



**"according to our best endeavors" -  
The Religious Foundation of Democracy  
by the Rev. Michael R. Leduc  
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Early in my thinking about what I want to say this morning, I decided to contact a professional church historian I knew whose specialty is American church history. I did this in order to get some ideas and suggestions about where to begin my studies.

As I explained the task at hand, which was to describe what the Pilgrims contributed to the ideals of democracy and freedom, my friend said, "Oh, that's easy ... not much." Somewhat taken back, I laughed and thought to myself, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Well, I hit the books and what I found, for the most part, were two very different viewpoints. One minimized or even ignored the Pilgrim contributions to American governance. Instead they focused on Puritanism and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay. The other viewpoint describes the Pilgrims and their Separatist movement in the most flowery and complimentary manner possible. Reading this material, one would wonder why the Pilgrims even would have needed the *Mayflower*. If these fawning reports were accurate, they should have been able to walk on the Atlantic to get here. The truth of course is somewhere in the middle. Thankfully, a number of recent publications have treated both the Pilgrims and the larger Puritan movement in a more evenhanded manner. It appears the Pilgrims, while not a major influence in the formation of democratic ideals, deserve more than a footnote in the long, arduous development of our democratic society. They were, after all, part of that broad religious movement of English Puritans who so profoundly effected our nation. As Christopher Dawson writes:

*The modern western beliefs in progress, in the rights of man [sic], and the duty of conforming political action to moral ideas, whatever they may owe to other influences, derive ultimately from the moral ideals of Puritanism and its faith in the possibility of the realization of the Holy Community on earth by the efforts of the elect.* (Reichley, p. 62)

And Joseph Crooker wrote in his book, *The Winning of Religious Liberty*, with regards to the influence of, and the example set by the Plymouth Colony:

*... the faith in civil and religious freedom .. has been a creative force in modern history ... It (Plymouth) was the first settlement on this continent dominated by great civic and religious ideals. It made the first planting in American soil of the principles of civil and religious liberty. It was the first community in the world actually to incorporate the principle of separation of church and state.* (Crooker, p. 169)

The Pilgrims were part of a grand social experiment arising out of a grassroots movement in which the ancient law of the Christian Church was reasserted. It was a movement maintaining "that within the sacred kingdom of religious worship the greatest prince had no more authority than the humblest of mankind." (Dale, p. 172) Everyone was a servant of the loftier throne of God. Here is a cornerstone in the development of congregational polity and the ensuing democratic ideals. As Ralph Barton Perry wrote, congregationalism denies:

*... any gradation of priestly rank, in the practice of lay representation in all governing ecclesiastical bodies, and in the more or less strict adherence that all such authorities shall, directly or indirectly, be chosen by, and responsible to, a body of believers who are equal before God.* (Perry, p. 106)

It was here that the direct leadership of Christ over the church, without the intervention and meddling of clerics and civil magistrates, was first emphasized. It was here that stripping the church hierarchy of its authority to impose religious practices and creeds on the masses began. If we are all equal before God, then no one - bishop, priest, king or magistrate - can command any person to worship in a way that violates the conscience of the believer. This was the radical idea with ancient roots that threatened the absolute power of both the monarchy and the church hierarchy.

Without some understanding of what was going on in England in the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the nature of the Pilgrim/Puritan venture would make no sense. As Edmund Morgan points out in his book *Inventing the People*, "in the Western World at least, politics have mingled promiscuously with theology." (Morgan, p. 17)

One example of this is Henry VIII's break with the Pope, using the pretext of wanting a divorce and then naming himself head of the Church of England. With this act, church and state in England became inexorably intertwined. Underneath such a transparent excuse, the real reason for the break with the Pope, as we all know, was national sovereignty. Henry did not want to be subject to a foreign authority.

Also during this time, the doctrine of the divine right of kings was developing and would find its fullest expression during the reigns of James I and his son Charles I. As Edmund Morgan points out, while citing the writings of Ernst Kantorowicz,

*... kings were conceived in the figure of Christ the son ... in England the legal fictions that accompanied the everyday working of the king's government endowed him with all the attributes of divinity.* (Morgan, p. 17)

The king was immortal, perfect, infallible and omnipresent, for "in himself he constituted the 'body politic' over which he ruled." (Morgan, p. 17) The implication of challenging or questioning the authority of a divinely sanctioned monarch meant the questioner or dissenter was actually challenging God. (Morgan, p. 18) With the Church thus becoming another extension of the divinely sanctioned monarch and therefore the State as well, anything other than uniformity was both heretical and/or treasonous.

Under the Tudor and Stuart reigns, religious ideals contrary to the Anglican Church were actively suppressed through intimidation, torture, imprisonment and death. The effects of the capricious and arbitrary power of the state-supported clerics and civil magistrates were experienced by anyone who expressed dissenting religious opinions. It was out of this oppression and for some, exile, that the Puritan and Separatist ideas found their fullest development and expression.

As those who became Puritans looked around them, they saw a church and society fallen far from the pure, primitive precepts set forth in the bible. For them, the reformation begun by Henry VIII had not gone far enough by merely substituting for Roman authority an Anglican hierarchy which remained for all intents and purposes "Popish" in its theology and structure. Dr. Laurence Chaderton, one of the scholars responsible for the King James Bible, said in a 1578 sermon that the church was

"a huge masse of old and stinkinge workes, of conjuring, witchcraft, sorcery, charming, blaspheming the holy name of God, swearing and foreswearing, profaning of the Lord's Sabbothe, disobedience to superiors, contempt of inferiors; murther, manslaughter, robberies, adulterye, Fornication, covenant-breaking, false witness-bearing, lieing..." (Willison, p. 5)

In the mid to late sixteenth century there was a growing sentiment that the hierarchy (at least as far as the church was concerned) was a human invention found nowhere in Christian scriptures. Because the church hierarchy was not scriptural, allegiance and obedience to it was not required in the view of the radicals attempting to purify the church and return it to its primitive state.

*When they resisted ecclesiastical authority they were not thinking of human rights, but of the necessity of doing the divine will. When they rose to power they did not think of human rights; they were still thinking that at all costs the divine will must be done ... Puritanism by its assertion of the supreme authority of God contributes to secure, and to make for ever sacred, the inalienable rights of man.* (Dale, p. 173)

The seedbed for the ever increasingly radical Puritan ideas was Cambridge University. There much of the theology and many of the social ideas found within the Puritan and Separatist thinking were formed.

Through the halls of Cambridge came a number of Separatist martyrs. These were men such as John Udall, John Greenwood, Henry Barrow and John Penry. Except for Barrow, all were no doubt known to William Brewster, the beloved elder of the Pilgrims, as they all attended Cambridge at the same time. All but Udall and Brewster were eventually hanged for their religious beliefs.

The most famous and influential of the early separatists was Robert Browne. He clearly articulated the ideas of the radical separatist thinking which led to his imprisonment at least twice and his eventual exile in Holland. In his writings, he called the Anglican Church "Moloch" and said that the

*... kingdom of God was 'not to be begun by whole parishes, but rather by the worthiest [in them], were they ever so few. In every parish these should withdraw from the church - secede, separate, as they had warrant to do by Scripture (2 Cor, 6:17, whereof come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you) - and organize themselves under a mutual covenant 'to foresake & denie all ungodliness and wicked fellowship, and to refuse all ungodlie communion with wicked persons.* (Willison, p. 7)

The "worthiest" of whom Browne was talking were the "elect." These were the people who had experienced the "inwarde working of the Holy Ghost in our hartes," and those whom God has given "his fullest consent or counsaile, whereby he is setled to save those whome he hath chose, and after that manner which pleaseth and liketh him." (George, p. 42) It was Browne's belief that the elect - the "saints" - needed to remove themselves from the unregenerate in the parishes and form their own congregations.

This theology is another piece in the beginning of congregational polity, of the separation of the church from the state. Because the elect were commanded to separate from the non-elect, and his belief that church hierarchies were unscriptural, Browne emphasized the power of the individual congregation - those gathered saints who had voluntarily professed experiencing the power of the Holy Ghost in their lives.

These congregations, formed by members in covenant with each other and with God, were the basic ecclesiastical units. They elected their own officers, disciplined their own members, and administered

the sacraments only to committed initiates. (George, p. 43)

Because the church was only for the godly, it needed to be free of civil authority in order for the purity of soul to be unhampered. In matters of conscience, the intrusion of the state only created hypocrisy, which thus interfered with the realization of God's kingdom.

While eventually rejecting the name Brownist for both himself and his followers, John Robinson - another Cambridge graduate - came to embrace the Separatist ideals espoused by Browne and others.

Though beginning his career as an Anglican cleric, in time Robinson came to doubt his Anglicanism. George Willison describes him:

*Always a sincere and sensitive soul, Robinson found himself in a painful position, harassed by doubts on every side. He was reluctant to go forward. He was quite unwilling to turn back. After wrestling with his soul for two years, he finally made his decision and joined those who were surreptitiously meeting in the manor house at Scrooby.*

*"Joining the Scrooby congregation as a humble private member, Robinson was overshadowed by Clyfton for a time but soon rose from the ranks, becoming second-in-command as 'teacher' of the group.* (Willison, p. 41)

Another important aspect in the development of democracy, both within a religious context and within society, is exemplified by Robinson's moving up through the congregation to a position of leadership. By emphasizing that the minister is in the first place a member of the church like all other members, the basis is laid for a concept of democratic leadership. (Wright, p. 17)

The minister, by way of his education and calling, would be the first among equals. Even so, he does not necessarily have the final word - he remains responsible to the congregation and to its covenant. He is always subject to the scrutiny of the lay people who have been encouraged to read and study the scriptures for themselves and who have the power to reject false teachers. (Hall, p. 240)

However, as the church historian Conrad Wright cautions us:

*Admittedly, congregational polity is not necessarily to be equated with democracy ... The democratic element was the power of the election vested in the church members. But once in office, the (leaders) exercised powers delegated by Christ and defined by Scripture, not powers latent in the people and entrusted on sufferance to the leaders.* (Wright, p. 17)

Robinson, sensitive to the charges that the "negative voice is in the body of the church, not in the Elders" responded:

*Wise men having written of this subject have approved as good and lawful three kinds of polities: monarchical where supreme authority is in the hands of one; aristocratical when it is in the hands of some few select persons; and democratical in the whole body, or multitude. and all these three have their places in the Church of Christ. In respect of him the head it is a Monarchy, in respect of the eldership an aristocracy, in respect of the body a popular state.* (Burgess, p. 117)

Even though this was a rather progressive view, true democracy still remained a long way off. Robinson and the Separatists were far more radical than we often times appreciate. In his writings, he bemoaned the fact that reform movements rarely, if ever, went beyond the thinking of the particular reformer. One example of this is when he said:

*You see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them, a misery to be much lamented; for though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God hath not revealed his whole will to them ... It is not possible that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.* (Taylor, p. 23)

As Timothy George points out in his book, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*:

*Beyond the incessant wrangling over liturgical trifles and nuances of church government lay very real concerns about the nature of authority, the meaning of community, and the extent of mutual responsibility.* (George, p. 245)

Robinson addressed these issues when he wrote,

*The Lord Jesus is the king of his church alone, upon whose shoulders the government is, and unto whom all power is given in heaven and earth; yet hath he not received this power for himself alone, but doth communicate the same with his church, as the husband with the wife. and as he is 'anointed by God with the oil of gladness above his fellows' so doth he communicate this anointing ... to every member of the body and so makes every one of them severally kings and priests and all jointly a kingly priesthood or communion of kings, priest and prophets. And in this holy fellowship by virtue of this plenteous annointment everyone is made a king, priest and prophet not only to himself but to every other, yea, to the whole ... So that not only the eye, a special member, cannot say to the hand, a special member, I have no need of thee; but not the head, the principle member of all, unto the feet, the meanest member, I have no need of you.* (Burgess, p. 117)

Each person remains responsible to and for every other person. All are equally important from the "meanest" to the most godly.

The concerns about authority, community and responsibility were formally addressed by the creation of covenants. Covenants are promises, agreements which define a meaningful collective existence and community. (Adams, p. 239)

*The organizing principle of Puritan social thought was ... covenant. Individuals are called to the covenant, one by one, through a mature experience of spiritual rebirth ... those included in the covenant ... formed a 'gathered community' held together by shared knowledge of individual salvation.* (Reichley, p. 55)

These voluntary agreements had the essential function of making "churches out of collections of individuals; to establish community." (Wright, p. 8) As James Luther Adams stated:

*... the meaning of life is found in the processes and responsibilities of groups and institutions ... one is related to the collective in such a way as to be responsible for the consequences of one's actions and for the consequences of collective action.* (Adams, p. 239)

There are a number of elements contained within a covenant which are important. A covenant recognizes the rule of law. It recognizes that meaningful, collective existence involves a

consensus and a commitment with regard to what is right. It also is created out of an attitude of trust and affection and is maintained because of love, not law. (Adams, p. 240)

Also in the concept of covenant, the meaning of life is found in the processes and responsibilities of history, namely in maintaining an agreement that provides order and continuity in society. (Adams, p. 239) It needs to be made very clear, however, that covenants are not creeds. Covenants say, "we unite," or "we join together," they do not say "we believe." This is an important distinction because a covenant is a promise to be together and work together as a community. It is not a statement of faith. The Pilgrims were very careful to not compose a statement of faith because of their belief in the supremacy of the individual conscience.

If we look at some of the important Pilgrim documents we can see the beginning of a democratic society.

The Scrooby Covenant, written in 1606, states:

*We, as the Lord's free people, join ourselves into church estate, in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all his ways made known, or to be made known, unto us, according to our best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost us, the Lord assisting us.*

David Hall remarks that the "resonating phrase, 'the Lord's free people'" strongly emphasizes the lay tradition found within the Pilgrim community. He also states

*Declaring themselves 'free,' the people ... coupled this assertion with a covenant in which they pledged to live according to the law of God. Theirs was liberation to fulfill the law, to obey it as completely as they could. They demanded of themselves and of others, obedience to a program of reform.*

(Hall, pp. 239-240)

The Mayflower Compact, written when the Pilgrims discovered they were not in Virginia and therefore outside the laws governing their patent, and in response to a potential mutiny, wrote:

*... do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves together into a civil body politic,; for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just & equal laws, ordinances, Acts, constitutions & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet & convenient for the general good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.*

This covenant marked the creation of a body politic based on the consent of the governed and ruled by law. In it they promised to one another to work together to create a viable law abiding society. They realized, as is pointed out by H. Richard Niebuhr, that

*... legal power was necessary for curbing unregenerate power, and therefore agreed to civil government, but because the exercise of power tended to corrupt men, they sought limitations by means of constitutionalism, the Scriptures, and 'political covenants,' and the dispersion of power.* (Reichley, pp. 57-58)

What is truly remarkable about the Compact is that it was signed by Separatists, non-Separatists, and the hired manservants. Even those men with no status or property were included in the formation of the new government. This was an extremely radical notion founded upon the idea that all people are

creatures of God. One of the democratic ideals that made Plymouth unique was that - unlike the later Massachusetts Bay Colony - voting and participation in civil government was not restricted solely to church members but rather to 'honest and good men' regardless of their social or economic station.

(Foote, p. 47)

Finally there are the General Fundamentals of the Plymouth Colony of 1636.

these laws, possibly viewed in a manner similar to our constitution, "recognized only such laws as were enacted by the consent of the body of freemen or associate, or their representatives, legally assembled, which according to the free liberties of the freeborn people of England." (Bartlett, p. 107)

These Fundamental Laws protected against the arbitrary authority of potentially corrupt magistrates; they called for annual elections; and set up a legal structure guided by reason, and at least theoretically, were constructed to protect the innocent from unfair and unjust accusations and trial. In what was probably the first officially sanctioned separation of church and state, the Fundamentals stated that the people

*... might with the liberty of a good conscience, enjoy the pure Scriptural Worship of God, without the mixture of Human Inventions and Impositions: and that their children after them might walk in the Holy ways of Lord...*

At no time did the Pilgrims forget what brought them to the new world. And while the State was charged with protecting and supporting the church, the church was protected from interference by the state.

I must disagree with my friend who said the Pilgrims did not have much influence on the development of democracy. Their contribution was subtle and profound - living out the principles of a covenanted community as they agreed to a mutual purpose without violating the conscience of any person, all the while promising mutual responsibility toward each other and the greater good of the community.

Through their efforts they removed the church from under the oppressive hand of the State, and through extension, at least in New England, moved the body politic from the person of the monarch and the state-supported clerics and embodied it in the exercise of power by the governed people. It seems much of their tolerance, especially in Plymouth, might have been born out of necessity and practicality. About half of the voyagers on the *Mayflower* were not Separatists. It would appear that excluding those "strangers" who made the voyage and survived that first winter from having a voice in the running of the colony would have created greater tension in an already tense situation (as it did in the Massachusetts Bay Colony).

As a small struggling community, there were not enough of them to have an "us" and a "them" at least with regard to civil matters. The Separatists were able to discover that the "strangers" were good and kind men and women.

While not tolerant as we understand tolerance today, if we place this small band of sojourners into context, the overall gentleness of their view comes through. Certainly they were strict Calvinists, but unlike many of their Puritan brothers and sisters, they were kinder Calvinists. Maybe their oppression and exile (one of the events which differentiates them from their Puritan brethren who chose to stay in England) increased their generosity of spirit as they appreciated even more fully the dangers of capricious governmental and clerical authority.

In Plymouth Colony they did not try witches or hang Quakers. Remarkably, they tried, convicted and hanged a man for murdering a Wampanoag. They lived by the law but were not legalistic; rather, they used their faith and, apparently, reason to guide them as they made decisions, seemingly always careful to not abuse their civil power or authority.

The legacy of the English Separatists - arising from their study of scripture, their oppression and exile - did indeed influence in a subtle manner, through their attitudes, the foundation of democracy. Their belief that all were equal in God's eyes, their denial of clerical hierarchy, and the belief that civil magistrates should stay out of religious issues, continues to be a strong influence in American society.

Their suspicion of authority, leading to the checks and balances on power and its corrupting

influence, manifests itself in regular elections both in the church and in the government. The consent of the governed is a fundamental principle of our democratic society. The Separatist belief in the possibility of the realization of the Holy Community on earth continues to drive this nation as we struggle with many of the same issues they did 400 years ago.

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