

CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY: A Theoretical Doctrinarian Approach¹

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Abstract:

This article aims at identifying the importance of Christian Scriptures in the evolution of the fundamental elements of democracy, like the ideas of freedom, equality and brotherhood. The underlining argument of the article will stress the belief that democracy is far from representing only a normative ensemble of institutions and formal rules, rather it signifies a moral-political value, a mentality, a philosophy and a lifestyle which draws its energy from a multitude of sources – across which those spiritual in nature – which, places Christianity in a favorable position for offering consistent as well as fundamental landmarks.

Democracy and the Bible

The complex and rather tormented relationship between Christianity and Democracy has been perceived and interpreted in innumerable forms and instances throughout history. In modern times at least, most accounts on this extremely controversial topic have engulfed two rather extreme and antithetical views. On one extreme of the spectrum we find authors like Ernest Renan, the renowned French historian of religions, who believed that Jesus, and nevertheless his mission, were entirely divorced from political ambitions and designs. In political terms, Jesus is for Renan at most an anarchist, for whom civil government, of which he knows very little, no more than a commoner, is largely an abuse. (Renan, 1991: 79) This seems to be in line with the ideas of Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, whose perspective of Christianity and of its founder, places this religion outside the tangible spheres of democracy, political economy or patriotism. Unlike pagan religions of old, which were political, Christianity was entirely apolitical, as long as democracy, civil liberty or dictatorship had nothing in common with it. Regardless of one's political views, ranging from supporting or opposing various democratic or tyrannical forms of government, Christianity offers the same guidance and spiritual support. Still Unamuno, seems to absolve at least in part this religion when he

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concedes that, indeed the Christian, the real Christian, has nothing to do with all this.(Unamuno, 1993: 70).

Such unequivocal perspectives are at times at odds with the Biblical verses specifically with Colossians (1:16) that states as follows: "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him...". It is exactly under this guise that renowned thinkers, spearheaded by Alexis de Tocqueville and Henri Bergson are convinced that out of all religious doctrines, Christianity is the most compatible with the fundamental values that define democracy counting here especially liberty, equality, human rights etc. H. Bergson goes as far as to place the essence of democracy in the Gospels, finding in *love* its main perpetual source of energy (Bergson, 1992: 335). This view of Christianity was shared not only by secular or religious intellectuals, but also by influential political figures. Abraham Lincoln or Theodore Roosevelt shared this view in much the same way contemporary political figures like the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, or Italy's Foreign Minister Alcide de Gasperi, or France's Prime Minister Robert Schuman did in recent times.

Nevertheless, our argumentation must move forward from the views of illustrious American Presidents or European politicians hailed as the artisans of the European Union. To this end we begin by focusing on a research questions, which is devised as setting the ground for an argumentative attempt that might shade some light on the intricate relationship between democracy and Christianity. The research question interrogates the degree to which democracy, indeed in its modern form, manages to find its source and fundamentals in Christian doctrine. The argumentative architecture that follows builds on the findings as well as on the radical affirmation of Bergson which considers democracy as being evangelical in its most basic essence.

The meaning of democracy: between the Athenian roots and the Christian legacy

Before we set forth with our research question we must take into account that "democracy" as a word and political concept is absent from the Bible, be it Old or New Testament. Likewise the Scriptures offer no description of a political regime that could be equated with what Plato or Aristotle were

describing in their works². The term as well as the political phenomenon circumscribed by it are inventions of the Greeks of antiquity. Linguistically the word democracy is formed by associating two words, *demos* meaning people and *kratos* meaning power. Literally, democracy would mean in approximate translation "power of the people", and has been used as such in many instances. Still, this needs further clarification as the term, though employed in discourses as portraying a political system in which the power belongs to the people, has portrayed seldom in history this reality. Even Greek cities that were democracies (the term is used here in its historical meaning) were far from the modern democratic ideal.

Let us take for example Pericles's Athens. In a funerary discourse, (described by Thucydides) held by him when the corpses of the fallen generals of the Peloponnesian war were repatriated, he describes such a paradigm in these words "Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbors, but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever be the obscurity of his condition. There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private intercourse, we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbor if he does what he likes; we do not put on sour looks at him, which, though harmless, are not pleasant. While we are thus unconstrained in our private intercourse, a spirit of reverence pervades our public acts; we are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authorities and for the laws, having an especial regard to those which are ordained for the protection of the injured as well as to those unwritten laws which bring upon the transgressor of them the reprobation of the general sentiment." (Thucydides, 2.37)

However, did things really functioned as described here? How was in reality the *demos* and how did it actually wield its power in the Athenian society?

²As in Plato, *The Republic* and the *Statesman*, or in Aristotle's *Politics*.

According to some approximate evaluations, Athens had at its height a population varying between 400 and 500 thousand people (Morris, 2005). From these people only about 40 or 50 thousand people were actually citizens and had implicitly the right to be involved in the political life of the city and take part in the public gatherings and debates called the Ecclesia. That meant that only about 10% of the total population of the city had the right to rule and take decisions in the name of the whole community. Therefore, significant social categories of the city such as slaves, women and foreigners were excluded from public life. We have to add that from these 10% not all were actively involved in the decision making process some being rather apathetic about their political role. Not even reforms carried out by Pericles such as the *misthos*, namely the payment of jurors (with the intention of employing people without wealth in the decision making process) did not succeed to profoundly change the Athenians society.

Altogether, "the people", the *demos* were just a small part of the total population of the city. The so much acclaimed Ecclesia was rather an extended Parliament and not an institution that would represent the large masses of people. For the old Greeks the representative democracy as we have it today was unconceivable, for them the only kind of functional democracy was that of the *demos* understood as citizens, namely a privileged class that would rule *de masses*. (see Raflaub, 1993)

For the Greeks the Ecclesia was the supreme governmental body, it functioned as a legislative branch but also as a tribunal, (the judges were selected by draw from the members of the Ecclesia). All the important decisions of the city, whether related to public issues or waging war, were taken inside the Ecclesia. The executive branch of government was represented by an Executive Council called *Bule* and its magistracies, a sort of ministries *avant-la-lettre*. Hence, formally, the power was divided in two and the appointment of magistrates was done by draw. In reality thou, the one who was really in charge was the ruler of the city. Not seldom, the rulers ended up by abusing their power and becoming tyrants. New archeological research show that Pericles himself was not a stranger to power abuse, which is why archeologist say he was ostracized for several times. In fact the problem lays in human nature, because every human being is at some point predisposed to abuse power, referring to this, Montesquieu was of the opinion that even virtue must be tempered. Therefore we have to build mechanisms that restrain the amount of power that one person can accumulate. The Greeks did not had these kind of

mechanisms, Hegel observed that most of the time throughout history the ancient Greeks experienced oligarchic and authoritarian regimes. There certainly are some exceptions to this, but even they have shortcomings as they kept on discriminating and excluding some social categories. That is why Henri Bergson included the ancient Greek democracies among so-called false democracies, regimes that did not stand up in reality to the principles that they fostered in theory (Bergson, 1991: 255).

Christianity and the separation of powers

In the Greek cities the temporal and spiritual powers were intertwined, every city had its own Gods. Every city had its own rules and ways of pleasing the Gods and disobeying them was considered a sacrilege. The case of Protagoras who was ostracized from Athens because questioning the Gods or that of Socrates how was accused of disobeying the Gods, are proof of the strict rules of religious life in ancient Greek cities.

The historian Fustel de Coulanges in his book "The ancient city" is of the opinion that Christianity changed profoundly the customs of the ancient world. The rise of Christianity brought about a vision of a unique, universal, common God that embraces all Humanity without distinction. For the Christian God there are no foreigners, the foreigner seized to be perceived as a sacrilegious presence because the Christian temple was open for everyone.

The new religion tried to erase hate among different ethnicities, clans of cities. Christianity demanded the believer to be responsible towards the other, respect and love him as his own kind. The new perspective proposed by Christian values was universal transcending borders and cultures.

Talking about the government and the state Fustel de Coulanges states, "As to the government of the state, we cannot say that Christianity essentially altered that, precisely because it did not occupy itself with the state. In the ancient ages, religion and the state made but one; every people adored its own god, and every god governed his own people; the same code regulated the relations among men, and their duties towards the gods of the city. Religion then governed the state, and designated its chiefs by the voice of the lot, or by that of the auspices. The state, in its turn, interfered with the domain of the conscience, and punished every infraction of the rites and the worship of the city. Instead of this, Christ teaches that his kingdom is not of this world." Fustel de Coulanges further explains how

Christ “separates religion from government. Religion, being no longer of the earth, now interferes the least possible in terrestrial affairs.” (Coulanges, 2001, 338-339).

Christianity, probably for the first time in History operated with this clear distinction between the political and the spiritual power. This distinction we might say is a prerequisite for the principle of separation of powers that lead to the development of modern democracy. Jean-Louis Harouel considered that in this distinction consists the “genius of Christianity”.

The episode described in the Synoptic Gospels concerning the tribute for the Caesar is clear about the separation of temporal and spiritual powers. From the Biblical narration, we discover that the Pharisees and the Herodians, the most important adversaries of Jesus intended to trap Him. They tried to put Jesus at odds with the Roman administration asking him if it is justified to pay taxes to the Caesar. Jesus answer was surprising “ Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in *his* talk. And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any *man*: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, *ye* hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose *is* this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. When they had heard *these words*, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.” (Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:19-26)

This Biblical episode has had different interpretations; some say that this is a legitimization of the political. Miguel de Unamuno suggests that we should have here a historical interpretation that is sensible to the context when this event took place. Jesus’s adversaries tried to find a pretext to incriminate him. If Jesus would have answered affirmative to their question his adversaries would have accused him of lack of patriotism (as the Jews were under Roman occupation), on the other hand, if he had a negative answer they would have had Jesus in contradiction with the Roman law. His answer thou, left his adversaries bewildered. This episode became a fundamental reference in the discussion about the relationship between Christianity and politics and Christianity and democracy.

Nevertheless, the principle of the separation of powers is not the only principle related to democracy that we could find in the Bible. At least at a theoretical level, Christianity has overthrown the discriminatory relations fostered by the Greco-Roman system, the power relations between master and slave, man and women, stranger or native. The Bible explicitly says that "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye *be* Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:28). In fact, Christianity contains all the principles that are at the basis of what we understand today as democracy, principles like liberty and equality.

In his book "Democracy in America" Alexis de Tocqueville argues that although it asks for passive obedience in the way of dogmatism, from all religious doctrines Christianity is the most favorable to liberty, because it only addresses to the spirit and the heart of those it wants to subdue. He argues that Christianity has a similar position towards the idea of equality. Because no matter what interpretation it would acquire, from all religious doctrines, Christianity is the most favorable to equality (Tocqueville, 1995: 374)

Furthermore, Christianity has added to these values a third one, namely fraternity. As Henri Bergson argues, fraternity harmonizes the values of liberty and equality considering them as being twin principles.

Moreover, Christianity is the doctrine that contains and promotes humans rights understood as universal rights. Basic principles that modern democracies carry and defend. According to Frederic Lenoir "The philosophy of Jesus Christ is based on seven values: equality between human beings, individual liberty, the emancipation of women, social justice, the separation of the spiritual power from the temporal power" (Lenoir, 2014). All these are indispensable values for modern democracies. The same author further argues that besides the separation of powers envisioned by Jesus, He also gives us an ethical fundament that provides a framework for human interactions, for political, social and economic relations.

According to Jean Louis Harouel, the West owns its great achievements to the legacy of Christianity. Intellectual liberty, scientific progress, economic

and social development, tolerance, individualism, secularization or laity, all these are elements that were conceived by a Christian civilization. Harouel is of the opinion that the great invention of Christianity, which is also a proof for the "Genius of Christianity" (reference to Chateaubriand), is the separation of spirituality from the temporal. Christianity, he explains, has invented the distinction between the sacred and the profane, that of the political from the religious, the distinction between the temporal power and that of the spiritual power. This distinction is the trait of Christianity. It is what makes the Christian civilization so different from other civilizations. Harouel considers the success of the Christian civilization as rooted in this separation. From here have originated some of the principles of modern democracy such as individual liberty, a concept fundamental for the dynamic of the occidental mindset. Harouel cites Jean-Luc Ferry who considered that the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" of 1789 is a form of secularized and rationalized Christianity (see Harouel, 2012). The same Jean-Luc Ferry would opine that the core elements of Christianity have favored the emergence of the laic and democratic society and that this was possible because Christianity encouraged introspection. This privileged attention given to interiority permitted the appearance of laity (see Ferry, Jurfagnon, 2009).

Man as the image of God and the gift of Agape

Further on, I will analyze two more concepts that I consider to be fundamental in understanding the forging of the Christian Civilization as a basis for modern democracy. I will elaborate about the concept of the human being envisioned as a privileged and unique creature, and then I will focus on the concept of divine love, Agape.

The first concept aims at explaining human nature and its relation to the Divine. Christianity affirms a vision about the human being, which is unique, different from other religious traditions, and opposed to the vision proposed by secular thought. The human being according to the Christian tradition represents a unique being, privileged, conceived and created accordingly to a divine prototype, in the Image and likeness of God.

In a famous sermon held in the Areopagus in front of the stoic philosophers, the Apostle Paul gives to those present an extraordinary news "He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth (...) for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, For we also are His children." (26-28).

What does this mean? It means that we are special beings, conceived and created in the image and likeness of the Creator of the Universe (Elohim). We are what we are because God created us equipped with dispositions, capacities, faculties that are not to be found in any other creatures. From this point of view, Christianity contradicts the Darwinist theory of evolution by stating that between the human being and the other beings there is a fundamental difference in quality.

At the same time, Christianity is apart from all doctrines that consider the human as being irremediably bad. Thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbs, Bernard de Mandeville or David Hume have elaborated this vision about the bad nature of man. Hume stated in his essay about the liberty of the Parliament that we have to consider a priori all man as bad. Machiavelli as well considered all man to be by nature bad but he suggested a modality to fight the evil of the human nature, namely a political power that would use all means to fight this evil. This political power was to be represented by a just ruler, the Prince. For Hobbes the solution is an authoritarian state the Leviathan. We could characterize these solutions as being the remedy for evil through evil. As humans are evil, the state must use evil in order to fight them; to avoid chaos the state must use all means and all tricks to control the evil of humans.

In the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 7 Saint Paul considers that humans are inclined to do rather bad deeds than good deeds and that there is a law of sinfulness sheltered in our worldly nature " For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice". But in his vision, and in the Christian vision in general, man was not from the beginning bad as Machiavelli suggests. Man was created as a good being but he has fallen into sin and has to redeem himself. Virtue and vice, good or evil, morality or immorality are options for man's own will. Man can choose between rightfulness and wrongfulness.

In the light of the Eschatology of the Bible man is a rescuable being, he can be restored following the example of Christ. In Hebrews 12.2 we are advised to look " unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God". Jesus is the ultimate solution for the crisis that erupted in the Garden of Eden. Opposite to Machiavelli that conceptualizes a political ethic based on a pessimistic

vision about man, the Apostle Paul as Kant argues promotes an ethic that admits the restoration of man, an ethic that is based on the idea that good is the only remedy for evil. We are advised "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" and "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12: 17-21)

The Christian vision about man, conceived in the image and likeness of God develops an ethical dimension in contradiction to that elaborated by Machiavelli, Hobbs, Hume or Darwin. In the same time, Christianity detaches itself from the conceptions fostered by Nietzsche for whom man was only an evolutionary phase towards the *Übermensch*.

If we admit that the human being is created based on the image of God than we have to respect man as such. In his ethics inspired by Christianity, Kant asked imperatively that we see man and humanity as ends, and do not use them as means to your end. More recently, Hans Kung stated the we should treat every human being with respect and dignity no matter the race, ethnicity, religion or sex. The Christian ethic and the Christian morality oblige the believer to respect his kind, as he should he respect God.

We can state, that thru its unique vision about man, and its unconditional respect for man, Christianity has proven to be favorable to democracy and pluralism.

The second element that I want to introduce in discussion here is the concept of Agape, or Christian love. As the theologian Anders Nygen explained in his book "Eros and Agape", the main purpose of Christianity in the World is Agape. Agape appears as a new creation of Christianity that has a profound and lasting trace on everything that is. Agape is Christianity's major element of originality. We can easily say that Agape is in fact the essence of Christianity. Christianity means Agape, because according to the Bible God is Love. The first commandment is to love "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). In John 3:16 it is written that "God so loved (agapao) the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." Agape, love has also the quality of not being relative and that of being eternal. St. Paul describes agape in this way "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not

proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." For St. Paul "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."

From this phenomenology of love, we can observe that Agape represents the broadest moral and spiritual value quintessential to all Christian values. Ideas such as equality, liberty, fraternity, justice, duty, responsibility are all contained in the substance of this element, which is the distinctive mark of Christianity.

About Agape, we could easily say that it is the true Genius of Christianity. This kind of Christian love that for Henri Bergson would represent the engine of democracy. Referring to Bergson, Robert Schuman was of the opinion that "democracy will be Christian or it won't exist".

Conclusion

If we understand democracy as being more than a sum of institutions, judiciary procedures and political parties and envision it more like a mindset, a philosophical perspective and a set of principles then we have to ask ourselves what can drain, and inspire its survival. This lets say democratic mentality has to aliment itself from different sources, as I have shown in this article, the Bible offers a multitude of examples that can influence the believer to behave in a manner that is convergent with democracy. We can therefore conclude, after the analysis made here, that Christianity as a religious doctrine favors democracy and democratic behavior. Christianity was an influential factor in the development of democracy and because of that, democratic countries should cherish their Christian legacy.

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