ABOUT CHRISTIAN FAITH AND MODERN DEMOCRACY

Robert P. Kraynak
Colgate University

As part of a symposium on his book Christian Faith and Modern Democracy, Robert Kraynak explains his motivation and purpose in writing the work. The essay addresses the limitations of democracy and claims for human rights, and points to the traditional teachings of Christian thinkers regarding the political sphere. In particular, the Augustinian doctrine of the Two Cities (the City of God and the City of Man) is relevant to the Christian understanding of politics.

I wanted to write a book that would be controversial because it challenged the conventional wisdom about the relation between Christianity and modern liberal democracy. Most people today believe in an essential harmony or convergence between Christianity and liberal democracy, once the two are properly understood. This was the view of Tocqueville in the 19th century and of Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr in the 20th. Maritain held this view because he believed that the democratic ideal was inspired and sustained by the Christian ideal of universal love—a notion that he took from Henri Bergson and developed into a philosophy of “personalist democracy.”

The position I take in my book is that the convergence theory is mistaken in positing an inner affinity or inherent compatibility between Christianity and liberal democracy, rather than the possibility of a prudent alliance. I know that this position will disturb some people and may even sound a bit un-American or dangerous. So, I would like to explain how I arrived at this point of view and how it might be justified, and where it leaves us in the present democratic world.

In the first place, I arrived at this position by taking seriously the great theologians of the Christian tradition and realizing that they were not exactly liberal democrats. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, even the early American Puritans favored monarchy, aristocracy, or mixed forms of government and thought that hierarchical corporate bodies were better than democracy or liberalism for ordering and perfecting the fallen, but rational, nature of man.
Were they all wrong? If they were not entirely mistaken, then maybe we are wrong today in thinking that democracy or liberalism are best suited to Christianity, or required by Christian ethics.

In the second place, I came to realize that the acceptance of democracy and human rights by most Christian churches and theologians is fairly recent in most cases. Among Catholics, it was only 35 years ago at the Second Vatican Council that constitutional democracy and a qualified notion of human rights were officially accepted in principle, although Pope Leo XIIIth began moving in this direction in the 1890's. Among Protestants there is a big misunderstanding that the Reformation was really pointing all along to Roger Williams or free-church congregationalism; Luther never intended "the priesthood of all believers" to lead to democracy in the political realm, and Calvin, Hooker and American divines like John Cotton understood this clearly. Among the Eastern Orthodox "caesaro-papism" of some kind prevailed, and it is not clear if the Orthodox churches have rejected this or just put it on hold in the present democratic age.

In my book I discuss the many factors that gradually opened up the Christian tradition to democracy and human rights over the last four centuries: the impact of the radical Reformation, Jesuit notions of popular sovereignty, the struggles against colonialism and slavery by Las Casas and the Quakers, the impact of the rational religions of the Enlightenment, such as Deism, and the experience of totalitarianism in the 20th century. Of all the factors, I emphasize the impact of Kant's philosophy of freedom and his notion of the inherent dignity of persons as rational beings possessing inviolable human rights. Modern Christianity, I claim, has embraced Kantian liberalism and made liberal democracy a moral imperative—the only form of government compatible with the dignity of man in his full moral maturity.

The problem with this new consensus, I argue, is that modern Christians have let down their guard and denied the negative features of democracy and human rights. For example, I argue that human rights are not only powerful weapons against tyranny and oppression; they also subvert the legitimate authority of parents, teachers, public officials and the hierarchies of the Church, and carry with them subversive notions of personal autonomy that are nearly impossible to contain. I also remind readers that democracy is tyrannical in its ruthless leveling of higher and lower goods, and of the hierarchies in the soul that are absolutely necessary for spiritual life. Democracy is inseparable from "mass society" or popular culture that is as destructive of Christian faith and spiritual life as any dictatorship or age of persecution has been. What has happened to formerly Catholic nations like France where, 200 years after the Revolution, the triumphant culture of modern democracy has de-Christianized the country?

If this critique is correct, what can we do in the present democratic age? My solution is to recover the traditional Christian doctrine of the Two
Cities—the distinction between God’s realm and Caesar’s realm, or between the city of God and the earthly city—and apply it to the modern age. The Two Cities teaches us that Christianity is a trans-political religion of otherworldly salvation that requires no specific form of government or political ideology as a matter of divine law. All political matters—the form of government, the arrangement of the economy and social classes, decisions about war and peace—are judgments of prudence about the best means to temporal happiness in the fallen world. The primary requirement of Christian politics is to recognize that the state is ordained by God for the inherently limited ends of the temporal realm—a teaching that I call “constitutionalism without liberalism,” and interpret to mean that all constitutionally limited governments under God are legitimate, though mixed regimes combining hierarchical and democratic elements are best. Constitutional democracy under God is therefore a legitimate government, provided we embrace it prudentially as an imperfect approximation of something higher. In this way, we avoid the delusions of those who see a convergence of Christianity and modern democracy and live with the enduring tensions of citizenship in two worlds.

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