Christian Justifications for Democracy
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Introduction

Two factors are generating particular ferment in contemporary global politics today: the continuing struggles of movements for 'democratisation' in states which are emerging fitfully from autocratic or totalitarian rule; and the striking and unsettling resurgence in both democratic and undemocratic states of new forms of 'public religion' – some wholesome, some deadly. British citizens need no reminder of the second factor, and it is not surprising that many of them are having a hard time comprehending how public religions other than a Christianity familiar to them – or public religion *at all* - might make any constructive contribution to political life in this country. There is evidently a pressing need for imaginative and critical reflection on the relationship between religion and public life in Britain, and good work on this theme is certainly coming on stream from a variety of sources. [1]

It is important, however, to pause for a while and pose a prior question, one to which most people, including most Christians, think they have a straightforward answer: why should we favour democracy in the first place? There are all sorts of valid pragmatic responses to this question, notably Winston Churchill's celebrated quip that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have ever been tried. But given the ferment just described, as well as the ever-deepening cynicism about the operation of democracy in societies like ours, it is more than ever important to be able to identify *principled* answers to this question. As Christians reflect on their political responsibilities today, they need to make clear – in the first instance to *themselves* – why democracy is important and what conception of democracy should guide their political engagements. In this article I present a broad overview of key strands in the tradition of Christian political thought which can equip us in this task.

The meaning and value of 'democracy'

In many discussions of democracy, the term is used quite loosely to mean anything from a society that values freedom, tolerance or human rights, to a constitutional state governed by the rule of law, to an egalitarian society which has cast off medieval hierarchy, or even simply to a 'modern' society. In this article, I shall use the term 'democracy' quite specifically to mean the principle of the popular election of political rulers (without implying that this is the only legitimate usage). This principle is actually one specific implication of a wider democratic principle, that of the accountability of government to the people (which itself needs balancing with several other political principles). This wider principle mandates much more than just popular elections, but here I will focus on the narrower implication of popular election.

It is true that democratic elections have, in the modern world, tended to go hand in hand with, and are generally supportive of, those other good things just mentioned: freedom, tolerance, the rule of law, equality, human rights, and more. But democracy does not itself guarantee them; indeed it can undermine them: elected majority governments can ride roughshod over the freedom and human rights of minorities. Consider the historic plight of Irish people in Britain, of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, or of Black people in the USA, to name just a few glaring examples from our own so-called 'civilised' liberal democracies. But nor is democracy always necessary to realise those other principles; unelected governments can sometimes respect the rule of law, secure civil freedoms, and pursue a measure of justice. Indeed non-democratic governments have not infrequently proven able to establish significant degrees of social provision and secure a measure of social order, without which public injustice would have been much greater. Democracy is not the highest or deepest political principle, nor the most comprehensive. It is rather one of a number of vital institutional components of a balanced constitutional framework, all of which need to play their distinctive roles in securing the larger goal of just governance. And the

justification and content of democracy are derived from more fundamental political principles.

Having entered those qualifications, I now want to explain why democracy is, nevertheless, a profoundly important principle, one which Christians should enthusiastically, if critically, support where it exists, improve and reform where it is flawed, and argue and mobilise for it where it does not exist and where political opportunities allow - and in a manner and at a pace that such circumstances render prudent. It is possible to distinguish three broad theories of democracy that have crystallised out of many centuries of Christian political reflection and experience. Each implies a specific kind of justification for the principle of popular election. I call them consent, defensive, and participatory theories. They do not imply, jointly or severally, that democracy is the only legitimate form of government, but they do suggest powerful Christian motivations for supporting and engaging with democracy today.

Consent theories

Christian consent theories propose a distinctive reason why the citizenry, or at least their representatives, must participate in the process by which political authority is legitimised. Consent theories were not invented by the social contract thinkers of the seventeenth century, only radicalised by them in an individualistic and eventually secularizing direction. Their origins go back to at least the twelfth century, and they were transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, first by Reformation political thinkers into full-fledged covenantal models, and later by Catholic philosophers into sophisticated natural law theories.

Christian consent theories hold that *both* divine and human appointment are required for the establishment of legitimate political authority. Political authority as such is seen as originating in God, operating either through creation or providence, rather than in autonomous popular will. But consent theorists argue that there is a necessary role for popular participation, expressed in various ways, in the public legitimising of those who exercise the divinely authorised office of government. The idea was developed in different directions. In a more conservative version, often termed the 'designation' theory, popular consent supplies only a recognition of the providential appointment of rulers. Through consent, however it may be expressed, the citizenry confirm, rather than confer, the authority of those in office. Designation theorists often drew upon Old Testament accounts of the divine appointment of kings by specific divine intervention, perhaps by the word of a prophet.

A more radical 'transmission' version of consent theory held that God has transmitted the inherent right of self-government to the people, not through direct intervention but through the medium of created human nature. God has planted in human social nature a natural capacity and inclination towards political community, so that when humans discern the need to establish a political authority at a particular point in history they are acting in conformity with their created nature and so with divine order. One of the more radical sixteenth-century Calvinist documents put it like this: 'it is the people that establishes kings, gives them kingdoms, and approves their selection by its vote. For God willed that every bit of authority held by kings should come *from the people, after Him....*'[2]

It is vital to recognise that on the consent theory, in either version, the right to establish a government is not seen as the right to create just any sort of political regime at all, nor as a mandate for rulers or citizens to pursue just any political goals they autonomously choose. The consent theory makes sense as a Christian theory only if we see political authority as having a divinely established normative purpose which is not itself created by an act of human consent but stands above the wills of both ruler and people. Consent is seen as being given by the people to those who will fulfill that normative purpose, and in exercising consent the people are in effect undertaking before God both to obey their rulers but also to hold them accountable for violations of that purpose. That normative purpose was described in various ways in medieval and early modern political thought: the securing of peace and justice; the establishment of public righteousness; the protection of the welfare of the realm. But the most comprehensive description came to be the pursuit of 'the common good'. And the common good was understood, not, as in much modern liberalism, as a mere aggregate of individual interests or an outcome of collective will, but rather as the assemblage of public conditions that protect and make flourish the normative structures of society created by God, broken by sin, but open to the operation of redemptive grace. It was seen as an integrated and substantive conception, a 'thick' vision of normative social order, with the act of political consent understood as pursuant to its realisation.

Participatory theories

The second and third kinds of justification for democracy are neatly summed up in the two parts of Reinhold Niebuhr's celebrated maxim: 'man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'[3] The first part of this maxim expresses the thrust of the *participatory* theory. This theory endorses the principle of popular election as an expression of the human capacity to assume responsibility for the doing of justice. The opportunity for democratic political

participation provides a channel for the fulfilment of our created impulse to actively and responsibly promote justice (or advance the common good). Once again the justification of popular participation derives from the normative purpose of government. Participation is not justified as subjective expressiveness but as fittedness for the pursuit of justice in solidarity with our fellow citizens.

Historically, Christian consent theory was compatible with very different conceptions of the method by which popular consent is to be expressed, including different conceptions of the extent of the electorate, or even with popularly-acclaimed monarchy. The participatory theory reaches a more far-reaching conclusion by explicitly affirming the *equal* possession of a capacity for pursuing justice by all human beings. It drives the logic of popular consent forward in the direction of an ever-widening franchise, and indeed beyond mere voting towards the expansion of other opportunities for political influence.

Advocates of this view often cite the model of the church as a spiritual community of equals as a generative source of participatory ideas. What eventually emerged around the seventeenth century was a conviction that each person stands equally responsible before God for the proper discernment of justice and the common good, and so equally capable of participating, in some manner, in public affairs. The Reformation had played a vital role in gradually infusing European society with ideas such as the equality of callings ('the priesthood of all believers'), individual freedom of conscience, and the right to share in communal self-governance. The Puritan movement was perhaps the clearest embodiment of these converging ideas. As Graham Maddox puts it: 'In the Puritan congregation each person was worthy of full participation in discussion not merely out of respect for her or his worth before God, but also because each person in a gathering in Christ's name could be a vessel for the outpouring of the Spirit - each could be moved by God to add something genuinely revealing, or revealed, to the collective understanding....'[4] Oliver O'Donovan captures the original biblical thrust of this view evocatively as 'pentecostal republicanism.'[5]

It is easy to see how, when applied to politics, these practices advanced democratising trends. Robert Dahl sums up the emergent Christian view thus: 'all men were equal not only in the eyes of God but equally qualified to understand the word of God, to participate in church government, and by extension to govern the commonwealth.'[6] The early twentieth-century Catholic movement known as 'personalism,' which was influential on subsequent papal social thought, contributed in a distinctive way to the participatory theory through its affirmation of equal human dignity and the human rights flowing from that dignity, and of the humanizing potential of widespread popular political participation.

Defensive theories

The third variety of justifications for democracy, *defensive* theories, is captured in the second part of Niebuhr's maxim which I quoted earlier. Whereas the participatory theory appeals to the enduring goodness in human nature – 'man's capacity for justice' as Niebuhr puts it - the defensive theory places the emphasis on human fallenness and corruptibility – 'man's inclination to injustice.' In this theory democracy is justified as a necessary check on the inescapable tendency of fallible office-holders to abuse their power: democratic election is one vital constitutional restraint on the corruption of power. Churchill might be counted as an honorary adherent to this view, but Niebuhr is the clearest modern exponent.[7] One of Niebuhr's characteristic claims was that human collectivities, especially larger bodies in possession of significant social power, substantially magnify the tendency and capacity of individual humans to exploit each other. Government, holding the greatest concentration of power, must therefore be brought under the restraint of the disciplines of democracy.

Advocates of the defensive theory will typically argue in favour of a wide range of constitutional disciplines; as in the first two theories, an argument for popular election yet again serves as but one element of a larger account of a just state. The point is stressed that to establish democratic elections *alone*, without further constitutional checks, carries its own dangers, since the people are, as much as their rulers, subject to corruption. This is why most Christian political theories have insisted on a point of enormous importance, namely that the expression of the popular will, valid though its role may be, must nevertheless be subjected to higher, justice-embodying principles, formalised in a set of constitutional brakes on the assertion of bare democratic will. [8]

Toward a robust Christian account of democracy

There is, then, a 'cloud of witnesses' in the Christian tradition, the cumulative impact of which is to counsel an embrace of the principle of popular election by Christians today. Indeed I suggest that we need to honour the insights of all three theories and integrate them in a robust Christian account of constitutional democracy. The consent theory generates an account of the role of popular will in the legitimising of authorised rulers; the participatory theory supplies an egalitarian extension of that role; and the defensive theory offers a significant supplementary reason for establishing democratic institutions, guarding against any idealising

interpretation of the first two. These amount to strong and authentically Christian reasons why we should favour not just the principle of popular election of rulers alone, but a participatory, representative constitutional democracy in which popular consent is seen as an essential ingredient, but in which both government and people are held accountable to transcendent norms of justice and the common good. Just governance cannot be left only to governments. Rather we should assert the principle of the *co-responsibility of citizens and government in the discernment and pursuit of justice and the common good.* As a member of the political community each citizen shares in the duty to contribute to the divinely-ordained purpose of that community. I suggest that, from a Christian point of view, it is this basic obligation, and not some supposed prior individual right to autonomy, which should be seen as grounding our constitutional rights to participate in the choice of our leaders and in the continuing shaping of government policy. That is only the first step in developing a rounded account of authentically Christian democratic engagement today, but it is an indispensable one.

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End notes

1 See, for example, three recent contrasting statements: *Faith and Nation: Report of a Commission of Inquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2006); Nick Spencer, *"Doing God": A Future for Faith in the Public Square* (London: Theos, 2006); Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

2 Julian H. Franklin, ed., *Constitutionalism and Resistance in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 158. Emphasis added.

3 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: *A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defenders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), vi.

4 Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1996), 150-151.

5 Oliver O'Donovan, *Response to the Respondents: Behold, the Lamb!* In *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11/2 (1998), 102. Cf. also Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 268-271; and Robert Song's notion of the 'right of public speech' in Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 197ff.

6 Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 32.

7 'If men are inclined to deal unjustly with their fellows, the possession of power aggravates this inclination. This is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice. The democratic techniques of a free society place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious.' Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defenders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), vi.

8 Charles Villa-Vicencio, writing from the perspective of liberation theology, makes the point forcefully while reflecting on the lessons of autocracy under apartheid in South Africa. See his *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-building and human rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chs 2,3.

For further reading

John De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (IVP, 2003), chs. 2, 5.

Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (Routledge, 1996).

Paul Marshall, *God and the Constitution: Christianity and American Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), ch. 4.

Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, 'Political Authority and European Community: the Challenge of the Christian Political Tradition,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), 1-17.

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005), Part II.

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