

Religion in a Democracy

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To run along in a sort of flaccid contentment in regard to many pressing problems is natural, for we do and indeed must confine our attentions to {???) near at hand, giving only occasional glances to demands that must be made in the future. The momentousness of the problems involved in the present condition of religious unrest can be but faintly realized. When we come to speak of religion in a democracy it seldom occurs to us that we are speaking of things which have never been tried, except in a very small way. Under the pressure of other demands the people of this democratic nation have not yet turned their attention to the readjustment of religious ideas and forms made necessary by the {???) and {???) of the spirit involved in our Democratic Life. While it is not clear that any consideration was given to the ultimate influence upon certain accepted forms for interpreting religious experiences, yet the men who were the commanding personalities in the establishment of our Democratic nation were openly at odds with current theological notions. Of course the fundamental tenet of government, that all men are created equal, was a proposition applied only to political problems. But it contains an implicit denial of every dogma of Catholicism, Calvinism and Lutheranism, and at the same time it is the grandest endorsement of the teachings of Jesus that has yet been given us.

But is it not absurd to imagine that the religious life in a Democratic community should be any different than the religious life of any other community? But in asking that question, one fails to distinguish between the spirit and the form of interpreting the spirit of the way in which a man feels himself to be related to the unseen world. The spiritual impetus which resulted in the development of the Catholic Church is of course essentially the same as the spiritual impetus which gave the Orientals the religion of Islam, or gave rise to the great Methodist movement of the eighteenth century. But the form of interpreting this

spiritual force is simply the mirror of the current political conditions. The Catholic Church is nothing more or less in its form, and it's worth, than the product of old Roman political and state ideals, applied to the problem of organizing the religious life of the people. Protestantism is simply the readjustment of, or a reinterpretation of, the {???) religion in terms of the political ideas that were developing during the centuries after the Reformation. The political principles involved in a democratic form of government found their first interpretation in the world of religion in the {???) of the various denominations of this country who follow the so-called congregationalism. But even here the spirit crystalized before democracy had developed into form. Many, in fact most of the churches bear the mark of the New England Theocracy rather than the stamp of the Democracy of the United States. So it happens that we have yet before us the task of reinterpreting the spiritual forms of life in terms of a church system which shall embody the principles of national life.

As we look over the religious conditions of the country today, we find a peculiar, even a grotesque conglomeration of various forms of church government, which represent as many political ideals as European nations and the Democratic U.S. have adopted. The Catholic Church belongs to the old Roman world and medieval Europe. The Episcopal Church belongs to England. Other bodies represent the commonwealth Congregationalism present in New England Theocracy, and thus it goes on. Each one of these groups represents a bygone age, or a foreign nation. Each one is a transplanted institution, and in sprit and in form is foreign to the atmosphere of the Nation. The church, and in fact the theology of a Democracy is yet to be given us. The germs of such an institution, and the beginnings of such a theology have already been made, but the work of extending, and defining the principles involved has not yet extended very widely.

In fact this is the religious problem before us today. The increasing acuteness of the friction between the decaying forms both as to {???) and theology, between the decaying institutions, and the Democratic interpretation of the religious life is apparent. The striking illustration

of the way in which this friction appears, and indicates the fundamental point at issue is found in the current trial for heresy of Dr. Crapsey of Rochester New York. The point at issue is one of {???, not of truth. It is simply the question of whether or not the subject is to enjoy the rights of free speech. Dr. Crapsey as priest of the Episcopal Church, has declared his allegiance to certain established beliefs, and principles. But as a matter of fact he does not believe these principles, and has been very bold and free to say so. Now the question at issue is not whether the statements of Dr. Crapsey are true or false, but whether as a servant of the Episcopal Church, he has a right to preach ideas not in conformity to the standards of the church. It is not a question of theology so much as it is a question of {???}. It is not so much a question of truth as it is a question of authority, a question as to whether or not the legitimate rights of the individual are to be restrained by a foreign institution.

The same point of dispute is at the bottom of the present controversy about the person of Jesus. It is not so much a question of the relative worth of Jesus' teachings, as it is the question of accepting anyone's dictum as a binding authority. In other words, we are changing our emphasis. Instead of accepting a thing as true, because it is alleged to have been proclaimed by Jesus, we accept whatever we may of his sayings because they commend themselves to us as being in harmony with our general conceptions of truth. The supremacy of Jesus will rise or fall according to whether the investigations now being conducted hear evidence of his conformity to truth.

At this time, the problem of readjusting our religious forms, and our interpretations of religious experience is beginning to press upon us for solution. It would be futile for me to attempt to forecast the outcome of this great religious movement. Yet one is blind who cannot see something of the tendencies, and perhaps one of the most striking, possibly the fundamental characteristic of the {???} movement, is seen in the present day habit of mind, evidenced by what is spoken of as search after truth.

Two very important ideas are involved here, one is the implicit faith in the existence of truth, and the second is

the implicit faith in the ability of man to discover truth. In our political institutions this faith has the form of confidence in the possibility of a just and equitable system of self-government, of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. And second in the ability of men through varied experiments of failure and success to discover this ideal system and adapt themselves to it. This implies the denial of the Divine Right to Rule, and its attendant apparatus. The high officer is the servant of all, and his fitness to rule rests not upon any supernatural endowment, but upon the personal integrity and ability for ruling. His election to office rests not upon any inherited supernaturalism or the casting of lots and such things, but upon the ability of the majority of the people to select one from among them to act temporarily as their executive in national affairs. This principle has yet to be widely applied to problems of the religious world. Interpreted in terms of theology, it means faith in God, and faith in man. Of course any organization which limits its faith in man by any artificial standard, such as a priesthood, or an authoritative book, or an authoritative creed, is simply a dead weight upon the progress of the people of our nation towards the development of a nation of self-controlling self-deciding people. Any institution that maintains such a system and enforces it is breaking down the bulwarks of Democracy. Any institution that maintains such a system and does not enforce it is of course playing double and deserves no recognition. The religion of Democracy knows no such institution. Every man is his own priest, and the ministers and other religious servants are not clothed with any special authority except the authority of noble life, and zealous effort along the line of their work. The Religion of faith in God and faith in man and faith in man's ability to know God, demands first of all the clearing away of these survivals of ancient days and former systems of government.

But if you have not authority of priest, or church, or book to maintain the standards and to keep people on the straight and narrow path, what authority have you? The authority of the religion of Democracy, is the authority of public opinion relying upon the statements of expert investigators. An illustration of the natural development of public opinion under such a system and the exceedingly

forceful influence of the public opinion developed is found in the medical profession. The medical man's authority no longer rests upon any supernatural power as it once did, but upon his hard work and his common sense ability to treat successfully the cases that come under his treatment. If his prescriptions and his treatments favor themselves by cures, his word along particular lines {???) for great worth. A particular illustration in point is the rapid development of the curative value of fresh air. Acting upon the expert testimony of eminent physicians, this method of treating many diseases has become common, and public opinion has become so strongly insistent of this method that tardy or delinquent physicians have to accept the new methods or they are left behind. The authority of religion in Democracy must rest upon a similar basis. A method, a doctrine must prove itself by its general probability of truth, and its workability when tested. Even then it must always rest under test, and be ready to be overthrown when a superior and more workable method has come to light. The great weakness of the Christian churches today can be traced to this one fault. Being bound hand and mind by ancient ideas about which a certain {???) has been cast, the churches have not been free to cast aside the superseded doctrines and ideas, and adjust itself to new truth. A valuable example of this is the attitude maintained by the church as a whole towards the discoveries of modern science. Being pledged to the finality of certain doctrines, the church found itself in the very undesirable position of being compelled to abandon as partly erroneous its doctrines once proclaimed as divine truth or to enter into a long period of worthless, and negative apologetics. Held in chains by these unnecessary ties, the church as a whole chose to put itself on the defensive, and in the face of advancing science, enter into a long period of apologetics. The result here as often before has been weakening to the church, and its work and now it is trying to forget and conceal the mistake brought upon it by the heavy load of doctrines proclaimed as final, and ultimate truth. If the church is to regain its fast diminishing control, it must throw off these chains which limit its freedom to seek after and accept new truth. The world of science has no fixed creed, no authoritative statement of any kind, yet there are certain fundamental truths that are quite generally accepted as final. For example, the law of

gravitation, and similar laws. Questions that are in anyway open to doubt are held in a tentative, until their probable truth is demonstrated by their workability. More than that the door is always open for new truth and the constant expectation of new scientific truth is a perpetual stimulus to constant investigation. In the world of religion we must remember that we are finite beings attempting to interpret our relations with the infinite. It is somewhat presuming to assume that we know anything final, and the claims to complete and final revelation such as the claim maintained in regard to the Bible, immediately chokes every effort after new truth, and transforms the work of the church into defensive apologetics. In the developing church of Democracy there can and will be no claims to absoluteness in all the doctrines developed to interpret religious experiences. The windows and doors will always be opened for the light of new truth, and the bias of iron will be removed. But one thing more at least may be noted, the religion of Democracy must be inclusive. It cannot permit that one self shall be lost. The organization of every form shall have their excuse for being, not because they serve as a place of refuge for saints, and a shelter for hypocrites, but because they serve all. The church like the saints exists to meet a social and individual need. It has no special plea to be honored except insofar as it can justify its claims by service just as a hospital justifies its claims. The churches then of the religion of democracy can lay claims to no honor or respect or special privileges for the church as such, but it may ask and will receive honor and support based upon its efficient and important service, and above all else insofar as its performs its work, and becomes an institution of worth in the religious life. It will receive the homage paid to it as a symbol of the highest relations of human life, just as we pay to our flag an honor as the symbol and emblem of a nation of freedom.

The individual's attitude towards the church in the religion of Democracy must of necessity be changed from what has been and still continues to be one of the great causes of the fake atmosphere within the church, and the false attitude without. For centuries the church has been regarded as a sort of gateway to heaven, and the people have been taught to look upon it as the natural channel

through which they may enter into salvation of their own souls, one of the most despicable, and yet one of the grandest ideas ever held. But this no longer holds in a Democracy. The church becomes one institution of spiritual service, and the individual identifies himself with it not for the benefit which it will be to him, but for the good that he can do to the world through the agency of fellowship in the church, and through the reciprocal influences of the fellowship of the noble life upon him, in keeping undefiled his personal integrity and keeping {???) his Divine nature. It is the fellowship of "noblesse oblige."

These are the general lines along which, and the aims towards which, the movement of religious ideals, and religious life in this country are progressing. The religion of democracy is yet to become widely accepted, but its spirit is abroad and its forms are establishing themselves with tremendous rapidity.