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Religion and Democracy

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Is religion and/or secularism a threat to democracy? Yes and No. It all depends on what sort of religion, secularism, threat, and democracy you have in mind. Historically, we know that religion has sometimes been a threat to democracy and sometimes a support. The same can be said of the secular. And democracy has meant many different things in history, some of which might be thought desirable by some Christian theologians today, others not.

In preparation for this session you will no doubt have read again that fine seventeenth-century text *Den Schotschen Duyvel,* probably by Johan de Wit,[1] which argued violently for toleration, against the supposed Scots Calvinism of the Voetians. The Scots are the source of all our troubles. You may feel that not only is religion a threat to external spheres of society and democracy. But because the religious are always quarrelling bitterly among themselves, their animosities spill over into the secular sphere and create strife where there was previously peace. Of course there is always a possible religious response. The penalties prescribed for Anabaptist heretics in seventeenth-century Holland could be said to be a model example of recognition of the distinctiveness of women: while men were to be burned at the stake, women were to have the privilege of being buried alive. Democracy allied to multicultural, gender-aware sensitivity. What more could we wish for?

1. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 673.

I'm delighted to be included in this conversation. Already back in the Dark Ages, in 1993, John Witte summed up what needs to be said about democracy:[2] "The cardinal *social* ideas of democracy are equality and freedom, pluralism and toleration. . . . The cardinal *political i*dea of democracy is that government must be limited and self-limiting."

Democracy, however, has no paradigmatic form. Democracy is modest in its minimal requirements and malleable in form. Christianity and democracy complement each other. Christianity provides democracy with a system of beliefs that integrates its concerns for liberty and responsibility, individuality and community. Democracy provides Christianity with a system of government that balances its concerns for human dignity and depravity, social pluralism and progress.

That, I think, still stands. I'm a little less optimistic than John about the Calvinist tradition. Calvin liked aristocracy. The Reformation only came in Scotland when the aristocracy decided it was in their interest. The Lutherans came along a little too early, and lost their heads. John's 1993 collection offers a couple of other important reminders. What about women? "Feminist theology works towards the transformation of democracy into multicultural forms of social and personal flourishing."[3] Calvin might not have liked this.

And just how proud of the Christian contribution can we be? "Christianity and the church must start off with a massive mea culpa when it comes to speaking of their records relating to democracy and human rights."[4] But we are talking of democracy here, not human rights. Well, perhaps there is a connection: "What we need is not democracy but human rights."[5]

I have recently been working on human rights. (I should, of course, have also been working on democracy: health warning—I have no expertise in political science or constitutional law.) This paper reflects much of what I originally argued in my *Christ and Human Rights.* In this field some scholars maintain that religion is almost incompatible with human rights (Louis Henkin), while others hold that religion is the keystone of human rights (Michael Perry). It seems to me that is never wise to restrict strategies for addressing complex issues to single focus perspectives. For

2. Witte, *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*, 2ff.

3. Chopp, "A Feminist Perspective," 126.

4. Tutu, "To Be Human Is to Be Free," 311.

5. Ignacio Ellacuria, 1998, quoted in Sobrino, "A Critique and Unmasking of Present-day Democracies," 69.

example, a Marxist analysis which tends to dismiss all liberal tradition as simply a tool of the market and an epiphenomenon of global capitalism is particularly susceptible to this problem. I do not myself see any credible way of cutting the Gordian knot of complexity and the need for careful differentiations.

This is swiftly confirmed in my view by a glance at the philosophical study of geopolitical problems involving democracy, rights, and religion by Jeffrey Stout. In the discussion of rights, especially in communitarian[6] thinking, considerable doubt has been cast on the notion of democracy as a reliable support for rights. This is a common aspect of the critique of liberal, post-enlightenment values. In his *Democracy and Tradition,* Stout defends democracy as a rich and living tradition, involving the activities and conversation of a wide variety of citizens with differing views, holding each other responsible in the creation of communal ethical agreements.

Democracy is a tradition of huge significance for social development:

> It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes towards deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events or persons with admiration, pity or horror.[7]

Character creates an attitude of what Whitman called piety. Piety can be constructive, but it can also be destructive—he cites Baldwin and West in criticism of aspects of Black National piety. Democracy gives rise to a hope, the hope of making a difference for the better by democratic means.

Stout turns to the role of religion in political discourse. Rawls and Rorty have questioned the legitimacy of religion in public reasoning. But religion need not inhibit conversation, and may be a factor in the construction of positive rather than negative freedom. Secularization as the questioning of infallible religious authorities does not necessarily lead to an equally doctrinaire secularism, *contra* the arguments of Radical Orthodoxy. Likewise the new traditionalism of Macintyre, and the appeal to virtue ethics by Hauerwas, misunderstands the liberal tradition. A positive step would suggest a convergence by the liberals and their critics

6. See the fine appreciation of Stout by David Fergusson, "Beyond Theologies of Resentment." I have also learned from discussion of *Democracy and Tradition* with Gretar Gunnarsson.

7. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 3.

on "a form of pragmatic expressivism that takes enduring democratic social practices as a tradition with which we have good reasons to identify."[8] He traces connections between the emergence of rights talk and the emergence of modern democratic culture. This involves reciprocity between rights and responsibilities.

Aligning himself with Annette Baier, he sees rights: "[A]s an alternative to begging on the one hand, and to certain kinds of coercion, such as torture and religiously motivated warfare, on the other."[9]

It involves specific attitudes: charity towards strangers. Whatever we conclude about God, "[o]ur grasp on the objectivity of obligation is firmest in these ordinary contexts where we fully understand the point of requiring one another to live up to the demands of the decent relationships in which we take part."[10] Ethical discourse is a social practice.

Stout concludes that:

> Democracy, then, is misconceived when taken to be a desert landscape hostile to whatever life-giving waters of culture and tradition might still flow through it. Democracy is better construed as the name appropriate to the currents themselves in this particular time and place.[11]

It may be thought that we are straying too far here from the high-road of theology. I do not think that we can avoid these issues.[12]

The Ingredients of Consensus?

What kind of democracy is desirable? This is where I am enthusiastic about bringing in the dimension of human rights.

8. Ibid., 184.

9. Ibid., 206.

10. Ibid., 269.

11. Ibid., 308.

12. Traditional liberal notions of justice and democracy have long been the subject of severe criticism. Derrida has written of "The Mystical Foundation of Authority." He speaks of Justice as the indestructible condition of deconstruction. Justice, for Derrida, is a messianic concept—unattainable (somewhat perhaps like Reinhold Niebuhr's notion of the relevance of an impossible ideal). But, as Richard Amesbury notes, Derrida seems both to deny the relativism of the concept of justice and at the same time to be unable to offer any specification which would make justice recognizable. ("Force of Law," 15. Cf. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. I am indebted to Richard Amesbury for this understanding of Derrida.)

It is widely recognized today that there is not, and is never likely to be, a single agreed perspective on human rights, at least in its theory. But with all due caveats and definitional variations, there is an increasing consciousness, except in totalitarian regimes, *that the cluster of human rights values will include tolerance, acceptance, mutuality and reciprocity, liberty of conscience and equal respect.*

There is, I hope, the future prospect of approaches to a *modus vivendi* in the manner of Rawls's proposals or to an overlapping consensus. It begins to be possible to compile an agreed list of basic and necessary goods as ground for agreement.

We may borrow here the language of wide reflective equilibrium and of agonistic liberalism to help us chart rational grounds for such beliefs. To cut a long discussion as short, as decently possible, it may be possible to contrast an "essentially contestedness" view of differing perspectives with coherence theory, searching for a wide reflective equilibrium.

Despite a potential lack of convergence, it is possible, however, to offer standards of justification—standards of *appropriate* coherence—according to which a conception generated by one wide reflective equilibrium is superior to one generated by another.

The problems of balancing liberalism with equality and democracy were much discussed by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* and *Justice as Fairness*, in what has been described as a complex egalitarianism.[13] Similar problems arise with rights theory. I have indicated the advantages as I see them of notions of sympathy and solidarity. These may be necessary, but may not be sufficient. They could be backed up by other principles/constructions of rationality—perhaps along lines suggested in his modified theory of rationality by Alan Gewirth. Hilary Putnam[14] draws attention to Dewey's criticism of sympathy and suggests that what is required is transformational sympathy, i.e., education into the ethical life in community. This would also go some way to meeting Wolterstorff's critique of sympathy.[15]

13. Daniels, "Democratic Equalities," 150ff. *The Cambridge Companion to John Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman, discusses the very real problems of arriving at a stable account of political liberalism which is compatible with equality and democracy, and makes possible a real *modus vivendi* without privileging particular views.

14. Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 102. Cf. Nussbaum, "Radical Evil in Liberal Democracies," 171ff.

15. Wolterstorff, *Justice*.

Cultivating a Thick Culture of Democracy—Tolerance and Its Allies

Can we enhance a democratic culture by encouraging tolerance? Freedom from fear of persecution, after all, is better than nothing.[16] Bernard Williams suggested that

> the practice of toleration has to be sustained not so much by a pure principle resting on a value of autonomy as by a wider and more mixed range of resources. These resources include an active skepticism against fanaticism and the pretensions of its advocates; conviction about the manifest evils of toleration's absence; and, quite certainly, power, to provide Hobbesian reminders to the more extreme groups that they will have to settle for coexistence.[17]

In the light of the checkered history of toleration, Williams' proposals seem to me to have much to commend them, not least the hint that in a democratic society toleration may on occasion have to be effectively enforced as well as abstractly proclaimed. "A wider and more mixed range of resources" will be deeply unsatisfying to our purist longings, but it may be the most practical way forward.

David Richards sees toleration as part of a continuing struggle against prejudice, exemplified in the parallel battles against racism in America and against anti-Semitism in Europe, but applicable also feminist and gay concerns. Against this, Andrew Murphy, after a rigorous historical investigation of myths about religious toleration, defines the scope and limitations of toleration more narrowly, against John Rawls and David Richards. Murphy notes that blacks and others are discriminated against not because of their conscientious beliefs but because they are perceived to be inferior as a group.

Though there is a real difference of perception here, it would seem that there is also a considerable area of overlapping consensus concerning

16. ""Freedom from fear" could be said to sum up the whole philosophy of human rights.' Dag Hammarskjold, speech on 180th anniversary of Virginia Declaration of Human Rights. Quote 20th May 1956. (*Simpson's Contemporary Quotations*. 1988. Houghton Mifflin).

On human rights, cf. Witte, "A Short History of Western Rights," and Wolterstorff, *Justice*. I do not agree with Wolterstorff that a secular grounding of human rights is not possible, but I do believe that a Christological grounding makes a vital contribution.

17. Williams, "Toleration, an Impossible Virtue," 26. Cf. D. Richards, "Toleration and the Struggle against Prejudice," and A. Murphy, *Conscience and Community*.

the practical issues to be addressed, since there are inevitably connections between individual and group rights. Both issues of conscience and belief on the one hand, and social respect and equal treatment on the other. Here Williams' notion of multiple resources seems apposite. This does not of course mean, for any of these writers, unlimited pluralism in toleration. In this theological study, the Christomorphic dimension is an indicator of the centre and limits of toleration.

Murphy's historical study of toleration issues in New England and in England in the seventeenth century, brings out the central role of political, as much as theological, judgement in the arbitration of toleration, and the complexity of a situation in which tolerance was often highly selective. He opposes three "myths"—that religious toleration is a self-evident and unqualified good, that toleration came about through the efforts of skeptical Enlightenment rationalists, and that toleration provides a basis for multicultural and identity politics. There were genuine reasons for tension between conscience and community. Toleration easily dropped when the political situation changed, and the tolerant could become intolerant. Liberal views were combined with the belief that a civilised society could only function within an orderly community, and there was often genuine fear of civil unrest. Toleration leads not to the celebration of difference *per se* but to search for a way of living together in peace, a *modus vivendi*. Interestingly for our study he highlights the religious nature of the argument:

> The arguments made by seventeenth century tolerationists were almost exclusively religious in nature: the true Christian displays humility and forbearance towards those with differing views; Jesus commanded preaching and not coercion; belief is beyond the control of the will and can only be brought about by persuasion; true belief requires the possibility of acting on those beliefs without the fear of penal sanctions.[18]

Though non-religious views have made important contributions in later times, religious views do not have to be coercive, and may make a distinctive contribution in particular circumstances.

Toleration of beliefs, liberty of conscience, concern for equality and equal respect for difference, a raft of issues are involved in the evolving emergence of a human rights culture. This is a very uneven development, involving interruptions and tensions. There is always the danger of the

18. Murphy, *Conscience and Community*, 14.

modus vivendi breaking down. The existence of monographs, conventions, and treaties is no guarantee of fair and equal treatment *ubique et ab omnibus.* We cannot presume that one instance of an effective human rights regime will set the benchmark for future conduct. Historical study, such as Murphy's analysis, suggests the need for a constant reinforcement of human rights culture from different directions. Where religion is involved in the political equation, as it often still is, it becomes important that the theological contribution also makes an explicit commitment to human rights.

Murphy's account of toleration reinforces the picture of *complexity* in the development of issues connected with rights which we have already noted in earlier periods. Nicholas of Cusa in his *De pace fidei* allows that different nations may legitimately observe different religious practices. "Where no conformity in manner can be found, nations should be permitted their own devotional practices and ceremonies."[19] We need not be scandalized that different writers approach human rights from different angles. A desire for certainty and uniformity seems to be an increasing attribute of the contemporary religious consciousness. Perhaps this should be resisted.

The notion of sympathy may be another marker for the optimum quality of democratic process—I think of the deployment of the notions of sentiment/sympathy, from David Hume and Adam Smith, to Richard Rorty. But sentiment without enforcement may be entirely useless, as the record of abuse in prison regimes throughout history amply demonstrates. The need for sympathy has to be expanded to include a vehicle for enforcement—otherwise sympathy may just be ineffective. In her *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy,* Jennifer Herdt[20] explores the notion of "extensive" sympathy in Hume's philosophy. We have to cultivate a sympathy for the point of view of others, even when we do not share their beliefs, and we can have no dogmatic certainty about our own beliefs. This paradigm of sympathetic understanding provides a way of entering and appreciating the point of view of others, and of avoiding unnecessary conflicts harmful to society.

Sympathy may be helpful. But is it enough? Michael Walzer in his *Spheres of Justice* analyzed the complexity of the notion of equality, in its political and economic dimensions, and in its implication for such

19. *De pace fidei*, 62, quoted by Nederman, 94.

20. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*.

important areas as education, public health, work, leisure, political office, and personal relationships. He concluded that "[m]utual respect and a shared self-respect are the deep strengths of complex equality, and together they are the source of its possible endurance."[21]

In my view it is possible to learn from Rorty on solidarity, and the tradition of sympathy, without subscribing to all the implications which he draws. Richard Amesbury has recently shown this in his excellent *Morality and Social Criticism.* Amesbury sets out from Rorty's proposal to replace objectivity by solidarity. He wants to replace human rights foundationalism by a human rights culture based on sentimental education. Amesbury objects that "his anti-authoritarianism—while ostensibly liberating—ironically renders Rorty incapable of seeing how it could be possible to dissent from the vast majority of one's peers without ceasing to be rational." Rorty dislikes the idea of obligations. But "[i]t is difficult to see how Rorty can hope to continue to talk of 'a human rights culture' while abandoning talk of obligations that obtain irrespective of whether or not one's peers happen to hold one accountable to them."[22] People have felt obliged to rescue strangers in danger, people outside their own communities. Realism without Platonist foundationalism can be reserved as a basis for social action. Amesbury's approach fits well with stress on the postfoundational.

William Talbott also supports the thesis that sympathy is important but not all that there is. He notes the importance of empathy—as a feeling, but more than this:

> The feeling of empathy itself cannot be separated from a judgement about what it is like to be the other person, and that judgement provides the basis for a moral judgement about how the other person ought to be treated.[23]

He discusses Rorty's theory of moral sentiment, concluding that reason *and* sentiment are at the basis of moral judgement: "Sentiments themselves are often a manifestation of reason and can essentially involve judgements of what is true and false."[24]

Human rights, sympathy, justice, these then are some of the basic structural elements which characterise the sort of democracy which

21. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 321.
22. Amesbury, *Morality and Social Criticism*, 14, 16.
23. Talbott, *Which Rights Should be Universal?* 66.
24. Ibid., 170.

I imagine most of us would want to support. They can be fostered by religion and by secular perspectives. What matters is not the source by the final balance. Christian faith understands these elements as part of the Christomorphic trace through which God is inviting the whole created order towards eschatological reconciliation. As such, theology supports these developments, as a contributing partner to a wider human conversation.

Faith, Politics, and Economic Crisis

Is that all there is? It is not possible in the real world, especially the world of global recession, to speak of democracy without addressing again the vexed question of the relation of faith to politics. The gospels speak about the values of the kingdom, money, talent, and investment. "You should have given my money to the money-changers, then at my coming I should have received my own with interest." In 2009, international news has been has been dominated by bankers talking to politicians. What has faith to do with politics and economics? Theologians become involved. Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? Asked the members of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. Jesus said, "Show me the money." And they came unto Jesus and presented him with a blue chip share certificate. And he saith unto them, "Sell, sell, sell. For the IMF has issued dire warnings, your GDP is falling and deflation is at hand."

How can we begin to speak about faith in relation to politics? Seeking examples we encounter the working out of untrammelled faith in the political arena. Here is an Archbishop.

> Ordinarily, it should be our joy that an African American is popularly nominated for the first time in American political history. We should however be concerned that this is a politician considered to be a far left wing liberal for whom all that counts is victory at the polls. . . . We urge Senator Obama to prayerfully reconsider some of his ultra liberal dispositions, not only for the sake of 'God's Own Country' but in the interest of the world.[25]

The Archbishop might take comfort from the New Testament assurance that "We are of God. He that knoweth God heareth us," as the King James Version puts it. "He that is not of God heareth us not. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error."

25. Archbishop Peter Akinola, 16th September, 2008.

How are we to understand these mysteries? What is faith? Well faith is trust, confidence, assurance, sometimes a sense of certainty against the appearance of things, a sense of an overarching providence. Sadly, history seems to show that people who have a sense of certainty are often a complete menace. Trust me. Absolutely. Christian faith is part of a complex, we may say, which moves on to hope. But sometimes those who hope are destroyed and those who act with the force of desperation survive. Well faith is sort of the hope of love. Faith would seem to be at best as secure as a kind of philosophical sub-prime mortgage. As for politics, the public does not rate politicians. British ones employ their extended families with salaries funded by the tax-payer. American ones have an insatiable taste for pork, pork barrel politics. Our joint gift to the world is democracy—and the most modern model democracies have a curious tendency to become totalitarian.

Confronted by the faith/politics issue, Jesus looked at a silver coin and he said, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" He invited his hearers to think, and not to be content with the standard answers. He did not say that political issues are a waste of time, and he did not say, "We don't do God." When we give up politics, demons tend to rush in to fill the vacuum. When we exclude the whole dimension of ultimate meaning we may easily diminish ourselves and our capacity to be there for our fellow human beings. There are no quick fixes in the sight of God. Christianity understands faith always in relation to Jesus who IS the instantiation of the presence of God among us.

Patrick Deneen has made an attractive case for the value of religion for democracy.

> In contrast to the "democratic faithful," whose belief in human malleability frequently leads them to reject traditional religious belief as undemocratic, "democratic realism" finds, in the religious stress on human fallibility, an extraordinary chastening and democratic resource.[26]

Religion can stress a shared belief in common neediness and a kind of "democratic *caritas*." He cites Reinhold Niebuhr, who identifies democratic humility with the long tradition of religious humanity. Above all, there is Lincoln, in his Second Inaugural Address:

> With malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish

26. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 11.

> the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. (2.687.)

We must just be careful not to tie particular political preferences to appeals to the command of God. Human beings, religious or not, have a perplexing capacity to twist meaning into its opposite. It is not an accident that Christian faith understands the incarnation of God to involve torture and identification with agony. The mystery of God remains in significant ways unfathomable to us. The consequences of that mystery include the implementation of a justice which is always built on compassionate hospitality. Christianity understands politics in the light of the particular compassion and solidarity which Jesus embodies. Christian people are invited to offer this trace of engaged faith in hospitable exchange with people of other faiths and none. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are those who always close ranks and never rock the boat." Jesus, it has been said, was a man who played to lose. Yet this drama of defeat is also the hope and ground of the persistence of love. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us. Not perhaps a strategy for a successful political campaign—but a reminder that there is more to life than politics, and that faith without love—is a fairly transparent example of a credit crunch.

Hospitable Politics

God's hospitality is expressed in personal commitment and in church engagement. But it has implications in almost all areas of human life, perhaps not least in politics, in its theory and its actualities. Though it does not explicitly reflect on hospitality, much weight is placed on dimensions of hospitable politics in Jim Wallis's classic, *God's Politics*, a moderate evangelical critique of the politics of the American Christian Right. Against this he advocates a different kind of religion:

> Prophetic faith is the best counterpart to fundamentalist religion. We bring faith into the public square when our moral convictions demand it. But to influence a democratic society, you must win the public debate about why the principles you advocate are better for the common good. That's the democratic

> discipline religion has to be under when it brings its faith to the public square.[27]

In their *Guidebook for Putting Your faith into Action,* Jim Wallis and Chuck Gutenson make an impressive effort to encourage engagement with basic Christian values at a practical as well as a theoretical level. Amesbury and I make a similar plea at the end of *Faith and Human Rights*. I underline again here the absolutely crucial importance of the difficult task of encouraging and facilitating the transition from theory to practice, to move from a rhetoric to a culture of hospitality. Faith believes that God's creation and reconciliation are shaped for universally instantiated hospitality.

Prophetic Hospitality?

What does prophetic religion look like? It is concerned with justice, with fairness, and therefore, above all, with poverty. Often religious fervor acts as a convenient but toxic diversion from the basic realities of deprivation, sickness, and neglect, the crushing burdens of absolute poverty. Often too, ethical action can become a substitute for faith. Both are involved. The hospitable God is committed to the elimination of a state of affairs in which governments, through international agreements, collaborate to produce a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Wallis highlights the Jubilee 2000 campaign as a concrete attempt to address this issue on a realistic scale. Despite a massive effort at the time, all too little has been achieved. But the vision remains central to a continuing challenge. Organizations like Adam Taylor's *Global Justice Organization*[28] are needed to maintain effective action.

Thomas Friedman produces detailed and specific examples of these developments. America is a giant consumer of resources. The acceleration of energy and resource demand is exemplified worldwide—e.g., in the very recent growth of new cities—he specifically mentions Doha in Qatar and Dalian in China. There is huge demand for energy to service these highly sophisticated developments. He instances the growth of luxury communities near the pyramids in Egypt where yesterday there were none. Some of these pyramids:

27. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 11.
28. Ibid., 289ff.

> [A]re now basically surrounded by gated communities filled with McMansions on quarter acre-lots—gated communities with names like Moon Valley, Hyde Park, Richmond, Riviera Heights and Beverley Hills. There is a ninety-nine hole golf course. There is a French-based Carrefour big-box store and a modern supermarket round the corner.[29]

Petropolitics is influential in changing custom and culture in small ways—notably in Islamic societies though "Saudification."

Climate change has been a much disputed topic, as special interests on various sides of political divides have argued about its existence. It has become clear, even to most skeptics, that there are here the makings of imminent catastrophe, partly due to natural causes and partly due to human action. Some countries may gain more than they lose from climate change, at least in the medium term. But the losers are those who are already among the world's poorest and most vulnerable people:

> Take just one country: Rwanda. In most of its countryside, there is no grid, and generators that run on gasoline and diesel are becoming more expensive by the day to operate. How are the Rwandans going to maintain vaccines, provide clean water, run climate change, without reliable energy—clean, dirty or expensive?[30]

A hospitable God is opposed to violence and coercion—with the sole exception of violence used to protect the most vulnerable from harm. Such a perspective will inevitably remind us of causes for which churches and politicians have often campaigned—opposition to nuclear weapons, the fight against poverty. Yet along with these headline-making issues there are even more deadly sources of violence and coercion in the world, more deadly because they are harder to pin down. Commercial and trade pressures are notoriously elusive. Arms control is one such issue.

Closely linked is the issue of trade connections and investment in brutal and totalitarian regimes. The considerable UK investment in Myanmar is a classic case.

It is always argued that if our country did not participate in such investment others would simply step in—one may point to ever increasing Chinese investment in Africa. Yet if Christian communities are serious about discipleship in following a hospitable God, then there is a need to

29. Friedman, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, 64.

30. Ibid., 159.

be involved effectively in these issues. God is as concerned for situations in which he is apparently absence as when he seems manifestly present. There is no situation with which God is not concerned.

Democracy means embracing justice, not simply benevolence. This brings us inevitably into the public square, and the realm of politics. The Tocqueville Symposium at Harvard in 2006, led by Hugh Heclo,[31] brings out the very different ways in which the relationship between Christianity and democracy in America may be viewed. The picture is of constant fluctuation, of internal migration of Christians from society but also of constant return and influence of democracy in culture and society on the churches. The discussion brought out well the distinctively American strands in American Catholicism and the local, congregational nature of much churchmanship. Progressive Christianity in America does and may derive strength from Catholic and evangelical, as well as liberal resources.

Why should Christians become involved in politics? Franklin Gamwell has argued that they have a duty to do so: "Because their faith means that God as re-presented through Jesus Christ is present to and understood by all humans, Christians may without pause pledge that this faith can be redeemed through reasons authorised by common human experience."[32]

This engagement has specific consequences, God calls us all to the community of love and thus to justice as general emancipation. He instances abortion, affirmative action, and economic distribution as spheres for the deployment of the idea of maximum mutuality.

The actualization of hospitality in specific instances will include the addressing of political dimensions in almost every case—poverty and development, conflict resolution, environmental destruction and population explosion, the proliferation of minor wars, often proxy wars which cause unimaginable suffering. The global problems of peace and security, of weapons and disarmament are even more bound up with politics, the geopolitics of the major powers. Hospitality as justice is eternally bound up with solutions to these perennial tensions.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness, like an ever-flowing stream. The multifaceted and omnipresent scope of justice is neatly captured by Walter Burghardt in his *Justice—A Global Adventure*. Burghardt analyses justice as legal, ethical biblical, social, and

31. Heclo, *Christianity and American Democracy*.

32. Gamwell, *Politics as a Christian Vocation*, 75, 130.

environmental. Hospitality without justice would remain a hollow simulacrum:

> The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom. It would be blasphemy against God and our neighbour while saying that God is closest to those in deepest need. We break bread with the hungry and share our home with them for the sake of Christ's love, which belongs to the hungry as much as it does to us. If the hungry do not come to faith, the guilt falls on those who denied them bread. To bring bread to the hungry is preparing the way for the coming of grace.[33]

Can We Dare to Get Real?

Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat and Crowded* provides a comprehensive and compelling reminder of the deeply challenging geopolitical realities faced by the twenty-first-century world, realities not easily faced with the aid of our traditional religious resources. Friedman lays out impressively the basic geopolitical challenges currently facing the world. The world has become flattened out through the technological revolution, through widespread access to the internet, and the possibilities for working and for information sharing which this has brought. The world has become hot, through the emission of greenhouse gases and the struggle for ever increasing energy supply. The world has become crowded, as population growth has rocketed exponentially throughout the world. Friedman identifies a challenge to innovation, determination, and effectively targeted aid to the weakest. The key players will be the United States, China, and India—each will have its own mountains to climb.

In all these countries democracy will involve inevitable tensions between popular control and issues of legitimacy—benevolent despotism, elective despotism, protection of minorities. Finally, there is another challenge to democracy—the role of the super-rich. In his remarkable *Who Runs Britain*?, Robert Peston underlined the immense influence of the complex financial derivatives, etc. The super rich can move money around the world at will, avoiding taxes and depleting government

33. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 163, quoted by Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, 204. Cf. A. Lijphart's plea for "a gentler, kinder democracy," in *Patterns of Democracy*.

revenues. Political parties depend on their donations for support. Kevin Phillips has done the same for the USA. Here is an area where the secular can indeed be a challenge. Except that the super-rich in the USA may also be identical with the Christian Right. Nothing is simple.

Christianity is concerned for the most vulnerable. We have to privilege these issues if we are to have any sort of hospitality worthy of the name. To reflect expansively on alterity or reconciliation without taking account of what is required to run the generators can only immunize us against facing the realities. Global hospitality is extricably linked to global economics. Obviously the Christian theologian cannot resolve these challenges, but should try to make an informed contribution to their solution. If we can try to constantly reflect on God's hospitality for the world with our eyes wide open, rather than with our eyes wide shut, that at least will be something.

Is Christianity a threat to democracy? It all depends on what sort of Christianity, and what sort of democracy. In ancient Athens only full citizens could participate in the democratic process. But at least that was an important beginning. As we discern more about equality, freedom, solidarity, and human dignity we may hope to move towards a more just democratic world order. But this will certainly not happen automatically. It has been suggested that as many people have been killed in the Congo in the last twenty years as died in the Holocaust.

Faith believes that the Christian gospel has an indispensable role to play in the human future, for this is part of that movement from creation to reconciliation which is centred on the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the concrete instantiation of the hospitality of God.[34]

34. Since writing this paper I have been encouraged by the stress laid on justice and tolerance in a partnership democracy by Ronald Dworkin in *Is Democracy Possible Here?,* and on empathy in the face of radical evil by Martha Nussbaum ("Radical Evil in Liberal Democracies: The Neglect of the Political Emotions." The suggestion that abstract ideals are not enough is stressed by Sen in discussing John Rawls—though Rawls would not himself have favoured abstraction. On the theological dimensions of justice, cf. too, Newlands and Smith, *Hospitable God*. I have much appreciated the many perceptive contributions made at the VISOR seminar on Democracy at the VU in Amsterdam in August 2009, for which this paper was written.