

## The Debacle of Liberalism

Will we return to the gospel or just merge into the cosmic woodwork?

Eternity Editorial

Only five years ago, headlines were announcing the death of God. It was the pinnacle of the great edifice known as liberal theology.

Today, at the dawn of 1972, it is quite obvious that God is still alive and well. Magazine articles are writing obituaries for liberal theology. The great edifice has collapsed.

One entire issue of *Context*, Martin Marty's keen and terse monthly commentary on the religious world, was devoted to "The Eclipse of Religious Liberalism." With Reinhold Niebuhr gone, Marty says, "There is a leadership shortage in liberalism." (Bultmann and Tillich have previously passed from the scene.)

With liberal-leaning executives being axed from denominational staff jobs by the money squeeze, they lack a platform from which to speak. Many liberals are forsaking the church altogether; for them it is either too conservative theologically, or too self-centered institutionally.

Pet causes of liberal theologians attract few big donors; and fewer books are aimed toward the liberal religious market.

Why? Marty blames the eclipse partly on the liberal theology (or secular theology) itself. He says, "At its heart there was a reductionism: 'How little baggage do I have to carry to be considered Christian?'"

"How does one come to terms with eternal destiny, ultimate questions, vital issues of meaning? Only a faith which addresses these concerns can continue to

produce courageous prophets and troops for a new movement." Marty notes that religious liberalism disdained such concerns.

As a result, when young people started asking ultimate questions, liberalism had no answers. Instead it could offer only despair. What else is left when you have declared that God is dead? When you've torn the Scriptures to shreds, debunked incarnate deity, and demythologized every historic doctrine—in short, when you have sold out to anti-supernaturalism, despair is inevitable.

To make matters worse, in recent years liberalism has been grasping at other religions—Buddhism, Islam, pantheism—in the effort to piece together a syncretistic world faith. The liberals' mood of despair fits in well with the fatalism and hopeless determinism of the East. Thus, liberalism, which in its nobler days boasted of the glory of man, now dehumanizes man and can think of nothing finer than to merge its victims into cosmic nothingness.

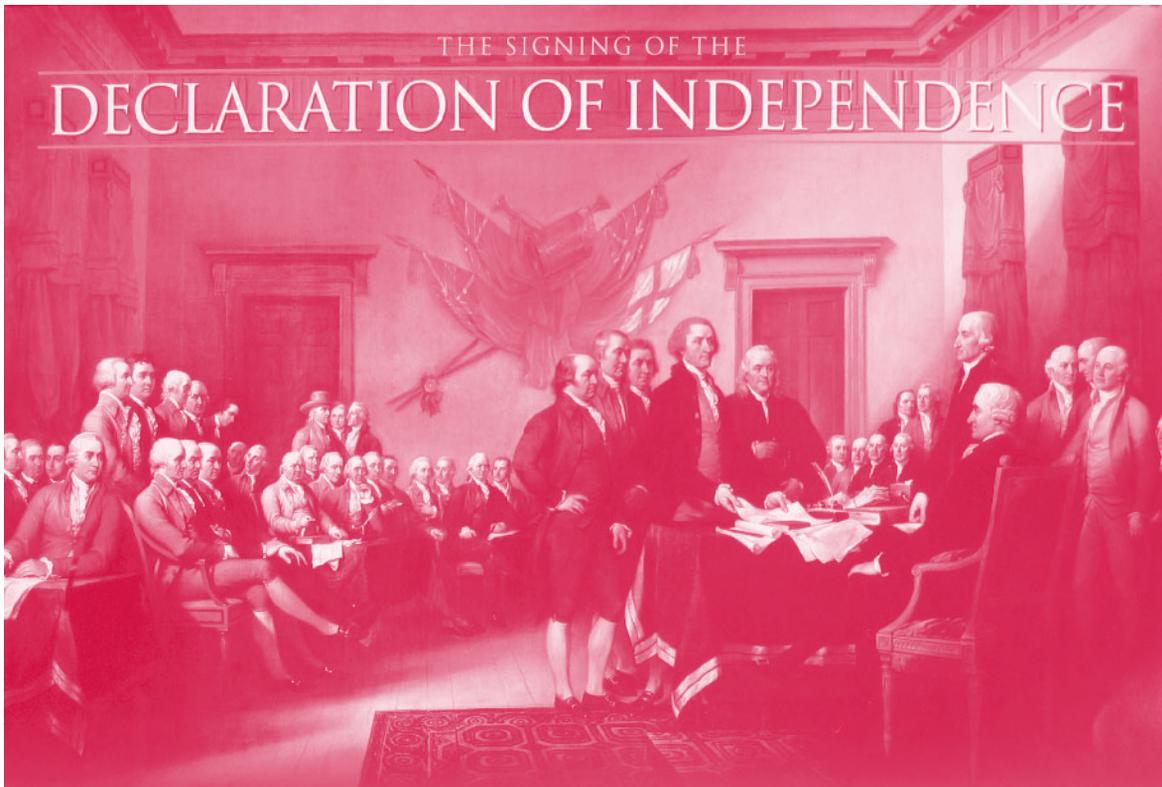
It is against this equivocating stance and gloomy mood that Professor Peter Berger's striking address to last fall's meeting of the Consultation on Church Union is to be seen. He reminds us that the Christian faith offers not a social but a *religious* message—and that it is a message of hope, not despair.

To be sure, liberalism has painted modern man into a corner. But he has an option: he can disappear into the cosmic

woodwork, or he can look up to the God who lives.

If modern man wishes to discover the meaning of life he must be challenged to return to the old message of hope, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that means looking up. Salvation is only from above.

(From Editorial, *Eternity January*, 1972 issue. Used with permission of Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Inc., [www.AllianceNet.org](http://www.AllianceNet.org), 2006)



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