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DEMOCRACY AND THE CHURCH

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“We are at the cross-ways and progress is not inevitable.” This arresting statement occurs in the Preface to a remarkable book on *Political Ideals* by C. Delisle Burns. He is persuaded that democracy and a League of Nations are the only alternatives to preparation for more civilized wars, the passions of the mob, and social chaos. The Christian church, too, is at the cross-ways. Whether it shall be discarded as outworn machinery or be refashioned to function creatively in the socialization and spiritualization of a new human order is no mere academic or even ecclesiastical problem. It is a social problem with vital implications for the future career of society. The purpose of this article will be to analyze the rôle of the church in our democracy with a suggested reorganization of that institution to fulfil its function.

Democracy and science are the two most significant mutations of social evolution today. They go hand in hand. We are concerned principally with democracy in this article, yet let us remember that science is the intellectual counterpart of modern democracy. Both had their small beginnings in a remote past. But their rapid expansion and development in modern life warrant the use of the mutation figure. They have come upon us so suddenly that we have been taken unawares and have scarcely had time to adjust ourselves to them.

Democracy is not yet achieved. It lies in the future. It is an ideal. “It is the ideal of those who desire a society of interdependent groups so organized that every man shall have equal opportunity to develop what is finest in him.” It has

arisen from the perception that the social organization of today does not allow most men to develop what is finest in them. In this sense democracy has not arrived, but is on the way. It is one of those flying goals that seem within our reach, but which we never quite overtake. We trust it is the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that shall lead us into a promised land of social order, harmony, and peace.

That is one aspect upon which we wish to dwell more emphatically. Democracy seems to be as much a process as an organization. It is a movement as well as a state of society. This is the dynamic rather than the static view of democracy. Stated more technically, democracy is that social process which permits and encourages both individual differentiation and social integration. It is the process which provides for the fullest, richest, freest individualization consonant with the most complete socialization. As Mr. Burns says, "Our Utopias are not now fixed and eternal situations, but continually developing organizations of life." Democracy, therefore, seeks the harmonious coadaptation and growth of both individualism and mutualism. It is that progressively changing organization of society in which the personalities of all members reach their ripest development through constant adjustment to and interaction with one another.

Thus defined, democracy is seen to mean more than the rule of "the undistinguished and ignorant 'demos'" in politics. It is not a mere counting of heads, or the sovereignty of the people. These are but the more or less imperfect methods and techniques of democracy as it is organized in society today. Democracy is the latest and most rational phase of the social process as it has developed among human beings.

It must be made clear at this point that this form of association we call democratic is not superimposed upon people from without. It cannot, by the very nature of the case, be foisted upon a group. It is rather the latest step in the evolution

of group association. It must be consciously initiated, sustained, and guided by the group. Every member of the group must voluntarily and consciously participate in the further functioning of this process. This means that a certain degree of education is necessary in the members of the group. The power to reason and moral responsibility are prerequisites. There cannot be a democracy among animal or low human groups. Only those groups capable of consciously directing the evolutionary process can be progressively democratic.

Thus education is ever the central and crucial problem for democracy. It has been said that the ideal of education in the United States is that each generation shall stand on the shoulders of the preceding generation. This is not only the ideal, but the method, of a democracy. No individual can be either a slave or a spectator here. Although he may occupy a subordinate position, each is a creative factor and force in the democratic process. Hence everyone must be capable of seeing his relation and function in the whole and must have developed a sense of obligation for the movement and success of the process.

Democracy does not repudiate all authority. It substitutes for the self-constituted authority of a minority or a vested interest, however, the freely chosen authority of the expert. And even the expert is subject to the constant criticism and recall of his constituency. More than any other organization or process, it gives recognition to real distinctions of intellect and character. "Democracy has been well said to be an hypothesis that all men are equal, which hypothesis we make in order to discover who are best; for it is only by giving equal opportunity that distinctions of intellect and character are made to appear." One of the principal functions of education, therefore, is not only to lift the level of intelligence and develop moral and social attitudes in the masses, but it is to grow experts, to provide specialists—in a word, to train leaders to guide the democratic process.

This may have seemed to be a highly attenuated and abstract treatment of democracy. But such a treatment is necessary. Democracy is too frequently identified with a specific organization of society, or confused with certain social ideals such as justice, equality, and the like. If this statement of what democracy means is valid, we see that it is the latest phase of the human social process. It is both organization and process, and if it be not paradoxical, it is an ideal. It stands for that method of development whereby the individual and the group reach their maximum of growth through mental interaction that is voluntary and rational. Its method is twofold. The principal technique of democracy is education. Following education, its method of development is through consciously trained and selected leaders. This in brief is the democratic process.

The church, as it stands today, is an institution which democracy has inherited. Organized in a past when authority was the ruling force in society and the form of social organization was a hierarchy, the church seems to be somewhat of an anomaly in modern life. In many quarters it represents medievalism stranded in the rising tide of democracy. The Roman Catholic branch of the church is still rigidly organized on the hierarchical and autocratic basis. Protestantism has cut loose from its mother-institution, yet even here we find the constant appeal to authority and a striving to impose a more recent hierarchical form upon society. The polity of some Protestant churches is avowedly democratic. The theology of most of them is conservative, traditional, and unadapted to the expanding stream of democracy. In a process where the function of religion should be to enhance and reinforce the highest ethical values with emotion, symbolism, and idealism, to socialize human attitudes and moralize human motives, one church is content to institutionalize its members and make blind devotees of them, the other would pluck individuals here and there from a lost world, like brands from

the burning, and save them for a postmortem bliss of questionable ethical character. These may be exaggerated pictures, but for the main the trend has been, in one branch of the church, toward a mechanical ecclesiasticism and, in the other branch, toward selfish individualism. Neither fulfils its function in a democratic society.

There may be controversy over that function. Indeed, that is the stage at which the churches find themselves today. There is a growing body of religiously minded people who do not think it is the business of the church either to call us back to medievalism or to disinfect us for the hygienic post-mortem society. Christianity means more to them than ecclesiastical regularity or creedal conformity. It would seem that the church should permeate the democratic process with passionate religious fervor for the highest ethical and social ideals. It should reinforce the democratic process with the religious motive. It should cultivate social attitudes, promote social values, and observe for the future what is vital in the religious tradition of the past. It should neglect neither the individual nor the group, but should seek to coordinate them and perfect them. The otherworldly motive should be supplemented by a burning enthusiasm for the improvement and amelioration of this world. Nothing short of the redemption of the social order from all its vices, diseases, malformations, and maladjustments should be the goal of the church, and its primary function should be to incite and then enlist men to the consummation of this task. Education will be the principal method. And this education will not be a cognitive affair, a pouring in and stamping in of information. It will be more affective and conative than in the past, a building up of social attitudes, desires, and habits, a moralization of the individual.

This will require a reorganization and redirection of activities. The basis for entrance into the churches in the past has been creedal. And once within the church, the chief duties

of the member were to observe certain rites and passively enjoy in anticipation his future security. Now there is a fundamental fallacy in the creedal basis of the church. Creeds are made to exclude, not to include. It is doubtful whether a creed can be constructed so liberal that all or any considerable portion of a community will subscribe to it. Creeds are usually the majority's voice in debatable issues and as such tend to split groups rather than to integrate them. Should not the basis of church membership be an intelligent willingness to co-operate in the church's enterprise rather than a submissive acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma? Is not loyalty to the humanitarian purposes of Christianity the more excellent and more just test of fitness for church membership? Once within the church, the members should be under obligation to promote the service of the church to its community group. The highest social values in the local community should be given a religious sanction by the church as those values emerge in the democratic process. The membership of the church should be the animated nucleus in the promotion of the salutary community interests, the moral yeast in an otherwise unleavened mass.

The church in a democracy will not require one peculiar type of religious experience as the prerequisite to membership. In the past the Protestant church has sought to standardize the emotional conversion experience and make that essential. In a democratic society the church should allow free play for individuality in religious growth. It will not seek to press all persons into the same mold or stamp them with a certified experience. It will respect variation and individuality so long as fundamental loyalty to its major motives hold sway in the life. Religion, moreover, is not something to be experienced once and for all. It is itself a growing experience of fellowship and service with God and man. It may express itself in a variety of ways, but to be vital in a democracy it must assuredly issue in some form of socially useful service.

Spontaneity and individuality in religious experience and growth ought to be prized by the church functioning in a democracy.

Dogma and doctrine will not be venerated because of their antiquity or origin in the sacred literatures of the past. They will deserve the respect of people only as they are instrumental to more harmonious and richer forms of human association. The teaching of such churches will not consist of *ex cathedra* utterances upon biblical interpretations and ecclesiastical formulas. It will be a co-operative working-out of specific and immediate problems in the lives of pupils in which both teacher and pupil participate. The solutions to these problems will be reached in the light and by the aid of the moving ethical and social ideals, standards, and values of the community.

The policies and organization of the church will be determined democratically. If this change could be accomplished in this generation a great step would have been taken. At present the overhead organization tends to perpetuate itself even in the most democratic of Protestant bodies. New and original leadership is excluded too frequently. Only the indoctrinated "machine" men are promoted. This is becoming less and less true, however. The strait-jacket of orthodoxy is no longer the only style which ecclesiastical leaders may wear. More and more variation, originality, and individuality will be welcomed, as these tend to enrich the life and service of the group.

Thus we have defined democracy as a dynamic process of human social evolution brought about by the conscious and voluntary participation and interaction of all individuals of the group, in which the goal is the most complete individuation in the richest social organization. Education and expert leadership are the chief methods of furthering this process. Institutions represent, more or less, nuclei of experts who are attacking specific problems, obstructions, and maladjustments which occur in this onward process.

The church has been organized in the past on the authoritarian and hierarchical basis. Admission came through submission to a standardized creed or experience. Its function was an otherworldly salvation. It sought to redeem individuals out of the group. To function in the democracy of today the church must reorganize and redirect its activities. It must find the ideals, standards, and values as they emerge in the social process which are of highest utility to the group and enhance and reinforce these with the religious sanction, motive, and fervor. It will seek to build up social and moral attitudes in the entire community. Free play will be given for originality and individuality in religious experience and in the expression of that experience. Its great objective will be the redemption of the group rather than of the lone individual. But the redemption and social regeneration of the individual will ever be one of the methods of group regeneration. All individuals who have the social passion will be members of this church. Its immediate objectives will be in its own community. But it will also orient itself to the world-community of which, increasingly, we are an effective part. Thus we shall have the church fulfilling its function in a democracy. So long as standards, ideals, and values are the moving dynamic forces in society, so long as human aspirations reach out toward an unseen, unrealized yet constraining goal, so long as the great facts of mystery, death, and imperfection abide, man will have a religion. In a democracy the religious spirit should permeate the total process. And the church's function is to impregnate the process with the religious spirit. Only when we have reached that divine-human democracy which Jesus called the Kingdom of God, and we more affectionately call the brotherhood of man, will there cease to be a need of a church.