

Democracy Versus Authority in Church (and State)

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This question of Democracy versus authority, whether in Church or State is getting to be quite an embarrassing matter. My impulse to select the Church end of the question is probably what the psychologists would call an escape decision. Whether in a totalitarian State or a totalitarian Church the most convenient thing to do with such a talent as Democracy or Freedom would be to bury it carefully. The lord of the totalitarian state might reward one handsomely. Not living in a totalitarian state we may still enjoy the privileges that inhere in the Massachusetts Convention of Congregational Ministers. I shall encroach upon the privilege thus enjoyed to change the wording of the subject to Freedom Versus Authority in Church, and leave the word democracy to cover such political mechanisms as provide for freedom. Also I speak as an advocate much more than as a critical examiner of all that is involved in this question.

Back of this attitude is the conviction that, during the past four hundred years and more, there has been a consistent development, very fundamental in its character, away from the authoritarian towards life and its institutions, and in the direction of freedom. The movement is from a world order dominated and controlled by the concepts of Authority, Revelation, and Obedience towards an order whose basis concepts are Freedom, Discovery, and Consent. If modern history has any meaning at all beyond economic struggle, it is intimately related to the principles of freedom and fellowship. The process is clear: from authoritarianism to freedom; from Revelation to Discovery; from blind Obedience to persuaded consent. The old order dies hard. In spite of atavistic tendencies, persistent survivals, and undisciplined variations the change goes on. Beneath contemporary storms and struggles

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of passion and reaction, there flows an irresistible current bearing even the most reluctant souls towards the order of Freedom, Discovery, and Consent.

The sweeping victory of these principles is, to me, the most amazing fact in modern history. In fact their very success creates the most difficult situation that we face. They are not ideals or dogmas created in the cloister or study and imposed on an obedient slave. They constitute the warp of the fabric of modern history that we have been weaving, they are the products of behavior, and are conditioned by the very nature of things. From the point of view of Religion and the church we have been so occupied with our own difficulties that we have failed to measure the scope and significance of the change. Because of our failure there we are at a great disadvantage in fulfilling our function now.

It is both fitting and pertinent that we bear in mind the background of the Congregational order and its experiences. The crafts that brought the Pilgrims and the Puritans to these shores were neither streamlined nor modern. But amid the furniture destined for fame as antiques, and the Calvinist Theology destined for oblivion, they managed to stow away some vital heresies. One of these heresies found its way into the disputation held in Zurich as early as 1523 when Peter [Simon] Stumph, pastor of Höngg made bold to declare that "the spirit of God must decide all matters of difference, and that each one must interpret the Bible for himself." One hundred years later that heresy came over with the Pilgrims. It has had a stormy and adventurous life, but it has grown in wisdom and stature, passed beyond the bounds set by Peter Stumph, and the Pilgrims, and claims and makes good its claims to freedom in all fields. The logic is clear. Once admit the possibility of private judgement; once create a necessity for private judgement; once create a situation such as the disintegration of the Holy Catholic Church of 1500 created, where men are compelled by necessity to make momentous decisions, and take the consequences, then and there the long and arduous journey towards freedom, discovery, and consent is begun. That which began as an assault on the authoritarian system of institution and dogma of the Middle ages, has broadened its scope. Galileo with his telescope, investigating, discovering, and reporting, with the long line of successors to follow after him, has broken all barriers. Speculation, travel, discovery, the researches of science

and the general acceptance of the method of science, the very modes of life which these changes have forced upon us; all these forces playing into one another's hands, supporting one another, have combined to accelerate the profound revolution that has been going on and is still in process. That which was heresy four hundred years ago has become the endowed institution of the modern world. In church, in state, in industry are numberless Galileos, small and great, investigating, discovering, reporting. Even political parties organize a brain trust to investigate and report. Make no mistake by underestimating the sweeping character of this amazing transformation. In principle as well as in reality it's an accomplished fact.

As one views the condition of the religious world in America, whether Protestant, or Catholic, one finds it hard to discover a trace of the Medieval authoritarian attitude. No one speaks with the authority of revelation. Even where the rags and tatters of authoritarianism are worn, they conceal the arch heresy of private judgement. Circumstances combine with expediency to force the appeal to private judgement, and to foster the concept of freedom in terms of individual liberty. Not even the atavistic antics of dictators and high-churchmen can long stay the process.

Prof. Bury² reminds us that "The conclusion (that coercion of thought is a mistake) is the most important ever reached by men." "Once the principle of Liberty of thought is accepted as a supreme condition of social progress, it passes from the sphere of ordinary expediency into the sphere of higher expediency which we call justice." To this point has the process arrived of incorporating in a coordinated social structure the principle of Liberty on a plain of higher expediency which we call justice.

It must be confessed that as one attempts to survey the present situation from the point of view of religion and the Church, he is faced with a great confusion. The very success and rapidity with which the revolution from authority and obedience to freedom and consent has taken place might be urged as an explanation of present conditions. In a large measure that is true. The danger of anarchy and social chaos cannot be denied. There seems to hover over us a warning voice such as prompted Lincoln to

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say that the nature cannot live half-slave and half-free. It will become wholly one or the other. The question still presses upon us as to whether or not, from the point of view of religion and the Churches, a substantial coordination on the basis of liberty and consent may be attained.

My second conviction is that a well-grounded understanding and a thorough application of the principles of Congregationalism, pure and undefiled, is the order of the day, little less than a mandate of history, not of one talent, or two, but of five talents to be used in the commerce and transactions of the religious thought and practice of the age.

Next to the scene in the cabin of the Mayflower where the Pilgrims organized themselves under the compulsion of necessity in a civil body politic by signing the Compact, the most appealing in the whole history of the New England Way, is the scene described in the letter written by Charles Gott, dated July 30, 1629, at Salem describing the process and justification for electing their pastor and teacher. "so Mr. Skelton was chosen pastor, and Mr. Higginson to be teacher; and they accepting the choice, Mr. Higginson, with three or four of the gravest members of the church, laid their hands on Mr. Skelton, using prayer therewith. This being done, there was imposition of hands on Mr. Higginson also."

Whatever may have been the influence of the Pilgrims through Dr. Fuller as factor in prompting this act, the fact remains that for one transcendent moment the ties of a superimposed and compelling authority were cut; the seat of authority was transferred to the hearts and minds of the believers consenting together in covenant. A church, created by members, existing prior to officers and preachers, beholden only to themselves and God, takes upon itself the responsibility and function of selecting and ordaining preacher and teacher. It's great event. Just reading those few lines of description always thrills me to the core. I see here not only the pattern of a church polity, about which the issues of life were concerned for three hundred years, but also the foundation principles which might become our guide in building for the age to come, when the concepts of Freedom, Discovery and Consent shall have superceded those of Authority, Revelation, and Obedience.

From this simple event, and from the lessons which the centuries have taught there are two or three conclusions that are pertinent to the question today. We cannot assume that the persons involved at Salem realized the full implications of their act, nor could they have foreseen the difficulties and problems into which the implication of their self-contained church would lead them. Soon they were destined to have neighbors, duly organized into similar congregational churches. What were to be their relations, one with another? How valid should be this claim of self-sufficiency if a neighboring church, organized under a covenant with the Lord, should happen to think differently and to act differently? They were all Calvinist in Theology, of one mind. What would happen if someone acting on the authority of the "inner calling" should vary from the Calvinist standard? All these searching questions put to them by the necessities of life submitted their congregational principles to severe test. Anne Hutchinson.³ Roger Williams, whose name still comes before the great and general court. Detailed matters of discipline and administration that involved the fundamentals. The development of the Theocracy. The Clerical party and the 29 proposals to which John Wise gave such a devastating reply. The whole complicated problem of the relation of the Church estate to the civil body politic. The struggle for the control of Harvard College. The controversy of one hundred years ago. The growth of the Episcopal order, insidiously as to its Anglican Branch, and militantly as to its Roman branch, both of which undercut the fundamentals of "The New England Way." Then the onslaught of science, the problem presented by Evolution. What does this three hundred years say to us today who inherit the tradition of the Congregational principles and have opportunity to measure them in the light of history? What values are valid for today and for tomorrow?

First of all, whether in full realization of thoughtful intent, or in unconscious adjustment to necessity which

³Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638 for heresy. She was the first female defendant in a Massachusetts court. She held prayer meetings attended by both men and women and she criticized the colony's ministers, asserting that a person could know God's will directly. She moved to Rhode Island and thence to New York where she died in an Indian raid.

also may be the voice of God, they covenanted themselves together in the freedom of the Gospel, asserting their right to join themselves together into a church estate, to select, elect, and ordain teachers and pastors, and to deal with all matters of belief and conduct.

Events have confirmed the validity of that principle. Whatever concessions must be made by the state in the interests of orderly government, it seems clear that in the church estate, where religion, world of values—intellectual, spiritual and ethical—are the dominate interests, every advance step, every regrettable error of judgement, every violation of the principle of freedom, individual liberty of thought or expression confirms not only the soundness but the spiritual necessity of this foundation stone upon which the Congregational method rests.

To avoid obscurities it seems important to make an amendment of elimination at this point. Some phrase, such as, "of the Gospel," determined the limits within which this freedom would permit them to move. That they contemplated the possibility of freely moving beyond "The Word of God" or the gospel, there is no evidence. Within the limits prescribed by this fence there was freedom. But the years have battered down the fence. Our knowledge of the origins of Christianity, of the Bible, of the Christian Church and institutions; our changed conception of religion itself; the discoveries of science as to the very structure of the universe, the nature of man, and the workings of his mind, all these factors have battered down any fence or walls that might limit the fields of investigation, discovery. It is important to be clear at this point. The slate must be wiped clean of even the implications of authority religion, superimposed by any form of coercion. This must be done not alone in the interests of our own integrity, but as a duty to the past. Whatever of the past survives to be incorporated into the structural process of the on-going world, it must survive on the merit of its own intrinsic worth. The main stream of history does not turn back. It may linger for a while in quiet meadows, or it may rush through narrow gorges, but onward it moves with the irresistible force of millions of years behind it. Here we stand, forced by the very necessity that your past has created, to re-interpret religion, in the light of what the past has to tell us to be sure, but in terms of our own pulsating pregnant expectancy. First of all, then, in the

world of values certainly, Freedom, complete individual liberty, the Puritan Home with the Fences removed.

Complete Individual Liberty cannot exist in the nature of things. True all life is conditioned. The appeal of freedom is that no artificial restraints beyond those that inhere in the nature of things be imposed. The most powerful and compelling corrective to the vagaries of complete individualism is the natural one of fellowship. Upon this within the local church, and in the relations of local churches one to another the Puritans relied. The essence of this was the independence and self-sufficiency of the local church enjoying friendly relations with its neighbors on a basis of equality. Thus they began their associations in the wilderness. Early attempts were made to modify this simple, natural relationship, by introducing an element of authoritarian control over the local church. Creeds were adopted; compulsions even were tried. As we review this story I think that we are forced to say that only with deep regret do we look back upon these violations of the early simple congregational method of fellowship. Out of those violations developed bitterness and strife. In the atmosphere of hectic controversy truth is distorted; judgements are warped; prejudices are created that belong not to the world of values. As I study the events out of [which] we have come, the strength of my conviction increases that not only in the interests of religion itself, but in the interest of fulfilling its function as one of the integral factors in our inclusive social economy, the principle of fellowship in freedom with no authoritative control or compelling influence over the units of association is the most valuable principle that we inherit. It is clear to me that we would be in a stronger position today to fulfill our obligations in religious thought and practice, as well as to meet the hazards with which our political and industrial life threaten us, had we escaped the attempts to preserve the content of thought at any given period by resorting to institutional authority of any kind. Both the mistakes of the past with their resulting failures, and the achievements upon which we look with satisfaction, combine to urge commitment to the pure congregational principle, free from any rags and tatters of the authoritarian system.

The valid check against the dangers and difficulties that inhere in this principle is not to be found through devices of legal or institutional restraint, but in the realm of

faith. Our Calvinist forefathers believed in the value which they called Sovereignty of God, that every act was in some way related to and concerned with the will of God. With diligence they searched their Scriptures, where they believed the will of God was to be discovered. With fidelity they checked their opinions and beliefs by their Scriptures. The principle and method was sound. The limitation was a limitation imposed by the dogma of a limited revelation. That limitation has been removed. Take over from the scientist the lesson he tells. Complete faith in the sovereignty of nature, to every question that nature asks there is an answer. Patiently he toils, observes, records, reports. Today, tomorrow, perchance in another generation the answer will come, the light of some fragment of truth will shine. Our concern is with the world of values. Faith in the Sovereignty of values, like to the Calvinists in the Sovereignty of his God, like to the scientists in the Sovereignty of nature, there is the check and curb on danger.

But values today in the world of religion require no less searching of scripture than in the days of the Puritan who founded a college to avoid the dangers of an uneducated ministry. The world of values offers great temptation to flights of the imagination, a danger to which we are subject. Again the faithful searching of the Scriptures, the plodding, careful, unbiased investigations of the scientist point the way to escape from the hazards of freedom.

What the future has in store for us we do not know. These principles are our heritage, not the product of the cloister, but the fruit of the tree of life. The presbyter, the priest, the bishop, properly attired, or disguised in the clothing of modernity may be standing on the deck of the Mayflower of history, as it rides in the harbor of the present, bidding us turn our backs on the unconquered wilderness of tomorrow, and sail back with them, to the past out of which we have come. But not one returned in the Mayflower. The age to come whence freedom, discovery, and consent still beckon, is the promised land.

From the point of view of their religious interests and their churches the Puritans tried to escape two dangers from the evils of which they had suffered much: Namely, a clerical order, and control of the Church by the State, the civil body politic. In neither of these were they entirely

successful, but, while the problem still presses on both sides, experience has confirmed the wisdom of their attitude.

An educated ministry, but not a clerical order. That I judge is sound wisdom. Whenever there develops a cleavage between the ministry, and the body of people who constitute the church, or the people at large, it is a warning signal both to the ministers and the people. Either one or both may have strayed from the path of a true reality. There are evidences of such a cleavage today. It may be that the world is going to hell. It may be that we ministers are riding in the air. It requires searching and candid consideration, and above all courage and patience.

I have attempted to deal with this question from the point of view of the churches, in the light of the present situation. But as churches, as people interested in the values of life, we live within the state, and from another angle of existence we constitute the state. Upon the question of freedom with the civil body politic I have touched. In days before James VI of Scotland became James I of England, he was vexed by the activities of the preachers of the Kirk. They met in council. It's a dramatic account. James undertook to put the clergy in their place, arraigning them for their seditious utterances. Mr. Andrew Mellville, grasped the King by the arm, and called him "Go'd silly vassal," and reminded him that there were "two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is Christ Jesus the King, and his kingdom the Kirk, whose subject James VI is, and of whose kingdom not a king, or a Lord, nor a head, but a member."

Allowing for differences in language, and changed conditions that utterance is still valid. The Puritans knew well the dangers and difficulties, but in separating the Church from the state they were not entirely successful. The years have contributed to a legal recognition of the principle, even though the independent territory, and the grounds of common interest are not clearly defined. Events of recent years have been disturbing. Many seem to take it for granted that the Churches are simply obedient handmaids of the state. It is a difficult and complicated topic which may be called to our attention very forcibly in the years ahead. Even now modern Andrew Mellvilles may have to grab the state by the sleeve, and remind it that there is a territory, in which the state has no voice. Only the future

can disclose how deep is our faith in the sovereignty of values, and how much of the courage of the Puritan survives in his descendants. However oaths of allegiance and compulsory salutes of the flag belong not to our way.

On the other hand, while we live under this arrangement of a somewhat defined separation of the Church estate and civil body politic, we are under obligations to recognize that, not being a theocracy, there are political territories upon which we have, as churchmen, and as organized institutions of religion, the right to trespass. When we enter that territory, we enter as citizens of the state, not as citizens of the church. To recognize the nature of the compact, and to adhere to its obligations is a matter of honor as well as duty.

In short the sweep of the social economy of our time is away from the totalitarian order of the middle ages with its concepts of Revelation, Authority, and Obedience, towards an order whose distinguishing concepts are freedom, discovery, and consent. In spite of atavistic reactions, in both Church and State, the future is with freedom, discovery, consent. The intellectual, the scientific and the religious advance of centuries combines with events in the political and industrial order towards the realization of this tendency. Within the field of religion and values, as elsewhere, the principles of freedom and fellowship, tested in experience, are valid guides to which complete allegiance may be given.