

## CHAPTER 8

# Christian Faith and Values of Democracy

*By Ralph Meier*

Nowadays it is commonly accepted in almost all churches over the world that democracy is the best of all political systems in the light of Christian anthropology and Christian ethics. This opinion is empirically observable by the fact that the Christian religion dominates in nearly 90% of the democratic states today. This alliance between Christian faith and democracy has not always existed. In Western Europe only after the Second World War the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church claimed democracy as the best form of government. In this chapter the focus is on three biblical aspects: the rule of the almighty God, the creation of man and woman in the image of God, and the sin of mankind. These aspects will be related to democratic principles. At the end, this chapter will consider some virtues which can be important for democracy.

### **The almighty God and the limited power of government**

In the Bible God is presented as Creator of the world and the universe (Genesis 1 and 2). He is the sovereign Lord of the universe and of all human beings. God is creator, mankind is his creation. This means that there is a sharp distinction between God as creator and mankind as creation. We find this distinction in the three monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This distinction means that all people are subordinated to the almighty God. According to the Bible, God handed over the world of nature to man as a sphere over which to rule (Genesis 1: 2-28). But this world is still the world of God as creator and this excludes arbitrary control by man. The human dominion is like the work of a gardener

*God is  
creator,  
mankind  
creation*

(Genesis 2: 15) and all human beings are responsible before God for how they rule over the nature (Pannenberg 1994).

*Only God  
has absolute  
power*

God is the only one who has absolute power. All human beings are subordinated to God and are responsible before Him. This has also consequences in politics. If we think of a state, it is important that in a biblical perspective the state and the authorities in the state have their power from God. This includes two ideas. First: God's use of power and his way of ruling are examples for the way people should rule on earth. The characteristics of God's reign are that it is a reign in love which is the opposite of oppression and tyranny<sup>24</sup>. Second: The power of a state is always limited and cannot be absolute. In former times, when the rulers, the statesmen and monarchs were a part of the Christian church, they could be reminded of God's law and order. This was the situation in past centuries in many countries in Europe. A monarch had his power from God and was subordinated to Him, so he himself could not have absolute power. Nevertheless, this did not guarantee a good sovereign and in many cases the ruler did not care for what the church reminded him about. In the 1900s we had examples of totalitarian states where the ruler had absolute power. There was no longer belief in God or God was totally separated from state and politics and the state got a religious dimension in its own right. Examples in Europe until the end of the Second World War include Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union.

*The power  
of a state is  
limited*

*Democratic  
government  
– limited by  
time and  
institutions*

In a democracy we have a kind of structural limitation of power for the sovereign in two ways. First, a democratic government is limited by time and institutions (separation of powers); usually the government can be voted out or removed from office. These control mechanisms can help to avoid a government or a sovereign from reaching absolute power as in monarchies and totalitarian governments. No structure of government can guarantee this limitation of power. As always, it is important what people make of it. But democracy, compared to other systems of government, seems to have an advantage in this respect.

### **Obedience to the state**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul proclaims: 'Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist

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<sup>24</sup> Pannenberg deals with the omnipotence and love of God in more detail (1991: 410-448).

have been established by God' (Romans 13: 1). Both theologians and politicians have argued that Christians have to obey state authorities under all circumstances because of this statement. It is a common view among theologians that Paul in this text calls Christians to respect and submit to government in principle. But it is important to notice that Paul speaks about *submission* and not about blind obedience (Witherington 2004: 312). Further he writes that 'rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong' and that the authority is 'God's servant to do you good' and that it has 'to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13: 3-4). Here we can see a condition that opens for (non-violent) resistance and opposition under specific circumstances, when government rules against protecting the good and punishing the wrong. The 'focus is on an exhortation to Christians as to how they should respond to the *legitimate* claims of the state on them for respect, honour and resources.' (Witherington 2004: 307) A democratic state gives all citizens a legal possibility for 'revolution' in the sense that they can vote from time to time and by this change the leadership of a state.

*Romans 13:  
Submission  
to govern-  
ment, but not  
without  
conditions*

### **Image of God and the dignity of mankind**

The creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26-27) is one of the basics in biblical anthropology. In Christian theology the image of God has been interpreted in different ways, but one central aspect is that man and woman are created to relationship in communion with God and with each other. In this view every person is created by God and has a relationship with Him, other human beings and the whole world. The origin of man is seen as origin from God and this gives human beings dignity. The first paragraph in the Pastoral Letter by the Catholic Bishops of Malawi of 1992 focuses on 'The Dignity and Unity of Humankind'. Because man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, each person is in communion with Him and is sacred. 'Human life is inviolable since it is from God...' (p 2). It concludes: 'Rejoicing in this truth we proclaim the dignity of every person, the right of each one to freedom and respect. The oneness of the human race also implies equality and the same basic rights for all. These must be solemnly respected and inculcated in every culture, every constitution and every social system' (p 2).

*The creation  
in God's  
image gives  
man dignity*

*Declaration  
of Human  
Rights*

Written two years before Malawi regained a democratic government<sup>25</sup>, these sentences were eminently political on the basis of Christian belief. The bishops did not proclaim more than what is said in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948. It reads: 'Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.'

In the preamble, this declaration states that 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.' The *recognition of inherent dignity* will be accepted in most cultures on face value as the declaration plainly states this value. Even so, it is good to strengthen the notion of human dignity by reason. Such a reason is given in the biblical view and the Pastoral Letter makes this clear as it refers to the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God. God himself gives dignity to mankind, to every individual.

*Dignity and  
inviolability  
of each  
individual*

This biblical view of mankind also proclaims the inviolability of human life in each individual. Genesis 9: 6 relates the prohibition of murder to the creation of man in the divine likeness. The thought of the inviolability of each human life has its reason in the biblical view, that every man is under a supreme authority, God, 'that releases us from obligation to other powers and especially from being controlled by other people or by society' (Pannenberg 1994: 176). The thought of the dignity and inviolability of each individual is important for example for the questions of abortion, bioethics, genetic research and euthanasia.

In addition to the dignity of all human beings, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also claims that they are endowed with reason and conscience. This statement suggests a positive or optimistic view of the abilities of human beings with the assumption that it is enough to listen to reason. To trust in this capability is an essential condition for democracy, because democracy is based on the assumption

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<sup>25</sup> Malawi had a starting democracy during 1961 – 1964 when she had a self government status. The budding democracy was discouraged by Dr Banda's dictatorial tendencies. He was prime minister 1961-1964 and president 1964 – 1994.

that the majority of people will vote for the good and the right.

Compared with this optimistic view of the human being, Christian faith emphasizes the mixed and ambivalent character of human nature – creative impulses matched by destructive impulses. A Christian view that every human being is endowed with positive as well as negative abilities goes well along with Niebuhr's statement: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary' (1944: XI).

*Every human being has positive and negative abilities*

### **The sin of human being and control of power in democracy**

The Bible talks about the sinfulness and fallibility of the human being. After the fall (Genesis 3) the relation between the human being and God, mankind and the world, has changed. Christianity has the doctrine of original sin which in short means that every human being is born turned away from God and with a drive to egoism, a desire to be in the place of God and to have power. Reason and conscience are seen as influenced by the fall and consequently by sin. Therefore we do not always choose what is best for the whole society, but what is best for us and for one self. But how could Niebuhr state that 'man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'?

*Sinfulness makes democracy necessary*

What is the advantage of democracy over other forms of government in the light of 'man's inclination to injustice'? Two principles in constitutional democracy are important in this perspective: the separation of powers and the limitation of government in time. Separation of powers means that legislative, executive and judicial powers are exercised by different institutions. The legislature makes the laws and decides on the national budget. Usually it is the national assembly or another representative body that has legislative power. The executive is not supposed to make laws, but is responsible for the day-to-day management of government. Its actions have to be within the limits set by the legislature. The leader of the executive is the Head of State as for example the Prime Minister or the President. The judiciary interprets the laws made by the legislature. The separation of powers thus implies a system of checks and balances between the different powers in the state discouraging any of them to seize undue powers for it self. In addition, most democracies have special instances to control each of the different powers. From a Christian view this separation of powers takes the fact of

*Media – the  
forth power  
in the state*

sinfulness and fallibility of human being seriously.

In addition to the three traditional powers in democracy, the role of media as the forth power is easily underestimated. A free media is significant in any democracy. Press, broadcasting, television and internet must be seen as important for shaping public opinion. Some politicians are aware of the power of media and want to use it to their own advantage. Media has a strong manipulating influence and because of this it has a special responsibility in society.

Another important factor in democracy is the limited time of rule for the government. The government can be confirmed or voted out through regularly conducted elections. In the light of the Christian view that human nature has capacity for justice and injustice, good and evil, this aspect must be seen as an advantage for democracy. A system of limitation of government in time thus makes government accountable to the citizens for their actions.

### **Threats to democracy**

*An open  
letter to the  
State  
President*

In spite of these constitutional principles, democracy often does not work as it should and as intended. Examples of this experience are illustrated in the *Open Letter to His Excellency the State President Dr Bakili Muluzi* of 1998, written by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Synod of Livingstonia. As deficiencies the Synod mentions for example the practice of taking away land from the owners, privatisation of companies and organisations in favour of a few individuals and foreigners, lack of security and lack of good education. Democracy, in which everybody in a country should participate, cannot thrive without education. People need to see the advantages and possibilities which come with democracy. Therefore education is an important factor in order to consolidate democracy.

*Education*

*Corruption*

Possibly the biggest threat to democracy today is corruption. Corruption in the public sector is often defined as the abuse of public office for private gain: public money is used for private ends and consolidation of power. The Synod of Livingstonia writes in its letter of 1998: 'The creation of Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Office of Ombudsman is commendable. However, we note that Corruption in Malawi has been institutionalised... It starts from the leaders at the top down the ladder. Scandals associated with leaders

have become the order of the day' (p 7). In 2005, President Bingu wa Mutharika, who was elected in 2004, championed an anticorruption campaign. This seems to be a positive tendency, but the effect it has on corruption in the country is yet to be seen. The problem of corruption in nearly all democratic states demonstrates that a democratic constitution does not guarantee democratic practices. However, the democratic principles of transparency and accountability are important weapons in the fight against corruption. It is important that the people who live in democratic states in their daily life adhere to the values and principles of democracy.

*A democratic constitution is no guarantee for democratic practice*

### **The need of virtues for democracy**

We can proclaim that constitutional democracy is the most human and most efficient political system. But it is also necessary to remember that democracy does not work automatically. All citizens in a country have a responsibility to make it succeed. It is important to think of the welfare of *all* citizens. The German Bishops' Conference in 2006 published a paper titled 'Democracy needs virtues.' Virtue is a character trait or personality trait valued as being good. In our context it may be defined as an attitude which focuses on public welfare (German Bishops' Conference 2006: 18-19). The Bishops' paper focuses on four groups in the society: the citizens, especially the voters, the politicians, the journalists and the different organizations.

*A bishops' paper about virtues in democracy*

For the *citizens* it is important that they accept the reciprocity of rights and duties after the golden rule: 'In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7: 12). All citizens should look for the welfare of all people (German Bishops' Conference 2006: 22). The citizens as *voters* should confide in the politicians they want to elect and they should take part in elections. The *politicians* must be aware that they are responsible towards all citizens and that they work for the welfare of the whole society (ibid: 26-27). They have to think of the majority and also the minorities and take care of them. By being elected the politicians have got power and are expected to rule the country. How to rule without selfishness and in a way that takes care of the citizens is shown in the New Testament. Jesus as the Lord did rule as a servant and the politicians should listen to the words he says to his disciples: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to

*Citizens' responsibility*

*Politicians should rule as servants*

*Journalists have an ethical responsibility*

*The role of interest groups in the society*

*Germany's first attempt at democracy*

become great among you must be your servant' (Matthew 20: 25-26). According to Christian theology the Head of State should look upon himself as the first Servant and take Jesus as example for reign. The politicians have to tell the truth also when it is unpopular and they should be persons of integrity and competence. The *journalists* as well have an ethical responsibility. Media informs the citizens about politics and the main issues in society. Journalists are competing in a tough market and there is a danger for giving in to the temptation of sensational journalism at the cost of truth and objectivity. They should be aware that media is forming the public opinion of politics (German Bishops' Conference 2006: 34- 40). Every society has different *interest groups and organizations*. They all try to influence politics and want to get money for their own concerns. This is a legitimate interest, but every organization should also think of the common welfare (ibid: 40-45).

### **Is there an alternative to democracy?**

'Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time' (Churchill 1947). We have no reason to glorify democracy. But is there an alternative in our time? Germany<sup>26</sup> had the first democratic government after the First World War, from 1919 until 1933, called the *Weimar Republic*. This first attempt to establish a liberal democracy in Germany happened during a time of civil conflict. There were many internal political conflicts and from the beginning the Republic was under great pressure from both left and right-wing extremists. Also there were many different smaller parties which were not used to work with each other, with the result, that the government was not strong enough to rule the country. In addition, the judiciary and the military had not been democratised enough after World War I and the Chancellor (the president) had a strong position which gave him power to take all necessary steps if public order and security were seriously disturbed or endangered. Another problem was that Germany had to pay reparations to other countries which lead to a

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<sup>26</sup> Germany is this author's home country.



very difficult economic situation for the Germans. Also there was much unemployment and the Great Depression from 1929 made the economic situation worse. The political system was not solid, the Chancellor changed very often. The antidemocratic parties both on the left and on the right wing became stronger. Especially the right-wing National Socialist Party, with Adolf Hitler as leader, influenced with its propaganda against the democratic parties many of the citizens who were unsatisfied with the government. His party made people to believe that all the problems in the country had been caused by the Weimar Republic with a weak government. Hitler proclaimed that Germany needed a strong leader who was able solve the problems of the country. After the National Socialist Party had been the strongest party in government and after Hitler had become Chancellor in 1933, he managed to abolish democracy in a very short time. And, no doubt, in a way he was successful. His totalitarian regime gave employment and more welfare to many people. But this was just one side of the coin. With the Hitler regime came also absolute control by the state, a one party system, racism, holocaust and the Second World War. We can only speculate: What would have happened if the Germans had not lost democracy at that time?

*From  
democracy to  
totalitarian-  
ism*

The example of Germany between 1919 and 1945 shows that there were many threats to democracy, but also that the totalitarian system was a bad alternative to democracy. Obviously the democracy was not strong enough against the antidemocratic parties, and there are several reasons for the Weimar Republic's failure. It had very serious economic problems with hyperinflation, massive unemployment and a large drop in living standards. The radical parties blamed the government for this. Also the democratic institution had several weaknesses, as for instance the strong role of the Chancellor and the pure proportional representation of any party in the parliament with the result of too many small parties. As another important reason it should be mentioned that many citizens had been influenced by the massive propaganda of the extremist parties and did not believe in the advantages of a democratic system. The failure of the Weimar Republic demonstrates that democracy does not guarantee welfare and employment – no political system does. But compared to the totalitarian state after the failure of the Weimar Republic there should be no doubt that democracy is worth to fight for, also in hard times.

*No good  
alternative to  
democracy*

## Questions

1. What does it mean that in a biblical view the state authorities have their power from God?
2. What does Paul in Romans 13 say about the obedience to the state?
3. Give a biblical reason for the statement that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'
4. Why is the separation of powers and the limitation of government in time important in a Christian view of state government?
5. What are great threats to democracy – and why?
6. Discuss the question of obedience to the state from your point of view.
7. Discuss the sentence: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'
8. Discuss the statement: 'Democracy needs virtues.' Give reasons for your point of view.
9. How do you interpret the word of Jesus: 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant' (Matthew 20: 26)?
10. Find reasons for democracy in favour of other political forms of government and discuss them.

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