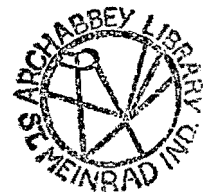


TOWARD A CLEARER DEFINITION OF LIBERALISM  
AND  
ITS ORIGINS

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
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It is important that we form a true picture of the events leading up to Liberalism so as not to judge past events in the light of present conditions. Just as in studying the Fathers we must go to the Fathers, so in unfolding the origins of Liberalism we must be influenced by the circumstances as they were seen by the eyes of the Middle Ages.

As we turn back the pages of History and attempt to understand the past so as to give us light for the present, our eyes reflect on the various circumstances that made history as we know it today. Through the Bible, the Great History Book, we look at the good that was omnipresent in the garden of Paradise, in persons, in things; we see all as it should be, all subject to the divine creator, all reflecting His goodness.

Telescoping history we know that the above was the roots of Christianity, yet we see at the same time evil, the parasite, as never quite able to root out the good. There is Cain and Abel, Caiphas and Christ. Holy Mother Church has encountered and has had to struggle against overwhelming opposition and attack ever since; Primitive Catholicism withstood the persecutions, the heresies of Gnosticism and Arianism. In the meantime, the tree grew and spread its branches of Life, until, in the sixth century, one idea predominated; that idea was God. It was only after the twelfth century that man himself stepped away from the most important Being of his life, his creator.

Into this God-Centered life there broke out what is

called the Renaissance. During this period men revived their interest and study of classical Greek pagan literature and art. Nevertheless, man did not deny the supernatural idea of God, but this period was the occasion for such a disintegration. Along with the pagan literature their necessarily came the concept of Liberalism.

Liberalism is an almost limitless subject. It has theological, philosophical, political, social, cultural, literary and other aspects. We can only attempt to present a clear definition of Liberalism and its origins.

Liberalism is a well-used word in the world today. It has a close connotation to freedom but not all agree that freedom should be for all. As for the word itself, "No word has been subjected to more bizarre uses than the word Liberalism"(1), "No word, not even Christianity or Socialism, is used to cover a greater or more contradictory variety of thought and action than Liberalism ."(2) Liberalism is often described as Conservatism, especially in the United States is it used to describe the political status of some of our government officials. But the term is more frequently associated with the naturalist philosophers, centering around Dewey, for Liberalism has often meant a denial of any spiritual quality in man.

Liberalism is a term, then, which means different things to different people. The term itself is an abstraction, a generalization, and as such it creates a difficulty when

applied to a concrete situation or concrete age. The reader "must be careful not to read his own or his age's understanding of a work back into the minds of men using the same word three or four generations ago." (3) The word was apparently first used in 1811 in Spain to indicate the proponents of a constitution modeled after the French Constitution of 1791. Liberalism took on an anticlerical connotation because this constitution opposed the Catholic religion of the old regime. The term, as used in Italy and England soon after, took on the meaning of freedom from constraint which ultimately was an attempt to break with authority.

By eliminating, thus, what the word only occasionally means, we can arrive at a definition which will enumerate the elements with which it is most frequently associated.

Liberalism is not a set of beliefs which essentially remain unchanged throughout the centuries, but it is evident that this can be said of most isms. Nor is it a theory of liberty, though it is often construed as such from the phrase Liberal Party. To the contrary, liberty and Liberalism are often construed to mean freedom from political, ecclesiastical, social or economic control (4). At other times, Liberalism is concerned with a concept of life that is humane and benevolent at the core.

Therefore, Liberalism should not, like so many other isms, be condemned outright as being evil at the core or to the core. On the other hand, it is not correct to equate Liberalism with

tolerance. Eugene Lyons has described the Liberals as "notoriously illiberal, intellectually parsimonious and emotionally conservative in anything affecting their favorite preconceptions and misconceptions." (5) This point is brought out affectively when we consider that Liberalism always worked in close logical harmony with the various nonestablished religions, being logically hostile to Catholicism, Anglicanism and Lutheranism.

The above attests to the two main senses that are applied to Liberalism. In its world-wide general usage it is identified with generosity of spirit or liberality of mind, but on the other hand it is a precisely defined and somewhat rigidly held body of doctrine, a secular religion, though from the Catholic point of view it could not possibly be called a religion properly.

The former is the generally accepted concept; we by nature desire freedom but it is precisely this reason why the latter philosophy cannot be justly held. We have the natural law; this is but a obvious sign of the eternal law and just as we must obey the Supreme Authority so we must obey all authority. To the contrary, sectarian Liberalism has consistently opposed the established government; has consistently inveighed against authority of any kind. It has stood for the rejection of authority in both Church and State.

We can now present a precise definition of Liberalism,

incorporating into this definition the elements that have stamped their impression on the intellectual minds of the world.

Cardinal Newman, who was "the greatest enemy modern Liberalism has ever had to meet...because Liberalism was the enemy of revelation"(6), states what he understands by Liberalism:

Now by Liberalism I mean false liberty of thought, or the exercise of thought upon matters, in which, from the constitution of the human mind, thought cannot be brought to any successful issue, and therefore is out of place. Among such matters are first principles of whatever kind; and of these the most sacred and momentous are especially to be reckoned the truths of Revelation. Liberalism, then, is the mistake of subjecting to human judgement those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it, and of claiming to determine on intrinsic grounds the truth and value of propositions which rest for their reception simply on the external authority of the Divine Word.(7) (This definition applies to ecclesiastical as well as anti-ecclesiastical Liberalism. This division of two principle types is a branch of sectarian Liberalism and will be treated at greater length as we examine the origins of Liberalism.)

Though it can be rightfully argued that Newman is emphasizing the Church's stand on Liberalism, yet the definition can be potentially applied to Liberalism as a political and economic philosophy for in truth there should be no separation of Church and State. God is creator of both, God gave authority to the rulers of both. But as we said in the opening paragraph, the forces of evil are everlastingly working against the greater force of good.

Having strived to pin-point the meaning of the term Liberalism let us examine the forces that were at work from

seventeenth century onward.

Liberalism arose as a result of Individualism which has its roots deep in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.. It sought to discover a basis for individual freedom which would free man from all social constraint. Under Liberalism the individual became of primary and the social of secondary importance.

Intellectual liberalism dictated that man was free to study, without caution, the pagan classics. This Liberalism became the momentum which pushed forth the notion and paved the way for Liberalism in regard to morality and religion. Moral Liberalism gave man freedom to do as he pleased, to refuse to recognize a law which regulates the actions of men. Religious Liberalism refused to recognize authority in religion and tried to give man the right of private interpretation of Scriptures. Added to this so-called freedom, the Protestant Revolt, it is now seen, made a great depression of the intellectual minds of men from the seventeenth century onward.

By the middle of the seventeenth century the idea of anything supernatural was overthrown. The world, as seen through the senses, became the truth for many men. Anything beyond the sensuous world was denied existence. Man placed sense and existence in a category of its own. The claim was that anything which could not be seen did not exist.

Liberalism continued in its spread in that it eventually



led to politics and economics. After men disregarded the authority which regulated their personal lives, so too, they disregarded the authority which governed their countries. And finally, Liberalism began to invade the economic life of man with the coming of the Industrial Revolution (England, 1760).

Besides Individualism, Liberalism was a direct offspring of Humanism and the Reformation of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Also it was further developed by the philosophers of England, Locke and Hume; of Germany, Leibniz and Kant. But Mme. Necker and her daughter Mme. de Staël (French writer) were the connecting link between the free-thinking elements before and after the French Revolution (1789) and the center of modern Liberal movement in France and Switzerland. From this drawing-room beginning, which cannot really be properly called a beginning for Liberal tendencies have been and still are coeval with the human race long before 1789, the paths run in all directions at once.

For purposes of a over-all presentation of the origins of Liberalism we must further divide sectarian Liberalism into two principles types (9): Anti-ecclesiastical and ecclesiastical Liberalism. The former can be further divided into its seven branches: (1) drawing-room Liberalism of Mme. Staël and the doctrinaire Liberalism introduced by Guizot of France (1790). (2) The Liberal Party of Radicals (1810) had progressive modern ideas. (3) The Liberal Democrats of 1914 had progressive ideas also. They wanted to make the masses of the common people the

deciding factor in public affairs, views common to the Socialists (1850 onward). The latter, Catholic Liberalism, aimed at regulating the relations of the Church and State, in accordance with the Liberal principles expounded by Benjamin Constant (France, 1800). Gallicanism, which was defended by Lacordaire and Montalembert, was another type and originated about 1815. Jansenism aimed at certain reforms in ecclesiastical doctrine and discipline in accordance with the anti-ecclesiastical liberal Protestant and atheistical theory or, as it is now called, Modernism.

But for a more historical examination of Liberalism, let us trace its steps before the time it started to really walk, before the Industrial Revolution.

Before this time, in France, relics of feudalism were being destroyed and along with them the strict liberties that men possessed because of their particular occupation. The prototype of the modern bourgeois emerged and because his wealth was in movable goods, money, he tended to be against the privileged class whose roots were in the soil. He had a general opposition against clerical and secular power. Also a new concept of liberty emerged along with this opposition.

The bourgeois was a free man, not tied to the soil. The individual rather than the social became the dominant idea. He protested against specific restraints that hampered his struggle for economic security and social recognition. In this sense, Liberalism was amoral but sometimes, as we shall see,

it fought good fights for good causes; sometimes it fought for vicious objectives; always it fought for itself.

Religious authority was more directly attacked. The Liberal rebelled often against political authority but, in essence, the Liberal used the State to crush the Church. The Protestant Revolt and Luther were the signs of what had emerged in the seventeenth century. Because of the Protestant Revolt, the individual became his own priest; the Liberal goal was being achieved: complete emancipation from ecclesiastical authority. Further, because of the protestant movement, Church land was confiscated, breaking up a large control of property. The market economy developed, also this was a big step in the direction of capitalistic agriculture. Finally, another result of the revolt was the creation of the absolute state: Nationalism; "It would be the State and not the Church that controls society and determines the condition under which men should live." (10) The later Intellectual Revolution freed even the mind from philosophical and theological tradition. Descartes helped to make each man his own authority, while in the scientific field Empiricism was ideally suited to the Liberal: it made nature the sole authority.

In England, the Revolution of 1688 resulted in the Bill of Rights. Personal freedom was enlarged; the executive's functions were limited. Their natural law, as summed up by George Sabine included:

the innate right of every man to a minimum of

political privileges, the doctrine of consent by participation in the choice of representatives, the justification of law and government as a protection of individual rights, and the limitation of every branch of government under the sovereign power of the people secured by a written list of inalienable rights. (11)

John Locke best expresses in his philosophy the results of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Locke, who History calls the Philosopher of the Revolution, has defined, in his theories, the essential outline of Liberal doctrine for the next centuries. He looked on society as not really a society but rather an aggregate of individuals united only by geographic proximity and by the desire of each to secure his and his property from attack by his neighbors. By the beginning of the eighteenth century Liberalism in England had contained the same essentials as that of France. The Liberal had freed himself from the authority of the Church and the arbitrary interference of the State. There was but a limited toleration against the Church and a political doctrine of natural rights against the State. Now we must look to its further growth after having attained the essentials for its survival.

We note that up to the eighteenth century Liberalism was still not on solid ground. It had grown to full stature but still centered centered itself around the points of origin, England and France. True, it had spread to the European Continent but we see that now in the eighteenth century it

crept even more into the religious, political and economical life. We find that it makes its entrance into America also. In fact, Liberal practice, it will be seen, culminated in the American revolution as well as the French revolution. The changes in land tenure known as the enclosure movement, with its accompanying agricultural revolution, were prerequisites for the development of capitalistic farming and the ultimate dissolution of the Social Order grounded on those who had their roots in the soil. Though this is the normal situation in America today, i.e., the listing of property (land) as a market commodity, yet at that time it was a revolutionary move and at the same time a Liberal victory because the Liberal Order was fully attained only when everything - land, labor, property, etc. - was concerned with movable goods, money. A likewise victory was the industrial mode of living caused by the enclosure movement; Since land passed into the hands of the capitalist farmer and families were uprooted from the land, they were forced to seek their means of livelihood in the industrial market.

In France, Turgot (French statesman) formulated a program that would have created a Liberal social order and, in time, give the middle man a measure of political power. But, as I stated previously, France (nor Turgot) had the power to accomplish this task. Ruggiero (Italian Liberal writer) states this situation in this statement:

This was the period at which the struggle of the poorer rustic population against the bourgeois Liberalism first began; that Liberalism which, under color of emancipating all citizens, really advanced the interest of property owners, and, while bestowing on the rest an empty form of liberty, left them actually at the mercy of the rich. (12)

That this would not <sup>lead</sup> to a true social order is now apparent.

During this same period, on the Continent, rational philosophy, though not concerned directly with Liberalism, yet an important aspect, created a weapon for the Liberal victory. The philosophers secularized the human spirit with their fundamental principle being reliance upon human understanding, unbounded faith in reason, which is proclaimed self-sufficient and the final arbiter in all things; "In the name of reason the leaders of the movement waged a relentless warfare against...all authority, in Church, State, Society, morals, which they look upon as tyranny of thought, government, social relation and conduct." (13) Just as Newton's law of gravity explained the harmony in the universe, the Liberal thinkers discovered that self-interest, self-reason, was the human law of gravity.

A further look into the Anglo-Saxon history sees Edmund Burke and Adam Smith as best summing up the Liberal thought of these people. Burke's work, Thoughts and Details on Scarcity presents the essentials of Liberal thought on another phase of society: that of ethics' relationship to business. Leo XIII, in his encyclical Rerum Novarum, had to fight against those very evils that were making their entrance into the working world then and are still not ready to make a very necessary

exit. Burke thought that the State should stand aside so that the middle class can have elbow room for achieving prosperity; that property has a natural right to rule and that "labor is a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand." (14) He was thus giving the opposite view of every admonition of Leo's encyclical. Burke especially eludes to one opposing essential element that is also manifested in all Liberal creeds: poverty is the decree of Providence and not the fault of the employer. God is pleased to punish the poor and reward the rich.

Adam Smith's statement of Liberal theory is similar to Burke's but different in one aspect which justifies its mention here. Smith's Wealth of Nations advocated that each man follow his self-interest in order to promote his own happiness but, as a moral being, self-interest should not degenerate into a war of all against all. We can see here the overtones of economics soon to be the natural law.

To present an insight into German Liberalism at that time I have chosen William Humboldt who expresses the general Liberal influence there. He is concerned with political rather than economic affairs of the individual man but the argument syllogizes to the same conclusion: the State is not to interfere with the individual's self-interest.

But to sum up Liberalism just before it made its debut into the nineteenth century let us view it from the two separate climaxes that give us the Liberal theory of Europe and

America at the end of the eighteenth century: the French and American Revolution (16) Neill states it this way:

Whereas the American Revolution was an expression of Anglo-Saxon Liberalism, the French Revolution (1789-1799) was an expression of the moral doctrinaire continental brand of Liberal Theory.

Just the word revolution, an overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler, asserts the dominate force of Liberalism on American and French thought.

In America two revolutionary groups dominated the times, the Moderates under Washington who, history attests, sought self-government but a type that would protect men of property from the envious masses below as well as from a tyrannical King above; the Radicals, associated with Patrick Henry, who believed that property owners needed a voice in politics and less control by government, by government which tends to control.

You and I both know that the Constitution was a victory for the moderate Liberals for it set up a government strong enough to protect men and property against foreign powers and against each other. We also know the freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights which protects us from the abuses of governmental authority. Since we should be so familiar with the Constitution, for by it we see the Liberal victory contained there-in, let us project our attention on the French Revolution of which we are probably less familiar. This revolution drew together all the aspects of continental Liberalism and transposed them into the nineteenth century. The state became a



collection of sovereign individuals, Church lands were confiscated and put into the market; after being sold it could be held in absolute ownership. Just the State and individuals existed and laissez-faire could do nothing but evolve into the concept that the State must care for all its citizens; a familiar cycle evolved: the rich win over the poor. Here the feudal regime dissolved into the interest of Individualism and liberty, putting the bourgeois into power and excluding the masses by a property qualification. As Liberalism enters into maturity we observe other certain and constant tendencies that separates the essential core of Liberalism from its accidental features. Besides being closely associated with the bourgeois, Liberalism and Capitalism, we saw, are closely interlocked systems. Likewise certain types of Protestantism go hand in hand with Liberalism. Also other important trademarks must be restated. Liberalism showed a strong respect for property rights, at least in regard to State property and the property of the bourgeois. More often property rights were respected over human rights. The Liberal was empirical and more or less skeptical-minded. Newman called their principles anti-dogmatic (18). Another constant note was its full trust in the goodness of the individual in accordance with his rationality, so much so that they made intelligence the core of life and progress the end of life, though that progress was measured by the advancing limitation of authority and a increase in one's stock

of individual freedoms. Last and really not the least, the Liberal favored any type of change, putting their faith in progress and thinking that, in this manner, they could attain satisfaction where before dissatisfaction was prevalent.

In conclusion, permit me to emphasize, before I summarize this paper, the expressions of some on what our attitude must be toward Liberalism.

In this regard Daniel-Rops states:

Liberalism can be credited with several happy results; by developing the spirit of initiative it contributed not a little to that praiseworthy advance in technical achievement...but it remains none the less that it has eliminated from the general conduct of life the very principle of morality. (19)

Leo XIII, pointing out the evils of the 1800's, stated that man sought "no help from Liberalism...(because it) had proved that it was utterly unable to solve the social problem aright."

(20) Speaking of morality also, Messner in his Social Ethics says that although morality plays such a large part in life the maxim of "double morality belongs to the fundamentals of individualist liberalism...(for) public and private life, it says, are subject to different ethical principles." (21)

Dorothy Thompson views Liberalism as it is often held constant before our eyes:

Liberalism should have held constantly before its eyes the twin ideas of freedom and responsibility; self-expression and self-control, extreme tolerance of others, with extreme demands upon oneself. (22)

With this outlook on liberty and since liberty is one thing we cannot have unless we give it to others, one person has

summed up the result of the opposite view: "Excess of authority is tyranny, and excess of liberty is anarchy, and anarchy ends in tyranny." (23) This is further brought out on the fundamental principle that reaches the root of the problem; Liberalism has this proposition: It is contrary to the natural, innate, and inalienable right and liberty and dignity of man, to subject himself to an authority, the root, rule, measure, and sanction of which is not in himself. (24)

Permit me now to leave you, the reader, with the frame of mind that should be associated with Liberalism, but at the same time allowing for the various understandings of this ism, by listing the eighteen propositions by which Cardinal Newman concludes his treatise on the Liberalistic movement in Oxford:

1. No religious tenet is important, unless reason shows it to be so...
2. No one can believe what he does not understand.  
(Therefore, e.g. there are no mysteries in true religion.)
3. No theological doctrine is any thing more than an opinion which happens to be held by bodies of men.  
(Therefore, e.g. no creed, as such, is necessary for salvation.)
4. It is dishonest in a man to make an act of faith in what he has not had brought home to him by actual proof.  
(Therefore, e.g. the mass of men ought not absolutely to believe in the divine authority of the Bible.)
5. It is immoral in a man to believe more than he can spontaneously receive as being congenial to his moral and mental nature.  
(Therefore, e.g. a given individual is not bound to believe in eternal punishment.)

6. No revealed doctrines or precepts may reasonably stand in the way of scientific conclusions.  
(Therefore, e.g. Political Economy may reverse our Lord's declarations about poverty and riches, or a system of Ethics may teach that the highest condition of body is ordinarily essential to the highest state of mind.)
7. Christianity is necessarily modified by the growth of civilization, and the exigencies of time.  
(Therefore, e.g. the Catholic Priesthood, though necessary in the Middle Ages, may be superseded now.)
8. There is a system of religion more simply true than Christianity as it has ever been received.  
(Therefore, e.g. we may advance that Christianity is the "corn of wheat" which has been dead for 1800 years, but at length will bear fruit; and that Mahometanism is the manly religion, and existing Christianity the womanish.)
9. There is a right of Private Judgement: that is, there is no existing authority on earth competent to interfere with the liberty of individuals in reasoning and judging for themselves about the Bible and its contents, as they severally please.  
(Therefore, e.g. religious establishments requiring subscription are Anti-Christian.)
10. There are rights of conscience such, that every one may lawfully advance a claim to profess and teach what is false and wrong in matters religious, social, and moral, provided that to his private conscience it seems absolutely true and right.  
(Therefore, e.g. individuals have a right to preach and practise fornication and polygamy.)
11. There is no such thing as a national or state conscience.  
(Therefore, e.g. no judgments can fall upon a sinful or infidel nation.)
12. The civil power has no positive duty, in a normal state of things, to maintain religious truth.  
(Therefore, e.g. blasphemy and sabbath-breaking are not rightly punishable by law.)

13. Utility and expedience are the measure of political duty.  
(Therefore, e.g. no punishment may be enacted, on the ground that God commands it; e.g. on the text, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.")
14. The Civil Power may dispose of Church property without sacrilege...
15. The Civil Power has the right of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and administration...
16. It is lawful to rise in arms against legitimate princes.  
(Therefore, e.g. the Puritans in the 17th century, and the French in the 18th, were justifiable in their Rebellion and Revolution respectively.)
17. The people are the legitimate source of power.  
(Therefore, e.g. Universal Suffrage is among the natural rights of man.)
18. Virtue is the child of knowledge, and vice of ignorance.  
(Therefore, e.g. education, periodical literature, railroad travelling, ventilation, drainage, and the arts of life, when fully carried out, serve to make a population moral and happy.) (24)

#### Footnotes

- (1) Thomas Neill, The American Mercury (August, 1948) p. 169
- (2) Ibid., Who Are the Liberals ?, (November, 1947) p. 550
- (3) Thomas Neill, Rise and Decline of Liberalism, (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1953) p. 6
- (4) Fulton J. Sheen, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, (New York: Macmillan, 1938) pp. 1 - 2
- (5) Eugene Lyons, When Liberalism Went Totalitarian, Whose Revolution ?, A Study of the Future Course of Liberalism in the United States, edited by Irving Dewitt Talmadge, (New York, 1941), p. 116
- (6) For Hilaire Belloc, Essays in Honor of His 71st Birthday, edited by Douglas Woodruff, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942) p. 32
- (7) John Henry Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua (New York Longmans, Green and Co. 1893), p. 288
- (8) Virigil Kolb, Communism, Its Founder, and Its Nature (Thesis submitted to the Philosophy Department, 1950) p.2
- (9) Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 9, pp. 212-214 (Edition )
- (10) Thomas Neill, ibid., p. 44
- (11) The Statement is Lilburnes' quoted by George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory, (New York, 1937) p. 483
- (12) Guido de Ruggerio, The History of European Liberalism, (London, 1927), p. 41
- (13) Catholic Encyclopedia, ibid., p.393
- (14) Schapire, Liberalism and the Challenge of Fascism, quoted by Neill, ibid., p. 60
- (15) Thomas Neill, ibid., p. 61
- (16) Ferguson and Bruin, The Survey of European Civilization, (Chicago: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1952), p.627
- (17) Arthur Bernard, A Preface to Newman Theology, (St. Louis: Herder, 1945), p.27

- (18) Symposium, Daniel-Rops, Christianity and Freedom, (London: Hollisand Carter, 1955) p. 148
- (19) Raymond J. Miller, Forty Years After, a commentary, (St. Paul, Radio Replies, 1947) p. 10
- (20) J. Mässner, Social Ethics, (St. Louis:Herder, 1949) p. 69
- (21) Dorothy Thompson's Political Guide, (New York, 1938)
- (22) Mr. Froudes' Historical Method, North American Review, (March 1880) p. 299
- (23) Catholic Encyclopedia, *ibid.*, p. 212
- (24) John Henry Cardinal Newman, *ibid.*, p. 288

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