

Models of the Liberal Church

by Rev. Tony Lorenzen

The Catholic Jesuit priest Avery Dulles wrote his work on ecclesiology, *Models of the Church*, in response to the critics of Vatican II who argued that the traditional church was going to collapse as a result of the Vatican II reforms. Dulles argued that the old way of looking at and defining the church had already collapsed and new models were needed for understanding the church in the modern world. Dulles turned to the work of Max Black on “analogue models” and Ian T. Ramsey on “disclosure models” (Dulles, 28). Ramsey’s work is especially pertinent to a study of the liberal church. In his book *Religious Language* Ramsey writes, “The central problem of theology is how to use, how to qualify observational language so as to be suitable currency for what in part exceeds it” (38).

Models began to have widespread use in theology in the 1970s, theologians borrowing their use from the sciences, where Max Black’s analogue models “assist one to be articulate, make accurate descriptions, or take a familiar situation in order to reach a less familiar one. Some models only approach what is to be reproduced” (Miller). Most people are familiar with these types of models in one way or another. Where Ramsey makes a distinction important for looking at models of the church is in what he calls “disclosure models.” These rely on “similarity-with-a-difference that produces insight” (*Religious Language* 47).¹ Ramsey refers to the “ah-ha” moments of religion that fail the

¹ Quoted by Randolph Crump Miller in *The Language Gap and God: Religious Language and Christian Education*

tests of empirical language and expository essay, but pass more neatly into the world of poetry, music and metaphor.

“Science also uses such models to generate insight,” writes Randolph Crump Miller, “So also, theological models may make discourse possible, simplify complexities and point to what otherwise eludes us” (Miller).

I hold with Dulles and Ramsey that no one model, no one disclosure in itself, perfectly corresponds with the “mystery of the church” (Dulles 28), even a liberal church, but each model or disclosure reveals some aspect of the church. Although some religious liberals may want a more concrete ecclesiology because trying to define the church through sets of symbols and analogues poses a problem in itself, I think the models approach is valid. The symbolic nature of a models approach “may block belief in an existential relationship to the divine reality (in this case the church) purportedly described” (Hayward 93). It is imperative to keep in mind that trying to define a church forces us into the language of metaphor and symbol, and “metaphors and models are rooted in disclosures and born in insight” (Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*).²

“What is the liberal church?” It is easier to respond when thinking in terms of what the church is like. This is what Dulles did with Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the wake of Vatican II. I will follow Dulles’s models of the church and briefly examine the liberal church as an institution, a mystical community, a sacrament, a herald, and a servant. Also following Dulles, I will look at the liberal church and the role of the ministry. Some of these models lend themselves more easily to liberalization than others, but an examination of each is fruitful for a complete liberal ecclesiology.

² Quoted by Miller in *The Language Gap and God*

We acknowledge that something in the richness and order of reality is reflected in the findings of science, granting at the same time that this ‘something’ transcends any one scientific description or such descriptions taken together. Science lives and thrives on a philosophy of abundance rather than a philosophy of reduction; there is always *more* for the scientist to find out (Hayward 96).

As with the scientist, so it is with the theologian and the spiritual pilgrim on their way to church.

The liberal church as institution

Although some might argue that the principles and purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association don’t make the liberal church all that different than many liberal or progressive nonprofit organizations in terms of mission statements, there is a calling beyond creed that beckons human beings to the voluntary associations named church. The need to touch the holy, reach the infinite, express the ineffable; to be in community and seek the sacred compels the existence of a social institution among us set apart from anything the realm of the social justice organization, the human rights campaign, or the political party can deliver. James Luther Adams and the Chicago Ecumenical Discussion Group (CEDG) called this the “mystical, invisible, suprahistorical character or orientation” (309) of the church.

Adams and the CEDG made the observation that church needs to be viewed as an “empirical reality with a variety of doctrines and disciplines” (309). Churches are. And their place in our societies and communities are unique. “As contrasted with other institutions, its special task concerns men’s contact with the divine. Thus the church is

to be understood in its relation to God, who stands beyond human society and history” (Adams 310).

The liberal church is a place where people meet to encounter the divine. Even the agnostic or the atheist, personally or in congregation, find the church’s special task related to wrestling with questions of divinity and sanctity, holiness and humanness, and their relationships to each other. However we approach church, it can only be understood in relation to the God question. We come to the liberal church to wrestle with the idea of God – do we affirm the idea of God, however defined or not? And if we do affirm, we wrestle with still more questions: How do we name God? Does God stand beyond human society and history or is God intimately a part of human society and history, or is God created and understood in the living out of history?

The New England synods of the seventeenth century speak of the “nature of the Catholick Church” by which they mean a universal, not a Roman, church. Joseph Bassett points out that the 1648 synod defines that universal church as “The whole company of those / That are elected, redeemed / And in time effectually / Called from the state of / Sin & death vnto a state / Of Grace & salvation /In Jesus Christ”³

By the time the Roman Catholic Church got around to defining the church as “the people of God” in the dogmatic constitution on the church, Gaudium et Spes in the 1960’s at Vatican II, congregational and thus Unitarian Universalist theology had been oriented in this way for over 300 years.

The idea of the people of God *being* the church is a primarily liberal model. It is arguably the ecclesiastical model of our time. Even churches of episcopal polity have

³ Bassett quotes the synod from Williston Walker’s work *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. Boston: Pilgrim, 1969, 204-207.

been dealing with this liberalizing model, some with acceptance, and some with ambivalence or rejection and hostility for the last forty years. Yet this model has always been a model of the liberal church going back to the early days of the New Testament church, through the New England synods and into the present day.

The people part of the phrase “people of God” and its disclosure and metaphorical connection to congregational polity and covenant will not be problematic for just about any religious liberal. The God part of phrase might be for some, and this is also characteristic of the liberal church, but if God is left out, are we left with a church?

Chapter IV of the Cambridge Platform stresses that what makes the people of god (a church so defined) particularly unique is that they gather for “the publick worship of God.” Joseph Bassett notes in the “New England Way and Vatican II” that going to church for the Puritans was not done simply for “mutual edification and fellowship with one another, but the *public worship of God* (his emphasis 24).”

Even if we approach worship in such a way that we do consider it time to gather together for mutual edification and fellowship in order that we may take something of worth away from our sharing, that act of coming together in a liberal church is the people gathering to wrestle with ultimate questions. It is still the people of God, one way or another.

The liberal church as mystical communion

The liberal church is a transcendent community as much as any mystical body of Christ, a self-image more likely to be held by Christian churches, but a mystical transcendent body we are. Ultimately, the liberal church is a unique institution like any other church in that it serves a unique function in human society and community by being

about the task of dealing with people's connection to the divine, the sacred, and the holy. The liberal church's ability to connect people to the sacred comes from its conservative nature – it's ritual, symbol and history. As John Hayward states, "To be liberal in religious life, to be oriented toward novelty and experiment, is not incompatible with a deep respect for ancient religious traditions. Freedom and tradition are complimentary" (105).

Even our newer rituals, such as flower communion, water communion, child dedications, and candles of joy and concern, ground us in ways that allow us to be transported into the mystic. We must have this in order to be a church.

A church without a ritual, without symbols and sacraments and corporate organism, as a permanent institution, is an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The religious sentiment, it is true is spontaneous and eternal; in one form or another it will always exist where man exists; but this spontaneous religion, unfixed and uncertain, may so degenerate as to become an evil rather than a good (Hedge).

Although a church can go too far the other way, as Frederick Henry Hedge notes in his sermon *The Broad Church*, and fall into "mummery and despotism" (Hedge cites the "Church of Rome"), he argues that without ritual and symbol and corporate structure by which to communicate them, a church ensures its own demise. It's important to note, as Thomas D. Wintle, Editor of the *Unitarian Universalist Christian* points out, that Hedge didn't advocate over-orchestrated worship and hierarchy, and that he was a

Transcendentalist, yet he had a deep understanding of “how religion is expressed and communicated.”⁴

Hedge, in true Transcendentalist fashion, understood the need of religion to facilitate mystical communion with the divine and the ways in which ritual and symbol help accomplish this, serving as our shamans. The liberal church brings together the Transcendentalist search for communion with the divine with the understanding of ritual study. As Ian Ramsey states, “Being sure in religion does not entail being certain in theology” (Christian Discourse 89). The mystical communion model is one that, surprisingly, fits the liberal church.

The liberal church as sacrament

Expanding the idea of sacrament to mean anything that makes the divine present and real for people, then the liberal church can most certainly be considered a sacrament. “It may be said that the task of Christian ethics is to make men aware of the sacramental character of all the relationships in life, so that God’s presence and challenge may be seen in every situation” (Adams, 321).

If the church is a unique social institution because it deals with people’s relationships to the divine, the sacred, and the holy, and the liberal church functions like other churches in this aspect, then it is fitting and appropriate to consider the liberal church a sacrament both to its members and to the world at large. The liberal church makes the divine a reality to be encountered, imagined, considered, pondered, and wondered over for its members. The liberal church makes a new way of encountering, imagining, considering, and pondering humanity’s relationship and connection to the

⁴Thomas D. Wintle Editor introduction to UU Christian Spring Summer 1981

holy present to the community. Either way, the liberal church is a sacrament and is sacramental.

The greatest difficulty in making sense of this model is realizing the disclosure for the religious liberal. Either many religious liberals are not familiar with the idea of sacrament or they have abandoned it. To see their association or their congregation or even themselves as something that makes holiness present in the world and yet not have this connected with Roman Catholic idea of the sacraments may be difficult.

The liberal church as herald

This model looks on the church as kerygmatic in the Christian sense, as Dulles writes, “one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on” (76). Dulles cites as an example the royal herald who comes with a message or decree from the king to proclaim in the public square. This image and model may work well within a Catholic or other episcopal framework, where the polity is top-down, hierarchical and the theological and spiritual messages come from the religious equivalent of royalty, but can the liberal church work or serve as a herald?

We are the church where the Christian and the Buddhist and the Jew and the agnostic and the atheist are all members, not only of the same denomination, but often of the same congregation. Yet, what is our proclamation? When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School (as a Catholic), one of the jokes about Unitarians Universalists was, Q: What does UU stand for? A: Uh, Undecided.

Not so fast. First of all there are actually Unitarian catechisms. James Freeman Clarke’s *Manual of Unitarian Belief* was published in 1884 and “sets out the tenants of Liberal Christianity before Neo-Orthodoxy and Ecumenical Christianity” (Bassett, 80).

In Part II of their paper on the “The Ethical Reality of the Church,” Adams and CEDG name among other things, this as one of the church’s heraldic roles: “Making clear the fundamental principles that give guidance here, without remaining in unmeaning and ineffective abstractions, and indicating how these principles bear upon the social life and its problems without assuming to offer detailed plans for social procedure (319).”

The principles and purposes of the UUA seem to do this well enough, although some may argue that they remain unmeaning and ineffective abstractions. The CEDG goes on in the next section of their statement to say that a church must also by its preaching, “Give men a knowledge of God and his eternal purpose which will furnish inspiration, courage, and direction for their effort.” This message must “give to the people a faith that is strong because it rests in God, so that they will work on without dismay or discouragement because it is God” (319) working in us.

What does the UUA or any congregation give to the community by its preaching today regarding the eternal? It may not always be a knowledge of God, but surely there can be a spiritual message from the liberal church that doesn’t remain in philosophical and ineffective abstraction. Many come to our churches to find the message of reason and an open search for spiritual truth and meaning freed from dogma and creed, opened from Biblical scripture to the world’s religious traditions and inspired poets and artists that help us reach the divine and the sacred in the human heart, and that furnish inspiration, courage and direction for the effort.

Many appreciate Rev. Bill Sinkford’s call for a renewal of “the language reverence” so that our call to those both within our churches and our call to the world outside our congregations and our association may be more clearly heard as religious

proclamation and the voice of a herald, the voice of good news for spiritual seekers, caught in the wastelands of limiting creeds, oppressive dogmas, and restrictive traditions.

What is the message of the liberal church? What is the message our liberal faith community is sent to proclaim? If we look at this solely in terms of articles of faith, there are none. Maybe that's our message. The medium is the message. We are a McLuhanite religious community! I think this is what we are sent to proclaim.

Sociologist and media critic Marshall McLuhan is credited with saying, "There are no passengers on spaceship Earth. We are all crew." The UUA is a bit like this religiously when it comes to matters of creed. Encouraging our membership to engage the personal search for truth and meaning, we truly are all fellow pilgrims on the journey. We are all spiritual crew. The liberal church is both message and messenger and so are our members.

We, as Unitarian Universalists, do have a proclamation to make. Can we find the words and the charism to make it? If we do, does that give anyone in the public square cause or pause to listen? When the king's messenger relayed the royal decree, you ignored it at your peril, whether you agreed with the king or his divine right to office. When the messenger proclaims, "Listen to me if you want, better yet, listen to yourself." – That's a herald trying to put himself out of a job. Maybe that's a good thing? Amnesty International has been trying to put itself out of business stopping human rights abuses for years.

For the liberal church to be a herald it needs to promote itself positively. We need to be able to define the liberal church not by saying, "We don't believe in hierarchy and dogma," but by saying "We believe in the free and responsible search for truth and

meaning. We believe there is no such thing as a lesser person. We believe our creed is never finished being born, you come, too - and help create it.”

The liberal church as servant

James Luther Adams and the CEDG state boldly that “the church is the servant of the kingdom of God,” and define the kingdom of God as “the consummation of the church’s common work and fellowship” (312). Few in the liberal church would argue, I believe, that they joined or continue to belong to a UUA church because it met their personal needs for spirituality or community. It served them and serves them. It fed them and continues to feed them in the strictest pastoral sense whatever their motivation for knocking on the door. Any effective church begins with effective ministry to its own members.

Adams and the CEDG also note that “the grounds of the church’s ethical nature lie in its inheritance from Judaism, in its conception of the moral nature of God, in the moral example of Jesus’ own life, in the ethical implications of the fellowship in Christ characterized by love the abrogation of human barriers” (315). In this last they follow the strict New England Unitarianism of Channing and the ethics of Parker, placing the emphasis on the religion of Jesus instead of the religion about Jesus. The religion of Jesus has always been about being of service to the other in need. From the UUA’s Principles and Purposes to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to your local parish food pantry, the liberal church may be most recognizable as this model and serve best as this model.

The liberal church and the ministry

In the earliest days of the New Testament church, leaders were called up from within the assembly to serve in various roles as teachers, preachers, deacons (servers at the Lord's supper and community meal) and those who took up collections on behalf of the widows and orphans. All Christian churches might claim to some extent that this is still their practice, but once one enters the ministry, the model of ministry in the liberal church sees the minister in a distinct light, one that is quite different from that of churches of episcopal polity, and arguably from that of presbyterian polity.

The minister in the liberal church remains, and is called to remain, above all, human. Jack Mendelsohn says that, "if the ministry is a call, it is a call not away from humanity, but into it, deeply into it" (26). This is a far cry from the perception of say, the Catholic priest who is deemed ontologically changed by ordination. Even so, being fully human, the demands of being religious lay heavily on the minister. The head is heavy that wears the publicly perceived halo.

"Here is a person who, by the deliberate deed of a congregation, is given the time, freedom, and sustenance to study, speak and act on the ethical and spiritual issues of living and to help make more intelligible, to those who cannot claim such time and freedom, the religious resources available to them" (Mendelsohn, 26).

Mendelsohn continues by saying he shuddered while writing the above because it's nothing if not a set up for failure. How can anyone live up to such expectations? One can't. The only way to meaningfully enter into such a vocation, Mendelsohn argues, is to do so in a firm grounding that one is nothing if not fully human because to do otherwise is to set one's self up, and to set up the ministry, in "some kind of semidivine posture of being above the common embarrassment, doubt and shame (26)." In the wake

of recent clergy pedophilia scandals there seems to be no doubt this happened and has been institutionalized in some polities and certainly exists outside the Catholic Church where it has been publicly on display.

It has been said that a wedding ceremony does not a marriage make, yet churches of all stripes somehow fall into this trap with the ministry. Just because one is ordained, one is not a minister. “It is not some ecclesiastical act that makes a minister, but participation in the lives of humans, individual and associated” (Mendelsohn, 27).

Where the liberal church sets itself apart in the practice of ministry is not that the liberal church ordains women and openly gay and lesbian persons, although those are important witnesses, but in the liberal insistence that the minister be human, be a person, like the congregation, not a hierarchical, controlling, semi-divine figure.

“To minister – and here the word embraces laity and clergy alike – is to be called out of our pretensions, poses and protective facades and into the great, open, windy world, where we are at least alive, even if tremblingly so, and where the chances of confirming the sanctities of our blundering hearts are endless” (Mendelsohn, 26-27).

Adequately Inadequate

Discussing Ian Ramsey’s work, Randolph Crump Miller writes, “Because all models are inadequate and diversity is essential for religious discourse, every model needs ‘qualifiers.’ These qualifiers are not further descriptions, for their logical status is not that of labels, rather they point the model in such a way that disclosure becomes possible” (Miller).

Examining the liberal church and its ministry through the models of institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant is by design not an exhaustive or

comprehensive approach to a liberal church ecclesiology, but rather a beginning that might lead to some “ah-ha” moments. The disclosure model in theology is not aimed towards arriving at what Miller calls “blueprints or descriptions of God,” and we could also add blueprints or descriptions of church as we look at models in ecclesiology. What we can hope for is that examining the models leads to disclosure, discernment, and further discourse as we continue our liberal pilgrim journey to church and towards *being* church.

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