CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY: PAST CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES
by
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Last November, eight hundred people convened in Atlanta to debate the past and potential contribution of Christianity to democracy. President Carter opened the conference. Archbishop Tutu closed it. In between, some thirty distinguished authorities from around the world took up the contributions of Christianity to democratic ideas and institutions in their respective homelands. Protestants and Catholics, Africans and Americans, freedom fighters and prime ministers shared the same stage and shared their own stories.

The time was ripe for such a cosmopolitan inquiry. The world was celebrating the centennials of its greatest democratic triumphs—Rerum Novarum (1891), the American Bill of Rights (1791), the French Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), and the English Bill of Rights (1689). The world was witnessing a democratic metamorphosis of near apocalyptic proportion. The Berlin Wall had crumbled. Eastern Europe had been liberated. The Soviet Union was dissolving. African autocrats were flinching. Apartheid was fading. Latin American dictators were falling. Thirty new democracies had been born since 1973. Democratic agitation had reached even Tiananmen Square. It was time for the Christian Church to take stock of the role that it had played and could play in this drama of democracy. It was time to shake off parochial nostalgia and to assess democracy in the light of Scripture and tradition, in the context of other cultures and countries.

So bold and broad an agenda could hardly yield a consensus of views, much less a concerted program of action. The conference did, however, provide a rare sampling of world opinion on the relationship of Christianity and democracy. Enlightened by this discussion, I offer a few reflections.

I. PAST CONTRIBUTIONS

The term “democracy” does not admit of easy or universal definition. It can perhaps best be understood today as a system of distinctive social and political ideas and institutions.¹

The cardinal social ideas of democracy are equality and freedom, pluralism and toleration.

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¹ For other definitions of “democracy,” see the collection of statements in JOHN H. HALLOWELL, THE MORAL FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY (1954); ROBERT A. DAHL, A PREFACE TO DEMOCRATIC THEORY (1956); JACQUES MARITAIN, CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY (Doris C. Anson trans., Books for Libraries Press 1972) (1944); SOURCES OF DEMOCRACY: VOICES OF FREEDOM, HOPE, AND JUSTICE (Saul K. Padover ed., 1973) [hereinafter SOURCES OF DEMOCRACY].
Democracy confirms the individuality and equality of persons and their inherent freedoms of life, belief, and expression. It confirms the diversity of persons and tolerates diverse values, convictions, and lifestyles. It confirms the interdependence of persons and protects the freedoms of family, church, school, and other associations. It confirms the capacity and responsibility of persons to govern and ensures their participation in the public square, their representation in the political process, and their access to political offices and officials.

The cardinal political idea of democracy is that government must be limited and self-limiting. The political office must be distinct from the political official and defined narrowly by external standards, whether constitutional or customary. Political authority must be distributed over multiple branches, each with a measure of control over the others. Political officials must be popularly elected to limited terms of office and accountable and accessible to the constituents they represent. They must serve to promote the values of equality, liberty, and diversity of individuals and associations.

These social and political ideas of democracy have historically drawn to themselves a variety of institutions — a constitution or compendium of written public laws; a charter of freedoms These social and political ideas of democracy have historically drawn to themselves a variety of institutions — a constitution or compendium of written public laws; a charter of freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, and press; a guarantee of procedural rights and protections in court; a commitment to majority rule and minority representation; a system of regular, contested, popular political elections; a system of education and social welfare; a recognition of structural and confessional pluralism and the institutional separation of church and state; and a predilection for market economies, for social and economic rights, and for federalist structures of government.

Democracy, however, has no paradigmatic form. Democratic ideas and institutions are cast in different ensembles, with different emphases and different applications. The arrangement of the ensemble is determined by the customs and the beliefs of the community being governed. Mature democracies differ from nascent ones. Democracies born of bloody revolution differ from those born of diplomatic convenience. Democracies rooted in heterogeneous cultures differ from those rooted in homogeneous cultures. Democracy is modest in its minimal requirements and thus malleable in its form.\(^2\)

A number of democratic ideas and institutions are of considerable vintage. Small historical communities like the Greek polis, the Catholic monastery, and the cathedral chapter all practiced a rudimentary form of “direct” democracy. Legal documents from the Edict of Milan (313) to the Declaration Right (1628) spoke of liberties, rights, privileges, and toleration. Greek writers from Cleisthenes to Aristotle extolled the virtues of liberty and democracy, and their discussions were echoed by dozens of medieval canonists, civils, and scholastics.\(^3\) Prior to the seventeenth century, however, these instances of democracy remained incidental and isolated. Monarchical and aristocratic theories and forms of government dominated both state and church. Democracy emerged as a formal theory and form of civil government and social organization only in the later eighteenth century.

Three “waves” of political democratization have broken on the modern world, Harvard political

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scientist Samuel Huntington argues. The first wave built on the English, American, and French Revolutions and swept over more than thirty European and British Commonwealth countries by the outbreak of World War I. The second wave, following World War II, restored democracy to much of Western Europe and brought new democratic governments to several nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The third wave, building since the early 1970s, has swept over more than thirty African, Latin American, and Eastern European nations. According to Huntington, these three waves of political democratization have been "cumulative," one building on the momentum and advances of the other. They have also been "regressive," invariably experiencing antidemocratic backlashes and undertows.

Three waves of Christian democratic impulses, I would argue, have anticipated and accompanied these three waves of political democratization. The first was a Protestant wave that broke into political form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries principally in Western European nations and their colonies. The second was a missionary wave that broke in Africa and Asia and a related Christian political wave that broke in Europe and Latin America in the middle third of the twentieth century. The third is a Roman Catholic wave that has emerged since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and effectuated political change principally in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and selected Asian nations. These three waves of Christian democratic impulses, like their political analogues, have been both cumulative and regressive. They have provided an important, even indispensable, impetus to the three waves of political democratization.

Protestantism provided the first wave of Christian democratic impulses. To be sure, the early Protestant reformers had little sympathy with democratic government. Martin Luther and Richard Hooker favored monarchy. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin favored aristocracy. Peter Rideman and Menno Simmons eschewed politics altogether. Their early followers were notorious for their intolerance, elitism, and chauvinism, and for their active participation in persecution, slavery, and religious war. Yet early Protestant doctrines of man and society, particularly in Calvinist form, were filled with democratic implications.

Building on earlier Roman Catholic doctrines, the reformers taught that man is both saint and sinner. On the one hand, man is created in the image of God and justified by faith in God. He is called to a distinct vocation, which stands equal in dignity and sanctity to all others. He is prophet, priest, and king and

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responsible to exhort, minister, and rule in the community. Every person stands equal before God and before his neighbor. Every person is vested with a natural liberty to live, to believe, to serve God and neighbor. Every person is entitled to the vernacular Scripture, to education, and to work in a vocation. On the other hand, man is sinful and prone to evil and egoism. He needs the restraint of the law to deter him from evil and to drive him to repentance. He needs the association of others to exhort, minister, and rule him with law and love. Every person, therefore, is inherently a communal creature. Every person belongs to a family, a church, and a political community.

These social institutions of family, church, and state, the reformers taught, are divine in origin and human in organization. They are created by God and governed by godly ordinances. They stand equal before God and are called to discharge distinctive godly functions in the community. The family is called to rear and nurture children, to educate and discipline them, to exemplify love and cooperation. The church is called to preach the word, administer the sacraments, educate the young, and aid the needy. The state is called to protect order, punish crime, and promote community. Though divine in origin, these institutions are formed through human covenants. Such covenants confirm the divine functions, the created office, of these institutions. Such covenants also organize these offices so that they are protected from the sinful excesses of officials who occupy them. The family, church, and state are thus organized as public institutions, accessible and accountable to each other and to their members.

Later Protestant groups in Europe and America cast these theological doctrines into political forms. Protestant doctrines of man and society were cast into democratic social forms. Since all persons stand equal before God, they must stand equal before God’s political agents in the state. Since God has vested all persons with natural liberties of life and belief, the state must ensure them of similar civil liberties. Since God has called all persons to be prophets, priests, and kings, the state must protect their freedoms to speak, worship, and rule in the community. Since God has created persons as social creatures, the state must promote and protect a plurality of social institutions, particularly the church and the family. Protestant doctrines of sin were cast into democratic political forms. The political office must be protected against the sinfulness of the political official. Power must be distributed among self-checking executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Officials must be elected to limited terms of office. Laws must be clearly codified, and discretion closely guarded. If officials abuse their offices, they must be disobeyed; if they persist in their abuse, they must be removed, even if by force.7

These Protestant democratic teachings were revolutionary in their time and helped to inaugurate what R.R. Palmer has called “the age of democratic revolutions.” They were the driving ideological forces behind the popular revolts of the French Huguenots, Dutch Pietists, and Scottish Presbyterians against their monarchical oppressors in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were critical weapons in the arsenal of the revolutionaries in England, America, and France. They were important sources of inspiration and instruction during the great age of democratic construction in later eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe and America.

Protestantism was not, of course, the only ideological source of the first wave of political democratization that finally broke in the later eighteenth century. Secular Enlightenment theories of democracy coursed through this wave as well, sometimes diluting and even drowning out the Protestant theories. Yet it is not accidental that more than two-thirds of the nations that adopted democracy during

this first wave of political democratization were predominantly Protestant in confession.9

The second wave of Christian democratic influences broke in the middle third of the twentieth century and helped to spread democracy to new nations and to restore democracy to war-torn Europe. Two Independent movements within Christianity produced this wave — one led by Christian missionaries, the second by Christian political activists.

Christian missionaries from Europe and America helped to catalyze democratic movements in Africa.10 To be sure, many foreign missionaries did not preach or practice a pure democracy. Some clerics and churches were accomplices in the belligerent policies of both the colonial establishments and the postcolonial dictatorships. Others insisted on soul-craft to the exclusion of state-craft. Still others sought to impose Western ideas and institutions of democracy on African culture. Despite these shortcomings, Christian churches and Christian teachings provided a fertile seedbed for African democracy which has begun to flower in the past half-century.

Christian churches sometimes served as “zones of liberty” in African society, to use Richard Joseph’s phrase.11 Many Protestant mission churches were organized democratically. Ecclesiastical authority was distributed among pastors, elders, deacons, and teachers. Communicant members elected the clergy to their offices and had ready access to those who were elected. Churches served as centers of poor relief, education, health care, and social welfare in the community. Churches catalyzed the formation of voluntary associations, like youth groups, women’s groups, and business associations. Churches provided a sanctuary for political dissidents and a sanction for movements of political reform and renewal. By so doing, churches provided both models of democracy and bulwarks against acratocracy in Africa.

Christian teachings helped to “lower” political officials and to “elevate” political subjects in African cultures. Many African religions, Kwame Bediako argues, “sacralized” political rulers, viewing them not only as preeminent authorities in the present but also preeminent interpreters of the past, of an ancestral tradition that had to be obeyed. Christianity “desacralized” politics, Kwame Bediako argues, by showing that all human authorities are subordinate to and empowered by divine authority. Christianity also “dignified” political subjects by giving each person access to the ancestral wisdom of the vernacular Scripture. The Scripture liberated Africans both from their political rulers and their Christian missionaries. It gave the Africans a common point of departure and reference to create a new belief system that combined Scripture with native traditions and a new political system that combined Christian political doctrines with indigenous lore.12

African democracy has grown out of this synthetic tradition. It combines Christian and other Western democratic traditions with African traditions. Many African customs have been conducive to the development of democracy — the strong emphasis upon communal cooperation, participation, and cohesiveness; the general encouragement and toleration of diversity within community; the long tradition of freedom of speech, self-expression, and worship; the healthy respect for the land and activities of

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9 See HUNTINGTON, THIRD WAVE, supra note 4, at 13-17, 75-76; JAMES H. NICHOLS, DEMOCRACY AND THE CHURCHES 29-41 (1951).
12 Bediako, supra note 10, at 4-16.
others; and the expectation that political rulers be accountable and accessible to their subjects.¹³ This combination brought democratic aspirations to many African nations in the 1940s and 1950s. New democratic governments emerged a generation later, first in Nigeria and eventually in several countries in Western and Central Africa."¹⁴

Concurrent with this missionary movement in Africa both Protestant and Catholic political activists helped to restore democracy to war-torn Europe and extend it overseas."¹⁵ Protestant political activism emerged principally in England, the Lowlands, and Scandinavia under the inspiration of both social gospel movements and neo-Calvinism. Catholic political activism emerged principally in Italy, France, and Spain under the inspiration of both Rerum Novarum and its early progeny and neo-Thomism. Both were principally lay groups. Both formed political parties, which now fall under the general aegis of the Christian Democratic Party movement.

Both Protestant and Catholic parties inveighed against the reductionist extremes and social failures of liberal democracies and social democracies. Liberal democracies, they believed, had sacrificed the community for the individual; social democracies had sacrificed the individual for the community. Both parties returned to a traditional Christian teaching of "social pluralism" or "subsidiarity," which stressed the dependence and participation of the individual in family, church, school, business, and other associations. Both parties stressed the responsibility of the state to respect and protect the "individual in community." Both agitated strongly for the recognition of social, economic, and political rights.¹⁶

These Christian democratic parties had a formidable influence on the democratization initiatives that followed World War II. They helped to destroy the totalitarian philosophies and politics that had plagued Europe. They played a part in the constitutional reformation of France, Germany, Italy, and Iberia. They helped to catalyze new democratic movements in Chile, Venezuela, Brazil, and various Central American nations. They were critical advocates, alongside ecumenical organizations, for the development of the Universal Declaration of Rights in 1948 and subsequent international covenants on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.¹⁶

The third wave of Christian democratic impulses began with the radical changes in Roman Catholicism introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).¹⁷ Prior to Vatican II, the Catholic

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¹³ Pobee, supra note 10, at 6-12.
¹⁶ See the conference essays of Aria Oostlander, Social Welfare and the Common Weal (Nov. 15, 1991) and Roberto Papini, Christianity and Democracy in Europe (Nov. 15, 1991) (on file with the Emory International Law Review).
Church had stood at a considerable distance from democracy. Democratic teachings on liberties, rights, and separation of church and state conflicted directly with traditional Catholic teachings on natural law, the common good, and subsidiarity. Notwithstanding the social teachings of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* the Catholic Church had little patience with democratic reforms or democratic regimes. It readily acquiesced in the authoritative regimes and policies that governed the European, Latin American, and African nations where Catholicism was strong.

Building on the work of John Courtney Murray, Jacques Maritain, and others, Vatican II and its progeny transformed the Catholic Church’s attitude toward democracy. In a series of sweeping new doctrinal statements — beginning with *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and ending with *Centesimus Annus* (1991) — the Church came to endorse the very same democratic principles that it had traditionally spurned. First, the Church endorsed human rights and liberties. Every person, the Church taught, is created by God with “dignity, intelligence and free will . . . and has rights flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature.” Such rights include the right to life and an adequate standard of living, to moral and cultural values, to religious activities, to assembly and association, to marriage and family life, and to various social, political, and economic benefits and opportunities. The Church emphasized the religious rights of conscience, worship, assembly, and education, calling them the first rights of a civic order. The Church also stressed the need to balance individual and institutional rights, particularly those involving the church, family, and school. Governments everywhere were encouraged to create conditions conducive to the realization and protection of these inviolable rights and encouraged to root out every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social distinction, language, or religion. Second, as a corollary, the Church advocated limited constitutional government, disestablishment of religion, and the separation of church and state. The vast pluralism of religions and cultures, and the inherent dangers in state endorsement of any religion rendered such democratic forms of government mandatory.

Vatican II and its progeny also transformed the Catholic Church’s actions concerning democracy. After Vatican II, the Church was less centralized and more socially active. Local bishops and clergy were given greater autonomy and incentive to participate in local and national affairs in order to bring the Church’s new doctrines to bear on political and cultural matters. The Catholic Church was thereby transformed from a passive accomplice in authoritarian regimes to a powerful advocate of democratic reform.

The Catholic Church has been a critical force in the third wave of political democratization that has been breaking since the early 1970s — both through the announcements and interventions of its papal see and curia and through the efforts of its local clergy. New democracies in Brazil, Central America, Chile, Hungary, Poland, South Korea, The Philippines, and elsewhere owe much of their inspiration to the teaching and activity of the Catholic Church. Catholicism, of course, has not been the only Christian

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20 For a good summary with documents, see *CHURCH ND STATE THROUG THE CENTURIES* 281-85, 298-355 (Sidney Z. Ehler & John B. Morrall eds., 1954).
21 See e.g., MARITAIN, supra note 1; JACQUES MARATAIN, MAN AND STATE (1951); JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY, THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (1965).
23 See HUNTINGTON, THIRD WAVE, supra note 4, at 77-80; Hehir, supra note 17, at 9-11.
force behind this third wave of political democratization. The explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America, and the political revival of the Lutheran, Hussite, and Free Church traditions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have also had an influence. Yet, it is not coincidental that twenty-four of the thirty-two new democracies born since 1973 are predominantly Roman Catholic in confession.

II. FUTURE CHALLENGES

Christianity and democracy complement each other. Christianity provides democracy with a system of beliefs that integrate its concerns for liberty and responsibility, individuality and community. Democracy provides Christianity with a system of government that balances its concerns for human dignity and depravity, social-pluralism and progress. This complementarity has brought Christianity and democracy together. It has led to something of a confluence between the three waves of Christian democratic impulses and the three waves of political democratization.

Christianity and democracy, however, also challenge each other. Democracy challenges the spirit of the Christian Church. On the one hand, democracy’s commitment to religious freedom opens new opportunities for Christianity. Once impervious autocracies are now open to Christian missionaries. Once inaccessible positions of power are now open to Christian influence. Democracy thereby challenges the Christian Church to extend its mission and ministry. On the other hand, democracy’s commitment to religious neutrality forces Christianity to fight the “battle of spirits” alone. Historically, the state aided the Christian cause by establishing its doctrines, prescribing its morality, protecting its clergy, and subsidizing its proselytes. Democracy forbids such favoritism. Christianity must stand on its own feet and on an equal footing with all other religions. Its survival and growth must turn on the cogency of its word, not the coercion of the sword, on the faith of its members, not the force of the law. Democracy thereby challenges Christianity to strengthen its sincerity and tenacity.

Democracy also challenges the structure of the Christian Church. While the Church has preached liberty and equality in the community, it has perpetuated patriarchy and hierarchy within its own walls. While the Church has advocated pluralism and diversity in the public square, it has insisted on orthodoxy and uniformity among its members. The rise of democracy has revealed the apparent discordance of such preaching and practice. It has emboldened parishioners to demand greater access to church governance, greater freedom from church discipline, and greater latitude in the definition of Church doctrine and liturgy. It has thus challenged the church constantly to restrive its delicate balances between order and liberty, orthodoxy and innovation, dogma and adiaphora.


26 For thorough discussions of recent democratization movements, see LARRY DIAMOND ET AL., DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (1988-89); GUILLERMO O’DONNELL ET. AL., TRANSITIONS FROM AUTHORITATIVE RULE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY (1986). On the role of the predominant role of the Catholic Church in this democratization process, see HUNTINGTON, THIRD WAVE, supra note 4, at 21-26; Brian Smith, Churches and Human Rights in Latin America: Recent Trends on the Subcontinent, in CHURCHES AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA 155 (Daniel H. Levine ed., 1979).

Christianity, in turn, must challenge the spirit and structure of democracy. On the one hand, Christianity must challenge democracy to extend itself. Among current political forms, democracy holds the most promise for peace, justice, and a better life. It offers the best hope for those who suffer from persecution and penury, discrimination and deprivation. It affords the greatest freedom to love God, neighbor, and self. Christianity must thus support democratization. It must use its collective power and moral suasion to face down autocrats and put down abuse. It must help to break the hardened soils of totalitarianism and sow the seeds of democracy.

On the other hand, Christianity must challenge democracy to reform itself. For all of its virtues, democracy is far from a perfect system, far from an "earthly form of heavenly government," to quote one exuberant Leveller. It is a human creation and inherently flawed. Democracy has stored up many idols in its short life — the proud cults of progress and freedom, the blind beliefs in materialism and technology, the desperate faiths of agnosticism and nihilism. Democracy has done much to encourage a vulgar industrialization that reduces both human beings and natural resources to fungible and expendable economic units. It has done much to impoverish the already poor, to diminish the already marginal, and to exploit the already exploited — all along promising them a better life. Christianity must work to exorcise the idols of democracy, to continually drive democracy to purge and reform itself.

Democracy needs such opposition to survive.28 For democracy is an inherently relative system of ideas and institutions. It presupposes the existence of a body of beliefs and values that will constantly shape and reshape it, that will constantly challenge it to improve. Christianity is by no means the only belief system that can offer such a challenge to democracy, but with a perfect example in the lordship of Christ at its disposal, Christianity cannot be silent.


28 Hans Kohn provides that: Ultimately, democracy will be determined by its strength as a moral and spiritual factor dominating the public mind. Great democratic statesmen, like William Ewart Gladstone in England, have always understood how to instill some of their own democratic fervor and moral conviction in their people and thus to keep democracy as a live issue. For democracy does not exhaust itself in political techniques or in economic reforms. It is, above all, a fundamental attitude, a scale of values, a definite conception of man and his place in society... Above all, It is the method of discussion, of open-minded critical inquiry, and of mutual regard and compromise that distinguishes democracy from its twentieth century caricature, the 'news or 'true' manipulated democracy of the totalitarian mass states. Democracy presupposes the existence of opposition as a legitimate partner in the democratic process.

KOHN, supra note 2, at 191-92.