WHAT SPIRITUALITY CAN RESOURCE THE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE?

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A SPIRITUALITY WHICH WILL RESOURCE the democratic culture must not only address the individual in relation to the whole, but must underpin and guide the relations of the community to communities. However, before this question can be explored, an understanding of the fundamental components of democracy and culture must be achieved.

Defining culture and democracy

Culture is expressed in constituent elements[1] such as the intellectual and aesthetic existence of a civilization, as well as the symbols, traditions, artefacts and behaviours through which culture is expressed. It is also evident in those often unconscious 'assumptions which underlie the thinking of a society and by which its members live their lives'.[2] Culture is, therefore, primarily concerned with the set of convictions and values which inform the world-view of a particular group or groups. What then are the basic values which are indispensable to democracy?

As we come towards the end of the twentieth century modern democracy appears to have scored a historic victory over alternative forms of governance. Political regimes of all kinds throughout the world claim to be democratic yet what these regimes say and do is often substantially different from one another. There is a tendency to believe that if a regime claims to be 'democratic' a certain aura of respectability is accredited to it. Yet it is important to note that since 1948 only twenty-three states in the world have consistently permitted competitive elections.[3]

Within the history of democratic theory lies a deeply rooted conflict about whether democracy should mean some kind of popular power or be an aid to decision-making. This conflict has given rise to three basic variants or models of democracy. First, there is direct or participatory democracy, a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved. This is the 'original' type of democracy found, among other places, in ancient Athens. Secondly, there is liberal

or representative democracy, a system of rule embracing elected 'offi-cers' who undertake to 'represent' the interests or views of citizens within the framework of the 'rule of law'. Thirdly, there is a variant of democracy based on a one-party model. Until recently, the Soviet Union, East European societies and many developing countries have been dominated by this image.[4]

Due to the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union the third model is now confined to relatively few nations, while the second model, representative democracy, appears to have tri-umphed. Essentially liberal democracy is founded on a cluster of rules or institutions permitting the broadest participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions, that is, decisions affecting the whole community. This cluster, which could also be described as foundational or cultural values, includes elected government; free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight; a suffrage which embraces all citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex and so on; freedom of conscience, information and expression on all public matters broadly defined; the right of all adults to oppose their government and stand for office; and associational autonomy – the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties.[5] The consolidation of representative democracy, thus under-stood, has been a relatively recent phenomenon, perhaps one should say a late-twentieth-century phenomenon. For it is only in the closing decades of this century that democracy has been securely established in the West and widely adopted in principle as a suitable model of government beyond the West.

Associations, interest groups and pressure groups are, therefore, an essential ingredient to any healthy democratic culture. They can be defined as any group which articulates demands that the political authorities in the political system or subsystem need either to consult or be aware of before making decisions. Yet it is important to note that pressure groups, unlike political parties and other groups, do not themselves seek to occupy positions of authority.[6] Rather their aim is to represent particular interests in an effort to affect political, social or economic policy. These pressure groups can be broadly divided into institutions and interest groups. The former include think-tanks, corpor-ations, local governments, churches, the media and universities. Their interests are often politically and analytically independent of the interests of individual members of these institutions.[7] Interest groups, on the other hand, are issue-focused and consist of individuals who have a particular commitment to the issue in question.

It is particularly evident in the latter part of our century that as people become better educated and articulate, and as knowledge and information become more widespread, more people have come to recognize their own interest in issues which, hitherto, they were happy to ignore or leave to others to resolve. New interest groups are constantly being formed in society to press for policy change.

An important component of modern democracy is dialogue leading to compromise. However, this is not unique to democracy, because a central feature in pre-democratic governance was the bargaining between the crown and barons. This has continued throughout the process of industrialization, and democratization, especially in post-industrial societies. Pressure groups are now the new barons with which governments have to deal. Thus, the existence of groups is a constraint on government action in all political systems. The institutions, structures and processes of intermediation between groups and government vary considerably. Yet the process of governing societies always involves some accommodation to the wishes of pressure and interest groups, even in totalitarian systems.[8]

At times we are led to limit this interaction to the sphere of the sovereign state. Yet the regional and global interconnectedness of our world means that no national communities exclusively make and determine decisions and policies for themselves; governments by no means determine what is right or appropriate exclusively for their own citizens.[9] A decision to increase interest rates in an attempt to stem inflation or exchange-rate instability is often taken as a 'national' decision, although it may well stimulate economic changes in other countries. Similarly, a decision to permit the 'harvesting' of the rain-forests may contribute to ecological damage far beyond the borders which formally limit the responsibility of a given set of political decision-makers. These decisions, along with other policies on issues as diverse as investment, arms procurement and AIDS, are typically regarded as fully within the legitimate domain of authority of a sovereign nation-state. Yet, in a world of regional and global interconnectedness, there are major questions to be put about the coherence, viability and accountability of national decision-making institutions themselves.

Towards a spirituality

Within the framework of the foundational values of democracy the question of an appropriate spirituality needs to be focused. This spirituality must not only resource political leaders and pressure groups to fashion democracy, but it should also act as a critique of political systems and interest groups which violate democratic values.

Bernhard Häring argues that the essence of all good political activity must be a way of assisting people to live faithfully in freedom and solidarity that enhances human dignity and makes possible the attainment of social justice and peace.[10] A spirituality which would resource and support the values of democracy seems to be one of solidarity. It would respond to the needs of individuals in relation to the community, as well as facilitating a vision which would focus on the interconnectedness of our world. Solidarity in its most basic form affirms the interdependence and unity of humanity – what happens to one happens to all. As a response to the reality of human interdependence, solidarity promotes the common good and affirms the intrinsic value of all persons, who are linked to each other by the Creator.[11]

The Book of Micah provides a useful foundation from which to expand this spirituality and demonstrate its practical implications.

> This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this:
> That you act justly,
> That you love tenderly,
> That you walk humbly with your God.
> (Micah 6:8)

These demands are evidently not merely theological ideas, but encompass an outlook on life and an attitude towards living. It would be a travesty to attempt to confine a spirituality of solidarity to the mere theoretical level. It must be revealed and expressed in action.[12]

To 'walk humbly with your God' demands a 'religious' conversion to the belief that God enters into human history in a variety of ways. In an age of religious pluralism the phrase 'your God' is able to respond to the multiplicity of beliefs that are current in any democracy. But the essential ingredient of a 'religious' conversion is the conviction that God, in whatever way the divinity manifest itself, values creation both on an individual and communal level. This acceptance of unique value is the foundation which inspires and determines a person's attitudes and relations towards others.

To 'love tenderly' refers to the interpersonal aspect of spirituality. In this instance the emphasis is on face-to-face relations with other people. What this implies is a 'moral' conversion where one is able to see not only oneself as having an intrinsic value, but also others because they are fellow human beings. It is due to this 'moral' conversion that we are able to respond to the demands of justice.

To 'act justly' pertains to public and political life. Justice is understood primarily as a concern with how society is organized, how wealth,

power, privileges, rights and responsibilities are distributed to every level
– local, national and global. It means, above all, working to build a
society that is intrinsically just. Therefore, willingly to exclude others
from full participation in society is not only to commit an injustice
against other human beings but also to commit a sin against God.[13]

If a spirituality of solidarity implies an affirmation of human com-
munity, then it implies a special affirmation of those persons who have
historically been excluded or ostracized from the human community:
the hungry, the naked, the sick, the 'least ones' (Mt 25:31–46). Matthew
25 speaks of Jesus Christ's identification with the powerless; hence the
Christian's identification with Jesus Christ is verified by his or her own
identification with the powerless. Commitment to solidarity with the
powerless thus impels the Christian to join them in their struggle for
justice, i.e. their struggle to be recognized as full members of the human
community.[14] Solidarity with one's brothers and sisters is the verifi-
cation of one's unity with God.

It is the contention that a spirituality of solidarity rooted in a balance
between 'religious', 'moral' and 'political' conversion provides the basis
not only for individual living, but also for public life. It focuses on
democratic values and resources those in authority. It also provides the
support for a constructive critique of the diverse institutions and
organizations which are essential to democracy.

This paper could now take two directions. It could highlight, from the
ample evidence available, those governments, institutions, multi-
national corporations and pressure groups which operate not out of a
spirituality of solidarity but from a desire to dominate and exploit. On
the other hand, it could focus on various organizations and pressure
groups which do manifest the essential features of a spirituality of
solidarity. The latter focus would, I think, prove more productive.

Signs of a spirituality of solidarity

Since the 1970s two pressure groups have become increasingly
important in the western world – the environmentalists and women's
groups. The origins of these two movements are rather different. In the
case of the environmentalists, the emergence of new and highly articu-
late and organized pressure groups is linked to the progress of scientific
discovery. Once scientists discover more about the effect of certain
processes, e.g. the burning of carbon fuels, the emission of waste gases by
cars, the use of artificial fertilizers, or the effects of smoking, then either
completely new groups are formed or existing groups become more
active. A number of striking points emerge from the environmentalist

lobby. First, there is a strong emphasis on human solidarity with nature
and, secondly, on the abuse of the environment which has short- and
long-term effects as well as localized and global ramifications. Commit-
ted environmentalist groups demonstrate the three-dimensional conver-
sion referred to earlier: a belief in the value of all life in its many forms
and the realization that the continued abuse of the planet must cease if it
is to have any future. The success of many of their campaigns and the
heightened awareness of environmental issues demonstrates that the
spirit of solidarity is intrinsic to them.

The rise of women's groups is rather different as it is difficult to relate
this to the scientific and technological developments in society. One
view proposed is that it is linked to women's ability to control their
fertility which only occurred, on a wide scale, in the West in the 1960s.
Yet this phenomenon appears to be more to do with a developing
consciousness and awareness amongst women, literally world-wide, that
women too have an interest in public policies and in securing new public
policies, which previously have been ignored or left to men. The belief
that women are valuable as women and not merely as wives or mothers
has ensured that women's groups have pressurized society to change
structures which were unjust and discriminatory. The success of their
campaigns is evident in most areas of social, economic and political life.
The right to vote, Equal Opportunities Commissions, and the ordi-
nation of women, to mention a few, aptly demonstrate the success of
their campaigns and their spirit of solidarity.

At both the local and international level Amnesty International
demonstrates this spirituality of solidarity. From its belief in the intrinsic
value of persons it has campaigned to highlight abuses of human rights
and in many instances to secure the release of prisoners of conscience. It
has also, through its letter-writing and post-card campaigns, demon-
strated both to victims and oppressors a sense of universal solidarity with
the poor and oppressed.

In Latin America an important development has been the growth of
pressure groups in the defence of human rights and, in particular, the
rights of the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez points out that wretchedness and
repression have always been there, but what is new is that people are
beginning to identify the cause of their situation as injustice and are
seeking to release themselves from it.[15] In many instances these pressure
groups, or basic Christian communities, are firmly rooted in a spiritu-
ality of solidarity – a spirituality that is balanced between 'religious',
'moral' and 'political' conversion. An important element of the process
in Latin America has been its influence on other parts of the world,

particularly in the West. People are far more aware that the plight of impoverished workers in Latin America is contributed to by the affluence and consumerism of the developed world. This consciousness has led in turn to solidarity pressure groups in the West that not only highlight the conditions of the oppressed but also bring pressure to bear on governments and major corporations to change their policies in Latin America. Due to this spirit of solidarity and the interconnectedness of the world many people are questioning the policy of the international banking community with regard to the debts these countries have been encouraged to incur. Whether these debts should be rescheduled or written off continues to be a point of controversy between pressure groups, governments and the banking community.

In North America and particularly in South Africa the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s was a major contributing factor in influencing and directing the political changes we now see occurring. What black consciousness attempted was to initiate a 'black renaissance'. This was achieved by reawakening in the black people of South Africa an awareness of their dignity as human beings and in their recognition of their own collective strength. It was an attitude of mind which required blacks to reject all value systems that made them aliens in their own land. In black consciousness thinking, liberation was conceived in holistic terms, and affected every aspect of black society. It engaged in cultural activities such as music, drama, literature, the reinterpretation of black history, and in general the rediscovery of black people's cultural roots. It recognized the religious quality of institutional and modern African culture and sought to express its philosophy in Black Theology.[16] This theology drew an important distinction between black theology and African theology. The latter had tended to confine itself to the inculturation of Christianity into Africa. Black theology, on the other hand, was an explicit attempt by black Christians to confront the conditions of political and economic exploitation endemic in South Africa. Biblical symbols such as exodus and resurrection were employed to motivate black people to become engaged in the overthrow of the conditions of their oppression.[17]

Black theology was to be an important influence on the major Christian Churches. It forced them to analyse anew their policies in South Africa and in many cases to make the fundamental option for the poor and oppressed. The *Kairos document* published in September 1985 and signed by 150 notable theologians was one of the major developments from black consciousness and black theology. Not only did this document criticize the theologies which defended apartheid or upheld

the *status quo*, but it challenged the churches to evolve specific pro-
grammes, projects and campaigns which would ultimately destroy
apartheid. In the spirit of universal solidarity people were called up to
become actively engaged in the destruction of apartheid.[18]

It was due to this pressure that churches, nationally and inter-
nationally, were able finally to argue and call for economic sanctions
against South Africa. In 1986 Archbishop Tutu appealed to the
international community to impose immediate and punitive economic
sanctions.[19] The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference followed suit by
arguing that 'the most effective and non-violent form of pressure left is
economic pressure'.[20] This pressure, coupled with repeated calls by the
African National Congress and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, ensured
that not only was there no new investment in South Africa, but also
massive disinvestment. Most political analysts would agree that it was
the effects of sanctions that finally forced the apartheid regime to enter
into negotiations with the other political parties in South Africa and
move towards democratic rule.

What is evident in black theology and particularly in the *Kairos
document* is that the basic tenets of a spirituality of solidarity are apparent:
conversion on the personal, social and political level.

The examples discussed point to the effectiveness of a foundational
spirituality of solidarity on the local, national and global levels. Yet this
spirit cannot be solely confined to pressure groups, it must also permeate
the whole political life of the world.

New directions of solidarity

The emerging and ever increasing interconnectedness of our world,
which is commonly called the process of globalization, forces us to face
new and urgent challenges.[21] What is new about the modern global
system is the spread of globalization through new dimensions of activity
such as the modern communications industry and new information
technology. Politics unfolds today against the background of a world
shaped and permeated by the movement of goods and capital, the flow
of communication, the interchange of cultures and the passage of
people.[22] If we are to cope with this new situation there needs to be a
recognition at the international level of solidarity. If this does not occur
the possibility of domination by regional power blocks becomes a
distinct probability. To ensure that there is equality between various
nations of our world, regional parliaments and a restructured United
Nations are vital. This would ensure the curtailment of multinational
corporations' ability to constrain and influence the political agenda

(through such devious measures as secret funding of elections), and the restriction of the activities of powerful trans-national interest groups to pursue their own interests unchecked.

What is at issue is a civil society that is neither planned nor merely market-oriented but, rather, open to organizations, associations and agencies pursuing their own projects, subject to the constraints of democratic processes and structured on a belief in human solidarity, justice and peace.

NOTES

[1] D. S. Amalorpavadass, 'Church and culture' in J. Komonchak, M. Collins, and D. Lane (eds), *The new dictionary of theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), pp 201–206.

[2] H. Montefiore (ed), *The gospel of contemporary culture* (London: Mowbray, 1992), p 2.

[3] A. Schmid, 'Terrorists and democracy', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4 (1992), p 15.

[4] D. Held, 'Democracy: from city-state to a cosmopolitan order?' in D. Held (ed), *Prospects for democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p 15.

[5] N. Bobbio, *Which socialism?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p 66.

[6] R. Kimber and J. Richardson (eds), *Pressure groups in Britain* (London: Dent and Co., 1974), p 3.

[7] R. Salisbury, 'Interest representation: the dominance of institutions', *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984), p 64.

[8] J. Richardson, *Pressure groups* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp 10–11.

[9] C. Offe, *Disorganised capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), pp 286ff.

[10] B. Häring, *Free and faithful in Christ*, vol 3 (Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1981), p 326.

[11] R. Goizueta, 'Solidarity' in M. Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 906–907.

[12] D. Dorr, *Spirituality and justice* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), p 8.

[13] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, nos 38–40.

[14] John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, no 8. See also John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, no 5. Here the Pope restates the position held in *Laborem exercens*, no 8.

[15] G. Gutierrez, *We drink from our own wells* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp 20–21.

[16] J. Leatt, T. Kneifel and K. Nurnberger, *Contending ideologies in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986), pp 107–109.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp 118–119.

[18] Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: a political comment and the political crisis in South Africa* (London: CIIR, 1985), pp 26–27.

[19] Bishop Tutu, *The Citizen*, 3 April and 13 May 1986.

[20] Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Pastoral letter: on economic pressure for justice* (Marianhill, 1 May 1986), p 13.

[21] A. McGrew, 'Conceptualizing global politics' in A. McGrew, P. Lewis et al., *Global politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp 1–28.

[22] G. W. Kegley and E. R. Wittkopf, *World politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p 511.