

Romanità

AS WE EXAMINED THE FIRST FEW PAGES OF TOPIC 8, we analyzed the true teachings of Jesus, at least in terms of their essential characteristics. After that, we began describing what actually happened as Christianity evolved, while noting that Christian leaders and theologians made up the religion's tenets and practices as they went along. (As previously stated, this is essentially what the revelators meant when they proclaimed, "Christianity is an extemporized religion" [*the Midwayer Commission, 2086:4 / 195:10.18*].)

Thus far we have considered this evolutionary process almost entirely from philosophic and theological perspectives. Now, however, we must turn in a different direction, so that we can analyze certain organizational and structural factors that became so closely associated with the Christian tradition as to be almost indistinguishable from it.

When the Emperor Constantine and his successors patronized and promoted the Christian faith, eventually making it the state religion of the Roman Empire, they were not engaging in any sort of partnership, for they certainly did not regard the bishop of Rome, or any other bishop, as an equal of theirs.

To the contrary, Constantine and his successors treated the Christian faith as *a department of the imperial government*, and while they did this they exerted organizational and administrative authority that church leaders were not free to ignore. As a result, the evolving Christian church rapidly became *a Roman institution*, an organization that was heavily influenced by Roman society and culture. Therefore Christianity acquired four hallmarks or birthmarks that have persisted ever since:

1. Authority.
2. Hierarchy.
3. Uniformity.
4. Explicitly defined responsibilities and roles.

The Italian word *romanità* is often understood as a reference to the Mediterranean and European domains that Rome conquered and ruled. On the other hand, *romanità* can also be interpreted as a symbol standing for the patterns and practices that pervaded Roman society and civilization. This second possibility is what the word means here.

To say this in a somewhat different way, the social, cultural, and political systems of the Roman Empire inflicted these birthmarks on the organized, institutional church, and the consequences were evident and obvious within just a few generations. Even though these premises and methods have evolved and mutated during the subsequent centuries, they still exert substantial influence on Christianity as it is practiced in the Western world. Although opinions may differ in degree, it would be difficult to deny that these birthmarks undermine many aspects of the true teachings of Jesus, while also immersing believers in profound paradoxes whereby sociology and group dynamics triumph over spirituality.

Jesus enshrined a fundamentally different perspective during the crisis at Capernaum: *"I have come to proclaim spiritual liberty, teach eternal truth, and foster living faith"* [the Midwayer Commission, 1710:4 / 153:2.6]. By implication, these fourteen words confront and challenge the entire heritage of *romanità* that infected Christianity during the early decades of the 4th century and that remains toxic today.

Here I will pause to promote discussion of the four birthmarks that Christianity inherited from the Roman Empire, including comments whereby panelists will seek to explain how their various consequences and overtones have evolved since then. After that, we will discuss the two excerpts from The Urantia Book that follow below.

The world is filled with lost souls, not lost in the theologic sense but lost in the directional meaning, wandering about in confusion among the isms and cults of a frustrated philosophic era. Too few have learned how to install a philosophy of living in the place of religious authority. (The symbols of socialized religion are not to be despised as channels of growth, albeit the river bed is not the river.)
[A Melchizedek, 1098:4 / 100:5.1]

When a member of a social religious group has complied with the requirements of such a group, he should be encouraged to enjoy religious liberty in the full expression of his own personal interpretation of the truths of religious belief and the facts of religious experience. The security of a religious group depends on spiritual unity, not on theological uniformity. A religious group should be able to enjoy the liberty of freethinking without having to become "freethinkers." There is great hope for any church that worships the living God, validates the brotherhood of man, and dares to remove all creedal pressure from its members. [A Melchizedek, 1135:2 / 103:5.12]

Entanglement of church and state. A regional subdivision of the Roman Empire was called a *diocese*, and a senior administrator exercised authority over church affairs within each one, perhaps ranking as an archbishop or metropolitan bishop, or even as a Patriarch. When the Goths overthrew imperial authority in the western half of the empire, they had no need for administrative districts and rapidly abolished them. In contrast, however, the pope and cardinals maintained their structure of ecclesiastical dioceses, for the Christian hierarchy continued to exert authority by means of Roman methods. Over the years, the word *diocese* lost its civil implications and became exclusively identified with the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of a bishop.

Throughout the two millennia since Christ Michael of Nebadon bestowed his inspirational life and teachings on the inhabitants of Urantia, the Roman Catholic Church may well have earned the epithet “the noblest Roman of them all.” Many of its medieval struggles of authority were waged against “the Holy Roman Empire” — a Germanic confederation that saw fit to assert non-existent Roman lineage. These and many other conflicts with a range of other rulers had ironic consequences for the overall development of Western civilization, partly by catalyzing certain tendencies that these paradoxes seem to capture:

AXIOM 1. Ecclesiastical aims are advanced by political methods.

AXIOM 2. Political aims are advanced by ecclesiastical methods.

As a central reality of the Western world, this entanglement of politics and belief creates intense controversy with predictable regularity. Current political agitation in the United States with respect to abortion is a particularly poignant example.

In a purely religious sense, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century had a significant effect on theological vocabulary and the nature of group observances. In addition, it increased the autonomy of local congregations and ended (or, at least, greatly diminished) their duties to a distant hierarchy.

As a practical matter, however, the Reformation by no means undermined the psychological and quasi-political abuses whereby the authority to interpret Christian teachings and administer church practices enabled favored individuals and groups to intimidate and dominate others. The Puritans and Pilgrims who founded the

colony of Massachusetts did not traverse the Atlantic in search of tolerance and true religious freedom. No, they sought virgin soil in which they could impose their own brand of Christianity and resolutely cast out dissenters (e.g., Roger Williams).

In principle, the Reformation enhanced the personal standing of the individual and encouraged each believer to cultivate a direct relationship with the Father. On the other hand, it remained quite difficult for individuals to think and act independently, for Protestant theologians, ministers, and self-appointed "divines" invaded and occupied a major part of the ecclesiastical terrain that had previously been monopolized by popes, cardinals, bishops, emperors, and kings. This thickening of the guard was excused by the assertion that without expert advice and guidance, the uncultivated Protestant masses would not have known what they were supposed to do or believe.

A few extraordinary individuals did manage to break free of established churches, but they too often succumbed to the temptation to found a new denomination and assemble their own herds of sheep. In short, the Reformation had little lasting effect on Christianity's underlying psychology of group authority aimed at uniformity of belief. Although most efforts to disseminate Christian teachings have been sincere and well intentioned, over the centuries there have occasionally been overtones whereby certain evangelical work seemed to be contaminated by base motives of intellectual aggression, psychological dominance, and personal self-assertion.

In section 12 of Paper 70, a Melchizedek warns us of a dozen pitfalls that human beings must avoid if they wish to preserve their freedom. Since almost all of these abuses are social or explicitly political (e.g., "[Usurpation of unwarranted power by either the executive or legislative branches](#)" [[a Melchizedek, 798:6 / 70:12.7](#)]), they will be at least reasonably familiar to anyone who has studied the evolution of politics and government. When we reach pitfall 11, however, we unexpectedly encounter a factor that pertains to religion: "[Union of church and state](#)" [[a Melchizedek, 798:16 / 70:12.17](#)]. In other words, the Melchizedek warns us that personal liberty is intensely threatened whenever the government embraces and sponsors an organized, institutional religion!

This, of course, is exactly what the Emperor Constantine and his successors did. For over one thousand years, the perils remained vivid and obvious. Further, it is also quite persuasive to conclude that the theocratic state that John Calvin and his successors established in Geneva was even more obnoxious, and even more oppressive,

than any set of institutional practices preserved in the surrounding realms whose rulers and peoples continued to adhere to the Roman Catholic tradition.*

The vestiges of the union of church and state are now considerably weaker in countries whose social and cultural background is predominantly Christian, but they still afflict humanity, in some locations more acutely than elsewhere. And even though our task is to compare and contrast the true teachings of Jesus with the traditional tenets and practices of organized, institutional Christianity, simple fairness compels us to point out that the union of church and state has long been a grave defect of certain other faiths.

Here I will promote discussion of the entanglement of church and state, whether prior or present.

* The Consistory of Geneva demonstrated the union of church and state by being a hybrid body that consisted of pastors as well as elders from the community. It endeavored to enforce theological conformity and a Puritanical approach to personal morality, while also seeking to overcome quarrelsomeness and other forms of misbehavior in family settings, as well as minor religious infractions such as inattention or apparent disrespect during church services. From the perspective of civil law, the Consistory often operated as a committee of initial inquiry, for it could compel testimony and question witnesses. In the case of offenses that seemed serious, it could refer persons to civil authorities for possible prosecution and trial. (For comments on the Consistory's practices in relation to marriage and family matters, see page 181 below.)

References:

— MACCULLOUGH, Dairmaid. *The Reformation*, pages 230-232. New York: The Penguin Group, 2003.

— The article "Genevan Consistory" in the online encyclopedia called Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genevan_Consistory (information accessed on January 14, 2019).

More detailed information is available in French:

— MEYLAN, Gueric. *Qui odit correptionem peribit. Genève et la discipline ecclésiastique de Calvin d'après les registres du Consistoire* In: *Les clercs et les princes: Doctrines et pratiques de l'autorité ecclésiastique à l'époque moderne* [online]. Paris: Publications de l'École nationale des chartes, 2013 (generated January 14, 2019). Available on the Internet: <http://books.openedition.org/enc/409>. ISBN: 9782357231122. DOI: 10.4000/books.enc.409.

Now that we have sought to analyze the organizational and structural factors that Christianity inherited from imperial Rome, we must return to the philosophic and theological perspectives that challenged and buffeted the Christian faith as its tenets and practices evolved thereafter. In other words, we must return to the early decades of the 4th century, portraying the theological debates that divided and convulsed Roman society for more than a century.

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Excerpt from section 12 (“Allocation of Civil Authority”) in Paper 70 (“The Evolution of Human Government”) by a Melchizedek

If men would maintain their freedom, they must, after having chosen their charter of liberty, provide for its wise, intelligent, and fearless interpretation to the end that there may be prevented:

1. Usurpation of unwarranted power by either the executive or legislative branches.
2. Machinations of ignorant and superstitious agitators.
3. Retardation of scientific progress.
4. Stalemate of the dominance of mediocrity.
5. Domination by vicious minorities.
6. Control by ambitious and clever would-be dictators.
7. Disastrous disruption of panics.
8. Exploitation by the unscrupulous.
9. Taxation enslavement of the citizenry by the state.
10. Failure of social and economic fairness.
11. Union of church and state.
12. Loss of personal liberty.

[A Melchizedek, 798:5-17 / 70:12.6-18]