

# **What makes us think God wants democracy?**

**The David Nicholls Memorial Lecture, Tuesday  
October 14<sup>th</sup> 2008**

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The title of this lecture “What makes us think God wants democracy?” deliberately tries to catch the tone of voice in which David would approach this subject. For, as we know, it was David’s way to question what we so easily take for granted in a radical, slightly mischievous way. In particular we know he questioned the assumptions which society likes to make about the God given basis of its political systems. For he showed, particularly in Deity and Domination<sup>1</sup> but also elsewhere, how easy it is for people to have a picture of God that reflects all too closely the political system of the time. As he put it in relation to the dominant image of God in our own time

Modern western Christians have indeed invented a God without enemies, a God who does not take sides, but spends his time conciliating and manipulating, like a celestial personnel manager. He is the God of the comfortable and contented....The modern emphasis on welfare images of God must be judged as unbalanced-uncritically reflecting, as they do, the ideology of a welfare state.<sup>2</sup>

David was above all concerned, I think, to get us to be aware of the interplay between images of the divine and the political system of the society in which such an image is held. It was dangerous when a society simply assumed a particular image was of eternal validity

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<sup>1</sup> David Nicholls, Deity and Domination, Routledge, 1989

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* p.242/3

without realizing how much it reflected the political status quo. It was even more dangerous when a particular image was championed in order to reinforce that status quo. All this has been particularly true of the way that images of God as all powerful ruler have both reflected and reinforced earthly systems of hierarchy and obedience. But he did not think it was inevitable that images of God were used simply to uphold the prevailing system. He drew attention, for example, to the way that the image of God as Divine King has been used to challenge tyrannical human rule rather than reinforce it. And although his personal sympathies were in the direction of a Trinitarian understanding of God that encouraged cooperation and community, he did not argue that this was the only image that should be adopted. In fact, he maintained that we need a balanced range of images, with a certain humility in what we claim as what God wants, for no one by itself is definitive when it comes to expressing a vision for society based on a Christian view of God.

All this is stated first of all as a warning to myself in this exploration of democracy from a Christian point of view. I am reminded of the cartoon that appeared at the height of the Honest to God debate in the 1960's. A preacher was proclaiming that "God is not an old man with a beard in the sky" and above him was an old man with a beard looking down and saying "How does he know?"

The same question can be asked about any Christian justification of democracy that claims to know definitively what God wants. "How does he know?" So, it is with proper hesitation that I will set out some theological considerations that do, I think, underpin liberal democracy from a Christian point of view-not as a final or ultimate answer to our political dilemmas but as a proximate solution to the issues as we now understand them.

## **THE MODERN CONTEXT**

First, however, the context in which this question is asked. The modern debate about democracy arose in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in relation to the growing economic power of the bourgeoisie, and their understandable desire to challenge the land owning aristocracy and share in the ordering of a society which they were making increasingly wealthy. The modern context is of course different and there are a number of features it is worth noting briefly.

First, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 100 year old debate on the relative merits of Soviet style democracy and liberal democracy have, at least for now, been settled in favour of liberal democracy. Former communist countries have, in however a flawed and manipulated a way, adopted liberal democratic rhetoric and institutions.

Secondly, however, there is a new challenge from Islam. Extreme forms of Islam totally reject liberal democracy on the grounds that the Divine Will for human society has been disclosed and our task is to be obedient to it. Mainstream Islam in some countries is beginning to reflect some democratic values but the question remains within Islam itself as to how far it is able to do this. This question has its counterpart amongst liberal democratic theorists: even given the fact that Islam political structures are developing, is it really able to incorporate some of the fundamental features of a liberal democratic system?

Thirdly, this challenge from Islam has an ironic sting to it. For whilst people in the West assume the superiority of liberal democratic systems, to many in the Muslim world they are associated with the most lewd and vulgar aspects of Western Capitalism. Furthermore, anyone who cares about liberal democracy is all too well aware of its manifest flaws-the low esteem in which politicians are held, the low turn out in polls in

Britain and the United States, and the way money and the press dominate the system.

So there is, or at least there ought to be, an understandable self-doubt and a proper questioning, at the heart of liberal democracy today. At the same time it remains an assumption behind US foreign policy that democracy is to be spread. This was quite explicit before the Iraq war. And although in the light of that disaster this crusading spirit has been in abeyance, it is still implicit in much of what is said and done. So the question presses as to whether there really are some fundamental features of liberal democracy which are worth struggling for, and whether these have a credible basis in a Christian view of what it is to be a human being in society. I am not going to discuss secular political theorists. My concern is the Christian theological foundations of liberal democracy.

## **FREEDOM**

Few would argue that the first and most fundamental value of liberal democracy is individual freedom. I do not say this is an absolute value, or in every case the overriding value, for other values have to have taken into account as well, and may very well qualify or limit freedoms. But it is certainly fundamental. This basic liberty includes a range of freedoms, freedom of speech, of worship and of assembly, for example. But in particular freedom to choose those by whom we will be governed.

We now take this so much for granted that we forget how new this is, and how until recently the Roman Church hierarchy in some countries opposed democracy. It is important to see why they might have done this. For if God is a Divine Ruler who has revealed his law to us, it is natural to think that this pattern should be reflected in human rulers, and obedience to their law. Hierarchy and obedience are as it were written into the very constitution of

the universe. And this, in itself, can provide a very beautiful vision for the ordering of both the cosmos and society. So it is easy to see how democracy, in the sense of rule of the people, by the people, for the people, is inimical to it. It is a vision not often defended today, but it was by C.S.Lewis. He argued that we need democracy in our fallen, sinful state, because we can never trust human rulers. But this is a concession. In a perfect unfallen state we would have hierarchy and obedience. He argued that our real hunger is for inequality. “The man who has never wanted to kneel or bow is a prosaic barbarian” he wrote.<sup>3</sup> This desire for inequality, he argued, is reflected in the adulation we give to heroes and superstars, and why right wing dictatorships can gain adherents. We do indeed need democracy in this world, nevertheless, “there is no spiritual substance in flat equality”. We should recognize that “under the necessary outer covering of legal equality, the whole hierarchical dance and harmony of our deep and joyously accepted spiritual inequalities should be alive.”

It seems to me, however, that we can hugely admire someone, say their spiritual qualities, without this leading to either prostration or obedience. Rather, admiration leads to a desire to learn from and be influenced by the person. Furthermore, it will almost certainly be a characteristic of the person we admire that they precisely do not want us to kneel and obey them. They will want us to gain our own insights and find our own way.

This last point, that they want us to gain our own insights and find our own way, has its theological roots in an understanding of God who creates, that is, who give us a life of our own, and who respects our freedom to live it, despite our frailty and fallibility. God works not as a divine puppeteer pulling strings but in and through our free decisions, and in the incarnation he literally puts himself at the mercy of our decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> C.S.Lewis, “Equality”, reprinted in the Canadian *C.S.Lewis Journal*, Summer 1990. It originally appeared in *The Spectator* in 1943

In his first treatise on government Locke puts forward a series of devastating criticisms of Robert Filmer's advocacy of absolute power. He does this mainly by tackling Filmer's arguments from scripture, especially those based on the creation of Adam. In the second treatise, when he turns more to his own positive emphasis on the crucial importance of consent it is noticeable that he relies less on scripture than on more general considerations about the nature of human society. Although he himself was a Christian believer and his view of both government and human rights is based on the reality of God, subsequent theorists have detached the theological foundations and argued for the legitimacy of Locke's views in themselves, irrespective of whether they are undergirded by a creator in whose image we are made. Related to this is the fact that despite the serious Christian faith of Locke and a good number of other enlightenment thinkers people persist in seeing the enlightenment as a secular achievement. I would like to consider why this is so, and to ask whether it is possible to pursue certain hints in Locke that can give modern democratic and human rights theory a stronger Christian base.

Kingship is the prime model of rule that was bequeathed to us by the Hebrew scriptures, both God as Divine Sovereign and Israel as ruled by an ideal Davidic king. Kingship is again the metaphor connected with the community into which Jesus called his followers. He put before people the rule of God's Kingship and invited people to live under it in his kingdom. The New Testament writers came to see Jesus himself as the King of this new Kingdom, the fulfilment of the Davidic ideal. It is not surprising therefore that ideas of kingship should have figured so prominently in countries influenced by the Christian faith. If the enlightenment can be seen in part as a rejection of kingship models, at least in absolutist forms, it is easy to see how the alternative put forth, the democratic ideal, could also be seen as a replacement of what was

once so closely associated with Christianity by a non-Christian alternative.

At its best this allows for the C.S.Lewis view that in heaven there is kingship by a king who is totally given over to our good but that we need democracy now because no human kings can be trusted. This was a view also expressed on the radio in a “Thought for the Day” on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2008 by Joel Edwards who said that whilst here “God does democracy”. But “In Biblical terms God’s ideal would be a theocracy in which all aspects of human relationships come immediately under his rule and sovereignty.” But it is just that, I think, we need to question.

If democracy is just a temporary expedient, a concession to our human weakness, due to be done away with when the rule of the perfect Divine King is established, I wonder whether this is either good enough to give a solid Christian foundation to democracy or true?

Let me take a parallel with another human institution, marriage. Jesus is reported to have said that in heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but we are like the angels. Now it is true that there will be no need for procreation in heaven, one of the purposes of marriage. But we can I think suggest that it does not mean the end of deep and intimate relationships. There is no marrying or giving in marriage because in a sense we will all be married to everyone else, there will be a deep and intimate communion within the body of Christ not only with Christ, but in him with all other members of the body. So there is one aspect of marriage for which there is no continuing purpose in heaven, but there is another which finds its fulfilment. Can we say the same about democracy?

In so far as democracy exists to check and stop the emergence of despotic rule, there is indeed no need for it in heaven, For there all

is perfected. But there is another aspect of democracy, and that is the natural coming together of human beings to order their common life. This is the emphasis in democracy going back to the ancient Greeks and preserved in the Catholic if not always in the reformed tradition. If this is a fundamental feature of what it means to be a human being, and not just a concession to either finitude or sin, then perhaps like marriage it finds its proper fulfilment in heaven, in ways of course which we cannot now imagine.

Here we come up against the emphasis on God's Kingship which is so prominent in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Lewis and Edwards both suggest that because God is the perfect king, who desires only the well being of his subjects, there is no need for any form of government other than that. However, I do not think that is the only conclusion to draw from this emphasis on Divine Kingship, nor do I think it is the right one. I suggest three interrelated reasons why this is so.

First, and most fundamental. God has bestowed on us the awesome gift of freedom. He has taken the risk of putting things in our hands. If this gift of freedom is fundamental to God's intention for us, what indeed helps to define us as human beings, then it would seem odd that this is a gift only for this life, as though we have it now, and then it is taken away from us. But a better approach is to say, not that it is taken away from us, but that there, made perfect in a *milieu* of intimate communion with the Divine Presence, that freedom is exercised rightly.

Secondly, heaven is a society, a communion of saints perhaps, but still a society. And as Austin Farrer used to emphasise, the Divine Presence that fully enfolds us is met in that society, in and through the body of Christ, the communion of saints.

Thirdly, the image of Kingship is not the only one suggested by the New Testament. Jesus said to his followers that in the Kingdom

they will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. There was a period in the history of Israel when it was judges, rather than kings, that arbitrated and ordered the common life. So it may be that God without ceasing to be king delegates the ordering of the common life in heaven as he does on earth. His kingship in other words does not just consist of each individual before the throne, but human beings in communion with one another, sharing responsibility for their common life before the throne. God rules, in the sense that the whole body of Christ moves in perfect harmony with his purpose. But that body has a properly delegated function, shared responsibility for the common life.

This is of course to speak in very anthropomorphic terms and I am conscious of speaking way beyond what it is possible to speculate about, but I hope the main lines of the argument are clear. The conclusion is that there is an element in democratic arrangements which is not just here for the interim, a concession to finitude and sin, but which, however impossible to picture, has its proper grounding and fulfilment in heaven.

The reason I have followed this path is because of the suspicion that democracy is really a secular achievement rooted in secular political philosophy. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Locke, though a Christian who undergirded his case for democracy with a belief in God, has been used by secular thinkers, who have separated that belief from the rest of this system.

I now want to approach this issue, as well as the question of human rights, so bound up with democracy via another route. Again I will begin somewhat obliquely.

It is well known that when Winston Churchill had his portrait painted by Graham Sutherland he so disliked the result that he

destroyed it. No doubt he took the view that he had paid for it, he owned it, and he could do what he liked with it. But suppose it was not a new portrait but one of his ancestors, say painted by Titian, for which he had always had an obsessive hatred, and which he destroyed? Was he really right to think that just because he owned it he could do what he liked with it? Many would say that the painting was of great value, not just monetary value, and he had no right to destroy it. Ownership did not give him that right. So today, we tend to have strict planning laws about what people may or may not do with what they own, particularly if heritage is involved. We put preservation orders on trees and so on. Ownership does not confer an absolute right.

In his first treatise on government Locke criticizes arguments in favour of absolute government. One of Locke's points is that parents do not have absolute rights over their children. There are various reasons for this, but one of them is that fathers do not actually create their children, only God does. As Locke says

To give life to that which has yet no being, is to frame and make a living creature, fashion the parts, and mould and suit them to their uses; and having proportioned and fitted them together, to put into them a living soul. He that could do this, might indeed have some pretence to destroy his own workmanship. But is there any one so bold that dares thus far arrogate to himself the incomprehensible works of the Almighty?<sup>4</sup>

What interests me in this sentence is the hesitant, qualified way he which Locke talks about what God might be entitled to do "He that could do this, might indeed have some pretence to destroy his own workmanship." It is a might-it is not argued through that he does have such a right.

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<sup>4</sup> P.36

In fact I would suggest that the language of rights is totally out of place in such a consideration. God creates us and we are of such value to him that he comes amongst us in his own Son to seek us out and save us from ourselves, that we might live with him for ever. We are of supreme worth in the eyes of God, and this is not because God just happens to regard us as of worth, the fact is that he has created us in his image has bestowed on us that worth, which he then recognises. We are of worth in ourselves for ourselves, and God affirms this. The question of a right to destroy what he has made simply does not arise, whatever impression the Bible might sometimes give. Contra St Paul, we are not pots with which the potter may do what he wants. We are human beings whose value God rejoices in.

At the heart of Locke's religious view is that we are God's workmanship. Perhaps he particularly had in mind Ephesians 2, 10, which says we are Gods *poiema* or workmanship. But I particularly like the modern translation of this that we are God's work of art.

The implications of this for questions of democracy and human rights is that in both cases the basis for our view is the inherent worth and dignity of each human being. From a Christian point of view this is rooted and grounded in our being of worth to God. But that worth can of course be seen and affirmed whether or not people share that belief. It is this belief in the dignity and worth of every human being in the body politic that makes consent, and the universal franchise key. From a Christian perspective it is rooted in God's creation of us as free, and his total respect for that freedom, and his equal valuing of each of us. There is a Christian foundation if we will see it. But we can and do recognise those values even without the foundation.

There is a famous passage in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov when Christ returns to earth and confronts the Grand Inquisitor in

Seville. The Inquisitor, far from being repentant at the cruelties being carried out in Christ's name accuses him of having too high an estimate of human capacities.

We have corrected your great work and have based it on *miracle, mystery, and authority*. And men rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep and that the terrible gift which had brought them so much suffering had at last been lifted from their hearts.<sup>5</sup>

Dostoevsky rightly grasped the fundamental nature of the freedom which God has given us, and how fearful a gift this is.

It is important to note that this freedom inevitably allows for disagreement and conflict. As Lord Dahrendorf has put it

Conflict is liberty, because by conflict alone the multitude and incompatibility of human interests and desires find adequate expression in a world of notorious uncertainty.

This freedom includes the freedom to devise forms of government. But freedom for whom? And this points to the second value, integral to freedom is freedom for every singly person to share in the choosing of those who will rule them. As we know, the struggle to bring this about has been a long one. There was democracy in Athens and indeed every citizen was expected to vote, and were literally corralled into it if they showed any reluctance, but women and slaves did not count as citizens. In our own society it was only in 1928, when woman were eligible for a vote at the same age as men, that the battle for universal suffrage was finally won. So we come to other fundamental value of modern liberal democracy, equality.

## **EQUALITY**

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<sup>5</sup> Fyodo Dostoievsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Penguin, 1958, p.301

The basis of modern democracy is that one counts for one. No pocket boroughs, no disenfranchised citizens, not one law for the powerful and one for the weak. The foundation of this equality in Christian theology does not need much spelling out. For although we are unequal in our capabilities, our gifts and talents, we are all of equal worth in the eyes of God. We are of equal dignity and each one the equal recipient of the Divine Love. The implications of this were spelt out in the Putney Debates in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by Colonel Rainsborough.

I think the poorest he in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he. Therefore every man that is to live under a government, ought first, by his own consent to put himself under that government. The poorest man in England is not at all bound to a government that he hath not had a vote to put himself under.”

We are used, in modern capitalist democracies, to regarding freedom and inequality as inimical to one another. This did not seem the case to the makers of the French 1789 revolution, with their slogan Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. They believed that if the old hierarchical inequalities were destroyed, and people had genuine freedom this would also result in genuine equality and fraternity. In fact, as we know on the basis of the new freedoms, economic inequalities grew up. Economic inequalities take us beyond the scope of this lecture, here it is necessary to point out that at root freedom and equality do belong together for the reason I indicated earlier, one counts for one, neither more nor less, both in giving consent to government and before the law.

## **SOCIAL BEINGS**

The next foundational consideration for a Christian understanding of democracy is that we are social beings. As Austin Farrer used to like to put it, “Mind is a social reality”. We get talked into talking

and then to the talking inside our heads that we call thinking. We become persons only in relation to others persons. All this is expressed in the African word *Ubuntu*.

The implication of this is that as the Thomist tradition has rightly recognized it is natural for human beings to come together to govern their life together. Government is not simply a concession to our fallen nature. It belongs to our unfallen nature as social beings to share responsibility for our life together. This is the predominant view in Papal Encyclicals. It was well expressed in the position of the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales before a recent election in their booklet “The Common Good.” Although the phrase by itself is rather abstract and lifeless, it expresses the invaluable insight that from a Christian point of view elections are not just about furthering ones own interests as a voter, but about the common good of the society of which I am inescapably a part.

It would be nice if we could leave it there, with the moral and theological base of democracy rooted in the Christian vision of human beings as created free, equal and bound up with one another in social solidarity. But all history teaches another truth.

### **SELF-INTEREST: INORDINDATE, ORGANISED, OCCULDED AND SELF DECEIVED**

There is nothing wrong with self-interest in itself. If a baby did not as it were push itself forward, it would quickly die. To live at all is to live with a desire to look after oneself and survive. This is part of our good nature, as created by God. Nor is there anything wrong with organized self-interest in itself. If a family work the family farm together or they get together with friends to form a small computer company, they strive together that the farm or company might prosper in a competitive world. In fact they use some of

their altruism, their willingness to put aside their own interests in the service of the organized self-interest of the group. So, on a large scale, we have the paradox of patriotism, extreme self-sacrifice fuelling extreme national interest. But self-interest is not wrong in itself.

What is wrong, of course, is that in practice that self-interest can become inordinate, and pursue its own cause ruthlessly at the expense of others. Our outlook is likely to be occluded, that is, we lack the sympathetic imagination to perceive others and what is happening to them. And often we are self-deceived, in that we cover the pursuit of our own interest with a moral rhetoric.

Because of this inordinate, organized, occluded and self deceived self-interest we cannot simply leave the organization of society to our free choices. Our choices, left by themselves, not only allow for the legitimate diversity of human aspirations already mentioned, they allow for destructive anarchy. So it has always been recognized both in practice and theory that governments have to govern with the use of coercion. Some theorists, notably Hobbes of course, saw this need to stop us tearing one another apart as the main justification for government. So, whatever the justification of hierarchy and obedience in terms of a beautiful vision, as suggested earlier, in practice it has been about control. Shakespeare put it with incomparable force

Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And hark what discord follows! Each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,  
And make a sop all this solid globe;  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead;  
Force should be right; or, rather, right and wrong-  
Between whose endless jar justice resides

Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.

(Troilus and Cressida, Act 1, Scene 3, Line 109 ff)

It is for this reason that the Protestant tradition, as exemplified by Martin Luther, have seen the need for a strong state. Luther likened human beings to tigers who would tear one another apart if it was not for the strong cages supplied by the state to stop us doing so. We may have been able to come together to organize our common life in Eden, when, as he put it God ruled the world with the movement of one finger, but in actual fallen, sinful humanity, something more brutal is needed.

Reinhold Niebuhr in his book Children of Light and Children of Darkness, still perhaps the best defence of democracy from a distinctively Christian point of view argued that the classic secular defence of democracy based on the values of freedom and equality is only half the story, based as it is on an optimistic view of human behaviour. The other half takes account of our inordinate, organized, occluded and self-deceived self-interest but turns Luther's argument upside down. For who is the biggest tiger of them all? Or, in terms of Shakespeare's image, who is the universal wolf? The state. So who needs the strongest cage? The state. And how is this cage to be provided? By the checks and balances of a democratic system. The classic separation of powers into the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, combined with the regular opportunity of people to change their government by democratic vote, provides a way of curbing the potentially

unbridled and tyrannous power of the state. So as Niebuhr put it in a justly famous formulation

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible: but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.<sup>6</sup>

Until the resurgence of Islam the major critique of liberal democracy was provided by Marxism. As Marx put it democracy meant no more than "the opportunity of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people." For Marxism the rise of democracy was simply the rise of rule by bourgeois interests, and these would rightly and inevitably be replaced by rule by working class interests. But this would have to be carried out by a vanguard, it could not allow the kind of political opposition that is fundamental to liberal democracy. The problem of this, of course, is not that this ideology is dominated by the idea of economic interests, but that exclusive rule by an elite governing in the name of the proletariat, however benevolent in theory, does not take into account that fact that any organized grouping power will pursue its own interests. In fact it precisely lacks those checks and balances that are the justification of liberal democracy. So, as we saw in practice Soviet Style Communism turned out to be a tyranny run by the new class of party bureaucrats, as did Chinese Communism.

You do not need to be a thorough going Marxist to recognize the element of economic interest at work in political life. As Niebuhr put it

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Nisbet 1945, p.vi

The social and historical optimism of democratic life, for instance, represents the typical illusion of an advancing class which mistook its own progress for the progress of the world.<sup>7</sup>

What we have to continue to recognize is that in the modern state system economic power now reigns, if not supreme, very powerful indeed. Behind the press, behind party funding, behind advertising, behind the organization that wins elections, sadly, even behind who dominates the courts, lies money: the interests of business. And in the modern world, with so much business being on a global scale, the power of government in relation to finance is relatively weaker than it was. Of all the startling figures we have been reading in recent days and weeks, the most amazing for me was one referred to by Will Hutton last Sunday. What he called “the dark heart of the global financial system-the \$44 trillion market in credit derivatives”, This he said is “ a market more than twice the size of the combined GDP of the US, Japan, and the EU”.<sup>8</sup> The sheer power of this highlights the need of government in its care for the common good not only to support business, on which we all depend, but sometimes to act as a counterbalance to the power of business in the name of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, which of course it is now having to do in relation to the banks.

It is all too easy to be unaware, even self-deceived about the power factor in human life. A powerful novel by Nadine Gordimer, July's People, describes Johannesburg before the end of apartheid , being occupied by black forces of liberation. A good, white liberal family have been rescued by their houseboy, July, and taken to his homeland, his people, for safety. Interesting moral dilemmas arise. Who should keep the keys to the landrover in which they have fled. Indeed, to whom does it now belong?

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.10

<sup>8</sup> Will Hutton, “The Observer”, 11 Oct 2008

The novel brings out brilliantly how we can be good, decent people, working against injustice, but in fact huge beneficiaries of a gross imbalance of economic power. Figures worldwide suggest that whatever improvements are being made in the lives of the poorest, this imbalance is in fact growing. This highlights two factors. First, as indicated briefly earlier, the crucial importance of governments acting for the common good. In a world where economic power on a global scale reigns supreme, this will mean that political power needs to be used not just to facilitate business, but to enable the most marginalized to share in the full life of their society.

Secondly it highlights a distinction made by John de Gruchy between “democracy as a *vision* of what society should become, and democracy as a *system* of government that seeks to enable the realization of that vision within particular contexts.”<sup>9</sup>

De Gruchy finds the foundation for a Christian understanding of democracy in the 8<sup>th</sup> BC prophets, with their vision of social equality, freedom and justice and its development in five trajectories. First, in the Messianic hope of true liberation for all people from all that oppresses; secondly, in the medieval championing of the common good and the development of trade guilds and other expressions of civil society; thirdly in the Reformation concept of covenantal obligation, whereby human beings are called to accountable responsibility both to God and to one another; fourthly, the other more radical Reformation emphasis on individual freedom and the separation of church and state. Fifthly in modern liberation theology which seeks to overcome economic injustice and oppression.

This distinction between democracy as a vision and democracy as a system is an important one and it reminds us that democracy

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<sup>9</sup> John de Gruchy, “Democracy” in The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, ed. Adrian Hastings, OUP, 2000, p.157. See also John de Gruchy, Christianity and Democracy, 1995

must always be an on going project towards the realization of that vision. We note, from recent years, the civil rights movement and the different aspects of the struggle for equality for women, which has been part of that quest for full and equal participation by all members of society. The fact that modern Western politics is now so characterized by one issue campaigns, is no bad thing, for it is an indication of other groups, e.g. the disabled or children, struggling for their proper place.

Given the distinction between democracy as a vision and democracy as a system, is there anything in the system as it has so far been developed in liberal democracies which is absolutely fundamental, and crucial to stand up for? Even given its present manifest flaws does the system safeguard some essential insights into what it is for us human beings to live in society? Or are we to say that this is the system that has developed in our society and a good number of others, but other systems may be just as good for rather different kinds of society?

The word democracy has been claimed by a good number of societies we would judge undemocratic. As T.S.Eliot wrote

When a term has become so universally sanctified as ‘democracy’ now is, I begin to wonder whether it means anything, in meaning too many things...If anybody ever attacked democracy, I might discover what the word meant.<sup>10</sup>

I think meaning can be given to liberal democracy, and it is worth standing up for. One essential element in a liberal democracy, the rule of law and the right to a fair trial, all that we mean by *habeus corpus* does not belong to democracy alone. It is essential to democracy, and where it fails, as in Iraq so far, democracy fails. But it is not unique to democracy. Islamic societies too insist on the rule of law. Of course questions arise about how far the

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<sup>10</sup> T.S.Eliot, The Idea of a Christian Society and other writings, Faber, 1982, p.48

judiciary is independent from the executive. It is a mark of a democratic system that they are but even in an Islamic society there is a measure of independence. But what about other features of liberal democracy in relation to Islam?

As mentioned earlier, there is some skepticism that Islam could ever allow for the development of a truly democratic system. However, those within Islam who take a more optimistic view about this possibility point to two features in traditional Islam that are conducive to such a development. One is the tradition of *ijtihad*, which allows for creative reinterpretations of traditional legal texts in response to modern needs. The second is the institution of the consultative assembly-*Majlis al-Shura*. It is well established that rulers should consult with their leading men and institutions. So it has been argued by Muslim scholars that a true consultative assembly would allow for full democracy.

Apart from these theoretical considerations we can point to the development of democratic institutions in some Islam countries, e.g. Jordan, and the emergence of democracy at a local level even in a country like Saudi Arabia. Then of course there is the example of Turkey, an avowedly secular, democratic state with a predominantly Muslim population and a very active Muslim party. There of course there is a major struggle going on for the kind of democracy it should be.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali has suggested that what we should look for in the Muslim world are political systems that allow for government by consent. It is certainly important that we should not simply think of the imposition of secular Western liberal ideals on Islamic societies. We need to look for the developments within Islam political thinking for what corresponds to the values and safeguards in liberal democracy. Nevertheless, given this caution, I think we have to go further and argue that liberal democracies stand not only for government by consent, but they look to obtain

that consent in particular ways. One is the genuine separation of powers, with a truly independent judiciary safeguarding the rule of law against arbitrary decrees of government. The other is a separation of the executive from the legislature, so that consent has to be obtained from those who are elected. Then, not least, the opportunity to elect others to these offices on a regular basis on the basis of a universal franchise. It is true that in the United Kingdom we have not had, at least until recently, a total separation of powers, but there have been other aspects of our system in place which have enabled it to function as a genuine democracy.

These are not of course the only essential features. There is freedom of speech and the press, freedom of assembly and to form political parties, freedom of worship. There is also, I would maintain, the acceptance of certain fundamental rights as well as these freedoms.

Human rights, I would suggest, are not simply an add-on to democracy but fundamental to it. This is because of what Alexis de Toqueville called the despotism or tyranny of the majority. It is possible in a democracy for the majority view to be elected to government, and then for the government to oppress various minority interests. Those fundamental, human interests, need to be protected

The declaration of human rights claims to be universal, and the purpose of all international human rights documents has been to obtain the agreement of all governments, not just those of liberal democracies. So, of course, a number of governments have gone along with the rhetoric, but with little or no attempt in practice to make them a reality.

The best definition I know of human rights is that of Ronald Dworkin who termed them “trumps.” Whatever reason a government might give from a utilitarian point of view, in the

name of the common good, for hurting an individual, a right is a trump with overrides that argument about the wider good. Clearly this understanding of human rights presupposes the pre-eminent value of the individual, which is why it was so criticized by Communist societies. But it does seem to me that there are certain fundamental political rights which are worth standing up for, and that these have a proper basis in the Christian faith. This basis is not just the unique worth and dignity of every single human being, but the fact that governments are in a position to violate that worth, even when they are democratically elected, for governments are governments of people who like all of us pursue their own interests, often self-deceived and blind about the extent to which they do this.

When it comes to social and economic rights, as opposed to political rights, their realization depends significantly on the state of development of that society. But the rights of individual people, of women, of gay and lesbian people, and in particular their right to be protected from cruel and demeaning treatment, seem to me a fundamental issue and we cannot take the view that one society's attitude is just as good as another's.

That danger, of course, is that if we start making value judgements, that some things are better than another, we can slip over not only into arrogance, but into a crusade mentality. I remember a cartoon that appeared after World War I, which showed two dead soldiers meeting in the sky. One says to another "I died to make the world safe for democracy" and the other replies "I died to keep it for civilization". Some of President Bush's rhetoric before the Iraq war had something of this about it. What is necessary is the ability to make value judgements, to say, yes, liberal democracy does safeguard certain essentials about what it is for human beings to live in society; to stand up for these in peaceful ways, aware always that democracy as we know it is very flawed, and even at

its best it is a proximate good, a project towards the realization of a vision.

It is, as Churchill, echoing Niebuhr put it, “The worst possible system in the world...except for the others.” I have tried to show that it is not just a product of the enlightenment, which itself of course was the product of Christian as well as secular thinkers, but of a truly Christian understanding of what it is to be a human being in society, a social being, who is at once made in the image of God and a violator of that image. Christianity has of course lived under a range of different kinds of government and democracy as we know is open to the criticism, as Eliot put it that “what we have is not democracy, but financial oligarchy”<sup>11</sup> But all qualifications notwithstanding, I have argued that it does stand for something. It does contain features that safeguard certain fundamental insights into a proper understanding of what it is to be a human being in society.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*