

## DEMOCRACY AS A RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE

Interfaith Impact of New York State Backgrounder by Richard S. Gilbert

*I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers and it was not there. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her fertile fields and boundless forests, and it was not there. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her democratic congress and her matchless constitution, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the greatness of her genius and power. America is great because America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.*

*Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) - Alexis DeToqueville (1805-1859)

*So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind – it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact – I can only submit to the edict of others.”*

*Martin Luther King, Jr, “Give Us the Ballot” speech May 17, 1957*

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

In discussing the ideals of Athenian democracy, Pericles (490-429 BCE) wrote: “An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as a harmless, but as a useless, character; and if few of us are originators, we are all sound judges of a policy.”<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) said that virtue refers not only to private morality but to public morality as well. The idea that private virtue should not obliterate public virtue was central to his sense of good citizenship. He wrote, “Like the sailor, the citizen is a member of a community. Now, sailors have different functions, for one of them is a rower, another a pilot, and a third a lookout man; a fourth is described by some other term; and while the precise definition of each individual's virtue applies exclusively to him, there is, at the same time, a common definition applicable to them all. For they have all of them a common object, which is safety in navigation. Likewise, one citizen differs from another, but the salvation of the community is the common business of them all.”<sup>2</sup>

"In certain ancient Greek cities, citizens, before casting a vote, swore in the presence of the gods that they were voting to the best of their judgment for the good of the whole city."<sup>3</sup> The Greek city states left a great deal to be desired - only free men could vote - not laborers or women or slaves. But at least they understood this imperfect form of democracy as a sacred trust. Our term "idiot" derives from the Greek – a private person, without political involvement. To be obsessed with one's private life meant to be deprived of a public life, a state of deprivation.

Democracy, as we know it, stems not only from the Greek tradition, but also from the ethos of the Native American, particularly the Iroquois (French) Confederacy of New York State. The Hau de no sau needs practiced what has been called the oldest living participatory democracy for 800 years. The Founding Fathers often consulted their Native American friends in the creation of the U. S. Constitution. The three principles of this unwritten covenant were peace, equity or justice, and “the power of the good minds,” that of the elders over the young. (Professor Oren Lyons, State University at Buffalo). According to New York State Bicentennial Commission executive director Stephen L. Schechter, “They (the founders) contemplated examples from Europe, examples from Greco-Roman times, examples from the Bible.... And they also looked at Native American Examples, particularly the Iroquois Confederacy.”<sup>4</sup>

Catherine Drinker Bowen called the Constitutional Convention of 1787 the "miracle at Philadelphia."<sup>5</sup> Some believe we have degenerated from miracle to "minor mayhem" in Albany and "major mayhem" in Washington. The constitutions of New York and the United States are basically moral and spiritual documents, "the sacred text for secular humanism,"<sup>6</sup> as E. L. Doctorow once described the national constitution.

Those who gathered in Philadelphia were fearful of "democracy," which in those days meant mob rule. George Bernard Shaw once said, "democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few."<sup>7</sup> Delegate Edmund Randolph of Virginia expressed the desire "to restrain the fury of democracy." Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts warned of the "excesses of democracy .... I have been taught by experience the danger of the leveling spirit." The Philadelphia 55 tended to be "well educated, wealthy and not without self-interest." As one of them, Alexander Hamilton, said: "...only the rich and well born should govern." Hence there was no direct election of Senators or the President. The archaic, anachronistic and elitist Electoral College persists to this day.

Blacks were mentioned, but as three-fifths of a white person for purposes of representation. Slavery was not abolished as some had hoped, though importation of slaves would be ended in 1808. It took a bloody civil war, and three constitutional amendments to provide even formal rights under the law. Apologists point out that the clause making blacks 3/5's of whites for representation was a compromise which weakened the political power of the pro-slavery states. If slaves had been fully counted, the South would have held majority power in the House.

Charles Beard, in his economic interpretation of the Constitution, believed the Founders were motivated by a desire to protect their property and stave off revolution. Their politics stemmed from their class interests. The *Declaration of Independence* had inspired the common people, with Jefferson amending John Locke's "life, liberty and property," to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In the *Constitution*, property rights were fully protected, but not civil rights. There would be little governmental interference in the market place. Though later scholars have challenged Beard's thesis, there seems to be at least a kernel of truth in it.

There is another major omission from the Constitution that cannot go unmentioned. There is no mention of God; only a reference to "in the year of Our Lord," 1787. The sole mentions of religion prohibit a religious test for office and provide for religious liberty in the First Amendment. Most of the Founders were influenced by rationalism and deism. God for Jefferson and others was not the Omnipotent Sovereign of the Puritans or the Omnipotent Essence of the Transcendentalists, but the Supreme Architect of the universe. This Creator, however, left earthly matters to the creatures and did not further intervene. Natural rights, presupposed in both the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*, were derived from natural law; from an original state of nature, not from a supernatural deity.

In many ways the Constitution was a sexist, racist, classist and atheistic document. Its authors were flawed men, susceptible to the prejudices of their class and their time. They were not demi-gods. They were finite men who gave the world its finest and most enduring political document. In the words of one critical patriot: "Of thee, nevertheless, I sing."

These fallible men knew they were finite creatures crafting an imperfect document. James Madison, in *The Federalist Papers* (1787-1788), wrote out of the Biblical tradition about the "infirmities and depravities of the human character." We were contentious creatures apt to split ourselves into factions. "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary." Some called for a Bill of Rights, but Alexander Hamilton, among others, opposed it,

feeling rights were implied. How wrong he was! Jefferson hoped for ratification by the necessary 9 of the 13 states to underscore the need for such protection.

Madison wrote: "The public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued, and that no form of government whatever has any other value than as it may be fitted for the attainment of this objective." He continued: "Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."

That was the genius of the Founders and the *Constitution* they wrought in the steamy summer of 1787. The document they created was not holy writ to be worshipped, but an experiment in self-government to be attempted. It was not, in the words of poet James Russell Lowell, "a machine that would go of itself." At the end of summer 1787 someone asked Ben Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?" "A republic," replied Franklin, "if you can keep it." The word "republic" means "res publica" -- the public good, the good of the whole.

### **THE PROBLEM OF MAINTAINING DEMOCRACY**

The "miracle of Philadelphia" was to understand that the Constitution was no perpetual motion machine but an organic process. It is a truism to say that we get the kind of government we deserve. We have not understood the legacy of the Founders who, whatever their weaknesses, knew the great drama of America was only beginning.

The survival of democracy is not a given, is not etched into the nature of things. Our democracy is in peril – behold, the government of the oldest democracy on earth is seemingly paralyzed. If it dies, it will die, not with a bang, but with a whimper. There is no cosmic guarantee it will survive the current onslaughts.

Democracy is now under siege. Our plight - and our hope - is aptly summed up in the words of a 19<sup>th</sup> century observer who used a sailing metaphor: "All monarchy is a merchantman, which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock and go to the bottom; while a Republic is a raft, which would never sink, but then your feet are always in water."<sup>8</sup>

Only half of us vote, even in a Presidential election; New York State has one of the poorest participation rates in the nation – only 29% voted in the last statewide election in 2014, placing us 41<sup>st</sup> among the states in voter participation. Relatively few are active in political parties, those flawed but necessary political mechanisms. Political scientist Erik Lindeman once called this political participation the "hum-drum work of democracy."

Instead of a nation of *citizens*, we have become a nation of *behaviors*. As historian Hannah Arendt puts it: "...men no longer act, they behave. The citizen now is an object of propaganda, a statistic, a consumer to be reached by advertising and to be brainwashed by advertising. He is a bio-mechanical link in the technological process. The individual as an actor on the public stage of the community is almost wholly disappearing."<sup>9</sup>

“Democracy,” as Winston Churchill famously said, “is the worst form of government in the world, except for every other.” It is an inefficient, inadequate and even insane way for a people to choose their leaders and determine their destiny, yet it has the virtue of reminding us that the mistakes we make are clearly our own. In an imperfect world, it is perhaps the least imperfect process of self-government. There are worse things to do than muddle on. Or, as E. B. White wrote: “Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time.”<sup>10</sup>

Lincoln said government should do those things which the people cannot do or do so well for themselves. James Madison wrote to Jefferson: "It is a melancholy fact that liberty should be equally exposed to danger when the government have too much or too little power." Conrad Wright, former history professor at Harvard Divinity School, wrote: "The infinity of the private individual was plausible enough on the shores of Walden Pond, when there was no one closer than Concord Village a mile away; it is hollow rhetoric on the streets of Calcutta or in the barrios of Caracas." He went on to stress the centrality of community.

But isn't democracy absurd? Plato described democracy as "a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder," but changed skepticism to cynicism by suggesting that "One of the penalties of not participating in politics is that you will be governed by your inferiors."

Writer H. L. Mencken once sardonically said, "I do not believe in democracy; but I am perfectly willing to admit that it provides the only really amusing form of government ever endured by man."<sup>11</sup> Mencken is fully justified in that assessment as Americans struggle with the confusion surrounding the 2016 presidential election and the possibility of Russian involvement as well as the election of a candidate who lost the popular vote by nearly three million. Only in America. This has to be an embarrassment, no matter what one's political predilections.

### THE HOPE OF DEMOCRACY

Hope for American democracy is in part anchored in history. Historian William Kornhauser in *The Politics of Mass Society*<sup>12</sup> (1959) argued that Adolf Hitler triumphed because there were few intermediate groups between Der Fuhrer and the people. Hitler controlled everything by direct radio contact with discouraged and disorganized masses. But what Nazi Germany lacked *then*, America has in spades *now* – in what we call civil society – the ACLU, the NAACP, Black Lives Matter, Common Cause, Public Citizen, Planned Parenthood, the Sierra Club, among others, and yes, the religious communities which can become what Martin Luther King called "the conscience of the nation."

Aiding and abetting these intermediary groups are prophetic figures who led them. In Friedrich Heyer's *Religione Ohne Kirche* – religion without the church – the author gives a stinging rebuke to the liberal churches in Nazi Germany who did not speak up.<sup>13</sup> German philosopher Karl Jaspers even advised young Germans to join the most traditional churches because the liberal church was cowardly. The leaders of the Confessing Church – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller – did speak up and paid the price – Bonhoeffer was executed; Niemöller was imprisoned.

Fortunately, we live in less perilous times. Our lives generally do not hang in the balance. Nevertheless, the principle of democracy prevails. Democracy is that capacity of the people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In political terms it is the right to govern themselves, to elect their representatives, and to advocate with them for the services government can provide. This we call civic engagement.

Many Americans, including New Yorkers, are disheartened. We may have worked hard on political campaigns only to see our favored candidates lose. Democracy is a messy business – a work in progress. That it is now in deep trouble is seen in the skepticism with which these familiar words are now heard: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Who can repeat them now without embarrassment? Politics today reveals an impoverished vision of citizenship; it has been reduced to interest groups. Politics is in service of economic gain, not promoting the general welfare as the Constitution requires. We live in a political culture in which politics, the art of the possible, has become who gets what, when, and how. Religion is the art of the ideal and asks the troubling question "why?" We know what we desire to do; what should we do and why should we do it?

Voting is an important, but obvious response. When we pull that voting lever we are engaging in a sacred rite of civic virtue - a religious event. And while voting is the sacred right of public participation, civic engagement is not limited to the voting booth, but is a daily obligation of the citizen. Voting is significant primarily if it is a culmination of participation in democratic dialogue on community concerns throughout the year. After all, what is democracy but "an incessant hubbub."<sup>14</sup>

We are losing that hubbub in declining social participation in voluntary associations, summed up in the phrase "bowling alone." Indices of citizen involvement in community organizations working for the public good has dramatically declined over the last several years.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "...citizens who owe (their) life to a civilized society and who (have) enjoyed since...childhood its very costly protections and advantages should appear at reasonable intervals before a properly qualified jury to justify (their) existence, which should be summarily and painlessly terminated if (they) fail to justify it, and if it develops that (they are) a positive nuisance and more trouble than (they are) worth. Nothing less will really make responsible citizens."<sup>15</sup> America is on trial. If American democracy were dependent on our participation in public life between elections, how would it fare?

On the one hand, we tend to forget how amazingly resilient our democracy is, despite all the brickbats thrown against it from every side of the political fence. For well over 200 years we have demonstrated that it is, in Churchill's words, "the worst form of government except every other."

And on the other hand, and in democracy there is always another hand. While American-style democracy sweeps the globe, it is in crisis here, the crisis of cynicism, indifference, apathy and corruption. Its ultimate success is not yet assured. But then, democracy is always on trial. It is like a baseball game forever in the beginning of the ninth. There is always another inning to play. There are some obvious flaws in the metaphor. Baseball fans incessantly want a home run or a strikeout; Americans want a quick fix to every problem. We are an impatient lot. We want more, and we want it now. Our expectations of what politics and government can do are greatly exaggerated. Politically we live by the rule of the excluded middle: you are either out or safe; you are either right or wrong. There is no middle ground. Yet democracy is inevitably based upon willingness to compromise.

The crisis is this: Will our political and economic environment determine our values, or will our values determine our political and economic life? And so, consider a new paradigm for democracy. Let us reverse the priorities suggested in Joseph Campbell's arresting image. Our religious values have top priority, and out of them comes our political ethic and our economic behavior. Our first duty as citizens is a moral one. Civic virtue ought to be our compelling value.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher Theodore Parker defined democracy as being of, by and for the people, a felicitous phrase picked up by Abraham Lincoln. Democracy is a messy business. Our job is to make the best of it. While both major parties and their candidates say "the era of big government is over," no one really addresses the issue of what is appropriate for government to do. Privatization is the new mantra, with never a kind word for government. No one seems to remember the words of Republican Abraham Lincoln which define the issue: "Government should do what the people cannot do, or cannot do so well, for themselves." It is so much easier to bash politicians and trash government than to debate its appropriate role.

"Private citizen" is an oxymoron - absurd - inherently contradictory. Yet the question on the minds of most Americans is: am I better off now than in the last election cycle, not "Are we, all of us and the nation we love and the world we cherish, better off than we were then? Are the strong more just and the weak more

secure? Have we done as much for the next generation and for our country as the first generations did for us?"

## **DEMOCRACY AS A RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE**

There are perspectives unique to the religious vision of democracy. Faith provides a perspective that as Maya Angelou put it: "No one can make it out here alone." There is a perspective here that reminds us that the Beloved Community will not be realized in our lifetime. There is a perspective here that reminds us that social justice is the work of a lifetime. The road to justice is not a 100-yard-dash, but a marathon. Our ethic requires a long horizon.

It is clear from American history that democracy and religion are inextricably intertwined. Reinhold Niebuhr once wisely said that "(Our) capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but (our) inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."<sup>16</sup> G. K. Chesterton called the United States "the nation with the soul of a church," writing that the U. S. was "the only nation in the world founded on a creed."<sup>17</sup> Clearly, despite the constitutional separation of church and state, religious values are close to the very core of American democracy.

And so, what is required of religious communities is that they organize themselves for prophetic witness. Prophetic religion is in many ways a part of what has been called the "loyal opposition." This would be true regardless of which party is in power. Prophetic witness requires envisioning a more just future apart from partisan ideology. It takes its cue from Amos dropping the moral plumb line of justice over the nation Israel, or Jesus telling his followers that "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." The Fifth Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association promotes "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."<sup>18</sup> Democracy is a religious principle.

## **CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY IS MAKING HISTORY**

Ultimately, "democracy is not what we have. It's what we do."<sup>19</sup> It is not "a spectator sport."<sup>20</sup>

Interfaith Impact encourages congregations to increase their members' informed and active participation in their government through education on major public policy issues. We seek to convey to our elected representatives the interest and concern of our faith communities in pending policies and legislation. Our interest in the democratic process is religiously based. Therefore, we support efforts to broaden and deepen citizen involvement in the issues that affect their lives.

History is not ours to observe, but to create. There is a popular chant often intoned at protest rallies: "This is what democracy looks like." And it is true that the "right of the people to peaceably assemble" is an indicator of democracy. But there are many ways for people of faith to embody democracy. Not all are able to participate physically. And so citizenship is exercised in many ways: keeping informed on the issues – local, state, nation, world - and then taking action. This is what democracy looks like: people talking with their neighbors, serving at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, financially supporting activist groups, writing letters, licking envelopes, placing stamps, signing petitions, sending e-mails and tweets, visiting their representatives, and, of course, voting.

The potential impact of civic engagement is illustrated in a story from the First White House Protests for Women's Suffrage, 100 years ago. As the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was being approved one state at a time, it seemed that the issue hinged on the vote of the Volunteer State, Tennessee. It all came down to the deciding vote to be cast by a 24-year-old state senator who was known for his opposition. However, one fateful day he received a telegram from his mother and he changed his vote. Women won the franchise.

As Adlai Stevenson, twice vanquished in runs for the White House, wrote: "What do we mean by patriotism in the context of our times? ... A patriotism that puts country ahead of self; a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime. There are words that are easy to utter, but this is a mighty assignment. For it is often easier to fight for principles than to live up to them."

Note: See also Rev. Gilbert's Backgrounders: "Campaign Finance Reform" and "Redistricting Testimony" at [www.interfaithimpactnys.org](http://www.interfaithimpactnys.org).

## TALKS

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## SERMONS

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Redistricting

# Finance Campaign reform

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, Book II *Great Companions*, 510-511.

<sup>2</sup> ?????

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Murray, from *The League of Nations and the Democratic Idea*, via *Great Companions I.*, 387-8.

<sup>4</sup> “Iroquois Constitution: A Forerunner to Colonists’ Democratic Principles.” *The New York Times*, June 28, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Bowen, Catherine Drinker. *The Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention May – September 1787*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> E. L. Doctorow????

<sup>7</sup> G. B. Shaw.??

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Politics" quoting Fisher Ames.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt.????

<sup>10</sup> E. B. White. *Saturday Review*. December 13, 1975 (quoted).

<sup>11</sup> H. L. Mencken, source unknown.

<sup>12</sup> Kornhauser, William. *The Politics of Mass Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Heyer, Friedrich. *Religione ohne Kirche*. Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 24.

<sup>15</sup> G. B. Shaw.????

<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*: Chicago: University of Chicago Press (reprinted) 2011.

Originally printed in 1944.

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<sup>17</sup> G. K. Chesterton. “What I Saw in America.” *Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Vol. 21.

<sup>18</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*.

<sup>19</sup> Center for Living Democracy, Winter 1995, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Marian Wright Edelman.