

Humane Spirit—
Towards a Liberal Theology of
Resistance and Respect

*From Religious Pluralism in the Modern World,
Festschrift for John Hick's 90th birthday*

I

JOHN HICK HAS MADE ground-breaking contributions to many areas of theology and religious studies. Much attention has deservedly been given to his work in interfaith studies. Here I shall reflect on the some aspects of the liberal tradition in Christian theology, a tradition in which John's work continues to be important, a tradition currently out of fashion, but in my view vital for the future of Christian faith and community, for interfaith engagement, and for engagement with a wider society.

Faith comes in many forms. Its diversity is also its continuing strength. Currents of faith stream through cultures and civilizations. They are dammed and disappear underground. Often they reappear in unlikely guises. There are many sorts of faith—here we shall be concerned with Christian faith, and the specific contributions that liberal Christian faith has made, is making, and will make to the future of the churches and society.

There are a number of recent studies on the future of liberal Christianity. Sensibly they note the decline of liberal theology and liberal congregations, and the difficulties of effective renewal. This paper would not be possible without a considerable debt, conscious and unconscious,

to existing work. Surveying the roadblocks, we might try to suggest new routes through which liberal Christian presence may continue to make sustained contributions to the understanding and the service of the Gospel and humanity. Our paradigm case is Christianity, but an inclusive faith is always open to learn from engagement with people of other faiths, and none.

This paper is designed to reflect upon the substantial and complex reality of liberal Christian presence in the past and in the present, and to encourage its development through new currents of engagement in the future. The attempt to produce a “pure” liberal presence inevitably constitutes a rather attenuated expression of Christian faith. Liberal presence permeates Christian life, and is hugely influential even in unlikely places—readers who doubt this need only look at Augustine through the eyes of Eric Gregory. Our task here is to trace this powerful current and to suggest new ways of harnessing its continuing energy in the future.

As is well known, John Hick studied philosophy as a fairly conservative evangelical Christian, gradually developed more liberal perspectives, and became increasingly concerned with interfaith issues. In the theology of religions he has been a pioneer—indeed, it is ironic that many of his most severe critics in that area would probably not receive the attention that they currently enjoy without his earlier initiatives. His engagement with issues and people outside the churches has not been limited to intellectual issues—social issues and human rights have been in the centre of his concern at least since his arrival in Birmingham. He has been in every sense an immensely humane scholar, a characteristic not least exemplified in his constantly irenic responses to his often extremely abrasive critics. Though Hick has developed his own distinctive positions in theology, he has never made exclusive claims for his work. The much excoriated *The Myth of God Incarnate*, for example, reflects perspectives which differ and in some areas disagree with each other. In the serious search for truth, dialogue and argument are encouraged.

II

How can we benefit from the insights which the work of Hick and other liberal scholars have given us, and take this legacy forward? First we may recall the context in which the marginalizing of liberal theology has occurred—reaction against “the Enlightenment,” and “Enlightenment

rationality.” This critique is in itself in large measure a product of the critical rationality of the Enlightenment, a multi-faceted phenomenon which clearly had its limitations, explored by the Romantic movement, by Karl Barth, the radical orthodox tradition, and similar movements. Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Neuhaus, and John Milbank have been central to this reaction to Enlightenment. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Josef Ratzinger have once again become influential authorities, along with appeal to Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth. Academic theology has been paralleled by movements in the churches. In the Roman Catholic Church, the progress of Vatican II has been systematically dismantled. In Orthodox churches, there has been a solid reaction, e.g. in the WCC, against Western liberalism. In the Anglican Communion, the Covenant process, supported strongly by the senior clergy, breathes a very different spirit from that of the bishops of the previous era—Runcie, Montefiore, Jenkins, Robinson, and others. In American Protestant circles, conservative evangelicals have powerful influence, intellectual and economic, at home and abroad—not least in Africa.

There are reasons for this reaction to Enlightenment. The world has moved on since the eighteenth century. Defects in Enlightenment thought have been identified. The validity of alternative visions had been recognized. We shall not attempt a comprehensive response to this critique here, though we shall have occasion to examine some specific issues. In any event, a liberal perspective such as I espouse attempts to learn from criticism as well as from commendation. The major thrust of this book is a constructive exploration and development of liberal theology over a very broad field. I am concerned to demonstrate that the liberal project is not vulnerable to sophisticated demolition based on any narrow focus of study. It is a project with widely spread roots, and, as such, it can safely withstand serendipitous attack from narrow standpoints.

Given the strong position of anti-Enlightenment theologies in prestigious university departments, it might seem that liberal theology is obviously moribund, and that is the end of a conversation. However, as has been forcefully pointed out, notably by Gary Dorrien and Philip Clayton in the United States, there is a great deal of imaginative and creative liberal theology in America today—in the work of the successors of Cobb and Hick, Hodgson, Tracy, and others. I want to draw equal attention here, in no particular order, to a previous generation of phenomenally gifted liberal scholars, for example Lietzmann, von Soden and von Campenhausen, Ebeling and Käsemann in Germany, Ronald

Gregor Smith and the Baillies in Scotland, Lampe and the Cambridge theologians of the Sixties, the Christian Realists in the United States, and Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Tracy in the Catholic world. Here is a galaxy of people who were both devout Christians and immensely erudite scholars, each with distinctive perspectives, yet each committed to a humane, liberal Christian vision. This is the broad base on which each generation of liberal Christians stands, from which it continues to draw inspiration and to move ahead. This was no narrow liberalism. These scholars were able to draw on writers who espoused different positions. Their interests overlapped with those of writers who straddled different schools of thought—Bonhoeffer is a classic case. They listened, they argued, and they did not neglect the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of their faith. When one compares the professional achievement and expertise of this array of great scholars from different academic and church traditions with the currently fashionable despisers of Enlightenment, it is hard to conclude that liberal theology has been refuted.

Citation of authority is never enough. The wisdom of the past may simply have been rendered obsolete—though oddly enough, theologians who ignore much of the past two hundred years of academic scholarship are often those who stress most vigorously the importance of tradition. It seems that authentic tradition stops with Aquinas, or at least with Calvin. It is as though the Holy Spirit took early retirement around 1300 AD, and certainly would never be associated with any thought which might have been influenced by the *proton pseudos* of all modern thought, Immanuel Kant.

III

Liberal Christianity is often portrayed as a rather shallow form of theology and spirituality pursued by a fringe collection of theological amateurs. I turn to just a couple of particular examples of the strength of the liberal tradition, beginning with my first graduate supervisor, Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen.¹ Born in 1903 on the family estate in East Prussia, he was banished to Siberia in 1919, escaped to Marburg when his father was shot by the Bolsheviks, and became a student of von Soden, von Schubert, and Lietzmann. Refusing to join the Nazi party he was disqualified from a number of chair appointments in the 1930s, joined

1. Slenczka, ed., *Die "Murren" des Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen*.

the Confessing Church in 1935, spent the war as a lance-corporal in Czechoslovakia, and was elected Rector of the University of Heidelberg in 1947. I was his student in 1966–68. Campenhausen was and remained a devout Lutheran, and preached regularly in the University Church, the Peterskirche. He wrote books on Ambrose of Milan, on martyrdom in the early church (a topic not without resonance in the Germany of the 1930s), on ecclesial power and spiritual authority in the early church, on the formation of the Christian Bible, on the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, on the church fathers, on humour and theological jokes—he regarded cheerfulness as a true Christian virtue—and on countless topics in early church thought. Demanding but unfailingly kind and hospitable to his students, Campenhausen was one of the last examples of that great scholarly tradition which knew the patristic writings intimately in their original languages and within the thick culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. Entirely absorbed in Enlightenment critical procedures, he was also steeped in the theology and spirituality of Martin Luther.

In England I detect a very similar perspective in the work of Geoffrey Lampe, a senior colleague in Cambridge till his tragic early death in 1980.² Lampe had a curiously similar shadow cast over him by war. In 1914 his German father returned from Brighton to Germany and was killed in the war. Lampe was educated in Devon and Oxford, won an Military Cross in the 1939–45 war, and became a professor in Birmingham (a predecessor of John Hick and a Pro-Vice Chancellor) and in Cambridge. Also a distinguished patristic scholar, he edited the definitive Patristic Greek Lexicon, wrote on baptism in the early church, on the Holy Spirit and on the church, and spent much time as a Cambridge University representative on the General Synod of the Church of England, during which he campaigned tirelessly for the ordination of women. Lampe was a large man with an equally large spirit, tolerant to a fault and immensely generous. Cambridge at that time was fortunate to have a number of impressive liberal Christian scholars. Maurice Wiles, Hugh Montefiore, John Robinson, Arthur Peacocke, Don Cupitt, and John Hick contributed greatly to the theological discussion. Impressive too, but scarcely acknowledged, was Norman Pittenger, an American transplanted to Cambridge, and the author of numerous solid liberal works

2. Moule, ed., *G. W. H. Lampe, A Memoir by Friends*.

on Christology and other central doctrinal themes. Pittenger wrote in support of gay Christians long before it became respectable to do so.

IV

In contrast with the above, here is a classic example of the tensions involved in debate about liberal Christian faith—attitudes to human rights. Liberal perspectives in theology and politics have frequently been attacked in modern thought, famously by Pius IX and John Henry Newman. Human rights has become for many people in the last decades a central concept for ethical reflection. The churches have maintained a seriously ambivalent attitude to human rights, in theory and in practice. On the other hand, where the language, culture, and enactment of human rights have been absent, oppression and even atrocity flourish. The adoption of democratic procedures, which might be expected to encourage human rights action, has not always done so—conservative majorities in church and society have sometimes overturned progress already made. It is good to recall that John Hick was a very active supporter of action against racial discrimination during his tenure of the Birmingham Chair and in Claremont.

In recent years I have written extensively on human rights, in one project together with another Claremont scholar, Richard Amesbury,³ and on hospitality as a path to extending human rights into a thick culture. Human rights have of course been much criticized, most recently by Samuel Moyn,⁴ who has argued that rights are a cultural concept of very recent origin, and will soon be succeeded by other cultural paradigms. Hospitality was famously critiqued by Derrida as impossible to actualize. I am still persuaded of the crucial relevance of an impossible ideal, provided that it can be embedded in specific and particular locations. In this there is encouragement in Amartya Sen's recent reflection on human rights and global imperatives,⁵ where he defends both the continuing seminal importance of human rights and the need to instantiate them in particular cultures. Conversations in various parts of the world suggest that churches are often still highly suspicious of the work of human rights

3. Amesbury and Newlands, *Faith and Human Rights*; Newlands, *Christ and Human Rights*; Newlands and A. Smith, *Hospitable God- the Transformative Dream*.

4. Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*.

5. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

commissions. This often reflects sensitivities about their own structures of power and control, not least on issues of gender and sexuality.

It is a strength of progressive traditions that they welcome reasoned critique and conversation. In his challenging essay, *Against Human Rights*, John Milbank⁶ argues robustly against liberal notions of human rights. In doing so, he seeks to refute various arguments recently advanced by Jennifer Herdt and Nicholas Wolterstorff about subjective rights. He argues that subjective rights were not central to medieval notions of *ius*. They could be alienated and reconciled with authoritarian control of society, both in medieval and in Enlightenment polities. Where they were of value, the value is derivative from Christian theological notions and will not exist without the Christian context. Much more promising is a development of Plato's concept of right order. We may readily agree that all notions of rights could be and were exploited in feudal society, and also by the absolute monarchs of the eighteenth century. Jonathan Israel in particular has underlined the limited nature of what he terms "the moderate Enlightenment." We may also agree that liberal traditions were not the exclusive source of movement on rights issues in the last three hundred years. Yet to privilege a highly exclusive interpretation of Christianity, while eschewing all interaction with a secular society, and failing to recognise the constructive aspects of secularization, can hardly be seen as a step forward. To deny the significant positive role of liberal Christian faith on the basis of an argument from a very narrow area of interpretation of medieval praxis is, at best, a doubtful strategy.

John Milbank sharpens his case by maintaining of Wolterstorff on justice that, "[r]eally he is involved in a common Christian-American doublethink."⁷ The argument is developed with a polemical assessment of the Franciscan theological tradition, from Bonaventure, through Scotus, to Ockham. "This led them into fantastic depths of double hypocrisy."⁸ The stakes are doubled throughout. Liberalism is the deeply flawed progeny of a deeply flawed nominalism. "A utilitarian 'do-gooding' is an eventual upshot of the Franciscan approach."⁹ We are therefore forced to seek for "an alternative modernity."

6. Milbank, *Against Human Rights*.

7. *Ibid.*, 24.

8. *Ibid.*, 29.

9. *Ibid.*, 38.

How are we to assess this brilliant piece of characteristic radical orthodox writing? It is of the essence of liberal theology that it should be open to challenge and be subject to reassessment and change. Liberalism values tradition, but it values it as a tradition of disruption as well as continuity. Liberal thought is certainly indebted to Enlightenment—Schleiermacher is the archetypal, liberal Christian—and is therefore committed to a critical assessment of the Enlightenment's failures.

Liberal Christian faith is built on much more than particular philosophical trends. It is built on a broad band of appropriation of revelation, reason, and experience stretching back to the early church. It is built on the interpretation of Scripture, on critical rationality, on the experience, shared by millions of Christians through the ages, of the presence of God in Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit within Christian community. It is ecumenical and emancipatory. Liberal Christian faith is grounded in trust that God is equally near to every generation, in times of flourishing and of suffering. God has indeed not opted for early retirement around 1300 AD, and we expect to revise our understanding of God as we are led to deeper understanding in the future. That is why faith's commitments are both serious in their engagement and yet provisional in their formulation. Some certainties must await the eschaton.

V

Liberal faith need not be unexciting. It will be expressed differently in different religions.¹⁰ In a Christian context, it may be liberal evangelical, liberal catholic, or somewhere between these in its liturgical expression. Far from being dryly rational, it may be conceived as a theology of the Spirit. It will express humility but will also express confidence. In the context of a Christian theology, it will be Christomorphic, a theology of resistance which opposes firmly whatever is not Christlike. It will be a theology of respect, which values the dignity of all human beings equally. It will be a theology of risk, which engages with serious issues in solidarity and identification.

Liberal faith is committed to the church, as a centre of worship and pastoral care. But it does not confuse the church with the kingdom of God, and is aware of the shortcomings of the church throughout the ages. It has no brief for ecclesial triumphalism, and for prejudice confused with

10. Siddiqui, ed., *Islam*, and Siddiqui, "Between God's Mercy and God's law."

obedience to God. Liberal faith is committed to dialogue and engagement with people of other religious faiths or none. It is always open to learn, but not to abandon the contribution which it brings to the dialogue. It can assimilate neither with atheism on the one hand nor religious fundamentalism on the other. It remains committed to historical and philosophical enquiry, and cannot revert to premodern perspectives. This does not mean that it cannot learn from other perspectives, notably non-Western perspectives. It serves as a community of inspiration and support to fellow liberal Christians, and is there as dialogue with specific contributions to bring to the table. Humanism is a term from a valuable tradition of faith. I prefer to speak of humane Christianity, the fruit of a humane spirit which brings faith to the service of a wider humanity, a spirit which depends on the existing presence of the Spirit of God. This liberal spirit may be seen one of the currents of the spirit of Christlikeness which flow through human history and are the bearers of surprise and resurrection, the source of unlimited energy and unlimited love.

I have mentioned non-Western perspectives. The Abrahamic tradition is important, and, particularly since 9/11, there has been a concerted effort in Europe and the United States to focus on a dialogue between Christianity and Islam, and to a lesser extent with Judaism. But it must be borne in mind that much of the world's population has no contact with the Abrahamic traditions, which can also be regarded as the product of a particular cultural development in a limited geographical environment. Hundreds of millions of people, equally valuable human beings in the sight of God, are steeped in traditions of Eastern religions. And there are many millions who have simply no belief in any transcendent source of being. Despite appearances, there may be more atheists in the East than in the West.

These are highly general notions. Most of the time liberal Christians are there to play their part in local community, and, where possible, in global solidarity, with individual people: a modest witness to the incarnate love of God delivered into human hands. And they bring this faith into their social and professional lives, without labels or manifestos, as an integral part of their understanding of discipleship.

A note of caution. Liberal Christianity has clearly not always been effective. This has, on occasion, occurred because of inherent limitations, sometimes arrogance, triumphalism and a variety of fundamentalism among liberal Christians themselves. It has also been the case that illiberal views have prevailed, the winners have written the master narrative,

and the truly “Left Behind” have sunk into voiceless anonymity. Years later, many of the injustices have been rectified, not without a sense of satisfaction. Yet we should not forget the innumerable human beings whose lives have been wrecked while institutions have gone down blind alleys or waited for a process of “discernment” to take place. Sometimes the “left behind” have developed the diplomatic agility and the toughness required to resist conformity and to influence Christian thought and action. But in Christian community, toughness should not be the necessary criterion for respect and affirmation. Liberalism may have its difficulties: its absence often makes space for tolerance of the intolerable.

Hospitable Spirit, Holy Spirit. In the face of the rise of conservative thought and practice in the twenty-first century, and the huge media attention which such views often generate, it is sometimes good to remind ourselves of the immense richness of liberal perspectives, an encouragement to renaissance and reconstruction and of the obstacles to this. Here is a cascade of concepts which may remind us that progressive thinking in theology, in the academy, and in the world religions is not quite dead and that it resurfaces, often in unexpected forms.

Though among the churches ecumenical effort has almost vanished in recent decades, the vision of unforced consensus and mutual recognition is still there, an aspiration for a future implementation. Despite continuing intolerance, notions of constructive rather than destructive conflict have been established and will not go away. In theology, concepts which have led churches to turn in upon themselves, over against others, are, at least on occasion, open to reasoned argument. The development of new themes—the multiple identities of God, theological humanism, and the taking up older notions such as the form of Christ in the world, signal a continuing liberal theology of resistance and respect. Compassion and flexibility, rather than control and the competitive exercise of power, are persistent themes in theology.

The turn to art and film, literature and music, long banished to the sidelines of theology, and the development of comparative theology, can be seen as enlarging rather than diluting fidelity to long standing traditions. Warhol, Cage, Updike may point to creative interruption in the traditions, alongside Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. Anxious as they were to make their contributions to contemporary communities, the latter might well have turned to *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, had these been available to them. The post-foundational and the meta-modern alert us to the less than obvious. The religious and the secular are not always

in complete antithesis, in a conceptuality which can match fluidity, liquid concepts, and structures with rigour and precision. So often striving for a pure religious vision falls into an unreflective framework of deeply secular culture. Postcolonial reflection has re-imagined the practice of hospitality without being patronising, while learning that the reverse of the colonial is not always sufficient for substantial development. Good theology is continuing conversation rather than imposition. A thick culture of hospitality intensifying may begin to replace confrontation, in a medium where conflict is often endemic. Typical of the rethinking of traditional tensions is Richard Kearney, with his notion of Anatheism: “The sacramental moment of anatheism is when finally the hyphen is restored between the sacred and the secular.”¹¹

I make no apology for this long list. Deeply conservative religion is highly vocal, not only in the United States, where it is difficult to imagine the huge influence of such books as the *Left Behind* series, but in Africa and in Asia. In this context, it is important to foster religious inclusion, and varieties of religious inclusion. Inclusion and pluralism may not always be exclusive alternatives. This is a task which will require the efforts of more than the theological professionals alone. It is still unfortunately worth commenting that the progressive is not inevitably the antithesis of the evangelical. The impressive development of evangelical programmes on social justice issues is a reminder of the significant role of this movement. Despite the difficulties, real and apparent, it is manifestly odd to be enthusiastic about dialogue with exotic religions while avoiding engagement nearer home.

For Christianity, there is a huge challenge and opportunity for progressive Christian influence through professions other than theology. Liberal Christian lawyers can speak authoritatively about the potential for Christian influence on legal issues, etc. Medical ethics develops a complexity which has come with increasingly complex medicine, and is another area, vital to maximizing human capability, where religious input may be important, and where a liberal contribution is crucial. Christian education, seriously developed in the USA, often remains critically weak in the UK—faith does not mature simply through osmosis. At the same time, this only underlines the need to foster faith and action through liberal Christian preaching and worship—an increasingly vulnerable gap—the need for liberal theology and spirituality to encourage faith.

11. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 153.

Progressive spirituality need not be an exercise in reductionism. Faith does not flourish by gathering around the aspidastra to utter vacuous platitudes. Much professional theology is increasingly specialised and opaque to non-specialists. One avenue for such interaction might be a nexus of Church, Academy and Human Rights. Such a project, a Humanitarian Theology persisting with the relevance of an impossible ideal, might be one way of taking forward the progressive religious culture into the future.

In the writings of a white Western Christian it is unsurprising that liberal thought should reflect its cultural context. But it should be stressed that the liberal notes of compassion and understanding which faith inspires need not always be expressed in a Western context. In the lives and actions of non-Western Christians there are important lessons to be learned from the absence of Eurocentric and North American pre-occupations, not least around the Pacific Ocean.¹² But it is not for this writer to presume to speak for progressive Christians who can speak eloquently for themselves. However we envisage the development of liberal theology, it is always essential to find fresh ways of continuing to remain aware, and draw strength from, the sense that the God of compassion and unconditional love is the source and goal of our lives. Human life is, as David Kelsey¹³ has strikingly put it, an eccentric existence, centred in God the incarnation of humane spirit, the source of all hospitality and humane action.

This brings me back to the life and work of John Hick at 90. John would be the last person to want liberal Christians to be minor clones of himself. Yet he has been an inspiring, unfailingly generous, and modest example to liberal faith for many people of different faiths and none. More, we cannot ask: *multos felices annos*.

12. Pearson, ed. *Faith in a Hyphen: Cross-cultural Theologies Down Under*.

13. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*.