

**Albert Schweitzer's Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life**  
**Part III: The Struggle for Truth**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**February 24, 2008**  
**Bruce Bode**

**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**

My sermon this morning is titled "The Struggle for Truth." Our responsive reading consists of statements by Albert Schweitzer related to truth, sincerity, and the life of the spirit.

MINISTER: The beginning of all spiritual life of any real value is courageous faith in truth and open confession of the same.

CONGREGATION: The most profound religious experience, too, is not alien to thought, but must be capable of derivation from this if it is to be given a true and deep basis.

MINISTER: Not less than the will-to-truth must be the will-to-sincerity. Only an age which can show the courage of sincerity can possess truth which works as a spiritual force within it.

CONGREGATION: Sincerity is the foundation of the spiritual life.

MINISTER: The deepest thinking is humble. It is only concerned that the flame of truth which it keeps alive should burn with the strongest and purest heat; it does not trouble itself about the distance to which its brightness penetrates.

CONGREGATION: If thought is to set out on its journey unhampered, it must be prepared for anything, even for arrival at intellectual agnosticism.

MINISTER: 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.

CONGREGATION: Since the essential nature of the spiritual is truth, every new truth ultimately means something won. Truth is, under all circumstances, more valuable than non-truth.

MINISTER: The highest honor one can show to a system of thought is to test it ruthlessly with a view to discovering how much truth it contains, just as steel is assayed to try its strength.

CONGREGATION: Truth has no special time of its own. Its hour is now – always, and indeed then most truly when it seems most unsuitable to actual circumstances.

(Albert Schweitzer, statements from: The Decay and Restoration of Civilization; Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography; Indian Thought and Its Development; and (On the Edge of the Primeval Forest))

## **Reading**

What is the extent and essence of our knowledge of reality of the universe? And what can this knowledge tell us about its direction and purpose and of our own place in it? This morning I will be giving Albert Schweitzer's answer to these questions.

My reading is from a little book that I have read to you before in this series, a small classic on childhood titled, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, which consists largely of memories related by Schweitzer to a friend when Schweitzer was in his late forties. In this morning's reading, Schweitzer recounts some memories of his education from his older youth, the time of his adolescence.

As soon as, thanks to Dr. Wehmann, I had given up my day-dreaming, I continued to be a fairly good scholar, without rising to sit among the best. It was for history alone that I had any real ability: in languages and mathematics my attainments did but correspond to the amount of industry that I applied to them. But history I mastered without any effort, a result for which I had partly to thank my passion for reading, which, as time went on, had gradually concentrated itself on historical works. It was fortunate for me that Professor Kaufmann, who taught us history, was a distinguished original worker in his subject, and in the higher forms he treated me more like a friend than like a pupil. I remained in constant communication with him till his death.

After history it was the lessons in science which took the strongest hold of me. We had in Dr. Forster an excellent teacher, though it is true that in Physics and Chemistry he was in no way distinguished. His special subject was Geology, and he once obtained a long leave of absence in order to carry out some geological investigations in (I think) Sumatra. When he worked out chemical or physical formulae on the blackboard, it was easy to see that he had learnt them up himself for the lesson. That, however, did not diminish his authority with us; his teaching was good because he had prepared it well. Unfortunately, the number of lesson-hours devoted to science was at that time far too small.

The science teaching had something peculiarly stimulating for me. I could not get rid of the feeling that it was never made clear to us how little we really understand of the processes of Nature. For the scientific schoolbooks I felt a positive hatred. Their confident explanations – carefully shaped and trimmed with a view to be learnt by heart, and, as I soon observed, already somewhat out of date – satisfied me in no respect. It seemed to laughable that the wind, the rain, the snow, the hail, the formation of clouds, the spontaneous combustion of hay, the trade-winds, the Gulf Stream, thunder and lightning, should all have found their proper explanation. The formation of drops of rain, of snowflakes, and of hailstones had always been a special puzzle to me. It hurt me to think that we never acknowledge the absolutely mysterious character of Nature, but always speak so confidently of explaining her, whereas all that we have really done is to go into fuller and more complicated descriptions, which only make the mysterious more mysterious than ever. Even at that age, it became clear to me that what we label Force of “Life” remains in its own essential nature for ever inexplicable.

Thus I fell gradually into a new habit of dreaming about the thousand and one miracles that surround us, though fortunately the new habit did not, like my earlier thoughtless day-dreams, prevent me from working properly. The habit, however, is with me still, and gets stronger. If during a meal I catch sight of the light broken up in a glass jug of water into the colours of the spectrum, I can at once become oblivious of everything around me, and unable to withdraw my gaze from the spectacle.

Thus did love for history and love for science go hand in hand, and I gradually recognized that the historical process too is full of riddles, and that we must abandon for ever the hope of really understanding the past. In this department also, all that our faculties allow us to do is to produce more or less thorough descriptions.

(Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, pp. 51-52)

## “THE STRUGGLE FOR TRUTH”

### Summary from two weeks ago

This is part three in a sermon series on Albert Schweitzer’s religious philosophy of Reverence for Life, a series in which by examining the religious philosophy of an outstanding twentieth century thinker who was well-known both as a theologian and philosopher, as well as a great humanitarian, we have the opportunity to consider our own religious philosophy and world-and-life view.

And, of course, I’m not just pulling Schweitzer’s name out of a hat. As I’ve indicated, Schweitzer’s writing and life have deeply affected my own, and my dissertation toward a Master’s of Theology degree some thirty-five years ago was written on his religious philosophy of Reverence for Life.

In my last sermon in this series from two weeks ago, under the title “The Sanctuary of Thought,” I spoke about the importance of thought and reason for Schweitzer. For him religion and reason, religion and thought, belonged together. They ought not to stand in opposition to each other; rather, the truths and ideals of religion ought to “stand to reason.”

This is to say that one’s most encompassing beliefs, highest ideals, deepest values, and ultimate allegiances ought to be grounded in thought and subject to human reason.

This is to say that one’s authority in religion and faith should ultimately be based on one’s own deep reflection and experience rather than on inherited scriptures, creeds, confessions or the authority of church councils, priests, bishops, or popes.

This is not in any way to disparage the value of received tradition or past revelations of truth, but simply to signify for a person’s religious philosophy to be most real it must pass through the refining fire of individual exploration and reflection. Wrote Schweitzer:

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

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 86)

And again:

All deep religious feeling becomes thoughtful, all truly profound thinking becomes religious.

(“Liberal Christianity,” Le Monde Religieux, p. 41)

So that’s a quick summary of my sermon from two weeks ago.

**What is thought after?**

And now today, in this third sermon, I look at what Schweitzer believed could be discovered through observation and thoughtful reflection. That is, as we examine this universe in which we have somehow appeared – as we probe outward into the far reaches of the heavens, as we penetrate deeply into the tiniest particles of being upon this earth – what can we learn of world-process that will tell us how we should live our lives?

Please notice that the knowledge we seek is not simple curiosity. What we are seeking is an overall understanding of the whole of reality and of our place in it. We want to find out about the universe so that we can, as Schweitzer says, “get hold of ourselves.” We are trying to find answers to certain elemental questions with which, as Schweitzer says:

...each one of us is newly confronted every morning, namely, what meaning and what value is to be ascribed to our life. What am I in the world? What is my purpose in it? What may I hope for in this world? I do not want to consider my existence merely as one which rises and perishes among the billions and billions of beings which constitute the universe, but as a life which has a value, if I comprehend it and live it according to true knowledge.”

(Christianity and the Religions of the World, p. 37)

Thus, we are not coming to this search as blank slates. What we are looking for in our search for truth and knowledge is a world-view upon which we can build a life-view. We come to the universe predisposed to find a direction, meaning, and purpose in it in which we can find and take our place. We believe, even before we think about it (or, perhaps, especially before we think about it), that our life is meaningful and significant. And we want to be shown from the universe how this is so.

Additionally, we want to believe that this universe has ethical aims, that at its heart there is an urge toward “goodness” that matches our own notion of “goodness.” As we begin our search of the universe we are predisposed to discover a world-view that is both affirming of our place in it and of our ethical ideals and sensibilities.

### **What does our search for truth discover?**

And now the question: Do we find such support? Does the knowledge gained by our observations of the earth and the wider universe confirm our inner desires for it? Is the universe disposed as we are? Or are we somehow at odds with it? And how could that be, since we ourselves are products of this universe?

As we begin our search, Schweitzer warns us – and let this be a little foreshadowing – that we must be prepared for anything, even for the arrival at intellectual agnosticism – a perpetual not-knowing. But for Schweitzer a truthful agnosticism is surer ground upon which to stand than a fudged optimism.

So what does Schweitzer discover in his exploration of reality? Does his examination of world-process reveal a purpose and meaning for humankind? Here in several eloquent statements is Schweitzer’s answer:

First, like the author of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, or like the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century French existentialists – Jean-Paul Sartre was a younger cousin of Schweitzer’s; he used to push Jean-Paul around in his pram – Schweitzer notes the disappointment, pain, and tenuousness of existence which accompanies the human generations:

Life attracts us ... with a thousand expectations, and fulfills hardly one of them. And the fulfilled expectation is almost a disappointment, for only anticipated pleasure is really pleasure; in pleasure which is fulfilled its opposite is already stirring. Unrest, disappointment and pain are our lot in the short span of time which lies between our entrance on life and our departure from it. What is spiritual is in a dreadful state of dependence on our bodily nature. Our existence is at the mercy of meaningless happenings and can be brought to an end by them at any moment. The will-to-live gives me an impulse to action, but the action is just as if I wanted to plough the sea, and sow in the furrows. What did those who worked before me effect? What significance in the endless chain of world-happenings have their efforts had? With all its illusive promises, the will-to-live only means to mislead me into prolonging my existence, and allowing to enter on existence other beings to whom the same miserable lot has been assigned as to myself, so that the game may go on and on without end.

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. 209-210)

And not only do individual lives continually hang in the balance, but the life of the entire species is tenuous, and even the continued existence of the our planet is uncertain. Says Schweitzer – he was writing here in the 1920’s:

The hopelessness of the attempt to find the meaning of life within the meaning of the universe is shown first of all by the fact that in the course of nature there is no purposiveness to be seen in which the activities of humans, and of humankind as a whole, could in any way intervene. On one of the smaller among the millions of heavenly bodies there have lived for a short space of time human beings. For how long will they continue to live? Any lowering or raising of the temperature of the earth [which we are now beginning to face big-time], any change in the inclination of the axis of their planet, a rise in the level of the ocean, or a change in the composition of the atmosphere, can put an end to their existence. Or the earth itself may fall, as so many other heavenly bodies have fallen, a victim to some cosmic catastrophe.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 204)

And if we cannot even find a meaning for mankind upon this earth, how much less within this vast universe. Schweitzer writes:

We are entirely ignorant of what significance we have for the earth. How much less then may we presume to try to attribute to the infinite universe a meaning which has us for its object, or which can be explained in terms of our existence.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 204)

Indeed, when we consider the immensity of the universe, we must confess that humankind is insignificant. The world began, as it were, yesterday. It may end tomorrow. Life has existed in the universe but a brief second. And certainly human life can hardly be considered the goal of the universe. Its margin of existence is always precarious. Study of the geologic periods shows that. So does the battle against disease. When one has seen whole populations annihilated by sleeping sickness, as I have [– this was as a medical doctor working in Gabon, Africa –] one ceases to imagine that human life is nature's goal.

(“The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” p. 226)

And, then finally, not only is humankind not the goal of the earth, nor the earth the goal of the universe, but it is impossible to see what goal, if any, the universe has. Writes Schweitzer:

It is not ... merely the huge disproportion between the universe and humankind which makes it impossible for us to give the aims and objects of humankind a logical place in those of the universe. Any such attempt is made useless beforehand by the fact that we fail to succeed in discovering any general purposiveness in the course of nature. Whatever we do find of purposiveness in the world is never anything but an isolated instance.

In the production and maintenance of some definite form of life, nature does sometimes act purposively in a magnificent way. But in no way does she ever seem intent on uniting these instances of purposiveness which are directed to single objects into a collective purpose. She never undertakes to let life coalesce with life to form a collective life. She is wonderfully creative force, and at the same time senselessly destructive force. We face her absolutely perplexed. What is full of meaning within the meaningless, the meaningless within what is full of meaning: that is the essential nature of the universe.

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. 204-205)

So this is Schweitzer's verdict. Our efforts to find a direction in the exterior universe about us that would match our interior desire for direction and purpose does not succeed.

And Schweitzer believes that those who find such a purpose in history or world process – such as Socialism, or Marxism, or Hegelianism – are simply imposing their inner reality upon outer reality. It's simply wishful thinking; knowledge does not take us that far.

### **The disconnect between human ideals and external reality**

Schweitzer, of course, is not the first person to recognize that outer reality does not perfectly fit with our interior hopes and desires for it. As a matter of fact, as adults we feel the need to break the news of the realities of our existence slowly to our children so they won't be completely horrified and psychologically wiped out. We feed our children the truth of our existence with plenty of sweeteners, and just a bit at a time.

And as adolescents, when we begin to think for ourselves and try to match our inner ideals with the outer realities of the world, we often go through a period of questioning so severe as to wonder whether life is worth the living. Many adolescents are lost to life just as they are getting going.

And then when we turn to the religions of the world we find that many, if not most of them, maintain that the world as we know it has somehow come under the spell of dark or demonic forces, and that at some point there must have been something like a “Fall” – something must have gone wrong with the initial plan for this earth, because no divine creator who is intelligent, powerful, *and moral* could have *deliberately* set things up this way....

... which is to say that the only way most people find this life purposeful in an overall way is to theorize that this world is in the process of being saved or redeemed ...

... which is to say that this world as it exists and as we know it is not purposeful, and we can only imagine it to be purposeful when we believe it's in the process of being changed or is about to be changed.

So Schweitzer is not the first to recognize that there's a bit of speed bump between world-process and a life-view to be built upon it – actually, less a speed-bump and more an insurmountable wall.

For Schweitzer, none of these scenarios work: not the world-affirming schemes of secular socialisms – they are just wishful thinking – nor the world-denying schemes of religious orthodoxies that look to another future reality to solve the problem – these involve not only wishful thinking but also suspect speculation.

### **Schweitzer's solution**

So where does Schweitzer go with this?

Well, he cuts the link between world-view and life-view, and advocates that one quit worrying about whether or not world-process affirms your ethical desires for it. He says:

My solution of the problem is that we must make up our minds to renounce completely the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world. If we take it as it, it is impossible to attribute to it a meaning in which the aims and objects of mankind and of individual men [persons] have a meaning also. Neither world- and life-affirmation nor ethics can be founded on what our knowledge of the world can tell us about the world. In the world we can discover nothing of any purposive evolution in which our activities can acquire a meaning. Nor is the ethical to be discovered in any form in the world-process.

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. xiv-xv)

Schweitzer's solution is to let it all go. Forget trying to tie your life-view to a world-view. You will be disappointed, or you will fudge the facts, or you will come up with some speculative scheme that will not be connected to reality.

But now what? How do you live your life?

Well, says Schweitzer, let's pause. Let's let things go fallow for a bit. Let's leave the universe to itself for a time. Let's quit trying to bend world-process to match our interior process and, instead, let's consider that interior process itself.

Instead of searching outwardly, let's spend a little time considering the searcher itself. Let's consider the impulse within that has been driving this search?

What has it been looking for?

Why has it not been satisfied?

What has caused us to describe the universe in more loving terms than it really is?

And why have we been tempted to invent other worlds than this one?

Let the search be over, says Schweitzer. The mysterious impulse within us that has us in its grip is itself meaningful! The interior desire for life, and for growth, and for union with larger life is itself purposeful!

Our inner urge is the clue to the meaning of our life! Knowledge of world-process cannot take this away.

Now there is no room for despair since really the only reason we despaired in the first place was because the world did not confirm to our own inner standards for it.

So let the world go. Don't worry any longer about world-process in outer reality, but consider instead the reality within, and begin your meditation, your thought process, there.

And what is that most elemental urge upon which our thinking should begin its mediation? Says Schweitzer, and with this I conclude:

...if we ask, "What is the immediate fact of my consciousness? What do I self-consciously know of myself, making abstractions of all else, from childhood to old age? To what do I always return?" we find the simple fact of consciousness is this, I will to live. Through every stage of life, this is the one thing I know about myself. I do not say, "I am life;" for life continues to be a mystery too great to understand. I only know that I cling to it. I fear its cessation – death. I dread its diminution – pain. I seek its enlargement – joy.

(“The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” p. 227-228)

Thus, letting go of world-process as a foundation for a life-view, Schweitzer turns to the one searching and to what he considers to be the most immediate fact of consciousness, the will-to-live.”

In two weeks when I pick up this series again, I will explore what is contained for Schweitzer in the phrase “will-to-live.”

### **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.

### **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 24, 2008. The sermon, “The Struggle for Truth,” is the third 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.)