

# "A RELIGION TO SUPPORT DEMOCRACY"

AN ABSTRACT OF RADIO ADDRESS

By

**Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, D. D.**

*Pastor of the Riverside Church*

*New York City*



*Distributed by*

**FRIENDS OF DEMOCRACY, INC.**

103 Park Avenue • New York

IN the generation in which some of us were reared, we assumed that as knowledge increased mankind would accept ever more universally the democratic faith. Instead, *democracy stands now in peril*. Democracy has done an incalculable service, and now in her hour of need democracy asks us what we can do for her. What kind of religion ought ours to be if it is to support the democratic faith and practise?

Democracy cannot be merely inherited. It must be reborn with every generation. *Unless the inner spiritual factors that created democracy in the first place can be constantly renewed, its outward forms decay*. What kind of religion ought ours to be if it is to support a government of, by, and for, the people?

I. In the first place, obviously it must be *a religion that dignifies personality*. Democracy springs from a high estimate of persons. It trusts people with freedom to think, to say what they think, to hear all sides of public questions discussed, to balance opposing arguments and to decide. That is an astonishing confidence in people. The Fuehrers and the Duces would say that it is an insane confidence. The founding fathers themselves were not unanimous about it. Said Alexander Hamilton, "The people is a great beast." *Yet that faith in people is the soul of democracy*. Nowhere is the contrast between democracy and dictatorship more evident than here. *Dictatorship herds persons like sheep*, hypnotizes them by mass propaganda and coerces them by mass pressure; *democracy trusts persons* as the ultimate sources of decision in the commonwealth.

Materialistic irreligion denies this estimate. It reduces the human being to an accidental collocation of physical atoms. Carried to its logical conclusion, it makes people what another calls "impotent nobodies hurtling toward nothingness." We cannot build a successful democracy on that idea. Some of us clearly can recall when first this new doctrine of materialistic irreligion, that has so swept across our generation,

came up over our horizon. How roused and shocked we were as Christians! This idea, we said, will destroy all faith in God; it will destroy our religion; it will destroy the church. But today we see a further truth. I wish it could be shouted from the housetops: this devaluation of persons will destroy democracy.

II. In the second place, the kind of religion that will support government of, by, and for, the people is one that recognizes a higher loyalty than the state. That seems to a dictator a weird idea. Yet behind it is an essential democratic faith that there is *something higher than any government, the truth yet to be discovered*, and that the only way of getting at it is to say to the people, "You are *not* the slaves of government; think for yourselves; if need be, differ from the government and oppose it; there is a higher loyalty than the government to which you must be true." It is as though democracy essentially were saying, "*We must obey God rather than man.*"

All too common is the idea that the essence of democracy is the rule of the majority. That is not true. Dictatorship also can be and often is the rule of the majority. But *the unique distinction of democracy* they utterly lack, not the rule of the majority, but *the rights of the minorities*. We set up a government and then actually pay salaries to opposition party members in the legislatures to criticize and obstruct the government. Looked at in cold logicity, that's an insane idea! *Yes, but it is magnificent too, one of the greatest political faiths ever ventured on in all history*. The British have a phrase that in these days I confess moves me deeply: "His Majesty's most loyal opposition." That's democracy and it is magnificent.

*Even in this country, with its Communists and Fascists, it is not easy to hold hard by the democratic idea*. Yet though the rights of minorities be abused and though the impatience of dictatorial minds be understandable, still *the democratic faith remains the best hope of mankind, and without it, I measure my words, Christianity may not survive*. For to the

Christian no human government can ever be the highest loyalty. The rights of minorities were, as a matter of history, created in the first place by the religious conscience obeying God rather than men. There, in a religious idea, this element of democracy was first produced and there it must find its perennial renewal. For the Christian conscience and civil liberties are done up in one bundle of life.

III. In the third place, the kind of religion that will support the democratic faith and practise must genuinely care not only for the *liberty* but for the *equality* and *fraternity* of the people. Our attention in these days is concentrated on the external enemies of democracy, the dictatorships that threaten war. *Only a fool would minimize the peril. But the deeper danger to democracy is still within*. It lies in the inequalities among our own people that spoil fraternity, destroy loyalty, divide us into economic classes, and make real democracy impossible.

One listens to the Brookings Institution reporting on incomes of American families in the prosperous year of 1929: "Thus it appears that one-tenth of one per cent of the families at the top received practically as much as forty-two per cent of the families at the bottom of the scale." That bodes ill to the republic. One-tenth of one per cent of American families receiving as much income as forty-two per cent suits not a democratic commonwealth.

The danger in this situation has become acute because it is on this that Communism feeds; it is the alleviation and cure of this that Communism promises; it is because of this that Communism spreads. The way in which Communism proposes to solve the problem, however, runs all against the democratic grain. Communism proposes the state ownership and conduct of economic processes. That means that the two most coercive powers in the world, the political and economic, are concentrated in the same hands. When we centralize in the same hands these two most pow-

erful coercive forces in the world, be sure that our civil liberties will soon be gone. A price is too high to pay for what is promised.

*We must face the fact that ultimately there is no such thing as a successful political democracy without economic democracy. If we cannot achieve that end, Communism's way, then we must find a democratic way of achieving it. Long ago it was said in England, "That which makes a few rich and many poor suits not the commonwealth."*

IV. Finally, the kind of religion that will support government of, by, and for, the people, must create *responsible personal character in the individual citizens*. Our American scene displays the lamentable lack of this.

Put it this way. A great population must be controlled. No sentimentality should blind our eyes to that realistic fact. If there is to be order and not chaos, discipline not anarchy, people must be controlled. And there are only two ways of controlling them. Coercion from without—that is one. Voluntary, responsible, public-spirited character spiritually engendered within—that is the other. *Now, a dictatorship stakes its very existence on the method of coercion, while a democracy remains a democracy only insofar as voluntary, responsible, public-spirited character takes coercion's place.* In any nation, the more we have of one, the less we have of the other. Is not this the very crux of the matter in America? We cannot go on forever in the republic neglecting those character-building faiths and incentives from which personal quality and moral integrity spring.

Here, too, Christ and democracy are at one. Whatever else Christianity at its best has done, it has produced self-starting, self-motivating, self-driving character. Church of Christ, this day of crisis is also the day of your opportunity if democracy is to be saved. *A republic must be built, not on coercion but on voluntary, inwardly right, responsible, personal character,*

to produce which should be your specialty. And you who have been careless of religion, negligent of the church, thoughtless of Christ, in general separate from the character-building faiths and motives of mankind, but who do care about government of, by, and for, the people, have we not a right to appeal to you to rethink your attitude?

They tell us that the devotion of youth in Europe to the mass movements of Stalin, the Fuehrer, and the Duce, is thrilling and that we in America have nothing to match it. I wish we could feel an equal thrill born of an equal devotion to democracy and to the kind of religion that sustains it. The dignifying of personality, the giving of conscience to God above all human institutions, the achievement not of popular liberty alone but of popular equality and fraternity, the erection of human society on transformed, responsible personal character—that is the cause on which the highest hopes of humankind depend.