Puritanism on Authority
by Roy Clouser

The main consequence of the biblical teaching for this matter is that God is the source of all earthly authority, so no person, group, or institution on earth can be the source or Creator of authority. Moreover, there is nothing in the Bible to support the claim person or institution—including the church—is the sole conduit of God's authority into human society. There is, on the contrary much to warrant the interpretation that authority is diffused in human life so that there is no single central form of it; that on earth there is no supreme authority, but only different kinds of authorit_ies_.

I believe Calvin saw this point very clearly when he took it that in virtue of the way God had made the world and human beings, there are different modes or spheres of authority in life, no one of which may trespass onto another's territory. For example, he says in the *Institutes*:

> Therefore, lest all things should be thrown into confusion by our own folly and rashness, [God] has assigned duties to each in the different modes of life. And so that no one may presume to overstep his limits, [God] has distinguished the different modes of life by the name of callings. Every man's mode of life, therefore, is a kind of station assigned to him by the Lord...only he who life to this end will have it properly framed; because free from the impulse of rashness he will not attempt more than his calling justifies knowing that it is unlawful to overlap the prescribed bounds. He who is obscure will not decline to lead a private life that he may not desert the post at which God has placed him...the magistrate will more willingly perform his office, and the father of a family confine himself to his proper sphere...and no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have splendor in the eye of God. (*Institutes* III, X)

It is an easy matter to contrast this position with all those which put the source of authority in some principle other than the transcendent Creator of the Bible. Various theories have advocated that the ground of authority was to be located in military force ("might makes right"); or in economic ownership, or in a biologically inherited majesty. It has also been regarded as residing in human intelligence and virtue, as it was by Aristotle, who advocated democracy on the ground that the mass of people would collectively have more wisdom and virtue than any smaller group no matter how bright its members. On the other hand, Aristotle saw the authority of the majority-ruled state as all-encompassing. He did not entertain for a moment the biblical notion that authority is pluriform so that no one kind is supreme over all other spheres of life.

Let me emphasize in this connection that the pluriformity which Calvin envisioned here, and which Kuyper developed in his theory of sphere sovereignty, is a *qualitative* pluralism of authority. It does not mean merely that political authority should be divided as we have done by dividing the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Rather, it means that there are non-political authorities such as that in family, church, business, or school which lie outside the proper sphere of the State altogether.

Now, I contend that if we look at the Puritan party platform we find there a complex amalgam of Calvin and Aristotle. For instance, when the secretary of state of the Puritan government, John Milton, wrote his *Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* in 1659, he clearly argued for pluriform authority between church and state. The authority of each is different, Milton argues, and neither should interfere with the other. Here he is on wholly Calvinist territory. But even earlier he had already written an essay called *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649). In this Milton was concerned to defend the right of the Puritans to depose King Charles I. Here we find him appealing to the Protestant Reformers to the effect that the king as well as the people is under the laws of God: if the people are wicked the King must punish them, while if the King is wicked he must be punished by the people. In support of this Milton quotes Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, Goodman, and many others.

So far so good. But we can also detect in this essay a failure to distinguish between the people having the right to choose and depose those who hold an office, and the people being the creators of the authority of office. For instance, Milton says that the right to depose the King is not simply that he had done what Calvin called "overleaped his prescribed bounds," but that the King "holds his authority from the people." And at the same time we find the House of Commons declaring that "the people are, under God, the source of all just power." What I find here is that early in the Puritan movement there was an unstable mixture of the ideal of democracy based on the belief in human intelligence and virtue as the source of authority, and the ideal of rights based on the biblical (Calvinist) belief in God as the sole supreme authority and hence in the pluriformality and limitation of each kind of earthly authority.

The above is an extract from a speech entitled "The Religious Roots of Two American Political Ideas." Roy Clouser taught Philosophy at The College of New Jersey, Ewing, New Jersey, U.S.A.