

March 15, 2019

Dear Theo Hobson,

I am grateful and excited to enter a dialogue with you this evening.

I think, to a great extent we share our explorations of new meanings and practices of liberal religion and humanism. This exploration appeared in the subtitle of my inaugural lecture in 2016, when I presented my programme as a professor of... yes, liberal religion and humanism at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht.

I start with where you've ended, the four things liberal religion needs in our time. I concentrate on the second one: we need...

- 'A new account of the danger of bad liberal theology, the sort of that neglects faith and cult in favour of rational humanism.'

1. I fully agree that liberal religion should not embrace rational humanism, that is, the type of humanism that is over-certain of itself, that claims to possess a clear definition of what is human, what is a human, what is humanity: that definition invariably ends up with Enlightenment's idea of humans as rational beings, and with the conviction that the only true world view is a scientific world view.

The type of humanism liberal religion should connect with is a questioning humanism. I mean, a humanism that, against all identity politics, stubbornly maintains that we do not know who we are, that being human is being a question... an investigation into oneself. Humanism is not an organized world view that has answers to profile itself with, answers to be exported as if it were humanist missionary work. On the contrary, humanism advocates the art of questions.

I sometimes experiment with a rephrasing of the Dutch term for liberal religion, *vrijzinnigheid* (impossible to translate). The experiment consists of recoining that term into *vraagzinnigheid*. The *vraag*, the question is what liberal religion relates to humanism: first of all the question that humans are to themselves.

2. Having said this, in your little list of four things you do not speak of liberal religion, but of liberal Christianity. This is crucial, I think. 'Bad liberal Christianity', as you call it, does not only fall into the trap of rational humanism; it's other pitfall is a lack of relation to Christianity, that is, to itself! Bad liberal religion neglects the need to *relate to* Christianity, to its history, its traditions and its current impact on our societies and culture. By *relating* I mean dealing with a difficult and ambiguous heritage: the roots of Christianity. It is a relation full of tension,

of confusion and of deconstruction, as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy names it.

Following on this problem of not relating to tradition, 'bad liberal Christianity' can go either way:

- a. Either, first possibility, it embraces a sort of universalism in which traditions play no part any longer, a general spirituality in which words like God, Christ, in which Christian doctrine and debate are discarded as being outdated and no longer relevant. Here, any relation with what is handed over to us, with tradition in the literal sense, is aborted. Incarnation, resurrection, suffering, , sin, creation, revelation, salvation, all these concepts are declared suspect and obsolete.
- b. Or, second possibility, it embraces not a universalism into which traditions dissolve, but it embraces exactly the opposite: its Christian roots, seen as a stable building of ideas, images, rituals, and theology. This type of bad liberal religion fails to acknowledge the fact that we should transform tradition, recreate and reformulate it. Relation is something dynamic: standing within the old heritage and breaking it open from within. This transforming relation is not the achievement of liberal Christians, but it is a historical process wherein we are caught up: Christianity, in its many shapes, *is* transforming

itself time and again in what Charles Taylor calls the secular age: an age, our age, not of straightforward secularization, but an age in which, according to Taylor, new connections between immanence and transcendence emerge.

This type of bad liberal Christianity pretends to defend the Christian roots against innovation. It underestimates the fact that traditions always change, even undermine themselves, often in playful ways. It is suspicious of new ways to approach tradition, it refuses new approaches to tradition, new words and metaphors like vulnerability, precarity, responsiveness, imagination, play.... In short, it makes the mistake to be afraid of 'humanistic theologies', or 'theological humanism'.

I propose to you to add these two pitfalls and mistakes to your 'account of the danger of bad liberal Christianity' you have presented to us here tonight as a programme to work on in the near future, and I'm looking forward to hear your thoughts on this!

Laurens ten Kate, University of Humanistic Studies

