

# Speaking from Faith in Democracy<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:** faith, representative democracy, pluralism.

**Abstract:** In liberal democracies characterised by both advanced secularisation and religious pluralism, Christians need both to critically retrieve and re-articulate the rich legacy of Christian political thought which has profoundly formed modern political systems, and to come to terms with the new challenges and opportunities thrown up by post-Christendom pluralism. Christians have robust reasons to favour representative constitutional government, and they should engage constructively and confidently in democratic debate in pursuit of the public good. On the one hand, they should defend a “principled pluralism” which treats diverse religious perspectives equitably in the public realm, and, on the other, remain prepared in certain situations to display “confessional candour” as they speak from faith into democracy.

### INTRODUCTION

The question explored here is how people of Christian faith can most faithfully and effectively represent their political concerns in the context of a liberal democracy which, on the one hand, has become so pervasively secularised, and yet which, on the other, now houses a ramifying pluralism of voices, both religious and secular. The article assumes a standpoint of Christian faith and is addressed primarily to Christians. But it is important to acknowledge that the question of the role of faith in democracy today cannot be answered adequately by purely internal dialogues within any one faith community. Voices from other faith perspectives, and dialogues between many of them, are obviously essential if debates on the question are to have any constructive public impact.

The article is concerned not so much with the *content* of Christian political concerns – what specific policy objectives Christians might promote. Much creative work is being done on this by a range of organisations in Britain and elsewhere. It is concerned rather with *motivation* and *communication*. It focuses on *why* Christians should take up political engagement at all, and then on *how* they should speak politically – how they should articulate their characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a lecture delivered at the inaugural event of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, Tyndale House, Cambridge, held at the Divinity Faculty of the University of Cambridge, 24 January 2007. [www.KLICE.co.uk](http://www.KLICE.co.uk). It addresses itself principally to the British ecclesial and political contexts, and does not attempt a thorough review of developments in the USA or Europe.

concerns in a situation shaped by a sometimes bewildering blend of restrictive secularism and pluralistic openness. Accordingly, its interest lies in the representative side of the democratic system rather than the legislative or executive sides – in inputs rather than outputs. The argument is that the Christian community should discern in the pluralism of viewpoints now characterising contemporary society not only a demanding challenge to its historically inherited public status, though it certainly is that, but also an opportunity for new avenues of faithful public witness. It addresses mainly the role of Christians in their capacity as citizens, rather than that of organs of the institutional church.

The article has three parts. The first briefly sketches the contemporary (British) context in which these questions are posed, illustrating it with reference to a noted contribution to recent public debate. The second offers an account of why Christians should actually favour democracy in the first place; that is, why and in what sense they should have “faith in democracy.” The third proposes an approach to democratic engagement in which Christians can, with confidence and integrity, contribute an authentic minority voice to the discernment of the public good – in which they can “seek the welfare of the city,” even while living “in exile.”<sup>2</sup>

#### *FAITH AND DEMOCRACY: HOW COMPATIBLE?*

In December 2006, Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped momentarily and no doubt inadvertently into the longstanding debate in western history over the relationship between religious faith and political authority. In the course of a thoughtful but typically pugnacious speech on multiculturalism,<sup>3</sup> he called for a better balance between “the right to be different” and “the duty to integrate.” He then addressed the problem of the conflict between what he called “British values” and religiously-motivated extremism. Urging the need to specify a set of shared commitments defining what British citizenship requires, he said:

*Obedience to the rule of law, to democratic decision-making about who governs us, to freedom from violence and discrimination are not optional for British citizens. They are what being British is about. Being British carries rights. It also carries duties. And those duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice.*

The speech occasioned controversy for a number of reasons. One was that it offered a somewhat thin and contestable definition of what “Britishness” means. Another was its lack of clarity on the distinctions between religion, culture and

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<sup>2</sup> Jer. 29: 7. For a fine treatment of the early church’s embodiment of this calling, see Winter, Bruce W. *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> “The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values,” 8 December 2006. <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10563.asp>

race. Those important questions will be bypassed here in order to focus on the crucial ambiguity in the words just quoted, in the assertion that the obligations of citizenship “take precedence” over *any* religious practice. Now on a favourable interpretation these words are unremarkable and indisputable: established legal obligations such as the duty to accept the outcome of democratic elections, to refrain from violence or incitement to violence, and to avoid arbitrary discrimination, cannot simply be set aside whenever someone appeals to what they take to be a religiously-imposed duty. As the American philosopher William Galston has bluntly put it, liberal democracies should not extend the right to the free exercise of religion to Aztecs.<sup>4</sup> Nor should they extend it to radical jihadists, or to loyalist paramilitaries.

But on another interpretation, probably wrong but surely foreseeable in current circumstances, the Prime Minister was heard to be implying something much more momentous: that the political values of the state exercise an unqualified priority over the claims of any religion. Not surprisingly a Muslim spokesman was quick to point out that any true Muslim would be bound to regard the authority of the Koran as ultimately standing above that of the British state. Many religions would make parallel claims about their own sources of authority. Introducing a global survey of the issue, American political scientist Nancy Rosenblum quite rightly observes:

*Not all demands of faith are compatible with the obligations of democratic citizenship, even if they claim to be.... The question for [some religious groups] is not accommodation between democracy and faith but the compatibility of democracy with faith.*<sup>5</sup>

But lest we think this is an issue only for religions other than Christianity, listen to what influential Catholic philosopher John Courtney Murray said about the question nearly fifty years ago:

*The question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent.... It must...be turned round to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism.*<sup>6</sup>

Murray’s question is being posed much more forcefully in our time by theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist and pacifist inspired by Anabaptist ecclesiology. Hauerwas charges Christians in western liberal

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<sup>4</sup> Galston, William. *Liberal Pluralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenblum, Nancy L., ed. *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Democracies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, John Courtney. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1960, ix-x.

democracies with succumbing to “the democratic policing of Christianity” – causing them to betray the radical demands of the Gospel and to allow themselves to be refashioned into the image of a liberal individualism.<sup>7</sup>

John Courtenay Murray was quick to reassure his readers of fifty years ago that Catholicism was indeed compatible with democracy, and much of his life’s work was devoted to persuading his American co-religionists that they could and should commit themselves wholeheartedly to democratic engagement. In recent times many Muslim voices have been offering similar reassurances about Islam, and with justification, since within classical Islam there is a recognised obligation on those Muslims not living in officially Islamic states, to abide by the law of the land in which they are resident.

But writers like Hauerwas are much less inclined than Murray to offer such reassurances about the compatibility of authentic biblical faith with what he regards as the debased “values” of western democracy. And Hauerwas is only the most prolific and the noisiest of a growing chorus of Christian critics of (one or other aspect of) modern liberal democracy. This is a discordant chorus, including such diverse voices as the influential theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, birthed here in Cambridge;<sup>8</sup> the Anabaptist-inspired London-based think tank Ekklesia;<sup>9</sup> and, at a very different place on the political spectrum, the (Judeo-)Christian neo-conservatism associated with the American journal *First Things*, which some years ago caused a minor earthquake by announcing that the judicial activism of the Supreme Court was undermining the very legitimacy of the American regime itself.<sup>10</sup>

So Murray’s question – how far is Christian faith actually compatible with modern liberal democracy? – is evoking a wide range of answers today. With memories of 7/7 still very much alive, we need no reminder of the malevolent answers being given to the question by a small minority, or of the need to restrain deadly political speech. Yet it is essential to restate that people of faith are not faced with a straightforward choice between, on the one hand, religiously-inspired violence, and, on the other, pliant accommodation to whatever demands

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<sup>7</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. “The Democratic Policing of Christianity.” In Hauerwas, Stanley, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994. Jeffrey Stout critiques Hauerwas’s attack on liberal democracy, with some justification, in *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, ch. 7. Hauerwas replies in “Democratic Time: Lessons Leaned from Yoder and Wolin.” *Crosscurrents* (Winter 2006), 535-552.

<sup>8</sup> See, especially, Milbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. For a critical response, see Chaplin, Jonathan, “Suspended Communities or Covenanted Communities?: Reformed Reflections on the Social Thought of Radical Orthodoxy.” In Smith, James K. and Olthuis, James H., eds., *Creation, Covenant and Participation: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 151-182.

<sup>9</sup> [www.ekklesia.co.uk](http://www.ekklesia.co.uk); [www.postchristendom.com](http://www.postchristendom.com).

<sup>10</sup> The Editors, “The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics,” *First Things* 67 (November 1996), 18-20.

a secularised democratic state happens to impose on them – between fanaticism and domestication. In his brisk speech the Prime Minister glossed over the scope and complexity of the questions he had inadvertently raised. But we can be grateful that he raised them, for they lend further momentum to a wide-ranging, far-reaching, and long overdue public debate over, first, the relationship between the claims of religion and the claims of democracy, and second, over the way in which faith-based claims should be presented in a pluralistic democracy.<sup>11</sup> These are the questions addressed in the next two sections.

### FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

It is important first to define the sense in which the term “democracy” will be used. Often the term is used loosely to mean anything from a society that values freedom, tolerance or human rights, to an egalitarian society which has cast off medieval hierarchy, or even simply to a modern society. Political scientists often use it to refer to a system expressing the doctrine of “popular sovereignty.” Here it will be used to refer instead to something more specific, namely “representative constitutional government,”<sup>12</sup> sometimes termed “constitutional democracy.” This is an arrangement which provides effective structures of popular representation and advocacy, but embeds those structures within a framework of constitutional restraints on popular will and governmental action. Representative constitutional government does not depend on the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which is an ambiguous doctrine at the best of times. But it does assume that the people – the citizenry – play a fundamental and an indispensable role in the process of governance.

The historical roots of representative constitutional government as we have come to know it today are many and varied, but among the deepest are those deriving from the biblical tradition and the subsequent history of Christian political reflection responding to that tradition.<sup>13</sup> There is no space here to review

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<sup>11</sup> Among the more recent British contributions on this theme are, e.g., the journal *Political Theology*; Fergusson, David. *Church, State and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; *Faith and Nation: Report of a Commission of Inquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance*. London: Evangelical Alliance, 2006; Spencer, Nick. *Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*. London: Theos, 2006; Schluter, Michael & Ashcroft, John, eds. *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda, and strategy for christian social reform*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005; Bartley, Jonathan. *Faith and Politics after Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> This term is preferable to the more standard term “liberal democracy,” as it indicates that the latter is but *one construal* of the normative principles justifying and conditioning representative constitutional government. It is the dominant construal today but it typically underplays the vital Christian antecedents to constitutional democracy.

<sup>13</sup> See O’Donovan, Oliver and Lockwood O’Donovan, Joan, eds. *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000; Canning, Joseph. *A History of Medieval Political Thought 300-1450*. New York:

those roots in detail, only to summarise five distinctive principles – of equality, freedom, justice, authority, and accountability – that have crystallised out of the complex and ambiguous history of Christian thought and experience. The following account draws more on pre-modern and early modern insights than contemporary ones which will be better known. The account is inevitably selective, but hopefully not self-serving.

First, the principle of human equality: the assertion of the common spiritual status of all humans as bearers of the divine image.<sup>14</sup> This biblical confession came to be practically embodied in the participatory political forms prescribed in the Hebrew scriptures, in the corporate experience of the early church and of later monastic and other religious communities, and again in the practice of early modern Protestant congregations. The principle worked to undermine any notions of permanent natural racial or social hierarchies,<sup>15</sup> and lent a distinctive foundation to the modern idea of human rights and the radical political implications flowing from it.

Second, the principle of spiritual freedom: the insistence that only uncoerced faith could be genuine faith. This laid the foundation for what was to become, much later, the principle of civil religious freedom – but only after many tragic and bloody conflicts, in which, for example, the witness of sixteenth-century Anabaptism played an exemplary prophetic role.<sup>16</sup> In turn that principle was the foundation for the wider principle of freedom of conscience so central to the modern western understanding of political representation.

Third, the principle of transcendent justice: the claim that justice was never simply whatever existing law or social order determined but rather derived from a source originating beyond, and standing in judgement on, both human tradition and human will.<sup>17</sup> Out of this was born a powerfully reformist stance towards

Routledge, 1996; Tierney, Brian. *Religion, law and the growth of constitutional thought 1150-1650*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; De Gruchy, John. *Christianity and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Maddox, Graham. *Religion and the Rise of Democracy*. London: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> See O'Donovan, Oliver. *The Ways of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, ch. 3; Rivers, Julian. "The Abuse of Equality." *Ethics in Brief* 11/1 (Summer 2006); Forrester, Duncan B. *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality*. London: SCM, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Medieval Christian political thought frequently obscured the *social* implications of this notion in virtue of being excessively influenced by a static concept of natural social hierarchy, originating in Greek and Roman philosophy and law rather than in the egalitarian and covenantal tradition of Hebrew religion.

<sup>16</sup> For a review of theological arguments in favour of religious toleration, see Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, ch. 4. Fergusson's judgment that "a theology of toleration is better served by attention to arguments from the early modern period than by secular claims that are often corrosive of our deepest convictions" (*Church, State and Civil Society*, 74), seems sound.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich, Carl J. *Transcendent Justice: The Religious Dimension of Constitutionalism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964; Gardner, E. Clinton. *Justice and Christian*

corrupt social institutions,<sup>18</sup> of which one outstanding modern manifestation was the Christian contribution to the legal abolition of the slave trade.

Fourth, a principle of distributed authority: the argument that political authority was not the only or the highest authority in human society, but was entrusted to governments by God to pursue a specific and carefully circumscribed purpose.<sup>19</sup> Government was not to usurp the many other social authorities given by God for the well-being of human society – church, marriage, family, economic and many other associations – but to establish conditions of justice and peace in which those other authorities could flourish. Such a plural distribution of authority is evident already in the highly distinctive polity of ancient Israel. It is cryptically, but emphatically, reaffirmed by Jesus in his words, “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”<sup>20</sup> – words which do not imply a compartmentalisation between divine and political authority but rather a radical subordination of the limited authority of government to the comprehensive Lordship of Yahweh. It is asserted again in the resistance of the early church to the sacral pretensions of the Roman Empire. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin has captured this most profound of Christian political claims as the “de-divinization of politics.”<sup>21</sup> Its implications in western experience for the humbling of political authority and the liberation of civil society are hard to exaggerate.<sup>22</sup>

*Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Berman, Harold J. *Faith and Order: The Reconciliation of Law and Religion*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> This reformist thrust came to be characteristic especially of early Calvinism; see, for example, Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, ch. 1.

<sup>19</sup> On this and the fifth principle, see Rivers, Julian, “Government,” in Schluter & Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto*. The purpose of government in Christian thought has been variously understood as, e.g., the establishment of justice, or the securing of the common good. Both were seen to demarcate a sphere of activity unique to government and thereby to impose clear limits on its authority.

<sup>20</sup> On this reading of the text, see Bauckham, Richard. *The Bible in Politics: How to read the Bible politically*. London: SPCK, 1989, ch. 5; Lugo, Luis E. “Caesar’s Coin and the Politics of the Kingdom: A Pluralist Perspective.” In Luis E. Lugo, ed. *Caesar’s Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government*. Washington, D.C.: EPPC/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, 1-22; Storkey, Alan. *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, ch. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 106.

<sup>22</sup> For the notion of a “humbled” state, see O’Donovan, Oliver, *The Desire of the Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, ch. 6. See also Wolin, Sheldon, *Politics and Vision*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, ch. 4. On the role of Christianity in preparing the ground for independent civil society institutions, see Taylor, Charles, “Invoking Civil Society,” in Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995, 204-225; Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, ch. 9; Coleman, John A. “A Limited State and a Vibrant Society: Christianity and Civil Society,” in Rosenblum Nancy L. & Post, Robert C. eds. *Civil Society and Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, 223-254; Banner, Michael. “Christianity and Civil Society.” In

The fifth principle, the accountability of government not only to God but also to law and to citizens, flows out of the first four.<sup>23</sup> The basic constitutional norm of the rule of law, an essential check on governmental arbitrariness, is at bottom grounded in this principle. The principle requires that not only citizens but also governments and their agents are subject to and answerable before the law. The principle was in fact singled out by Mr. Blair in his speech as one of the “shared values” that defined “Britishness.”<sup>24</sup>

The related principle, that governments are also accountable to *citizens*, derives from the intuition that political wisdom is not the monopoly of rulers but that ordinary people are gifted by God with a sense of justice, and so can contribute to the discernment of the public good. Today this has come to mean that they are entitled to participate in the selection of rulers and in the ongoing formation and critical evaluation of public policy.<sup>25</sup> This is the deepest justification for the structures of popular representation we know today: not some supposed right of personal moral autonomy as for much modern liberalism, but rather a call of God to contribute to the common discernment of the public good.

It is important, however, to add a contemporary sharpening of this historically evolving view of representation. For structures of representation to fulfill their normative purpose today, they should meet at least three conditions: (1) they must be institutionalised, and not merely *ad hoc* manifestations of popular acclaim, solicited at the whim of and in the interests of rulers; (2) they must be effective expressions of the views of the entire citizenry, allowing all citizens, but especially the least powerful, to have their voices registered in public debate – the poor, the alien, the sick, the disabled, the stigmatised, the unborn, and the elderly, for example; (3) they must register the considered political convictions of citizens, and not their shifting and manipulable temporary enthusiasms transmitted through or manufactured by opinion polls or focus groups. These are demanding aspirations. They make demands not only on governments but equally on citizens. For example, if citizens do not have any considered convictions, they will have few resources to resist being manipulated by those who do and who possess the power to pursue them. To adapt a phrase famously coined by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a healthy representative

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Chambers, Simone & Kymlicka, Will, eds. *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002, 113-130.

<sup>23</sup> On this see, e.g., Friedrich, *Transcendent Justice*; Villa-Vicencio, Charles. *A Theology of Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, ch. 2.

<sup>24</sup> It is, therefore, deeply troubling that in the case of the Serious Fraud Office’s investigation of alleged corruption in arms deals with Saudi Arabia, he was prepared to subordinate the principle, without adequate public explanation, to supposed “national interests;” and even more disturbing that previous suspicions of illegal collusion between security services and loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland have recently been emphatically confirmed (see “Operation Ballast”. [www.policeombudsman.org](http://www.policeombudsman.org)).

<sup>25</sup> On the distinctive Puritan contribution, see Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy*, ch. 6.



democracy needs more than ever, not only conviction politicians, but conviction citizens.

These five principles – of equality, freedom, justice, distributed authority, accountability – obviously find echoes in other traditions of thought, and have of course been influenced by them. But they have an authentically biblical cast and have proved to be of enduring significance in shaping the constitutional democracies we enjoy today. Although the foregoing account of them has had to be slender, they have been highlighted because Christians are sometimes swayed too easily by the widely-held perception that constitutional democracy is entirely the invention of secular modernity and that Christianity's role in its emergence was overwhelmingly reactionary. On the contrary, Christianity has had, and still has, powerful and distinctive resources for the generation and sustenance of such a system today. This is, indeed, borne out by the significant, and occasionally decisive, role played by people of Christian inspiration in democratising movements in many places of the world over the last thirty years<sup>26</sup> – in contexts as diverse as East Germany and Poland, Argentina and Nicaragua, South Africa and Kenya, Philippines and South Korea.

So although Christians are now a minority community, they are not in the situation of the early church. Christians live *post*-Christendom, which means both that they must not forget the heavy burden of failure in their compromised past, but also that they must not neglect the valuable cultural legacy of Christian political wisdom still sustaining our political system, a legacy on which Christians can draw into the future, and which still makes possible elements of a common political language across faith perspectives.

There are, then, well-grounded and compelling reasons why Christians should favour a system of representative constitutional government over others.<sup>27</sup> Contemporary Christianity, and not only in the West, has increasingly come to adopt what has been called a clear “preferential option for constitutional democracy.”<sup>28</sup> It can be ventured that such a position is what is required of those who wish to be faithful to the biblical tradition today.<sup>29</sup> Christians, then, have a

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<sup>26</sup> See Witte, John, Jr., ed. *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. For a multi-faith global comparison, see Diamond, Larry et al, eds. *World Religions and Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> On the important question of whether this system is really western rather than Christian, see Skillen, James W. “Politics in One World.” *Philosophia Reformata* 66 (2001), 117-131. Kwame Bediako explores Christianity's powerful potential for undermining authoritarianism in Africa, in “Unmasking the Powers: Christianity, Authority, and Desacralization in Modern African Politics”, in Witte, ed., *Christianity and Democracy*, 207-230.

<sup>28</sup> Grasso, Kenneth L. “Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, the Free Society, and the Second Vatican Council.” In Grasso, Kenneth L. *Catholicism, Liberalism and Communitarianism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, 30.

<sup>29</sup> In *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, American political theorist Robert Kraynak concludes instead that democracy is a late and regrettable aberration for Christianity. He argues that the embrace of

powerful motivation to commit themselves wholeheartedly to principled and critical engagement in such a system.

But when they do that, how should they speak? The final part of this article focuses more narrowly on representation, on how Christians should communicate their concerns in a simultaneously secularising and pluralising context. What should be their strategic aspirations as they take up democratic politics and how should they convey them?

### SPEAKING FROM FAITH, INTO DEMOCRACY

The argument of this part is that Christian democratic engagement today will be most effective if it can embrace a *principled, equitable pluralism*.<sup>30</sup> By this is meant a representative politics which responds justly to the expanding and challenging diversity of political visions now clamouring to enter it – a diversity which, of course, characterises the Christian community itself. A principled pluralism is, obviously, opposed to an *unprincipled* pluralism based on moral scepticism and feeding a pragmatist politics of interest-brokerage. It is also opposed to a principled *monism* in which one faith perspective – religious or secular – assumes the right to dominate democratic debate and relegate rivals to the sidelines. Rather it offers equitable representative status to all political visions who seek to make their voice heard and who are prepared to act constitutionally. In our society many such visions are indeed advancing distinctive and often incompatible claims to political truth in public debate, offering rival accounts of what makes for the public good. At times this produces a pleasing rainbow of diversity, at others a jarring cacophony. But this presents not only a challenge to Christian people but also a new opportunity. It implies two strategic guidelines: one the one hand, the relinquishing of political privilege, and on the other, the facilitation of “confessional candour.”

First, a principled, equitable pluralism implies that Christians can no longer assume the right to any privileged status in public debate. The reality of pluralism is making increasingly untenable the claims of those who favour what has been called a “Christian nation” stance.<sup>31</sup> This stance proceeds from a broadly correct

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democracy by modern Christianity is indicative of its uncritical absorption of Enlightenment ideas, such as Kant’s notion of radical moral autonomy. Arguably, however, this late embrace indicates a *blocked maturing* of political principles rooted deeply in the biblical tradition and working themselves out over many centuries. On the other hand, see the wise Christian reservations about modern liberal democracy in O’Donovan, *Ways of Judgement*, ch. 10.

<sup>30</sup> See Skillen, James W. *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994; Mouw, Richard J. and Griffioen, Sander. *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> For defences and critiques of American versions of this position, see Smith, Gary Scott, ed. *God and Politics: Four Views of the Reformation of Civil Government*. Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1989. Insightful treatments of “nationhood”

empirical assumption: that British culture and politics have historically been shaped predominantly by Christian faith, indeed by Protestant faith. The version of constitutional democracy Britain enjoys today undoubtedly still bears this stamp, and Christians may continue to be grateful for that legacy and seek to sustain it by argument and example. The Christian nation position, however, then makes the mistake of invoking the past as a norm for the future: it proposes that Britain's historical Christian formation has created a standing entitlement that Christianity should retain a constitutionally protected influence over culture and law. But this argument falls foul of all such "traditionalist" arguments: it is never enough to evoke what has been in order to justify what should be. On the contrary, Christian political witness today must earn a hearing and make its case on a basis of parity with numerous other minority groups. This should not be a mere reluctant recognition of our minority status, to be quietly abandoned should we ever acquire majority influence again. It is the inescapable contemporary logic of a consistent commitment to the principle of religious freedom discussed earlier.<sup>32</sup>

Vestiges of a former Christian national pre-eminence still survive in aspects of British public life; Anglican Establishment is one of them, the entitlement of Bishops to sit in the House of Lords is another.<sup>33</sup> In themselves these arrangements can bring positive benefits to public life, as their defenders are quick to point out (and among such defenders are representatives of other religious faiths).<sup>34</sup> It is hardly worth diverting huge energies trying to reform them, but they do seem increasingly exposed as remnants of unjustifiable history of constitutional privilege. Representative structures should be open to all faith perspectives – whether religious or secular – on an equitable basis. Christians, then, should relinquish any desire to hold on to protected historical prerogatives. Indeed, in principled pluralism Christians should not only defend their own corner, but be prepared to defend that of others with whom they may deeply disagree. Here, one litmus test might be how Christians would respond to the emergence of a possible Islamic political party (one that committed itself to

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are found in: Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, ch. 7; Rivers, Julian. 'Nationhood.' In Schluter & Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto*, 122-137; Storrar, William. *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision*. Edinburgh: Handsell Press, 1990; Evangelical Alliance, *Faith and Nation*.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, argues, correctly, that extensive religious freedom can be upheld even in a state which accorded some special constitutional status to Christian faith (*Desire*, ch. 6). His case for such special status is forceful and original, though I am not finally persuaded by it. See my "Political Eschatology and Responsible Government: Oliver O'Donovan's Christian Liberalism," in Bartholomew, Craig et al, eds. *A Royal Priesthood*. Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 264-308.

<sup>33</sup> For a careful analysis of these practices, see Evangelical Alliance, *Faith and Nation*. A measured critical evaluation of establishment is offered in Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, ch. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Madood, Tariq, ed. *Church, State and Religious Minorities*. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997.

operating within the law). There is already at least one Christian political party in Britain, the Christian People's Alliance.<sup>35</sup> Whatever we think of such a party, on what principled grounds would Christians oppose the establishment of an Islamic one? Christian public influence today will carry much more integrity and credibility if it flows through democratic channels equitably available to all.

The second guideline for principled pluralism is "confessional candour." The argument so far has been that, in principled pluralism, Christians accept their minority status alongside a multitude of contending voices, each one advancing rival and sometimes incompatible political visions.<sup>36</sup> But the counterpart to this is that Christians should remain fearless and unapologetic in contending for their distinctive vision of the public good, insofar as they have one to offer, and they expect others to do the same. They should stand ready to disclose the unique confessional inspiration that motivates them, at moments when that may be called for. In fact, for principled pluralism to function effectively, confessional candour is actually necessary.

Two immediate clarifications are called for. First, political speech is not preaching, so recommending confessional candour does not imply that Christians enter politics as a platform for the proclamation of their faith. Second, as any practicing politician will immediately point out, for the most part when people of faith engage in politics their faith commitments quite rightly remain in the background, as is the case in most spheres of professional life. This is the normal experience of the many Christians doing fine work from within mainstream political parties. Most political debate is not conducted as a gladiatorial contest between rival political faiths; and much of it consists of marginal, and often mundane, modifications to existing policy.

Yet we are already familiar with the presence of explicitly Christian groups within political parties, such as the Christian Socialist Movement, and reading the publications of such groups leaves no doubt that there is an intentional causal influence between being "Christian" and the party political stance being commended. But going beyond this well-known and fairly relaxed association between faith and partisan stances, it seems undeniable that conflicts between rival political faiths – both religious and secular – are currently intensifying in key areas of policy, and therefore rising more frequently to the surface of public debate.

It is clear that liberal democratic representative systems (much more in Europe than in the USA) remain uncomfortable with the growing confessional candour this seems to evoke – with what the new public theology think tank Theos has called "doing God."<sup>37</sup> But there is an obvious asymmetry at work in public perceptions of the issue. While the expression of religious faith in politics is still often seen as illicit, mainstream secular faiths seem to face no such censure

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<sup>35</sup> [www.cpalliance.net](http://www.cpalliance.net).

<sup>36</sup> We need not positively celebrate such diversity for its own sake: I find nothing to rejoice over in the upsurge of support for minority movements like the British National Party.

<sup>37</sup> Spencer, *Doing God*.

– largely because their status as “faiths” is still denied. A few representatives of such secular faiths are working hard to roll back the new confidence of religious citizens. Commenting recently on this group, Tobias Jones, writing in *The Guardian*, and employing some understandable journalistic hyperbole, claims that “secular fundamentalists are the new totalitarians.”<sup>38</sup> There is indeed troubling evidence of a gradual tightening of freedom of religious expression occurring as a result of legal developments especially in the area of anti-discrimination policy,<sup>39</sup> an issue on which Archbishop Rowan Williams has recently made some valuable interventions.<sup>40</sup> But whatever our precise diagnosis of the status of religious faith in public debate, it is clear that those seeking more confessional candour in such debates face formidable obstacles, and will need to be persistent and prudent as they proceed.

The suggestion, then, that some of our most important debates over public policy are proving so difficult to resolve because they reveal deep and deeply contending underlying faith commitments. In the field of bio-ethics, for example, adherents to fundamentally incompatible convictions about the origin, ending and manipulation of human biological life are engaged in a tense stand-off over how or whether to regulate the awesome potentials of the new medical technologies. The debate over the legal definition and regulation of marriage involves much more than marginal disagreements over matters such as pension entitlements or hospital visiting rights, but is animated by deeply divergent views of whether human relationships come with an inherent moral design or are essentially constructed from autonomous individual choice. But the contest is no less evident in the field of economics, where a rejuvenated neo-classical economic theory, now dominant in the global economy and the leading business schools, is meeting with deep resistance from many rival perspectives arguing for exactly such inherent moral constraints on economic choices. Public policy debates on these

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<sup>38</sup> *The Guardian*, January 6 2007. On this, Theos’s *Doing God* presents a more balanced treatment.

<sup>39</sup> Julian Rivers presents a careful and troubling study of the trend towards a tightening of legal constraints on freedom of religious expression in Britain in “Law, Religion and Gender Equality,” in *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 9/1 (2007), 24-57.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, Rowan. “It is not a crime to hold traditional values.” *Times Higher Education Supplement* 10 December 2006 (addressing the recent conflict in the UK between student unions and Christian Unions); and, at greater length, “Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State.” *Political Theology* 6/2 (2005), 153-164. This is a more compelling position than the one adopted by the think tank Ekklesia (see various recent articles on their website). Ekklesia proposes a “post-christendom” model of faith and politics (see, e.g., Bartley, *Faith and Politics after Christendom*). While this model shares some of the background assumptions of “principled pluralism,” it has, in its legitimate reaction against the legacy of Christendom, found itself siding with those who would wield anti-discrimination legislation to coercively restrict the kind of pluralism that Archbishop Williams rightly favours. For an analysis of this issue as a contest between rival individualist and pluralist models of tolerance, see Chaplin, Jonathan, “Understanding liberal regimes of tolerance,” *Ethics in Brief* 11/5 (Spring 2007).

issues, and many others such as ecological sustainability, the allocation and control of health funding, the pace and depth of European integration, the justification of military intervention, and so on, are wracked with deep divisions which cut across mainstream party lines and which show no sign of abating.

Some observers, including some Christians, worry that, in such circumstances, encouraging principled pluralism will unleash such a din of contending voices that mutual understanding will become impossible in public debate. This is always a risk, but this response fails to see that the main problem is not, after all, mutual incomprehension but mutual incompatibility. I may have a pretty good idea of the deepest beliefs of those who favour unrestricted abortion, or unlimited global capital flows. I just reject those positions profoundly and will want to oppose them democratically. Likewise, I am prepared to accept that someone holding the ethical views of an evolutionary ethicist like Peter Singer or a radical libertarian like Robert Nozick would *understand* my stances on eugenics or capital markets, but find them reprehensible, even oppressive; and I would confidently expect them to oppose me at every turn. The political dilemma then is how groups representing such diverse views can strike workable public policy accommodations which each side can in some sense recognise as just, or at least as having proceeded from a process in which their account of justice was respectfully heard.<sup>41</sup> Christians must of course seize whatever opportunities for consensus-building or co-belligerence come their way, and there are still many. But an adequate account of representation under conditions of deep pluralism must reckon with the difficult cases of democratic disagreement, not just the easy cases of democratic convergence.

These contested questions are examples of what the leading liberal thinker John Rawls has rightly termed the “fundamental issues of justice” around which political debate properly turns.<sup>42</sup> But *contra* Rawls, it is not possible to render such debates more amenable to resolution by imposing upon them a supposedly neutral public language uncontaminated by clashing confessional convictions.<sup>43</sup> We can respond more appropriately to the contemporary situation of deep pluralism by standing Rawls’s proposal on its head. Representative structures should not try to usher confessionally-motivated political speech to the sidelines in a desire for predictable, accessible, familiar and stabilising public discourse. That would lead to the “democratic policing” not only of Christianity but of any

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<sup>41</sup> For further reflections on this, see Chaplin, Jonathan, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism’.” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35/2 (Winter 2006), 143-175.

<sup>42</sup> Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 1996.

<sup>43</sup> See Eberle, Christopher. *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Audi, Robert & Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Religion in the Public Square*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997; Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, ch. 3. An important British contribution is Plant, Raymond. *Politics, Theology and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, Pt. III. For a critical appreciation of Plant see my review in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16/2 (2003), 107-113.

counter-establishment viewpoint, including radical feminism, deep ecology or Islam. Rather, representative structures should throw open the arena of public discourse to as many divergent, discordant, disturbing voices as are prepared to work within the law. Democracy should facilitate and not suppress confessional candour.

Such candour will, however, evidently require the cultivation of advanced skills of inter-confessional understanding. Principled pluralism will work better to the extent that participants make a conscientious attempt to enter into the mindset of their political opponents, to ask themselves what might seem reasonable and just *to them* given *their* convictions, ones which many will think are false and damaging.<sup>44</sup> Some Christians need to do better in this regard than they have in the past. Too often Christians, like many others, are tempted to bypass the time-consuming work of public explanation and fast-forward to a rapid mobilisation of their constituencies on one or other hot-button issue. At times, of course, imposed political deadlines seem to leave no other option – which suggests, incidentally, that under conditions of deep pluralism, democratic governments should intentionally *slow down* processes of consultation on controversial policies, rather than arrogantly speeding them up.

Of course it is not only Christians who need to heed advice about public explanation: secular-minded believers are also under an obligation to enter into the mindset of religious believers, to ask themselves what might seem reasonable and just from *their* point of view, given *their* deepest convictions. Indeed, because religiously-informed political convictions have been pushed to the margins of public debate for so long, some secular-minded people are finding themselves on a steeper learning curve in this regard than religious believers, who have had to struggle for much longer with how to couch their claims in languages available to others.

#### *CONCLUSION: CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY*

This article declines to endorse the pessimism about, or critical detachment from, existing structures of representative democracy motivating the voices cited earlier. Christians have reasons to remain hopeful about the possibility of political dialogue and to resist retreating into pessimism and balkanisation. Equitable principled pluralism, however, offers no guarantees of favourable outcomes for participants in such a system. It even risks offering enhanced space for groups who will be critical of constitutional democracy as I have described it. Principled pluralism may make for a turbulent ride. It will also impose tough demands:

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<sup>44</sup> Eberle describes this as an “ideal of conscientious engagement,” in *Religious Conviction*, 104ff. In similar vein David Hollenbach proposes the principle of “intellectual solidarity,” in *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, ch. 6. A profound theological treatment of inter-confessional and intercultural understanding is Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

clarity about convictions, dexterity in translating them into intelligible public language,<sup>45</sup> patience in making sense of the views of opponents, and prudence in planning campaigns and constructing alliances. Representative politics will in the foreseeable future, in Britain as elsewhere, be marked by intensified contestation among diverging faith perspectives. This will make the reaching of fair public policy agreements more difficult than it was during the salad days of (what in Britain was called) the “post-war consensus.” But Christians can work to make those agreements more rather than less conducive to the public good, not by clinging to the receding threads of a privileged past, but by embodying today in fresh ways the demanding imperatives of justice, and then speaking confidently from faith with prudence and passion.

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<sup>45</sup> One example of this task of translation is the work of Cambridge-based Relationships Foundation ([www.relationshipsfoundation.org](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org)), which employs the notion of “relational well-being” as a vehicle to convey biblical social principles in a publicly-available language. See Schluter and Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto*.