Chapter 8 – The Historical Origins of Voluntaryism

Table of Contents
Previous – Section Two – Chapter 7 – “The Origin of Religious Tolerance” by Wendy McElroy

8
The Historical Origins of Voluntaryism
by James Luther Adams

In modern history the first crucial affirmation of voluntaryism as an institutional phenomenon appeared in the demand of the sects for the separation of church and state. In England, for example, and then later in America, the intention was to do away with direct state control of the church and also to remove official ecclesiastical influence from the political realm, toward the end of creating a voluntary church. In the voluntary church, religious faith as well as membership was to be a matter of individual choice. The individual was no longer automatically to become a member of the church simply by reason of his being born in the territory. Moreover, he could choose not to be a member of a church. Nor was rejection of the established confession any longer to be considered a political offense or to deprive the unbeliever of the civil franchise. In rejecting state control, the church (and the theological seminary) were no longer to be supported by taxation. The objection to taxation in support of the church was two-fold: tax support, it was held, not only gave the state some right of control; it also represented a way of coercing the nonmember or the unbeliever to give financial support to the church. Freedom of choice for the individual brought with it another freedom, namely, the freedom to participate in the shaping of the policies of the church group of his choice. The rationale for this voluntaryism was worked out theologically by the sectarians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and more in terms of social and political theory by John Locke in the next century.

From the point of view of a theory of associations, the demand for the separation of church and state and the emergence of the voluntary church represent the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one. The earlier era had been dominated by the ideal of “Christendom,” a unified structure of society in a church-state. In the new era, the voluntary church, the free church, no longer supported by taxation, was to be self-sustaining; and it was to manage its own affairs. In the earlier era, kinship, caste, and restricted community groups had determined most of the interests and the forms of participation. In the new era these interests became segregated. In this respect the freedom of choice was increased. The divorce of church and state and the advent of freedom of religious association illustrate this type of increase in freedom of choice.

In accord with this new conception of religious freedom and responsibility one must view the collection plate in the church service on Sunday as a symbol of the meaning of

disestablishment and of voluntaryism. The collection plate symbolizes – indeed it in part also actualizes and institutionalizes – the view that the church, as a corporate body, is a self-determinative group and that in giving financial support to the church the members affirm responsibility to participate in the shaping of the policies of the church. Thus the voluntary principle amounts to the principle of consent. One must add, however, that although the struggle for voluntaryism on a large scale in the church began over two hundred and fifty years ago, it was not achieved generally and officially in the United States until the nineteenth century – that is, apart from the colonies that from the beginning had had no establishment.

The thrust toward the separation of church and state could succeed only by carrying through a severe struggle for freedom of association. Initially, the authorities who opposed it asserted that the health of society was threatened by the voluntary principle. They held that uniformity of belief was a prerequisite of a viable social order. As a separation of powers, voluntaryism was viewed as a wedge for chaos. In order to defend the unrestricted sovereignty of the commonwealth, Thomas Hobbes published in 1651 *Leviathan*, the most cogent attack of the times upon the voluntary principle. In his view the church should be only an arm of the sovereign. Indeed, no association of any sort was to exist apart from state control. Therefore he spoke of voluntary associations, religious or secular, as “worms in the entrails of the natural man” (the integrated social whole). Analogous attacks upon the voluntary church came also from conservatives in the American colonies where establishment prevailed.

Hobbes recognized that freedom of religious association would bring in its train the demand for other freedoms of association. His fears were fully justified. Indeed, with the emergence of this multiple conception of freedom of association a new conception of society came to birth – that of the pluralistic, the multi-group society.

—

Next – Section Two – Chapter 9 – “For Conscience’s Sake” by Carl Watner