who shared this scientific vision. By comparison with the God of the Bible, he seemed an impressive improvement. One Deist is reported to have said that the majestic God of Newton could in no way be reconciled with the condescending deity of Scripture who deigned to appear in a burning bush to a single individual and, on another occasion, stooped to wrestling with a mere mortal, whose name was Jacob.

Newton's vision of the universe was impressive, not only to scientists and philosophers of his time, who on other grounds opposed the church and its tradition, but to many clergy and theological students of the period, who found in Newton's natural philosophy a new summa. Newton's most active and eloquent champion was an Anglican clergyman,

Dr. Samuel Clarke, who became the spokesman for Newton in his dialogue with the German philosopher, Leibniz. Clarke argued that Newton's natural philosophy was more illuminating of things divine than most of what the established church was offering. As evidence of this he cited the fact that several theological students in Cambridge University, after reading Newton, decided to become scientists instead of clergymen on the grounds that science offered more security for one's faith than the creeds of the church.

It was common in the age of Newton to speak of "the book of nature" and to compare it with the book of Scripture. Both nature and Scripture had their ambiguities, but the book of nature seemed to get clearer, while Scripture remained difficult to understand. The very momentum and excitement of scientific clarification, following from Newton's vision of the universe, made it a ready displacement of theological explication.

There are impressive examples, too, of theologians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries turning the scientific vision of Newton into explicit statements of natural theology. Two names especially come to mind: Joseph Butler (1692–1752) and William Paley (1743–1805). Butler's famous book *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736) remains a classic to this day and is currently the one work to which language analysts most frequently turn for theological statements to examine and evaluate.

The scientism that developed in Western thought throughout the nineteenth century and after not only replaced theology but replaced philosophy as well. For many of that period it became the sole source of knowledge and assurance regarding matters of final belief.

I have already referred to the procedure common among modernists beginning with the closing decade of the nineteenth century and continuing well into the 1920's, in which theological doctrines were explicitly and quite self-consciously translated into what were considered to be their scientific equivalent—first into psychology of religion, then into biological arguments for theism in what was termed theistic evolution, and later into sociological insights.

The modernist era presents us with the most explicit and self-conscious efforts to replace theology with science, or to translate theological doctrine into scientific statements.

So one answer to the question "Can science replace theology?" is quite obviously, "Yes, it can"; for it has clearly done so among certain religious communities in certain periods of Western history.

MODERN SCIENCE MORE MODEST

What members of the liberal church must ask today, however, is: Has anything happened, either in the sciences, or in religion, to change this assumption that science can replace theology? The obvious answer is that so much has happened that even to catalogue the changes becomes a formidable and bewildering task.

We know that the world changed beyond recognition after 1945. But what the world noted in 1945 with the falling of atomic bombs was but a worldwide alert to what had been happening in the sciences for half a century. And these innovations in the sciences, particularly in modern physics, have effected changes in our intellectual outlook as well as in our cultural mood that must alter our answer to the question "Can science replace theology?"

It is a remarkable coincidence, I think, as I tried to point out in my *Realities of Faith*,³ that the new vision in science has provided an intellectual outlook that has become increasingly more open and hospitable to theological inquiry, and at the same time it has impelled disciplined and sensitive scientists to be more guarded in considering their own findings as resources for such inquiry or in relating scientific inquiry to theological ends.

There remain impressive spokesmen for the sciences who, despite the altered vision of science in our time, continue to appeal to science as a source of authority for religious and ethical judgments. Julian Huxley's *Religion without Revelation*, first published in 1928 and a revised edition in 1957,⁴ and his later works, pressing for a new formulation of religious directives based on the knowledge of the sciences, are perhaps the most assertive efforts of this kind. The late Canon Charles Raven, former vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, England, was a vigorous champion of a scientifically centered religious outlook in defiance of much of current theology. Professor Raven was more commonly known as a theologian and churchman; yet he was a serious student of the sciences and published a biographical study of John Ray, the seventeenth-century Cambridge botanist. His two volumes of Gifford Lectures, published in 1953,⁵ set forth a persuasive and comprehensive statement of his views on science and religion.

The most famous of the scientist-theologians in our day, of course, is the late French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose books *The Phenomenon of Man* and the *Divine Milieu* have had unprecedented popularity and influence among people of various vocations,

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religious affiliations, and nationalities.⁶ Although Teilhard's works were not intended to replace theology with science, they draw upon the full scope of scientific knowledge and understanding in giving interpretation to the spiritual dimension of man's existence and of natural phenomena.

For many, no doubt, his mystical rendering of scientific data actually serves to replace theology with science. For others, it provides a scientific basis for taking a fresh look at theology and for understanding it in a new light.

Alongside this persistent, or even resurgent, concern to distill from scientific findings new light on the religious life of man, or even a new religious vision of experience, one needs to set the caution of scientists who look upon scientific inquiry and its results more modestly, concerned that we do not make more of it than the facts of the situation warrant and, more important, that we are not misled into making of science a new messiah which in their judgment could make of science a false messiah.

The most significant change in science contributing to this new stance of caution with regard to religious or theological concerns has been in scientific method. In one sense, the procedure of inquiry has not changed. It is still a process of observation and reason, employing models with which to explore a designated area of problems. Only the models are not "picture models," as Professor I. T. Ramsey of Oxford University has put it; for what is being explored is not an order of nature presumed to be already known as a vast, cosmic machine, the understanding of which would seem to require only direct observation and description of visible processes. Rather, these models being employed in scientific inquiry are in the nature of "disclosure models"—formulas projected as one might shoot an arrow into the air hopefully, but never certain what the outcome will be. As one scientist put it, many formulas fail, some succeed; and when they do, it is as if a venture in faith had been realized.

What lies back of this tentative, almost fortuitous procedure in science is the scientist's awareness of the perplexity of data with which his inquiry is concerned, arising from the knowledge of relativity and quantum theory, and subsequent disclosures in nuclear science, and from the realization that the statistical measure now employed must more and more address itself to mass data, leaving much that arises in particular concrete occurrences, or that can so occur, uncalculated. In the face of this awareness of a mysterious universe that lends itself to highly complex occasions of disclosures, scientists, when they are

not just technicians, have become modest men, the most modest of modern men, one might say. Their projects are audacious, and the results of their experiments are breathtaking to the skilled as well as to the unskilled eye. Nevertheless they know that, despite their fantastic accomplishments, they move within a sphere of natural phenomena that both eludes and responds to their disciplined overtures. They are more adept at carrying through technical experimentation within a closely defined area of inquiry than at venturing upon ultimate or final judgments of natural law. Whereas Newton's age could readily cast its findings into a natural philosophy designed to describe with the precision of a vast machine, the orderly movements of the spheres, scientists of the present nuclear age recoil from such audacity, resistant even to affirming an ultimate order of nature, though their efforts may presuppose it, either out of habit and tradition or as "a vision of faith," as Einstein was quoted as saying. The accomplishments of modern nuclear science are such that one not disciplined in science may understandingly become absorbed in its miraculous undertakings; one may even become so impressed by the precision and magnitude of its accomplishments that one's absorption in its activities may lead to complete commitment to it as to gospel truth. Hence, one finds modern enthusiasts uttering the incantation, "science says," with the credulity of an evangelist chanting, "the bible says."

Understandable as these responses are, they do not concur with the sober judgment of scientists themselves, who take a more modest measure of their role and contribution to man's understanding of himself and human existence.

There is, of course, the possibility that religious thinkers will avail themselves of the new vision of science in ways that will inform their task and add new dimensions, as well as resources, to their understanding in pondering the meaning of man's existence. This may imply the replacement of theology by science; but then again it may not. It may instead imply their correlation. One sees such a venture being undertaken in the seminar now being projected at Meadville Theological School under the guidance of Professor Ralph Burhoe. As I read over the prospectus of that faculty seminar, which is concerned with developing a theological structure in the light of the sciences, I wished that he rather than I were making this presentation. For he undoubtedly would present issues and possibilities more pertinent to concerns of this centennial.

I have one misgiving about the Meadville project as announced.

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It clearly means to make science a normative source of the theological doctrines of Creation, God, Man, Good and Evil, Salvation, and the Church. And this could become but a sophisticated version of a scientific fundamentalism, content with asserting the evangelical refrain "Science says!" And this would be regrettable; for a theology of science that settles into a doctrinal formulation on the basis of existing scientific knowledge could become obsolescent before its systematic formulation is completed. For the mobility of scientific judgment is well known. Science is committed to continual advance in the formulation of its suppositions and findings. And it is intent on disproving what has been presupposed. As a working perspective, critically guiding or assessing the range and limits of our intellectual outlook, science is a long-beamed beacon that lights our way ahead illimitably far. As a dogma of man's nature and destiny it could make for another dated orthodoxy.

RELIGIOUS THINKING EMPLOYS SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE

I turn now to consider changes in religious thinking in this present era, affecting our answer to the question "Can science replace theology?" Before analyzing the changing situation insofar as religious thinking participates in the innovating circumstances of modern culture and in the new stage of the modern consciousness, it is important, I think, to recognize that certain aspects of this situation have not changed.

The passage from the liberal-modernist era to the present one, while marked by cataclysmic changes affecting both the response of the human psyche and our modes of thought, has not been one entirely of upheaval. In the midst of radical reversals and reactions, certain convictions and practices have persisted, carrying forward into this second stage of the modern consciousness responsible, critical judgments that continue to guide and to shape a sophisticated religious outlook.

For example, the science of biblical criticism, which became the most highly disciplined and technical form of inquiry in religious studies during the earlier liberal-modernist era, has continued unabated, despite cultural changes. The sacred texts of Scripture, long held to be authoritative in the West on questions about time and space, as well as on the emergence of man and of human history, have been relieved of their absolute and final claims in these critical spheres of thought. And the historic consequences of the critical examination of sacred texts have continued to speak to the modern mind. Within this disciplined view, biblical lore and legend, gospel his-

tory and communal witness, however much they may be valued for religious purposes, are not taken to be traditional documents in science, rivaling or challenging the findings or proposals of modern sciences. On questions pertaining to natural phenomena and the structural processes of existence, critically informed, modern people, within and outside the churches, heed the inquiries of the sciences.

Again, speaking of persisting, critical processes of thought in religious inquiry, studies in human behavior which were only in their infancy during the earlier liberal-modernist period have matured and widened their scope of inquiry, so that what was tentatively and experimentally explored as first steps in a religious psychology at the turn of the century has become a thriving, confident phase of the church's ministry in the present age.

Sociological ventures in understanding religion as a social process, which first took form as a serious aspect of religious inquiry about 1900, have evolved from an abstract, environmental study of religion and a lyrical, polemical social gospel to a highly disciplined, practically oriented inquiry into the ecology of religious institutions, their biases and sensibilities, and to a technical study of the church's role in the urban community.

Premonitions of liberal ministers of an earlier era which led them to find homiletic inspiration and pointed utterance in the poetry or narrative of a literary piece have flowered into serious and critical studies in theology and literature, theology and art, religion and culture.

The history of religions, arising initially from a feeling of universal altruism and benevolence toward other religions, has developed from the format of a travelogue, or a sight-seeing tour through various religious cultures, to specialized studies, commanding the attention and respect of linguistic and cultural anthropologists and evoking proposals of co-operative projects in exploring common areas of research.

This survey could go on, indicating or illustrating the way efforts begun in the earlier liberal modernist era, bent on encouraging critical, scientific inquiry in religious thought and experience, have persisted. Not only have they persisted, they have attained the stature of cultural disciplines, capable of enlisting the co-operative responses of other more established sciences and disciplines, and of contributing themselves in kind.

Thus when one views the modern religious scene, fearful of reactionary influences that have beset it and nostalgic for the days when the liberal voice was being heard, one would do well to ponder these persisting ventures in critical inquiry in faith and culture. For one

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will see that the currents of critical religious reflection, which began in that earlier liberal period, have deepened, not dried up. They have attained a more purposeful channeling of their "waters of change" and have thus gathered power along with precision in their effects.

REALITY'S COMPLEXITY FORCES FAITH BEYOND SCIENCE

But it would be a mistake for the liberal church to take consolation in this persisting liberal thrust of religious inquiry and remain oblivious to the radical changes that have occurred in this new stage of the modern consciousness. For this flowering of these earlier ventures, seeking the correlations of religious and scientific inquiry, has occurred within, and to some extent by reason of, a deepening cultural mood and outlook.

One way to focus our discussion of this aspect of the issue is to say that in our time complexity has come to be a formative notion in all areas of experience. This point was vividly made some years ago by E. G. Lee in his moving book, *Mass-Man and Religion*. Said Lee,

In his spiritual life mass-man must turn from his factual, spatial simplicities with their correlative myths to learn to live with complexity. It is the complex which is real and not the simple. . . . He [man] is surrounded by infinities that leap up out of facts; and he is faced by death, the surest fact of all, but one that somehow contains within itself all those other infinities. The infinities are real; the facts are empty and meaningless without them. Indeed it is this very emptiness, this blank shadow existence without the complete fullness of infinity, that cries aloud that something is missing. Man must live with the infinities that surround birth, marriage, and death. He must live not only with these, but with unnumbered other infinities also. He must attach himself to this vast complexity, for only this is real, all else without this is but a shadow or a blank.⁷

Now I submit that this statement catches the mood of modern inquiry and sets it in sharp contrast to the mood of inquiry that dominated the earlier modern period dating from Descartes. For in that earlier stage of the modern consciousness, the starting point of disciplined inquiry was that of clear and distinct ideas. Having arrived at a clear premise or affirmation, rational construction could then begin. And we have monuments of rational reflection from that period, the most formidable perhaps, though some would say the most pretentious, being that of the nineteenth-century philosopher Georg Hegel, whose systematic reflection, stemming from a clear and simple beginning, encompassed the whole of essence and existence.

When we acknowledge that complexity forms the basis and starting point of our inquiry, that we think out from deep involvement in a nexus of relationships which hold us in existence, we are immediately alerted to the fact that the word "reality" conveys a more profound and deeper context than can be expressed or formulated by reason. This is not to reject reason or to deprecate its role in the life of faith. On the contrary, given this basis of complexity, the concern for intelligibility in the exercise or affirmation of faith is made all the more insistent. Whatever is said to accentuate this important fact of our new situation, setting reality over reason, must not be allowed to obscure this concern for intelligibility in faith.

But intelligibility in faith is not to be equated with the complete rationality of faith. The concern for intelligibility in faith is a more modest recognition of the role of reason in religion. It assumes that, at best, we can aspire to but a margin of intelligibility in the face of depths of relationships which form the complexity of our existence.

Now if this principle of limitation is observed in the pursuit of intelligibility in faith, it would be my judgment that we can be free to pursue the intellectual task in religious inquiry with vigor and aggressiveness, employing the resources of philosophy, science, and the social sciences to extend our inquiry. The one thing we cannot afford to do is to lose sight of this judgment of reality over reason.

The persistence of this note of dissonance, setting our own clear intellectual formulations in juxtaposition with the enigma of existence, whose depth and complexity resist ready analysis or comprehension, is what compels the sensitive religious thinkers to give heed to such modes of discourse as art, poetry, and religious myth. These are not necessarily in conflict with science and discursive reason, though they may be. They may, however, be the very disciplines to supplement scientific and rational inquiry, to provide occasion and capacity to give a listening ear, as it were, to what is beyond immediate comprehension.

Insofar as one pursues this mode of awareness and response, one will understand what is intended in disciplined theological inquiry by the use of the phrase "revelatory events." This is a term that gives trouble to the liberal religious thinker; for it is suggestive of theological dogmas that yield no rights to human reason and that open the way for establishing authoritative methods in religious thought. But this is precisely the kind of situation in which the liberal method of religious inquiry is put to the test. If it retreats to a safer strategy of thought, employing only an appeal to philosophy or science, it

will do what liberal methods have historically done, to the loss of religious interpretation, namely, relinquish the responsibility to speak with discipline and discernment within a liberal idiom concerning the depth of existence conveyed in the mythical response.

The answer I have come to, then, is that science cannot replace theology in that phase of religious inquiry that addresses the ultimate, more elusive, and subtle dimensions of our existence, informing our purposes and destinies. Science is indispensable as a resource of criticism and perspective for theology in bringing discipline to its concern for intelligibility and relevance. And no theologian who is indifferent to its counsel and vision can speak relevantly, sensibly, or adequately to the religious concerns of modern man. But science is not an alternative to theology in the pursuit of its basic task; for the depth and range of inquiry to which the theologian must address himself is a dimension of man's meaning and experience toward which scientific inquiry is not oriented and for which, by virtue of its own disciplined and restricted method, it cannot adapt its inquiry. Insofar as he is attentive to the human ends of science, and to possible, ultimate, spiritual consequences of the technological drives of modern society, the scientist is alerted to the area of concern which haunts the theological task. And his ethical and religious sensibilities as a human being impel him to speak of these matters, if only to alert his fellowmen and fellow scientists to the urgency of these ultimate aspects of our lives and of his labors. In so doing, he is an ally of the theologian, not his competitor. And it must be said that the persistent expression of concern among sensitive scientists that this problem of the humane and spiritual end of man's labors, of their own labors, be seriously addressed is one of the theologian's most heartening, and, at the same time, demanding, incentives to do his work faithfully, and to do it well.

NOTES

1. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965).
2. John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965).
3. Bernard Meland, *Realities of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).
4. Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957).
5. Charles E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology*, 1st ser.: *Science and Religion*; 2d ser.: *Experience and Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953).
6. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), and *Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Both books are now available in paperback.
7. E. G. Lee, *Mass-Man and Religion* (New York: Hutchinson, 1947), p. 84.