

# de vrijzinnige LEZING

The Idea of Religion. Prospects of a liberal Christianity today.

Dear friends of Liberal Christianity,

I thank you very much for your honourable invitation. I am very glad to be here. My special thanks also go to Rick Benjamins and Wouter Slob. They spent much of their precious time to read my books and to write a wonderful introduction to our meeting today.

It sounds, I have to admit, a bit pretentious to describe liberal Christianity as an "Idea of Religion". But behind these words lies the conviction that liberal Christianity actually unites in itself much of what we dream of in a religion that gives people support and consolation and enables them to live together in peace and solidarity, especially in our times. I would like to present this ideal of a religion in four steps. First of all, in a brief, so to speak, philosophical foundation of religion, I would like to explain what a liberal Christianity is based on. The basis is a certain way of religious encounter with the world. This position has some weak points, which I do not want to conceal. So the second part is about the criticism of liberal Christianity. The discussion of the critique helps us to unfold in the third and fourth part some - hopefully - constructive prospects of a liberal Christianity today. So thirdly, I would like to present the central content-related motifs towards which a liberal Christianity is oriented, and fourthly, I would like to make some suggestions as to which social consequences are to be drawn from our discussion for the shape of a liberal church.

## 1. What is liberal theology? "The essence of liberal Christianity".

Liberal theology is usually understood as a theological school. It is characterized by a creative continuation of the concerns of the Enlightenment, but also of Romanticism. It is open to the political, social, and cultural achievements of modernity and seeks to reconcile Christianity, the church, and the modern world. Although there are influences of religious liberalism on Catholicism and Orthodoxy, it is primarily a Protestant affair. The starting point - and some would say, at the same time, the highlight - is the 19th century. We have great liberal traditions in English-speaking theology and also in Germany. Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch are forefathers of German liberal theology.

An interesting figure, unfortunately less known today, is Richard Rothe, who was a professor of theology in Heidelberg from the middle of the century and at the same time a member of the church leadership of the church of Baden. The case of Rothe illustrates that liberal Christianity is not only an intellectual movement, but also an ecclesiastical one. Rothe is also interesting for his striking statements. He could say that the invention of the railroad did more for the good of humanity than the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. Likewise, he said that the modern state realized more of the Christian values than Rome, Wittenberg and Geneva combined. Rothe clarified that the church, according to a Christian conviction, is not an end in itself, but a means to realize Christian ideals on earth. It might be possible one day, he suggested, for the church to be completely dissolved into an ideal state. Rothe is an interesting representative of liberal theology. He had quite a positive view of the political and cultural developments after the French Revolution from a Christian perspective. For him, more freedom and more political participation were the implementation of important Christian concerns. We can consider Rothe as a critic of a too simple theory of secularization *avant la lettre*. It is too simplistic to say that modernity has taken something away from Christianity. Rothe embodies intellectual courage, openness, and optimism for the future of Christianity. Nevertheless, it is obvious that his theses provoked horror and fierce opposition from conservative Christians.

There is, of course, a strong liberal tradition here in the Netherlands too. (See Arie L. Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands*, Oxford 2022.) For liberals, the Netherlands have always been a sort of country to long for. In two respects, the Netherlands is particularly interesting for liberal Christianity. First, unlike in

Germany, liberal Christianity here has also produced strong ecclesial expressions that reach into concrete congregational life. Second, the history of the Netherlands teaches us that what is called liberal Christianity did not only exist from the 19th century on. We can already interpret the Remonstrants' opposition to an over-dogmatic Calvinism as a liberal protest. Liberal theology is, therefore, according to my thesis, less a particular theological school than *an attitude* within Christianity. It has existed and continues to exist in various forms at all times.

Liberal Christianity starts from a central basic insight: People experience a mystery in their lives and in the world that transcends this world. We can describe these experiences as a "beyonding" (Robert Bellah) in which a transcendent dimension appears in the immanent sphere of the human interpretation of reality. These experiences shed a new light on the world, as they break through the ordinary mode of cognition. These are experiences in which the world speaks to us and reveals a deeper meaning. This conviction basically unites liberal Christianity with all religions of revelation. However, there are also striking differences compared to the classical and traditional use of the concept of revelation. I have tried to articulate these differences with the concept "Levensduiding in het licht van transcendentie". I would, by the way, make some corrections to this idea today. The term "life interpretation" sometimes seems too activist, as if we can pour religious interpretations over our life like ketchup over French fries.

Often, religious interpretations present themselves and come to us. This passive dimension, which I would bring to the fore more strongly, cannot mean, however, that humans are bare receivers of the revelation. Whatever causes people to interpret incidents and events in the light of transcendence, these interpretations are always interpretations and that means: human symbolizations. It is a deep insight, going back to Kant, that we do not represent reality directly, but can only reconstruct it by means of our own respective possibilities. We represent all our experiences symbolically. And this happens in many ways through linguistic, ritual, but also artistic symbolizations. It is a basic conviction of liberal theology: Whatever people experience as the mystery of existence and try to implement in their lives, the mystery always remains greater than all they can comprehend and articulate.

Liberal Christianity is in this respect related to all forms of negative theology. I have often been criticised that my concept of transcendence is too vague. That is true. I would like to deal with the concept of transcendence as Plato did when dealing with the idea of the good. It is a concept of approximation. The term "transcendence" is a response to something that really exists, but which we can only approach in fictional and constructive descriptions. I know that I know nothing. Liberal faith knows about the limitations of the possibility to express itself. Self-relativization therefore is a very important part of its constitution. This is the basis of the freedom of the liberal attitude. Liberal faith is loyal to its own tradition, but it does not submit to it in blind obedience. In order to do justice to the mystery, the forms of expression of Christianity must change in the course of history. This is not a matter of de-dogmatization or de-mythologization, but of a "deliteralization" (Hans Joas) of the dogmatic tradition. It is a matter of being faithful to the spirit, not to the letter. Only then the ground of religious experience can speak to our own time. All this sounds very abstract, so I will conclude this first part with a concrete example. I came across the example in the great book "Religion in Human Evolution" by Robert Bellah, who points to this exemplary description of a religious experience in the modern age. In a letter from prison, the Czech poet and later president Václav Havel writes to his wife:

"Again, I call to mind that distant moment in Hermanice when on a hot, cloudless summer day, I sat on a pile of rusty iron and gazed into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose, up and over all the fences, wires, bars and watchtowers that separated me from it. As I watched the imperceptible trembling of its leaves against an endless sky, I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state outside time in which all the beautiful things I had ever seen and experienced existed in a total "co-present"; I felt a sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle consent to the inevitable course of things as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced. A profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzying sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss of its mystery; an unbounded joy of being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning – this joy formed a strange alliance in me with a vague horror at the inapprehensibility and unattainability of everything I was so close to in that moment, standing at the very "edge of the finite". I was flooded with a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and with myself, with that moment, with all the moments I could call up, and with

everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning. I would even say that I was somehow “struck by love”, though I don’t know precisely for whom or what.”<sup>1</sup>

Havel's description gets by without classical dogmatic terminology; as an author of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, he must certainly have had at least a distanced relationship to Christianity. Nevertheless, and I will come back to this, his description offers an excellent clue as to how we can express the Christian message today. It is one of the elementary characteristics of liberal theology that among the manifold ways in which people articulate the experience of transcendence, cultural expressions are of special importance to them. Literature, art, and even music may help to articulate the experience of transcendence, and sometimes they can do so even closer to our life experience than the classical ecclesiastical and dogmatic expressions.

## II. Critique of Liberal Theology

The relativity of our own expressions of faith, liberty against the tradition, and religious openness to culture are hallmarks of liberal Christianity. Criticism is to be expected from all sides. For some, liberal theology is always too little; for others, it is always too much. Its difficulties are also well known within liberal theology. Almost none of its representatives called themselves "liberal", and Allard Pierson in the Netherlands, Ralph Wald Emerson in America and David Friedrich Strauß in Germany were all prominent liberal Christians, who later distanced themselves from Christianity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant theology of the Word of God criticized liberal theology severely. Liberal theology, it is argued, is a mere subjective sentimentalism that abandons classical dogmatic convictions. Theologically, this criticism is weak, in my opinion. It only exaggerates its own, and therefore only subjective symbolization of religion, but calls it obedience to a revelation and thus makes it supposedly objective and true. This procedure is common from the theology of Word of God to various fundamentalisms and it is in the 20th century one of the most successful religious methods to generate truth in and outside Christianity. How can we explain the great success of this opponent to all forms of liberal theology?

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<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel, *Letters*, quoted: Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution. From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge (Mass.)/ London 2011, 6-7.

Those who understand their own theological stance as the direct result of a divine revelation can obviously credit it with a higher authority. Indeed, liberal theology necessarily lacks unambiguity and clarity. But it is precisely unambiguity that seems to be required in order to do what a religion is supposed to do: To provide consolation and support. Criticism for a lack of unambiguity also comes from a completely different direction. The modern critics of religion also see this as a major, intellectual weakness. Liberal theology dilutes religious content. Antony Flew, whom the British press sometimes called "the world's most famous atheist," expressed this in his famous "Parable of the Gardener."

"Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>2</sup>

It is, as so often with arguments of analytical philosophy. They seem clear at first sight, but we suspect that they ultimately do not reach the depth and complexity of reality. What we can nevertheless learn from Antony Flew: if we want to increase the plausibility of Christian motifs, we need to explain them more credibly. In the case of the parable: it is not a gardener who tends the forest, but it is a being, a force that acts like a gardener. We call it a gardener to give an image to our experience, but we know that it is something quite different from a human gardener. We should be more courageous in labelling our religious expressions as images and symbols.

The criticism of conservative theology on the one hand and the modern criticism of religion on the other hand uncover what is perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of liberal theology. It is the accusation of arbitrariness of content, we could call it: "whateverness". This is also associated with a certain coolness. Liberal theology cools down the inner passion of

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<sup>2</sup> Antony Flew, *Theology as Falsification*, very often printed et reprinted, see f.e.: ([https://web.archive.org/web/20160912194021/http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/flew\\_falsification.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20160912194021/http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/flew_falsification.html))

faith, turns a hot - to take up Claude Lévi-Strauss' distinction - religion into a cold one. Is there anything at all in liberal theology worth standing up for, perhaps even fighting for? In its arbitrariness, a liberal religious stance seems to be the opposite of a "Fighting Faith." Liberal theology addresses itself primarily to individuals and does not seem to contribute much to community building. Robert Bellah called this lack of social power "flaws in the Protestant code." Liberal theology seems to be a phenomenon of elites. Liberal Christians tend to be highly educated, and liberal Christianity seems to be attractive to academically instructed culture-bearers who prefer a peaceful, individual private Christianity. The problem of a gap of representation arises. Liberal theology obviously cannot integrate the broad spectrum of popular spirituality, which it encounters with a certain lack of understanding. This is connected to a kind of arrogance. Liberals sometimes think to have reached a higher stage of development. Liberal Christians often cannot understand why so many other Christians still cling to the traditional forms of churchly Christianity. This attitude might befall what happened to Francis Fukuyama's theory of the "End of History" in the 1990s. One considers one's own point of view to be indisputably superior, and yet history teaches one quite otherwise. The suspicion arises that liberal Christianity has arrogant features. But the arbitrariness of content, the affective coolness, and the strong individualism without inclinations towards social binding raise yet an altogether different question. To put it simply, is liberal Christianity just boring?

A look at the church structures in Europe and the world is not encouraging. Globally, Christianity is a growing religion. But it is precisely the definitely non-liberal religious movements that are on the rise. In Europe, on the other hand, where liberal movements have traditionally been strong, Christianity is in a rapid retreat. The intention of liberal Christianity to reconcile Christianity with modernity seems to have little success. Liberals are obviously not succeeding in winning over agnostics and seekers for Christianity, despite all openness to culture. I do not want to let the *Vrijzinnige Lezing* fall into depression, but, and this was the point of this second part, the program of a liberal Christianity today faces formidable challenges. We must acknowledge and face them.

### 3. Motives of Christianity

In the public debate, at least in Germany, the program of a liberal theology receives support from a side from which one would not have expected it. Jürgen Habermas is one of the most

famous contemporary German philosophers. For almost two decades now, he has been dealing with questions of religion too. That is pretty astonishing for a follower of the Frankfurt School. In his latest book, he spends nearly 2,000 pages examining the Western relationship between faith and knowledge. His interest in religion is explained by a remarkable reason. The Western-style liberal state should be a plural and open society. All sources of meaning and interpretation of life deserve to be heard. For reasons of Western cultural history, Habermas argues, it would be reckless to exclude Christianity as a discussion partner. The question of identity plays a major role in modern societies. For our identity is no longer given to us, we have to choose and determine it ourselves. The question at stake, therefore, is simple: Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I here for? Habermas acknowledges that Christianity is a resource for finding answers to this question. Christianity as a resource for finding meaning is an idea that is discussed in many ways today. The French philosopher François Jullien has also put forward interesting thoughts on this theme. Habermas has spent a lot of thinking about how public debates can proceed in a liberal modern state. This is also very important for the program of a liberal Christianity. Christianity can and must no longer count on an unquestionable authority, but it must face the discussion like all other worldviews. Reasons must be given for one's own view, which can be disputed and discussed, refuted and advocated. Habermas calls this the "space of reasons," in which the public debate about plausibility is carried out. But public theology, which is currently on so many people's lips, then should mean: a theology that enters the space of reasons, a theology that gives reasons for its views. It means translating the content of the Christian faith into a language that is accessible to contemporary debates. Liberal theology seeks to communicate its own motives and convictions in a way that is compatible to modern life experiences. Liberal theologians always have endeavoured to translate Christian content into languages of their respective present in a methodologically responsible manner. Schleiermacher chose the language of romanticism (theology of feelings), Tillich that of existentialism. Process theology is an interesting attempt to try to do this at present. You had Catherine Keller here a few years ago on this occasion, Rick Benjamins is a prominent exponent here in Europe.

Let me give a brief attempt of my own on how we might bring in the central Christian motifs in the present. It is a sketch of something like a liberal dogmatics - if there can be such a thing at all. An excellent interlocutor here is the culture of today with its questions and issues. Liberal theology, it must be remembered in view of the current debates, is not a secular but a

religious stance. It reckons with a responsive character of reality from which a deeper meaning shines forth. It reveres this deeper meaning as the presence of God in the world; therein lies its centre and its strength. The presence of the divine is not something abstract, but concrete. When we speak of God as a person, we mean: The ground of the world has a face; in God we encounter not an approximate, vague counterpart, but a concrete intention and will that underlies what happens in the world. God is the Christian word for what Havel calls in his letter the "sovereignty of Being". To put it in a dogmatic language: Revelation and soteriology belong together. We know that we are sustained from "elsewhere". This becomes visible in the person of Christ. His death and resurrection breach the laws of life as we know them. Jesus Christ substitutes the "struggle for life" and competitive self-assertion for a new ground of existence: a merciful benevolence that sustains the world.

In relation to this, people experience their place in the world with ambiguity, with splendour and misery. The image of God is a strong symbol of humanity's destiny for the good. But human beings are not simply good, they can fail in their lives. Lostness and alienation are the existential attitudes meant by the concept of sin.

That is why Christianity is a religion of grace. The divine shines into life as a redeeming and liberating force. The denominations have developed many concepts to catch this: justification, forgiveness, divinization. Paul Tillich has called it in a modern language the "great yes". Václav Havel called it a "gentle consent to the inevitable course of things", the experience of a deeper meaning and harmony. People know themselves accepted and sustained by a meaning that exceeds everything they themselves could attribute to this life as meaning. Creation, then, means nothing else than gratitude. We find traces of the divine presence in the world in spite of all evil and insanity. This is the reason for a deep cosmic sense of security. The Christian doctrine of the last things could be described simply: The best is yet to come. This is not a consolation to a distant hereafter, but an appreciation of our present. It is not indifferent to how we live our lives and how we overcome evil. Ernst Troeltsch has masterfully brought this to the point. "Das Jenseits ist die Kraft des Diesseits." (The beyond is the power of this world)

This is a very brief and thesis-like summary of our central motives. It is an attempt to make traditional concepts such as God, creation, sin, grace, redemption and the hereafter speak into the reality of people's lives today, but they do so in a different form and in different wordings than the classical phrases of the dogmatic tradition. That is what liberal freedom is

about. The intuition of the presence of the divine in the world sets people free to know that their own lives and the human togetherness are supported by a deeper meaning. Liberal Christianity sometimes has hesitant, sometimes uncertain, sometimes only intuitive answers, but that is precisely the way in which it takes the doubts of our way of life seriously. Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I here for? In all uncertainty, the direction of the answer is simple: something is meant with us, with our life and with this world. We live out of a benevolent reason for existence, which it is worth living for and then even dying once.

#### 4 Social Dimension

I come to my last point. How can such a liberal Christianity with its strong content take social shape. There is no question, this is one of the most sensitive points of liberal Christianity. For a long time, the focus on the individual and private belief has made the question of church building unimportant. It may be different in the Netherlands, but in Germany, especially in the present, this focus has produced an attitude of indifference among church leaders. Even if they appreciate liberal theology, they do not use it in any way for the concrete shaping of church life. Liberal theology may be a beautiful thing, but it is of no use for church practice.

There is something right about this accusation. There is a sceptical attitude towards the church in liberal theology. The great liberal tradition has always urged its audience that Christianity should not be confused with the church. Christianity is more than the church. The new discussion about secularization also refers to this perspective. It is absolutely undeniable that in Europe, since the beginning of the 18th century, the influence of the churches has been declining. In Western Europe, in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, this seems to have been accelerated rapidly in recent years. Formally, this means that fewer people belong to the church. But does less churchiness automatically mean less Christianity? I want to take up once again the good liberal thought of Richard Rothe. The church is not an end in itself, but a means to realize Christian ideals in the world. My thesis is simple: our supposedly secular present in the West realizes a bigger amount of Christian values and ideals than ever before in history. Ideals of respect, recognition of persons, solidarity, care, and shared responsibility are at work right down to social legislation. We often say that the Middle Ages were the peak of Christian culture. When would one have preferred to live as a poor or sick person, in the Middle Ages or today? This is obviously only a rhetorical question; the answer is quite clear. If we understand modernity as a great transformation and

metamorphosis of Christianity, then even the phenomenon we call secularization appears in a completely different light. Christian values are firmly rooted in our culture. In this respect Christianity as a resource of our culture has its meaning. It is still worthwhile to bring our ideas of being human into the world.

Of course, we still cannot be indifferent to the fate of the churches in Europe. For Christianity is necessarily bound to a social form. When we read the writings of the New Testament, this is precisely what makes early Christianity so convincing: the presence of the divine Spirit does not only change people, but also their life together. The community of Christians is itself something like an image of the divine presence in this world. The institutionalization of the Christian faith from antiquity on is, without a doubt, an impressive and necessary event. Max Weber called this the routinization of the charisma. The building of the great European popular churches since the 19th century is undoubtedly a great success story, but we now also see its great risks. Institutions are necessarily very concerned with their self-preservation. European churches, it seems to me, are currently far too preoccupied with themselves, with structural issues and fear for their future. It is a truism, which is nevertheless valid for the present: Every crisis is an opportunity. The necessary downsizing of our churches helps us to get rid of dead weight. The church does not have to concern itself with real estate issues and asset funds. It seems to me that the opportunity of the present is to focus on the essentials. And the essential can only be to support and contribute to the great Christian motives in the public discussion, to bring them in into the congregations in order to give people support and consolation.

I can only hint at what this might mean. On the one hand, the church should by no means withdraw from its public mission. Christian schools, Christian education, also a Christian press are of indispensable value. Christianity can only function as a resource if there is a way to bring these resources into the public debate. At the level of the congregations, the present changes offer opportunities to create stronger forms of participation and involvement and to move toward a more personal approach. After all, the mainstream European churches look like huge service-institutions in many respects, anonymous and abstract. And perhaps we need to reconsider what it means to belong and not to belong. A major concern of liberal theology is openness. We should practice this in our congregational life as well. Those who are not against us are for us.

Of course, there is the question of how to finance such an open church that is no longer tied to a narrow membership. I think we have to break new ground here as well. In Europe, we consider the separation of church and state to be an important achievement of the Enlightenment. In principle, the state has to be neutral; religion is a private matter. If we have learned anything since the late 20th century, it is this: Religion is not a private matter. That's why we have to rethink the relationship between the state and the church. Religion is a common human concern; it is a way to find orientation in the meaning of existence. That is why support for religions should be part of the state's existential care. It could establish a new contract between state and church. In countries like Germany, Austria or Switzerland, church taxes would have to be abolished. Churches, congregations and all religious communities in general could be supported by the state. Conversely, religious communities should undertake to recognize the basic ideals of the state. This would free the churches from their eternal worries about money, even if the level of their supply would of course be different from today. But it would also offer Islam entirely new opportunities to gain a foothold in Europe and as a part of Europe. This would provide an external framework in which denominations and religions could meet anew in the "space of reasons" in an exchange of arguments and views.

### Conclusion.

Today, the times for liberal Christianity seem more unfavourable than ever. Recent events show us a world in which hatred of the West and of all forms of liberalism, of freedom and of mutual respect, has taken such violent forms as we would never have expected before. But perhaps it is also the time in which we need more liberal Christianity than ever. An Ukrainian intellectual has very aptly described the current situation: the vacation of the West is over. We could also say: the vacation of liberal Christianity is over. It is necessary to step out of the whateverness into an attitude that stands up for its conviction with words and arguments. All people, regardless of their religion, are inhabitants of the cosmos. Liberal Christianity stands up for a religious cosmopolitanism. Despite their difference, people also meet in peaceful curiosity and exchange views of how they live in and with the mystery of our existence. This should be a common agreement among all true religions: whatever people experience as the mystery of existence and try to implement in their way of life, the mystery remains greater than all people can grasp of it.

This is the slightly edited text of the *Vrijzinnige Lezing* that professor Jörg Lauster (Systematic theologian at the LMU Munich) gave in the Geerte Kerk in Utrecht on 25 March 2022