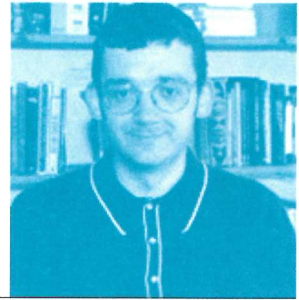


# DEMOCRACY: WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS SAY?

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*In this second article Robert Pope takes up the theme of participation by arguing that democracy is more than a process. He calls on Christians to be the "social conscience, living in critical relation to democracy" and offers the tantalising possibility that we may need to develop new forms of government: "... the principles of justice and righteousness found in the Bible to be the outworking of the will of God will always require humankind to strive for better and fairer political, social and economic structures".*

While in the West democracy is exalted as the best form of government, it remains difficult to define. At its root, democracy clearly means "rule by the people". Generally this is taken to mean majority rule, where representatives are given the ability to form and pursue policy through fair and regular elections which are open to a range of candidates and during which no coercion is brought to bear upon the voters, the media are able to report on policy in an unbiased way, and all votes are counted equally.<sup>1</sup>

Much can be said in commendation of all these points primarily because they emphasise the ability of "the people" to regulate the activities of their elected representatives. Nevertheless, a number of questions can be asked relating to whether democracy should be seen in procedural terms alone: what happens to minority voices in systems governed by majority rule? To what extent is democracy served when "the people" leave all decision- and policy-making to the conscience of others, and, possibly, to those for whom they never voted in the first place? How do party politics enable or disable the democratic process when elected representatives who oppose party policy either suffer some form of coercion or are granted "absence with leave" from parliamentary debate (as, for example, in the recent reading of the bill to introduce Identity Cards in the British House of Commons, December 2004)? Is democracy to be viewed in pragmatic and procedural terms alone or should it also actively pursue particular goals? And, if so, what would constitute those goals? Does democracy imply the pursuit of "individual self-interest, to assist persons to fulfil their potentialities, to preserve individual rights, to increase justice, to seek the common good, or some combination of these?"<sup>2</sup>

None of these questions are easily answered, even though the nations of the West now pride themselves on being the bastion of democratic systems of government and, in recent years, have often presented their mission on the world stage as the promotion of

democracy. This, alongside our recent experience with the so-called "war on terror", the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, subsequent political developments in both countries and the apparent intervention of powerful conservative religious groups in recent presidential elections in the USA all leave us needing to ask a rather fundamental question. If democracy is the pursuit of an ideal rather than merely a procedure, should we approach our current democratic systems as though they have reached their final definition? Some help in answering this question can be found in the ideal of democracy as espoused over sixty years ago by Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.<sup>3</sup>

While it has been recently demonstrated that Niebuhr was far less a neo-orthodox theologian than has often been thought to be the case,<sup>4</sup> and while, too, his analysis bears the hallmark of an Idealism which has long since lost much of its appeal, it remains true that the thrust of his argument is worth restating. Niebuhr argued in a basically Hegelian fashion that democracy was the result of the historical struggle of nations to forge a middle way between the possible alternatives of anarchy on the one hand, where there is no government of the people and each is left to pursue his or her own goals, and, on the other, tyranny, where government is the responsibility of the few who are thus able to influence and abuse it in their own favour. For Niebuhr, this scheme had biblical precedents. In Scripture government can be seen as an ordinance of God and thus a reflection of the divine authority. However, it is also true that the scriptures pronounce judgement and wrath on rulers and judges because they oppress the poor. Democracy, then, is a historical development arising from the challenge to organise power and to retain balance in the exercise of power. And that balance is primarily maintained by recognising that there is an authority which stands above and beyond it. Thus democracy, according to Niebuhr, "is a principle of order and its power prevents anarchy; but its power is not identical with divine power."<sup>5</sup> In democracy, then, excess and abuse of power is avoided by the recognition that no power as exercised on earth is absolute. There are no mere procedures here. It is an attempt to put into practice a government of the people, by the people, for the people, under the guidance of a divine providence which, it is to be hoped, will keep it on the right track.

Niebuhr's approach has much to commend it. Unlike Hegel, who tended to view what we now call liberal

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### NOTES

1. This list is offered by JL Allen, "Democracy" in J Macquarrie and J Chilress (eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1986), pp.150–1.
2. Allen, "Democracy", p. 151.
3. R Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (2 Vols.; Vol. 1 Human nature; Vol. 2 Human destiny; London: Nisbet, 1943).
4. See S Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (London: SCM, 2002), pp. 113–40.
5. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol. 2, p. 279.
6. D Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. E Bethge; trans. NH Smith; London: Collins, 1964), pp. 120–43.
7. Quoted by JW Gladwin, "Democracy" in DJ Atkinson and DH Field (eds.), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), pp. 294–6, at p. 295.
8. The "Kairos Document" offered a Christian, biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa at that time. See [www.bethel.edu/~letnie/AfricanChristianity/SAKairos.html](http://www.bethel.edu/~letnie/AfricanChristianity/SAKairos.html)

► democracy as the divinely ordained political economy, Niebuhr recognised that political approaches are inevitably pragmatic and dynamic: there can be no final and definitive approach to politics. In Bonhoeffer's terms, politics belongs to the *penultimate* and not to the *ultimate*, because it cannot save or justify us.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, it should be able to respond to new situations as they arise and thus it can never be said to have found its final form. Furthermore, Niebuhr was aware that democracy possesses certain virtues. It is, perhaps, the best political approach that we have known and, possibly, can know. Yet it always suffers the possibility of injustice arising from human sin which results in a call to constant vigilance. This gave rise to the oft quoted epigram "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, and man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary".<sup>7</sup> Societies characterised by political apathy are thus in danger of slipping towards tyranny because "the people" fail to call their political representatives to account. Yet this is what makes democracy an ideal rather than *merely* a procedure for it requires all people (bearing in mind that those not of age and certain groups in society such as the criminal element have always been excluded) to take seriously their responsibilities towards the political process. Until that happens, it remains an ideal to be pursued. Finally, Niebuhr suggests a theological principle which helps to avoid the idolatry of the state: democracy needs to recognise the higher justice and righteousness which stands in dialectical judgement over and above it, namely, the justice and righteousness of God. Until the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness, no political system, however commendable its tenets and structures, will ever entirely encapsulate the divine imperative for justice. But until that time, the pursuit of the principles of justice and righteousness ought to characterise all political endeavour. Consequently, all political systems are to be judged on their pursuit of justice and the extent to which they give practical expression to righteousness.

Ultimately, it is this sense of the divine remaining over and above human systems which saves democracy from descent into tyranny and provides us with the key to understanding all Christian approaches to politics, namely, that faith approaches politics *critically*. No policy or structure can be endorsed without also bringing a degree of criticism which recognises it to belong to the penultimate and that the principles of justice and righteousness found in the Bible to be the outworking of the will of God will always require

humankind to strive for better and fairer political, social and economic structures. This pertains as much to democratic forms as any other.

The dangers of an uncritical approach to democracy as majority rule have become all too clear in recent years. The West is pervaded by the sense that the claims and policies of secularism are the natural conclusions of reason with the added, often unspoken, claim that no reasonable person could possibly reject them. Rather than a tool to weigh up evidence, allowing us to arrive at a reasonable and practicable conclusion, reason has erroneously become allied with secular liberalism and its interpretation of democracy. In truth, secular liberalism is as value-ridden as other worldviews and is as open to abuse as any other political policy. A striking example of this has been seen recently in the French ban on the wearing of religious symbols in schools. Even in a world irrevocably changed by the attack on the World Trade Center and the emergence of global terrorism, this ought not be seen as reason safeguarding the public against religious extremism, as it occasionally purports to be. Instead, this is secular liberalism at its worst, intolerant of any religious expression and dismissing it as contrary to its own aims and values. Rather than engage in its own tenet of religious toleration and freedom, in truth this is a form of fundamentalism – or even terrorism – potentially as dangerous as any movement motivated by religion, intolerantly restricting certain freedoms which pertain, or so it believes, to values other than its own. God is replaced with the glory of the liberal, reasonable, human. But the potential to dictate and to terrorise exists as much here as in other political structures. Secular liberalism is not, then, the natural concomitant to the *ideal* of "democracy", even if it appears to be its natural bedfellow when democracy is practised as a *process*.

All of this seems to suggest that three possible approaches to politics should be avoided, the first two corresponding to the "Church Theology" and the "State Theology" of the "Kairos Document", produced in South Africa in 1985 in opposition to apartheid.<sup>8</sup> First, as in "Church Theology", Christian approaches to politics in general and democracy in particular must avoid the aridity of a spiritualised Christianity which sees politics and religion as separate, each to be endorsed in its own sphere and left to regulate itself. Such an approach leads to a quietism (rather than neutrality) which is unable to act as a safeguard against, or even as a critic of, tyranny. Second, as in "State Theology", the wholehearted endorsement of political

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policies, practices or parties is also to be avoided for it fails to grasp the penultimate nature of political process. Support must always be tempered by the sense that any given policy will always fall short of any ultimate ideal. This goes as much for democracy as for any individual policy. While there is much to be said in support of Western democratic principles, and while, too, it is easily seen to be preferable to political practices elsewhere in the world, it remains a *historical* development. For the West, this means that it ought to continue to develop in the future as the historical process continues. But it also means that democracy cannot easily be imposed on people who may not have nurtured the desire for it and in countries whose political practices have hitherto been very different. To impose it would constitute a form of dictatorship and cultural imperialism which paradoxically contradicts the very ideals of democracy itself. Of course, it may be done with the best intentions, but it fails to recognise that all political systems are the result of historical developments. And it fails to recognise too that there may be weaknesses in the way politics has developed in the West. Third, the sense of religion that sets itself in opposition to political authority because it is interpreted as contrary to the will of God ought to be avoided because it maintains too sharp a distinction between the religious and the political which tends to betray the all too obvious implications of the incarnation, which reveal a God who is interested in embodied and material existence.

Instead of these approaches, Christians need to live in critical relation to democracy. This a certain independence of the political structure, weighing up its pros and cons, challenging it always to move forward to better expressions. In short, Christians need to act as the social conscience. Faith groups ought not be without a voice, but nor should they be used to give some kind of divine approval to political policies. Rather, faith groups must constantly call politics (and politicians) to account, ensuring that systems, policies and markets are not given more prominence and significance than people. For it is people and their flourishing which lie at the heart of the gospel's interest, and people, too, which ought to be of utmost significance in democracy. ■