CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING THEIR RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

In the new democratic society in South Africa both Christian faith and theology are facing the challenge to affirm democratic values and goals without selling out to a secular ideology in which Christian faith inevitably becomes privatised. With this challenge in view the relationship between Christianity and democracy is examined. The historic yet ambiguous nature of this relationship is described. Four trajectories within Christian tradition which have made significant contributions to the development of democratic theory and praxis are identified. An attempt is made to delineate more clearly what is meant by democracy. A distinction is made between democracy as a vision of what society should become, and democracy as a system of government which seeks to enable the realisation of that vision within particular contexts. The origins of the democratic vision in the prophetic vision of a society in which the reign of God's shalom will become a reality, are indicated. On the basis of this prophetic vision and the doctrine of the trinity the relationship between democracy and ecclesiology, the church's role within civil society and the tension between national sovereignty and global democratisation are submitted to critical theological reflection.

Introduction

The present debate in South Africa about Christianity and the secular state has raised a host of pertinent issues which have significantly contributed to the post-apartheid agenda for critical theological reflection (De Gruchy 1995). In the church struggle against apartheid, critical theology had the clear task of countering the idolatry of racism; today, within a secular democratic society committed to multi-cultural and religious tolerance, the challenge is to ensure that both Christian faith and theology remain publicly engaged and prophetic. How do we affirm democratic values and goals without selling out to a secular ideology in which Christian faith inevitably becomes privatised? What contribution can and should Christian theologians make to democratic theory and praxis? Such questions provide the rationale for examining the relationship between Christianity and democracy.

1. An historic, yet ambiguous relation

The roots of democracy in the western world may be traced back to ancient Athens and Renaissance Italy. But democracy as we now know it only developed after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and as a result it has become the polity of modernity. At the same time, there has been a long-standing relationship between democracy and Christianity, albeit one which is full of ambivalence, ambiguity and even hostility. Christians have by no means always regarded democracy as the best form of government. In fact, the contrary has more often been true. This has been particularly so in Continental Europe where, from the time of the Enlightenment until after the Second World War, democracy has usually been regarded as inadequate in preventing anarchy and therefore rejected as the unwitting handmaiden of

revolution. In assessing the role of Christianity in contemporary struggles for democracy in Europe, Wolfgang Huber rightly comments that the 'affinity of Christian faith to democratic values' has been severely compromised by 'the historical distance of churches towards democracy' (Huber 1992:35).

Nonetheless, certain fundamental impulses within democracy may be traced to the ancient Hebrew prophets, and western Christendom historically provided the womb within which modern democracy gestated. Thus, while democracy as we now know it is secular in character, many of its original exponents (e.g. John Locke) were deeply rooted in those verities which derived from Christian faith and ethics, even if some of them had already moved beyond the parameters of the church and its theological claims (Berman 1983).

If we take a brief historical detour for a moment, we may refer to at least four trajectories within Christian tradition which have made significant contributions to the development of democratic theory and praxis. The first, which emerged in various ways within Medieval Catholicism (expressed, for example, in the constitution of the Dominican order and conciliarism), brought Christianity into creative interaction with Aristotelian political philosophy. Key political notions, such as subsidiarity and the common good, were developed on a Christian basis. The central focus of this trajectory as it subsequently developed, particularly under the influence of Thomism, as for example in the writings of Jacques Maritain (Maritain 1986), may be labelled Christian personalism. Though democratic in its vision, it is a trajectory which rejects the notion of a society made up of atomistic individuals seeking their own self-interest, affirming human solidarity and participation in the life of an organic society.

The second historical trajectory is the covenantal which derives from the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. This stresses the need for human responsibility before God and towards others on the basis of God's reign in Jesus Christ. In some ways this trajectory corresponds with the secular doctrine of the social contract, yet unlike the social contract, its binding force is not just a sense of obligation, but a commitment to others within the body politic under the authority of God. This leads to a strong emphasis on accountability not only to an electorate but to God. What is required is a just social order which reflects the 'righteousness of God'. The covenantal tradition had a particularly strong impact upon the shaping of democracy in the United States in its formative stages.

The third trajectory, the liberal, which we find expressed variously in the heirs of the Radical Reformation, English Nonconformity, and liberal Protestantism in North America (see, for example, the writings of Martin Luther King jnr.) affirms the dignity of the individual, human rights, the freedom of consciences, separation of church and state, and religious toleration. Liberal Christians have insisted on the God-given value of the individual, and the rights of individual dissent over against both the will of the majority and the power of the state.

The fourth trajectory has been variously embodied within the broad Christian Socialist tradition, and finds contemporary expression in various forms of liberation theology today. Hence there can be no democracy without a just economic order. Key concerns are human solidarity, participation in the democratic process, and economic justice. This trajectory, which has had its advocates across the ecumenical spectrum, has been particularly influential within the ecumenical movement, notably the World Council of Churches.

Each of these four trajectories emerged within specific historical contexts as Christians of different traditions sought to express their faith within the public arena on the basis of the dominant theological motifs and insights of the time. All of them have rejected tyrannical government, though they have developed different strategies for opposing it; all have

acknowledged that human sinfulness leads to political corruption, though some are more optimistic about human nature than others; and all have eschewed selfish individualism and sought to develop forms of community as the place within human beings find fulfilment. Yet the trajectories, though complementary, are not identical in the way in which they have understood or influenced democracy. The personalist trajectory has a more organic understanding of society than the liberal; the liberal has clearly affirmed individual freedoms and given its support more readily to a free-market style economy; the socialist regards economic democracy as a priority. In other words, different Christianities have given different rationales for democracy, and therefore have supported different kinds of democracy.

Ecumenical Christianity, especially after the twentieth century experience of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, now appears to be irrevocably committed to the retrieval of democracy as essential to its vision of a just world order. Indicative of this new Christian appreciation of the value of democracy is the fact that Catholic social teaching, after centuries of hostility and ambivalence, has come out so strongly in recent years in support of democratic forms of government. This can be seen, for example, in John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1992:474). It is noteworthy that while previously Anglo-Saxon Protestantism was the home of democratisation, the so-called 'third democratic transformation' which we have witnessed during the past few decades began in predominantly Roman Catholic countries such as Portugal, Spain, Poland, and Chile.

Of course, Christianity, unlike Islam, has no 'ideal political model written into its foundation charter' (Hastings 1991:4). To this extent Stanley Hauerwas is right in insisting that the 'church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization' (Hauerwas 1981:12). Christianity should not be used to give any political system, including democracy, divine legitimation. On the contrary, it is part of Christian witness within the political sphere to evaluate all political systems prophetically from the perspective of the reign of God. Moreover, the church has to be on its guard especially when it exists within cultures which seem most congenial, for there Christianity is most in danger of losing its critical and prophetic character. This is obviously the case within liberal democracies where the threat to truth and justice is more subtle than blatant.

The fact that it is wrong to equate Christianity with a particular political system does not mean that all systems of government are equally acceptable to Christian faith. 'There is', wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1976:352), 'justification for asking which form of the state offers the best guarantee for the fulfilment of the mission of government and should, therefore, be promoted by the church'. Bonhoeffer was not a liberal democrat, so he was not suggesting that democracy is the best form of government (De Gruchy 1996). But his substantive point remains -- not all systems of government are equally acceptable to Christianity. Karl Barth (1960: 181), reflecting on the task of the church in the aftermath of the Second World War, observed that Christianity, when faithful to the gospel, 'betrays a striking tendency to the side of what is generally called the 'democratic ' state'. Without equating democracy with any of its historic forms, he argued that there is 'an affinity between the Christian community and the civil communities of the free peoples'. Like Reinhold Niebuhr, Barth would have agreed that while the establishment of a democratic order will not usher in the kingdom of God, it is the best form of government that human beings are able to construct given the constraints of our ability and the extent of our fallibility.

With good reason, many people, not least in Africa, remain sceptical about democracy as a system of government which can truly address the challenges of our time, especially those of poverty. Their views may be encapsulated in statements such as: 'we don't want democracy,

we want justice'; 'wherever democracy is implemented violence erupts'; 'democracy is a western system of government that is being used to reinforce neo-colonialism'. There is *prima facie* evidence for all of these. Yet we may argue in return that democracy truly understood is a means to achieve a more just social order; that it is the only long-term solution we know for the creative resolution of conflict and the problem of legitimacy; and that the roots and scope of democracy are much deeper and more inclusive than the western political tradition. How, then, are we to understand democracy, and in what ways does this relate to the public and prophetic witness of the church?

2. Understanding democracy

All democrats would affirm with Abraham Lincoln (1991) that democracy is 'rule of the people by the people for the people'. But there is considerable disagreement about what this sovereignty of the people means, and on how 'popular power' should be structured politically. Indeed, the problem of defining democracy is notorious (Macpherson 1966). But this does not mean that the attempt should not be made to delineate more clearly what we mean by it.

Traditionally, discussions on democracy have distinguished between direct, participatory democracy, and representative democracy. Participatory democracy reminds us of the necessity of the involvement of the people as a whole in the democratic process, and of the importance of what is called civil society. Representative democracy, on the other hand, whereby the people elect others to make decisions and act on their behalf, has become necessary at the macro-level of the region, nation-state, and global arena, because of the demands of size. Participatory and representative forms of democracy are not, however, antithetical but need each other (Macpherson 1977). How they should be related to each other is one of the main challenges facing those who are concerned about the revitalization of democratic forms of government today. Certainly, if the democratic process is to function properly and not become a charade, ways have to be developed whereby the participation of people becomes more than a four year voting formality for the election of representatives.

The two competing ideological variants which have shaped the modern world, liberalism and socialism, have both determined the way in which democracy has developed. Hence the distinctions made between liberal democracy, social democracy, and democratic socialism. Whatever its inadequacies, without liberalism democracy would not have been historically possible, and could not presently function (Hall 1993:275). But without the vision provided by socialism, democracy remains a means of protecting individual self-interest rather than pursuing the common good.

There is, then, a need to distinguish between democracy as a *vision* of what society should become, and democracy as a *system* of government which seeks to enable the realisation of that vision within particular contexts. By democratic *system* I mean those constitutional principles and procedures, symbols and convictions, which have developed over the centuries and which have become an essential part of any genuine democracy whatever its precise historical form. By democratic *vision* I refer to that hope for a society in which all people are truly equal and yet where difference is respected; a society in which all people are truly free, yet where social responsibility rather than individual self-interest prevails; and a society which is truly just, and therefore one in which the vast gulf between rich and poor has been overcome.

Contemporary struggles for democracy and the theoretical debates they have evoked, particularly with regard to gender, culture, and economic issues, have made it necessary for us to go beyond the arid confines of the debate between liberalism and socialism. They have also

indicated the need for democracy to be contextually embodied and developed. There are, indeed, certain universal aspects of democracy irrespective of where it may be implemented, but contextual needs and realities may require that the specific character and shape of democracy vary. The democratic struggle is not simply a matter of extending liberal Western democracy to places where this does not exist; nor can democracy flourish today and serve the cause of justice, equality and freedom if it remains encrusted in past expressions, even though it will embody many of the same principles (Dahl 1989:340).

Democracy as we understand it, then, is both a specific way of structuring society in terms of certain procedures and institutions, and an open-ended process which seeks to become more inclusive, more just, and more truly global. Democracy enables us to pursue freedom and justice in a way which is both structured according to hard won political principles, and yet one which is open-ended. It is therefore not only realistic to affirm, but also appropriate that we recognise that a fully just and democratic world order can never be achieved. Democracy is, as Robert Bellah (1991:20) reminds us, an 'ongoing moral quest' whose success is contingent upon the development of people able to participate fully in the body politic, and therefore of institutions which allow and foster such participation. Democratic theory thus requires the constant critique and revitalization which comes from genuine democratic praxis. This is where critical theological reflection becomes particularly important.

3. Some critical theological reflections

Christianity cannot make its particular contribution to democracy on the basis of the insights provided by political science, however much these are part of the necessary dialogue. Why should anyone listen to theologians if we simply repeat what everyone else is saying? To make a meaningful contribution, one which I would regard as of vital importance, theology has to draw on its own resources in entering into the discussion. In Reinhold Niebuhr's (1944:xii) trenchant words, 'democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history'. Even if it is not acknowledged by secular society, we have good reason to believe with Niebuhr that 'the profundities of the Christian faith ... are indispensable resources for the historic tasks which lie before us' (1944:188).

Our point of departure in this regard must be the witness of the eighth century Hebrew prophets, and the way in which this witness is affirmed and taken further in the proclamation of the reign of God in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The democratic *vision* (as distinct from the *system*) has its origins in the messianic hope for a society in which the reign of God's *shalom* will become a reality. Of course, the religious custodians of the vision, whether Jewish or Christian, have often failed to witness faithfully to its demands. As a result, the vision has been secularised in various ways, some of them revolutionary as in Marxism. Nonetheless, it is essentially the vision of prophetic eschatology which arises out of the experience of liberation, affirms human equality, and seeks social justice. Utopian as it may be, it is this prophetic vision which has been, and often remains, the driving force behind the struggle for democratic transformation across the world, even if it can never be fully realised and embodied adequately in systems of government.

Critical theological reflection on democracy must of necessity continually return to this prophetic source of Christian faith and its witness to the reign of God. Indeed, this provides the basis upon which Christianity must reject all absolutist political claims as idolatrous, and therefore keep the political process open-ended -- both of which are fundamental to the contemporary revitalization of democracy. This also gives us a handle on dealing with issues

such as national sovereignty, political accountability and economic justice. The prophetic vision prevents us, then, from falling into the trap of giving uncritical theological legitimation to any particular expression of democracy, while at the same time it allows us to espouse and articulate the vision which is fundamental to the democratic goal of equality, freedom, and justice.

This brings us back directly to our opening comments with regard to the danger of the church losing its critical and prophetic thrust within a secular democratic society. It is not easy for prophets to speak critically when you are trying to develop a tolerant political ethos within a pluralist context. It is also not easy for prophets who have supported the cause of liberation to exercise their critical craft against former comrades who have finally achieved power. Yet this prophetic task, or 'critical solidarity', is essential for the future well-being of democratic society. Critical solidarity is essential in order to prevent a secular state from privatising religious faith and witness, without at the same time attempting to reassert some kind of Christian triumphalism within the political realm. Democracy is not a form of government that can be established and then left to its own devices. It is in constant need of renewal and development if it is to fulfil its promise. Theological reflection can contribute to this renewal by referring back to the sources of democracy within the Christian tradition, and by enabling the church to participate more faithfully and purposefully in the democratisation process through its witness to the reign of God.

If the prophetic vision provides the necessary utopian and iconoclastic basis for critical theological reflection and ecclesial praxis, reflection on the doctrine of the trinity provides us with the insights necessary to overcome the way in which democracy has become a casualty of the contradictions of modernity, and therefore lost its spiritual foundations. In particular, reflection on trinitarian doctrine enables us to discern ways of transcending the split between individualism and collectivism which has bedevilled the debate between liberalism and socialism, and develop an understanding of human sociality in which both individual rights and the common good are complementary rather than conflictual. At the risk of overloading trinitarian theology, we may also recognise the extent to which it illuminates the debate about gender and cultural differentiation and about power relations.

By bringing the prophetic (critical) and the trinitarian (human sociality) dimensions of Christian theological reflection and tradition together -- in much the same way as others relate the mystical to the prophetic or Christian spirituality and political engagement -- we have a theological basis for both contributing to the debate about democracy and enabling the church to discern its role within the democratic process. If the prophetic provides us with the necessary critical distance, the trinitarian enables us to contribute to the construction of a truly democratic society. In pursuing this task we may well ponder on the four trajectories we discussed earlier in order to see what insights we may derive from those theological and ecclesial traditions. But this cannot take the place of developing our own theological reflections in relation to our particular context and Christian witness within it. In conclusion, then, let us reflect on three issues, viz., the relationship between democracy and ecclesiology; the church's role within civil society; and national sovereignty and global democratisation.

4. Democracy and Ecclesiology

From the beginning of the Christian movement the role of the church in society has not only been to proclaim the message of the reign of God but to seek to be a sign of that reign within its own ecclesial life and structures. In the course of Christian history, canon law and the polity of the *ekklesia* has had a considerable influence on the shaping of western constitutional

law. And in many situations, such as the Third Reich, the structure of the church became a matter of considerable theological and political importance. As the Barmen Declaration indicates, ideological critique of Nazism on its own was insufficient; there was also the need for an ecclesiology of human sociality and solidarity.

If genuine democracy should enable human fulfilment and flourishing, how much more should the life of the church enable its members to discover an even deeper fulfilment and freedom in Christ. Thus it has been argued that 'the most authentic support that the church can give to a democratic order of society remains that of an effective and increasingly profound praxis of communion within itself' (Provost and Walf 1992:23). For this reason there is much contemporary debate on whether or not the church should itself be more democratic in its own structures.

The issues are complex because for some traditions hierarchy is of the essence of the church whereas for others the goal is an egalitarian community. Even so, all church traditions would insist that the final authority for the church is not the will of the majority but the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ 'according to the Scriptures'. Nonetheless we need to recognise that from the beginning the idea of participation has been central to all forms of church government. This is symbolised most dramatically by the sacrament of baptism which declares that all those who are baptised, irrespective of gender, social class, or ethnicity, are united as equals within one body and share together in the mission of the church in the world. The debate about the democratisation of the church is really about the implications of baptism (Provost and Walf 1992:17). To what extent have these implications got to do with authority and power within the life of the church?

Although the emphasis of Vatican II on the church as the 'people of God' did not mean a rejection of hierarchy, it did pave the way for the fuller participation of all Catholics in the life of the church at various levels (Vorgrimler 1966:98). In many respects, its ecclesiology was a rediscovery of the Medieval notion of subsidiarity and the representative aspects of conciliarism. Even if not intended by all, Vatican II also provided an opening for some to go further towards the democratic transformation of the church, as in various forms of 'base communities' in and through which such participation could be meaningfully expressed. In the words of Jon Sobrino (1981:103):

> In the Church of the poor the age-old barriers between hierarchy and faithful, priests and workers, peasants and intellectuals have been broken down. They have been broken down not by a process of formal democratisation in which all are made equal, but by the rise of solidarity in the form of 'bearing one another's burdens', being 'one' ecclesial body, and thus making the Church 'one'.

Thus liberation theology, with its strong prophetic witness against injustice and poverty, developed an ecclesiology of human sociality and solidarity which was of crucial significance for democratic transformation within society as a whole.

A similar development has taken place within feminist/womanist theologies. Their critique of the dominant paternalistic structures of the churches has led to attempts to form an alternative ecclesiology which is likewise related to the wider democratic transformation of society (Ruether 1985; Thistlethwaite 1983; Oduyoye 1986). Indeed, the question of the relationship between equality and difference which has been raised by both feminist and womanist political theorists and theologians has become critical both for democracy and the public witness of the Christian faith today (Ruether 1989:125). The recognition of gender-difference in the life of the church, and how this impacts for example on the ordination of women, is clearly of fundamental importance in raising questions about the relationship

between patriarchy and hierarchy. Should women allow themselves to be co-opted into the hierarchical structures of the church rather than bring about the transformation of the church as a whole in ways which express human solidarity, enable equal participation, overcome patriarchal domination, and promote justice within society. In other words, the ecclesial vision is directly related to the heart of the democratisation process. That is, to the sharing of power within the life of the church and society.

5. The church and civil society

If political society refers to the structures of government or the state, including the civil service, then civil society is that network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), churches and other religious communities, trade unions and voluntary associations, which, in modern societies provide the means whereby people can participate in pursuing social goals and protecting particular interests. When it is functioning best, 'civil society provides an intermediate layer of governance between the individual and the state that is capable of resolving conflicts and controlling the behaviour of members without public coercion' (Schmitter and Karl 1991:80) A strong civil society is necessary if democratic transition from authoritarian rule is to be sustained, reversals resisted and democratic transformation pursued.

From a theological perspective, the church can never be regarded as simply another NGO within civil society. Its prophetic witness to the reign of God, and its witness to the gospel of forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation, requires that it always retain a critical distance from both political and civil society, that it refuses to be co-opted. Indeed, if that critical distance is surrendered the church does not become more relevant but less relevant within society.

Nonetheless, the church is also a very significant institution within civil society. Just as it may provide a model for society, it can also provide space within which those engaged in the struggle for democracy can find solidarity and a home. In fact the development of local communities of participatory democracy is a key contribution which the church can make to democratic transformation and the development of a democratic culture which is so fundamental to the success of any democracy. Precisely because the church does represent a diversity of culture and ideology it also embodies the potential of enabling the building of a new ethos of understanding and tolerance without which democracy is impossible, but also without surrendering its distinct witness.

There can be little doubt that the ecumenical peace monitoring task force established by the South African Council of Churches with the help of overseas ecumenical partners was of considerable importance as part of the wider monitoring task force provided by the United Nations and by the National Peace Committee. Indeed, as a church-based project it had its own unique and specific contribution to make because of its direct connection to grass-roots communities and their leadership. Likewise, as in the Civil Rights Struggle in the United States, where voter registration was such a key issue, so in South Africa as elsewhere, the church has a vital role in voter education and in helping to prepare the way for free and fair elections with the maximum of participation (Duncan 1992).

This raises a further issue of fundamental importance, namely the need for Christians to co-operate with people of others faiths in the building of a democratic culture. Hans Küng (1988:227) has rightly said 'that discussion with the other world religions is actually essential to survival, necessary for the sake of peace in the world.' Those familiar with Küng's argument will know that this broadening of ecumenical vision does not mean a lack of concern for the truth claims of the Christian gospel, nor does dialogue mean an end to witness. But it does

mean a very different attitude and approach towards other religions, and a sharing together with them in ensuring justice in society, in dealing with the environmental crisis, and in enabling the flourishing of humane values.

It is not surprising that political and religious radicalism and fundamentalism flourish in situations of political uncertainty and transition. But a major test of a truly free and democratic society is the extent to which it permits and protects religious freedom -- not just the freedom of worship, but also the freedom of witness. In Niebuhr's words (1944:124), 'one of the greatest problems of democratic civilization is how to integrate the life of its various subordinate, ethnic, religious and economic groups in the community in such a way that the richness and harmony of the whole community will be enhanced and not destroyed by them.'

6. Global democratisation and the ecumenical vision

One of the major threats to both democracy and Christianity has always been that of nationalism. Tragically, the collapse of communism in eastern Europe resulted not only in the attempt to create democratic societies, but it to the resurgence of nationalism. This is an issue with which we in South Africa have to deal in relation both to our neighbouring countries and the many foreigners who have entered our borders. The church as an ecumenical community has a key role to play in regard to both issues, as well as in countering any forms of nationalism and patriotism which are uncritical, jingoistic and unjust. Perhaps our prophetic witness is most needed in this regard. Even as we rightly and necessarily seek to engage in national building, we must be critically wary of the dangers of nationalism. The church has the responsibility of preventing the nation from embarking on ventures which lead us down the slippery slope of national chauvinism.

National sovereignty has legitimacy, but not in any absolute sense. Many of the problems facing the future of humanity, not least those concerning the economic order, development, health, and the environment, are not and cannot be confined within national boundaries. In order to deal with them effectively they require international co-operation. Just as the tension between individual and community interests are dealt with most satisfactorily and creatively through the democratic process, so there is no other way for the future of just and peaceful world politics than through dealing with the tension between national and international interests in the same way. For example, because the debt crisis is 'in the long-term interest of most people in the world' it might be necessary to ensure that the norms of international financial transactions are more democratic (Bellah 1991:248).

The globalization of democracy has now become essential because a 'global interconnectedness' has created 'chains of interlocking political decisions and outcomes among states and their citizens, altering the nature and dynamics of national political systems themselves' (Held 1992:39). Thus, while the focus of democratisation in the past shifted from the city-state to the nation, so its future focus must be the ecumene as such. We therefore need to be reminded that ecumenism is not primarily about the church, but about a just world order; the search for the unity of the church, and its mission within the world, are bound up with a vision of the world characterised by justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. That is our missiological mandate. It is not a mandate to promote the democratic system as such, but it is a mandate which impinges directly upon and is fundamental to global democratic transformation.

Democracy by its very nature is a fragile form of government, and the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic order is beset with enormous problems. In many countries the process is exacerbated by large-scale inequalities, a lack of resources, including money and

time, and an inadequate education and preparation for democratic participation. In countries such as South Africa, this has been made worse by a legacy of racist oppression in which people have been systematically deprived of resources. To assume, then, that a new democratic order of world justice and peace is around the corner and that all that is required of us is some mopping up operation, would be theoretically foolish, politically fatal, and theologically unsound. It is, as Niebuhr (1944:159) described, one of the illusions of 'the children of light' to assume that the forces pushing towards world community cannot be stopped or reversed. However cogent democratic theories might be, they are not self-fulfilling (Dahl 1989:30). There is good reason, then, for a greater degree of realism with regard to the so-called 'new world order' than was previously the case since those astounding events of 1989.

Yet the fact remains that we have entered a new historical epoch for good or ill. 'It would be a mistake,' then, 'to replace an optimistic evolutionary view with a cynical and pessimistic cyclical alternative. For the last two centuries have witnessed an increase, often interrupted and certainly slow, in the number of stable democracies' (Held 1992:350; Fiorenza 1983:272). We cannot ignore the risks, the current disorder, and the promise of more to come, but all is by no means dark for those who live and work in anticipation that the present democratic transformation will fulfil its promise. There is good reason to believe that present and anticipated traumas may well be the birth-pangs of new and more just and democratic social orders throughout the world. The transition to democracy, whether on a national or international scale, will inevitably involve a long and difficult march. The route may vary considerably from one historical context to another, but there is no alternative but to press on in the struggle for a new democratic order in the modern world.

Irrespective of whether other people are buoyant about political developments or tired and cynical, despairing of an end to the struggle for justice, Christians 'hope against hope', interpreting what is happening in the light of God's promise. Unless this hope is kept alive there can be no commitment to the struggle for a democratic society because the ecumenical vision of a renewed and transformed cosmos has been surrendered. Thus faithfulness to the gospel means an ongoing commitment to the struggle for the just transformation of society. It is the task of the church to keep that hope alive through its participation in the mission of God to make all things new.

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