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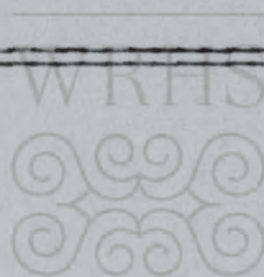
The church in politics, 1927.

"THE CHURCH IN POLITICS."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

NOVEMBER 6, 1927, CLEVELAND.



About three weeks ago I stepped into the political arena to champion the cause of our present form of municipal government---and I have had an interesting time of it ever since. It was a radical departure for me, for while in my pulpit I frequently discuss major political problems, I never spoke from the political platform or participated actively in a political campaign. The reactions in the community to this, my maiden political effort, were, as you well might imagine, varied and diverse. Some were rather pleased that I had given of myself to a worthy cause; others were not so pleased. Some were furious, and especially those who were on the other side. Mr. Davis felt offended because, he averred, I had called him and his followers morons. Well, of course, I never did. I do not know him and his followers well enough to call them any names. A colleague of mine in the ministry also thought that he was designated by me as a moron, and he arose to disavow this designation.

What I actually said, what was actually reported in at least two of the dailypapers of our community, was that all this loose talk which is going on in our municipal campaign about democracy and czarism and the flag and getting the boys out of the trenches,--that all this loose talk might excite the moron but not mislead the thoughtful. I made no particular application to anyone.

Anyone that wishes to invite himself into that class is perfectly welcome.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction, and the one which is to me the most visible of all, was that of a Jewish officer or walking delegate of some Jewish labor organization in our midst. I had taken occasion in my maiden political speech to address a few words to organized labor in our city. I pride myself that I have some friends among the working people of our community. I said that it would be a mistake for organized labor to ally itself with any reactionary government, quite regardless of any temporary gain which might accrue to organized labor as a result of such an alliance. I said that the greatest foes of organized labor are those cheap politicians who befriend labor when labor's vote is being solicited and betray labor afterward. I said that if labor is dissatisfied with this or that action of the present incumbent of the office of the city manager, the thing for them to do is to demand the recall of the city manager--not to disrupt a system of government which has proved highly efficient. I said that one does not disrupt an orchestra if one becomes dissatisfied with the conductor; one changes the conductor.

Now this Jewish walking delegate thought that he would minimize the possible effect of this appeal to organized labor by suggesting subtly and delicately that Rabbi Silber had sold himself to the capitalistic class and to the political bosses of Cleveland. For, he said, is not Mr.

Maurice Maschke a member of the Temple? Does it not therefore follow quite conclusively that Rabbi Silver would be influenced by Mr. Maurice Maschke? Well, I wish that Maurice Maschke were a better Temple goer. I should try to influence him.

Some wrote me and said that they felt that the church ought not to enter the political arena, for it somehow loses its prestige and dignity in so doing. Others bluntly said that it is not any of the business of the church, and still others maintained that there is a real menace involved in this identification of church and state.

Evidently there is a good deal of confusion in the minds of people concerning the mutual relations of politics and religion, of the church and the state, and I should like to clarify this situation a bit, if possible, or at least to present my point of view on this rather important subject.

It is clear, is it not, that the church--organized religion--ought not to seek political power? It ought not attempt to control government. The alliance of church and state has always worked a double iniquity. The state suffered and the church suffered. The state suffered because civil administration was confused with theology; the state suffered because the church which happened to be dominant at that particular time through that particular state sought to inject its particular theologic bias into legislation and government, thereby saddling upon the country bigotry

and intolerance; the church suffered because a politically powerful church is one which sooner or later loses its soul. It becomes temporal in character and quality; it begins to compromise; it becomes interested not in its spiritual message and mission but in the perpetuation of its power, of its prestige, of its hierarchy, of its vested interest.

The church ought not to look for strength outside of itself. Its greatest power is its own spirit, its own eternal mission. And it is clear, too, is it not, that the church ought not to put a political party into being as it is doing in some countries? That it ought not attach itself to a political party, and that it ought not to further the interests of a political aspirant just because that individual happens to belong to that particular church? The church has no moral right to lend its prestige to any political candidate simply because of that candidate's religious outlook. In a democracy qualifications for office ought to be--I emphasize the words "ought to be"--in a democracy qualifications for public office ought to be ability and character; and the man who votes for a candidate simply because he is or is not a Protestant, or simply because he is or is not a Jew,--that citizen exercises neither intelligence nor patriotism but pure medieval bigotry and rank stupidity.

And in the third place it is clear, very clear to some of us, that just as the church ought not to attempt

to control the state, so must it not permit itself to be controlled by the state. It is much more dangerous for civilization when the state controls the church than when the church controls the state. The church has frequently been used as a tool of the state, as the lackey of the state; the church has frequently been asked to cast its mantle of sanctity over every nefarious purpose in which the state at the moment happened to be engaged, instead of remaining, as it should be, autonomous, free, the censor, the critic, the guide of the state. The church has frequently become the defender and the apologist for the policies and the programs of the state; that is, when the state declares war the church will sprinkle holy oil upon the banners and the cannons and the battleships. The South had slavery for two and a half centuries, and the church of the South not only condoned it, not only was silent about it, but even defended that ugly institution.

In Russia before the revolution the church was the strongest arm of the czarists, of despotism, and the state used the church to keep the people subdued and ignorant; and so in Mexico before the revolution; and so in many parts of the world. The church ought not to permit itself to be used by any organization, political or economic or social. The church ought to remain true to its own vision, its own life and its own mission and preach it at all times, quite regardless of consequences to itself. I wish to God the church today were a persecuted church instead of a

prosperous church,--then religion would be a telling factor in the lives of men and women.

But if it is clear that the church ought not to attempt to dominate politics, ought not to attach itself to a political party, and ought not to further the interests of a candidate simply on the face of his denominational allegiance, it is, to my mind, also clear that the church would fail its devotees if it did not at critical moments enter the active arena of life and definitely point out to men and women what their specific duty in a specific occasion or situation is. I know, for example, that there are many thinkers who maintain that the church ought to content itself simply with preaching morality and ethics in the abstract; there are many thoughtful men who maintain that this is to be the position of the church: it should attempt to create among men and women the mood and the temper for the good and the just; to teach ethical idealism in the abstract, and then to leave the individual man or woman to decide for him or herself how that abstract morality should be applied in a given situation. That is, of course, to ask the church to present a platform without a program, a platform without a technique, a set of principles without the vehicle or the channel for the expression of these principles.

These people maintain that the church ought to preach peace without recommending any specific agency by means of which peace may be brought appreciably nearer to

realization; the church ought to preach social justice without, however, pointing to any specific case of injustice where the religious man might work an improvement therein; the church ought to ask for clean government without, however, at any time helping clean government when it is being attacked by corruptionists and social malefactors.

Now that is a point of view, and a legitimate point of view, and with that point of view I am thoroughly and completely in disagreement. If the church today--and by church I mean church and temple and synagogue--all organized religious institutions,--is not as effective as it might be, it is because, to my mind, it has done just that which these men recommend. It has contented itself throughout the ages to preach abstractions without entering the hard arena of life and battling for its sanctity. Men look upon the church at best with a certain amount of reverence, as an old, venerable institution, but they disregard it in the serious struggles and conflicts of their life because they regard it as irrelevant. To my mind, the church ought to be an institution organized for a crusade for justice and peace; it should be an agency which every right-thinking, right-doing man may invoke when he knows it will help him when he works for the betterment of society. It should be an agency which should be feared by all the dark and reactionary forces of the world.

The prophets of Israel did not content themselves with abstract morality; they were very direct and pointed in their social preachments. When King David sinned--sinned in the sight of God and men, when he had an officer in his army put in the front ranks so that he may be killed, in order that he may then take unto himself his wife, the prophet Nathan appeared before the king and told him that marvelous parable about the poor man who had the one little lamb and the rich man who had flocks and herds, but when the rich man wished to make a feast to entertain some guests, he did not go to his own flocks and herds to fetch the sheep for his feast, but he went to the one little lamb of the poor man and stole that of him; and the king was outraged at it and demanded who that man was that dared to do such a criminal act. And Nathan, pointing his hand at the king, said, "Thou art the man!"

There was no fear of degrading the prestige of the religious mission in making such direct and dynamic application of a moral principle. And Jeremiah did not fear to denounce his people, his king, for a palpable wrong which they had done, for the violation of a moral principle, even when that denunciation involved, as it did, his being cast into a pit to perish.

The church, friends, has preached peace now for three thousand years--preached it eloquently. Why, the Christian religion looks upon its master and founder as the "Prince of Peace," and yet in 1914 Christendom found

itself blessing war; and Jewry found itself blessing war and sending men into battle with the blessing of the church. Why? Because the church gave people the platform of peace but not the program for achieving peace; it gave mankind a counsel of perfection; it told him what is desirable; but it did not tell these human beings who are struggling and groping in the dark what the next step should be in order to approximate it. The church has preached for thousands of years--all churches--economic justice and righteousness. "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue!" And yet for thousands of years all that the church has done has been merely to take care of the victim of injustice,--to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to house the shelterless. All that the church has done in hundreds and hundreds of years is simply to take care of the flotsam and jetsam, the social wreckage which was brought to its door. But aggressively, affirmatively, it has not contributed anything to a plan of social reconstruction which would make the number of the victims of injustice appreciably less.

Now I do not maintain that the church ought to entangle itself in any economic dogmatism. I do not maintain that the church ought to spend itself in championing this economic system or that economic system. That is not the business of the church. The church is concerned not with systems but with principles which ought to express themselves in system in every age as that age requires it.

It would be a mistake, for example, for the church to champion the present economic system with all of its inevitable flaws and defects; and it would be a mistake for the church to champion a fastastic or imaginary economic system which may not even approximate in reality the virtues which are claimed for it. The church is concerned with the safeguarding of certain basic principles which are involved in any and every economic system---capitalistic or socialistic or communistic---and which no system adequately expresses or represents.

Nor would the church be wise in injecting itself into every and any small, insignificant economic dispute which takes place by the hundreds in our land daily. There are today economic conflicts between capital and labor which do not at all involve the clear-cut moral issues which would justify the church in entering into the conflict. It cannot fritter itself away on these things. But there have been economic conflicts, there are today, there will continue to be, great, desperate economic conflicts in which clear-cut moral issues were involved and are involved and will be involved. There the church, if it is true to its own inspiration, must speak, must raise its voice like a trumpet and speak, or it will betray those who have placed their confidence in it. It must speak when there is wrong, palpable and in evidence. Whenever men and women are struggling for a greater chance, for more favor, for greater freedom, for

better standards of living, for a little more of decency and a little more of sweetness and light in their world, the church must speak, or its vision is a lying vision and its ritual a mockery and an abomination.

And so with politics. There are political campaigns in which no moral issue is involved. Where the question is simply a choice as between candidates or as between two proper or improper ways of doing certain things, it would be folly, the height of folly for the church to inject itself into such a campaign. But there are campaigns which involve real moral questions,--campaigns in which civic integrity, municipal betterment, social vision are involved,--issues whose defeat would mean civic defeat and whose triumph would be a triumph for progress. There are such campaigns, and at such times the church would not be fulfilling its duty to its devotees if it did not point the way, if it did not help men in making their decision. And such a campaign I believe the community of Cleveland is engaged in this week.

Now, I was delighted to see that all the Protestant Churches of Cleveland, speaking through the Federal Council of Churches of this city, threw their weight of influence and prestige on the side of right and decency in the community, just as I was delighted to see for the first time in a long time most of our newspapers have done the right thing.

What is involved in this campaign which will be

determined one way or another this coming Tuesday? It is not a question of personality,--whether we prefer this man or that man. If that were the only issue, I would, for one, have thought quietly and in my own way and would not make a public issue of the matter. What is involved in our community? Our most vulnerable government in the United States is the municipal government, the local government. They are far more corrupt than state governments or federal governments; they are the least credited as far as efficiency, competence, honesty, are concerned; their record throughout the land has been such that no American citizen is very, very proud of it. Now a few of the forward-looking communities in the United States who have suffered under these conditions of waste, incompetence, graft and corruption for generations, have in the last fifteen or twenty years bestirred themselves finally and have set out to discover a way, a method, a system which would clean house for them, which would give them a competent, efficient, honest government, while at the same time of course remaining a democratic government. They were looking, too, for a system which would centralize power and responsibility and at the same time leave the ultimate control of the government in the hands of the people, and this city manager form of government was accordingly evolved,--a system which simply means that the people elect their council directly and that the council in turn selects a city manager for ability, for competence,

for character; in whose hands complete authority--executive, not legislative--complete executive authority is centralized; who is responsible to the council and who is subject to the recall of the council at any time.

Now the evident advantages of this council-manager form of government are these: in the first place, it gives to a city like ours that which every great and successful industrial or commercial establishment has: a competent and responsible administrator; a chief executive. It relieves this chief executive of the unpleasant necessity of paying political debts throughout his administration, and of doing the hundred and one unsavory things which any elected chief administrator must do if he wishes to remain long in the political field. It gives this chief executive, under this city manager form of government, the greater chance of succeeding because it puts him in office less encumbered and less involved. It invites to office many a good man, many a desirable man who would otherwise, under the old system of campaigning, not seek the office; because there is many a good man who will not subject himself to the unpleasantness and the embarrassment and oftentimes the indignities of a municipal campaign. It makes possible the continuation in office of a man, and thereby makes possible the successful carrying out of far-visioned programs which require years for their maturity; it makes for continuity in office,--it might make; it does not necessarily make.

And lastly, but to my mind, one of the most important reasons for this system is that it is going to build up in our land a set of professionally trained executives who will make the management of cities a life profession, just as the doctor and the lawyer and the minister makes his calling a life profession. So these men who go through a systematic process of training to equip themselves for the enormously difficult and highly technical job of administering a big city, they will make that a life profession, and we will be spared the indignities of amateurs in office whose only qualification for the job of chief executive seems to be their ability to be gracious, to smile and to shake hands from the shoulder down.

Now these reasons have commended themselves to American cities so that in the short space of fifteen years almost 375 cities in the United States have adopted it; and Cleveland is the largest of the cities to have adopted it. So that quite naturally the country is watching the experiment in Cleveland. If it is repudiated here, as it is threatened to be repudiated, it will give a severe blow to the whole movement for better government in the United States; if it succeeds here, as I hope it may, it will give a tremendous impetus to the movement throughout the land.

Now this form of government which has been operated in our city for less than four years has given

us--I speak now not from my own point of view, but what seems to be the general concensus of opinion of our citizens-- has given us good government, clean government, efficient government; it has given us government of faithful and economic management, of civic vision, of high integrity; it has given us better law enforcement, better police protection, better streets, better light, better water, more recreational facilities, more park facilities,--and it has done all this economically, even, I understand, paying back the deficits which were bequeathed unto this administration by the older administrations.

Now this system of council-manager form of government which has operated successfully in our community for four years, and which is just getting its real start, it is now proposed to scrap,--in six days to scrap it. And why? No reason in the world that any man of clear logic can grasp but a lot of talk about democracy and autocracy and czarism and the flag and George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. What has all that to do with the issue of efficient, competent, civic government? During the last four years I have lived in Cleveland and lived under this form of government I did not at all experience at any time that my democracy has been depreciated or that I have been denied any democratic privileges in the city.

There seems to be a confusion in the minds of people. They think the more they vote the more democratic they are. You will get a real thrill Tuesday when you

enter a voting booth and you will be called upon to vote upon eleven ballots, and you will be given thirty seconds to vote for each ballot, and you can feel thrilled that you will be a democrat a hundred per cent.

So in our highly involved life today it is a defeat of democracy to be called to vote for candidates whose very names are unfamiliar to us, and for issues which would involve days of studying. Why, some of these charter amendments which you will be called to vote on, and for which you will be given thirty seconds to vote, are longer than our Megillah.

The principles of democracy are not in the least involved in this campaign as long as the ultimate control over a public official is vested in a democratically elected body such as our council, so long as the democratic principle completely safeguards it. And for what shall we exchange our form of government? For what are we asked to exchange it? For a better form? No! For a new and untried form? No! We are asked to scrap this splendid experiment in government for the old, already repudiated and discredited system which was tried here for years--tried and found wanting.

Now I do not know what the outcome of the Tuesday election will be. I do hope that our confidence in the intelligence of the voters of Cleveland will not be rudely shaken. What happened in Chicago may happen in Cleveland. What happened in Chicago was that a clean,

✓ decent administration was thrown out of office by the administration which was notorious for its mal-odorous politics; which appealed to the lowest instincts of the community; which appmised a free and easy government to everybody. And that type of appeal carried in Chicago. The pretext there was also very much like the pretext used here in this city. In Chicago Mr. Thompson was fighting King George. That was the issue in the campaign.

It is my earnest hope that Cleveland will continue its fine tradition of civic progress and vision in retaining in office a form of government and a personell which have given us good government, clean government, efficient government.

Whenever such issues present themselves in a campaign, much as I dislike the hurly-burly, the moil, the toil, the unpleasantness of the political campaign, I pray I may be found at all such times in the arena battling for what I think is for the betterment of my community.

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