

A Christian-democratic Vision: Foundations and Futures¹

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by

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Introduction

In this lecture I want to reflect on the meaning of the rather unusual hyphenated term in my title, “Christian-democratic.” This is not a reference to the movement of political parties in Europe and Latin American known as Christian Democratic, though they are instances of what I have in mind. Rather, in the term “Christian-democratic” the word “Christian” qualifies the word “democratic” adjectivally. The implication is that there is such a thing as an authentically Christian conception, and practice, of democracy. I think there is, and in this lecture I want to consider some dimensions of what a “Christian-democratic politics” might look like and of its prospects for advancement in the highly pluralistic and increasingly turbulent political orders of the twenty-first century.

Quite evidently, not only the Christian community, but the entire world, urgently need more sustained reflection on the relationship between Christianity and democracy. The number of significant global public issues today in which that relationship is implicated is steadily increasing. The future of the relationship is under intense scrutiny in the USA, where notwithstanding numerous constructive ventures in faith-based democratic action at many levels, Christians are perceived by outsiders, and many insiders, as those who have been “blinded by might” in their attempts to shape the polity by their faith – the phrase referring to the title of a book by two chastened former Religious Right activists.² In much of Western Europe, Christians face almost the opposite problem: having been enervated and sidelined by secularization they now strive to reclaim public legitimacy and theological integrity in the face of a powerful secularist headwind and a steady overall decline in church affiliation. Eastern Europe, of course, was the site twenty years ago of the most dramatic demonstration of the potency of Christian-democratic action, as churches and Christians in civil society played a decisive role in overturning communist totalitarianism. But East European Christians now face the enormous challenge of deciding what it is they are for, and how to achieve it in fragile democracies marked by cultural secularization and resurgent nationalism. By contrast, Christians in Majority World contexts face altogether different challenges. On the one hand, we can take inspiration from

¹ I am grateful to my two respondents at the lecture, Villanova faculty members Catherine Wilson and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler, and to John Hiemstra, for their insightful comments on a draft of this lecture, though I have not been able to respond to all their suggestions in this version.

² Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

many remarkable and inspiring examples of Christian-democratic action, such as the courageous stands against authoritarianism, violence and corruption over the last generation in nations such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria, Chile, Nicaragua or Peru. On the other, we also witness many misguided interventions, such as the ill-fated triumphalist attempt to turn Zambia into a constitutionally “Christian nation,” or the dissipation of Protestant political energies in a multiplicity of political parties in post-Sandinista Nicaragua.

In these unsettling circumstances, it will not be enough simply to urge a maximum mobilization of Christians behind some undefined process of “democratization.” The goal needs to be more precise: to support Christians, in ways suited to their contexts, in their struggle for a robustly-grounded understanding of representative, participatory, constitutional, and just government, and, no less important, the moral and social skills required to practice it. Obviously that monumental task can only be approached incrementally in any specific situation. But to know we are nudging the process in the right overall direction requires a degree of clarity about what democracy is fundamentally for, and that, in turn, requires a clear understanding of what the state is fundamentally for.

In the first part of the lecture I present an account of what I take to be an authentically Christian conception of the state.³ The substantive elements of this account will be familiar to some, but I will propose an opening thesis which may not be self-evident: that we should derive the justification and design of democracy from the normative purpose of the state, rather than, as in secular modernity, deriving the justification and design of the state from the supposed normative priority of democracy. Put differently, we will only reliably know whether and why we need something like democracy, and what kind, if we properly understand what states are for.

In part two of the lecture I will sketch a picture of constitutional democracy that seems to me to correspond most closely to the purpose of the state as described. I do not promise any surprises here regarding institutional design. I will not be suggesting that the litmus test of Christian-democratic politics is congressional term-limits, or reverting to an indirectly elected Presidency. But I do hope to display how a classical Christian view of the normative purpose of the state can inspire us to be passionate constitutional democrats in the twenty-first century.

In the third part of the lecture, I identify two (out of many possible) significant global challenges facing “Christian-democratic politics” today: sectionalism and fragmentation. I will propose that in order to address these obstacles we require a lucid grasp of the normative purpose of the state and a practical readiness to tack closely to that purpose at every stage of democratic engagement.

³ I speak of an “authentically Christian” conception of democracy rather than a “distinctively Christian” one, because my emphasis is on how such a conception flows out of broader Christian political principles, rather than on the ways in which it might converge with or diverge from conceptions of democracy flowing from some other set of principles. I am interested in its “identity” rather than its “difference,” recognizing that these are always co-determining.

I A Classical Christian Conception of the State

The opening thesis I wish to develop is that we should derive the justification and design of democracy from the normative purpose of the state, rather than, as in secular modernity, deriving the justification and design of the state from the normative priority of democracy.⁴

Let me offer three clarifications before I proceed. First, when I speak of the “normative purpose of the state” I mean its defining purpose, its *raison d’être*, not any particular tasks it might happen to pursue, like keeping sewers (or financial markets!) clean. Second, I use the term “state” broadly to stand for all kinds of political authority and not only the particular form of the state predominant in the modern West. And third, by “state” I mean not simply the formal institutions of state but rather the polity as a whole, the “political community” composed of both government and citizens. The far-reaching significance of that definition will become clear as I proceed.

To make the relevance of my opening thesis clear, I begin by summarizing the view that came to prevail in secular modernity: that the purpose of the state is determined by the collective wills of those who freely associate in order to establish it. This is the heart of the “contractualist” or “voluntarist” view of political authority. The very constitution of the state – hypothetically if not historically – is the first democratic act. Free individuals, imagined in an ideal “state of nature” or behind a “veil of ignorance,” agree to establish a state where there is not one, or decide what its defining purpose will be if there is. The existence and purpose of the state, then, are determined in an act of collective will.

This need not imply that such collective acts work upon a moral *tabula rasa*, as if there were no moral constraints at all prior to the establishment of a state. In the English-speaking liberal tradition originated by John Locke, for example, the key constraint is individual natural rights, rights which people find themselves endowed with – for Locke, by God. But on this liberal view, political institutions have no authority to protect such rights, or pursue any other moral purpose, unless they have been authorized to do so by the collective will, the consent, of the people. Such acts of collective consent I call “democratic acts.”⁵

The dominant view, then, is that the state lacks any constitutive purposes of its own. Such purposes can only be given to it by democratic acts. It is democracy that tells us what the point of a state is. So if the people collectively will that the state should be charged with protecting our rights, that, and that alone, it is authorized to do. Or if the people choose to designate the state’s purpose as guaranteeing order, so be it. Or if they choose to designate it as promoting the national interest or protecting national security, that is the nature and limit of its mandate. If you doubt this reading of the dominant view, consider what the typical response of the average western citizen would be to the suggestion that the people may not autonomously decide what their states are for, that instead they should receive the purpose of the state as something arising from the state’s own constitutive purposes. The immediate question would be: “says who?”

⁴ For a fuller statement of a comparable thesis, see David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), ch. 5.

⁵ I do so acknowledging that today we reserve the term “democracy” today for acts based on universal franchise, an arrangement about which, incidentally, the early founders of consent theory, and the America Founders, were unenthusiastic.

There have been substantial challenges to this dominant view since its emergence in the late seventeenth century. The most influential was propounded by traditionalist conservatism, which asserted that it is tradition that tells us what the purpose of the state is. That purpose might be construed as something like the protection of historical property entitlements, the preservation of social order or the maintenance of national character (or all three). On this view, tradition is entitled to instruct us about the purpose of the state because it is the repository of the accumulated wisdom of centuries, and this cannot simply be set aside by johnny-come-lately popular assemblies wielding their rights, their reason, or their will.

But this view, at least as stated, has little life in it today anywhere, even in Christian circles, and I do not propose to resuscitate it – least of all in the city of Philadelphia. Indeed, such traditionalism is antithetical to an authentically Christian political conception, even though some Christians have in fact espoused versions of it. The British political theologian Oliver O’Donovan, who holds a very high view of tradition but is sometimes wrongly assumed to be a traditionalist, goes so far as to declare such a reverential view of the supreme authority of tradition as a “heresy.”⁶

I suggest that the dominant secular modernist view – the view that the normative purpose of the state can only be determined by democratic acts – is another Christian “heresy,” a serious deviation from the central thrust of biblical revelation and from those central traditions of Christian political thought shaped by Scripture. This view is essentially an ideology of “democratism” – a deep-seated religious creed, rooted in the secular Enlightenment, in which the people place their faith in their own collective will to secure political “salvation.”⁷ Christians who subscribe to this ideology, even if unwittingly, have married themselves to the modernist spirit of the age. I have stated my aim in this lecture as showing why Christians today should be “passionate constitutional democrats,” but their passion will be misdirected if it is inspired by any lingering allegiance they may have to the ideology of democratism.⁸

In stark contrast, the common starting point of the central Christian traditions of political thought is that political authority is originated not by democratic acts but by divine acts. What that confession means has been interpreted in very diverse ways, to put it mildly. The first thing to say about it is that a parallel claim can and has been made about many human authorities: institutions like marriage, family, private property, even workers’ associations, have also been construed in some sense as divinely established. It is routinely supposed by secular liberals that attributing the authority of the state to divine authority necessarily plays into the hands of authoritarianism; and there is no lack of historical instances to back that up. But secular liberals – and Christian authoritarians – miss the point that by authorizing many institutions simultaneously, God thereby limits all of them. Under God social authority is plural not singular, distributed not concentrated.

But how has the tradition understood the operation of this divine act of authorization of the state? One influential view holds that the state has a wholly remedial purpose, and is

⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, “Response to Respondents: Behold the Lamb,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11.2 (1998), 99.

⁷ In *Political Visions*, ch. 5, Koyzis distinguishes between democracy as “structure” and democracy as “creed.” Like me, he endorses a version of democratic structure, but repudiates democracy as creed.

⁸ It is because this secular ideology of democratism has come to be so closely linked with the word “liberal” that I have opted to call the form of government I am commending here, not “liberal democracy,” but “constitutional democracy.”

instituted by God through specific providential interventions as a merciful but coercive response to the anarchic consequences of sin. On this view the state is seen as an “order of providence.” A second influential view holds that the state is instead an “order of creation,” arising from the inclinations of created social human nature. On this view, the divine “act” from which the state derives is the act of creating human beings according to a certain design and sustaining that design through time. This is my own view and I elaborate it further in a moment. But I want to stress that, on either view, neither the authority nor the normative purpose of the state is seen as originating from what I have called democratic acts. Democratic acts can only ever be acts done in response to the action of God in blessing humankind with the gift of and capacity for political community.

Let me explain the creational view of the state in more detail. One way to describe it is to say that the state is construed along the lines of marriage. This may initially seem a counter-intuitive suggestion, and I am not suggesting that the state in any way does or should mirror the emotional intimacy or moral formation of a marriage. Indeed when it tries to do these things, nationalism or totalitarianism may lurk around the corner. What I mean with this comparison is that the state, like marriage, is an institution arising out of the imperatives of human nature as divinely created, a body uniquely fitted to meet specific kinds of universal human social needs. It is an “office” in creation, existing for purposes which are constitutive to it and not merely instrumental to something outside it.

It is perhaps easier for Christians to see marriage as an “office” in this sense. The main Christian traditions have generally identified something like “companionship” as the definitive purpose of marriage (“help,” as Genesis 2:18 puts it).⁹ It is recognized that marriages can, of course, also pursue other, extrinsic, purposes: they can be the locus of property holding, or of business activity, or of social networking. And marriages can also be distorted by damaging purposes: self-centered hedonism, tax evasion, or emotional manipulation. But none of these define what a marriage is intrinsically for, what it was created to make possible. Thus to enter a marriage is to enter a moral field with a shape of its own. It is to assume a package of responsibilities and rights which the parties do not themselves construct, even though the specific inflection they give to those moral realities will vary widely from marriage to marriage and culture to culture. Furthermore, entering a marriage is a consensual act between two independent adults (as the account in Genesis 2 seems to suggest). Marriages might in some cultures be “arranged,” but a “forced” marriage is a contradiction in terms.

I suggest that the state is in crucial ways a similar kind of institution to marriage. To enter it – by birth or through that act of consent termed “naturalization” – is to enter an office with a normative purpose already built into it. By “built into” I mean that the institution is a necessary community arising out of our created social nature rather than a happenstance that we might do without or that can be designed in just any old way. This means that when we align ourselves with properly functioning states we do not enter alien territory but rather embrace one of the essential conditions for human flourishing.

Note that I said “properly functioning states.” I am referring to political communities insofar as they really do purpose their normative purpose, fully aware that the actual states we live in frequently veer recklessly away from this purpose or flagrantly violate it: by waging

⁹ The Catholic tradition has also insisted that openness to procreation is inseparable from marital companionship.

unjust war against their enemies, by terrorizing their own populations, or by maximizing economic growth above maintaining a sustainable environment for their future citizens. So to “align ourselves” with the normative purpose of the state will most certainly involve criticizing our actual states, and could involve disobeying or resisting them, or in extreme cases, even removing their sitting office-holders.

What then is the normative purpose of the state? Here too the Christian tradition has formulated its answer to that question in diverse ways, such as securing peace and order, establishing public righteousness, defending true religion, or protecting the welfare of the realm. But probably the most comprehensive description in the Christendom era and beyond has come to be the promotion of “the common good.”

The common good is itself a contested term. Indeed today many political commentators think it redundant: a radically pluralistic society by definition cannot acquire a *common* good, only throw up a conflicting multiplicity of particular goods. Others construe the common good in narrowly procedural terms, as if the purpose of the state were simply the adjudication of individual freedom rights or the facilitation of fair deliberative processes.

But in the classical Christian tradition, the common good is a substantive, content-rich notion.¹⁰ People might argue fiercely about its exact contents; indeed some Christians killed each other over that question. But it is neither empty nor elusive: only in the last century or two has there been widespread doubt about its meaningfulness. It is much too early to give up on it. Indeed in some contexts it is as clear as daylight, and its practical relevance comes through immediately in this courageous statement issued by clergy from 59 denominations in Zimbabwe in September 2003:

We maintain that a good government comes from God and is charged with the tasks of promoting the common good of the nation, ensuring justice for all...as well as being custodian of the nation’s social and moral values. Such a government is worthy of the obedience and loyalty of its citizens as demanded by Romans 13. Any government that negates these fundamental principles...forfeits its God-given mandate to rule.¹¹

Let me propose this working definition of the term: the common good is the *assemblage of public resources, conditions, and projects that everyone in a society necessarily participates in, as contributor or beneficiary or both*.¹² The practical contents of the common good can include a wide range of things, from integrated transit systems, to robust civic virtues, to sound banking practices, to university accreditation rules, to the rule of law – the latter being what was, and is, at stake in Zimbabwe. I want to elaborate this abstract definition by pre-empting a common worry, entering a crucial clarification, and offering an ecumenical comparison.

First, anxiety is sometimes created when voices in the tradition have asserted that the common good “takes priority over” the particular or private goods which are also essential to flourishing human lives. But this does not mean that private goods are generally subordinate to public goods, only that, where the two collide and where some vital component of the common

¹⁰ For a lucid account of the pre-modern understanding of the “common good” and how it was thought to be related to parallel notions, see Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, “Political Authority and European Community: the Challenge of the Christian Political Tradition,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), 1-17.

¹¹ Quoted in Terence O. Ranger, “Afterword,” in Terence O. Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239.

¹² See, for example, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 2004), §164.

good is at stake, the claims of the common good come first. Thus in the recent banking crisis, the exclusive private rights of bank shareholders to exercise authority over the policies of their banks have been justifiably infringed by government interventions in order to protect everyone's vital interest in financial stability.

Second, it is sometimes wrongly supposed that the state is solely responsible for securing the common good. Looser formulations sometimes give this impression, but from its beginning Christian political thought has generated a powerful anti-statist thrust. I would put the point this way: the state is not responsible for promoting every aspect of the common good but only those aspects that are woven into the fabric of public space over which the state exercises unique guardianship. In modern Catholic social thought, that limitation was specified more closely when the principle of the common good was explained to include also the principle of subsidiarity, which counsels the state only to intervene in another social authority – a family, or a bank – when that authority is in danger of failing to make a necessary and unique contribution to the common good.¹³

Indeed it is vital to assert that every *human being* shares responsibility for securing the common good. We do this in the *first* instance not by taking up *political* tasks but simply by contributing to flourishing social practices and relationships in day to day life: living virtuous individual lives, raising well-adjusted children, nurturing supportive neighborhoods, caring for the environment, consuming for need and not excess, using productive resources efficiently, practising just employment relationships, and so on. Most of this activity takes place outside the structures of the state in one of four spheres: in the intimate spheres of family, friends, neighborhoods, churches; in what we now call “civil society,” the network of voluntary associations and other non-government organizations meeting myriad social needs; in the labyrinth of economic interactions we call “markets;” and finally in what Jürgen Habermas calls “the public sphere,” where the task is to stimulate vigorous and critical public discourse about the shape of the common good itself. Indeed, without at all taking away the importance of political action, I propose that the most pressing contribution of supporters of a Christian-democratic vision today is to nurture a public vision of the common good as *everyone's responsibility*. This will mean practising what John Paul II calls the virtue of “solidarity:” “*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.*”¹⁴ For western Christians, doing this will require a painful but ultimately liberating severance from a prozac culture of consumerist individualism that blinds our vision, numbs our spiritual energies, and turns us in on ourselves.

I have addressed a frequent worry regarding the common good and a typical misunderstanding about the state's role in securing it. The common good emerges principally from the Catholic tradition, but a comparison with the specific inflections of Protestant political thought may help elucidate its meaning further. While Protestants have often invoked the language of the common good, they have even more characteristically referred to the purpose of the state as the establishment of *justice*.¹⁵ But justice and the common good should not be seen as rival principles. For Protestants the content of what justice is thought to require often overlaps

¹³ For an account of subsidiarity, see my “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Catholic and Reformed Conceptions of the Role of the State,” in Frances P. McHugh & Samuel M. Natale, eds., *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1993), 175-202.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §38.

¹⁵ In diverse Protestant articulations, justice has been understood more narrowly, as retributive justice, or more broadly, as social justice.

considerably with what the common good seems to mandate, just as for Catholic thought, principles of justice – such as commutative and distributive justice – are seen as contained in the common good.¹⁶

This is not the occasion to tease out the relationship between these two principles further, but it may be useful for those new to the thinking behind the Center for Public Justice to add these remarks. The Neo-Calvinist stream of Protestant thought informing the Center’s work has proposed the trademark notion of “public justice” as the best way to capture the task of the state.¹⁷ Public justice is the name this movement gives to *that part of the common good* which falls uniquely to the state. It comprises that swath of justice-claims which are integrally woven into the fabric of public space, and it imposes on the state the demanding task of balancing multiple public claims arising from individuals, many associations, and the larger public good.¹⁸ We could equally call it the *political common good*, and this is the term I will use in the remainder of this lecture.¹⁹

The central point to which I have been working in this part of the lecture can be summarized thus: pursuing the political common good is, to the state, like practicing companionship is to marriage partners: the parties entering into these communities will, *when they discern truly*, find these purposes awaiting them. The normative purpose of the state cannot be determined as a result of a “democratic act.” The mere exercise of collective human will is never sufficient to authorize what states are for. This has very concrete implications. For example, to construe the act of voting primarily as the securing of one’s own self-interest or the sectional interests of one’s group, locality or even faith-community, is analogous to entering into a marriage but then refusing, say, to co-habit with one’s spouse. It is a breach of the very *raison d’être* of the relationship.

II A Contemporary Christian Conception of Democracy

I have proposed that the normative purpose of the state is the promotion of the political common good. That is to say, the *object* of the state is the good of the public as a whole. But it is not only the *object* of state action that is public. The state as a *subject* is a public community. This is why I defined the state earlier as a political community of government *and citizens*. Contrary to appearances, the state is not supposed to stand over against the public; the public – the citizenry – is itself part of the state. This means that the normative purpose of the state must be *our own purpose*. By virtue of being citizens, we are called to be active partners in the

¹⁶ Thus the recent state interventions in the financial markets can be justified both as an attempt to do justice to the property rights of depositors and creditors, and as a strategic contribution to the common good of a sustainable banking system.

¹⁷ For a popular account of “public justice,” see my “Defining Public Justice in a Pluralist Society: Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Concept,” *Pro Rege* (March, 2004), 1-10. For a technical account, see my “Public Justice as a Critical Political Norm,” *Philosophia Reformata* 72 (2007), 130-150.

¹⁸ An innovative Protestant contribution to reflection on justice and the common is Ronald Sider and Dianne Knippers, eds., *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). This contains fine essays on these themes by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Sider, as well as many others addressing key areas of public policy in the light of those themes.

¹⁹ Catholic philosopher John Courtenay Murray refers to what I call the political common good as “public order,” in which he included public peace, public morals, and justice. John Courtenay Murray, *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, ed., J. Leon Hooper, S.J. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 145.

promotion of the political common good. The state is an *inclusive public community*, a dynamic partnership between government and citizens engaged in this common pursuit.

Here, then, is the crucial link between the Christian conception of the purpose of the state I have outlined so far, and the Christian conception of democracy I now want to spell out. Since the political community embraces the entire citizenry as participating members we can speak of the *co-responsibility of people and government in the discernment and pursuit of the political common good*.²⁰ As a member of the political community each citizen stands under a duty to contribute to the essential purpose of that community. Over against the dominant secular modern view, it is this obligation, not some supposed individual right to autonomy, which grounds our legal entitlement to participate in the choice of our leaders and in the ongoing shaping of government policy. We should be democrats first of all because we are called to discern the requirement of the political common good, not primarily in order to assert our right to freedom or to secure our own interests.

Now admittedly it took the Christian tradition a long time to reach such a conclusion. There is no space here to tell the story of that complex journey, but let me mention two decisive steps along the way. One was the emergence of the “covenant theory” in political thought, a theory with medieval antecedents but which flourished after the Reformation. At its climax, the covenant tradition produced the remarkable idea of a three-way covenant in which ruler and people jointly submit themselves to God’s law, in which people pledge to obey their ruler, and in which the ruler pledges to rule through just law, on pain of loss of authority if failing to do so. The idea gave rise to an authentically Christian theory of the social contract which, on close inspection, is markedly different from the classical liberal contract theories arising in the seventeenth century. Graham Maddox states the contrast starkly: for covenant thinkers, “the covenant is not merely a voluntary congress of autonomous individual persons, but is grounded upon supra-personal authority.”²¹ Here is how one of the more radical sixteenth-century Calvinist documents put it: “it is the people that establishes kings, gives them kingdoms, and approves their selection by its vote. For God willed that every bit of authority held by kings should come *from the people, after Him*....”²²

Now it is exceedingly difficult for denizens of secular modernity to embrace the idea that “kingdoms” can *both* come from God *and* yet be “established by the people.” Modernity has instructed us that this is a zero-sum game, leading many to suppose that to claim that the attribution of divine authority to the state is equivalent to calling for “theocracy.” But early Calvinist writers had no difficulty with the idea that humans could be pursuing a purpose created by God when they engaged in freely elected a political ruler. Indeed they thought this was what occurred in all human associations. As one commentator puts it:

[T]he common character of all associations in Calvinist political literature...is neither individualist nor absolutist. It begins neither with the self-evident rights of individuals nor with the a priori authority of rulers. Rather it asks what is the vocation (or purpose) of

²⁰ This is not, of course, to say that people and government have *equal* responsibility or authority for that task.

²¹ Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1996), 153. See also E. Clinton Gardner, *Justice and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 4.

²² Julian H. Franklin, ed., *Constitutionalism and Resistance in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 158. Emphasis added.

any association, and how can this association be so organized as to accomplish this essential business. Authority (or rule) becomes a function of vocation.²³

The second step on the Christian journey toward democracy was closely linked. It is the Reformation idea that the *whole people of God* are called, not only to authorize those who will administer justice, but also to participate in the act of discerning justice. Ordinary members of the laity, it was asserted, were capable of participating actively not only in the ministries of the church but also in every social calling beyond it, including government; and these were seen as divine callings on the same level as the priesthood. This notion – a social application of the earlier idea of spiritual equality – sowed seeds which later grew into the principle of political equality, of which universal franchise was but one later outcome.²⁴ As is well known, Puritanism played a key role in advancing this aspiration. Maddox again:

In the Puritan congregation each person was worthy of full participation in discussion not merely out of respect for her or his worth before God, but also because each person in a gathering in Christ's name could be a vessel for the outpouring of the Spirit – each could be moved by God to add something genuinely revealing, or revealed, to the collective understanding....²⁵

When applied to politics, these practices nurtured the acquisition of distinctive democratic skills. As Robert Dahl puts it: “all men were equal not only in the eyes of God but equally qualified to understand the word of God, to participate in church government, and by extension to govern the commonwealth.”²⁶ O'Donovan identifies one of the generative sources of this vision in the participatory practices of the early church, giving it the striking name “pentecostal republicanism.”²⁷ Remarkably, we are today witnessing a momentous resurgence of what can literally be called Pentecostal republicanism in many parts of the Majority World.

²³ Frederick Carney, “Associational Thought in Early Calvinism,” in D. B. Robertson, ed., *Voluntary Associations* [Richmond: John Knox, 1966], 43, 36. Carney writes further: “Associations are the places and occasions wherein we give ourselves to the glory of God and the welfare of the neighbor. They are the purposes that arise when men acknowledge fundamental human needs and commit themselves to meeting them....[These purposes] are given (or natural) in that there is a determinate structure to God's creation. They are arbitrary (or voluntary) both in their adaptation to... human finiteness and... [to] human sinfulness. The constitution or basic structure of an association... is a function of the vocation that, through the combination of necessity and volition, the association serves. And rule or government of an association is to be judged by how well it contributes to this vocation....”

²⁴ It should be noted that this developing line of thought does not at all imply that every social institution ought to be “democratized,” that the ideal of political equality should be realized everywhere. On the contrary, while we can rightly speak of a generic norm of “participation” in every institution, the precise form that participation should take (and the specific rights and duties framing it) should be determined by the defining purpose of the particular institution in question. The institutions of family, church and civil society are not to be transformed into miniature replicas of the democratic state. The concern to uphold the distinctive natures of different social institutions and to resist the leveling imperatives of an unchecked strategy of societal “democratization” is especially marked in Catholic and Neo-Calvinist thought. See Jeanne Heffernan Schindler, ed., *Christianity and Civil Society: Catholic and Neo-Calvinist Perspectives* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington, 2008).

²⁵ Maddox, *Religion*, 150-151.

²⁶ Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989), 32.

²⁷ *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 268-271. See also Song's notion of the “right of public speech” in Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 197ff. O'Donovan is, however, more critical of modern “democratic structures” than I am. See, for example, his searching analysis of the exaggerated status of democratic legitimating procedures in *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), chs 9, 10. For an assessment of the theory of representation in *Ways of Judgment*, see Jonathan Chaplin, “Representing a People: Oliver O'Donovan on Democracy and Tradition,” in *Political Theology* 9.3 (2008), 295-307.

Some are even suggesting that this movement holds a key to the consolidation of democratic political cultures in many parts of the Global South in this century.²⁸

I have identified two key contributors on the journey of the Christian tradition towards an embrace of the principles of democratic consent and democratic participation. But the Christian tradition has come to favor not only the simple principle of democracy but rather the complex principle of constitutional democracy. Constitutional democracy is a system in which the democratic principle is constrained by limits on what the *demos* may will. It proceeds from a sober reckoning with human sin: from the recognition that the people may, at times, will foolish, unjust, or violent things and need to be restrained from doing so as far as possible.²⁹ Simply put, constitutional democracy is democracy bent toward the promotion of the political common good. It is a far cry from the literal idea of “popular sovereignty.”³⁰

A constitution comprises legal principles which organize, empower and constrain the institutions of state, and confer rights and duties on its citizens.³¹ But the Christian tradition (at its best) has held that a constitution is not just a procedure for checking power or allocating rights but a codification of substantive principles designed to direct the use of government power to the imperatives of the political common good. A constitutional democratic state will be a state that both executes just law and stands under such law. Following O’Donovan we can call this a “humble” state – a state that knows its place, discerns its calling, and faithfully and enthusiastically strives to fulfil that calling.³² This is not a utopian idea. Nor is it elusive. Indeed, as soon as we begin to criticize and oppose the numerous arrogant states parading their power in every corner of the world today, we already testify to an implicit grasp of the vision of what a humble state looks like.

There have been many formative Christian contributions to the concept of a “humble state.” These reach back well before the Reformation and find their origins in the early church and medieval Christendom. For example, in asserting the independence of ecclesial authority from political control, Christianity challenged the ancient assumption of the absolute supremacy of political authority. Or, in holding that secular rulership was a form of Christian “ministry,” Christian thought contributed to the notion that political authority was a public trust and not a

²⁸ Some also suggest that Pentecostalism may even herald a “fourth wave of democratization.” See Paul Freston, “Introduction,” in Paul Freston, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-36. Freston also notes, however, that Pentecostalism is a complex movement also containing apolitical and sometimes markedly authoritarian strands.

²⁹ Equally, the doctrine of sin could be invoked to urge restraints on rulers as well as people. And one of those very restraints is democracy. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it: “If men are inclined to deal unjustly with their fellows, the possession of power aggravates this inclination. This is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice. The democratic techniques of a free society place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious.” *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), vi.

³⁰ On this see Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*, ch. 5. For a proposal that the term “sovereignty” be jettisoned entirely by political theory, see Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), ch. 2.

³¹ The US Constitution was probably the first constitution to be “written,” i.e., codified, but it was not the first constitution in history. Medieval political communities already had constitutions. The English constitution arguably dates back to the twelfth-century *Magna Carta* by which royal power was subjected to the consent of the nobility.

³² In her response to the lecture, Catherine Wilson helpfully suggested that the notion of a humble state also implies that of a “humble citizenry.” The issue of how humble citizens might be formed (e.g., through the experience of participation in local voluntary associations, as De Tocqueville observed) is a large and important one but cannot be addressed here.

piece of private property. And in insisting that rulers were to regard themselves as subject to natural law, the tradition lent weight to the crucial later development whereby governments were also to be subject to *positive* law – from which the all-important achievement of the “rule of law” emerged.

The conclusion to the second part of the lecture, then, is that the *form* of democracy toward which Christians today should aspire will be some version of constitutional, representative, participatory, and just government. I suggest that, in our historical juncture, this is the form most conducive to the state’s pursuit of its normative purposes of promoting the political common good.³³ Obviously the precise design of such a constitutional democracy will vary greatly according to historical and cultural conditions. Quite rightly, the Christian tradition has never endorsed a single institutional blueprint. And the speed and trajectory of any nation’s journey towards an appropriate version of constitutional democracy will vary widely according to numerous circumstances. The recent catastrophic attempt to engage in “democracy promotion” in Iraq carries tragic lessons in how not to circumvent the contingencies of history and culture. But we must not allow that ideologically driven distortion of a commitment to constitutional democracy to bring the commitment itself into disrepute.³⁴ The weight of the contemporary Christian tradition, I submit, now stands firmly behind what has aptly been called “a preferential option for constitutional democracy.”³⁵

III Two Challenges for Christian-democratic Politics Today

The concrete challenges confronting the realization of a global Christian-democratic politics today are, of course, many and varied, and it would be impossible even to list them all here (even if I knew what they all were). But a brief consideration of two such challenges may help convey something of the practical urgency of the vision I have tried to sketch.

Sectionalism

The first challenge I call “sectionalism.” By this I mean an attitude, conscious or unwitting, which uses democratic channels or proximity to state power principally to favor the special interests of one section of the citizenry over others. Its practitioners look to the state to generate benefits or privileges for themselves or for their own ideological, religious, denominational, kinship, tribal, ethnic or regional group and are at best indifferent, or perhaps even hostile, to the state’s safeguarding of the legitimate interests of others. Sectionalism fails to grasp both the meaning of the state’s nature as an inclusive public community in which every citizen and group have an equal stake, and the state’s mandate to promote the political common good.

Recent studies of the role of Evangelicals in the politics of the Global South illustrate the temptations of sectionalism. Let me first acknowledge, however, that where Christians are a

³³ In Koyzis’s terms, this would be a suitable “democratic structure” not dependent on a underlying “democratic creed.”

³⁴ For a careful defence of the idea that the conception of constitutional democracy outlined here is not merely a parochial western invention but has global significance across diverse political cultures, see James W. Skillen, “Politics in One World,” *Philosophia Reformata* 66 (2001), 117-131.

³⁵ Kenneth L. Grasso, “Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, The Free Society, and the Second Vatican Council,” in Kenneth L. Grasso et al, eds., *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 30. For a substantial and contrasting Catholic critique of modern Christianity’s embrace of democracy, see Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

marginalized, harassed or even persecuted minority, their first task, if they are able, is simply to carve out for themselves a secure public space, free from hostility and violence. Defending the rights to life, property and religious liberty is not sectionalism, it is survival. And such rights are, in any case, indispensable components of the political common good, so that even when they defend themselves, they also defend that good. Supporting such Christians must be among the highest priorities for global Christian-democratic action in the West.

But Evangelicals in the Global South are increasingly taking up political action, in newly democratized political systems, to press for much more than just security. This is all to the good, but too often they do so having had no opportunity to develop any breadth of theological or political vision able to steer them away from sectionalist temptations. The outcome is often what Paul Freston calls “corporatism”: “While universalist concerns such as human rights and democracy predominate among some actors, the practice of many is reducible to an ecclesiastical corporatism which seeks to enlist state resources for church aggrandisement.”³⁶ The goal of such practice is “to strengthen the churches as corporations, to equip them better for their activities, to reward some of their members individually (...) and to strengthen their position *vis á vis* other faiths in the country....Benefits received are not seen as a betrayal of the evangelical message, but as a sort of tax which ‘worldly’ power should pay to the truth.”³⁷

Paul Gifford also observes that Evangelicals in Africa are succumbing to entrenched sectionalist patterns such as “neo-patrimonialism,” or “clientelism,” in which powerful patrons – local, tribal, military, business or religious leaders – enter into mutually beneficial exchange relations with their dependent and uncritically loyal supporters.³⁸ While understandably motivated by a desire for material or other benefits for themselves or their churches, such Christians end up merely reinforcing the incapacity of weak African states to move towards a genuine politics of the common good, the rule of law, and impartial administration.

It is all too easy for Christians in the comfortable and relatively secure West to point the finger at Christian sectionalism in the Majority World. But sectionalism is not only a problem for Christians in the Global South. Sectionalism is less of a practical possibility in western states where policy-making operates broadly under the rule of law, and where the notion of the state as a public trust is formally embedded in the political culture, even if often breached in practice. Few will need reminding, however, that one of the most frequent criticisms of the US Congress is that pressures such as localism, the power of incumbency, the weakness of party discipline, and the immense financial clout of interest groups, seriously obstructs Congress’s capacity to generate coherent national policies. Where Christians buy into this kind of politics, even in pursuit of otherwise worthy objectives, they connive in the frustration of the political common good.

Fragmentation

The second challenge to Christian-democratic politics is the *fragmentation of its political energies*. In *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*, leading Evangelical activist Ronald Sider echoes the observation that too much Christian political action in the US over the last generation

³⁶ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 285.

³⁷ Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 294

³⁸ Paul Gifford, “Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa: A Response,” in Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity*, 226.

has appeared to follow the maxim, “ready, fire, aim.”³⁹ He opens his book with the charge that, “Tragically, Christian political activity today is a disaster.” Why? Because “Christians embrace contradictory positions on almost every political issue.”⁴⁰ He is referring to Evangelicals, whose interventions have, for good or ill, dominated the discussion of the Christian contribution to democracy over the last thirty years. But this audience will not need reminding that the Catholic community is hardly free of heated internal political disagreement.

The result is that Christians in the US, as in much of Europe, speak with what James Skillen twenty years ago called “a scattered voice.”⁴¹ By that he meant not only that some Christians can be found supporting almost every available policy idea, whether universal health care or gun control or the death penalty or the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. More importantly he meant that Christians operate out of deeply divergent and often incompatible perspectives on the normative purpose of the state itself, making even constructive dialogue on policy stances, never mind concerted political action, virtually impossible. Now it is clear that there is no ready-made, off-the-peg account of the political common good that we can all just sign up to. But too often, the content we put into these notions reflects the dominant secular ideological traditions around us rather than the considered fruits of a common process of Christian discernment. The challenge he posed then is still just as relevant today:

Politically speaking, Christians ought not to subsist as moralistic parasites on conservative and liberal bandwagons. As citizens and government officials we should not be swept about by every wind of contrary political doctrine.... Without a balanced and biblically wise perspective oriented toward the full reality of government and politics, Christians will continue to swing wildly back and forth from overinvolved zealotry to nay-saying retreat, from single-issue hypermoralism to opportunistic pragmatism, from false hopes to that some political leader can save America to a dismissal of political life as the Devil’s playground.⁴²

Some may ask whether what I am calling “fragmentation” really matters. They might suggest that seeking Christian political consensus is just practically unattainable even if desirable in principle, and that each group had better just get on with the task of working democratically according to its own lights, seeking out its preferred allies, and backing its favored causes. Others might suggest that the very idea of reaching such consensus is theologically invalid – that while making our way through the darkness of the Earthly City we cannot expect the light of the City of God to point us all in the same direction politically. Christian political consensus, they will say, is something for the eschatological future not for our present fallen condition.

There is some value in both these cautions. Even given the utopian ideal of a universally shared global political theology, differences of context, challenge, social location, political culture, and so forth, would militate against any universal consensus on policy or strategy. This is the case even for the Catholic community which, notwithstanding its admirably coherent body of official social teaching, now summarized in a handy one-volume *Compendium* for all to inspect, somehow still can’t all get along politically. But I suggest nevertheless that a Christian-democratic politics shaped by clear conceptions of the purpose of the state and constitutional democracy can take us much further towards consensus on policy principles than we have so far

³⁹ Ronald Sider, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 25.

⁴⁰ Sider, *Scandal*, 11.

⁴¹ James W. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁴² Skillen, *Scattered*, 185.

thought possible. Among Evangelicals, for example, Ronald Sider has proposed a credible theological starting point for a principled consensus in that constituency, and perhaps beyond it. Indeed David Gushee has recently identified an emerging “Evangelical Center” now poised to overcome the polarizations of the chastened Evangelical right and the resurgent Evangelical left.⁴³

Such *intra*-confessional steps toward consensus would already be a significant advance towards the possibility of a coherent Christian-democratic politics. At the same time, steps toward *inter*-confessional rapprochement on basic political principles are also needed. A few promising signs can be seen, both at academic and grass-roots levels. For example, the scholarly discussions taking place under the project “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” have made good progress in the area of doctrine. Might the time now have come for a project called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together in Politics”?⁴⁴

The obstacles to Christian political coherence are much greater in the Majority World, given the fissiparous tendencies of the burgeoning Protestant communities there. Paul Freston writes:

The institutional division [of Third World Protestantism] into myriad denominations is functional for growth but not for concerted political action or for elaborating a normative “social doctrine.” . . . [Protestantism] does not usually have strong institutions; often composed disproportionately of the poor in poor countries, its cultural and educational resources are limited. It operates a model of competitive pluralism. . . which does not encourage reflection or costly stances on ethical principles. It often has no international contacts, cutting it off from the history of Christian reflection on politics.⁴⁵

One encouraging exception is the National Evangelical Council of Peru (CONEP), which succeeded in presenting a united Evangelical front against human rights abuses in the 1980s, and against President Fujomori’s bid for an illicit third term in 2000. Another is the work of the Christian Association of Nigeria in the northern state of Zamfara state. In response to the controversial and divisive incorporation of sharia law into the constitution in 1999, this group was able to present a broadly united Evangelical voice.⁴⁶

But if *intra*-confessional cooperation in the Majority World is demanding enough, *inter*-confessional cooperation can face even stiffer challenges. This is especially so in Latin America where Protestants have often found themselves marginalized in public life in dominantly Catholic countries and so have forged historic alliances with secular liberalism which at least

⁴³ David Gushee, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008). I leave to others to report what the prospects are of parallel signs of rapprochement between, for example, “*First Things Catholics*” and “*Commonweal Catholics*.”

⁴⁴ Since this lecture I have learned that just such an initiative is already under way.

⁴⁵ Freston, “Introduction,” in Freston, ed., *Evangelical Christianity*, 13.

⁴⁶ Nigeria is an example of situations where Christians face the challenge not only of resisting religiously-inspired violence against them, but of formulating workable models of pluralism which avoid the imposition of either official state secularism or renewed Christian hegemony. (See the five-volume series on Nigeria, *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, by Jan H. Boer, published by Essence Publications, Burlington, ON. [www.SocialTheology.com].) No less difficult is the issue of the extent to which Christians should contemplate the accommodation of traditional African religions (such as animism) under arrangements for pluralism. See Ranger, “Introduction,” in Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity*, 32.

offered them religious liberty. Relations across this historic divide often continue to be cool at best.

Even here, however, there are hopeful counter-instances. A Mexican initiative, called “Christian Convergence,” has brought Catholic and Reformed Christians together for political discussion and cooperation, on the assumption that the heavy-handed secularism of the Mexican state is the principal obstacle to Christian-democratic politics, not each other’s diverse theological traditions.⁴⁷ In Guatemala, Protestants and Catholics came together in 1999 in a remarkable example of ecumenical political action, when they succeeded in formulating an alternative draft of a code of rights for children and youth recently passed into law. The code, inspired by UNICEF, contained many good features but was thought to undermine Christian understandings of the integrity of family life and parental authority. Whatever we make of this particular stance, the case is an example of a kind of political cooperation on the basis of which an inter-confessional Christian-democratic politics might be constructed in other contexts, and not only in the Global South.

Let me conclude. To the challenges of sectionalism and fragmentation could be added many more. Advancing the vision of an authentically Christian-democratic politics, in any global context, faces obstacles so enormous that many will be tempted to view it as an impossible dream, perhaps a distraction from more mundane but at least achievable tasks. So I want to emphasize that, as with any large vision, the point is to identify precisely those achievable steps toward it that lie within our power and opportunity to hasten. More importantly, we should recall that promoting a Christian-democratic political vision is simply one of the many tasks of faithful discipleship to which Christians are summoned by the Gospel, and which we are invited to discharge in a spirit of eschatological hope, a hope that God will leave traces of His Kingdom in history in his own time and in his own way, and that in doing so he may also choose to use us along the way.

⁴⁷ Felipe Vázquez Palacios, “Democratic Activity and Religious Practices of Evangelicals in Mexico,” in Freston, ed., *Evangelical Christianity*, 39.