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UNION OF  
Church and State

What Constitutes Such a Union?

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# Union of Church and State.



WHAT constitutes a union of church and State? and would the success of the National Reform movement result in such a union? are questions of paramount importance, and to assist to a proper understanding of them those who have not in the past given the subject the thought which its importance demands, is the object of this little tract.

In an article in the *Christian Statesman* of April 10, 1890, Rev. W. J. Coleman, Professor of Political Science in Geneva College, Pennsylvania, and a prominent National Reformer, attempts to show the impossibility of a union of church and State in this country, and asserts that outside the ranks of Mormons and Romanists nobody desires such a union. In stating the matter, Mr. Coleman says:—

In the phrase, "union of church and State," there can be no doubt as to the sense in which the word "State" is used.  
. . . The State means the nation, or whole body of people.  
. . . The word "church" may mean: (1) A building where worshipers meet; (2) those who gather in such building, or a congregation; (3) a body of believers acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority, or denomination; (4) the collective body of believers in the world. These acknowledge no central authority, and are not combined in any human organization; (5) the aggregate of religious principles and ideas in a community.

The professor then asks, "When we speak of a union of church and State, which of these is meant?" and continues:—

The union of the State with the church, taken in the first, second, or fourth sense, would be impossible. . . . When, however, we turn to the third and fifth meanings, we reach the heart of the whole difficulty.

Referring, then, to the claim that the adoption of this "aggregate of religious principles and ideas" would be a union of church and State, Mr. Coleman says:—

We deny this *in toto*, and declare that when the State adopts an idea or principle, it does not constitute such a union.

But a denial is not proof, and so we must examine the facts before we can feel warranted in accepting this denial, explicit though it be. Mr. Coleman's first argument is that "a principle and a State not being of the same species cannot be united." But this is merely technical and deserves but brief notice. The whole body of believers, he says, may properly be called the church. But he assumes that they recognize no central authority. This is, however, a mistake, as he himself shows later on in his own article. The church, in this broad sense, does not recognize a common authority. All denominations more or less fully recognize God as the great moral Governor, and his law as that by which all men will be judged; in short, the revealed will of God is the authority recognized by the church in its broadest sense, and it is this same authority that the National Reformers demand shall be recognized as the supreme law of the United States, thus making the law of the church and the law of the land one and the same. If this would not be a union of church and State in all essential particulars, it would be hard to say what would constitute such a union.

Mr. Coleman's second argument deserves more attention; for while it is no stronger, it is more specious. He says:—

The American objection to a union of church and State is founded on the evils which such a union has produced in the nations of the Old World. The phrase, therefore, has an historical sense, and to take it from that sense is to give it a new meaning with which to deceive people, who suppose that we are talking of the same kind of a union of church and State that produced the evil results. The union of church and State found in history has always been the union of an organized State with an organized church. In England the State is united with the Episcopal Church, in Scotland with the Presbyterian Church, in Prussia with the Lutheran Church, in Spain with the Roman Catholic Church. . . . This is the kind of union of church and State that the American people are opposed to. •

It is noticeable that Mr. Coleman goes back only a few hundred years for all his examples of a union of church and State. Why does he not go at once to the fountain-head of all corrupt church establishments, namely, Rome in the fourth century?—This would have been the logical and just method; but this he could not do without destroying his own argument. Everyone who is familiar with the history of the first four centuries of the Christian era knows that the first union of church and State was nothing more and nothing less than that which Mr. Coleman insists would not now constitute such a union. Constantine did only that which the National Reformers demand that this nation shall do, namely, he made the nation Christian by adopting the Christian religion as the national religion. Then the bishops of the Christian church, that is, of the whole body of believers, came together and decided what was the Christian religion; and thus was formed the nucleus of what has for centuries been known as the Roman Catholic Church.

To say that only a union of religion and the State is desired, and not a union of church and State, is to say that the church and religion can be separated. But this is impossible. Constantine only adopted the Christian religion; he did not make any denomination the State church. He had no thought of such a thing. Neander testifies that it had become Constantine's "favorite plan to unite together all his subjects in the worship of one God." That is, he wished all to become Christians; not necessarily to come together in one organic union, but in one faith so broad that all could assent to it. The emperor "represented the questions in dispute as being nothing but rash, speculative questions, standing in no connection whatever with the essence of Christianity." He reasoned, no doubt, as men do to-day, that even if all could not see alike on all points, they ought to upon essential doctrines, and therefore he wanted some authority to decide what were the essentials. And that is just what is said now about the differences which separate the various denominations. These, we are told, are minor differences; and that which they demand that the government shall recognize, is what they term the fundamental, non-sectarian principles of Christianity, those things upon which all can unite, not in the sense of forming one organic whole, a single denomination, but in the sense of giving united moral support to those principles. And this is just what they did in the time of Constantine; they simply agreed that Christianity, in the abstract, should be the recognized religion. But as soon as the bishops had decided what was Christianity, a church began to crystallize around the creed which contained their definition of Christianity. And it was inevitable that it

should be so. It could not have been otherwise. And it would be the same now. Before Christianity can have practically, as the National Reformers demand that it shall have, "an undeniable legal basis" in this country, it must be defined; that is, it must be decided what constitutes Christianity, and that definition will be the national creed, just as the Nicene creed was the creed of Rome.

Of course nobody intends that this shall result as it did in Rome. Nobody wants to make any denomination the State church, but it is none the less the truth that the adoption of "national Christianity," which the Declaration of Principles of the recent National Reform Convention at Washington demands, would constitute a union of Church and State just as truly as such a union was formed in the time of Constantine the Great. It is true, as Mr. Coleman says, that "the phrase, union of church and State, has an historical sense;" but it is also true that that historical sense is just as inseparably connected with the history of the church in the fourth century as in the fifteenth, or at any other time.

Of the relation of the church to the State during the early part of the fourth century, Neander says:—

With the commencement of this period the church entered into an entirely different relation to the State. It did not merely become a whole, recognized as legal, and tolerated by the State,—which it had been already from the reign of Gallien down to the Dioclesian persecution,—but the State itself declared its principles to be those to which everything must be subordinated. Christianity became, by degrees, the dominant State religion, though not entirely in the same sense as paganism had been before. Church and State constituted, henceforth, two wholes, one interpenetrating the other, and standing in a relation of mutual action and reaction. The advantageous influence of this was that the church could now exert its transforming power also on the relations of the State; but the meas-

ure and the character of this power depended on the state of the inner life in the church itself. The healthful influence of the church is indeed to be perceived in many particular cases, though it was very far from being so mighty as it must have been had everything proceeded from the spirit of genuine Christianity, and had the State *actually* subordinated itself to this spirit. But, on the other hand, the church had now to struggle under a great disadvantage; for instead of being left *free*, as it was before, to pursue its own course of development, it was subjected to the influence of a foreign, secular power, which in various ways would operate to check and disturb it; and the danger, in this case, increased in the same proportion as the political life with which the church came in contact was corrupt.

And this is exactly the relation which National Reformers insist shall exist between the State and the church in this country; and this is the nature of the temptation to which they would expose the church. They demand that the Christian principles, the principles of the church, shall be those to which everything shall be subordinated; and that the church, as such, shall participate in political matters, but that for their mutual good the church and State shall be separate.

But being under one law, governed by one principle, what was the result anciently? Let Neander answer:—

The supreme magistrates now considered themselves as members of the church, and took a personal share in its concerns; but it was no easy matter for them to fix the proper limits to this participation.

And who can doubt that it would be the same again? Once let the civil authorities be called upon to decide church questions, or to pass upon the meaning and scope of the law which governs the church, even though it be called civil law, and they can nevermore be separated from the administration of that law. "Whatever domain government invades it dominates. The jurisdiction which it takes it keeps."

The National Reform movement of the nineteenth century is the National Reform movement of the fourth century over again. Then, under stress of so-called Christian influence, the State declared the principles of the church to be those to which everything must be subordinated, and the demand is made now that the State shall do the same thing. Can we hope that the result would be different? The demand as now formulated is that "Christian morality shall be taken as the ultimate standard of right, and that all our laws shall conform to this standard." This simply means to make the divine law, or rather that which the courts may hold or the church decide to be the divine law, the fundamental law of the land. It would then be superior to the Constitution, and human judges would administer the divine law, and decree punishment for its infraction! As before stated, the church and the State would both be governed by the same law; in the church it would be known as ecclesiastical law, in the State as civil law; but it would be the same law. This is simply what was done in the Dark Ages; and the evils of a union of Church and State are inseparable from such a system, whether it be called a union of church and State, or only a union of religion and the State. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and it is just as true that the name by which a union of church and State may be called does not in the least change the nature of that union. The evil of such union is due to the fact that it constitutes men judges in matters pertaining to the conscience, and that would just as surely be the result of that which Mr. Coleman and other National Reformers are pleased to designate by the term, "union of religion and the State."

C. P. BOLLMAN.