

Democracy

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This article examines how democracy can be a way of enacting fundamental Christian commitments. It opens with a definition and then assesses the scriptural precedents for a commitment to democracy. The article closes by outlining the key modern theological arguments that exhort active involvement in democratic struggles for justice and liberation as well as responsibility for developing and sustaining democratic political systems. The entry as a whole outlines a theological grammar of democracy, providing a means to evaluate theologically whether a particular polity or form of politics is democratic.

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1. Democracy defined

Definitional to democracy as a way of organizing and undertaking politics is *demos-kratia*: the ruling power (*kratia*) of the people (*demos*). Democracy is both locational and vocational; it is rule by the people for the people, in this place and at this time. To sustain good political order, the contention of democracy is that the widest possible net must be cast to catch the insights and experience needed for good government. However, rule by the people is inherently unstable since the identity of the people is itself ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the holistic sense of the term 'people' as denoting the whole or common. On the other, there is a factionalist use of it as a term for one section of the whole, the "have-nots" or poor. To be democratic, politics must enable access for those who have little or no part in the whole, even as it constitutes a people from many parts.

In the holistic sense of "the people," democratic forms of rule aspire to serve everyone (no matter their station or identity) through the pursuit of the commonwealth or public/shared goods. The contrast here is with ways of ruling that serve only the interests of the one, the few, or even the many (i.e. majoritarianism). The wager of democracy is that the common people, meaning the propertyless, poor, and those of limited or no formal education, are political equals to the rich and educated. They are just as capable of being citizens in the fullest sense, and need to be included in the political system if the good of the whole is to be upheld. Classical, renaissance, and modern republican defences of democracy take this line of argument, contending that good rule requires an active, broad-based citizenry in order that the *res publica* or public things might be sustained and made to serve the commonwealth, rather than be directed to personal gain by elites. The latter produces private splendour enjoyed by the few amid public squalor endured by the many.

Democracy is often confused with its mechanisms, and mostly associated (and conflated) with its instantiation in liberal democratic nation-states. In this prevalent understanding, democracy entails some combination of elections, party systems, the rule of law, parliaments, checks and balances of power, a regularized means of administration (e.g. an independent civil service), and an independent media. However, democratic politics (as against a democratic political system) can exist without any of these features being present. Indeed, democratic social movements of one kind or another exist prior to the formation of democratic systems and are the precursor to their establishment. Elections, independent media, and other mechanisms are means for expanding the circle of people involved in the deliberative and decision-making process.

To be sustained over time and at scale, politics requires two things. One is institutional forms that enable the creation of a common life amid disagreement and diversity. As a name for the institutions of a polity, politics is a synonym for statecraft: that is, the exercise of sovereignty and government by state apparatus. Democracy is a name for ways of doing statecraft. Democratic modes of statecraft are part of, and compatible with, multiple constitutional settlements that include oligarchic and monarchical ways of doing statecraft, as for example in the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom. When used to identify a contemporary political system, democracy signifies a representative democracy within a mixed constitution.

While necessary for sustaining a common life over time, political institutions and systems by themselves are insufficient. Also needed are relational practices and modes of communication that generate and renew shared worlds of meaning and action. Politics as an informal, relational craft takes place in multiple settings. It is not coextensive with control of the state, nor even dependent on there being a state: elders and pastors negotiating changing service times in a church are practising the craft of politics.

There are different ways to parse the distinction between democracy as a formal system of government and democracy as a way of generating and sustaining the common life of a body politic. One is given by the French Catholic philosophy, Jacques Maritain ^{GND} (1882–1973), who distinguishes between a democratic system and a democratic culture. The former prioritizes democracy as a means of statecraft, and the latter emphasizes democratic social practices. Democratic systems of government without a vibrant democratic culture are brittle and easily broken.

2. Scriptural precedents

There are myriad stories and frames of reference in the Bible that fund a democratic social imaginary.

2.1. Created in the image of God whose likeness is renewed and fulfilled in Christ

A point of reference drawn on repeatedly as a warrant for democracy is that every human is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26). In Christian terms, this is not a stand-alone claim, but one aligned with how Jesus Christ is the revelation and incarnation of the true human. Christ reveals the true likeness of God in human form and what it means to live a truly human life. Over and against the ravages of sin and idolatry, humans can recover their own humanity through contemplating and participating in Christ. To do that entails encountering Christ through active solidarity with the least, the lost, and the last. This at least is the takeaway from a history of interpretations of Matthew 25:31–40, where Jesus describes self-professed followers of his asking, “[w]hen did I help you, Christ?,” with Jesus replying, “it was when you welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and visited prisoners.” At a minimum level, to treat all people as made in the image of God implies that, whatever a person’s own station or situation, they are fully human, and their humanity is revealed and secured in Christ, who died for them and in whom their life is liberated and redeemed.

2.2. Covenant

In scripture, the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Israel are paradigmatic. Through them, God reveals the covenant as the basis and structure of human community and divine-human-nonhuman relations. Central to this revelation is that all forms of relationship between God and humans, as well as between humans themselves, require the active agreement and participation in the decision-making process of those entering the relationship, whether individually or by their representatives.

The biblical portrayal of covenant as the foundational basis of political community was hugely influential on the development of democratic thinking in the West. Communal identity and purpose are not founded in ethnicity (blood), nor sharing the same territory (soil), nor even a shared history or set of ancestors (culture). All these things may contribute to the formation of ‘the people’, but they are not the foundational basis of the people as a moral and political community. This is constituted through and derived from an act of covenant. Biblical Israel constantly forgets this and tries to secure its identity and existence through non-covenantal means. Its renewal, therefore, entails a return to covenantal faithfulness, and the same is true for the church.

Covenant is the scriptural term for the quality and character of relationship that should be the basis of any form of common life through which people realize their humanity. Covenant names how persons are constituted as human beings through mutually responsible, cooperative fellowship with others and how, if this fellowship is to enable human flourishing, it must be ordered in relationship to God. Failure to live in covenantal relations with others is a failure to be fully human. Conversely, love of God and love of neighbour, realized through covenantal relations, are the ground and fulfilment of what it means to be human.

Covenant is taken up by numerous Christian political thinkers to frame the nature and basis of a democracy as a way of structuring and inhabiting political community. This was most forcefully done from the Reformation on by Calvinist theologians. For example, the seventeenth-century Dutch Protestant thinker Johannes Althusius (1563–1638) develops a complex account of sovereignty that is based on covenant. For Althusius, sovereignty is an assemblage that emerges

through and is grounded upon a process of mutual communication between covenantal associations and their reciprocal pursuit of common goods. A twentieth-century example is the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth ^{GND} (1886–1968), who justifies the rule of law and a liberal democratic polity through a covenantal framework.

2.3. Rule of law

A basic premise of modern democracy as a form of statecraft is the rule of law. This holds that nobody is above the law and that government is bound or limited by law and due process. All members of a society (including those in government) are considered equally subject to publicly-disclosed legal codes and processes. The rule of law gives rise to a whole apparatus that makes possible the attempt to ensure equality under and before the law and that the law is administered impartially and independently. The divisions of powers between executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government in the United States is one direct manifestation of such an arrangement. Crucially, while it is enacted through laws and juridical apparatus, the rule of law is itself grounded on social convention and a moral commitment.

The rule of law has a deep scriptural warrant. The people of God are a polity ruled by God, mediated through law. A tenet of scripture is the claim that human political orders should be determined neither by the personal fiat of a single ruler nor by an oligarchy. Rather, they should be determined in the first instance by covenant and law. This tenet has formed the basis of whole moral and political frameworks. One is natural law, which frames the rule of God as being mediated throughout creation, through eternal law, natural law, the law of nations (*ius gentium*), and the law of particular polities. As Brian Tierney ^{GND} and John Witte ^{GND} argue, natural law frameworks were the seedbed out of which modern human rights frameworks grew.^[1]

2.4. Assembly

Assembly is central to democracy. It is through assembly that the people are constituted as a people. This is also true of the people of God, who are founded as a people through a civic-cultic assembly when God gives the law (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16 – *qahal* in Hebrew and *ekklesia* in Greek). This assembly is gathered again before entering the promised land (Deut 31:30), and again on entering the promised land (Josh 8:30–35). After the first assembly, all the people (including women, children, and resident aliens) were supposed to assemble every seven years (Deut 31:10–13; Park 2015).^[2] At crucial points in the story of Israel, it is a congregation or assembly that enables the reconstitution of the people of God as a holy people (e.g., Nehemiah). In summary, a civic-cultic assembly is the means through which to constitute the people as those who stand in covenantal relation to God, each other, and the rest of creation. Constructive modern examples of how assembly is central to democratic politics, especially in the absence of democratic forms of statecraft, are those who gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and Wenceslas Square in Prague in 1989 or Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011. Assembly is also constitutive of democratic statecraft itself, institutionalized as it is in parliaments, congresses, and council chambers.

2.5. A preferential option for the people

Latin American liberation theologians argue persuasively that there is a preferential option for the poor and oppressed throughout scripture. However, the common people can be “stiff-necked” and act in either oppressive or self-destructive ways, even as they cry out for justice. Yet, in stark contrast to other human histories and myths, in the story of Israel the marginal, enslaved, and colonized stand alongside God as central characters. However, while the experience and perspective of the oppressed should be given priority, their perspective is not necessarily decisive. In scripture it is not enough to prefer the poor; there must also be a movement toward becoming a people.

A preferential option for the people is intensified in the New Testament with the demotic and universalizing work of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost represents the moment when the nature of mediation, whether of Temple, priest, king, law, or territory is ruptured, if not entirely undone.

The Spirit is poured out on all flesh and can be manifested in any place and any form of human life – Parthians, Elamites, Phrygians, etc. – without distinction, and anyone can receive the anointing needed to speak for and with God (Acts 2). The popular, the ordinary, and the vulgar (in the older sense, meaning “common”) can mediate God’s presence, and God’s presence can be articulated in one’s own idiom, however uncouth. At Pentecost it is the marginal who speak forth God’s Word, not those from the centre. Moreover, all now have gifts to share and all may now be active participants in building up the people of God. The Reformation emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers” reflects this, as does Roman Catholic teaching on synodality. In summary, the divine empowering and formation of a people to act and speak for themselves before God has had enormous influence in the history of Christian thinking about democracy.

2.6. A distributed structure of political authority

As a group, the people of God are a theocracy. But this should not be understood in the modern usage of the term as denoting a polity ruled by a priestly caste. The scriptural portrayal of theocracy is meant to prevent the rule by a single person or class, priestly or otherwise. Rather, the people are ruled directly by God, which means no human ruler or class can claim sovereignty. Theocracy in this scriptural sense means something like ‘no master but God’ – a sensibility turned to revolutionary ends by Protestants in the sixteenth century. God’s sovereignty is distributed throughout the people rather than being concentrated in a single figure or group. Even with the ambiguous installation of a monarchy (1 Samuel 8), the legitimacy and authority of the kings are institutionally negotiated and contested by prophets and priests.

2.7. Prophecy

Prophecy is of enormous significance for democratic thought and practice. The figure of the prophet, prophetic speech, and prophetic action offer biblical authorization for dissent and social criticism as divinely ordained. However, it is not only the legitimacy of dissent from the dominant consciousness and critique of existing authorities and systems for which biblical prophecy provides inspiration and warrant. The themes of the biblical prophets are taken up repeatedly to frame democratic discourse. This is also true of prophetic genres: notably, lamentation (giving voice to suffering and the anguished yearning for a better world), theodicy (assigning suffering meaning and purpose), jeremiad (identifying the causes of suffering and who or what is to blame), and messianic envisioning (invoking the world as it should be beyond suffering and energizing hope and desire for such a world). By way of illustration, Frederick Douglass^{GND} 1852 speech *The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro*, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s^{GND} *I Have a Dream* speech, delivered at the 1963 March on Washington, deploy all these frames and genres.

2.8. Neighbour love

The constructive way in which Christian’s frame relations with others in a fallen world is in terms of loving one’s neighbour. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the paradigmatic scriptural passage for understanding neighbour love. In the story, the neighbour has three identities: he is a stranger, an enemy, and someone who, in his suffering, is without either friends to help him or the capacity to care for himself. In the light of the parable, neighbour love is a vocation to love strangers and enemies as well as the suffering, excluded, and impoverished who lack the resources to meet their needs. The focus here is on how love of enemies is folded into neighbour love (Matt 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–28).

Theologically, friend-enemy relations need converting so they are ordered according to neighbour love. The universal scope of God’s love and presence calls into question any attempt to make the “friend-enemy” binary definitive. The Midianite Jethro, the heretic Samaritan, and the Syrophoenician woman, no less than the faithful Jewish man, can teach Christians something about God, about how to live well, and that God can be present in “their” form of life, despite it being very different from “ours.” Friend-enemy relations are fallen rather than created, and thus they can be converted. Indeed, love of neighbour embodies the redemptive possibilities of politics. It disrupts how Christians

imagine and construct friend-enemy relations, by extending their sense of who to include in our common life. Democratic politics is a mode of neighbour love that includes love of enemies.

3. Modern political theologies of democracy

There is a family of modern theological arguments that inform the advocacy of democracy as enshrining Christian beliefs and practices.

3.1. Christological humanism

Christological humanism (otherwise known as Christian humanism), in all its variations, can be summarized as follows: humans are created and redeemed to fulfil their personhood within and through a just and generous common life, the realization of which is best enabled by democracy. The theological basis for this line of argument proposes that democracy enables humans to realize their true natures as those created in the image of the triune God and redeemed by Christ. As noted previously, the implication of this theological confession is that each person has an intrinsic worth that must be honoured and that everyone matters equally, no matter who they are or what they do. A further implication is that to image Christ and participate in divine-human relations, and thereby fulfil what it means to be human, requires participation in a just and generous common life here and now, not just in the age to come. Democracy is then taken to be the form of politics that best honours the dignity of each person whilst also ensuring that everyone can participate in forming a common life and so fulfil their personhood. Rather than be acted on and have their world determined and controlled by the one or the few, all can have agency in cultivating and contributing to shared worlds of meaning and action. Democracy thereby provides the conditions and means through which human personhood is actualized, in and through free and mutually responsible relationships with and for others. It makes provision for each person to have a hand in shaping and benefitting from the material and social conditions under which they live and work. Other political systems inherently inhibit such participation and thereby prohibit the full realization of human personhood. Even at their best or most benign, other political forms produce unfree and demoralized people. Within this framework, democracy accords with an understanding of the human as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This Christological humanism rejects both individualism and collectivism, advocating instead for humans as persons constituted in and through relationship with particular others in specific places.

3.2. Political animals called to be covenanting creatures

A related line of argument to Christian humanist justifications for democracy focuses on how humans are political animals whose nature is best expressed and fulfilled through forming covenants. Democracy enables both the formation and sustention of covenantal association, whether in the church (e.g. congregationalism, synodality) or the wider body politic. It is through a multitude of covenantal associations forming relationships together by democratic means and housed within a democratic form of statecraft that a peaceable, just, and generous common life can be forged and sustained over time. This approach is exemplified in confederalist accounts of democracy, represented in the work of Johannes Althusius ^{GND}, the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Herman Dooyeweerd ^{GND}, the Anglican political historian John Neville Figgis ^{GND} (1866–1919), and more recently in John Inazu's ^{GND} arguments for “confident pluralism” and Luke Bretherton's ^{GND} arguments for consociational democracy. The emphasis here is less on the full development of persons (although that is vital) than on the way humans only realize their personhood in forms of proximate covenantal association, and how these forms of association need democratic social practices and forms of statecraft to connect them. Without democracy, these covenantal associations either turn against each other or become sectarian enclaves.

3.3. Legitimizing authority and generating wise judgments

This third line of argument focuses primarily on democracy as a mode of statecraft. It builds on the convention of consent as well as a “dual appointment” theory of authority, according to which both divine and human appointment

are required for the proper constitution of political authority. On this kind of account, divine authorization of the office of government is compatible with, and indeed requires, the expression of popular consent to the holders of that office (*vox populi, vox dei*, “the voice of the people is the voice of God”). Conversely, the withdrawal of consent by the people is a sign of divine disfavour. This is not a modern argument but was part of European medieval political theologies, embodied in the need for the sovereign to receive acclamation by the people as part of the coronation process. However, in its modern form, democratic means of legitimizing authority through elections systematize it.

The representatives of the people also require reflexive processes of widespread debate and deliberation in order to generate wise political judgments. Conversely, when democracy is reduced to an electoral procedure for collating individual preferences and interests, the consultative, deliberative, and discriminative aspects of making political judgments are erased. Open, widespread, and accessible public debate, protected by freedom of speech as well as ongoing forms of participatory democracy underpinned by freedom of assembly, are vital to producing this reflective deliberation and consultation. Without it, democracy collapses into a form of elected dictatorship.

3.4. Restraining evil and remediating the effects of sin

A further line of argument builds on Augustine’s ^{GND} dual (somewhat paradoxical) emphasis on the tendency of all earthly political authorities towards domination and their postlapsarian role in restraining evil. Inhibiting evil is not, however, only a negative act. It includes positively enabling life to be so ordered that evil does not flourish and the good is pursued. In the modern context, this is achieved through such measures as upholding the rule of law and providing common goods like public healthcare and education. On this line of argument, democracy both enables the good to be pursued and is a necessary check on the unavoidable tendency of sinful holders of political authority towards abuse and domination. It is thereby a vital restraint on the corruption of power. Reinhold Niebuhr ^{GND} gave a strong articulation of this approach in his book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and it can be summarized in his famous statement that “[m]an’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”^[3]

3.5. Forming the people of God (or democracy as an ecclesial practice)

This fifth line of argument contends that democracy is not simply synergistic with Christian commitments but is constitutive of the church and faithful forms of Christian witness. The emphasis on synodality as constitutive of the people of God by Pope Francis ^{GND} echoes this line of argument.^[4] In a different register, Stanley Hauerwas ^{GND} (b. 1940) presents an argument for democratic social practices as constitutive of authentic Christian witness. While he is a vocal critic of contemporary forms of liberal democracy as a mode of statecraft, he calls on the church to embody the peaceable kingdom of God through the radically democratic social practices of nonviolence and patient, non-controlling, place-based ways of building relationship together.^[5]

3.6. Witnessing to and participating in salvation

Maximalist accounts of the mutually-constitutive relationship between Christianity and democracy are created by rejecting “pie in the sky when you die,” highly spiritualized understandings of salvation. Several political theologies situate democracy within a broader incarnate soteriology that incorporates pursuit of freedom and justice here and now as part of anticipating and bearing witness to the coming kingdom of God. Exemplary of this line of argument is the work of Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez ^{GND} (b. 1928). Since democratic politics is the primary means through which to pursue liberation, there is no salvation outside of democratic means. Variations on this kind of argument can be heard in the North American feminist theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether ^{GND}, the German political theology of Jürgen Moltmann ^{GND}, the South African liberation theology of Allan Boesak ^{GND}, the Dalit liberation theology of Arvind Nirmal ^{GND}, the Palestinian liberation theology of Naim Ateek ^{GND}, and the Korean *minjungshinhak* or peoples’ theology of Nam-dong Suh ^{GND} and David Kwangsun Suh ^{GND}.

Martin Luther King Jr. ^{GND} and J. Deotis Roberts ^{GND} (1927–2022) represent a somewhat different way of enfolded democratic social practices into participating in salvation.^[6] Rather than liberation, King and Roberts focus on reconciliation and beloved community as the primary motifs of salvation. Nonviolent democratic politics, exemplified in the actions of the civil rights movement, bear witness to and enact beloved community. Challenging injustice and seeking to convert enemies into friends through nonviolent democratic means is a way of witnessing to the reconciliation of all things in Christ, a deeper reality than the violence which opposes it.

Variations of this family of six arguments, each of which overlaps to varying degrees, represent the primary modern arguments for democracy as embodying central Christian confessions.

4. Conclusion

As set out here, democracy embodies in practice – and enshrines as a means of statecraft – core elements of Christian belief and practice. Moreover, democracy, both as a set of social practices and a system of government, finds powerful warrant in the Bible, which has been turned to consistently in order to foster a democratic social imaginary, both by Christians and non-Christians.

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