The Roger Williams Fellowship / American Baptist Churches Biennial
June 30, 2017 / Portland, Oregon

Democracy and Dissent

Cotton Mather began the final book of his history of New England, published in 1702, by telling the story of a windmill in the Netherlands that turned so wildly during a violent storm its grinding stone became overheated, causing the mill to catch fire and setting the entire town ablaze. Mather went on to claim that the whole country of America was once set on fire by a man with the rapid motion of a windmill in his head. This man with an overheated brain was Roger Williams, who Mather described as having "zeal, but not according to knowledge," with "less light than fire in him." Mather's negative view of Williams is not surprising, given that his maternal grandfather and Boston minister, John Cotton, was Williams' chief antagonist.

Williams contended that the patent issued by England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony was invalid. He argued that they had no right to settle there unless they compensated the indigenous Indian people. On October 9, 1635, the General Court banished Williams for having "broached and divulged diverse new and dangerous opinions." Cotton defended the banishment, contending that society must be protected from the contamination of undomesticated dissenters like Williams, who's "errors be fundamental, or seditiously and turbulently promoted." After being exiled from Massachusetts, Williams set out to establish a colony at Providence as "a shelter for persons distressed of conscience." He acquired land by customary law, agreeing to a fair purchase price with the local tribal leaders, imagining a lively experiment with

free and full liberty of conscience for all residents, including "Papists, Protestants, Jews, and Turks."

Two Rival Visions

From the arrival of the first immigrants in the great migration of the 17th century, through the continuing waves of newcomers over generations, the American dream has continued to arise from two rival visions. One, represented by the spiritual descendants of John Cotton, imagines a covenant community with an errand in the wilderness. The other, following in the footsteps of Roger Williams, envisions an inclusive society emerging from a lively experiment of plurality. One looks to the center. The other leans toward the circumference. One builds on the shared commitments to a common life. The other celebrates the diverse expressions of a universal humanity. The force of one is centripetal, drawing participants toward a collective sense of common goods. The energy of the other is centrifugal, propelling outward, ever widening the scope of its field.

The lessons of history ironically suggest that the flourishing of America depends not on the conquest of one vision over the other, but on the vitality of both the errand and the experiment. These competing narratives are opposable, but not oppositional. Democracy is held in a fragile balance between the two. When the tension is resolved in favor of the partisans of purity leaning too sharply toward the center, the circumference tightens resulting in a forced uniformity that excludes voices of dissent.

And when the conflict is settled in the interest of the devotees of diversity by pushing too forcefully expanding the circumference, differences can become so great that near neighbors become moral strangers to one another with little sense of a common life. Holding these polarities in uneasy tension has been an ongoing challenge for democracy. The Protestant majority in early America struggled to make common cause with Catholics and Jews. Descendants of European immigrants strained to welcome the children of Asian and Arab emigrants. Sometimes the tension snapped, and the dream foundered.

The call of fidelity to the vision of a good society combined with openness to a widening scope of participation have created a constant tension and struggle. The hopes of this lively experiment found expression in First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which acclaimed that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It made space in America for both church and dissent, communal goods and individual differences. The danger of losing a shared sense of goods that binds Americans in a common purpose is an ever-present reality that imperils the coherence of our democratic republic, but the lurking menace of tyranny poses an equal if not greater danger for democracy. Yet those who stand in defense of freedom are not without recourse. The generative source for renewing democracy as well as the transformative force for resisting to the tyrannical powers of domestication lies in the dissenting imagination.

The Dissenter Tradition

In the late 1940s, a young Republican Senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy burst onto the national stage by calling for fellow citizens to rally around a vision of American exceptionalism. The animating center of his call for a new errand was anti-Communism, and he questioned the loyalty of any and all who did not share his vision of America. He used fear-mongering tactics of insinuation and accusation to intimidate everyone he suspected of being left-wing extremists. Many simply refused to speak out, but one brave soul stood up. His name was Edward R. Murrow. He refused to be intimidated by McCarthy's red-baiting rhetoric. On March 9, 1954, in an episode of his news program *See It Now*, Murrow offered a devastating critique of McCarthyism, which included these memorable lines:

> We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful [people] – not from [people] who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes that were, for the moment, unpopular.

Murrow's admonition to dig deeply into the history and doctrine of America would surely begin with the foundational documents that convey our shared sense of national identity. Such a journey of remembrance would predictably lead to Thomas Jefferson's "Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom," which declares that "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry," and to James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious

Assessments," which asserts that "the religion of every [hu]man must be left to the conscience of every [hu]man." And any serious investigation of the common heritage and teaching of American democracy most certainly would include the United States Constitution, which guarantees freedom from religious tests of any sort and freedom for religious expression according to each individual conscience.

But the history and doctrine Murrow was recalling preceded the founding of the United States of America. The Quaker home in which he was raised, formed and nurtured his convictions about liberty and dissent. The tradition that shaped his religious and political imagination can be traced to William Penn's "An Act for the Freedom of Conscience" (1682), which declared that no one living in the province "shall in any case be molested or prejudiced for his or her conscientious persuasion or practice." Nor, it added, shall anyone "at any time be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place, or ministry whatever contrary to his or her mind, but shall freely and fully enjoy his, or her, christian liberty in that respect, without any interruption or reflection."

It was the same dissenter tradition, stated even more strongly, that produced the 1663 Royal Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, which proclaimed:

> that noe person within the sayd colonye, at any tyme hereafter, shall bee anywise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any differences in opinione in matters of religion and doe not actually disturb the civill peace of our sayd colony; but that all and everye person and persons may, from tyme to tyme, and at all tymes hereafter, freelye and

> fullye have and enjoye his and theire owne judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments.

Full freedom of conscience for those who joined in the lively experiment with Roger Williams (or William Penn) did not rest on religious uniformity. Instead it presupposed a rich and robust diversity. On issues theological Williams disagreed strongly with Quakers. He considered George Fox and his Society of Friends to be "lying spirits" propagating a religion of "horrible wickedness." But in matters political Williams defended their religious freedom and their civil liberties. It is no surprise, then, that Quakers were free to live and worship in Providence at a time when they were still being hanged for heresy in Boston.

This ability of religious groups to disagree agreeably is no small matter. As Harvard historian Jill Lepore has argued, the recognition of and capacity to live with fundamental religious differences is foundational to the basic political tolerance on which American democracy depends. This robust pluralism left a legacy of religious liberty that operated not merely as the "loser's creed," but rather became a crucial factor in the formation of American democracy and remains essential for its flourishing today. Reinhold Niebuhr famously said that "[hu]man[ity]'s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but [hu]man[ity]'s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." It is a great theological sentence that Niebuhr spent the rest of his life unpacking. But I would suggest Murrow's contention that "dissent is not disloyalty"

may be even more important today, so I want to sharpen his observation that dissent is not disloyalty because *democracy depends on dissent and dissent defends democracy*.

To understand this practice of forbearing those with whom we differ deeply and even sharply demands the telling of a story older than the memory of American democracy. This conviction of religious liberty was transmitted through the tradition of English Protestant dissent that was shared by a wide range of groups from Presbyterians on the right flank to Quakers on the left with Baptists and Congregationalists in the middle and more radical movements from Familists and Fifth Monarchists, to Levellers and Diggers, to Ranters and Muggletonians on the far left fringe. Dissenters diverged widely in theological outlook, often within the same group, but they all shared a common bond as minorities who were first persecuted and later tolerated by the dominant majority in the established church.

In my book *Undomesticated Dissent*, I tell a story that begins at Bunhill Fields, the nonconformist burial grounds in London where John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, and William Blake lie together in memoriam with the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds them. It examines their most famous texts—*The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Jerusalem* as testaments of dissent, which transmitted democratic ideas across the globe, hidden within their stories. It is a message that was welcomed in societies around the world, especially where the bloody tenet of persecution was supported by state and church. But it was particularly suited for the emergent

democracy of America, which became a kind of Beulah Land for dissenters, not heaven, but as John Bunyan described it, the land "next door to heaven," from where with prophetic vision the saints can catch a glimpse of the city of God. In that new and fragile democratic project the convictions of dissent found expression and continued to exert influence on its development throughout history, calling for the inclusion of all to share in its liberties and privileges.

Retrieving Dissent

In his magisterial study of Baptists in New England, entitled deliberately *New England Dissent*, William McLoughlin argued that "the continuous search for liberty and equality in religion, politics, and economics owes much more than we have realized to the pietistic doctrine of the priesthood of all believers," which was a keystone principle of the Baptists. McLoughlin concluded that in their practice of dissent, Baptists struggled not for their liberty alone, but for the liberty of all. Without question Baptists stand in the historic tradition of religious dissent, which contributed significantly to the establishment of democracy in America. But if Baptists have any prospect of contributing to the completion of the errand and the extension of the experiment it will demand the retrieval of the convictions and practices of dissent.

From Cotton Mather to Martin Luther King, the prevailing assumption was that completing the errand would somehow further the Christianization of America. Even dissenters from Roger Williams to John Leland believed that extending the experiment

would foster the thriving of religious communities that had been suppressed. It is now clear that the cultural establishment of Christianity in America, which held sway for so long, is weakening as the number of Christians continues to decline and the ranks of the non-religious grows. This development is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of the wider process of secularization that has settled over the cultures in the global North, resulting not simply in the legal separation of church and state or even the cultural decline of Christianity, but in a reality where faith is simply "one human possibility among others."

Secularization is bringing an end a time when Christianity, though legally disestablished, was still culturally dominant. But as Charles Taylor explains, the emerging secular age will not be void of religion, though it will be a time when faith is radially optional. In such a context the church will be a minority presence. Yet even in a secular age it is conceivable that the faith can flourish through vital communities of believers. In this way, the habits of dissent could become an important ecumenical strategy for all Christians, not merely a sectarian tactic for a few. Retelling the story of dissent, then, is a reminder that followers of Christ must learn to live in a perpetual state of tension with the status quo, regardless of what it is. Stripped of privileged standing and majority status, perhaps Christians may again become the salt of the earth as dissenters.

But what is this practice of dissent we must recover? It surely entails the conviction to say “No!” But dissenters are not just contrarians, who like Groucho Marx reflexively reply, “Whatever it is, I’m against it.” Dissent is also grounded in a profound “Yes!” to Jesus Christ as Lord, to God alone as sovereign over the conscience, and to the gathered community where Jesus Christ reigns and is discerned together. Some will be tempted to return to the more secluded spaces of their own fellowship and refrain from engaging the wider church and culture. Others may choose a path driven by the aspiration to reverse their diminishing influence by transferring the energy of the Christian vision into the service of political processes and market forces. Yet neither alternative offers a strategy adequate to resist the forces of domestication. The nature of the emerging world order is too challenging for anything short of a radical strategy, one that does not desire the privilege of social influence or demand the security of fixed boundaries, but one that cultivates communities of resistance grounded in a deep suspicion of the powers that be, a fierce conviction of the lordship of Christ, and a hopeful imagination of God’s coming reign.

The Apocalyptic Imagination

In my book I show how what I call “the apocalyptic imagination has been the primary means of resistance for communities of dissent. Such communities grasp that seeing the world apocalyptically is not about predicting the future, but about living in the light of a revelation that causes the world they inhabit to appear in an entirely new

way. They promote the habits of an imagination that equip members with the capacity to see the world through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They read history backwards, seeing their own lives retrospectively in continuity with the story of Israel's God and God's servant Jesus. They understand God's disruptive action in Christ, not as a future event, but as a reality that is always present and ever new. They do not withdraw into sectarian enclaves of homogeneity or accommodate to institutional structures of secularity, but seek a life together that participates in the new creation and exemplifies what God in Christ intends for all humanity. They recognize that they do not bring God's reign in history, but reach out to meet the new world that is on its way. They do not simply mirror the secular politics of left or right, but seek to practice the politics of Jesus through forgiveness and friendship. They refuse to regard distinctions of race, class, gender, or sexuality as determinative of standing in society, but see only one new humanity in Christ. They seek the peace of the earthly city, telling the truth about what they see and advocating for the healing of its brokenness, but they recognize that their citizenship is in heaven. They see themselves as pilgrims in this secular age, answerable to the law of another city toward which they journey by faith on the wings of the love of God and neighbor.

It is understandable that after the conviction of religious liberty was preserved in the United States Constitution and the rights of conscience were protected by the force of law, many Christians found it tempting to think about the institutions of democratic

society more as instruments of God's justice than as beasts from the abyss. Yet as communities of resistance seek ways of witnessing to the new creation in the age of emergent empire, it will require a capacity to see the world in Christ not only as redeemed, but as a new social reality in which all that is Antichrist will be vanquished. A moral imagination suited for a vocation of dissent in this new context will likely not be found by exploring the established patterns of Romans 13, but by seeing the world through the subversive imagery of Revelation 13. Though both accounts represent opposing tendencies of socio-political reality, envisioning history through the aperture of John's *Apocalypse* may prove especially useful, not only for clarifying *what is*, but for imagining *what can be*.

The freedom of the new creation is not merely the freedom of choice or even the political freedom to live without the coercive domination of others. It is freedom to be a new humanity reconciled in Christ, who liberates all the sons and daughters of earth from the powers that would determine their lives and opens up the space in which it is possible to live as free people. The most determinative act for a witness of dissent may then simply be to listen to the voice that calls out from the heavens, "See, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5), and then to imagine the world through this vision as it can become when fully reconciled and renewed. For the new age is ultimately beyond the reach of human effort. It breaks into history as God's gift. Prophetic imagination can only envision it descending and call fellow pilgrims to

journey toward it. Seeing what comes last in light of the new in Christ opens blind eyes to enduring realities that outlast the fragile contingencies that will not endure the ends of history. Only such a transformed vision can imagine the building of a world that gestures to the life beyond.

For beyond the temporal age, lies the New Jerusalem and the hand of providence bringing history to its appointed end. Living faithfully in this earthly pilgrimage requires the sense of an ending full enough to disclose what endures beyond the fall of empires and the passing of ages. It demands attending to *what lasts* by seeing *what comes last*. In moments of great crisis, prophetic voices have descended from the mountaintop, calling for America "to finish the work," "to bind up the nation's wounds," "to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." Would that all God's people were prophets. For when all God's people take up their prophetic mantle, mount up their chariots of fire, and lift up their gifts of a creative imagination, then and only then will Jerusalem come down from heaven to earth.

In his poem *America, a Prophecy*, William Blake envisioned the coming of the fiery Prince of war on the company of General Washington. In the spiritual vision of his mind's eye, Blake did not see England's army, clad in red coats. Instead, he imagined an ancient dragon, clashing its scales, flashing at midnight, spewing flaming red meteors all around. It is a terrifying vision straight from the Apocalypse. But Blake also saw in this apocalyptic conflict, a struggle for political freedom, not in some distant

time, but in his social world. He celebrated the dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which loosed chains, opened dungeon doors, and brought Jerusalem from heaven to earth. With prophetic awareness he declared, "Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease." For when Jerusalem comes down, the sons and daughters of earth will be set free from the chains that bind them—set free to love and forgive, set free to build and create things of beauty, set free to wonder and imagine, set free to struggle for justice and peace, set free to give and receive the gifts of life, liberty, and laughter that belong to all the sons and daughters of earth.

Can communities of resistance imagine what it might mean to continue the errand and extend the experiment of democracy now? The weight of these present times in which we are living bears heavily, and may simply confirm, as William Butler Yeats famously lamented:

> Things fall apart;
> The centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Democracy seems once again precariously perched on the threshold of Armageddon. What lies beyond the horizon is not visible. So the saints must work and pray, as they ask: Is there a rough beast, whose hour has come, slouching toward Bethlehem to be born, or are there prophets yet to arise, who may still arouse the conscience and awaken the consciousness of free people to the task of building Jerusalem here and now? God give us strength.

Curtis W. Freeman is research professor of theology and director of the Baptist House of Studies at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC, and author of the new book *Undomesticated Dissent: The Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity* (Baylor University Press, 2017).