

## CHAPTER 14

# Building Democracy by teaching Religion and Ethics

*By Birger Løvlie*

*Democracy... is coming from the Sermon on the mount,  
which I don't pretend to understand at all.  
I believe in a moral universe and  
a mighty judgement is coming.*

**Leonard Cohen**

This chapter is written with a background in the history of European churches. It will mostly deal with the role of the Christian church in that part of the world and in particular about the church in Norway. Nevertheless, it is written in the hope that some of the questions, observations and answers can be generalized and useful in a Malawian context. We are talking about two nations with their own history, a history that can reveal many differences, but also similarities. Above all they have a great task in common: to build a strong democracy in order to secure a safe future for the inhabitants. Democracy is not built once and forever. It has to be renewed in order to maintain an understanding of democracy as a moral contract between the individual and the society. That means it has to be taught to every new generation, in the schools and in daily life. As long as religion plays a role in the life of a people, it will also be able to participate in the formation of young people that makes them fit for fight for democracy. The main objective of this chapter is to give the reader some ideas of how and to what extent Christian faith can contribute to a democratic mentality. First some words about the church.

*Two nations  
with a  
common task*

## The nature of the church

*Church and society are different*

The church is not primarily the bishops. She is the body of Christ,<sup>39</sup> a community of believers, praying for peace on earth, knowing that to establish and maintain a society with justice requires all political skills. How can a community so different from a political society by nature contribute to democracy?

Two points made by Hunnes in chapter 13 'Can Democracy be measured?' should be underlined. He writes: 'Practice in democratic ways may be obtained in several ways. If NGOs<sup>40</sup> are run according to democratic principles, a lot of practice may be achieved through participation in such organizations.' It is easy not only to agree with him, but also to say that this point is very important. If the church wants to promote democracy in a society it is not enough to preach democracy as a part of her social ethics; it is also necessary to practise democracy. Hunnes also shows that at the core of democratic mentality and thinking, you will find the dignity that should lead to participation in processes where decisions are made. This dignity may the churches nourish by their theology and practice. You will find a theological elaboration of this dignity in chapter 8: 'Christian Faith and Values of Democracy' by Meier.

*Dignity of man: the foundation of democracy*

The structure of a church is often a product of a long tradition that can be an obstacle to democratic thinking in the churches. In European history the churches have been institutions with a structure like pyramids. At the top you find pope, bishops or even a king. The lay people are at the bottom, expected to come to church, sit down, listen and sing or pray at command. The protestant churches had drifted far from the shores of reformation when the priesthood of all believers was rediscovered as a basic authority in the church. If we want the church to work for democracy, we should work for a more egalitarian structure where the congregation makes the decisions in responsibility and faith.

*The pyramidal structure of churches is a problem*

While we are talking about democracy, we should be aware that this word announces a tool, not the objective. A main ethical objective of the church is peace on earth. The church may seem more or less naïve as she preaches peace. Peace is a part of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not only meant for eternity in heaven, but is meant for this life and it is present among the peacemakers that

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<sup>39</sup> This metaphor is often used in The New Testament, see I Cor 12:12 and Eph 4:4.

<sup>40</sup> NGO: Non Governmental Organization.

Jesus talked about in his Sermon on the Mount. Democracy is a tool that becomes important as we use it to achieve a peace here and now with justice as a distinct quality.

We can, of course, also discuss who is the most naïve in working for peace. Let me illustrate by an example from modern history. In 1938, 29th of September, hundreds of thousands came home from evensong in the churches in England, celebrating the Day of St. Michael, the great apocalyptic conqueror. The evensong ended with a prayer: 'Give us, oh Lord, *peace in our time*.' Those words were meant to express the longing of hearts of believers. Some of them may have turned on their radios later in the night and heard their prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, coming home from Munich with the triumphant words: 'I bring with me *peace in our time!*' His words showed that he knew the prayer of his church, but the coming events also showed that he did not know Hitler very well. Prayers should be offered in a single-minded mood, and the church should never stop praying for peace. On the other hand, politicians have a duty to tell people that peace is achieved through 'blood, sweat and tears,' as Winston Churchill said.

*Peace on earth should be prayed for and requires hard work*

### **From religious homogeneity to pluralistic societies**

In the history of Europe, religious intolerance has been frequent. Emperors and kings have mostly wanted their subjects to have the same religion. Religious freedom as a presupposition for democracy was established when Christian and ethnic minorities fought for their rights after the reformation.

The empires in the history of the Western world have mostly had religion as a constitutive element, often combined with a minimum of tolerance. The Roman Empire (ca 300 BC-410 AD) was a religious state, where the citizens had to pay absolute respect to the genius of the emperor as the Supreme Being. The empire accepted the religions of the different ethnic groups they conquered as long as they did not try to spread their religions to the Roman citizens. Jewish religion was accepted, and also Christianity as long as the ruling class believed it was a Jewish sect.<sup>41</sup>

*The Roman Empire: accepted religions providing the emperor was duly respected*

Later in the history of Europe, the problem of religious tolerance has mostly been a complex issue. At the time of the reformation,

<sup>41</sup> Acts 18: 12-17 shows that this is how the Roman rulers dealt with the Jews.

*The first steps towards religious tolerance*

they tried to solve the problem by forcing the citizens to have the same faith as their king. At the end of the Thirty years war (1618-1648) many nations in Europe for the first time had to accept religious minorities within their borders. The 1600s mark the beginning of the development of religious tolerance in Europe (except for the Scandinavian countries, where only the Lutheran faith was allowed). But the religious element did not disappear from the conflicts. Different groups within the borders of the same nation have ever since fought for political freedom and used their faith as one of several expressions, easy to use, but not always well chosen, for their ethnic identity. Yugoslavia was divided in the 1990s between the Catholics in Croatia, the Orthodox Serbs and the Muslims in Bosnia, just to mention one complex of modern conflicts.

*Churches accept a secular state*

In principle most parts of Christianity accept to a certain degree a secular state today. You will find a state church in some countries, but these countries have also ratified the European Convention on Human Rights, including individual freedom to change religion, or to have no religion at all. Little by little, the churches have lost their legal and cultural privileges, and parts of the Western world have been secularized even to the point where the word Christmas is replaced by Xmas!

When we look at Norway, we see that it has not always been easy to practise religious freedom in the sense of justice and equality. The Lutheran church gained a status of monopoly during the time of autocracy (1660-1814), a position that was prolonged even in the liberal constitution of 1814. Those who wrote the Constitution of Norway at that time took it for granted that the Evangelical Lutheran religion should be the official religion of Norway. Until 1969 you had to be Lutheran to teach Christianity or be a headmaster in the public school, and the cabinet must still have a majority of state church members.

*Freedom of religion in Norway grew after 1845*

The process towards religious freedom started in 1845 when, for the first time, it became possible to be a citizen without being a Lutheran (but you had to be a Christian). Not until 1964 religious freedom was written into the Norwegian constitution. It took much time for us to learn and accept that a person's faith or lack of faith should not cost him any civil rights.

### **Secularization of education**

The school system in Norway has little by little been secularized in the sense that the state religion has lost control. Ethics is still a dis-

cipline, but now as a philosophic matter, and not based on religious faith. Democracy is hardly mentioned as an ethic topic.

The public school in Norway goes back to 1739, in the days of pietism. The king wanted to give all citizens more knowledge of the Lutheran faith, with confirmation at the age of 14 as the final test. This meant that all children had to learn to read and write, and thus it became a Christian obligation to build a school system for all children in the country. Since then the history of the school has developed step by step, from being run by the church to become a school of and by the people.

*From Church school to a school of and by the people*

In the last 30 years Norway has become much more pluralistic in religious matters than before, and this has had consequences for the school. The major change came in 1997. Before that year religious instruction had been confessional, which meant Christianity according to the Lutheran confession. In 1997 a new national curriculum was introduced. We still teach Christianity, but only as one among many religions and world views, and the teaching has to be given according to the same pedagogical principles in all parts of the subject. One of the consequences is that in the curriculum ethics is separated from Christian/religious faith. Instead it is a part of elementary teaching about philosophy. On this background, one should expect democracy to be important as an ethical and philosophic issue, but that seems not to be the case. Many textbooks about religion and ethics for the school do not even use the word democracy. This silence speaks volumes to me, and the silence should wake us up before we all forget the roots of democracy in Christianity and humanism.

*Christianity: from the one and only to one among several*

According to Norwegian law, all teaching in our schools should still be done according to the basic values in our Christian and humanistic tradition. These values are, according to the national goals for the school, basic to a democratic state with equal rights for the individuals to involve themselves in politics, and they are also a foundation for our total culture. They are about love of your neighbours and human rights, and they are promoted by science, reason and critical thinking. All these values are basic in the sense that they are the point of departure when we deal with problems like poor and rich; ethnic minorities and racism; war and peace; religious faith and scientific thinking.

*Teaching according to basic values, love and human rights promoted by science*

Many of these problems are dealt with in chapter 13 by Hunnes about measuring democracy. It would not be wise of me to go fur-

*The system in power was often opposed to democratic values*

ther into that discussion now, but we should reflect over one question: Do we need an explicit moral basis for the criteria Hunnes has written about, or is it so that they go without saying? A possible answer is that democratic values are obvious enough but still they must be fought for. On one hand, our history shows that they often have prevailed in a fight against the establishment, including religious power. Churches have preached that some people are born poor by God's will and churches have accepted the use of military power against ethnic minorities and defended slavery. We cannot overlook the fact that the combination of religious and political power in given situations has been an obstacle to democracy, justice and peace. On the other hand if we are willing to learn from history, it should be possible to make religious faith a political support for all men of good will. Religion teaches us that some principles are not open for discussion. If a principle is evident, you do not vote for or against it; you die for it.

*New sciences challenged the church*

The problem about faith and science has been debated in the Western world since the time of Enlightenment. Church and religion have had to accept a growing competition from the new sciences in the matter of understanding the universe, society and man. Enlightenment theology tended to end in total rationalism. From a position as the administrator of absolute and objective truth, the church was dethroned and was only granted a place in man's heart. Christian faith became an option just as atheism became another. From that time the churches have had no other choice than to work for individual moral and religious convictions that could not be obliterated by modern 'scientific' and destructive ideologies like Nazism and Communism. Today, the main danger seems to be the unlimited individualistic understanding of liberty. According to our humanistic tradition, political liberty needs both a system of written laws, individual conviction and courage to practise them for the benefit of others. That is true also for our Norwegian welfare state. My point is that a liberal democracy, which should be accepted by the church, is far away from anarchism and (post-) modern individualism. It is difficult to see how a welfare state system may survive if the citizens are without a personal moral obligation to the benefit of the community. 'Do your duty, and claim then your right,' a Norwegian prime minister told his son. The welfare state is a realization of a modern concept of democracy, but for it to survive we as well as the coming generations must be willing to accept it as a moral contract, a contract that makes

*True liberty requires laws*

*The welfare state is a realization of democracy*

every inhabitant responsible for democracy's survival and growth. That is a task for the school.

What about Islam in this context? There are some crucial points from history to be mentioned. In the time of the Ottoman Empire, Islam won great victories, but from the beginning of the 1700s the Islamic world has suffered much humiliation in Europe. They lost one geographical area after another. They had already lost Spain, and now they had to give up Balkan and their lands around the Black Sea. They did not participate in the scientific progress, mostly because their imams said that they could not learn from the pagans. Today we see that many of them are able to live amongst the peoples in Europe, but at the same time they cannot permit the type of change that we call Westernization. They seem to be more able to adapt to than to adopt the cultures of Europe. The hijab on their women in the towns of Europe may be an illustration. It remains to be seen whether Islamic cultures can be integrated in European democracies, where equal rights for women is no longer a matter for discussion. In most countries where Islam is in majority, freedom of religion will be defined according to the ancient tolerance principle: they accept existing religious minorities within their borders, but they punish severely those who leave Islam for another religion. To express critics of a religion is a democratic right, but critics of Islam lead immediately to accusations of blasphemy, a sign of resistance towards the concept of a modern (Western) democracy.

*Muslims are adapting to, more than adopting European culture*

### **Church and secular power**

History shows that a religion can be an obstacle to democracy. The church must be aware that she should not seek political power and privileges. It is her task to be a critical voice against all abuse, including the abuse of political power.

As mentioned above, in the Norwegian school the students shall learn about all religions, according to the same pedagogical principles. That means first and foremost that objective information shall be present in such a way that the homes of the students find the school as a support in their own religious education of their children. Norway has a tradition in her schools for critical teaching that makes it relatively easy to talk about what the church has done wrong in the past. The idea of tolerance towards minorities seems to make it easier to have a critical attitude towards Christianity than

*Objectivity in teaching is a must*

*Difficult to be critical of minorities?*

other religions like Islam. When the textbooks are telling the history of Christianity you can read about persecution of Jews, the use of military power against heretics and the burning of witches, wars of religion and so on. It is difficult to find much about Islamic fundamentalism or Arab slave trade in the same books. It is not easy to avoid the suspicion that the writers of the books are too afraid to be accused of unfair criticism.

*Both own and other people's cultures must be treated critically – in fairness*

A culture dominated by one religion can be an obstacle to the ideas we connect with democracy. It is sufficient to mention the cast system in Hinduism or sharia in Islam. We should also be willing to look at unpleasant elements in different parts of the European tradition. Religion and political power has always been a risky combination and have led European churches to support and bless dictators. Church leaders have often been too willing to forget some wise words in the Lutheran confession: Church and secular power should not be mingled.<sup>42</sup> That sentence can have two meanings: The church should not have political power, and the kings should not rule the church. Both are important. This does not mean that the churches should not seek influence in society. On the contrary, we have an obligation as Christians to work for justice and peace, and when we educate people for that purpose, we have to be aware that religion can work both ways. This is discussed in chapter 7 'To legitimate Power or to be a prophetic Voice – a Choice for Churches'. In the 1700s the founders of Methodism challenged their listeners in both spiritually and social matters, by saying: You are responsible for your life, your life and eternal destiny can change, and it starts by an act of your will. You make a personal choice to be a Christian and by your own choice, you change your life. This message was the core of the great revivals in Great Britain, and it is easy to see that the next generations became liberal politicians and union leaders. The way Lutheran doctrine was preached at that time can be summarized: Common man needs strong authorities since he is a fallen sinner. The people should be subject to Christian kings with real political power. At a certain stage in history (1884), all the Norwegian bishops and most clergy drew the conclusion that democracy was contrary to Christian faith. It is an irony of history that the churches have contributed most to tolerance and democracy when they have lived as minorities. A most striking example is the history of the Protestants in France in the 1500s and

*Christian revivals made men active in society*

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<sup>42</sup> This is the message of article XXVIII in The Augsburg Confession.



1600s. Under the pressure of a hostile state, they developed the first democratic church order, the Presbyterian system, that was developed in correlation with the first modern republics in Europe.

### **Faith as foundation of ethics**

A personal ethics is always based upon a conviction. Teaching ethics often reduces education in ethics to a question of knowledge, and that is to neglect pedagogical insight in how we learn.

We give young people the knowledge they need to understand and accept some ideas as evident rights for men and women. We teach ethics in our schools, but we should also admit that what is done in the schools is only giving a framework for building moral personalities. What has to be done outside the school, at least in Norway, is to build a conviction among people that these evident rights are integrated parts of God's will. Human rights are not only self evident; they are Christian evident in the sense that it is an obligation to defend them. It may be argued that it is difficult for them to survive only as more or less reasonable. They have to be supported and carried out by a faith in 'a moral universe' to use the words of Leonard Cohen. When he goes on to speak about a coming judgement day, he is underlining our responsibility towards him who gave us the Sermon on the Mount. My main point is that you do not change the moral attitudes of a man just by giving him more information. New knowledge may cause a person to change a bit, but not habits. A strategy for change must aim at influencing knowledge, behaviour as well as emotions at the same time.

It goes without saying that the way the connection between ethics and personal conviction is explained in this chapter is based on an understanding of Christian ethics which of course is not shared by everybody. That should not prevent anybody from getting more insight. Let us take a new look at the triangle that we find in chapter 1 'Learning Citizenship in Democracy' by Berge. There it is distinguished between the cognitive, psychodynamic and societal aspects of learning, giving a place both for knowledge and emotions combined with societal aspects. By taking all these aspects into consideration, teaching ethics will help building integrated personalities with skills that are preparing students for life in a community. This approach is in line with a holistic view of man. Man is created with reason, will and emotions, and all these elements should be

*Ethics is based upon a conviction*

*Christians are obliged to defend human rights*

*Ethics and a holistic concept of learning*

addressed in order to build up an ethic commitment. This commitment may have the character of Christian faith or something else. The point is that we are committed.

*Change may  
be reached  
through  
influencing  
emotions*

Here a comment upon emotions may be appropriate and introduced by asking: can we frighten people to behave morally? It is easy to say that the answer is no, perhaps too easy. In Norway we have worked more than 30 years trying to build up attitudes among students against smoking, drugs and alcohol. It did not work, at least not until we got laws making smoking illegal almost everywhere. The laws were followed up by a campaign on television with horrible pictures of throats and lungs after some years with cigarettes. The aim was to frighten and it worked. Another example is a German campaign for safer driving. On the highways you can see big posters with a picture of some vultures, saying: 'Come on crazy drivers, we are waiting!' Campaigns like these have taken the weakness of human nature seriously. The former Secretary General of UN, Kofi Annan, expressed the same understanding when he said: 'People will not change behaviour until they feel a pain in their bodies.'

*People learn  
from what  
they see and  
enjoy in  
practice*

Let us go back to the triangle in Berge's chapter (1). The concept combines learning through knowledge and emotions in order to produce an understanding and motivation that is vital for learning as a social process. It is important to take the whole triangle into account in learning processes in school as well as church. In family life we do it daily, by addressing feelings like joy or fear, honour or shame, in our children. At this point a democratic practice in the life of the churches becomes of highest importance. A church that wishes to promote commitment to democracy in society must show respect for the rights and duties of her believers in her own life. A holistic approach means to understand that people learn from what they observe and enjoy. It is vital that people are given opportunities to participate in making decisions in their churches if we want them to appreciate democratic processes. Norwegian church people could benefit from a study of the constitutions of churches like The Seventh Day Adventists or The Presbyterian Church of Malawi. In every detail it can be seen that measures are taken to avoid clericalism and other dangers that threaten the rights of the members in the congregation. When this is practised by churches in their lives, the result may be a growing responsibility that is prepared to fight for basic human rights in society.

## Modernity and the validity of ethics

Modernity has put us under ‘the tyranny of individual choices.’ Our societies are threatened by unlimited individualism, which should be met by churches that are willing to fight for freedom and justice. This is a question about the realm of ethics. Can the validity of your ethics be limited to your individual and small world, just like religion in modernity, or are common accepted ethic values also basic to society at large? The question is often answered indirectly in the textbooks for Norwegian students by a short summary of European philosophy, ending with the subjectivism of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and the liberalism of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). One conclusion is that textbooks often leave the impression that freedom is equal to individualism. The goal is to create *the good life* in society for oneself. It may be argued that the textbooks should be corrected here. As mentioned above, political freedom for the individual requires laws and regulations, made in a spirit of solidarity, or love for one another. As Malawians often say, the individual freedom stops where your neighbour’s rights begin. The combination of personal commitment and social responsibility should be an important contribution by the church in developing a democratic mentality. We have a right to expect from Christians a solidarity that never ceases to fight for peace, freedom and justice.

*Modern ethics tends to be about the good life for individuals*

Certain aspects concerning the confrontation between ethic values and politics, as well as between faith and science have been hard to deal with for European churches. The scientific development in the time after the Enlightenment seemed to be the major force for the secularisation of mind and politics, and the churches saw for some time no other way than to cling to their cultural hegemony by means of political influence. In chapter 7 ‘To legitimate Power or to be a prophetic Voice – a Choice for Churches’ it is pointed out that church leaders in Norway did not accept democracy at all late in the 1800s. Another example may also be mentioned. In 1870, at the first Vatican council, the catholic bishops condemned all that threatened the power of the church, from liberalism to socialism. But the council was interrupted as Italian troops marched into the Vatican and ended all political power of the pope. At the second Vatican council (1963-65) it was declared that the political basis for the church is not a catholic state, but the principle of religious freedom. From then on, the influence of the churches in society has had to be

*From religious states to religious freedom*

*A secular  
state may do  
good*

according to the parable of leaven, or in modern words: to be yeast in the dough.<sup>43</sup> The church can fulfil her ethical as well as her religious mission as long as her members understand themselves as representatives of the Kingdom of God in secular surroundings. And her ethical mission starts by understanding that a secular state is not automatically demonic. Rather, by granting freedom for individuals, a state is a necessary framework for human rights. It might be discussed to what extent these human rights are a product of our Christian tradition, but it should not be doubted that Christians are obliged to fight for them, and teach the next generation to do the same. After World War II, a German bishop said: ‘When Hitler arrested the Jews, we did not protest, because we were not Jews. When he arrested the communists, we did not protest, since we were not communists. When he took us, there were nobody left to protest.’

*Democracy  
appreciates  
plurality*

As pointed out above, it may be discussed to what extent the concept of democracy has its roots in our Christian heritage. It should be added that such a discussion can not be won. The moment you think you have won, you may have lost democracy. The point is not even to win a discussion, but to gain insight through discussion. The first insight could be that real democratic mentality includes appreciation of plurality. The next insight ought to be agreeing with Leonard Cohen that democracy has one root in the Bible, and thus to feel free and proud to use what we find there. In teaching ethics, the best way to use the Bible is to use the stories you find there, and by doing so, a teacher will little by little be trained in finding other relevant stories, and in telling them.

### **A didactical must: good stories**

The national curriculum for teaching religion in the schools of Norway is built upon a narrative tradition. I recommend story telling, mainly because that is what I remember from my own childhood. In addition, it can hardly be doubted that the church has some very good, if not the best, stories. It is also evident that the stories have been used deliberately for ethical purposes. The history of Joseph and the Israelites in Egypt was told to give us an idea of injus-

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<sup>43</sup> See Math 13: 33 and Gal 5: 9.

tice, how to suffer in confidence to God who can change evil into good, or how to stand up for freedom like Moses saying 'let my people go!' The history of David, Bat Sheba and the assassination of her husband will always serve as a warning against abuse of power and violation of the dignity of man. From Jesus we have even got a story about a corrupt manager.<sup>44</sup> The examples could be multiplied.

*Many stories  
in the Bible  
are about  
human rights*

Biblical stories are not the only ones that are used in our tradition. There is one short fairy tale that was often told in primary school that may serve as an illustrating end of this chapter. It is a story about participation: Once upon a time, a little hen found one little seed corn. She picked it up and decided that she would sow it, in order to harvest enough to bake a bread. She asked her big friends: 'Who will plough the field?' 'I will not,' said the horse, the ox and the pig. So the hen did it herself. Then she asked: 'Who will sow the corn?' The answer from all her friends was: 'I will not,' and the same answer came as she asked for help harvesting, grinding the corn and baking the bread. Then she asked: 'Who will eat the bread?' The horse, the ox and the pig all answered: 'I will!' 'No, I will do that,' said the little hen – and ate the bread.

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<sup>44</sup> You will find these examples in Gen 39, Ex 8, 2 Sam 11 and Luke 16.

## Questions

1. What is wrong when the church is understood as a pyramid?
2. What is the main obligation for the Church in society?
3. How and when became Europe tolerant in religious matters?
4. What does it mean that the school in Norway has been secularized?
5. Find some basic Christian values mentioned in the text.
6. What has been the impact of modern scientific thinking on the Church?
7. What is the nature of the Church and what is it not?
8. Why should Church and secular power not be mingled?
9. Is it possible for Islam to accept a liberal democracy?
10. What does it mean for the Church to be yeast in the dough?
11. Read Genesis 39 and/or 1 Kings 21. Discuss how these stories are relevant in teaching human rights.