

## IS THERE A DISTINCT AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE NOTION OF CHURCH?

This paper argues that there *is* a distinct American contribution to the notion of Church. The American understanding of the nature and mission of the Church arises from the distinct American experience and exercise of the principle of voluntarism, on the one hand, and of the separation of Church and State, on the other. The latter is an outgrowth of the former, while the existence of the former has tended to sustain and reinforce the latter.

I shall also argue that certain alternate suggestions regarding the distinctively American contribution to the notion of the Church are inadequate; namely, that the Social Gospel movement is the distinctively American ecclesiological phenomenon or, secondly, that the American understanding of Church is distinguished by its eschatological, future-oriented, and political horizon.

It is important to be clear about the terms of the question. By "Church" I mean the whole Christian community, i.e., all those who explicitly accept responsibility for confessing the Lordship of Jesus in the context of a sacramental fellowship which identifies its mission in the world with that of Jesus; namely, to be the spokesman, the embodiment, and the facilitator of God's reign among men. I am not speaking here of a specific denomination, sect, or other grouping within the Christian community, and certainly not of the Roman Catholic Church alone, but of the whole congregation of those who confess the Lordship of Jesus and who accept responsibility for the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

By "American" I mean that which pertains to the historical experience of the Church in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of ecclesiological pluralism, see my book, *Church: the Continuing Quest* (New York: Newman Press, 1970), especially Chapter I, pp. 5-21.

<sup>2</sup> See N. R. Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); H. S. Smith, R. T. Handy, and L. A. Loetscher, eds., *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, (2 vols.; New York: Scribners, 1960 and 1963); S. E.

By "distinctively" I mean that which is not found anywhere else in substantially the same form. "Distinctively" does not mean "uniquely." The principle of voluntarism, or of free association, did not originate in the American colonies nor is it to be found and exercised today in the United States alone. But its modern form is so intimately related to the establishment and development of the American nation that the principle and its exercise can, in fact, be called "distinctively" American.

By "voluntarism" I mean the freedom to form, or to belong to, associations that can bring about innovation or criticism within society. Voluntarism, therefore, is an associational and institutional concept. It is this institutional sense which distinguishes the democratic society from any other and which, therefore, provides a distinctive context for the emergence of an American ecclesiological perspective.<sup>3</sup>

The separation of powers, traditionally called the separation of church and state (although not without some reservation<sup>4</sup>), is one

Ahlstrom, ed., *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); E. S. Gaustad, ed., *Religious Issues in American History* (New York: Harper and Row, Forum Books, 1968); John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (second rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); J. C. Brauer, ed., *Reinterpretation in American Church History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); W. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953); E. A. Smith, ed., *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); S. E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); for recent sociological studies of the phenomenon of religion in America, see R. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 168-189; J. F. Wilson dissents from Bellah's thesis in "The Status of 'Civil Religion' in America," *The Religion of the Republic*, pp. 1-21; S. M. Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963); J. M. Yinger, *Sociology Looks at Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); J. L. Thomas, *Religion and the American People* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963); C. Y. Glock and R. Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); G. Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); and T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> I am accepting here, with only slight modification, the definition of James Luther Adams in his essay, "The Voluntary Principle in the Forming of American Religion," in *The Religion of the Republic*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> See Sidney Mead, "The Fact of Pluralism and the Persistence of Sectarianism," in *The Religion of the Republic*, pp. 247-266.

of the principal outgrowths of voluntarism. In the voluntary Church religious faith was no longer a matter of governmental enforcement but of individual choice. Indeed, the individual could choose not to be a member of the Church at all. The power of the Church was limited by the power of the state, but so, too, was the power of the state limited, in such wise that it could not interfere with the internal operations of the Church nor could it impose, by political fiat or by legal coercion of various forms, membership upon those outside the Church.

This separation of powers, which both influenced and was influenced by the principle and exercise of voluntarism, provides the distinctive context for the emergence and development of a distinctive theology of the Church.

Although this paper necessarily relies upon the work of American church historians and sociologists of religion, the paper itself is a work neither of history nor of sociology, but of theology, and specifically of ecclesiology. My purpose, however, is exceedingly limited: I am trying only to determine those distinctively American influences in the theological process by which we, individually and collectively, make up our minds about the nature and mission of the Church. We have learned enough in recent years about the socially, historically, and culturally conditioned character of all theological reflection to know that where, and out of what context, we do our theology will determine in large measure the kind of questions we ask and, inevitably, the kind of answers we formulate. Ecclesiology, which is that aspect of the total theological enterprise which focusses upon the communitarian expression of Christian faith, is no exception to this rule.

Alexis de Tocqueville reported that "the religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck (him) on arrival in the United States. The longer (he) stayed in the country, the more conscious (he) became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation."<sup>5</sup> His interviews with clergy and laity throughout the land disclosed that the reason behind this unusually benign situation was the separation of church and state.<sup>6</sup> Theolo-

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by G. Lawrence (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272, 276-277.

gians, historians, and sociologists of religion today tend to support Tocqueville's initial impression.<sup>7</sup>

Voluntaryism did not begin in America, James Luther Adams concedes. Indeed, it was characteristic of the primitive Church of the New Testament, at least in its human self-understanding. (The primitive Church also understood itself, as the modern Church still does, as a creation of the Spirit, as a reality brought into being by the grace of God.) The primitive Christian community rejected the notion of a state religion and appealed instead to the principle of free choice. "In modern history," Adams suggests, "the first crucial affirmation of voluntaryism as an institutional phenomenon appeared in the demand of the sects for the separation of church and state. . . . The rejection of the established confession (would no) longer be considered a political offense or . . . deprive the unbeliever of the civil franchise."<sup>8</sup> The Church would no longer be the beneficiary of tax support and special political privilege, but instead it would have to be self-sustaining, managing its own affairs. As the Church grew apart from the protection of the state, so did the Church's freedom increase. Adams, in fact, refers to the collection plate as a symbol of the Church's freedom—an interpretation not universally shared by Church members today!

Out of this principle of voluntaryism there developed the distinctively American ecclesiastical form known as the denomination, "an organized group that . . . recognized itself as a visible but finitely limited part of the church founded upon imperfect knowledge, apprehension, and exemplification of the gospel."<sup>9</sup> Unlike the sects, denominations made no pretense to universality of revealed truth nor did they claim to be exclusively the Church. By their very nature, therefore, denominations were committed to the principle of

<sup>7</sup> For historical and sociological references, see #2 above. Among the theological supporters, there are James Luther Adams, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, and John Courtney Murray, all of whom are discussed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>8</sup> *Art. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> S. E. Mead, *art. cit.*, pp. 260-261; see also his essay "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church'," in *Church History*, 36 (1967), 262-283. H. Richard Niebuhr reminds us of the negative aspects of denominationalism in his *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: World, Meridian, 1967, [first published, 1929]), pp. 21-25 and 264-275.

voluntaryism, indeed they were the outgrowth of the principle of voluntaryism. Because of their commitment to the voluntary principle, they supported and defended the principle of religious freedom, of the limitation of both governmental and ecclesiastical power, of constitutionalism, of tolerance of dissent and heterodoxy. According to Sidney Mead "any attempt to understand the religious situation in America must begin with recognition of the fact of pluralism."<sup>10</sup>

"The American experiment," he argues, "was to find out whether a commonwealth could exist and flourish 'with a full liberty in religious concernments' and a plurality of religious groups, each claiming in traditional fashion exclusively to be 'the church.'"<sup>11</sup> It is Mead's thesis that the Church, in the sense that the word "Church" was understood in Christendom for centuries, simply does not exist. It is

an abstract concept, a figure of speech, a theological assertion, pointing beyond the actual and confusing diversity of sects to the pious faith that each is a part of the unbroken body of Christ. For this reason alone the old concepts of church and state no longer describe the actuality experienced. The church as such is not a recognized legal entity in the U.S. at all. This is what the American observes and experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Mead finds support for his thesis on the religion of the Republic in John Smylie's essay, "National Ethos and the Church."<sup>13</sup> Because no single denomination could function as "the church," Mead argues, the nation itself came more and more to function in this way. Indeed, American Protestantism endowed the nation with specific ecclesial attributes; one might even speak of them as notes of the Church. First, the nation emerged as "the primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history."<sup>14</sup> Only America can provide "the physical effort and pecuniary and moral power to evangelize the world" (Lyman Beecher). Secondly, the nation became "the primary society in terms of which individual Americans discovered

<sup>10</sup> S. E. Mead, *art. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>13</sup> *Theology Today*, 20 (October, 1963), 313-321.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Smylie, *art. cit.*, p. 314.

personal and group identity." And, thirdly, as the nation became the primary community for fulfilling historic purposes and realizing personal identity, it also assured a churchly function in becoming "the community of righteousness." Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the major theologian of the religion of the Republic, clearly compared the American nation to the Church, declaring that "when the people rise in masses in behalf of the Union and the liberties of their country, truly may it be said, 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against them.'"<sup>15</sup>

What outstanding ecclesiological function did the Republic perform? Mead suggests,

Primarily, the Republic's neutral civil authority set limits on the absolutistic tendencies inherent in every religious sect, preventing any one of them, or any combination of them, from gaining a monopoly of the definition of truth, and imposing its particular forms on all the people. . . . It was the civil authority that limited the conflicts between religious groups in accordance with Jefferson's plea that 'reason and persuasion' were 'the only practicable instruments.'<sup>16</sup>

The voluntary principle, therefore, has been an eminently creative one "by making way for free interaction and innovation in the spirit of community."<sup>17</sup> The Church thereby remains open to influence from its members, from those outside the Church, and from the Holy Spirit. At the same time it assumes the responsibility for exercising influence within the general community. "The organizational prerequisite for this kind of interaction," Adams insists, "is the separation of powers, a separation that combines independence and interdependence and which looks toward the achievement of unity in variety."<sup>18</sup>

The voluntary principle has always supported and encouraged the formation of free associations in the United States. Christians

<sup>15</sup> R. P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. IV, pp. 193-194; cited by S. E. Mead, *art. cit.*, *Church History*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>16</sup> S. E. Mead, *art. cit.*, p. 281.

<sup>17</sup> J. L. Adams, *art. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

have just as consistently been found in various associations designed to meet some social problem or other, whether in the movement against slavery or, today, in the protest against the war in Indochina or the struggle for the civil rights of Blacks, Mexicans, Indians, and other minorities. It was through such participation in voluntary societies that many members of the Church have been able to extend their perception of social and political realities and thereby "with some concreteness to move in the direction of a theology of culture and to attempt to fulfill the mission of the Church in a new age."<sup>19</sup>

The foregoing interpretations are generally supported by the Niebuhrs, Reinhold and H. Richard. "While it may be questioned whether the Founding Fathers intended, in Jefferson's private phrase, an absolute 'wall of separation between Church and State,'" Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "both the peculiar conditions of American life and the Constitution of the United States have created a more complete separation between the two than is found in any other nation."<sup>20</sup>

H. Richard Niebuhr pushes the source of Christian constitutionalism and the separation and limitation of powers beyond the principle of voluntarism to the eschatological horizon of American Christianity. It is the idea of the Kingdom of God which is "the dominant idea in American Christianity."<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr traces three stages of development in American history: the foundational period where the sovereignty of God was paramount; the period of awakening and revival where the reign of Christ was central; and the most recent period where the notion of the kingdom of God on earth has been preeminent. These are not three divergent views of the kingdom; rather they are intimately related to one another. The idea of the kingdom, according to H. Richard Niebuhr, cannot be expressed by any one of them alone. In various ways, "through insistence upon constitutionalism, upon the primacy and independence of the church,

<sup>19</sup> *Art. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> "A Note on Pluralism," in *Religion in America: Original Essays on Religion in a Free Society*, J. Cogley, ed. (New York: World, Meridian, 1958), p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937, [Harper Torchbook, 1959]), p. xii.

and upon the limitation of all human power, the faith in the kingdom of God became a constructive thing in early America."<sup>22</sup>

The principal Catholic theological support to these essentially Protestant analyses has been offered by the late John Courtney Murray, S.J. The problem of pluralism as found in America, he stated, is "unique in the modern world." It has not been the result, as in Europe, of the disruption and decay of a previously existent religious community.<sup>23</sup> The American proposition affirms the principle of the consent of the governed, the limitation of the government's power over the people, free speech, free press, and so forth. It represents, therefore, an act of faith in the capacity of people to govern themselves.<sup>24</sup> Catholics have easily participated in the American consensus because of the "evident coincidence of the principles which inspired the American Republic with the principles that are structural to the Western Christian political tradition."<sup>25</sup>

The influence upon the Second Vatican Council of American theology, and of John Courtney Murray in particular, is evident in the council's remarkably forthright Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. Three doctrinal tenets are proposed: the ethical doctrine of religious freedom as a human right (personal and collective); a political doctrine with regard to the functions and limits of government in matters religious; and the theological doctrine of the freedom of the Church as the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and the socio-political order. "A long-standing ambiguity" was finally clarified by the council, Father Murray noted in his own popular commentary. "The Church does not deal with the secular order in terms of a double standard—freedom for the Church when Catholics are a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics are a majority."<sup>26</sup>

"The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>23</sup> *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), p. x.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, W. Abbot and J. Gallagher, eds. (New York: Guild, America, and Association Presses, 1966), p. 673.



truth," the council declared, "as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power."<sup>27</sup> The council defines religious freedom in the following way: "This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits."<sup>28</sup>

The principle of religious freedom, or of voluntarism, is grounded in the "very dignity of the human person" and creates a right that must be "recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed. Thus it is to become a civil right."<sup>29</sup> It would "clearly transgress the limits set to its power" if the government were to "presume to direct or inhibit acts that are religious."<sup>30</sup> The principle of freedom applies to groups as well as to individuals. Religious bodies must freely govern themselves without interference from the state and must not be hindered by civil action in the proper pursuit of their external mission, whether in the training of ministers, the erection of buildings, public teaching, meetings, worship, and so forth.

Religious freedom is grounded also in the revealed word of God: "It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free. . . . The act of faith is of its very nature a free act."<sup>31</sup>

The document continues:

Where the principle of religious freedom is not only proclaimed in words or simply incorporated in law but also given sincere and practical application, there the Church succeeds in achieving a stable situation of right as well as of fact and the independence which is necessary for the fulfillment of her divine mission. . . . All nations are coming into even closer unity. Men of different cultures and religions are being brought

<sup>27</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 9.

together in closer relationships. . . . Consequently, in order that relationships of peace and harmony may be established and maintained within the whole of mankind, it is necessary that religious freedom be everywhere provided with an effective constitutional guarantee, and that respect be shown for the high duty and right of man freely to lead his religious life in society.<sup>32</sup>

We thus can give some meaning to another of the terms in the original question: Is there a distinctively American *contribution* to the notion of the Church? The "contribution" is evident, particularly in Catholic ecclesiology, by way of the insertion of the voluntary principle into, and its official endorsement by, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration of Religious Freedom.

Further evidence of the continuing contributive character of American ecclesiology is provided by the recent work of the Canon Law Society of America, particularly by such exceptionally useful projects as its study of constitutional government for the Church,<sup>33</sup> its proposals for widening the selection process for the choosing of bishops thereby realizing more fully the American, but also the canonical, notion of the consent of the governed,<sup>34</sup> and its special report on due process which has been accepted by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and which is now being put into practice in various dioceses throughout the United States.<sup>35</sup> The growth of priests senates, parish councils, and, more recently, diocesan pastoral councils in this country lends further weight to the historical, sociological, and theological interpretations of Adams, Mead, the Niebuhrs, and Murray.

The distinctively American understanding of the nature and mission of the Church arises from the distinctively American experience and exercise of the principle of voluntarism, on the one hand, and of the separation of Church and State, on the other. The

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 13 and 15.

<sup>33</sup> *We, the People of God . . . : a study of Constitutional Government for the Church*, J. A. Coriden, ed. (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> *The Choosing of Bishops: Historical and Theological Studies*, W. Bassett, ed. (Hartford: Canon Law Society of America, 1971).

<sup>35</sup> *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Due Process to the Canon Law Society of America* (Cleveland, Ohio, October 21, 1969).

latter has been an outgrowth of the former, while the existence of the former has tended to sustain and reinforce the latter.

There are, of course, other possible approaches to the question at hand, and none indeed more different than Winthrop Hudson's insistence, over against the position of C. Howard Hopkins, that there is, in fact, no distinctively American concept of Christianity.

Hudson calls Hopkins parochial for attempting to argue that the Social Gospel movement is "America's most unique contribution to the great ongoing stream of Christianity," that this movement was "indigenous" to America, "deriving its dynamics and its ideology from the social context in which it grew."<sup>36</sup> Religion in America before the First World War, Hudson argues, can best be understood "only when it is viewed as an integral part of the developing life of the larger English-speaking community and not unrelated to European society as a whole."<sup>37</sup> He opposed the tendency to look for uniquely American contributions:

First of all, the search for uniqueness leads to a narrow and provincial understanding of ourselves, to a turning inward at a time when eyes should be on events and developments beyond our national boundaries. Second, the recognition that we are part of a larger community serves as a counter to the sense of difference and superiority which accompanies efforts to prove that we represent an indigenous spirit that has developed independently of outside influences. . . . Lastly, such a recognition gives us a sense of continuity, perspective, and insight, and at the same time gives us an awareness of being

<sup>36</sup> *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940 [paperback ed., 1967]), pp. 3 and 326. To say, however, that the Social Gospel movement is not distinctively American is not to deny that it occupied a major place in the development of American ecclesiology. See, for example, the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch on the theological perspective of Harvey Cox and Martin Luther King. See David Little, "The Social Gospel Revisited," and George D. Younger, "Does *The Secular City* Revisit the Social Gospel?" in *The Secular City Debate*, D. Callahan, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 69-74 and 77-80. Cox's response is contained in his own essay, "Cox on His Critics," pp. 85-88. King acknowledges his indebtedness, with reservations, to Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement in his *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> "How American is Religion in America?" in *Reinterpretation in American Church History* (see note #2), pp. 166-167.

related in intimate fashion to the whole church of Christ both past and present.<sup>38</sup>

But Hudson seems opposed not so much to the search for distinctiveness as to the search for uniqueness. In another place Hudson himself concedes that there are certain distinctively American characteristics of religious life and these, at least indirectly, affect our understanding of the nature and mission of the Church. He mentions in particular the "mood of eager expectancy" and the national sense of "having escaped in so many ways the limitations of a bounded existence. . . . The hope of all things being made new, in the course of time, was often subtly secularized and frequently restated in political terms. But the conviction remained that somehow this was God's country with a mission to perform."<sup>39</sup>

Another, more common interpretation of the distinctively American contribution to the notion of the Church, not to say Christianity itself, is that provided by Braaten, Clebsch, Altizer, and others. "Historians have been piling up evidence," Carl Braaten writes, "that an adequate interpretation of American history is possible only in the light of its eschatological underpinnings. . . . American history has been, from the time of the Founding Fathers, a living movement on the frontiers in tension toward the realm of the future—the coming kingdom of God."<sup>40</sup>

"Christianity's earliest stimulus to the American dream is also its most enduring influence on the American experience: the vision of the new world as locus for a new city," William Clebsch suggests.<sup>41</sup> But Clebsch also agrees with the interpretation given in the first and major part of this paper; namely, that the distinctive contribution of American experience to our notion of the Church lies in the area of voluntarism—of freedom, of pluralism, of constitutionalism.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>39</sup> *Religion in America*, (New York: Scribners, 1955), pp. 21-22; see also p. 409.

<sup>40</sup> "American Historical Experience and Christian Reflection," in *Projections: Shaping an American Theology for the Future*, T. F. O'Meara and D. M. Weisser, eds. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 90-93.

<sup>41</sup> *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209ff.

Thomas Altizer identifies "the meaning of America" with her "original promise of a universal historical liberation of humanity, and . . . in a new and final victory of the Kingdom of God."<sup>43</sup> For T. O'Meara and D. M. Weisser the distinctive theological context is "political," although they, too, acknowledge that the secular horizon of American experience includes "democratic participation, pluralism, the preservation of both freedom and social responsibility."<sup>44</sup>

Herbert Richardson suggests that sociotechnics is uniquely characteristic of American life; namely, the view that the world is intrinsically malleable by social techniques. This has, in turn, produced a distinctively American vision, a "holy worldliness, the sanctification of all things by the Holy Spirit."<sup>45</sup>

Martin Marty, on the other hand, reminds us of an opposite trend in American Church history, toward political isolation rather than toward political involvement. During the period of the so-called Modern Schism (1830-1870),

institutional religion in America not only survived but greatly expanded and progressed. But religious forces accepted a division of labor; they were boxed in. In the new social contract, religion acquiesced in the assignment to address itself to the personal, familial, and leisured sectors of life while the public dimensions . . . were to become autonomous or to pass under the control of other kinds of tutelage. This accepted new contract was a novelty in Western culture, even if it has come to be regarded as normative by many later American Christians, especially the conservatives.<sup>46</sup>

Marty's position does not necessarily contradict the material we have discussed thus far, particularly in the first part of the paper where the principal thesis has been argued. American Protestants became less critical of the state and therefore withdrew from more

<sup>43</sup> "Theology and the Contemporary Sensibility," in *America and the Future of Theology*, W. A. Beardslee, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>45</sup> *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 28 and 112.

<sup>46</sup> *The Modern Schism: Three Paths to the Secular* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 98.

active involvement in political affairs because they felt that they had succeeded in producing a Protestant nation. But after the Civil War the situation changed drastically: industrialization, urbanization, immigration, Darwinism, Higher Criticism, entered the scene. The conservative and activist schools continue to coexist, but the direction and shape of church mission is far less clear to both sides now than before these developments first took hold.

There is a simple difficulty with the view of some contemporary writers that the distinctively American contribution to Christianity in general and to the notion of the Church in particular is our peculiarly eschatological, future-oriented, political horizon. Eschatological, future-oriented, political theology has never been restricted to the American scene. Indeed, the term "political theology" was coined by Johannes Metz, a German. The roots of Harvey Cox's secular ecclesiology are as much European, (e.g., F. Gogarten), as American. And the theology of hope had its initial launching in J. Moltmann and W. Pannenberg, both German theologians, and in the writings of Ernst Bloch, the German—and indeed Communist—philosopher. The thrust toward the future, with a concomitant evolutionary view of history, is strongly Teilhardian, and eschatology itself is hardly an American export.

Those of us who do ecclesiology in America do it in a social, political, and cultural context which prizes freedom, not only of speech but of association. This reverence for freedom of association (voluntaryism) leads us to defend and protect the separation and limitation of powers, both of the state and of the Church. It moves us to lobby on behalf of those reforms which make the principle of the consent of the governed prevail in every aspect of church life and mission: whether in the formation of parish and diocesan councils, the widening of the process of selecting bishops, the introduction of due process, the revision of canon law in order to enhance the dignity and freedom of the human person, and so forth.

The issue of freedom does not constitute the whole of ecclesiology, but if we are to exploit the resources that are distinctively ours, this is the value, i.e., voluntaryism, that we ought to cherish and to promote. At the risk of oversimplifying, one might say that the most serious violations of the gospel of Jesus Christ, both inside

and outside the Church, have been crimes against human freedom. If the Church is to be a credible sign and an effective instrument of God's reign among men, a kingdom of freedom as well as of truth and justice and peace,<sup>47</sup> then it will have to be a community which gives freedom first place, because it is only in freedom that we can genuinely confess the Lordship of Jesus; it is only in freedom that we can offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father in the eucharist; it is only in freedom that we can manifest the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to all mankind; and it is only in freedom that we can gather our resources—moral, economic, political, social—to facilitate the entrance of the kingdom of God among men, to enable God to break through at those critical points where there is still injustice, hostility, division, and apathy—indeed where there is oppression of the human spirit because there has been suppression of human freedom.

As this spirit of freedom struck Tocqueville when he first came into contact with America, so it should strike every man and woman as he or she first comes into contact with that community which proclaims and celebrates the Lordship of the one who came to set all men free.

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<sup>47</sup> See Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), n. 39.