

A SPIRITUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

Eugene C. Bianchi

THE CHURCH IS NOT A DEMOCRACY.' Many people think that the values of a pluralist, secular democracy such as the United States are incompatible with Catholic Christianity, and that the Roman Catholic Church is essentially authoritarian. When, through the influence of John Courtney Murray, Vatican II issued its Declaration on Religious Freedom, the Council Fathers were implicitly rejecting this kind of contrast. Instead, they were acknowledging that the whole Church had something to learn from the experience of the United States, where Roman Catholicism was one religion among others, and where the State was religiously neutral.

This essay seeks to honour Murray's achievement by extending it. Murray was contending with an attitude—one that is still, despite the work of the Council, common in official Catholic circles—according to which democracy is alien to the Church. For such people, the Church's present monarchical structure is mandated by God, or at least by centuries of tradition. I want instead to argue that democracy is a vital dimension of Christian spirituality, and I will develop this case by setting out eight key principles for a spirituality that is at once democratic and authentically Christian.

Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity tells us that spirituality is both 'within' and 'below'. Both of these words connect with the spirituality of Jesus. When political subsidiarity tells us to look to the local community first for decision-making, it echoes Jesus' central message: the kingdom or domain of God is within us. In the end, our worth comes not from outside authority, but from our intrinsic value. As embodied persons, we are all temples of the Holy Spirit. It may take us some time individually to come to this realisation in a way that counts for us. But

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the Jesus tradition is clear about the presence of God within the world and within each creature.

It might be objected that subsidiarity refers to the 'within' of local communities, whereas I have been speaking of the 'within' of individuals. Yet Christianity also stresses the presence of the divine in groups. 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' (Matthew 18:20) A major thrust of liturgical renewal after Vatican II emphasizes God's presence in the whole worshipping community.

The principle of spiritual subsidiarity also indicates that spirituality comes from 'below' rather than from 'above'. It comes from the individual and from the community, and is not handed down to them by established authorities. The parts of the New Testament that show us a pre-episcopal, pre-institutional Church contain teachings of Jesus that support such a religion from below. Jesus appeals to the marginalised, the outsiders in Palestine; he is critical of various aspects of established Judaism in his time. He says that one has to become 'as a little child' to recognise his teaching. There is a similarity here with the Buddhist notion that one needs a humble 'beginner's mind' in order to open oneself to the path of enlightenment.

This spirituality from below may well be fostered by a teacher, who as such remains 'above'. The place of the authentic teacher is vital in all wisdom traditions. The Bodhisattva vows to turn from the singular enjoyment of his enlightened state to teach others ways of dealing with their suffering. Sometimes the teaching role takes on corporate dimensions in councils and synods and other communal forms. Yet the ultimate goal of the teacher in these traditions is to become unnecessary, as learners gradually become their own gurus. Of course, there is always a place for dialogue between those on the spiritual path, and for listening to communal guidelines which may contain the accumulated wisdom of ages. But democratic spirituality resists the rigid imposition of teaching from above, an imposition linked to sanctions and retribution.

Jesus' friends gleaned grain on the sabbath, and Jesus taught that the sabbath as a religious and cultural event is for the sake of the people, not for the sake of immutable authority. In humanising the sabbath, Jesus was acting in a well-established rabbinical mode. Those in positions of authority were not to impose burdens on widows, orphans and other less powerful people. This stream of Christian

thinking has taken different forms in various periods of history. It can be found, for example, in the movements of lay spirituality in the Middle Ages as well as in today's liberation theologies. The latter explicitly talk about finding God from below, and privilege the experience of the poor.

Dialogue

In a democracy, traditions are formulated and applied through a process of respectful dialogue. 'Respectful dialogue' may sound sanitised and lofty when we think about the reality of democratic politics, in which intense partisanship plays a constant role. Yet the ideal of respectful dialogue remains fundamental; even those who abuse it in practice recognise it as essential to the long-term success of democracy. In non-democratic political systems, a variety of people may be consulted in making a decision, but such systems maintain the intrinsic superiority of the ruler over the ruled. A good ecclesial example would be the 1968 papal edict on the evil of birth control. Dialogue within the papal commission had urged a change in the Church's position, but the Pope, understood as intrinsically wiser or more valuable as judge of things, decided otherwise. Dialogue here was merely consultative, not truly deliberative. But an authentic process of dialogue implies that all parties involved have intrinsic value, with a right to exchange views and to be involved in the application of tradition to present needs. In church language, such a process privileges the *sensus fidelium*, the lived experience of the faithful.

What does the principle of dialogue have to do with spirituality? When everyday decisions are taken through a process of dialogue, this implies a respect for the worth and opinions of individuals. We become active agents, rather than passive recipients of orders from those above us. If spirituality enhances the deeper meaning and experience of human life, it is dialogue, both inward and outward, that makes this possible. Inward dialogue is a type of prayer or meditation, a rhythm of listening to the interior spirit and communing with it. Through the processes of listening and communing, we tap into our mystic potential and experience an interrelatedness with others and with nature. Through such inner dialogue, we gradually move beyond our fears of isolation and alienation, our constant attempts to shield our fragile

egos from the threats of life. We have a chance of learning how to live and die in peace.

For Buddhists, such going inward means the gradual dissolution of the false, solid and separate self, and the awakening of a new, compassionate being, in connection and solidarity with others. In Christianity, this inward dialogue is sometimes referred to as an experience of the dark night, or of the cross. Beyond it is a new birth or resurrection in which the fearful ego is released into a union with the divine in the world. The Taoist master sums up the process:

Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source If you don't realise the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realise where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes, you are ready.¹

The spiritual life is a process of inward dialogue by which we move from sensations of isolation and threat to the experience of union, from feeling worthless to being 'dignified as a king'.

The outward dialogue of spirituality is strongly democratic. In their origins and in their development, spiritual movements question rigid, hierarchical structures of authority. Jesus attacked religious and even secular authorities that had become oppressive to ordinary people. He respected tradition, but he questioned authority, calling on his hearers to realise their inner kingdom, their own worth both to themselves and to God. If the lilies of the field are excellent in God's eyes, 'how much more [are] you ...'? Jesus wants his followers not to lord it over one another, but to live in a fellowship of equals.

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The Quakers are an interesting example of a reforming movement in Christian history to which dialogue and democracy are important. In his powerful reaction against the Anglican union of altar and throne, George Fox not only summoned his Society of Friends to attend to the 'inner light', but encouraged them towards dialogue and egalitarianism. The Buddha, while preserving many aspects of ancient

¹ Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperPerennial, 1988), chapter 16.

Indian spirituality, made a powerful break with Brahmin hierarchies in religious and cultural life. Enlightenment became a possibility for everyone; it ceased to be determined by caste and condition of birth. Near his death, the Buddha urged his disciples not to fear his leaving them as if he were the superior or unique carrier of the *dharma*. The spiritual path, he told them, was already among them and within them. Buddhist spirituality goes forward through an inward and outward dialogue within the community, the *sangha*.

Decentralisation

This democratic principle says that each community should regulate itself. Decentralisation overlaps with subsidiarity in its stress on how communities should be responsible for themselves rather than controlled from above. But decentralisation also involves respect for diversity. Throughout the world today we see violence and social breakdown occurring because of a fundamental lack of respect for diversity in religion, politics, ethnicity and culture. This often happens in countries where democratic ways of life have not been established: Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Rwanda and the Sudan are cases in point. Even in places with democratic political structures, such as Northern Ireland, respect for diversity and decentralised rule is difficult to achieve. Throughout history, institutional religion has aggravated the problem of accepting differences. People fear and want to control others, to impose their own doctrine and behaviour on them regardless of differences. Decentralisation implies the honouring of diversity within communities as well as among them.

From the standpoint of spirituality, diversity in teaching, organisation and action is intrinsic to authentic religion. The mystery of divine presence in the world is varied, multifaceted. To claim perfect knowledge of this mystery is a supreme hubris; to impose teaching and norms of behaviour on others defies the gift of faith. Moreover, coercive religious centralisation implicitly denies the limitations of human intelligence and goodness. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution, regarding the free exercise of religion, is a political statement of a theological truth: respect for the diversity of religion is based on the limitations of human intelligence, humanity's history of religious oppression, the nature of faith itself and the ultimate incomprehensibility of divine mystery.

In our age of advanced technology and communications it becomes ever more necessary to respect religious diversity, because people encounter other religions and cultures more frequently than before. Our personal spirituality can profit from knowledge of different wisdom traditions. In recent decades eastern modes of spirituality have come into dialogue with western contemplative traditions. This phenomenon has created a renewed interest in western mysticism; the encounter of similar yet diverse traditions stimulates creative possibilities. Some conservative groups view the development of religious pluralism as a threat to the integrity of their particular heritage; within Roman Catholicism there are tensions between theologians who foster the 'inculturation' of Christianity in Asia and critics of such moves. Yet the encounter with a diversity of spiritual traditions can help us to reinterpret our own theology and clarify what is fundamental in our heritage. Appreciating diversity enables individuals and groups to face change and impermanence, and to move beyond the disturbance that diversity provokes in a religious mentality orientated towards certainty and security.



Participation through Elections

A key element in democratic government is the process of election. Elections, which give a voice to all constituents, are an important way of enhancing personal participation in democracies. Fairly conducted elections allow contending political groups to advance their programmes through open debate. Elections also permit peaceful change within a society, and they give individuals a sense of worth by emphasizing the deliberative value of each person's vote. Church history shows that choosing leaders by election was much more common among Christians in an earlier era than it is now, although some religious orders and cathedral chapters have continued the practice.

Though new popes are chosen by election within the College of Cardinals, Christianity's tradition of electing its leaders has been largely submerged in the Roman Catholic Church. As the Church attained ever greater power in Europe from the medieval period onwards, it imitated feudal and monarchical forms of government. Popes and bishops became lords whose authority derived from on high rather than from the will of their constituents. Theological theories were developed to show how a version of the divine right of kings pertained to church officials.

This turn away from participation is reflected in the often-repeated statement that the Church is not a democracy. Those who oppose the election of officials in the Church allege that there is a danger of encouraging partisan politics. Those who advocate ecclesial elections point out that such partisan politics already exist within the monarchical form of church governance, and that politicking is done in ways which are less open to public scrutiny than they would be under a democratic system.

Moreover elections, which seem on the surface to be a merely political matter, relate to two aspects of spirituality found in different wisdom traditions: participation and inclusiveness. In Christianity, all are called to participate in God's sanctifying grace. All are children of God who participate in the one creation. Recent expressions of creation spirituality underscore our interconnectedness and our participation in a single, evolving world. Our participation goes right back to our animal ancestry. In the New Testament, Jesus awakens his hearers to their inclusion in God's domain and breaks down barriers of exclusivity in his work of calling them to spiritual participation. He brings sinners to sit at the same table with the seemingly righteous. He heals people who are outside the confines of the religious community; he talks about a worship in spirit and truth in a place that will welcome the participation of Samaritan and Jew alike. The religion of Jesus has no place for different degrees of participation, for special initiates, or for the privilege of authority. All are invited to participate in the festival, including those outside the circles of power; Jesus wants his followers to pay special attention to the marginalised and the poor.

Term Limits

In the political sphere, there are standard arguments for and against term limits. Those who oppose term limits point to the value of retaining experienced people in office without limiting their claim beyond the requirement to stand periodically for re-election. Their opponents insist that limits on office-holding better serve the common good. They hold that such limits prevent the perpetuation of incompetence and restrict power-mongering, and that they allow new energies and ideas to rise in the political process.

Within the Church, the issue of term limits bears on both the individual and the community. Religious traditions encourage individuals to renounce egocentricity and self-glorification. This spiritual discipline works on two levels. First, it helps people towards inner transformation, preventing them from being sidetracked by the desires of the ego, and it enables them to experience union or connection with a wider reality. And on a second level, this discipline helps to turn them towards the humble service of the community. The Church has recognised the need to avoid giving its leaders too much personal power. After Vatican II, a retirement age of seventy-five was introduced for bishops. While this was a move in the right direction, it is not enough to ensure creative and energetic leadership, or to guard against the possibility of mental or physical incompetence. Church leaders need to be able to cope with the challenges of the modern world in order to serve the community fully.

Religious orders, with their frequent changing of local and provincial superiors, have long recognised the importance of term limits to spiritual discipline and pastoral efficiency. It makes little sense today for general superiors and popes to stay in office for life. The case of John Paul II is a clear example of the problem. Here is a leader with a major debilitating illness who thinks that God is calling him to lead the Church into the new millennium. How far is he responding to spiritual inspiration? And how far is he clinging to office from love of power masquerading as pious sacrifice and obedience to God's will? Would not the witness of a pope who was prepared to step down accord better with the attitude of Jesus, who warned against the dangers of clinging to power? Eastern religious traditions, while not

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dealing directly with term limits in office, are virtually unanimous in calling adherents to question the direction of their desires. The Tao Te Ching portrays the master as one who does not lead by dominance and coercion in the manner of the world, but who leads in a humble and self-effacing way:

When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists If you don't trust the people, you make them untrustworthy When his [the master's] work is done, the people say: 'Amazing, we did it all by ourselves!'²

The point of all this is to see how a topic as seemingly far removed from spirituality as term limits actually can carry significant spiritual meaning.

Separate Powers

The US Constitution calls for a separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, along with a system of checks and balances between them. Developed modern democracies adopt this principle to protect themselves against any oppressive accumulation of power in the hands of one branch of government. This is an acknowledgement of Lord Acton's maxim: all power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The history of absolute monarchies in the West provides overwhelming evidence of the potential for abuse in the concentration of power, and of the harm this concentration does to human rights.

The Roman Catholic Church has retained an absolutist mode of government long after such systems were abandoned in much of Europe, although even in its most centralised periods it has had a variety of ways to resolve conflicts. Two factors may have contributed to the persistence of centralised control. One is the close identification of ecclesial government with the autocratic regimes of the kind common in Roman Catholic countries from the middle ages until after World War I. The other is the tendency for historical contingencies to become sacralised. When the Pope is seen as the vicar of Christ, or when bishops are described as princes of the Church, their offices start

² *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 17.

to seem theologically immutable. Roman Catholics are then taught that a centralised, even absolutist, form of government is God's will. Talk of the separation of powers and of democratic constitutions appears to many to be theologically untenable.

But most forms of church government may also be seen as human, cultural phenomena which are subject to reform. Once this standpoint is taken, then sacred office no longer appears as an unquestionable given, and what we learn from spiritual traditions about the ambiguity of human motives, about sin and destructiveness, becomes all too relevant. The abuse of power to aggrandise the ego and to dominate others for personal or group gain is an aspect of the human inclination towards evil. From this perspective the separation of powers, with its checks and balances, acts as a communal corrective, mitigating abuses. It is a hedge against our negative proclivities.

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From a positive point of view, such checks and balances provide a spiritual discipline that can lead to the empowerment of the many rather than to control by a few. Separation of powers entails the election of councils and leaders, as well as the establishment of judicial systems at all levels. It attests to the diverse gifts inherent in people, and allows them to use their gifts. Individuals gain a sense of self-worth from participation at all levels in the three separated powers. They realise that their involvement contributes to the welfare of all. Empowering people to realise their gifts is a goal of many traditions of spiritual wisdom. Christian creation theology would discuss this empowerment as people experiencing their co-creative potential with the Creator. Buddhists might speak of it as realising one's own buddha-nature. The Tao Te Ching talks about returning self-governance to the people:

If you want to learn how to govern, avoid being clever, filled with rigid concepts, or rich. The simplest pattern is the clearest. Content with an ordinary life, you can show all the people the way back to their own true nature.³

³ *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 65.

Accountability

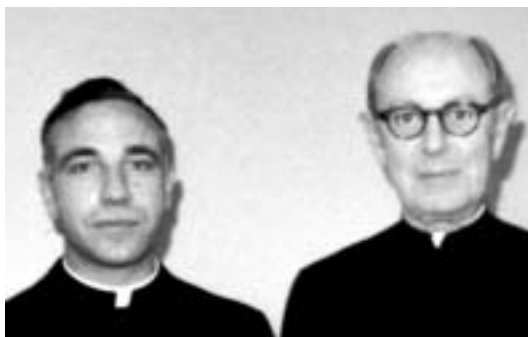
This principle states that people in authority will regularly give their constituents a report on their work, including financial accounts, to be reviewed by an outside auditor when appropriate. Like the previous one, this principle seeks to avoid abuses, especially in financial matters. When power is concentrated in one person or group, financial transactions tend to be secretive; only insiders are privy to the use of money. Great scandals, such as the Banco Ambrosiano affair, have befallen the Vatican in recent decades over the misallocation and mismanagement of funds. For the most part, dioceses, parishes and religious orders are not accountable to the wider Church community regarding financial resources and their uses.

Accountability, communal responsibility, can itself be seen as a kind of spiritual discipline. Scripture speaks of Christians as members of one body, an organic whole with many functions. One part of the body must respond honestly and with integrity to other parts of the body for the health of the whole. Such communal understanding has been intrinsic to the Christian movement from its beginnings (Acts 2:42-47; 5:1-11) to the present day (in base and small faith communities). While the transformation of the individual is important to Christianity, it is accomplished in and through community, through responsible belonging.

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Representation

This principle states that all groupings of the faithful, including women and minorities, should be equitably represented in leadership and decision-making. Patriarchy and eurocentrism within the Church have a long history. We need now to respond to the present. The Church has spoken out in recent decades on the need to respect the rights of minority groups in various parts of the world; and, in limited ways, Roman Catholic documents uphold the rights and the dignity of women. What seems to be more difficult is the implementation of this vision when it comes to minorities and to women within the Church. Progress has been made in bringing racial and ethnic minorities into leadership positions, but women are still kept out of the priesthood and the episcopate. Pope John Paul II issued a declaration barring women from the priesthood on the grounds that women priests would be



*Eugene C. Bianchi and John Courtney Murray on the day
they both received doctorates from Columbia University, 1966*

incompatible with tradition and with the Vatican's interpretation of the consequences of Jesus' maleness. Homosexuals represent another minority which has an uneasy status within Roman Catholicism. Since gays have been well represented in the priesthood, they have probably in fact participated in the higher levels of Roman Catholic governance. But their ambivalent position in church doctrine (homosexual orientation is seen as intrinsically disordered while homosexuals as persons are pastorally welcomed to the Church) has generally forced gays to conceal their orientation, especially in clerical circles.

The principle of representation is linked to the quest for inclusiveness. Many spiritualities strive for greater connection or union, and a sense of unity in diversity is widespread in the Christian Scriptures. There are many dwelling places in the Father's house, and the walls dividing peoples have been broken down. Unfortunately, Christians in history have not always fulfilled Christianity's aspiration towards unity. But the call to fuller interconnectedness and more inclusive representation remains a key ideal of the Christian movement.

There are profound connections, then, between spirituality and democracy. Democracy does not claim to be a spiritual movement, and in many ways it is not. But Catholic Christianity—perhaps as a result of the Reformation conflicts—has been slow to recognise how democratic structures promote spiritual growth and reflect gospel values. John Courtney Murray's work represented a decisive

breakthrough in this regard. Let us hope that the Church of the twenty-first century can carry his message forward.⁴

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⁴ An earlier version of this article was published by the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church: <http://arcc-catholic-rights.net>.