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The Faith of the Liberal, 1925.

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"THE FAITH OF THE LIBERAL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

APRIL 26, 1925, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



The subject for this morning was suggested to me by a book which appeared recently from the pen of Doctor Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University. The book is called "The Faith of a Liberal." Dr. Butler is, from his own statement, a confirmed liberal. Dr. Butler seems to detect everywhere about him tendencies which are making for the gradual extirpation of liberalism in this land-- liberalism which is, according to his thinking, the whole basis and foundation of our American government.

Dr. Butler defines the term liberalism literally. A liberal is one who believes in liberty as an end in itself; in fact, the highest political end. A liberal is one who is opposed to every artificial restriction placed upon a man's effort to grow and to express himself, as long as these efforts do not conflict or delimit similar efforts on the part of other men. A liberal is one who is opposed to every attempt to institute uniformity and conformity in society by means of compulsion, prohibition. Liberalism is therefore a temper, a point of view, a frame of mind, which, jealous of man's inalienable prerogatives and rights, looks upon the invidious encroachment of government upon the domain of man's rights with great distrusts; looks with distrust upon the expansion of bureaucracy in government, of all collectivistic agencies, such as socialism and communism, which tend to circumscribe the free play of a



man's initiative.

Liberalism, in other words, is content with the minimum amount of governmental supervision--compatible, of course, with social well-being and social peace.

Now, all this is excellent doctrine, but in the hands of Dr. Butler liberalism receives too restricted an interpretation. Dr. Butler is principally concerned with the danger of centralizing authority in government; with the danger of centralizing authority in Washington; with the expansion of a system of agents and spies and inspectors, at an enormous cost, throughout the land, tending to deprive people of their local self-government and tending to establish a democratic imperialism, which is just as obnoxious to the writer as a monarchical imperialism.

Dr. Butler feels that the foundations of our government are being undermined by this tendency to centralization of power in the hands of the Federal government. He believes, and rightly believes, that our institutions, our political institutions, are found upon four basic principles. First, that our government is a federal government; that it is a federation of political entities; that it is, to quote him, "an indestructible union of indestructible states," and that the federal government possesses no rights and no authority other than those specifically granted to it by the individual states. In other words, the federal government is not absolute and sovereign in all the domains of political life.

Secondly, our government is based upon a bill



of rights. Ten amendments were added to the constitution soon after its promulgation, which again delimit the sphere of governmental authority. There are certain rights possessed by individual men as their inalienable rights over which government has absolutely no control. Not alone have states preempted certain privileges, but individual citizens have preempted certain privileges which government cannot abrogate. The privilege of free speech, the privilege of the right of assembly, the privilege of arrest by warrant only, the privilege of freedom of worship, the privilege of holding office without being subjected to a religious test,-- these rights are of men; they are sovereign rights not granted to them by government and not subject to governmental revision or abrogation.

Thirdly, our government has established a judicial protection for the individual. Inasmuch as authority in government is circumscribed and sharply defined, there must be a tribunal to determine at any time whether the government is trespassing upon the preserves of the state or of the individual, and to that end the Supreme Court was established.

And lastly, claims Dr. Butler, our government is a republican form of government. It is not a direct democracy; we do not directly as citizens make laws; we elect representatives who legislate for us, and while we assume that our representatives will in a large measure represent our issues and our needs, still under our form of government we allow them free play, of their own thinking to form



laws comparable to the highest interest of ourselves and of the country at large; and in this republican form of government under which we live the rights of the people are also delimited and sharply defined. No majority, however large, can deprive a minority of certain inalienable rights; majority rules, but within a well defined scope of power; beyond that even a majority cannot go. In other words, our government has protected the people not alone against the government, federal or state, but has protected the people against themselves, against any precipitate, harsh, unjust, oppressive action against weak minorities.

Dr. Butler claims that the tendency in our land today is to undermine these four fundamentals. A new American revolution is afoot, he maintains, which is slowly but surely destroying these basic ideals of American life. We are beginning more and more to turn to the federal government for every conceivable remedial legislation; we are making more and more for the paternalistic form of government; we are reading more and more into the fundamental law of the land by means of amendments to the constitution, legislation which rightly does not belong there, legislation which violates the rights of the states and which violates the rights of individuals.

Dr. Butler points to the prohibition amendment, to the income tax amendment, to the universal suffrage amendment, to the attempted amendment to regulate child labor, to the attempted effort to establish a federal bureau of



education, as evidences of this fateful, harmful tendency over centralized power and authority in Washington; thereby destroying, first of all, a sense of local self-government and responsibility in self-government; thereby, in the second place, creating a vast, cumbersome machinery which is doomed ultimately to crumble because of its own unbearable weight; and he appeals to the citizens of the land to rally around the ancient landmarks; he calls the conscience of America back to first principles of sound American government.

Dr. Butler is right, very right, and to that extent Dr. Butler is a liberal; but only to that extent. Dr. Butler seems to feel that liberalism is a question of government, and that if government, if the machinery for the administrative facilities of government can be kept free, liberal, decentralized, that liberalism would then be an established fact in society. Yet that is far from the truth. Under the most liberal form of government; under the most decentralized form of government, men can still be bigots and snobs and exploiters and enemies of human progress. No liberal political institution safeguards against individual liberalism the people who most champion the cause which Dr. Butler is now championing--that of state rights for the people of the South. In the days before the Civil War they were the people who stressed state rights; they were the people who stressed local self-government; they were the people who insisted upon decentralization of legislative authority; they were the people who would have subscribed and



underwritten most zealously every contention of Dr. Butler; and yet behind these fine liberal sentiments there would have lurked the blackest and ghastliest form of liberalism which tolerates human slavery.

So that the two, a liberal external government and an illiberal internal spirit, are not at all compatible. Under our present form of government, with its bill of rights guaranteeing free speech, we have seen with our own eyes, during the war, for example, that right completely abrogated, and the right of freedom of assembly flaunted. Nay, not only during the war but since the war, in times of peace; we have seen how a man, a great man, a man of light and leading, a visitor to our shores, was muzzled so that he could not tell a freedom-loving people of the tyrannies and the dark, abusive power of the blackest figure in Europe today--Admiral Horthy.

With our bill of rights and with our free institutions, in our own day we see a senator of the United States, because he willed to clean house, when corruption of the vilest kind besmirched our noble institutions,--we see that senator persecuted--persecuted by the very agencies of justice which were established to enforce liberty and the bill of human rights. In our own day, with our liberal institutions, we can see all about us groups of men, champions of the constitution, fraternal organizations who idolize the constitution, and have that constitution constantly on their lips, engaging ruthlessly and ceaselessly in an intensive campaign of hate and bigotry, of intolerance, social, political.



religious. In our own day, in the midst of our liberal institution, we see such tendencies as those manifested by our Secretary of Labor, Mr. Davis, who would register aliens in our land annually, just like the czar of Russia did in the days before the revolution--to spie upon them, to pry into their lives, all under the name of the free institution of America.

My object in pointing to these facts of contemporaneous history is this: to demonstrate how futile is the hope placed by liberals in external liberal political organization. Ultimately the problem must be reduced not to government and not to institutions and not to agencies and not to ~~decorations~~ <sup>our own state</sup>; ultimately the problem must be reduced to the human equation--to man, who makes and breaks institutions; to man, who can reinterpret any declaration and any bill of right, so that it will mean the very opposite of what it was originally intended to mean.

In other words, liberalism is not so much a problem of keeping the respective rights of the federal government, state government and the individual sacred; liberalism is a problem of educating the mind and soul of man into liberality. Liberalism is a human problem and not a governmental problem. #

What is liberalism when reduced to its human equation? What are the tenets of real liberalism? To my mind, they are four. In the first place, liberalism believes in the primacy of human life over human institutions. Man is



the focus of all social, economic, political and religious institutions. These institutions are only the avenues along which the spirit of man adventures. The spirit of man! That is primary; that is fundamental; that makes institutions to serve his needs, the dire urgencies of his life; and that is the thing which breaks institutions when they are found cumbersome and no longer valid and helpful. Man of course will pay deference to those institutions which experience and time have shown to be helpful and worthwhile; man will not rashly and thoughtlessly destroy an institution which has served him through thousands of years helpfully; but man will also, and must in deference to his evolved and on-rushing soul,--man must, when occasion demands, destroy institutions, however sacrificial, however time-honored, however hoary with age; he must destroy them or else these institutions, moribund, petrified, will destroy him. That is the first faith of the liberal--the primacy of man over man-made institutions.

The second faith of the liberal is the faith in the free exchange of ideas. The liberal believes that no man is in possession of absolute truth, and no age is in possession of final truth. The liberal believes that out of the conflict and clash of ideas truth is revealed and error is exposed. The liberal therefore looks upon every artificial suppression or repression of the free exchange of ideas and ideals as the greatest menace to human progress.

And thirdly, the liberal believes that man



develops as opportunities are given him to develop; that education, economic competence and social contacts,--these opportunities strike sparks in man's soul; these opportunities destroy shackles; they emancipate the life of man; they develop him; they increase him; they magnify him. And the liberal therefore believes that the prime concern of civilization and of society is to continuously and constantly increase the number of these opportunities and to destroy those social restrictions and inhibitions which keep opportunity from knocking at the soul of a man, and which therefore keep man enslaved to his lowest comforts.

Inasmuch as life today is still full of such restrictions and inhibitions, the liberal is a man who dares to experiment--and this is a great truth to bear in mind--the liberal is a man who dares to experiment. No progress is ever made except through risk and dare and adventure; no continent was ever settled and exploited except by pioneers who dared to face the alternative of success and failure, of life and death. The liberal believes that the greater security of the freer life must scoff at the lesser security of slough and stagnation. The liberal is convinced that no truth was ever gained, that no goal was ever attained by cowards, just as he is also convinced that no good was ever gained by rashness, by precipitate, unpremeditated rashness of action. For the liberal believes that, guided by the best and noblest experience, taking cognizance of the inherent limitations of human nature and of social existence, man can, that man must,



adventure into the unknown and face the possibility of defeat and disaster, for the sake of the greater victory of the spirit and of man's transcendence. This is the third faith of the liberal.

And the last faith, which, in a sense, is derivative from the second faith, posits belief in the indispensability of the exchange of free ideas, and the belief in the need of cooperative effort. The world cannot remain half slave and half free. It was Lincoln who said that this nation cannot permanently exist half slave and half free. And that is true of all human relationship. My well-being, my security, my peace of mind, my happiness, are dependent upon the security, the peace of mind, the well-being, the happiness of my neighbor. No people can be happy, half of it oppressing and half of it oppressed; half of it dominant, half of it enslaved; half of it luxuriously wealthy, half of it penuriously in want. The good things of life must be universalized to be fully enjoyed by any man.

And so the liberal is a man who gives of himself to every promising enterprise which tends to universalize the blessings of life, whether in the realm of politics, or in the realm of social uplift, or in the realm of religion, or in the realm of economics. The liberal seeks to participate in any national or international activity which tends to make all men share in the things in which all men ought to share. The reactionary is, in the truest sense of the word, a provincial; his sympathies are limited because his ideas



are constricted; he is concerned with himself, with his little circle, and with the here and now, regardless of the cost of his security, of his peace, of his well-being. He is a localized, provincialized, self-centered, starved individual--spiritually starved.

The liberal is, in the truest sense of the word, a cosmopolitan; his sympathies embrace the whole cosmos of human life, of human problems, of human interests; he invites the whole world to come and people his world, in order that his world may become livable for him.

These, then, to my mind, friends, are the four fundamentals of real liberalism. There are two aspects to liberalism--the negative and the positive. Negatively, liberalism means enshacklement; negatively, liberalism means discontent with all forms of restraint, of the past or of the present, and the restraints of the present are greater than the restraints of the past. Liberalism refuses to be confined by traditions and creeds and conventions which no longer have valid meaning, purpose, significance or function in life today. Liberalism therefore seeks to destroy barriers, to break down dungeon walls. That is its negative side.

Positively, affirmatively, liberalism works first of all for the subordination of human institutions to man; for the establishment in every department of human life of the supremacy of man's interest, of human personality, of the rights of the individual soul to live its own life and to express itself to the fullest without let or hindrance, except



those made necessary by social existence, by aggregate social life. Liberalism constructively enthrones human personality as sovereign ruler of social life; liberalism also works for the increasingly larger number of opportunities--educational, social, political, economic, so as to inspire and stimulate the soul of man progressively evermore; more opportunities so that man can expand, reach out, stretch out the antennae of his life and touch more worlds and more worlds.

Liberalism constructively works for the establishment of forums for the free interplay and interchange of ideas. The liberal is not a wishy-washy, indifferent sort of a person, who does not care about your ideas because he does not care about his own; a liberal is not an indifferent being. Very frequently that term is misunderstood. If I am not a religious person, I do not care what religion you have. That is not a liberal. A liberal clings to his own convictions and champions them courageously and constantly; for perchance he may be in possession of the truth. But lest perchance he may not be in possession of the truth, or of the whole truth, he grants you the same privilege of clinging to your ideas and convictions, or professing them, or postulating concerning them, or advocating them. In other words, the liberal wishes this free exchange of ideas in order by that means he may test and correct his own truths and his own convictions.

And then lastly, the liberal seeks cooperative enjoyment of the goods of life--of the intellectual, spiritual



or material. The liberal embraces the world; the liberal, again, is not one who has no local loyalties and local affinities; the liberal is a man who is undoubtedly, and must be by the very nature of his liberalism, an enlightened patriot of his land. The liberal must have his local loyalties--to country, to tradition, to his family, to his nation; for the liberal knows that these interests are best served when they are identified with the interests of other groups, of other peoples, of other lives. The liberal does not destroy his own loyalties; he raises them to the enth power by encompassing in their all-embracing sympathies the loyalties, the highest loyalties of other men.

This, then, friends, is the faith of the liberal: faith in man, faith in man's progress, faith in man's free exchange of ideas; great faith in the ultimate commonwealth of mankind.

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