PRIVATE BELIEF, PUBLIC AVOWAL: RELIGIOUS LIBERALS AND THE ETHICS OF SINCERITY

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‘Freedom for Honesty, Sincerity, and Truth’

The age demands freedom for the teacher, freedom for the worshipper, freedom for the thinker, freedom for honesty, sincerity, and truth. Without this privilege neither science nor religion can conquer.

Henceforth, if we are asked for our creed and faith, we would point not to scrolls and tomes, musty with the dust of superstition; not to priests and palimpsests; not to synods and decrees; not to rites and vestments; but to an honest heart inscribed with the motto of all zealous lives: ‘Here is sincere search after truth.’ (Frank, 1901: 278)

Honest hearts driven by a sincere search after truth: such was the image religious liberals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cherished of themselves. In spite of any differences among them, all desired freedom in their quest for truth. Religious liberals, or modernists as they are also often called, fought for the right to think freely and to freely publish the results of their scientific research. They wished to be free to answer the call of modern culture. The world had moved on and religion should keep pace with the cultural, social and political leap forward. “We do not to-day travel by coach, or wear jerkins, or speak the language of Chaucer, or believe that the earth is the centre of the solar system,” an English Roman Catholic modernist remarked, “Why in matters theological should we be forced to think in terms of bygone centuries?” (Major, 1927: 41).

The ideal of freedom in the religious domain as well as the sincere quest for truth lead us straight into the matter of the relationship between public and private aspects of religion. What did the confrontation with modernity imply for the public and private aspects of the faith of those believers who wanted both to remain loyal to their faith and accept the modern

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1 Whereas in current literature the terms ‘liberalism’ and ‘modernism’ are often used interchangeably, modernism actually denotes a more radical variety of liberalism. Besides, there is a difference in the usage of the labels in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Protestant denominations, a matter which need not concern us here.
spirit? Looking at the personal narratives of religious liberals there is one single theme that appears to stand out among all others: sincerity.

Religious liberals, especially those who turned from orthodoxy to a liberal faith, saw themselves forced to address the question how to deal with their newly won convictions. Should one publicly avow one’s recently adopted belief or rather keep it to oneself? In other words, was faith a private matter or did intellectual honesty and moral integrity require to make one’s religious and theological views publicly known? Naturally such questions were particularly urgent for clergymen, many of whom felt, in view of their responsibility for their flock, that caution was needed regarding the best way to resolve this pressing matter.

The question about coming out as a liberal believer became even more acute whenever religious liberals were confronted with ecclesiastical repression from conservative fellow believers. Knowing that these might condemn religious liberalism as infidelity or heresy made the question of public avowal a matter for profound consideration. In the face of ecclesiastical repression the issue of the relationship between private belief and public profession acquired a particular urgency.

In what follows the issue of ‘public’ and ‘private’ will be dealt with in relation to the conversion to religious liberalism. The topic will be approached from a historical perspective. By highlighting the relationship between private and public religion within the context of the severe and prolonged crisis in modern Christianity occasioned by the upsurge of modernity, here we will view the issue from a somewhat unusual but fascinating angle. The literature dealing with religious liberalism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has much to say about the tensions caused by believers’ inner conflicts surrounding the question of private conviction and public avowal, but to my knowledge the issue has so far not been systematically explored. For students of liberalism and modernism such as Alec Vidler (1970), Kurt-Peter Gertz (1975), Lester Kurtz (1986), John Barbour (1994), C.J.T. Talar (2002: 39–65; and 2002a: 67–89), Harvey Hill (2002: 13–17; and 2002a) and others it is hard to avoid paying attention to the issue of sincerity in relation to liberal and modernist believers, given

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2 Theoretical and conceptual studies, most of them coming from sociologists, abound in attempting to clarify the meaning of the term ‘modernity’. Attempts to qualify the term present us with adjectives ranging from ‘selective’ to ‘liquid modernity’ (Zygmunt Bauman) and ultimately, as was to be expected, to ‘multiple modernities’ (Shmuel Eisenstadt). In this paper the notion ‘modernity’ will be first and foremost taken in the sense of intellectual modernity, which is closely related to the liberalization of theology. Religious liberalism or modernism can be viewed as a particular expression of coping with modernity.