

JUDEO-CHRISTIAN VALUES IN DIALOGUE WITH DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The current paper analyses the intricate relationship between Judeo-Christian values and democracy, understood not in its historical sense, but in connection to the network of social shared meanings that are required for supporting democratic cultures. Following a brief mention of various perspectives on the matter, we extract core democratic values such as: human rights, equality, justice, tolerance and set them beside fundamental Judeo-Christian values such as: human dignity as an outcome of divine creation, incarnation and atonement, the emphasis on social justice, fraternity, equality and love. The final section of the article is an analysis of both freedom and responsibility, in light of the Judeo-Christian values.

Keywords

Judeo-Christian, values, democracy, democratic culture, freedom, equality, human rights, justice, tolerance, responsibility

Attention-seeking newspaper headlines of recent months have filled our collective imaginary with Armageddon-like snapshots of yet another religious conflict, one that would drown the world in the blood of the suicidal martyrs waging war against pagans and infidels. The violent protests in the Middle East and the less than moderate speeches on the need to respect religious belief¹ amply highlight the fact that the complex issue of religion and democracy is on the backburner no longer. In fact, this tendency that has been insinuating itself in the contemporary political

¹ In the attempt to uphold two of the main pillars of Western democracy, freedom of religious belief and freedom of speech (Article 18 and 19 in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 9 and 10 of the *European Convention of Human Rights*), President Barack Obama urged Arab leaders to actively participate in the relief of recent tensions while stating that banning the infamous video "The Innocence of Muslims" would be impinging on the right to express oneself freely. French caricatures of the prophet of Islam did precious little to further the cause of democracy in the minds of Muslim worshipers, as did previous similar drawings by Danish magazine, depicting Mohammad with a bomb instead of a turban (Strenski 2010).

awareness as Norris, Ingelhart, Dogan, Iversen, Woodhead, Fischer, Motzkin and many other scholars have pointed out.

As the divide between the secular and the sacred confers even greater depth to the *private* versus *public space* dichotomy, many are left to ponder over the dynamic winds of change that are sweeping across the world, bringing about seemingly contradictory phenomena, ranging from an empirically proven increase of secularization, especially in the European context, to a revival of religious feeling in South America or Africa. A renewal of the religious belonging and practice and that of the search for spirituality begs the question: 'What is the place of religion within a democratic state?'

Whereas this particular topic is immensely pertinent, the purpose of our article follows a slightly different direction, in the sense where our aim is not so much to launch on yet another heated argument about the legal and political initiatives to either exclude or embrace religious belief and practices in the weaving of our civic and politic institutions, but more to highlight essential values of Judeo-Christian understanding that have the potential of supporting and sustaining the life and wellbeing of democratic cultures in general. Therefore, we dedicate the first section of this article to a discussion about religion and democratic cultures, which will be followed by a relatively short overview of the historical relationship between Judeo-Christian values and modern democracy. The core of our analysis, the various values that stem from Judeo-Christian tradition and doctrine, will be joined by the discussion of a vital attitude, that of responsibility, which should function as an interpreter between the theoretical aspect and the practical one.

Democratic culture and its core values

The political arena of the last 30 years has known a sizeable explosion of newly formed democracies. The fall of the communist regime and that of the Iron Curtain certainly made room for the expansion of the "power of the people" political ideology; however, one single major historical event could not completely account for this increasingly widespread preference, as a wave of democracies actually preceded the end of the Cold War².

² Here we refer to the late 1970's leading to the 1989 dramatic change in political regimes (Caramani 2008).

Robert Dahl noticed this penchant towards democracy and analysed some of its mechanism, drives and obstacles (Dahl 1997). His demarche of differentiating types of democratic regimes certainly contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, through his discussion about *pre- and proto-democracies*, to which he adds the analysis of *polyarchies* (Dahl 2006) according to the degree to which nations manage to create and sustain the conditions and, indeed, the fundamental elements that constitute a democracy, such as the right to vote, the access to information (Dahl 1982) (including one that has its source in the opposition), the right to form assemblies and organizations (including political ones), the right to claim justice for any perjury or abuse that was done against the individual or the community, etc. Although he made an argument about avoiding black and white classifications of the criteria that need to be met in order to extend the name “democratic” to certain states, he argued that one important factor in their sustainability is the presence of a democratic culture.

This culture is understood in terms of people openly adopting, adhering to or upholding a certain number of vital values such as tolerance, equality, respect for human dignity and rights (Goodhart 2008), solidarity and the many aspects of freedom: freedom of speech³, freedom of conscience, freedom of religious feeling and belonging, etc. and a general sense of individual autonomy restricted only when the liberties assumed by someone infringe upon those of another. Therefore, democratic cultures need a rich network of meaning that legitimates and sustains claims such as the inherent value and worth of each human being⁴, our equality, the need to limit political power, etc., a network that is enriched by the active participation of religious entities. John Witte Jr., in his analysis of the relation between religion and human rights talks of religion as “an ineradicable condition of human lives and human communities. Religions invariably provide many of the sources and ‘scales of values’ by which many persons and communities govern themselves. Religions inevitably help to define the meanings and measures of shame and regret, restraint and respect, responsibility and restitution” (Witte 2009).

³ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Weltzer suggest the term “self expression values” that require the presence of democratic institutions (Inglehart and Weltzer 2005).

⁴ There exists a rich debate about alternative sources for human dignity and human rights. One such alternative is that of Andrew Fiala, who argues in “Theocentrism and Human Rights - A Debate”, that rights should be located in the capacity of humans to be sentient beings (Fiala 2008).

Seeing as this characteristic tends to be widespread, applicable for various cultures, in various historical contexts, it is essential that we take a short look at the past, with the purpose of identifying possible connections. When it comes to establishing direct links between the role that Christianity played in the formation of modern democracies, opinions are divided. In fact, it is much easier to undertake the observation of the way in which Judeo-Christian actors became involved in the pro- human rights movement in the immediate post World War II period, though even this attempt would not be without controversy. However, when it comes to claiming Judeo-Christian principles were foundational for the development of modern democracy, we have diametrically opposed viewpoints.

On the one hand, authors such as Miguel de Unamuno would argue that such a claim is not sustainable, as “Christianity is a-political,” (Unamuno 1984) in the sense where Christ and his disciples concerned themselves with preaching about the eternal world, not the fleeting one. Even if we were to undertake a study of the political regimes mentioned in the biblical text, we would not find any mention of *democracy* within; therefore we cannot make a direct connection between the two based on the scriptures. Other proponents of this sharp divide argue from entirely different positions, by claiming that the Enlightenment spirit and attitude, which was crucial for modern democracy, stood in sharp contrast to the dominating Western religious traditions. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* was thus seen not only as a claim for social justice at a time when the French monarchy endorsed high taxes, but also as a reaction against the abuses of the Catholic Church and, ultimately, a rejection of the rigidity and inflexibility of the Judeo-Christian hierarchy and religious claims.

On the other hand, we find a number of philosophers, politicians or scholars⁵ that postulate and attempt to demonstrate that Judeo-Christian influence was foundational for democracy, be it the American or the European one. The argument that serves to re-start the discussion is the fact that modern democracy was forged on the fecund cultural background of

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, Henri Bergson, Jacques Maritain, the U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, Vice-President Henry A. Wallace, Robert Schuman, Luc Ferry and many others have made explicit statement where they consider that the role played by the Judeo-Christian traditions and by Christianity in particular was pivotal for the formation of democracy. Thus, Tocqueville highlights that Christianity is the most compatible with democracy, Maritain speaks of the evangelical ferment for democracy, while Bergson considers that the engine of democracy is Christian love.

the Western world and it is considered that Judeo-Christian values and principles helped bring together the elements that facilitated its birth. In this view, the French revolution borrowed and made use of key concepts such as *solidarity* that, in fact, belong to the Judeo-Christian discourse. Our aim, however, is not rehash this ongoing debate, but to look to the present situation and examine core values and their scriptural references⁶ that are capable of sustaining democratic values such as human dignity and human rights, equality, justice, tolerance and freedom.

Judeo-Christian values and democracy

Probably the first value that springs to mind is that of **human dignity** and the attitude of respect that it calls for. In the Judeo-Christian understanding, humans have inherent worth because of having been created by God in his own image. This translates into the concept of *imago Dei* which legitimizes value independent of function, achievement or even capability.

The biblical passages that are foundational for this view state that: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1: 27); “when God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them ‘Mankind’ when they were created.” (Genesis 5:1, 2) Also, another explicit passage is: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.” (Genesis 9:6)

An added factor is that, in the biblical story of the creation, God commands light, planets, plants, animals to come into being; however, a special care is displayed when it comes to making human beings: “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:5) as God is seen directly involved in fashioning the human body and then bringing it to life. This “personal touch” has led to the view that humanity constitutes the “crowning jewel” of all creation. Much more importantly, though, it has led to an appreciation of the value of each human being.

Since the source of human life is thought to be the very breath of God, Christians in general are vocal about defending the right to life of the

⁶ All biblical references will be rendered in the New International Version translation.

unborn and of the disabled. Thus, initiatives of campaigning against abortion are often done under the banner of “pro-life’ arguments, in the need to uphold the rights of the unborn. It is not the scope of the article to settle the pro-choice vs. pro-life matter; yet, we consider that pregnant mothers should be informed about alternatives to abortion and that they should be granted support if they choose not to terminate the pregnancy. By firmly believing in the sacredness of life that starts at the moment of the conception, voluntary religious organizations provide this type of service for communities; also, they can easily become involved in sexual education, especially for teenage girls, thus providing information for a safer lifestyle.

The Genesis account of creation is also often quoted as the reason why people should not be treated as means towards an end, but as ends in themselves. Human dignity thus excludes practices of slavery, defined both in the traditional sense of master- dependent servant and in the case of forced prostitution and sex trafficking.

In the Christian narrative, two more elements legitimate the inherent worth of human beings: incarnation and the atoning work of Jesus Christ: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19: 10); “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) The liturgy is often the occasion on which believers are reminded that their race was so valuable that the solution to the problem of sin and spiritual degradation involved the embodiment, the sacrifice and the resurrection of divinity itself. These elements, however, tend to be less appealed to than the argument from creation; perhaps this is due to the fact that the latter is perceived as more universal than the former.

Proclaiming the universality of human dignity is one step away from entering the vast realm of **equality**. A sweeping view of this theme is enough to sketch a historically rich range of definitions, starting from Aristotle, through the work of Kant, Rousseau, Marx, Hayek, Nozick, Rawls, etc. to contemporary theories of social justice and equality proposed by neo-contractualists, communitarian scholars or feminist proponents. Consequently, there is certain confusion about the term, as its use and abuse have earned it multiple layers of meaning and references from interpersonal sameness, to a form of social equity that sometimes requires inequality.

The Christian perspective, although lacking the word itself, conferred a level of equality to people, irrespective of gender, nationality and social status: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3: 28) More often than not, this equality has been translated into two categories: equality of worth (where this verse is seen to advocate that all people are equal in value, as creatures of God) and inequality of function (where verses that uphold the natural hierarchy God-angels-man-woman legitimate clear-cut gender roles and responsibilities). It is no secret that Christianity has been systematically linked with gender discrimination in the public sphere by feminist critique and that it is still reluctant to allow women in position of authority within churches, with the notable exception of the Anglican Church, which ordains women vicars and promotes female vergers.

The hope of change in this particular area lies in a redemptive hermeneutical process⁷ of reading the biblical texts within their contexts and comparing them with the way things were during those days. This attempt would situate Christian theology on a more open interpretation⁸ of the role that men and women, living in scientifically informed, technologically advanced societies, could and should play within the church and in society. After all, even the very early Christian practice included a woman-deacon Phoebe, who is mentioned in Romans 1:16: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae."

The Judeo-Christian perspective may need to reconsider equality of function, but it contains ample exhortations to pursue social and judicial **justice**, irrespective of immigration status, ethnicity, culture or financial situation: "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits." (Exodus 23:6); "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge." (Deuteronomy 24:7); "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd." (Exodus 23: 2)

⁷ Webb proposes to give more attention to the historical context and to the way biblical commandments constitutes a redeeming step, sometimes a counter-cultural one, for human dignity (Webb 2001).

⁸ Hermeneutical artifices make possible the constant reinterpretation of sacred texts (Vanhoozer 1998).

Justice however did not stop at peoples' concerns being heard and dealt with in the case of faulty behaviour on the part of their neighbours; it stretched beyond the judiciary aspect, towards a distributive justice understood in terms of caring for the vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the slave, the poor. The Israelites were asked to succour the alien, in the name of empathy, as they once used to be slaves and poor in the land of Egypt: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19: 33-34) In addition to this, they also needed to provide the place and means for the less financially secure to earn at least some of their own food: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:9, 10)

This social concern for the destitute and the vulnerable finds its echo in the New Testament as well, with the difference that there is an identification between the poor and Christ himself: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:37-40) and, as a consequence, care for the poor becomes a priority. In spite of many instances of exaggeration, greed and disregard of this principle in church history, this identification has encouraged and supported charity organizations around the world, and it continues to do so.

The Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount bring the justice aspect to a heightened level due to the emphasis on **love**: "Love your neighbour as yourself" is enriched by a dimension of personal sacrifice and generosity. The practice of sending aid internationally is spoken in relation to the church of Corinth, that organized a collection of goods for the community in Jerusalem.

This love extends not only to those of similar belief and lifestyle. It also encompasses one's enemy, which probably still constitutes a revolutionary idea due to the difficulty of setting it in practice. This radical love is

described in a passage in 1 Corinthians 13, and it is best known after its Greek name as agape love.

Love in the Christian context does not end at **tolerance**⁹, if we understand the latter as a passive virtue, halfway between acceptance and indifference, but it certainly incorporates it. One of the first scholars to be profoundly interested about discussing the concept of tolerance was John Locke. Johannes van der Ven describes his contribution in an article called *Religious Freedom – Challenges for the Church*:

In his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* [John Locke] made some moves toward a positive, respectful, and appreciative tolerance by presenting three perspectives: those of the church, the state, and the individual. From the angle of the church he argued that tolerance is characteristic of the true church, because it is founded on love. Love can flourish in the church because it is an association of free individuals, who joined its ranks of their own choice. From the point of view of the state he pointed out that it should not interfere with things that did not concern it, because the state and the church had very different aims. The former should look after safety, peace, and prosperity; the latter should busy itself with saving souls. The state would be wise to practice maximum tolerance in the religious sphere, since that, in contrast to coercion and sanctions, contributed most to social peace. From the individual's point of view he argued that religion is an individual affair, hence religious freedom was an individual right that brooked no state interference. (Van der Ven 2009, 51)

It should be remarked that, while he assigned this right to Protestant dissidents, Jews, and even "heathens," they were not assigned to Catholics, Muslims, and atheists.

Catholics are denied the right because they are subjects of a foreign sovereign, the pope; Muslims because they obey the mufti of Constantinople; and atheists because they cannot keep their promises, oaths, and contracts since they do not believe in God. With this three-pronged approach Locke exceeded the bounds of negative, permissive tolerance, moving toward religious freedom in a narrow sense and the separation of church and state, although his attitude toward Catholics,

⁹ Lars Binderup upholds the importance of tolerance for democracy when he notes that: "the principle of tolerance is one of the cornerstones of a democratic, liberal state and it is the central theme in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Binderup 2005).

Muslims, and atheists indicates that he had not yet arrived at a concept of reciprocal tolerance. (Van der Ven 2009, 52)

A historically rich avenue for political research sought to analyse the intricate and complex relations between the nation-state and Church. Some countries in Europe have opted for an overtly privileged relationship between a particular denomination (usually one pertaining to Christianity) and the State by officialising it as State Church (the Anglican Church, the Folkekirke in Denmark), while striving to circumspect an increasingly large ground for religious pluralism. Other countries have declared themselves neutral on that respect, while admitting that some Churches have a more privileged position, due to historical presence and dominance (Catholicism in France, EKD in Germany - Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland). Irrespective of their relationships with the state, in recent decades, an openness towards inclusion of the "religious other" has been noticed. Despite of previous abuses perpetrated by representatives of this tradition, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, one can militate not only for the importance of tolerating other religious beliefs, but also for the need for active engagement with them in inter-confessional, ecumenical dialogue. John W. de Gruchy aptly noted that ecumenical Christianity "recognizes democracy as the best available option for the establishment of a just social order, whether in individual countries or worldwide" (de Gruchy 1999, 228). As for those engaged in the struggle for democratic transition and transformation, de Gruchy notices that there are some who recognize the need for the support of religious communities, "both as instruments of enabling the process to take place, and as nurturers of a culture of democratic moral value" (de Gruchy 1999, 228).

Freedom and responsibility

In an article entitled *Human Rights and Its Destruction of Right and Wrong*, Melanie Philips considers that Western society is based on the essential Judeo-Christian values of duty and responsibility because Judaism and Christianity are not, in her opinion, fundamentally religions of rights. Quite the opposite, they are religions of duties of the individual in relation to God and in relation to his fellow humans, as we are all made in the image of God. Duties to one another bring about entitlements as well, but duty is prior to rights. In Melanie Philips' words, "the modern human rights culture has replaced that set of duties, that essential prior set of duties, by a culture of entitlement, which has had a particularly dramatic effect on our society" (Philips 2007, 115).

One of the most dramatic effects is displayed when we compare the different stances of freedom. The desire for freedom from an autocratic state morphs into a longing for freedom from *all* authority, which might actually prove coercive to individual liberty. Melanie Philips believes that we live now in a society “in which the individual’s freedom of choice trumps everything else, meaning that every individual is entitled to the same treatment regardless of his personal circumstances or behaviour” (Philips 2007, 117). People are divided into groups which threaten each other as they forcefully assert their rights; therefore, as a society, we are caught between the doctrine of entitlement and a free license for irresponsibility.

Whereas we consider that Philips presents a somewhat pessimistic and biased view of humanity and contemporary times in particular, there are two elements from her approach that we would like to draw on at the end of our analysis.

The first one concerns liberty, which is sometimes hailed as the be-all, end-all of Western Culture. We echo Montesquieu when he described **freedom** as the right to do whatever the laws of the state permit (Montesquieu 1989), and not whatever the citizens desire. This echoes the Judeo-Christian view that freedom is bound by morality and morality is defined by truth. Freedom, in the biblical sense, does not so much follow a liberal sense where people can act according to their preferences but a spiritual seeking of truth: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8: 32) and an existence according to it.

The second one is the importance of duty and responsibility, not as ends in themselves (displayed in an ascetic, self-flagellating attitude) but as part of the broader context of stewardship. This might be a concept that irritates contemporary sensitivities, as it recalls vivid images of unchallengeable, abusive masters or cunning administrators caring for their own purse solely.

In the Genesis account, stewardship was part of the first blessing that humans received: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” (Genesis 1: 28) These verbs: “rule” and “subdue” have acquired a more rounded sense that is built on responsibility towards creation

(ecological concerns), towards themselves (personal development) and towards others (in the practice of solidarity).

Conclusions

We set out to explore a number of Judeo-Christian values that could sustain democratic values, as well as scriptural references that support these values. Along the way, we have discovered that some of these have a great potential not only of “shouldering” democratic values, but also of offering a network of meaning that is important for their legitimization (here we refer, of course, to human dignity that stems from creation, incarnation and atonement).

The need to respect religious otherness (whether it be another Christian understanding of Scriptures and tradition, belonging to a “pagan” or a denominationally different religious direction or even having no religion at all) was hailed as far back as the seventeenth century, as John Locke’s work demonstrates. Despite occasional glitches in practice, the embrace of tolerance has been established and enriched in the name of individual autonomy and freedom. This has led to a proliferation of instances of ecumenical dialogues between religious scholars and to collaboration in the realm of civic duty for the sake of community welfare, irrespective of ethnicity, status or religious belief in the name of social justice and fraternity.

Therefore, we consider that Judeo-Christian values are able to provide a network of meaning that offers a positive outlook on democratic values and encourages participation in upholding them, in the spirit of responsibility and love.

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