

The Influence of Democracy on Religious Thought and
Practice

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Montague, MA

June 3, 1913¹

The very wording of this subject which your scribe has assigned to me indicates the great fundamental change that has taken place. The modern point of view, that "religious thought and practice" is not an entity, either intellectual, moral or spiritual, apart from the common functions and relations of life, is itself a product of the influence of democracy upon religious conceptions. Religion is a word which symbolizes a function of human personality. "Religious thought and practice" are phrases which designate certain forms and methods of expressing religious experience in any given time or circumstance. Doctrines, creeds, rituals, and forms of government are passing expressions of a universal function. From the conception of religion as a system, to religion as a function of personality, of personal experience, whose interpretation mirrors the environment of the experience, is the sweep of the revolution that has taken place. The theological system, the ritualism, and the ecclesiastical organization of the Catholic Church are the products of religious experience under imperialistic feudalism, and can be understood only in that social environment. The same must be said of Anglicanism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, and Congregationalism. This fact must be in mind constantly in considering the question before us today.

At the present time we are engaged in the work of interpreting religious experience in the midst of a great democratic movement, whose outlines and power are becoming more clearly defined each day. This is what gives rise to our question. In this paper I assume the fact of this

¹ This is a text that Earl C. Davis read at the meeting of the Connecticut Valley Association of Liberal Ministers meeting, June 3, 1913 in Montague, MA. It was subsequently published in the *Christian Register*, Volume 92, October 9, 1913, pp. 970-973.

movement. But I stop for a moment to observe that we do not appreciate its very far-reaching and fundamental character. We see superficial evidences of unrest and change. Then we speak of reform, and philanthropy, and imagine that we are in touch with the times. Far from it. This movement is working away at the very roots of values, institutions, and customs that have had a recognized standing for ages. Its aim is not repair and reform, but revolutionary reconstruction, as fundamental as the change from feudalism to capitalism. You are frequently told that all this unrest of our times is but the vain discontent of utopian dreamers, fired by the appeal of an artificial scheme of society. Ignorant, indeed, is he who sees nothing more than that in the spirit and genius. Pitiably also beyond hope is such a creature. The waters of life are stirred far deeper than that. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly." Well, that is the genius of this movement. It is the Life-Urge itself forcing its way through the crusts and dead values of civilization, as the vegetation of the spring breaks the crust and debris of an earlier day.

From a slightly different angle we get another line on the fundamental character of the change. Prof. Foster says that the word God is a symbol for our faith in the substantial integrity of the universe. But how far removed is that concept of God from the God that once lived in the system of St. Thomas Aquinas? Far removed also, is it from the Fatherhood of God idea of which we speak so frequently and with such finality. More and more the significance of the statement, put into the mouth of Jesus by the mystic author of the fourth Gospel, becomes clear. God is Spirit; God is Life, not *ex-parte* creator, not a great first cause, but the living reality of the eternal present. Prof. Doan's idea of thinking of God in terms of concrete human life is suggestive. Bouch White's point in this connection is well taken.

Democracy's complaint against the church is not against this or that detail of her makeup, but against the very central fact which is at the heart of all the churches today—even those that style themselves liberal—the fatherhood idea. It quarrels with the first-person-of-the-trinity doctrine, which the church has made the alphabet of all her thinking. For a paternal despotism flows copiously from that dogma. The democracy, even where it has not analyzed it out, feels

subconsciously that a benevolent absolutism is its arch foe.

The fact is that we instinctively repel any idea of an isolated entity, apart from the common relations of life, that can interfere with, and regulate authoritatively our development. It is a fundamental faith of man that there are undeveloped resources in our own personalities, and in the universe. But we ask that these resources shall not be revealed to us by any paternalistic scheme of things. The statement that we shall earn our bread by the sweat of our brow is not confined to the needs of our one hundred and fifty pounds of flesh more or less. It touches a principle of human personality that is too deeply implanted in our natures to permit long to desire that which we have not earned by pain and toil. We resent any paternalism that sets itself above this sublime self-assertion of an increasingly God-conscious human being. The idea of the universal priesthood of man in all the relations of life, which was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation in the days of its vigor, is still with us and must be reckoned with. For near two thousand years we have been trying to demonstrate that Christ was "very God of very God." Today we are accepting this as literally true, not only of Christ but of all humanity. This conception has developed in close relation with the democratic tendency of our times, and dovetails in with its essential principles.

This conception of development carries with it two implications, often overlooked, but of considerable importance. The first implication is that the Universe judgement upon our activities, upon our wisdom, upon our social organization is made in terms of our capacity to develop the abundant life. The thread of historic continuity is not carried through forms and institutions, but runs along the line of our life-producing dynamic, where life is most abundant, most persistent in quantity and quality, there is the line of historic continuity. We are always in the presence of that mysterious storehouse of undeveloped resources. Herein is the great adventure of life. Herein, also, is the inscrutable mystery of life. Thus far only does our faith take us, that in the abundance of life is salvation. Our intellectual systems, our ritualistic devices, our industrial machinery, our ecclesiastical polity, our political organisms, our moral codes, can have no standing in the presence of the Infinite except as they nourish and further the growth of abundant personality. Humanity itself, in the last analysis,

measures these same institutions by precisely the same standard of measure. The capacity for life is the common measuring rod of the worth of all forms which life produces.

The second implication of this point of view is that the primary sources of information through which we may judge and interpret the experience of life are contemporary life itself. "I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser of things to be." said Walt Whitman². The cumulative dynamic of past experience, freed from the forms through which it has passed, exists in the pulsating life of today. The achievements and the limitations of our fathers, from the beginning are visited upon us now. That which is taking place today has its roots deep in the past, and includes in its present day manifestations the gleanings of the ages. To be sure the records and monuments of past experience are of tremendous service to us in interpreting that which we now experience, but the deeper records of the past are burned into the very fiber of our being. Should all the objective records of the past be expunged from our civilization, even then we could not be what we were before those records were produced, nor can we lose what we have become in the production of them. They are secondary sources of information which supplement and throw light on the primary sources of contemporary life. But we cannot find life among the dead.

When we turn to contemporary life for such information as it may have on this question of the influence of democracy upon religious thought and practice, we are met by what may be called a tumult of tongues. Unrest, uncertainty, confusion, and disintegration seem to be the distinguishing characteristics of current events. To many the events are but evidences of terrible possibilities. But if one takes this prickly thistle boldly in his hand, examines it, one finds that contemporary life bespeaks a development pregnant with great possibilities. Amid the confusion of the times we discover two centers about which the changing order tends to focus itself. One is the struggle for economic freedom, for industrial democracy; the other is the struggle for sex freedom, for democracy of the sexes.

The first of these struggles, the struggle for industrial democracy, is pressing hard for adjustment in this country.

² Excerpt from "Song of Myself, 44" by Walt Whitman

For more than a hundred years as the institutions of capitalism have been developing, there has been germinating the anti-toxin of a conflict which carries the elements of disintegration for the old order, and the embryo for a new social order. With increasing intensity, with ever-widening scope, the petty struggles between labor and capital of a hundred years ago have developed into an organized and irrepressible conflict between those who stand for existing conditions, and those who labor for what ought to be. It is not pleasant to note this situation as one of the characteristic facts of the times, but it is becoming increasingly apparent. Within the past few years this conflict has passed from the attempts at collective bargaining, to deliberate industrial revolution. The industrial workers of the world are pointing out with great clearness the conscious purpose of the industrial tendency. Their methods may be questionable but their purpose is clear. The revolt against wage slavery and the socialization of the means of production and distribution, this is the essence of the whole thing. In the background of all our political unrest today is to be found, either the power of allegiance to, or the fear of, this ideal of a new social order. It is a central fact. But in judging this movement, we judge it more as an intellectual system than as a social variation with a tremendous moral dynamic behind it. However important may be its intellectual program, of infinitely greater importance is the vitality, the consecration, the hope, and the aggressiveness, the dynamic of the movement. It is a life fact. It has a message and it will be heard.

The second significant fact of the times is the women movement, a struggle for economic and sex freedom. At the present moment the suffrage question is well to the front, but the question of the ballot is only one aspect of the great sex revolt that is taking place right before our very eyes. The tremendous fact is that women who have depended for centuries upon their sex characteristics for their economic right to live, are now in open and conscious revolution for their fundamental rights as human beings. The spread of higher education for women, the feminine invasion of industry, the astonishing increase in the number of divorces, the remarkable protest against commercialized vice, and the increasing condemnation of the double standard of morality, all these, as well as the political equality agitation, are aspects of the great sex revolution that is taking place in our midst today. It is

working and will work profound changes in the conventional institutions and moral codes. It is the second great fact of modern social changes.

These two movements are the centers about which the constructive growth of our times is taking place. In one form or another they furnish the theme for all our literature, our drama, and art. They are in the background of all our political divisions. They find their ways into the contentions in churches, and are bones of contention in theological thought and discussion. Together they constitute the great divisive issue of the generation in which the principle of democracy is pitted against some form of paternalism; the principle of freedom against the principle of authority. The entire social order is involved with all its institutions.

With the situation, thus formulating itself before us, the question of the influence of democracy upon religious thought and practice has a definite significance. At a time when a great democratic movement is working such basic changes in the social order, we have taken upon ourselves the task of interpreting religious experience into a thought and practice that shall be true to the genius of the coming order. Appreciation of the pressing nature of this task is made evident by the almost frantic and frequently grotesque efforts of churches to connect themselves in some way, either directly or indirectly, with what they instinctively feel to be the movement of our times that makes for the abundant life. In many cases these efforts are backed by worthy motives, but limited appreciation. Often the unworthy motive of exploiting the unrest in the interest of ecclesiastical aggrandizement is apparent. To institutions as well as to individuals applies the maxim, "To thine own self be true." It is not a function of organized religion to agitate for a political program, or a political party. Too bitter has been the experience in this matter of alliance between the State and Church to permit any intelligent man to fail to distinguish functions here. Nor is it the function of organized religion to fritter away its time and energy in those innocent activities which are called "social service." Again it is not the function of the Church to administer ritualistic anesthetics to jaded personalities whose conscience has been corroded by the weathering process of comfort and luxurious affluence. Rather it is the function of organized religion to rouse the individual from his

apathy and to call his finite personality to its universal task in feeling, thought, and action. In the past this always has been, and in the present it must be the function of vital churches. The pith of the criticism of Churches in the past twenty-five years is that they are prodigals, that they are no longer doing father's business, that they are wasting their precious substance of human consecration in cleaning up the refuse of a mammon-worshiping generation. Aroused at last by the sting of criticism, they have been, and still are, trying to escape a fundamental duty by resorting to useless and superficial substitutes. But there is hope in the thought that recent self-criticism, and these same extraordinary activities indicate that we are going through a process which the old time theologian would call "the conviction of sin." We are beginning to realize that we have hired ourselves out to an unrighteous master, and that we have been sent into the fields by him to feed his swine. We have not yet come to the point of declaring that we will arise and go to our father and say, "We have sinned against our purpose, and are no longer worthy of our task." But that moment is close at hand.

When the moment of that awakening comes all this side-stepping, all this discussion about the function of the Church will cease, and as clear and fixed as the North Star on a wintery night will be the task that shall guide us. Ibsen, in his searching play, "The Pretenders," presents with dramatic clearness the great fundamental truth of life that we cannot ride into glory and power by the aid of the King thought of another. Only he to whom the thought is the product of his own experience can realize it. That work, that thought which we borrow from another is but a dangerous weapon, and the slaying of our own thought is a great sin. To the structural processes of our time there are many contributions to be made to the fullness of tomorrow's reality. Working, as we are, from the point of view of the function of religion in man's struggle for existence, we have a king thought of our own, a contribution which our experience, our environment, and our history enable us to make. No other can make it for us, and the times we live in need it, and need it badly. We kill a great thought, and we falsify ourselves when we attempt to slip from under our own clearly defined task, and ally ourselves with the king thought of another individual or institution. I pointed out above that our task is to be performed in an environment dominated by two great basic social movements alive with the spirit of democracy and the

passion for freedom. However close may be our sympathy with the intellectual and institutional expression of these great movements, we must [not] confuse their task with the task of the Churches. Rather we must recognize that in the atmosphere of moral and spiritual dynamic which these movements generate, and by which they themselves are fed, our task is set. That task is the task of interpreting religious experience in terms of thought, and we have ours. They have their task. We have ours. Even though "they" and "we" may be the same persons, the difference in function must be maintained, lest, in the confusion, we lose the freedom we seek, and sacrifice the democracy of the mind which alone makes freedom worth seeking.

At this point, then, let us narrow the question down to our own particular field and fellowship. By virtue of our environment, our history, and the atmosphere in which our experience takes place (if so it does) we have a peculiar task to perform. In the statement of this peculiar task I come directly to my conception of the influence of democracy upon religious thought and practice. Already one element of our possible contribution has been referred to. It is the significant contribution of the early Unitarian movement to the intellectual development of the last century. Says Channing in the introduction to his published works, "The following writings will be found to be distinguished by nothing more than the high estimate which they express of human nature. A respect for the human soul breaths through them." This germ of the new world view through the hands of Parker, Emerson, and a line of less conspicuous, but not less devoted thinkers, has developed logically and irresistibly into the revolutionary conception of human nature which belong to our time. This idea that we are very God of very God is the king thought. It is the paramount intellectual contribution that we have to make. We are told that our generation is starving for spiritual food, that it is wasting its substance in its vain search for wealth, pleasure, and excitement, that it is lost in a morass of materialism. Very well. To all this our answer is the infinite significance of this common human life, its common values, and the sanctity of its common functions. To call man from his limited existence into his social and infinite relationships; to rouse in him the undeveloped resources that lie dormant in his soul, and await the clear sharp call to repentance, that is the task and a task of no mean proportions or importance. All these undeveloped resources are present in the seething

tumultuous times in which we live. I know it, for I have seen them, watched them respond with a modest simplicity coupled with a determined self-assertion. More than anything else in our religious life today we need what may be called spiritual direct action. We need to give up the indirect appeal, the side-stepping of our real task in the obscuring efforts of palliative social service and artificial attempts at ritualistic enrichment. We must make our appeal directly and bluntly to the very best and highest that lies dormant in personality, and rouse men and women to a consciousness of their own worth.

The second element of the task is ethical, the insistence on the translation of the dynamic of religious experience in terms of ethical conduct. I spoke disparagingly a few moments ago of social service and ritualism as substitutes for the real function of organized religion. But when either of these forms of expression grow out of a real vitality and satisfies a deep ethical need or an aesthetic craving, it becomes something quite different from a substitute for religious dynamic. The thought of God as becoming in and through the processes of life carries us direct not only to those Christ-like souls in whom we can find no fault, but quite as well into the lives of the sinners and the outcasts upon whose burdened shoulders rests the burden, not only of their own limitations, but ours also. They, too, are very God of very God. They are suffering for our transgressions, and through their sufferings we are coming to a deeper conception of the subtle interdependence that binds us together in this common life. Thousands of prostitutes still point to us with the threatening finger of rebuke and retribution, reminding us that we are still crucifying the very God of very God on the altar of our lust and prudery. The sordid life of those who struggle under the hellish shadow of poverty, and its dread are still proclaiming to us that man cannot live by bread alone, but through the realization of every value that proceeds from the infinite mystery of life. These and countless other facts of our present day life call to us as from the very depths of infinity, if perchance we have had an experience that has taken us into the Real Presence. In fact the reality of our experience is measured by the sincerity and heartiness of our response to this call of God from out of the abysmal depths of human sordidness. The trouble is that we have not had the experience of the Garden of Gethsemane. This translation of religious experience into ethical conduct, individual and

social, is the second element of our king thought, and task.

Finally there is one more element that our experience and inheritance may permit us to make, and failing here, we forfeit all the rest. This most important contribution is our ancient congregational polity, the democratic organization and democratic administration of our ecclesiastical institutions and affairs. This is the great contribution of New England Puritanism to the political and social development of the nation. In the days when the New England Theocracy, and the English Government threatened to destroy the spirit of local sovereignty it was the insistence by fearless ministers and laymen upon the congregational polity, that gave to us the spirit and the wisdom that carried through the revolutionary war, and established the republic. In those days again the Churches to whom the congregational polity is their richest heritage may perform a similar service. But unfortunately neither branch of the congregational body seems to appreciate the importance of what may remain to them of their heritage. In the last few years the trinitarian body has been moving in the direction presbyterian polity, or some other semi-authoritative hybrid. In our own fellowship we have been trifling with, if we have not already departed from, our congregationalism. The insidious inroads made by the non-representative missionary body, the American Unitarian Association, upon a true congregational practice is the most dangerous development of our body. The gradually increasing control of this body over weakened churches, a control gained by monetary power, the rapid extension of what may be called very justly the temporal power of the association—the ownership of the local church properties—are striking at the very vitals of our congregational integrity. If we are to make any contribution to the growth of the democratic spirit, and the establishment of democratic forms in the coming social order, it can be only through the dominance of the democratic spirit, and democratic forms in our own body. More important to us as a religious body, more important to the moral and spiritual vigor of the nation to whose development we hope to contribute, than all our property, all our funds and all our intellectual apparatus is this same congregational polity with which we are trifling so wantonly. I know that arguments of business efficiency and expediency support and endorse the development that has taken place in our body, but our duty to business efficiency and expediency does not

balance in the scales of justice with our obligation to the contribution of a democratic polity made by the Greenwoods, John Robinsons, the Pilgrims and the Puritans. We speak of the precious heritage of a liberal faith, and all too frequently we have in mind nothing more than a set of little intellectual platitudes. The very root of our liberal faith, the very thing that made possible our development into the richness of modern thought is the fact that we existed organically under this democratic polity of congregationalism, under freedom in thought, and local sovereignty. Any violation of this principle, direct or indirect, is an attack upon the one great distinctive characteristic of our movement. With this congregational polity firmly established for a background, we are still a great and prophetic movement. With it choked or destroyed, we are indeed the most helpless and pitiable of cults. Here is the great king thought for our contribution to the political and social development of our times, as well as for religious growth of the nation. For the safety and perpetuation of the principle of pure congregationalism in our body, I am more interested than in all things else, for it is the principle that has made possible all the rest. It cannot and must not be lost.

To this point my thoughts upon the influence of democracy upon religious thought and practice lead me. Every generation feels that its own time is critical. To the unrealized tomorrow we make our contributions each according to his ability. Our ability grows out of our past, and our experience. If the spirit of human progress to stand before us in human form, and direct us in our tasks, I am sure he would say to us, "Go, preach this word to all the world." At least upon this conviction I have staked my own life venture.