

THE INFLUENCE OF PROTESTANTISM ON DEMOCRACY IN THE WESTERN WORLD

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION

We live in a turbulent political world today. In the UK, we had a referendum to choose the Alternative Vote or retain the First-Past-the-Post system. In the Middle East, we had multiple uprisings with people in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria toppling (or attempting to) their old autocratic regime and attempting to replace with democracy. Many times we hear politicians speak of Democracy in Western society as if it started from a vacuum and that the world would be a better place with it. In this paper, I hope to demonstrate that the seeds of modern democracy were sown during the Reformation and Puritan eras but the Enlightenment degenerated this movement to what we have today.

To begin, we need to define democracy. Democracy can be defined as *“a society in which all adults have easily accessible, meaningful, and effective ways: 1) to participate in the decision-making processes... and; 2) to hold other individuals, and those in these organizations who are responsible for making decisions and taking actions, fully accountable... so that all organizations in the society are citizen-owned, citizen-controlled, and citizen-driven, and all individuals and organizations are held accountable for wrongdoing.”* (Democracy Watch) Or to simplify, democracy is *“Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”* (Abraham Lincoln)

EARLY BEGINNINGS – REFORMATION (15-16TH CENTURY)

Although the ancient Greeks had a form of democracy (literally mean “people-power”) long before Western society held it, it was markedly different from democracy during the Reformation and today. Before the Reformation, early medieval society was characterised by a struggle between the Papacy and an absolute monarchy. An unhealthy social hierarchy meant that the rich inherited land, possessions, religion and allegiance to the ruling monarch, and the working classes had little control over their own circumstances.

It was during the Reformation that we see a *“real starting point of democratic ideas”* starting with a rediscovery of the Bible which impacted not only church life, but also family life and the State (3 main ‘institutions’ in Bible whose health determines the stability of any nation). A writer observed that *“when Martin Luther declared his “conscience was captive to the word of God” it had political repercussions.”*

Protestant nations like Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, etc, were transformed because of the Reformation. During this period, key Reformation doctrines such as the sufficiency and authority of Scripture, the Priesthood of all believers and the government of the Church, caused the public to think about democracy. The people were taught a concept of human equality as taught in Genesis 1 and in the universal message of the gospel. It was due to the Fall that we understand the powerful corrupting nature of sin in all men and women. Despite the Fall, all men are still under God and His Law and this extends to kings (Deut 17:14-20). The godly people understood the balance between submission to the King and the unwise nature of allowing a single person or family to rule the masses [*“it is safer and more tolerable that government should be in the hands of a number”* Calvin]. The old saying is true *“Power corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”*.

The concept of civil rights, based on the earlier teaching on equality in light of Scripture, was important during the latter period of the Reformation (mid 16th century) when Reformed Christians, as a minority, needed to fight for their religious freedoms, in the face of Roman Catholicism amongst the general public. It was during time that the English Reformers also began to promote a limited monarchy [in terms of its powers] and constitutionalism. They wanted local rulers within a country, a early version of “local government” with elected officials. They re-established the duties and responsibilities of elected representatives, based on the Word of God and early 8th century teaching in the English Church on this matter. Contrary to the modern view, democracy was not a rule by anybody. That view would have shocked the Reformers. The nature of elected representatives meant that they needed to possess an “blameless” character. Calvin reminded rulers that *“...they are vicars of God, [and] they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice.”* In fact, those who fail to do so are *“insulting toward God himself, whose most holy judgments they defile”*.

One of the surprising teachings connected to democracy that came from the Reformers is the duty of the average citizen to protest against tyrannical rule. The concept can be traced back to the 12th century, but was brought back to the fore during the Reformation, especially when religious freedoms were threatened. An example can be seen during the conflicts between Germany’s Emperor and local evangelical rulers in the town of Magdeburg. When the Pope tried to impose Roman Catholic doctrines and practices into the town,

the townsfolk of Magdeburg wrote a Confession to reject such a move. A quote from this Confession would suffice:

“If the high authority does not refrain from unjustly and forcibly persecuting not only the lives of their subjects but even more their rights under divine and natural law, and if the high authority does not desist from eradicating true doctrine and true worship of God, then the lower magistracy is required by God's divine command to attempt, together with their subjects, to stand up to such superiors as far as possible. The current persecution which we are suffering at the hands of our superiors is primarily persecution by which they attempt to suppress the true Christian religion and the true worship of God and to reestablish the Pope's lies and abominable idolatry. Thus the Council [of Magdeburg] and each and every Christian authority is obliged to protect themselves and their people against this.” Another example can be seen from the title of a book by Christopher Goodman (1558) - *“How Superior Powers Ought To Be Obeyed By Their Subjects: And Wherein They May Lawfully By God's Word Be Disobeyed And Resisted. Wherein also is declared the cause of all this present misery in England, and the only way to remedy the same.”* One wishes the spirit of lawful protest will live on in today's society, especially when Protestant liberties are fast disappearing.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS – PURITAN ERA AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT (17-18TH CENTURY)

“...it was the Calvinists who first switched the emphasis of political thought from the prince to the saint (or the band of saints)...” (Michael Walzer, political philosopher)

“The only enduring and successful constitutionalist (republican) revolutions of this period (first 4 generations after 95-theses) were carried out by the Calvinists.” (James Nichols, church historian, citing H D Foster)

Democracy was continued by the 17th century Puritans, built upon the foundation that was laid down by the Reformers. This period was crucial as it affected both sides of the Atlantic. The execution of Charles I in 1649 was a key event in the push for democracy and a constitutional monarchy. Charles I had bypassed Parliament, and taxed the people unfairly. He also tried to impose Archbishop Laud's liturgy in the nation. This led to the English Civil Wars (1642 – 1651), a rebellion between Parliamentarians and the Royalists. With the Royalists defeated and Charles I executed, the English monarchy was replaced with a

Commonwealth (1649–53), followed by a Protectorate (1653–59), under Oliver Cromwell. This also signalled the end of a monopoly by the Anglican Church on Christian worship. All was not well amongst the Parliamentarians. The failed negotiations between Charles I and Parliament, the proposed plans to disband the Parliamentarian army and the lack of pay for the soldiers led to in-fighting which came to its head with the **Putney Debates (1647)**. The debates were between the senior officers (including Cromwell) and the representatives of the soldiers (including Colonel Thomas Rainsborough), fighting for democratic rights for the soldiers. Though this was a short-lived event, it was significant this country's step towards democracy. Later, during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a constitutional monarchy was firmly established and the beginning of the modern English Parliamentary democracy.

The Non-conformists also played their part in establishing democracy, with their renewed interest in the Bible's teaching on the "gathered church", the "local autonomous church" – where a local church is self-governing [**Walzer 138-9**] and its people are gathered out of the world and around the Word of God. This teaching influenced the concept of the "social contract" in politics – a group of people forming a society based upon a contract with certain moral and/or political obligations.

As Alexander Dunlop Lindsay rightly pointed out, "*The inspirers of democracy in 17th century England were the Anabaptists and the Independents and finally, the Quakers*".

Other important issues that arose in the Church which promoted Democracy in the State was continual work of the Holy Spirit in the Church's understanding of the Word of God. The practice of godly conversation (conferences) commonly practiced amongst the Puritans was adopted in the political realm in the use of discussion and debate. Other lesser known to democracy included, the educating of the general public regarding political matters, the writing of the English constitution and the forming of political journalism. All these led to an increase in society's appetite for political reform, which led a Roman Catholic writer to say that "*In England the pure Calvinist tradition was united with that of the Anabaptist and Independent sects to produce a new movement which was political as well as religious and which marks the first appearance of genuine democracy in the modern world....*". (Christopher Dawson, historian and sociologist)

However, democracy was also conditioned by the Enlightenment movement [aka Age of Reason, reason being chief source of authority in all spheres of life], characterised by first scepticism, next unbelief, and

finally a rejection of the Bible as the chief source of authority in all spheres of life. It was said that “*the man of the Enlightenment implies or presupposes, that there is no God or that He is unconcerned with men, since he rejects, or at most considers as “private”, as optional, obedience to the law of God.*” (Manent) In the political realm, men sought to establish the liberal/free state, whose primary task was to “institutionalise the sovereignty of the human will”. What we have today in Western society is this form of modern democracy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Although the seeds of democracy can be traced back to the Reformation, the ideals could never match up to the reality. While the ordinary man was given back his civil rights, it was [modern] democracy with its shifting overemphasis of the freedom of man’s will, that later sought to get rid of the Sovereignty of God, a key Christian doctrine. Man, the proponents think, should be given total liberty to decide his destiny. However, as Manent pointed out before, such assertions come with “*two opposite but equally disastrous consequences*”, namely fear and a mixture of permissiveness, selfishness and licentiousness. Fear is bred because of the uncertainty as to how one should live one’s life. A mixture of permissiveness, selfishness and licentiousness is also bred as a result of absolute freedom when men imagine that they have the “*right to will everything and anything... [and] approves the ‘impious maxim’ that in the interest of society all is permitted.*” Ironically, both consequences will ultimately lead back to a form of despotism e.g. French Revolution which led to the rise of Napoleon, or the February Revolution which led to the rise of Stalin.

Tragically democracy in the UK is no longer a rule by the “*God’s vicegerents, his representatives; they stand in His place*” (Calvin). Pressure from the European Union could force this country to allow even criminals the right to vote. **The rise of secularism, Islam and Roman Catholicism in a nominally Protestant nation means that our Protestant religious freedoms are largely lost [read the news on The Christian Institute].** The PTS has a booklet entitled “*Why Broken Britain needs Christian values*”, and the same can be said about our democracy. Not to Christianise our democracy, but for this nation to return to the source of all authority – the Holy Word of God, the Bible.

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