

**FREEDOM AND THE CHURCHES.  
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF  
AMERICAN CHURCHES TO  
RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL LIBERTY**

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Freedom and the Churches. The Contributions of American Churches to Religious and Civil Liberty by Charles W. Wendte

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*The Contributions of American Churches  
to Religious and Civil Liberty*

EDITED BY  
CHARLES W. WENDTE, D.D.



BOSTON  
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1918

## INTRODUCTION

In the early part of the year 1918 a liberal religious congress was held in the city of Rochester, New York, one of whose features was a series of addresses by speakers of prominence in the American religious community on the contributions of American Churches to religious and civil liberty.

It has been thought that the interest and value of these papers warranted their publication.

While they have been revised by their authors it is inevitable that they should in some degree retain the informality of extemporized addresses. This is, however, atoned for by the freshness, directness and vigor of these utterances, in which the eminent services of American Churches to religious and civil liberty find eloquent and convincing expression. Professor Williston Walker, D.D., has kindly contributed a chapter to this volume in which the contribution of the Congregational Churches of the United States to the cause of religious freedom is more fully exhibited.

CHARLES W. WENDTE.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE BAPTIST CONTRIBUTION . . . .	1
Walter Rauschenbusch, D.D.	
II THE CONGREGATIONALIST CONTRIBUTION	11
Williston Walker, D.D.	
III THE FRIENDS' CONTRIBUTION . . . .	27
O. Edward Jarney, M.D.	
IV THE JEWISH CONTRIBUTION . . . .	36
H. G. Enclow, D.D.	
V THE METHODIST CONTRIBUTION . . . .	46
Lewis Marshall Lombardy	
VI THE PRESBYTERIAN CONTRIBUTION . .	57
Paul Moore Strayer	
VII THE REFORMED CHURCH'S CONTRIBUTION	67
William Elliot Griffis, D.D.	
VIII THE UNITARIAN CONTRIBUTION . . .	82
L. Walter Mason, D.D.	
IX THE UNIVERSALIST CONTRIBUTION . .	92
Isaac M. Atwood, D.D.	
X THE RELIGIOUS RADICALS' CONTRIBUTION	97
Edwin D. Mead, A. M.	

I

THE BAPTIST CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL LIBERTY

WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH, D.D.

The contributions which Baptists have made to theology have been comparatively small. They have always been strongest among the common people and have had less hereditary lodgment among the educated classes than, for instance, the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Their strict biblicism has also hampered their theological freedom. They have been dragged in the wake of Presbyterian theology. On the other hand, their contributions to the religious and civil liberty now attained in the Western World have been immense.

It is possible to use the term "Baptists" in a narrower and a wider sense. In the narrower, denominational sense, they are an offshoot of English Congregationalism which has gained great numerical power in the English speaking nations. In the wider, historical sense they are part of that great democratic movement of modern Christianity, which began in the evangelical movements before the Reformation and made its first great stride to-



## 2 FREEDOM AND THE CHURCHES

ward historical power in the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation. The Mennonites, the Dunkards and the Quakers belong to the same great stream of religious life in this wider sense.

I shall speak first of the Continental Anabaptists of the Swiss and German Reformation.

The Reformation fractured the monopoly of the Catholic Church and broke the hypnotic spell of its infallibility. It lost its power to enforce uniformity and submission in large parts of Europe. But the Anabaptists were the radicals of the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers were against the pope and most of them were against the bishops. The Anabaptists were against the entire clerical church. Their ideal was church democracy and lay Christianity.

The Reformers pruned down mediæval sacramentalism mainly in so far as it clustered around the Lord's Supper. They did not venture to apply the same principles to infant baptism. Since baptism is the rite of initiation into the church, any fundamental change in baptism involved a change in the conception of the Church itself and a revolution as to its membership. The Anabaptists alone risked that.

Luther had refused submission to the old theological authorities and leaned back on the Bible and human reason, but he reserved this privilege for himself and the theologians. The Anabaptists put the same spirit into the common man and thereby multiplied the centers of independence in

## THE BAPTIST CONTRIBUTION 3

matters of religion. They carried the spirit of inquiry, of religious self-determination, into the masses. History is not made by the intellectuals alone. The decisive turns in history begin when broad masses of men are welded into unity of action by some new guiding principle. History is not made by writing pamphlets but by creating solid and stubborn social forces. Even if the Anabaptists had never written a book about religious liberty, they created the fact of religious liberty and in time the world had to make room for that fact.

The world at first refused to make room and undertook to whip these rebellious artisans into line. Their slaughter was enormous and unparalleled in history. Catholics and Protestants alike sought to suppress them. Their sufferings did not profit their own cause. Their movement was almost entirely crushed. But their passive sufferings did help the larger life in the long run. "By their stripes we were healed."

In addition to their passive resistance they also made active literary protest against coercion in religion. Balthasar Hubmaier wrote the most remarkable plea for liberty of conscience produced in the sixteenth century. Some individuals in other bodies might arrive at the idea of toleration to all. With Baptists that was a necessary part of their conviction. A Baptist who does not believe in religious liberty is an illogical Baptist, only slightly affected by his own principles, a case

#### 4 FREEDOM AND THE CHURCHES

of atavism, a throw-back in religion. The essential thing with them was not at all baptism, but a free church of believers. Baptism of adult believers was simply a corollary. The essential thing was a pure, spiritual, and voluntary church. But infant baptism admits all to membership and makes a church of the regenerate in time impossible to maintain, as the "Half-way Covenant" in New England shows. But such a voluntary organization cannot use force to compel others to come in; it cannot suppress dissent; it cannot exact State support. This then lifts the whole church out of the realm of coercion into the realm of liberty.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine how daring an experiment in freedom it was to create such churches. If the warden in some State's prison should to-day propose that all prisoners in all penal institutions be employed out-doors and put on their honor not to cross bounds, that might offer a fair analogy to the impression made by the proposal of the Baptists in the sixteenth century.

Their faith in religious liberty was closely connected with faith in civil liberty. Since they fought for religious freedom, they necessarily desired free assembly, free speech and a free press. The creation of free religious bodies narrowed the realm of coercion in human society. It created protected areas of freedom where the soul could learn the art of being free, and for all who lived