

“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of ‘Reverence for Life’”
Part II: “The Sanctuary of Thought”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
February 10, 2008
Bruce Bode

Quotation for Order of Service

“Nothing but what is born of thought and addresses itself to thought can be a spiritual power affecting the whole of mankind.”

(Albert Schweitzer)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

Our responsive reading today is taken from Albert Schweitzer’s autobiography published 75 years ago in 1933. The content of this responsive reading seems remarkably modern to me, even if some of the examples are a bit dated.

I might also mention, since this responsive reading has to do with independent thought, that these responsive readings are not meant as creedal or semi-creedal statements, or statements of faith. On the contrary, they are meant to stir thought, feeling, and reflection, and to bring another perspective related to the sermon of the day.

MINISTER: Humans today are exposed to influences bent on robbing them of all confidence in their own thinking.

CONGREGATION: The spirit of spiritual dependence to which they are called to surrender is in everything they hear or read.

MINISTER: It is in the people whom they meet every day; it is in the parties and associations they have claimed as their own.

CONGREGATION: It pervades all the circumstances of their lives.

MINISTER: From every side and in the most varied ways it is dinned into them that the truths and convictions they need for life must be taken from the associations that have rights over them.

CONGREGATION: The spirit of the age never lets people come to themselves.

MINISTER: Over and over again convictions are forced upon them in the same way as, by means of the electric advertisements which flare in the streets of every large town, any company which has sufficient capital to get itself established, exercises pressure on them at every step to induce them to buy their boot polish or their soup tablets.

CONGREGATION: By the spirit of the age, then, humans today are forced into skepticism about their own thinking in order to make them receptive to truth that comes to them from authority.

MINISTER: To all this constant influence they cannot make the resistance that is desirable because they are overworked and distracted beings without power to concentrate.

CONGREGATION: Self-confidence is also diminished through the pressure exercised upon them by the huge and daily increasing mass of knowledge.

MINISTER: They are no longer in a position to take in as something which they have grasped all the new discoveries constantly announced; they have to accept them as fact although they do not understand them.

CONGREGATION: This being their relation to scientific truth, they are tempted to acquiesce in the idea that in matters of thought also their judgment cannot be trusted.

(Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, adapted, pp. 220-221, tr. C.T. Campion; first published in 1933)

A Time For All Ages

This morning I will be talking to your parents about a man who was very important in my own life, a man by the name of Albert Schweitzer.

About sixty or seventy years ago – long before you were born – he became known as a great humanitarian because he brought modern medical treatment to people in the rain forests of Africa who had did not have such medicine.

He was also famous because he was a great thinker. He believed it was very important to think – to think about life, to ask questions about whatever you don't understand so that you can figure out what is good and how to live.

Here are some pictures of Albert Schweitzer providing medical aid, and here are some pictures of him thinking. [pictures from [The World of Albert Schweitzer](#)]

When Albert Schweitzer was a young boy, before he had ever gone to school, his father told stories from the Bible, including a story of a great flood that was said to cover the whole world, a great flood caused by a rain of forty days and forty nights that rose higher than the mountains, and which destroyed everything on earth except a man by the name of Noah, his family, and the creatures he had with taken with him on a boat called an “ark.”

But when young Albert heard this story he had some questions about it. Many years later in wrote about some of the questions he had. Here's what he said:

Before I began going there [to school] my father had told me many of the Bible stories, among them that of the Flood. As that summer happened to be a very wet one, I surprised him with the remark, “Why, it must have been raining here now for nearly forty days and forty nights, but the water has not yet got up to the houses, much less to the tops of the mountains!” “Yes, well at that time,” he replied, “at the beginning of the world, it didn't rain just in drops, but like water pouring out of buckets.” This explanation cleared my ideas. So when our teacher in school told us the story of the Flood, I waited patiently as far as the point where she ought to mention the difference between the rain then and the rain now, but she passed this over altogether. Then I could restrain myself no longer. “Teacher,” I called out from my place, “you must tell the story correctly,” and without giving her time to tell me to keep quiet, I continued, “You must say that in those days it didn't rain in drops, but like pouring water out of buckets.”

([Memoirs of Childhood and Youth](#), pp. 13-14)

So those were some of young Albert Schweitzer's questions about the great flood. And maybe you have some questions. These you can ask your parents about. Off you go now to your classes.

Reading

My sermon today, titled “The Sanctuary of Thought,” is the second in a six-part sermon series – seven if you count Good Friday – on Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of “Reverence for Life.”

Schweitzer argued that his religious philosophy of “Reverence for Life,” was based on thought, rational thought, the kind of thought he found most clearly demonstrated in the

Renaissance and Enlightenment periods of history. He felt that since that time the level of rational thought had fallen badly, and with it civilization, World War I being the clear example.

For Schweitzer, the philosophers of an age set the tone for the spirit of the age. “The ultimate vocation of philosophy,” he said, “is to be the guide and guardian of the general reason,...”

(Albert Schweitzer, The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 12)

He once wrote that: “[Immanuel] Kant and [Georg] Hegel have commanded millions who had never read a line of their writings, and who did not even know that they were obeying their orders.”

(Albert Schweitzer, The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 82)

But the philosophers of his era, Schweitzer felt, were not doing their jobs, or there were not enough of them doing their jobs, to keep civilization on track. They had retreated from the rational and ethical thought of earlier years, and the result was the kind of *Realpolitik*, of which we know plenty about in our time, a kind of philosophy interested only in so-called practical results, in material factors, and not spiritual, ethical factors.

Thus, Schweitzer advocated a “new rationalism.” In 1931, with the spirit of *Realpolitik* sweeping Germany, Schweitzer wrote these words:

In a period which regards as absurd and little worth, as antiquated and long ago left far behind, whatever it feels to be in any way akin to rationalism or free thought, and which even mocks at the vindication of unalienable human rights which was secured in the eighteenth century, I acknowledge myself to be one who places all his confidence in rational thinking. I venture to say to our generation that it must not think it has done with rationalism because the rationalism of the past had to give first place to romanticism and then to *Realpolitik* which is coming to dominate the spiritual sphere as well as the material. When it has run the gauntlet of the follies of this universal *Realpolitik* and has thereby got itself into deeper and deeper misery, both spiritual and material, it will discover at last that there is nothing for it to do but trust itself to a new rationalism, deeper and more efficient than the old, and in that seek its salvation.

Renunciation of thinking is a declaration of spiritual bankruptcy. Where there is no longer a conviction that men [people] can get to know the truth by their own thinking, skepticism begins. Those who work to make our age skeptical in this way, do so in the expectation that, as a result of denouncing all hope of self-discovered truth, men [people] will end by accepting as truth what is forced upon them with authority and by propaganda.”

(Out of My Life and Thought, pp. 222-223)

“THE SANCTUARY OF THOUGHT”

Introduction

Last Sunday I briefly introduced you to the person of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, and in particular to some of his academic accomplishments, which were ground-breaking in three different fields: theology, philosophy, and music.

Then at the age of thirty, to the surprise and dismay of family and friends, but following a secret vow he had made to himself at age twenty-one, he announced he was beginning the study of medicine to become a physician so that he might devote himself to humanity in some direct form of service, namely, to bring modern medical aid to one of the most disease-ridden areas on the globe, the sweltering rain forests of Equatorial Africa.

Though he was well-known prior to going to Africa because of his academic successes, it was in Africa that he gained a world-wide prominence – something like that of a more recent, Mother Teresa – a prominence that was related not only to his humanitarian service in medicine, but also to his work to promote nuclear disarmament and world peace, for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. It was also in Africa that he came to develop the religious philosophy he named, “Reverence for Life,” which was a significant part of his fame.

This morning, in part two of this sermon series, I will speak of the basis for his religious philosophy. But before I do so, I’d like to talk a little about my use of the term “religious philosophy.”

The term “religious philosophy”

In examining Schweitzer’s world- and-life view, it seems to me that neither “philosophy” nor “religious view” by itself is broad enough to describe his position.

You might call his approach a “philosophy” in that Schweitzer regards it as a product of thought, not a result of revelation. Further, his position is entirely this-worldly and naturalistic. And since religion, particularly in the West, is usually associated with *supernatural* concepts, it might seem plausible to call Schweitzer’s life-stance a “philosophy.”

But that, it seems to me, would be incomplete, because it touches too much of what we usually associate with religion. Schweitzer names his approach “Reverence for Life.” And even though it’s concrete life, here and now, and upon this earth, he calls upon us to have “reverence” for it. And he means “reverence” in the fullest and deepest sense of the word. He wants to include all the qualities of mystery, sacredness, and shuddering awe that are associated with the word.

And so, because “reverence” is properly associated with religion, it is appropriate to add the word “religious” to “philosophy,” even though I realize that “religious philosophy” is a bit cumbersome.

Schweitzer himself recognized that his approach of “Reverence for Life” was more than a philosophy, more than an ethic, and more than simply a way of action. The ethic of reverence for life, he said, “...profound, universal, has the significance of a religion. It *is* religion.”

(“Religion in Modern Civilization,” The Christian Century, November 28, 1934, p. 1521)

Again he said, “In reverence for life religious feeling lies before us in its most elemental and profound form.”

(from Civilization and Ethics, quoted in, Albert Schweitzer: An Anthology, ed., Charles R. Joy, p. 261)

For myself, I admit, I invariably have trouble delineating between philosophy and religion. Or, rather, more accurately, I should say, I find the two overlapping, intermingling, and co-joining.

I can distinguish between the two following, for example, the definition of philosopher of religion, Frederick Ferre, who says that: “Philosophy is one’s way of *thinking* most comprehensively and critically, “ whereas, “Religion is one’s way of *valuing* most comprehensively and intensively.”

(Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion, p. 69)

But though the distinction can be made, in life the two go together, and certainly so in Schweitzer’s “Reverence for Life.” Jackson Lee Ice, one of Schweitzer’s finest interpreters, writes:

Schweitzer openly admits that it is characteristic of him not to make a “sufficiently sharp distinction between religious and philosophical thinking.” According to him, the two are and must remain inexorably fixed in man[*kind*]’s quest for life and truth. Philosophy without religious concern is sterile, and religion without philosophical thought is blind. Despite the obvious and often erudite distinctions that can be made between philosophy and religion, they are of importance only to scholars, and in the long run are not essential when it comes to performing the main tasks of deep reflection as we face the perennial problems of existence. And this, obviously, is Schweitzer’s concern.

(Jackson Lee Ice, Schweitzer: Prophet of Radical Theology, p. 20)

Authority in seeking a religious philosophy

Now I turn to the “perennial problems of existence” and the concern to find a world-and-life view, a religious philosophy for ourselves. Can we discover a direction in universal

process in which we can take our place? Can we find a world-view upon which we can build a life-view? These will be our fundamental questions.

How do we go about seeking answers to those questions? What will be our authority in dealing with and answering these questions?

For Schweitzer the authority was thought – human thought, human reason.

For Schweitzer religion and thought, religion and reason, belong together – that is to say, one's highest ideals, deepest values, broadest beliefs, and ultimate allegiances are to be grounded in thought, and they are to be subject to human reason. Religion has to make sense to the rational mind; it has to “stand to reason.”

And so, for Schweitzer, the authority in religion, as in the rest of life, is thought – rich, deep, embracing, penetrating, concentrated thought.

A debate

With regard to the authority of thought in religion, there comes to my mind a little story about the minister who gave me a chance in the liberal ministry, namely, Dr. Duncan Littlefair, a person who had visited Schweitzer (in the 1950's, I believe). He went first to Africa to see him there, but found Schweitzer had just gone to Europe for a visit, so Littlefair followed him there. (Don't know who set up their travel schedule.)

Anyway, long before I had begun working with Dr. Littlefair, he engaged in debates with scholars of the orthodox community. In one of these debates, his opponent, who later became a good friend, asked him what his authority was for a given opinion that he had put forward. His debate opponent was expecting him to quote some scholar, biblical proof text, or whatever, so that he could counter and refute those authorities with authorities of his own. So what was Littlefair's authority? “I thought about it.”

Now, how do you respond to that in a debate? It totally threw his debating opponent off-stride. So the story goes.

The current divorce of thought and religion

Indeed, in our day, the idea of human thought and human reason being an authority in religion is almost lost. In our day, the divorce between religion and thought, religion and reason, is almost absolute. It's almost as though if you are a thinking person, you will have nothing to do with religion; and if you have something to do with religion, you can't be a thinking person...

... as, for example, in our current political campaigns: “Oh, that's a religious belief, don't touch that. It's private, it's personal, and it has nothing to do with thought or reason, and thus is not subject to questioning ...

... as if “religious beliefs” are in a world of their own; as if “religious beliefs” are all of the same value and make no difference in policy decisions.

So: call something a “religious belief” and you get a free pass on it – “eh, eh, religious belief, sorry, you can’t ask me about that.”

Reformation versus Enlightenment

The split between religion and thought grew larger in the early 1900’s following World War I, which had come as a severe blow to the optimistic religious ideals that sought to build a Kingdom of God upon earth.

In the aftermath of World War I, neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth sought a new foundation for life, in his case a return to the Protestant orthodoxy of the 16th century reformers like Luther and Calvin, with the authority being the revealed Word of God, as witnessed to in the biblical scriptures.

Karl Barth reports a conversation with Albert Schweitzer in which Schweitzer said to him, “You and I started with the same problem, the disintegration of modern thought; but whereas you went back to the Reformation, I went back to the Enlightenment.”

(George Seaver. Albert Schweitzer: Christian Revolutionary, p. 45)

And Schweitzer writes that Karl Barth:

...whom I, personally value greatly ... is the most modern theologian, because he lives most in the spirit of our age.

Barth, contends Schweitzer:

...more than any other has that contempt for thinking which is characteristic of our age. [He is talking here of the early- and middle parts of the 20th century.] He dares to say that religion has nothing to do with thinking.... He says a religious person does not concern himself with what happens to the world. The idea of the Kingdom of God [upon this earth] plays no part with him. He mocks at what he calls “civilized Protestantism.” The church must leave the world to itself. All that concerns the church is the preaching of revealed truth. Religion is turned aside from the world.”

(Albert Schweitzer, Indian Thought and Its Development, p. ix)

Schweitzer, for his part, treasured religion and Christianity *because* of thought, not in spite of it. Its great commandment of love and mercy, which was expanded by Enlightenment thinking to oppose “slavery, witch burning, torture, and all other ancient and medieval forms of inhumanity,” was the ideal Schweitzer that held to. Schweitzer believed that the free thinking person assimilates the truths of a religion more easily than the one who receives the religion without thought and reasoning. He writes:

I know that I myself owe it to thinking that I was able to retain my faith in religion and Christianity.

The man [person] who thinks stands up freer in the face of traditional religious truth than the man [person] who does not, but the profound and imperishable elements contained in it he assimilates with much more effect than the latter.

(Out of My Life and Thought, p. 238)

Thus, for Schweitzer, religion and thought belong to each other. As he says:

From my youth I have held the conviction that all religious truth must in the end be capable of being grasped as something that stands to reason. I, therefore, believe that Christianity, in the contest with philosophy and with other religions, should not ask for exceptional treatment, but should be in the thick of the battle of ideas, relying solely on the power of its own inherent truth.

(Christianity and the Religions of the World, pp. 1819)

An interview

In his old age, Schweitzer, having lived through two world wars, having been a prisoner of war, and having seen what he regarded as the erosion of humanitarian values at every turn, still put his confidence in thought. Listen to this interesting interview by a journalist visiting Schweitzer in Africa when Schweitzer was 88 years old. (This would be in 1963.) The interviewer is questioning whether Schweitzer's ideas would be different if he had lived in a large city instead of spending so much of his time in the rain forests of Africa:

Journalist: Do you think that if you had spent these fifty years in France instead of Africa, your thought would have followed the same course?

A.S.: The same, it would be the same.

Journalist: You don't think you would have been influenced by the outside, and well, by the pressure of civilization ...?

A.S.: Civilization is morality ... the true civilization is spiritual, isn't it?

Journalist: But the modern world exerts a pressure for which you condemn it.

A.S.: Pardon me?

Journalist: The modern world exerts a pressure on the individual that you condemn.

A.S.: I condemn it for not having respect for existence, the veneration of life.

Journalist: So, in the context of a large city, you think you might have avoided these external pressures?

A.S.: But I have lived in a large city, I lived for a fairly long time in Paris ... and men [people] are the same everywhere. I didn't feel pressure, no.

Journalist: So, according to you, if, instead of having spent these fifty years here, you had spent them in Paris, you would still have arrived at the same conclusions today?

A.S.: Oh! You mean a troubled world could disturb one's philosophical thought? Thought is always thought, it is born as thought, it remains thought.

(Erica Anderson, The Schweitzer Album, p. 107)

Thus, for Schweitzer, the authority in religion, and the authority for life in general, was the authority of one's own thought, reason, and experience – not the authority of received tradition, of past revelations, of scriptures, of creeds, of councils, of bishops, of popes; but the authority of one's own deep thinking. For Schweitzer, everything must be subject to the review of thought, of human reason.

As individuals, obviously, we do not have the time or the resources to examine everything ourselves, and must rely on the research of others. But we must never abdicate the right to question, to doubt, to subject any opinion to the bar of human thought and reason.

Playing with the dual meanings of “faith,” you might say that Schweitzer put his faith in thought, not in faith.

Characteristics of thought

Let me conclude by giving you two qualities or characteristics of the kind of thought that Schweitzer advocated.

First, it must be elemental.

“Elemental thinking,” asserts Schweitzer, “is that which starts from the fundamental questions of man [kind] to the universe, about the meaning of life, and about the nature of goodness.” (Out of My Life and Thought, p. 174)

He says:

Mere reflection about the meaning of life has already value in itself.... How much would already be accomplished towards the improvement of our present circumstances [this was published in 1923] if only we would all give up three minutes every evening to gazing up into the infinite world of the starry heavens and

meditating on it, or if in taking part in a funeral procession we would reflect on the enigma of life and death, instead of engaging in thoughtless conversation as we follow behind the coffin! The ideals, born of folly and passion, of those who make public opinion and direct public events, would have no more power over men [humans] if they once began to reflect about infinity and the finite, existence and dissolution, and thus learnt to distinguish between true and false standards, between those which possess real value and those which do not.

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, pp. 102-03)

The aim of thinking for Schweitzer is so that “one can get hold of oneself.” And Schweitzer is critical of academic philosophy for not tending to the basic, elemental questions of life. He lodges a complaint against academic philosophy, saying that it is:

...becoming less and less elemental, losing all connection with the elemental questions which man [humans] must ask of life and of the world. More and more it [has] found satisfaction in the handling of philosophic questions that [are] merely academic, and in expert mastery of philosophic technique.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. x)

This was something I felt when I was a college student. I remember my eager anticipation at the prospect of taking philosophy classes in college. “Now,” I thought, “I will really have the chance to explore my big questions with professors who have given themselves to the contemplation of such matters.”

But how disappointed I was to find that mostly the philosophy classes were a kind of history of philosophy and not an actual grappling with the questions themselves. Only in one philosophy class – this of all things on medieval philosophy – did the professor begin by saying, “Okay, in this class we are going to ‘do philosophy.’” And how I rejoiced at that!

So, too, Schweitzer is critical of modern science. Again, writing in the 1920’s, he says:

Today thought gets no help from science, and the latter [science] stands facing it [thought] independent and unconcerned. The newest scientific knowledge may be allied with an entirely unreflecting view of the universe.

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 72)

Looking longingly to the past, particularly the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods, he writes:

Once every man [person] of science was also a thinker who counted for something in the general spiritual life of his generation. Our age has discovered how to divorce knowledge from thought, with the result that we have, indeed, a science which is free, but hardly any science left which reflects.

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 72)

Fearless thought

A second and final characteristic of thought for Schweitzer I will mention is that thought must be willing to push through its fear and face the hard truths of reality, whatever those truths might be. Thought to be truly rational must be grounded in reality, and to be grounded in reality, it must be willing to search everywhere. He writes:

Thinking which keeps contact with reality must look up to the heavens, it must look over the earth, and dare to direct its gaze to the barred windows of a mental asylum. Look to the stars and understand how small the earth is in the universe. Look upon the earth and know how minute mankind is upon it. The earth existed long before mankind came upon it. In the history of the universe, mankind is on earth for but a second. Who knows but that the earth will circle round the sun once more without mankind upon it? Therefore we must not place mankind in the center of the universe. And our gaze must be fixed on the barred windows of a mental asylum, in order that we may remember the terrible fact that the mental and spiritual are also liable to destruction.”

(“Religion in Modern Civilization,” p. 1520)

Schweitzer believed that:

Since the essential nature of the spiritual is truth, every new truth means ultimately something won. Truth is under all circumstances more valuable than non-truth.... Even if it comes in a guise which piety finds strange and at first makes difficulties for her, the final result can never mean injury; it can only mean greater depth.”

(Out of My Life and Thought, p. 51)

But, it may be objected, perhaps we will end in agnosticism; perhaps we will have to confess that we cannot discover any meaning or direction in the universe in which our lives can find a purpose. Schweitzer replies as follows, and with this I end:

If thought is to set out on its journey unhampered, it must be prepared for anything, even for arrival at intellectual agnosticism. But even if our will-to-action is destined to wrestle endlessly and unavailingly with an agnostic view of the universe and of life, still this painful disenchantment is better for it than persistent refusal to think out its position at all. For this disenchantment does, at any rate, mean that we are clear as to what we are doing.

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 104)

In two weeks

In two weeks, under the sermon title, “The Struggle for Truth,” I will examine what Schweitzer’s search for truth through rational thought uncovers and discovers, and whether he finds a world-view upon which a life-view can be built. You may be surprised by his answer.

Benediction

May peace be in our hearts,
And understanding in our minds,
May courage steel our wills,
And the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on February 10, 2008. The sermon, "The Sanctuary of Thought" is the second of seven planned on "Albert Schweitzer's Religious Philosophy of 'Reverence for Life.'" The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)