

Clark University

## Clark Digital Commons

---

Manuscripts

Pittsfield, Unity Church, 1905-1919

---

1906

### Religion in a Democracy

Earl Clement Davis

Follow this and additional works at: [https://commons.clarku.edu/pittsfield\\_manuscripts](https://commons.clarku.edu/pittsfield_manuscripts)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Davis, Earl Clement, "Religion in a Democracy" (1906). *Manuscripts*. 1.  
[https://commons.clarku.edu/pittsfield\\_manuscripts/1](https://commons.clarku.edu/pittsfield_manuscripts/1)

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Pittsfield, Unity Church, 1905-1919 at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Manuscripts by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [larobinson@clarku.edu](mailto:larobinson@clarku.edu).

## Religion in a Democracy.

To run along in a sort of flaccid contentment in regard to many pressing problems is natural, for we do and indeed must confine our attentions to clothes, near at hand, giving only occasional glances to demands that are to be made in the future. The momentousness of the problems involved in the present condition of religious worship can be but faintly realized. When we come to speak of religion in a Democracy, it seldom occurs to us that we are speaking of things which have never been tried, except in a very small way. Under the pressure of other demands the people of this democratic nation have not yet turned their attention to the readjustment



123

of religious ideas and forms made  
necessary by the growing and ex-  
panding spirit of the spirit-involved  
in our Democratic life. While it is  
not clear that any consideration was  
given to the ultimate influence upon  
certain accepted forms for interpreting  
religious experiences, yet the men  
who were the commanding person-  
alities in the establishment of our  
Democratic nation, were openly at odds  
with current theological notions.  
Of course the fundamental tenet of  
the government, that all men are  
created equal, was a proposition official  
only to political problems. But it  
contains an implicit denial of every  
dogma of the Catholicism, Calvinism  
and Lutheranism, and at the same  
time it is the grandest endorsement  
of the teachings of Jesus, that has  
yet been given us.



But is it not absurd to imagine that  
the religious life in a Democratic com-  
munity should be any different than  
the religious life of any other community?

But in asking that question, one fails to  
distinguish between the spirit, and the  
form of interpreting the spirit of the  
word in which a man feels himself  
to be related to the universal world.

The spiritual impetus which resulted  
in the development of the Catholic  
Church is of course essentially the  
same, as the spiritual impetus  
which gave the Oriental ~~Church~~  
the religion of Islam, or gave  
rise to the great Methodist move-  
ment of the eighteenth century. But  
the form of interpreting this spiritual  
force, is ~~to~~ simply the mirror of  
the current political conditions.  
The Catholic Church is nothing more



or less in its form, and its worth, 4  
than the product of old Roman political  
and State ideas, applied to the problem  
of organizing the religious life of  
the people. Protestantism is simply  
a readjustment of, or a reinterpretation  
of the spirit-religion in terms  
of the new political ideas that  
were developing during the  
years centuries after the Reformation.  
The political principles involved  
in a democratic form of government  
found their first interpretation  
in the world of religion, in the  
policy of the Congregational churches,  
~~of this country~~ of the various  
denominations of this country who  
follow the so-called Congregationalism.  
But even here, the spirit-crystallized  
before democracy had developed  
into form. Truly, in fact worth



of these churches bear the mark of the  
New England ~~Democracy~~ Democracy  
rather than the stamp of the Democra-  
cy of the United States. So it hap-  
pens that we have yet before us  
the task of re-interpreting the spiritual  
power of life in terms of a church  
system which still embody the  
principles of natural life.

As we look over the religious con-  
ditions of the country to day, we find  
a peculiar, even ~~an~~ a grotesque  
conglomeration of various forms of  
church government, which represent  
as many political ideals, as European  
nations, and the Democratic U. S.  
have adopted. The Catholic Church  
belongs to the old Roman world,  
and Universal Europe. The Episcopal  
Church belongs to England. Other  
bodies represent the Commonwealth



6

Congregationalism represents the New-England Theocracy, and thus it goes on. Each one of these groups represents a bygone age, or a foreign nation. Each one is a transplanted institution, and in spirit and in form is foreign to the atmosphere of the nation, The church, and in fact the theology of a Democracy is yet to be given us. The germ of such an institution, and the beginnings of such a theology have already been made, but the work of extending, and deepening the principles involved has not yet extended very widely.

In fact this is the religious problem before us to-day. The increasing acuteness of the friction between ~~the decaying forms~~



7

both as to polity and theology, between  
the decaying institutions, and the  
democratic interpretation of the  
religious life is apparent. The striking  
illustration of the way in which  
this friction appears, and indicates  
the fundamental point at issue, is  
found in the current trial for  
heresy of Dr. Crosey of Rochester  
New York. The point at issue is  
one of polity, not of truth. It is  
simply the question of whether or  
not the subject is to enjoy the  
rights of free speech. Dr. Crosey  
as priest of the Episcopal Church, has  
declared his allegiance to certain  
established beliefs, and principles.  
But as a matter of fact he does not  
believe those principles, and  
has been very bold and free



to say so. Now the question at issue<sup>8</sup>  
is not whether the statements of Dr Aofsey  
are true, or false, but whether as a  
servant of the Episcopal church, he  
has a right to preach ideas not in  
conformity to the Standard of the  
church. It is not a question of theology,  
so much as it is a question of liberty.  
It is not so much a question of  
truth, as it is a question of authority,  
a question as to whether or not the  
legitimate rights of the individual  
are to be restrained by a foreign  
institution.

The same point of dispute is at  
the bottom of the present controversy  
about the person of Jesus. It is not  
so much a question of the relative  
worth of Jesus' teachings, as it  
is the question of accepting any  
over dictum as a binding



authority. In other words we are <sup>9</sup>  
changing our emphasis. Instead of  
accepting a thing as true, because  
it is alleged to have been pro-  
claimed by Jesus, we accept what-  
ever we wory of his sayings because  
they commend themselves to us  
as being in harmony with  
our general conceptions of truth.  
The supremacy of Jesus will  
rise or fall according to whether  
the investigations now being  
conducted bear evidence of  
his conformity to truth.

At this time the problem of reconciling  
our religious forms, and our interpre-  
tations of religious experience is be-  
ginning to press upon us for solution.  
It would be futile for us to attempt  
to forestall the outcome of this



great religious movement. Yet one <sup>110</sup>  
is blind who cannot see some-  
thing of the tendencies, and perhaps  
one of the most striking, possibly  
the fundamental characteristic of  
the fermenting movement, is seen  
in the present dry habit of mind,  
evidenced by what is spoken of  
as search after truth.

Two very important ideas are in-  
volved here, one is the implicit  
faith in the existence of truth,  
and the second is the implicit  
faith in the ability of man to discover  
truth. In our political institutions  
this faith takes the form of confi-  
dence in the possibility of a  
just, and equitable system of  
self government, of a government  
of the people, by the people, and



for the people, and second in the  
ability of men through varied  
experiments of failure and  
success to discover this ideal  
system, and adopt them-  
selves to it. This implies the  
denial of the Divine Right to Rule,  
and its attendant offshoots. The  
high officer is the servant of all,  
and his fitness to rule rests not  
upon any supernatural endow-  
ment, but upon the personal integ-  
rity, and ability for ruling. His  
election to office, rests not upon any  
inherited supernaturalism, or  
the casting of lots, and such things,  
but upon the ability of the majority  
of the people to select, one from  
among them to act temporarily



as their executive in national affairs.  
 This principle has yet to be widely applied  
 to problems of the religious world. Inter-  
 fered in terms of theology it means  
 faith in God, and faith in man.  
 Of course any organization which  
 limits its faith in man by any  
 artificial standard, such as  
 a priesthood, or an authoritative  
 book, or an authoritative creed,  
 is simply a dead weight upon  
 the progress of the people of our  
 nation towards the development  
 of our nation of self controlling  
 self deciding people. Any insti-  
 tution that maintains such a  
 system and enforces it is  
 breaking down the bulwarks of  
 democracy. Any institution



that maintains such a system  
 and does not enforce it, is of  
 course flying double, and de-  
 serves no recognition. The religion  
 of democracy knows no such  
 institution. Every man is his  
 own priest, and the ministers and  
 other religious servants are not  
 clothed with any special authority  
 except the authority of a noble  
 noble life, and zealous efforts  
 along the line of their work.

The Religion of faith in God, and  
 faith in man, and faith in man's  
 ability to know God, demands first  
 of all the clearing away of these  
 survivals of ancient days, and  
 former systems of government.



But if you have not authority of <sup>114</sup>  
priest, or church, or book, to maintain  
the standards, ~~what is~~ and to keep fer-  
fle in the straight and narrow path,  
what authority have you? The authority  
of the religion of Democracy, is the  
authority of public opinion relying  
upon the statements of expert in-  
vestigators. An illustration of the  
natural development of public  
opinion under such a system  
and the exceedingly powerful influ-  
ence of the public opinion developed,  
is found in the medical profession.  
The medical man's authority no longer  
rests upon any supernatural power  
as it once did, but upon his hard  
work, and his common sense  
ability to treat successfully the  
cases that come under his  
treatment. If his prescriptions  
and his treatments were



themselves by aver, his word <sup>15</sup>  
along particular lines forer for  
great worth. A particular illustration  
in point is the rapid development  
of the curative value of fresh air.  
Acting upon the exact testimony  
of eminent physicians, this method  
of treating many diseases has become  
common, and public opinion has  
become so strongly insistent of this  
method that tardy or delinquent  
physicians have to adopt the new  
methods, or they are left behind.  
The authority of religion in sermons  
must rest upon a similar basis.  
A method, a doctrine, to merit fame  
itself by its general probability of  
truth, and its workability when  
tested. Even then it must always  
rest under test, and be ready  
to be overthrown when a superior



and was a noble method to  
come to light. The great weakness  
of the Christian churches to day  
can be traced to this one fault.  
Being bound hand and mind  
by ancient ideas about which a  
certain glamour has been cast  
the churches have not been free  
to cast aside the superstitious  
doctrines and ideas, and adjust  
itself to new truth. A notable  
example of this is the attitude  
maintained by the church as  
a whole towards the discoveries  
of modern science. Being  
pledged to the finality of certain  
doctrines, the church found itself  
in the very undesirable position  
of being compelled to abandon



as faithy erroneous its doctrines  
 once proclaimed as divine truth,  
 or to enter into a long period  
 of worthles, and negative of obligtis.  
 Held in chains by these unnecessary  
 ties the church or a whole store to  
 put itself on the defensive, and  
 in the face of advancing science  
 enter into a long period of of ob-  
 gitis. She resnet here as often  
 before has been meekening  
 to the church, and its work, and  
 now it is trying to forget, and  
 conceal the mistake brought upon  
 it by the heavy load of doctrines  
 proclaimed as fivol, and ultimate  
 truth. If the church is to regain  
 its fast diminishing control, it  
 must throw off these chains



which limit its freedom to seek  
after and accept new truth. The  
world of science has no fixed  
creed, no authoritative statement  
of any kind, yet there are certain  
fundamental truths that are quite  
generally accepted as final, for  
example the law of gravitation, and  
similar ones. Questions that are in  
any way open to doubt are held  
in a tentative, until their probable  
truth is demonstrated by their  
workability. Worse than that the  
door is always open for new truth  
and the constant expectation of  
new scientific truth is a perpetual  
stimulus to constant investigation.  
In the world of religion we must  
remember that we are finite  
beings attempting to understand



our relations with the infinite. <sup>(13)</sup>  
It is somewhat presuming to  
~~thus~~ assume that we know any-  
thing final, and the claims to  
a complete and final revelation  
such as the claim maintained  
in regard to the Bible, immediately  
checks every effort after new  
truth, and transforms the work  
of the church into defensive glos-  
sities. In the developing church  
of democracy, there can, and  
will be no claims to absoluteness  
in all the doctrines developed  
to interpret religious experiences.  
The windows and doors will  
always be open for the light  
of new truth, and the bars  
of iron will be removed.



But one thing were at least wry  
 to voted, the church <sup>religion</sup> of democracy  
 will to must to inclusive. It  
 cannot permit that one sheep  
 shall be lost. The organizations  
 of every form shall have their  
 excuse for being, not because  
 they serve as a place of refuge  
 for saints, and a shelter for  
 hypocrites. Not because they  
 serve all. The church like  
 the saint exists to meet a  
 social, and individual need.  
 It has no special pleas to be  
 favored, except in so far as  
 it can justify its claims. By service  
 just as a hospital justifies  
 its claims. The church then



121

of the religion of democracy, can lay  
claim to no honor or respect or  
special privileges for the church or  
such, but it may ask and will  
receive honor and support based  
upon its efficient and important  
service, and above all else in so  
far as it performs its work, and  
becomes an institution of worth  
in the religious life, it will  
receive the homage paid to it  
as a symbol of the highest  
relations of human life, ~~such~~ <sup>just</sup>  
as we pay to our flag an honor  
as the symbol and emblem of a  
notion of freedom.

The individuals attitude towards  
the church in the religion of democracy  
must of necessity be changed  
from what has been, and still  
continues to be the one of the  
great causes of the false atmosphere



within the church, and the false <sup>122</sup>  
attitude without. For centuries the  
church has been regarded as a  
sort of a gateway to heaven, and  
the people have been taught to look  
upon it as the natural channel  
through which they may enter into  
the salvation of their own souls, one  
of the most desirable, and yet one  
of the grandest ideas ever held.  
But this no longer holds in a  
Democracy. The church becomes an  
institution of spiritual service,  
and the individual identifies  
himself with it not for the  
benefit which it will be to  
him, but for the good that he  
can do to the world through  
the agency of fellowship in the  
church, and through the recipi-



23

influence of the fellowship of the noble life upon him in keeping undefiled his fervent integrity and keeping unsoftened his divine nature. It is the fellowship of "noblesse oblige."

There are the general lines along which, and the aims towards which the movement of religious ideals, and religious life in this country are progressing. The religion of democracy is yet to become widely accepted, but its spirit is abroad, and its forms are establishing themselves with tremendous rapidity.



## Religion in a Democracy

Earl Clement Davis

1906

To run along in a sort of flaccid contentment in regard to many pressing problems is natural, for we do and indeed must confine our attentions to {???) near at hand, giving only occasional glances to demands that must be made in the future. The momentousness of the problems involved in the present condition of religious unrest can be but faintly realized. When we come to speak of religion in a democracy it seldom occurs to us that we are speaking of things which have never been tried, except in a very small way. Under the pressure of other demands the people of this democratic nation have not yet turned their attention to the readjustment of religious ideas and forms made necessary by the {???) and {???) of the spirit involved in our Democratic Life. While it is not clear that any consideration was given to the ultimate influence upon certain accepted forms for interpreting religious experiences, yet the men who were the commanding personalities in the establishment of our Democratic nation were openly at odds with current theological notions. Of course the fundamental tenet of government, that all men are created equal, was a proposition applied only to political problems. But it contains an implicit denial of every dogma of Catholicism, Calvinism and Lutheranism, and at the same time it is the grandest endorsement of the teachings of Jesus that has yet been given us.

But is it not absurd to imagine that the religious life in a Democratic community should be any different than the religious life of any other community? But in asking that question, one fails to distinguish between the spirit and the form of interpreting the spirit of the way in which a man feels himself to be related to the unseen world. The spiritual impetus which resulted in the development of the Catholic Church is of course essentially the same as the spiritual impetus which gave the Orientals the religion of Islam, or gave rise to the great Methodist movement of the eighteenth century. But the form of interpreting this



spiritual force is simply the mirror of the current political conditions. The Catholic Church is nothing more or less in its form, and it's worth, than the product of old Roman political and state ideals, applied to the problem of organizing the religious life of the people. Protestantism is simply the readjustment of, or a reinterpretation of, the {???) religion in terms of the political ideas that were developing during the centuries after the Reformation. The political principles involved in a democratic form of government found their first interpretation in the world of religion in the {???) of the various denominations of this country who follow the so-called congregationalism. But even here the spirit crystalized before democracy had developed into form. Many, in fact most of the churches bear the mark of the New England Theocracy rather than the stamp of the Democracy of the United States. So it happens that we have yet before us the task of reinterpreting the spiritual forms of life in terms of a church system which shall embody the principles of national life.

As we look over the religious conditions of the country today, we find a peculiar, even a grotesque conglomeration of various forms of church government, which represent as many political ideals as European nations and the Democratic U.S. have adopted. The Catholic Church belongs to the old Roman world and medieval Europe. The Episcopal Church belongs to England. Other bodies represent the commonwealth Congregationalism present in New England Theocracy, and thus it goes on. Each one of these groups represents a bygone age, or a foreign nation. Each one is a transplanted institution, and in sprit and in form is foreign to the atmosphere of the Nation. The church, and in fact the theology of a Democracy is yet to be given us. The germs of such an institution, and the beginnings of such a theology have already been made, but the work of extending, and defining the principles involved has not yet extended very widely.

In fact this is the religious problem before us today. The increasing acuteness of the friction between the decaying forms both as to {???) and theology, between the decaying institutions, and the Democratic interpretation of the religious life is apparent. The striking illustration



of the way in which this friction appears, and indicates the fundamental point at issue is found in the current trial for heresy of Dr. Crapsey of Rochester New York. The point at issue is one of {???, not of truth. It is simply the question of whether or not the subject is to enjoy the rights of free speech. Dr. Crapsey as priest of the Episcopal Church, has declared his allegiance to certain established beliefs, and principles. But as a matter of fact he does not believe these principles, and has been very bold and free to say so. Now the question at issue is not whether the statements of Dr. Crapsey are true or false, but whether as a servant of the Episcopal Church, he has a right to preach ideas not in conformity to the standards of the church. It is not a question of theology so much as it is a question of {???}. It is not so much a question of truth as it is a question of authority, a question as to whether or not the legitimate rights of the individual are to be restrained by a foreign institution.

The same point of dispute is at the bottom of the present controversy about the person of Jesus. It is not so much a question of the relative worth of Jesus' teachings, as it is the question of accepting anyone's dictum as a binding authority. In other words, we are changing our emphasis. Instead of accepting a thing as true, because it is alleged to have been proclaimed by Jesus, we accept whatever we may of his sayings because they commend themselves to us as being in harmony with our general conceptions of truth. The supremacy of Jesus will rise or fall according to whether the investigations now being conducted hear evidence of his conformity to truth.

At this time, the problem of readjusting our religious forms, and our interpretations of religious experience is beginning to press upon us for solution. It would be futile for me to attempt to forecast the outcome of this great religious movement. Yet one is blind who cannot see something of the tendencies, and perhaps one of the most striking, possibly the fundamental characteristic of the {???} movement, is seen in the present day habit of mind, evidenced by what is spoken of as search after truth.

Two very important ideas are involved here, one is the implicit faith in the existence of truth, and the second is



the implicit faith in the ability of man to discover truth. In our political institutions this faith has the form of confidence in the possibility of a just and equitable system of self-government, of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. And second in the ability of men through varied experiments of failure and success to discover this ideal system and adapt themselves to it. This implies the denial of the Divine Right to Rule, and its attendant apparatus. The high officer is the servant of all, and his fitness to rule rests not upon any supernatural endowment, but upon the personal integrity and ability for ruling. His election to office rests not upon any inherited supernaturalism or the casting of lots and such things, but upon the ability of the majority of the people to select one from among them to act temporarily as their executive in national affairs. This principle has yet to be widely applied to problems of the religious world. Interpreted in terms of theology, it means faith in God, and faith in man. Of course any organization which limits its faith in man by any artificial standard, such as a priesthood, or an authoritative book, or an authoritative creed, is simply a dead weight upon the progress of the people of our nation towards the development of a nation of self-controlling self-deciding people. Any institution that maintains such a system and enforces it is breaking down the bulwarks of Democracy. Any institution that maintains such a system and does not enforce it is of course playing double and deserves no recognition. The religion of Democracy knows no such institution. Every man is his own priest, and the ministers and other religious servants are not clothed with any special authority except the authority of noble life, and zealous effort along the line of their work. The Religion of faith in God and faith in man and faith in man's ability to know God, demands first of all the clearing away of these survivals of ancient days and former systems of government.

But if you have not authority of priest, or church, or book to maintain the standards and to keep people on the straight and narrow path, what authority have you? The authority of the religion of Democracy, is the authority of public opinion relying upon the statements of expert investigators. An illustration of the natural development of public opinion under such a system and the exceedingly



forceful influence of the public opinion developed is found in the medical profession. The medical man's authority no longer rests upon any supernatural power as it once did, but upon his hard work and his common sense ability to treat successfully the cases that come under his treatment. If his prescriptions and his treatments favor themselves by cures, his word along particular lines {???) for great worth. A particular illustration in point is the rapid development of the curative value of fresh air. Acting upon the expert testimony of eminent physicians, this method of treating many diseases has become common, and public opinion has become so strongly insistent of this method that tardy or delinquent physicians have to accept the new methods or they are left behind. The authority of religion in Democracy must rest upon a similar basis. A method, a doctrine must prove itself by its general probability of truth, and its workability when tested. Even then it must always rest under test, and be ready to be overthrown when a superior and more workable method has come to light. The great weakness of the Christian churches today can be traced to this one fault. Being bound hand and mind by ancient ideas about which a certain {???) has been cast, the churches have not been free to cast aside the superseded doctrines and ideas, and adjust itself to new truth. A valuable example of this is the attitude maintained by the church as a whole towards the discoveries of modern science. Being pledged to the finality of certain doctrines, the church found itself in the very undesirable position of being compelled to abandon as partly erroneous its doctrines once proclaimed as divine truth or to enter into a long period of worthless, and negative apologetics. Held in chains by these unnecessary ties, the church as a whole chose to put itself on the defensive, and in the face of advancing science, enter into a long period of apologetics. The result here as often before has been weakening to the church, and its work and now it is trying to forget and conceal the mistake brought upon it by the heavy load of doctrines proclaimed as final, and ultimate truth. If the church is to regain its fast diminishing control, it must throw off these chains which limit its freedom to seek after and accept new truth. The world of science has no fixed creed, no authoritative statement of any kind, yet there are certain fundamental truths that are quite generally accepted as final. For example, the law of

gravitation, and similar laws. Questions that are in anyway open to doubt are held in a tentative, until their probable truth is demonstrated by their workability. More than that the door is always open for new truth and the constant expectation of new scientific truth is a perpetual stimulus to constant investigation. In the world of religion we must remember that we are finite beings attempting to interpret our relations with the infinite. It is somewhat presuming to assume that we know anything final, and the claims to complete and final revelation such as the claim maintained in regard to the Bible, immediately chokes every effort after new truth, and transforms the work of the church into defensive apologetics. In the developing church of Democracy there can and will be no claims to absoluteness in all the doctrines developed to interpret religious experiences. The windows and doors will always be opened for the light of new truth, and the bias of iron will be removed. But one thing more at least may be noted, the religion of Democracy must be inclusive. It cannot permit that one self shall be lost. The organization of every form shall have their excuse for being, not because they serve as a place of refuge for saints, and a shelter for hypocrites, but because they serve all. The church like the saints exists to meet a social and individual need. It has no special plea to be honored except insofar as it can justify its claims by service just as a hospital justifies its claims. The churches then of the religion of democracy can lay claims to no honor or respect or special privileges for the church as such, but it may ask and will receive honor and support based upon its efficient and important service, and above all else insofar as its performs its work, and becomes an institution of worth in the religious life. It will receive the homage paid to it as a symbol of the highest relations of human life, just as we pay to our flag an honor as the symbol and emblem of a nation of freedom.

The individual's attitude towards the church in the religion of Democracy must of necessity be changed from what has been and still continues to be one of the great causes of the fake atmosphere within the church, and the false attitude without. For centuries the church has been regarded as a sort of gateway to heaven, and the people have been taught to look upon it as the natural channel



through which they may enter into salvation of their own souls, one of the most despicable, and yet one of the grandest ideas ever held. But this no longer holds in a Democracy. The church becomes one institution of spiritual service, and the individual identifies himself with it not for the benefit which it will be to him, but for the good that he can do to the world through the agency of fellowship in the church, and through the reciprocal influences of the fellowship of the noble life upon him, in keeping undefiled his personal integrity and keeping {??} his Divine nature. It is the fellowship of "noblesse oblige."

These are the general lines along which, and the aims towards which, the movement of religious ideals, and religious life in this country are progressing. The religion of democracy is yet to become widely accepted, but its spirit is abroad and its forms are establishing themselves with tremendous rapidity.