

The Religion of Democracy

THE essence of the system of government we Americans call "democracy" is an emotional complex quite akin to faith. The laws and the machinery of that government are not unlike the ritual and organization of religion, which also attempt to give objective expression to a deep-seated personal emotion. The constitutional devices of "democracy" are the rational implementations of that faith, not the guarantee of it, and must bend to its strength or weakness. It is the faith, not the outward form, that is the determinant of "democracy."

The cardinal tenet of the faith underlying the "American way of life" is the capacity of the individual for self-government. So long as Americans cling to that belief, just so long will "democracy" prevail; only when the individual American renounces his self-sufficiency as an instrument of government will the system under which he has lived and flourished lose its potency. Any succeeding form of government will be the expression of whatever new turn his religious experience takes.

To this thesis, which by itself is incontrovertible, Felix Morley brings a mass of historical evidence, and the support of political philosophy, in his highly readable book, *The Power in the People*. One may question, why is that faith weakening, as Mr. Morley admits, or what has happened to the American that he seems ready for conversion to a contrary faith? But, one cannot argue the point that "democracy" is in fact a belief born of an acceptance. In a way, the argument of Mr. Morley is a variation of the argument of Henry Weaver, in his *Ideas Have Consequences*, that the way we think is the way we live. Who can gainsay that?

The seed of that faith which is "democracy" took a long time in maturing. It flowered ultimately in the Declaration of Independence and in the American Constitution; but the germinating process was furthered by the Christian ethic, in which it is rooted, and by a series of historical events that took place in England. The heritage of the American Republic includes Milton and Locke and Burke, the Civil War of 1641, the Revolution of 1688, and all the religious, social and political movements which gave shape and character to the "mother country." It was out of these experiences and currents of thought that the "American way of life" was born. Self-government did not originate in Philadelphia in 1787; it came into its own there as a result of previous environmental influences.

All that is quite true. But one cannot ignore the influence of their own peculiar economic environment on their way of thinking. They brought with them a strong conviction of individual dignity and a religion that gave that conviction firm support. But here where the opportunity of making a living was as limitless as the vast spaces open to them, this underlying tenet of the "democratic"

faith had easy going. Whatever else man is, he is an economic animal, and the facility with which he can supply his material wants must have a bearing on the other needs of his nature, social, spiritual and cultural. Hence, if the American is now turning away from the faith of his forefathers, one must look for at least a partial cause in a change of economic environment. The political intervention in his private affairs (which he seems to welcome) is not the cause of his lost faith; the political intervention is in fact only a symptom of a fundamental disease—the persistence of poverty in the face of increasing wealth. He turns to political intervention simply because in the matter of making a living "democracy" has somehow failed him.

One quarrels with a good book only because one expects more of a good book. It seemed to the present reviewer that the avoidance of the question of economic causation is a weakness in Mr. Morley's argument; but, then, maybe the inclusion would have thrown the book completely out of shape and made it less attractive. As it is, *The Power in the People* serves the good purpose of calling us back to first principles, and deserves wide reading.

F. C.

The Power in the People, by Felix Morley. D. Van Nostrand Company, New York. \$3.50.



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