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CHAPTER 30

Democracy

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No system of government is perfect, nor can any claim to be Christian. Yet democracy is widely regarded today as the best available political polity, and many church traditions, even those previously wary of democracy, now regard it as a form of governance that resonates well with Christian values. However, despite such consensus not all theologians or social theorists agree on what is meant by democracy. One reason for this is the complex history of the concept; another is the way in which it has been variously formed and understood within different national contexts. Even more problematic is the gap between the rhetoric of democracy and the social realities evident in many countries committed to democratic rule. Democracy can, in fact, be used as a slogan in the interests of political expediency. Yet, despite these problems and shortcomings, the vision of a democratic world order is a compelling one. In what follows I will begin by considering the nature of democracy, commenting on both its origins and the forms or systems of governance in which it has become embodied.

The Nature of Democracy

All democrats agree that democracy implies a form of government elected by and responsible to the people in free and fair elections. They would also agree that democracy requires the rule of law, the protection of civil liberties, the separation of legislative and judicial powers, the freedom of the media, and the upholding of human rights. A major point of disagreement, however, concerns the extent to which personal liberties should be constrained by social responsibilities. This has led to the distinction between liberal and social democracy, and more radical anarchist versions of both. Anarchism is a rejection of any tendency toward statism or totalitarianism. As such it provides an enduring critique

of any tendency within democracy which leads away from the voluntary participation and cooperation of people in governing themselves.[1]

While all democrats profess a commitment to the will of the people and the common good, liberal democracy stresses the importance of personal liberties and generally supports a free-market economic system. Such an understanding of democracy is currently dominant in the West, where it is regarded as normative for all societies claiming to be democratic. However, many committed to democracy believe that some form of social democracy is vital to deal not only with the demands of their own contexts but also with those facing global society, especially the growing gap between rich and poor. For social democrats, the equitable distribution of resources and equal opportunities for all are essential ingredients of a genuinely democratic order. The struggle for a global democratic order, then, is not simply a matter of extending liberal Western democracy to places where this does not exist, but of developing a genuinely democratic world order that is rooted in the particularities of different contexts. Such an order would have the capacity to protect human rights and promote the common good. This would apply equally to countries which have a long tradition of democracy, but where its development has come to a standstill.

The liberal tradition has undoubtedly contributed enormously to the development of democracy, especially through its insistence on protecting individual rights and liberties. But without the more egalitarian vision of social democrats and their concern for social responsibility, democracy easily becomes a means of protecting individual self-interest rather than pursuing the common good. For example, the linking of democracy and the free-market system is often stressed to the advantage of the economically powerful and to the detriment of developing countries. Indeed, the trade policies of the United States of America and other "first world" countries are often protectionist rather than open to others. So finding the balance between the liberal and social democratic traditions is not easy, given the constraints placed upon democratically elected government by political and economic interests. The struggle to enable both individual freedom and social responsibility to flourish amid the realities of particular historical contexts is at the heart of the continuing debate about democracy's ability to provide political stability and achieve its goals of justice and equity.

A further area of disagreement among democrats concerns the way in which "popular power" should be structured and exercised. Such differences have led to distinctions being made between direct, participatory democracy, and representative democracy. Participatory democracy heightens the involvement of the people as a whole in the democratic process, but is often impractical even though desirable. Representative democracy, whereby the people elect others to make decisions and act on their behalf, has become necessary at regional, national, and global levels. This requires parliamentary structures and procedures, as well as the development of political parties and organizations that are able to govern democratically. But representative democracy always runs the danger of becoming detached from grassroots needs and developing an unwieldy and self-perpetuating bureaucracy. Hence the need for a strong civil society that is able

to keep a check on the way in which those elected to office exercise their power. This cannot be done simply through an electorate exercising its right to vote every four or five years. Hence, too, the need for political maturity within party political structures and especially the eschewing of any resort to violence in settling differences.

Civil society is comprised of a range of institutions and structures (e.g. organized labor, educational bodies, the media, faith communities) which are not controlled by government or political parties. If political society refers to the structures of government or the state, including the civil service, then civil society is that network of nongovernmental organizations that provides the means whereby people can participate in pursuing social goals and protecting particular interests. Civil society is important not only for the sake of critically monitoring the exercise of power; it also provides the framework within which many people can participate in shaping the structures and values of society. A government that begins to oppose the organs of civil society has begun to attack one of the pillars of democracy. It is therefore in danger of undermining both its own legitimacy and the future of democratic rule.

Globalization and contemporary struggles for democracy, along with the theoretical debates they have evoked – particularly with regard to gender, culture, and economic issues – have made it necessary to go beyond the debate between liberalism and socialism, or participatory and representative government. They have also highlighted the need for democracy to be contextually understood, embodied, and developed. What has become evident is that if democracy is to flourish it has to be constructed and sustained in ways that serve the cause of justice, equality, and freedom today rather than remain trapped in past formulations and embodiments. This suggests the need for a further distinction in democratic theory between *system* and *vision*: that is, the recognition that democracy is a *system* of government built on those constitutional principles and procedures, symbols and convictions, which have developed over the centuries in order to embody the unfolding democratic *vision* of what a just and equitable society requires. If we regard democracy simply as a system of governance, we fail to appreciate its character as an open-ended process that is ever seeking to become more inclusive, more just, and more global in response to the needs and hopes of society. This democratic *vision* resonates with fundamental elements within the Christian tradition even though Christianity has not always been supportive of democracy as such.

Christianity and Democracy

The roots of democracy in the Western world may be traced back to ancient Athens and Renaissance Italy. But democracy as we now know it developed only after the European Enlightenment and especially the French Revolution. As a result it has become the polity of modernity. The relationship between

Christianity and democracy both before and during the modern period has been full of ambivalence, ambiguity, and even hostility. Christians have by no means always regarded democracy as the best form of government; indeed, the contrary has more often been true, especially in Europe. Moreover, there are contemporary Christian theologians who are decidedly suspicious of linking Christian witness to democracy (Hauerwas 1981). Much depends, of course, on how democracy is understood within particular historical contexts. But the fact remains that fundamental impulses within democracy may be traced to the ancient Hebrew prophets, and Western Christendom has historically provided the womb within which modern democracy gestated (Berman 1983; de Gruchy 1995). In this regard we may point to at least five trajectories within Christian tradition that have made significant contributions to the development of democratic theory and praxis.

The first is the egalitarian communal experience and example of the primitive church itself, and its anticipation of the imminent arrival of the reign of God with its promise of universal justice and peace. In some ways, this was embodied in various radical movements within post-Constantinian Christianity, including the early monastic movement. The second, which emerged within medieval Catholicism, brought Christianity into creative interaction with Aristotelian political philosophy. Key political notions, such as subsidiarity and the common good, were developed on a Christian basis. These ideas have played an important role in shaping social democratic theory, affirming in particular the personalist and organic character of society and the need for human solidarity. The third trajectory, the covenantal, derives from the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. This has stressed human responsibility before God and toward others on the basis of God's covenant in Jesus Christ. In some ways this corresponds with the secular doctrine of the social contract. However, its binding force is not that of social obligation, but a commitment to others within the body politic under the authority of God. This leads to a strong emphasis on accountability both to an electorate and to God. The fourth trajectory, the liberal Christian, which we find expressed variously in the heirs of the radical Reformation, English nonconformity, and liberal Protestantism in North America, affirms the dignity of the individual, human rights, the freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and religious toleration. The fifth trajectory, that of Christian socialism, insists that there can be no democracy without a just economic order. Key concerns are human solidarity, participation in the democratic process, and economic justice. This resonates strongly with many of the concerns of liberation theology.

Each of these trajectories emerged within specific historical contexts as Christians of different epochs and traditions sought to express their faith within the public arena on the basis of the dominant theological motifs and insights of the time. While they vary in emphasis, each rejects tyrannical and absolutist forms of government, though they have developed different strategies for opposing such; all acknowledge that human sinfulness leads to political corruption, though some are more optimistic about human nature than others; and all eschew selfish individualism in the interests of genuine community. These trajectories, though complementary, are not identical in the way in which they have understood or influenced the development of democracy. Nor is there always a clear causal line between them and the way in which democratic governance has developed. But each in its own way has contributed to democratic theory and practice as each has sought to express the prophetic demand for social justice and equity.

As already intimated, the French Revolution heralded the birth of modern democracy. However, because the Revolution was anticlerical and often anti-Christian, democracy, especially in Europe, was identified with social forces inimical to Christianity. This was less the case in Britain, where nonconformists were generally strong advocates of democratic governance, and in the United States, where Christianity played a formative role in the shaping of the new American republic. Despite these exceptions, for much of the nineteenth century Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and mainline Protestant Christianity remained either skeptical about or hostile to democracy. Democracy, for them, implied the rejection of Christian faith and of the church's role as the moral guardian for the nation. It was the political expression of secularism and atheism.

A decisive reversal came about during the twentieth century, especially following the demise of Fascist, Nazi, and Stalinist totalitarianism. This does not mean that all ecclesiastical antipathy to democracy has disappeared, but it does appear that ecumenical Christianity is committed, possibly irrevocably, to the retrieval of democracy as essential to its vision of a just world order. Indicative of this new Christian appreciation of the value of democracy is the fact that Catholic social teaching, after centuries of hostility and ambivalence, is now strongly in favor of democracy as the best form of political governance.[2] It is also noteworthy that while previously Anglo-Saxon Protestantism was the home of democratization, the so-called "third democratic transformation" which we have witnessed during the past few decades began in predominantly Roman Catholic countries such as Portugal, Spain, Poland, and Chile. However, this espousal of democracy cannot be taken for granted as there remains within sections of Christianity a strong tendency toward hierarchy and absolutism.

Democratic Transition and Transformation

The Allied victory over Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II was hailed by the West as a victory for democracy and soon led to the establishment of democratic governments in those countries. Shortly after the war, India and many countries previously under colonial rule, notably in Africa (e.g. Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda), gained their independence. All of them adopted democratic constitutions. Other examples of transition from oligarchic or authoritarian control occurred in Spain and Portugal, as well as in several Latin American countries (e.g. Nicaragua, Argentina, and Chile) and some in Asia (e.g.

Malaysia). But perhaps the most dramatic transitions to democracy occurred in the late twentieth century. Notable among these were the democratic revolutions which occurred in former communist-ruled countries of eastern Europe (e.g. Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union), and in apartheid South Africa. Many more countries across the globe have begun to follow suit.

These transitions to democracy, whether initially imposed from without or achieved from within, have changed the face of global politics. They have demonstrated the potential of democratic rule, but also its fragility and hence the need to implement measures which can help new democracies to reach maturity.

Countries with a long democratic tradition are obviously in a different historical situation from those that have undergone a sudden transition to democracy from colonial or authoritarian rule. In the former, it is unlikely that elections will be disrupted by widespread violence, whereas in the latter holding free and fair elections without violent intimidation is often a problem. Democracy requires the development of an ethos, and accordingly cannot be built overnight. Such an ethos includes political tolerance, a working relationship between opposing political parties and leaders that excludes violence for the sake of the common good, and, of course, the building of a strong civil society. This takes considerable effort. In established democracies the challenge is to keep the democratic spirit alive and not take democracy for granted. Hence the need both for civil society and for a growing appreciation of the democratic vision. In those countries where democracy is a recent introduction there is a need for consolidating what has been achieved, for the development of appropriate institutions, as well as to press on urgently toward the democratic transformation of society. There now exists a growing network of institutions and agencies around the world whose mandate is to facilitate the transition to democracy in countries undergoing such change. At the same time older democracies may well learn a great deal from the newer; for if democracy is to realize its potential and fulfill its promise, it requires constant critique, development, and revitalization.

The transition to democracy, especially after years of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, invariably requires that a nation deal with its past history of injustice and oppression. While the transition may require political compromises, the sustainability of what has been achieved demands the overcoming of legacies that potentially threaten to undermine those gains. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and similar commissions elsewhere provide examples of what can and has been done in this regard. Following up their recommendations has not always proved easy or politically expedient, but without some process of restorative justice being implemented national healing and reconstruction are unlikely to take place. And without the latter, democracy will be constantly under threat.

But the transition to democracy not only requires dealing with the past; it also requires responding to new issues and concerns. This brings us to the question of democratic transformation. If democracy is understood not only as a *system* of government but also as a continuing moral quest, then as soon as one stage is reached in the struggle for justice and equity, other issues emerge that need to be addressed and embodied in democratic practice. The extension of the franchise to freed slaves or women in many countries came about long after those countries – the United States and Switzerland are good examples – had embarked upon the path of democracy. So, today, the rights of homosexuals, of unborn children, of refugees and foreigners more generally are matters of considerable concern in the shaping of contemporary democratic legislation. Some would also argue that democracy should encompass animal rights as well.

Throughout this essay I have emphasized the importance of civil society in the consolidation and protection of democracy. In many countries the transition to democracy has come about *because of* pressure from civil society; in no country is democratic transformation possible *without* such participation. A strong civil society is indispensable if democratic transition from authoritarian rule is to be sustained, reversals resisted, and democratic transformation pursued. This brings us to the contemporary role of the Christian church, along with other faith communities, in democratization.

Faith Communities and Civil Society

From a theological perspective, the church can never be regarded as simply another NGO within civil society. Nonetheless, the church – along with other faith communities – is a significant institution within civil society. Especially in twentieth-century democratic transitions, the church has played a key role in a variety of contexts, whether in eastern Europe (Poland and the former East Germany), or Latin America (Nicaragua is a good example), or South Africa. In South Africa the ecumenical church was deeply involved both in the struggle against apartheid and in the processes which led to the transition to democracy. This happened in a variety of ways, both at the national level and in many local contexts. For example, the ecumenical peace monitoring task force established by the South African Council of Churches with the help of overseas ecumenical partners was of considerable importance in enabling free and fair elections to take place in 1994. Indeed, the church had its own unique and specific contribution to make because of its direct connection to grassroots communities and their leadership. Likewise, as in the civil rights struggle in the United States, where voter registration was such a key issue, the church has often played a vital role in voter education.

At a local level, the role of the churches has to do with the building of communities in which participatory democracy is practiced. Of course, churches are often very hierarchical, patriarchal, and undemocratic, a matter to which we will shortly return. But there are many examples of congregations in which community lay leadership is encouraged, along with the development of the necessary values and skills. Many of the leaders in political organizations, labor

unions, NGOs, civic associations, and the like have had their initial training in local churches. This was certainly true in Britain in the nineteenth century and it has been true more recently in South Africa and elsewhere.

Just as the church is often undemocratic, so it is often ethnically captive. But there are also many instances where the church, at both a wider and a local level, represents a diversity of culture and political ideology. As such, it has the potential to build that new ethos of understanding and tolerance among people of different ethnic communities without which democracy is impossible. Again South Africa serves as an example: apartheid in the church was widely practiced, but it is also true that many people of different racial backgrounds had more meaningful contact with each other through the churches than was generally the case elsewhere.

This raises a further issue of fundamental importance, namely the need for Christians to cooperate with people of other faiths in building a democratic culture. In the struggle against apartheid people of different faiths discovered not only that they could work together for justice, but also that they shared similar values and concerns in doing so. Even though believers disagree on many things of importance, all the great religious traditions affirm the dignity of human beings, the need for justice, equity, and compassion in society. These values (and there are others) are of considerable importance in shaping a truly democratic and civil society. In fact, such a society cannot come into being or exist without them.

Most religious traditions, for example, stress the importance of the individual and of the community, and seek to maintain the value of both without allowing the former to degenerate into a selfish individualism, or the latter into a depersonalized collectivism. For this reason, some religious traditions are critical of the way in which liberal democracy too often exalts human freedom above social responsibility, especially in the economic sphere; or the way in which totalitarian communism has denied human freedom in the interests of maintaining central control over all aspects of life. Many of the major religious traditions stress the need for community-building in which individual needs and rights are inseparable from a commitment to the common good. While this may be contested by many advocates of liberal democracy, from a Christian theological perspective it is the essence of democracy (Barth 1960; Niebuhr 1960; Maritain 1986; Dorrien 1990).

It is not surprising that political and religious radicalism and fundamentalism flourish in situations of political uncertainty and transition. But a major test of a truly free and democratic society is the extent to which it permits and protects religious freedom – not just the freedom of worship, but also the freedom of witness and social critique. Religious commitment often leads to intolerance toward others, reinforcing social and political divisions, and providing what believers regard as divine sanction for conflicting positions, as is the case in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, India, and elsewhere. Religious conflict in South Africa has been largely among Christians, who have been radically divided with regard to apartheid and the political role of the church. Fortunately there has been very little conflict between the adherents of different faith communities, though the potential for such conflict is undoubtedly there.

Disagreement among people of different faiths and even of the same tradition is inevitable, as is political disagreement within a nation; it is also healthy if a society is to develop and change for the better. Indeed, the interaction of conflicting views is of the essence of democracy, which is why some religious traditions that stress the importance of conscientious dissent have played an important historical role in shaping democratic societies. But all of this requires the development of a culture of tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding within the churches and other faith communities. In adopting such a stance, religious believers will not only learn how to relate to one another, they will also be making a major contribution to the development of a democratic culture.

This broadening of ecumenical vision does not mean a lack of concern for the truth claims of the Christian Gospel, nor does dialogue imply an end to witness. Tolerance does not indicate a lack of concern for the truth, but an ability to speak the truth in such a way that it helps to build rather than break down community. It encourages a very different attitude and approach toward other religions, and a sharing together with them in ensuring justice in society, in dealing with the environmental crisis, and in enabling humane values to flourish. Churches and other religious communities can help their adherents to change their own attitudes and perspectives, learn how to forgive those who have wronged them, and help those who are guilty of oppressing others to see the need to make restitution and reparation. Churches should enable people to handle difference and change, to live through crises, and to participate more fully and creatively in the processes of social transformation. In many places, churches have the potential to create and sustain a vast network of people who do care, who do have a sense of justice, and who, through the resources of their faith and mutual support, can cope with social transformation. Moreover, many churches, especially those which stress lay participation and responsibility, provide a training ground for developing interpersonal skills that are of vital importance in community-building and, where necessary, in helping to resolve conflict in a creative way.

A democratic order implies that there will be a genuine separation of "church and state." In many countries in Europe, this is complicated by the existence of established churches, part of the legacy of Christendom. For some of them disestablishment might not be a realistic option, nor would it necessarily make them more effective in serving the common good. But even so, a democracy requires that all faith communities should be respected and treated fairly by those in authority. This has important implications for issues such as religious education in schools, as well as for the broader role which religion might play in public life more generally. Certainly, the separation of "church and state" need not mean that prayer is excluded from public events, or that a national anthem does not refer to God (after all, "Nkosi Sikele' iAfrika," the South African national anthem, was originally composed as a hymn). But it does mean that people of

all faiths, as well as people who are secular in outlook, should be able to identify with the symbols of the nation and regard them as their own.

The separation of church and state also means that religious communities should have the necessary freedom to worship and live out their faith in daily life. Part of what this means is that religious communities have a responsibility to the broader public. Religion is not simply something of the private sphere. Hence religious freedom is necessary not only for the purpose of worship, but also in order to exercise the prophetic task to which I have referred. From a theological perspective, the freedom of the church is not contingent upon democracy; it is rather a freedom that is derived from faithfulness to the witness of the church. And it is through exercising this freedom, and especially its prophetic witness to justice and equity, that the church best serves the democratic vision.

Critical Theology and Prophetic Witness

The democratic *vision* of justice and equity has its origins in the messianic hope for a society in which the reign of God's *shalom* will become a reality. Of course, the custodians of this vision, whether Jewish or Christian, have often failed to witness faithfully to its demands. As a result, the vision has been secularized in various ways, some of them revolutionary, as in Marxism. These too have generally failed to fulfill their promise of a new and just world order. But the vision has endured, and it re-emerges through history out of the longing for or the experience of liberation from oppression, the struggle to affirm human equality and achieve social justice. Furthermore, it continually reminds us that the touchstone of a truly democratic society is the way in which it cares for the disadvantaged, and thus seeks to develop structures in which all share equitably in a nation's or global resources. Utopian as it may appear, this prophetic impulse has been the driving force behind the struggle for democratic transformation in many parts of the world, even if its religious roots are often unacknowledged. The establishment of a new democratic social order in formerly oppressive contexts will not bring in Utopia or the kingdom of God, but without such expectation and hope, the struggle for democratic transformation will not be engaged.

Critical theological reflection on democracy must continually return to this prophetic source of Christian faith. In doing so, we need to remember that the struggle for democracy has often in the past been a struggle against a reactionary church which has done everything in its power to prevent social change. Within the Old Testament canon itself there is tension between the royal trajectory, with its tendency toward absolutism, and the egalitarian trajectory of the eighth-century BCE prophets. This tension has continued through Christian history. But the prophetic tradition provides the basis upon which Christianity must reject all absolutist political claims as idolatrous because they invariably oppress and dehumanize. It also keeps the church aware of the danger of giving uncritical theological legitimation to any particular expression of democracy, for that too can easily lead to its corruption.

The prophetic tradition also provides the church with the basis for dealing with issues such as national sovereignty in relationship to global needs, for example, in the development of environmental policies and practices. Many of the problems facing the future of humanity, not least those concerning the world economic order, social development, health, and the environment, are not and cannot be confined within national boundaries. International cooperation and political will are essential if they are to be dealt with satisfactorily. Just as the tension between individual and community interests is dealt with through the democratic process, so there is no other way for the future of just and peaceful world politics than through dealing with the tension between national and international interests in the same way. A democratic world order does not mean imposing the Western model on all nations, but developing a genuinely global democratic order through which matters of global concern can be addressed.

Even as Christians rightly and necessarily seek to engage in nation-building, they must be wary of the dangers of nationalism. The relationship between genuine national aspirations, as in building a nation out of the ruins of apartheid, and a nationalism that leads to xenophobia and even war against neighboring states, is a critical issue facing democracies and the churches. The collapse of communism in eastern Europe resulted not only in the attempt to create democratic societies, but also in the resurgence of historic nationalisms that have threatened the stability of the region and led to ethnic cleansing. The church as an ecumenical community has a key role to play in countering any form of nationalism and patriotism that is uncritical, jingoistic, and unjust. National sovereignty has legitimacy, but not in any absolute sense.

In the church struggle against apartheid, critical theology had the clear task of countering the idolatry of racism; today, within a secular democratic society committed to multicultural and religious tolerance, the challenge is to ensure that both Christian faith and theology remain publicly engaged and prophetic. It is not easy for prophets who have supported the cause of liberation to exercise their critical craft against former comrades who have finally achieved power. In South Africa, for example, there is still the need to speak out against corruption, the abuse of power, racial and gender discrimination, economic injustice, the destruction of the environment, and whatever else may destroy the well-being of society. In this regard, key questions need to be addressed. This critical task is essential for the future well-being of democratic society not just in the new democracies but also in those that are historically well-established. For example, how does the church affirm democratic values and goals without selling out to a secular ideology in which Christian faith inevitably becomes privatized? What contribution can and should Christian theologians make to contemporary democratic theory and praxis?

If the prophetic vision provides the necessary utopian and iconoclastic basis for critical theological reflection and ecclesial praxis, reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity provides us with the insights necessary to overcome the way in

which democracy has become a casualty of the contradictions of modernity. Indeed, by bringing the prophetic (critical) and the trinitarian (sociality) dimensions of Christian theological reflection and tradition together we have a theological basis for both contributing to the debate about democracy and enabling the church to discern its role within the democratic process.

The triune God, in whom Christians believe, is not a homogeneous collectivity in which the uniqueness of each person is subsumed within the whole, but a community within which the distinctness of each person is affirmed and therefore within which the other remains a significant other. At the same time, God is one, but not the monolithic, patriarchal sovereign of the universe remote from human history, relationships, struggles, and sufferings. By analogy, a trinitarian theology cannot support an understanding of society that promotes individual self-interest at the expense of the common good, even under the guise of personal freedoms. But equally, a trinitarian theology cannot support an understanding of society in which personal identity and freedom are trampled on by a collective. It is not easy to avoid these two tendencies under certain historical circumstances. But a truly democratic order, from a trinitarian perspective, requires constant effort to discern ways of transcending this split between individualism and collectivism, which has bedeviled the debate between liberalism and socialism, and to develop an understanding of human sociality in which both individual rights and the common good are complementary rather than conflictual.

The Church as Democratic Model

From the beginning of the Christian movement the role of the church in society has been not only to proclaim the message of the reign of God but to seek to be a sign of that reign within its own ecclesial life and structures. Hence, in the course of Christian history, canon law and the polity of the *ekklesia* have had a considerable influence on the shaping of Western constitutional law (Berman 1983). Furthermore, in many situations, such as the Third Reich, the structure of the church became a matter of considerable theological and political importance. As the Barmen Declaration of 1934 indicates, ideological critique of Nazism on its own was insufficient: there was also the need for an ecclesiology of human sociality and solidarity.

As mentioned previously, from a theological perspective the church is not simply another NGO, though it is part of civil society. NGOs are essentially voluntary organizations called into being to serve a particular role at a given time in society, and generally composed of like-minded people. Once their purpose has been served, and sometimes once their founder or leader is no longer involved, NGOs tend to dissolve or are disbanded. The church, on the other hand, is a community of very diverse people who have been baptized "into Christ," that is, they

participate in an organic life that exists beyond themselves or their own choice, and for a purpose that derives from God's purpose for the world. The church, then, is not a democracy, that is, a community that is governed by the people and for the people, for Christ is the head of the body that exists to serve the purposes of God. This understanding of the church is, as already emphasized, a theological one, but it is essential for the church's own self-understanding, that is, in order for the church to understand its particular and peculiar role in society. The church exists both as a means to an end that has to do with God's justice and *shalom*, and as an end in itself, that is, as a community in which human divisions are transcended in the "unity of the Spirit."

The issues regarding the relationship between the church and democracy are complex, not least because of the various church polities that now characterize the different denominations and confessions. For some traditions hierarchy is of the essence of the church, whereas for others the goal is an egalitarian community; and there is a range of options between these ends of the spectrum. But all church traditions would insist that the final authority for the church is not the will of the majority but the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ "according to the scriptures." This allows for the possibility of the prophet who is seldom in the majority but often the authentic voice of revelation. Indeed, for the church to be a prophetic witness in society it has to be careful not to become the mouthpiece of any majority will which might well contradict the Gospel. Take, for example, the way in which the Reich church in Nazi Germany became captive to the national will and the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

But if the church exists to serve God's purposes of justice and peace in the world, and if democracy is the best polity for approximating that goal, then there is a clear connection between the church's life and witness, and the struggle for a just democracy. If democracy should promote human fulfillment and flourishing within the body politic, how much more should the life of the church enable its members to discover an even deeper fulfillment and freedom in Christ? If the church is a key institution within civil society, and in some ways the handmaiden of democracy, is it not important that the church itself should emulate democratic values? After all, the participation of the "whole people of God" in the life of the church, not least though not always in the governing structures, is an important element in most forms of church government. This is symbolized by the sacrament of baptism, which declares that all those who are baptized, irrespective of gender, social class, or ethnicity, are united as equals within one body and share together in the mission of the church in the world.

The debate about the democratization of the church is really about the implications of baptism. From this perspective, the holders of hierarchical offices should be regarded as those who serve the people of God rather than dominate or rule over them. This was certainly the understanding of the Second Vatican Council, which Latin American liberation theologians began to express in their "base community" ecclesiologies. A similar development took place within feminist/womanist theologies, whose critique of the dominant paternalistic

structures of the churches led to an alternative ecclesiology related to the wider democratic transformation of society. Some African indigenous churches have also found ways to combine hierarchy and participation that have potential for developing the relationship between traditional culture and democratic transition in Africa.

It is difficult to determine precisely to what extent such ecclesiologies have, in fact, contributed to the democratization of societies at large, but at least they have given embodiment to the democratic vision and raised issues that are of considerable importance for both church and society. Among these is the question of the relationship between equality and difference, an issue that has become critical both for democracy and for the public witness of the Christian faith today. The recognition of gender difference in the life of the church, and how this impacts on the ordination of women, is clearly of fundamental importance in raising questions about the relationship between patriarchy and hierarchy. Should women allow themselves to be co-opted into the hierarchical structures of the church rather than bring about the transformation of the church as a whole in ways which express human solidarity, enable equal participation, overcome patriarchal domination, and promote justice within society? From this perspective, ecclesial vision is directly related to the heart of the democratization process: that is, to the sharing of power within the life of the church and society.

A further issue of ecclesiological significance is the globalization of democracy. This has now become essential because a "global interconnectedness" has created "chains of interlocking political decisions and outcomes among states and their citizens, altering the nature and dynamics of national political systems themselves" (Held 1993: 39). Thus, while the focus of democratization in the past shifted from the city-state to the nation, so its future focus must be the ecumene as such. Ecumenism is not primarily about the church, but about a just world order: the search for the unity of the church, and its mission within the world, are bound up with a vision of the world characterized by justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

The Future of Democracy

Democracy by its very nature is a fragile form of government, and the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic order is beset with enormous problems. In many countries the process is exacerbated by large-scale inequalities, a lack of resources, including money and time, and an inadequate education and preparation for democratic participation. In countries such as South Africa, this has been made worse by a legacy of racist oppression in which people have been systematically deprived of resources. To assume, then, that a new democratic order of world justice and peace is around the corner and that all that is required of us is some mopping-up operation, would be theoretically foolish, politically

fatal, and theologically unsound. However cogent democratic theories might be, they are not self-fulfilling.

Yet the fact remains that we have entered a new historical epoch, for good or ill. We cannot ignore the risks, the current disorder, and the promise of more to come; but all is by no means dark for those who live and work in anticipation that the present democratic transformation will fulfill its promise. The transition to democracy, whether on a national or international scale, will inevitably involve a long and difficult march. But there is no alternative to pressing on in the struggle for a new democratic order in the modern world. What needs constant affirmation, however, is that democracy requires the commitment and participation of all citizens if it is to work properly. This may be an ideal, but it is an ideal that is worth striving for. Perhaps that is why some writers insist that democracy is ultimately dependent upon the development of a spirituality in which human freedom, genuine community, and a willingness to share undergird political programs and action.

Notes

1 On anarchism and other issues related to democracy see the articles in the *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, edited by Paul Barry Clarke and Andrew Linzey (London: Routledge, 1996).

2 The development of Catholic social teaching on this and related matters can best be seen in terms of the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). See *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited by David O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

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CHAPTER 31

Critical Theory

Marsha Aileen Hewitt

Marxism is the consummation . . . of the most progressive thoughts of humanity.

Ernst Bloch

The term "political theology" is by its nature ambiguous and potentially misleading, for at least two main reasons. The first rests on the assumption that there is something distinctive or uniquely different about a theology that is "political," as if some or most theology were not in any case "political." The idea that theology is apolitical is blind to the inner contradiction between the repressive and emancipatory impulses within theology that become visible through critical self-reflection. It ignores the fact that theology, like all cultural forms and theories, is mediated through human action and experience, generating its own forms of social organization and power hierarchies, and is thus inevitably political. Rosemary Radford Ruether's remark about the role of experience in feminist theology comes to mind as precisely relevant to the question of the political nature of theology. She observed that the concept of experience is not unique to feminist theology, since all the "objective sources" of theology "are themselves codified collective human experience" (1983: 12). Especially since the ideology critique of Karl Marx and its subsequent development in the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School, it is no longer possible to overlook the ideological and political dimensions of all theology.

One of the key questions that must be asked in order to evaluate the political meaning of theology and its role in shaping and directing human action is: Whose interest do specific theological doctrines and ideas serve? In her critique of Rudolf Bultmann's assertion that historical meaning is located in the present, Dorothee Sölle writes, "In the face of such a statement, we have no right to disregard the interests that produced it, which means concretely that we must raise the questions originally posed by Karl Marx. Whose interest is served by perceiving the meaning of history always in the present? *To which class* do those persons belong who talk that way?" (1974: 49, emphasis added). The interest here does not involve an assessment of Sölle's critique of Bultmann, but rather concerns her critical *method*: *Whose material interest* is being served with particular theories and how openly is it acknowledged? A theology that disregards this question accommodates itself, consciously or not, to the social conditions in which it is contextualized. It is a theology devoid of a sense of "social obligation" (Moltmann, 1967: 316) that, if confined merely to the realm of "constant