

CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY

A theology for a just world order

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Introduction

Future generations will look back on the events which occurred in eastern Europe in 1989 as a watershed in world history. My wife and I were at Union Theological Seminary in New York at the time. For a few days in September we hosted the Director of the Marxist-Leninist Institute in Rostock, Dr Günther Hoffman. Hoffman was a member of a group of theologians and philosophers from the German Democratic Republic who were visiting the United States to experience life within a liberal democratic and capitalist society and compare it with their own. Together we watched the news on television each evening. It was the week during which many East Germans were fleeing across the border into Czechoslovakia and then to the West. On two occasions the television coverage of the events taking place in East Germany was juxtaposed with that of mass marches in Cape Town protesting against apartheid. These were the first such protests for many decades which were permitted by the authorities in South Africa.

As South Africans we found the marches no less remarkable than the events taking place in eastern Europe. As we watched their unfolding, we believed that this was the beginning of the end for apartheid; our guest, on the contrary, was confident that the German Democratic government would reform and survive. Yet, whatever our differences of perception, we sensed that the traumatic developments in eastern Europe were historically connected to what was happening in South Africa. This was, indeed, the case as it turned out. Moreover, the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994 have been hailed as two

miraculous events which have reshaped the global politics of the late twentieth century and ushered in a new world order.

If one looked closely at the television footage of the democracy protests in Leipzig, Dresden, and East Berlin, it was possible to recognize the presence of Protestant pastors, often within the leadership ranks. Some of the televised scenes took place within church buildings and even during church-services. In the case of South Africa one did not have to look quite as closely. Certain church leaders, Catholic and Protestant, were already international celebrities in the struggle against apartheid, and were prominent at the head of the protest marches. There were also many others within the crowds who would have professed that they were there out of Christian conviction and commitment. This introduces a major theme of our study, namely the role of the churches in contemporary struggles for a democratic and just world order, which we will examine in Part Three. There, specifically in chapter seven, we will also discuss more fully the role of the church in democratization in Germany and South Africa.

A new world order?

One way of understanding the dramatic events which have occurred in eastern Europe and South Africa is to see them as part of what has been called 'the third democratic transformation' of the world which began with the Lisbon coup in 1974.¹ Within a decade of the demise of the Salazar government in Portugal, one country after another formerly ruled by authoritarian regimes, embarked on a process of democratization. Once this process was underway there was a snowballing effect leading inexorably to the ending of the Soviet empire, which in turn altered the course of events in southern

¹ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 311f. For different analyses which reach the same conclusion with regard to the significance of the Lisbon coup in 1974 see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, and Phillippe Schmitter 'The International Contest for Contemporary Democratization,' draft paper, September 1991.

Africa and proved to be an even greater catalyst for further change than the Lisbon coup. 'Never before in history', it has been said, 'has awareness of popular struggles for democracy spread so rapidly and widely across national borders. Never have democrats worldwide seemed to have so much cause for rejoicing.'² Western political analysts and leaders began to talk about a new liberal democratic capitalist world order, and Francis Fukuyama, adapting G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of history to support his argument, declared that we had arrived at the 'end of History', the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution'.³

All democrats rejoiced in the collapse of Communist totalitarianism as they did at the ending of apartheid, but not all were as convinced or exuberant about the prospect of a victory for liberal democratic capitalism.⁴ Certainly not all rejoiced at the extension of North American power and influence. As Noam Chomsky put it, 'the guardians of world order have sought to establish democracy in one sense of the term, while blocking it in a different sense.'⁵ Thus the proclaimed victory of a new world order of liberal democratic capitalism raised again the question of the meaning of democracy and its global significance at the end of our millennium.

An irony of present world history is that western forms of liberal democracy are in trouble and even decay at precisely this moment when their triumph over totalitarianism is being

² Larry Diamond, 'Three Paradoxes of Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 1, 3, Summer 1990, 48.

³ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16, Summer 1989, 4; *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Hamish Hamilton and Penguin; New York: The Free Press, 1992.

⁴ See Jonathan R. Macey and Geoffrey P. Miller, 'The End of History and the New World Order: the Triumph of Capitalism and the Competition between Liberalism and Democracy', *Cornell International Law Journal*, 25, 1992, 279ff; Fred Halliday, 'An Encounter with Fukuyama'; Michael Rustin, 'No Exit from Capitalism?'; Ralph Miliband, 'Fukuyama and the Socialist Alternative', *New Left Review*, 193, 1992; Krishan Kumar, 'The Revolutions of 1989: Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy', *Theory and Society*, 21, 3, June 1992; and the essays by David Held, Alex Callinicos, and Anthony Giddens, in *Theory and Society*, 22, 2, April 1993.

⁵ Noam Chomsky, 'The Struggle for Democracy in a Changed World', a paper presented to the conference on Negotiating for Change, London; Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1991.

celebrated. Cynics also have reason to suspect that the western insistence on multi-party democracy in eastern Europe, Latin America, or sub-Saharan Africa is motivated more by economic self-interest than a concern for meaningful democratic participation in government and economic justice. Newly established democratic systems are already being severely qualified in some eastern European and African countries by presidential rule in the name of protecting democracy.⁶ There is also the possibility that some well-established western democracies might regress and become more authoritarian in defending their own interests, even under the guise of protecting and extending democracy.⁷ Some are certainly better advocates of democracy in faraway places than at home, and when they are struggling for power than when they achieve their goal, or when they are voted out of power. Understandably, many people living in the West have opted out of the political process, no longer believing that their vote makes any difference. This has long been true of the disadvantaged, the discriminated against, and the poor. As a result, a vacuum has been created which has been eagerly filled by those who seek to manage the system in such a way that it serves self and group interests rather than the good of society as a whole. Hence John Dunn's somewhat cynical reference to democratic theory as 'the public cant of the modern world'.⁸

Reinhold Niebuhr, writing on the eve of the allied victory in the Second World War, cautioned those who believed that the forces pushing towards world community could not be stopped or reversed.⁹ In similar vein, Kitson Clark later remarked, in words which still retain their validity, that the 'most terrible lesson of this century is the ease and swiftness with which retro-

⁶ Neal Ascherson, '1989 in Eastern Europe: Constitutional Representative Government as a "Return to Normality"', in John Dunn, ed., *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508BC to AD1993*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 227.

⁷ Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, p. 79.

⁸ John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, Cambridge University Press, Canto edition, 1993, p. 2.

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1944, new edition, 1960, p. 159.

gression can take place'.¹⁰ However cogent democratic theories might be, they are not self-fulfilling;¹¹ there is no guarantee of inevitable democratic success. The very process which has brought us to this moment in history has revealed or created contradictions and tensions which have the potential for future and ongoing conflict, much of it violent, on a world-wide scale. Some analysts even suggest that we might be entering a new period of world disorder rather than order.¹² It is too early to tell. But it would be theoretically foolish, politically fatal, and theologically unsound to assume glibly that a new democratic order of world justice and peace is around the corner, and that all that is now required of us is some mopping up operation.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that present and anticipated traumas associated with democratic transition may well be the birth-pangs of a more just and democratic global society. We are living in an environment which is turbulent, traumatic and dislocating, yet it is also one which is potentially creative.¹³ In other words, the fact that a new world order may not have arrived, and the further awareness that its arrival cannot be taken for granted as part of an evolutionary process, does not mean that the third democratic transformation is not underway. Like its predecessors, it may run out of steam, and the democratic transformation of the world might take some steps backwards before a fourth wave may take democratization further. But time probably is, as Samuel Huntington suggests, 'on the side of democracy',¹⁴ even if it is not always on the side of present movements of transition. There is no reason then 'to replace an optimistic evolutionary view with a cynical and pessimistic cyclical alternative'.¹⁵ Yet the critical question remains: what kind of democracy, and what kind of new world order, is – or should be – in the making?

¹⁰ G. Kitson Clark, *The Kingdom of Free Men*, Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 71.

¹¹ Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, p. 30.

¹² Ken Jowitt, 'The New World Disorder', *Journal of Democracy*, 2, 1, Winter 1991.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15f. ¹⁴ Huntington, 'Democracy's Third Wave', p. 33.

¹⁵ John A. Hall, 'Consolidations of Democracy', in David Held, ed., *Prospects for Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, p. 272.

Understanding democracy

The problem of defining democracy is notorious.¹⁶ But it is essential to try and understand democracy if we are to consider meaningfully its relationship to Christianity and enter into the debate about the new world order. This is the task we have set ourselves in Part One of this volume. All democrats would affirm the classic words of Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address in 1863, that democracy is ‘rule of the people by the people for the people’.¹⁷ But there is considerable disagreement on what this sovereignty of the people means, and on how ‘popular power’ should be structured politically. In response to a 1949 Unesco questionnaire on the subject, all those scholars selected to participate agreed that democracy was recognized as the ideal description ‘of all systems of political and social organization advocated by influential proponents’, yet they found it difficult to define precisely what it meant and the way in which it can be put into effect.¹⁸

Traditionally, discussions on democracy have distinguished between direct, participatory democracy, and representative democracy. Participatory democracy reminds us of the necessity of the involvement of the people as a whole in the democratic process, and of the importance of what is called civil society. Representative democracy, on the other hand, whereby the people elect others to make decisions and act on their behalf, has become necessary at the macro-level of the region, nation-state, and global arena, because of the demands of size.

The two competing ideological variants which have shaped the modern world, liberalism and socialism, have both determined the way in which democracy has developed. Hence the distinctions made between liberal democracy, social democ-

¹⁶ See also C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

¹⁷ ‘Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863’, in Abraham Lincoln, *Great Speeches*, New York: Dover Publications, 1991.

¹⁸ *Democracy in a World of Tensions*, Unesco: Paris, 1951, appendix III, p. 527, in S. I. Benn and R. S. Peters, *Social Principles and the Democratic State*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971, p. 332.

racy, and democratic socialism. Contemporary struggles for democracy and the theoretical debates they have evoked, particularly with regard to gender, culture, and economic issues, have made it possible, however, for us to go beyond the arid confines of the debate between these contending ideologies. At the same time the globalization of democracy has injected a new range of issues of fundamental importance for the future of the world which have direct significance on local, grass-roots democracy. All of which makes us aware as never before that democracy is an open-ended process in constant need of broadening and deepening, and therefore of debate and clarification.

Fundamental to our discussion will be a distinction between the democratic *system* and the democratic *vision*. By democratic *system* we mean those constitutional principles and procedures, symbols and convictions, which have developed over the centuries and which have become an essential part of any genuine democracy whatever its precise historical form. When we speak about the democratic *vision* we refer to that hope for a society in which all people are truly equal and yet where difference is respected; a society in which all people are truly free, yet where social responsibility rather than individual self-interest prevails; and a society which is truly just, and therefore one in which the vast gulf between rich and poor has been overcome.

The democratic *vision* has its origins not so much in ancient Athens, the symbolic birthplace of the democratic *system*, as in the message of the ancient prophets of Israel, and especially in their messianic hope for a society in which the reign of God's *shalom* would become a reality. This we will discuss in chapter two. Undeniably, the religious custodians of the prophetic vision, whether Jewish or Christian, have often failed to witness faithfully to its demands. At the same time, the vision has been secularized in various ways, some of them revolutionary. Utopian as it may be, it is this vision which has been, and remains, the driving force behind the struggle for democratic transformation across the world, even if it can never be fully realized and embodied in democratic systems of government.

Christianity and democracy

As we will document in Part Two, the relationship between Christianity and democracy has been ambiguous for much of their respective histories, reflecting both the divergent tendencies in the Christian movement (conservative, reformist, radical) as well as those within the evolution of democracy (liberal and socialist). Wolfgang Huber rightly reminds us that the 'affinity of Christian faith to democratic values' has been severely compromised by 'the historical distance of churches towards democracy'.¹⁹ At the same time western Christendom undoubtedly provided the womb within which the democratic *system*, as we now know it, gestated, and it also contributed decisively to the shaping of the democratic *vision* through its witness, albeit ambiguous and severely compromised, to the message of the Hebrew prophets.

Despite this, Christians have by no means always regarded democracy (the *system*) as the best form of government. While certain Protestant 'free churches' have had a close connection with the emergence of liberal democracy, mainstream Christianity on the whole, especially Roman Catholicism, has long resisted it. This was especially so from the time of the Enlightenment when democracy became equated with liberalism, which in turn was regarded as the handmaiden of revolution and seen as an onslaught upon traditional Christian faith and values (chapter four). Christianity, it was argued, does not proclaim that the voice of the people is the voice of God or that the majority is always right.²⁰ With this in mind, the contemporary theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas insists that the 'church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization'.²¹ There is obviously a fundamental truth in this claim. Christianity, after

¹⁹ Wolfgang Huber, 'Christianity and Democracy in Europe', *Emory International Law Journal*, 6, 1992, p. 35.

²⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 168.

²¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 12.

all, has no 'ideal political model written into its foundation charter',²² and cannot be equated with any system of government.

But the fact that it is wrong to equate Christianity with a particular political system does not mean that all systems of government are equally acceptable to Christian faith. 'There is', wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'justification for asking which form of the state offers the best guarantee for the fulfillment of the mission of government and should, therefore, be promoted by the church'.²³ Reflecting on the task of the church in the aftermath of the Second World War, Karl Barth observed that Christianity, when faithful to the gospel, 'betrays a striking tendency to the side of what is generally called the "democratic" state'. Without equating democracy with any of its historic forms, he argued that there is 'an affinity between the Christian community and the civil communities of the free peoples'.²⁴ This affinity is now widely acknowledged within the ecumenical church as Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* and recent documents of the World Council of Churches indicate.²⁵ In passing, it is noteworthy that, while previously Anglo-Saxon Protestantism was the home of democratization, the 'third democratic transformation' began in predominantly Roman Catholic countries. Thus Christianity, especially after the twentieth-century experience of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, now appears to be irrevocably committed to the retrieval of democracy as essential to its vision of a just world order.

In Part Three we will examine several case studies on the role of the churches in the struggle for democracy since the end of the Second World War: the struggle for civil rights in the United States and for democratic liberation in Nicaragua

²² Adrian Hastings, *Church and State: The English Experience*, University of Exeter Press, 1991, p. 4.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, New York: Macmillan, 1976, p. 352.

²⁴ Karl Barth, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community', in Barth, *Community, State and Church*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960, p. 181.

²⁵ See John Paul II, 'Centesimus Annus', in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992, pp. 474f.

(chapter five); the 'second liberation struggle' in sub-Saharan Africa (chapter six); and the transition to democracy and democratic reconstruction in East Germany and South Africa (chapter seven). These are all paradigmatic in understanding the relationship between Christian faith and the church in contemporary struggles for democracy.

Christianity and the church are complex phenomena. It is important, therefore, not to indulge in sweeping generalizations, nor to assume that there is Christian unanimity on the issues at hand. There are, in fact, different Christianities, and different ways in which the gospel is understood and related to the world. Confessional and denominational differences clearly affect the ways in which churches participate in the political arena. We must also avoid claiming too much credit for the churches. Their participation has often been ambivalent, and in some instances even today they have resisted rather than enabled liberation and democratization. Yet it is misleading when political analysts ignore the extent to which churches and church-groups have contributed to democratic struggle and change, whether they do so out of ideological antipathy, or because they do not include such matters within their purview. The involvement of churches in the struggle for democracy in the second half of our century has demonstrated that in many places the churches have become virtually indispensable in the process of transition. But is this merely a matter of pragmatic usefulness and perhaps ecclesiastical expediency, or is it something which is more deeply grounded in theological conviction?

A theology for a just world order

The reader should note that there is a clear structural link between Part One and Part Four, even though they are separated by the bulk of the book. In Part One we express our understanding of democracy and the prophetic vision; in Part Four we reflect on this from a critical theological perspective. It is our conviction that, in order to engage in the task of theological reflection, it is important that we first critically

analyze and consider the historic relationship between Christianity and democracy (Part Two), and also consider the church's involvement in twentieth-century struggles for democracy, as well as the theologies which informed or emerged from that participation (Part Three).

It may be helpful, then, to consider briefly here at the outset the theological perspective which underlies the project as a whole and which will be developed more fully in the final chapter.²⁶ In doing so we would suggest that theology has to reclaim its place at the centre of political discourse, not on the terms which other disciplines may be willing to allow, but on its own terms.²⁷ In Niebuhr's trenchant words which in many ways express the motivation for this study: 'democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history'.²⁸

Two major interrelated theological themes are fundamental to this task. The first derives from the prophetic tradition, especially as expressed in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching about the reign of God (discussed in chapter two). The prophetic tradition is based on Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt, and the awareness that Yahweh has a particular predilection for the poor, the oppressed, and for other victims of society. This divine partiality does not mean a lack of love for other people, but a concern to overcome social injustices and thus bring about a society in which all people are equally respected as bearers of God's image. This alone is the basis for reconciliation and peace in the world, and therefore for the establishment and consolidation of democratic societies.

The second theological theme derives from the Christian conviction that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is triune (Father, Son, and Spirit). Reflection on the doctrine of the trinity provides us with the insights necessary to overcome the

²⁶ For a more detailed account of the author's own theological position see John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

²⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, p. xii.

way in which democracy has become a casualty of the contradictions of modernity, and therefore lost its spiritual foundations. The doctrine also enables us to transcend the split between individualism and collectivism which has bedeviled the debate between liberalism and socialism, and develop an understanding of human sociality in which both individual rights and the common good are complementary rather than conflictual. Trinitarian theology likewise relates directly to the debate about gender and cultural differentiation, about hierarchy and power relations, human sinfulness and transformation. It is also fundamental to our understanding of the nature of the Christian *ekklēsia* as an inclusive, participatory, local and universal fellowship, and therefore as a sign of a just world order embodied in different contexts.

On the basis of both the prophetic message of the reign of God and the doctrine of the trinity we are thus able to reflect theologically on human identity, freedom and responsibility, universal values and cultural plurality, the relationship between the Christian *ekklēsia* and democratic polities, national sovereignty, political accountability, and economic justice. In this way it becomes possible to give concreteness to the message of the ancient Hebrew prophets and the ministry of Jesus, as well as to the experience of Christian tradition, in relation to the contemporary debate about democracy and a new world order, and so contribute to the ecumenical discussion about 'justice, peace, and the integrity of creation' which so helpfully provides us with a modern definition of God's *shalom*.²⁹

²⁹ *Now is the Time*, JPIC Final Document, Geneva: WCC, 1990.