

# Democracy, Conflict & the Bible: Reflections on the role of the Bible in International Affairs



Editors:  
Cristian Romocea and Mohammed Girma

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ISBN 978-0-564-09126-3

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The International Bible Advocacy Centre (IBAC) exists to advocate for the place of the Bible in the public square and to support and inspire others to do the same. We encourage people to consider the relevance of the Bible in their lives and communities, breaking down barriers, misconceptions and apathy towards the Scriptures. Our focus is on opening up conversations while leaving space for local churches to further explore this in their own way, at grassroots level. IBAC is an initiative of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and we work particularly with the United Bible Societies Fellowship. For more info, go to [www.bibleadvocacy.org](http://www.bibleadvocacy.org)

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# Introduction

*"The past is never dead. It's not even past."* William Faulkner





The global rise of democracy, human rights and international peace-keeping are the hallmarks of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s barely more than a dozen countries could be described as democratic. However, by the year 2000 about 70 (out of 190 countries represented at the United Nations) were said to be democratic. As G. J. Buijs et al point out, now even the countries which are dictatorial and repressive at heart are trying to legitimise their rule by not only adopting the term “democracy” as jargon, but also imitating democratic procedures such as elections and multi-party parliamentary systems.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the quest for democracy caused a political earthquake across the Arab world propelling some enthusiasts to coin the term “Arab Spring”. Until the Arab Spring transformed itself into what can now be called the “Arab Winter”, it looked like Francis Fukuyama’s prediction that the advance of democracy will bring about the “end of history” was about to be realised.

Democracy, as a means to end repression, realise freedom and achieve global peace has been seen – in both the media and in academia – as the ultimate political accomplishment. What is not discussed as much however are the origins of democracy, and how the concept itself evolved to global prominence. This publication, therefore, aims to fill in this gap by highlighting the contribution of the Bible to democracy and peacebuilding not only by tracing its origin but also by referring to accounts from recent history. Democracy, on the surface, is not a biblical term or concept we find in the Christian Scriptures. The question, therefore, is: how did the Bible contribute to the birth and development of democracy?

The Bible talks at length about governance. Many people recognise the biblical vision for good governance as aligning with democracy, and certainly much of Western political tradition has been profoundly influenced by the idea, expressed in Deuteronomy 17.14–20, that the law applies equally to all. The king of Israel could command huge authority as God’s anointed, but ultimately was under the same judgement as everyone else. The centrality of the law in the Bible is key to understanding how the Bible and Christianity relate to democracy, government and political power. Its universality and pervasiveness for the people of Israel, instituted a kind of government of the people by the people.

The Bible has often been used as a force for good in the extension of democracy around the world. Values such as freedom, individual conscience and human rights can be traced back to the Bible and the Christian tradition as it unfolded over centuries. For example, the egalitarian communal experience of the Early Church was a model for modern emphases on social equality. The notion of subsidiarity and common good are said to have developed amidst the interaction between medieval Christianity and Aristotelian political philosophy. Also, concepts like individual dignity, human rights, freedom of conscience or religious tolerance may be traced back to the radical Reformation, English non-conformity and North American liberal Protestantism and were profoundly shaped by the Scriptures.

Yet parallel to this, ambiguous interpretations have at times led to the Bible being used as justification for dictatorial regimes and conflict. From bishops opposing the great democratic Reform Act of 1832 in the UK, to churches offering theological justification to Nazism and Communism in twentieth

century Europe, the Bible often appears supportive of hierarchical and authoritarian forms of political authority. Some Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have chequered pasts espousing tendencies toward hierarchy and absolutism often biblically justified, while formally claiming support for democracy and human dignity. During the Balkan wars of the last century, it was said that churches' support of nationalism blinded its clergy to the atrocities committed in the name of religion and ethnicity, while during the Rwandan genocide, the church buildings became primary killing grounds.

However, while appearing to support conflict, the Bible has been fundamental to the entire constitution of international order. Not only human security and peacekeeping, but foreign aid, environmental stewardship, and other such key issues have all been rooted in the Biblical ideas of justice. These have shaped the early articulation of international order, of the 'just and durable peace' envisioned after World War II, having a decisive influence on the constitution of the United Nations and its approach to peace and diplomacy. The purpose of this publication is therefore to highlight the role that the Bible can play in international affairs and governance.

Thus, in the first chapter, Robert Joustra explores the origins and outlook of the Bible and U.N. peacekeeping by showing how Biblical ideas of justice influenced the principle and ideas for international order envisioned by political and Christian leaders at the end of World War II. Using the U.N. armed-peace keeping missions – starting with Suez in 1956 – as case-studies, Joustra argues that the Biblical vision for international order enabled and supported the practice of peacekeeping. He concludes that a fresh re-engagement with the Bible remains significant to the future of peacekeeping as part of global governance and for realising Isaiah's ancient invocation of 'beating swords into ploughshares.'

Another way of addressing conflict is through attempts at reconciliation and conflict resolution. Thus, in the second chapter, Sean Oliver-Dee discusses the contribution of the Bible to addressing social conflict using case-studies. The chapter begins by surveying the perspectives of theologians and psychologists on the possibility of reconciliation and conflict resolution. It looks at the necessity of 'forgiveness' in the reconciliation process, before digging into two modern day conflicts to show how the Bible continues to be a valuable tool for healing societies which have been torn apart by extreme social conflicts. The first case-study looks at Rwanda, where the ethno-tribal divide led to a genocide which brought international outcry and where the work of knitting back together the deep wounds it caused, involved NGOs turning to the Bible as a tool for bringing long-term peace and solidarity to the country. The second study takes stock of Cambodia where the clash of ideologies led to the systematic and brutal extermination carried out by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, and whose effects still fester in a society unused to forgiveness. Here the author explores how the biblical doctrine of justice and reconciliation through Christ's sacrifice is permeating the growing Cambodian churches and, in turn, bringing reconciliation and the closure needed by many Cambodians towards the horrors of the past.



In the third chapter, Nick Spencer tests the relationship between the U.N. and democracy, exploring the ways in which the Bible supports attempts by the U.N. to extend democracy around the world. Nick describes the ambiguous relation of the Bible and democracy, suggesting that the Bible is seemingly both opposed to structures of governance and supportive of the moral content of governance. He identifies and outlines four key commitments – to the depth of law, the rule of law, the demands of the good, and the limits to power – from which a positive and measured Christian engagement with democracy can be fashioned. Following this analysis, he argues that the Bible does offer support to democracy – not because democratic systems are salvific, but because the decentred nature of its power system allows political rulers to hear the needs of their people and puts better checks on political abuse than other systems. The author concludes that the Bible does support attempts by the UN to extend democracy around the world, so long as these U.N. efforts are not limited to the development of democratic structures and processes within a country but they are also aimed at nurturing and protecting the culture and wider social commitments within which a just and stable democracy may develop.

The work of churches that shape society through a rediscovery of the importance of the Bible is furthermore explored in the fourth chapter, where Tobias Winright reflects on Catholic social teaching and the Roman Catholic Church's position on democracy and human rights in Latin America. Winright argues that the tenets of Catholic social teaching, such as the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, respect for human rights, and subsidiarity, represent key components for peace-making and for the promotion of democracy and human rights in Latin America. The chapter traces the changing perspective of Roman Catholicism during and after the Second Vatican Council exemplified through an emphasis on the Bible and liturgical and other reforms. It then argues that such developments had significant repercussions in Latin America, with bishops shifting their stance to identifying with and working on behalf of the poor, the growth of small Bible study groups and the development of liberation theology. Through an increase in the reading and study of the Scriptures in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic social teaching began emphasizing social justice, human dignity, the communitarian character of social life, subsidiarity, stewardship of the environment, and a preferential option for the poor. All these radically changed Roman Catholicism's stance and contributed to the democratization of Latin America and to the promotion of peacebuilding.

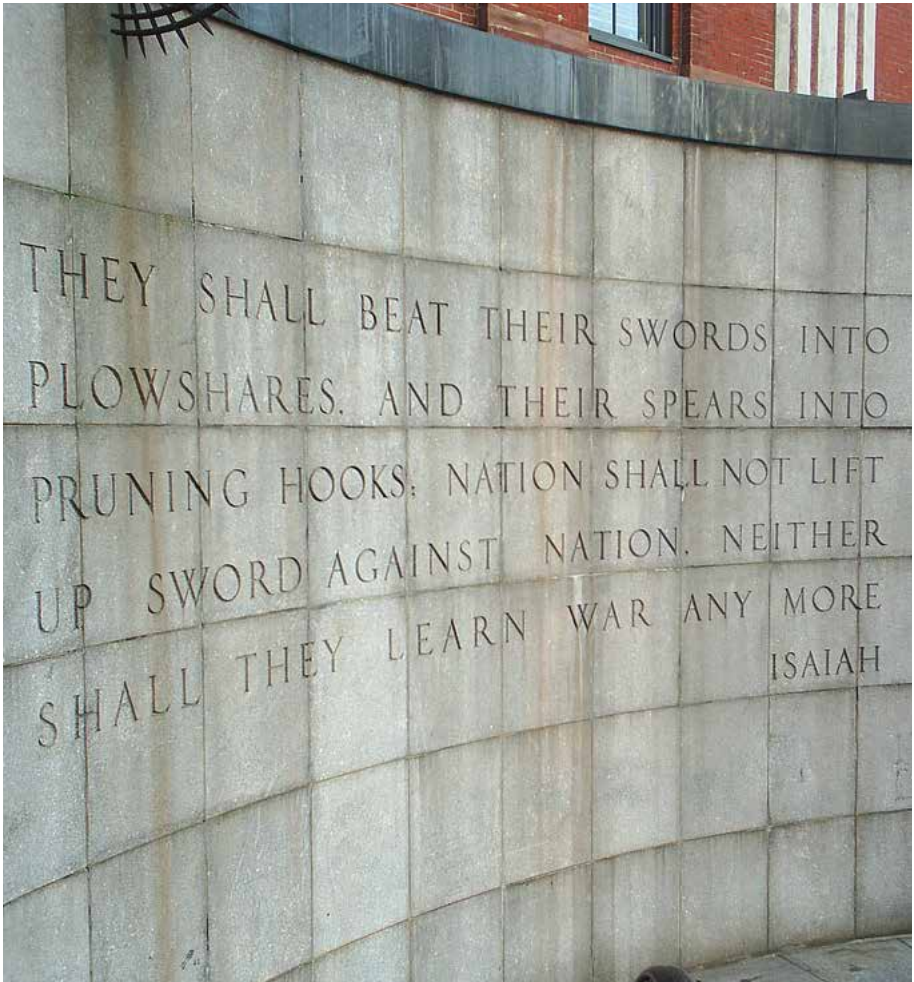
We hope these various themes and international perspectives on the positive contribution of the Bible to international order, governance, democratisation and peacebuilding will challenge the reader and contribute to a dialogue between biblical scholars, civil society and politicians.

Cristian Romocea

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# The Isaiah Wall and the World: Origins and Outlook of the Bible and U.N. Peacekeeping



## Abstract

*The Bible matters for global affairs. It matters not only because it was influential, once upon a time, but because it is a living, serious book which shapes hearts, minds, systems, and institutions even in the present day. The question of the United Nations and peace-keeping, the subject of this chapter, is therefore like a case study. I show, first, how Biblical ideas of justice shaped the early articulation of international order, of the 'just and durable peace' envisioned after World War II. I then show how this vision became translated and practically enabled, as in the case of the first armed-peace keeping mission in Suez in 1956. Over the course of the U.N.'s 69 peacekeeping missions (56 of them since 1988) this vision, and the practice of peacekeeping which is a part of it, has been seriously tested, and while in many cases found badly wanting, it remains a significant tool for that original Scriptural-project, a just and durable peace. Finally, I make an argument for the future of peacekeeping as part of global governance, for the special significance of engaging the Bible afresh for that future, and the possibilities this holds for realizing Isaiah's ancient invocation to 'beat swords into ploughshares.'*

## Introduction

On First Avenue, across from the United Nations in New York City sits a small park, less than a quarter of an acre, named for Ralph Bunche, the first African-American recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. It's so close to the U.N. that people often mistake the park for being part of it. It's not. But the mistake is natural, because the park is also home to the famous 'Isaiah Wall' which so many people naturally associate with the United Nations and its' peacekeeping. There, carved into granite, is the old prophesy of an obscure Hebrew itinerant, predicting a day that seems as far away now as it did then in ancient Mesopotamia; that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall we learn war any longer.

And yet, "Isaiah's vision of human security," as international relations scholar Scott Thomas puts it, has shaped the world in powerful and profound ways. Writes Thomas, "Indeed, the Book of Isaiah with its visions of peace and the restoration of Israel has loomed larger in the Western theo-political imagination than almost any book of the Hebrew Bible."<sup>1</sup> It has contributed, he argues, to various types of messianic ideas and schemes, Zionism as well as anti-Semitism, Catholic liberation theology, feminist, environmentalist, peacekeeping, and inter-faith theologies. Even William Penn famously used it in a practical way in his "Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe" (1693).<sup>1</sup> And, strikingly, argues Thomas, Isaiah's vision for *human security* and for peace has been and continues to be an essential 'normative' component of the United Nations, and of its discourse and practice.

The influence of Scripture on peacekeeping and global governance, of course, is not limited to the Book of Isaiah. The Bible itself, as an integral whole, has been fundamental to the entire constitution of international order. Not only human security, but foreign aid, environmental stewardship, and a host

of other issues have all been rooted in Biblical injunctions and interpretations. This is not to overstate matters and say that “the Biblical perspective” on twenty-first century global order is straight forward. It certainly is not. The same Bible that built the Isaiah Wall and fuels the diplomatic optimism of a future peace, has also fuelled terrible crimes, even genocide, in the last century. Isaiah’s vision for ‘human security’ sits in the same book as Joshua’s cleansing of the Canaanites, a text of such terrible, violent imagery that Philip Jenkins argues it has often been at the root of some of our century’s worst crimes, like Rwanda.<sup>2</sup> *Interpretation*, in other words, matters. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), the Protestant Reformers may have shouted, but Scripture is never alone.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter is therefore aimed to fill part of this conversation: the use and interpretation of Scripture for a vision of international order and justice as applied to the United Nations efforts at peacekeeping. Other chapters could, and should, be written. Chapters on Scripture and the International Criminal Court, chapters on Scripture and accords on climate change and the environment, chapters on Scripture and holy war, just war, on human rights and human freedoms, on weapons of mass destruction, nuclear deterrence and nuclear disarmament. The Bible, as well as other sacred texts, all form a fundamental normative foundation for global institutions and global order in this century. Especially with the now widely accepted discrediting of what academics called the ‘secularization thesis’ (the idea that religion is going away), prudent students of both the Bible and the world will need to pay ever closer attention to the use (and abuse) of the Bible in global affairs. We live in *God’s Century*, argue Monica Toft, Timothy Shah, and Daniel Philpott.<sup>4</sup> These conversations must be, and are becoming, strikingly common.

“the Biblical story is intrinsically international, it spans the minor, temporal boundaries of power and wealth”

My argument in this chapter is that the Bible *matters* for global affairs. It matters not only because it *was* influential, once upon a time, but because it *is* a living, serious book which shapes hearts, minds, systems, and institutions even in the present day. The question of the United Nations and peace-keeping, the subject of this chapter, is therefore like a case study. I will show, first, how Biblical ideas of justice shaped the early articulation of international order, of the ‘just and

durable peace’ envisioned after World War II. I will then show how this vision became *translated* and *practically* enabled, as in the case of the first armed-peace keeping mission in Suez in 1956. Over the course of the U.N.’s 69 peacekeeping missions (56 of them since 1988) this vision, and the practice of peacekeeping which is a part of it, has been seriously tested, and while in many cases found badly wanting, it *remains* a significant tool for that original Scriptural-project, a just and durable peace. Finally, I will make an argument for the future of peacekeeping *as part* of global governance, for the special significance of engaging the Bible afresh for that future, and the possibilities this holds for realizing Isaiah’s ancient invocation to ‘beat swords into ploughshares.’

## “A Just and Durable Peace”: The Biblical Origins of the United Nations and Peacekeeping

The origins of Biblical internationalism vastly predate any conversation on the United Nations, or even the modern era at all. Bob Goudzwaard, for example, argues that in Scripture we find one of the first true *cosmopolitan* blueprints for globalization: that the Kingdom of God, as announced in the Christian Bible, is an innately globalizing force, one eschatologically driven to unite all people under one King.<sup>5</sup> This vision has been alive in Christian kingdoms, empires, and states since that first century of the Common Era. The Biblical story is intrinsically international, it spans the minor, temporal boundaries of power and wealth that experts of international relations and history often fixate upon.

But in few times in history has the Biblical story of globalization been so powerful and seemed so persuasively possible than in the last century, when economies, technologies, and industries of scale compressed space and time so that human beings could, for the first time, genuinely *conceive* of a global, interconnected community. It was one thing to *talk* of a message going out to all the world, wherever that might be. It was another to look at a nearly complete cartography of that world, and point out who was missing.

This spirit of internationalism was not lost on some of the century's early global enthusiasts, fore among them American President Woodrow Wilson. After that fateful Paris Peace Conference, John Maynard Keynes wrote of the President that he “thought like a Presbyterian minister” and that Wilson's thinking about international affairs did not rest upon “a secular ideology or definition of national interests” but “in his personal religious faith, a faith so absolute and pervasive that it determined not only what he thought, but also, more importantly, how he thought.”<sup>6</sup>

Keynes did not mean this as a compliment.

But whether we share Keynes' postwar frustration with Wilson or not, the point remains that his Presbyterian faith and the Christian Bible had an essential, though of course not isolated, effect on the President's enthusiasm for what he thought was an ethical and a Christian postwar international order. The effect of what has been called Wilson's *idealist* vision for international affairs, and particularly for a community of nations – or his League of Nations – was as important as it was ill fated. The League, as many twentieth century historians will be quick to remind us, was a spectacular failure, partly because Wilson lacked some critical domestic support. But it is not, we should hasten to add, because the American public and its leadership lacked Christian conviction. It is because the tradition of Biblical interpretation, and how that relates to specific international institutions, was *and is* a major fault line in political-theological debates about the Bible in America (and the world). The challenges, in other words, that Wilson faced, and that ultimately tore the League apart, would be faced again during and after World War 2.

Several factors shifted in and during the Second World War that made *this* Biblical ideal – of a communion of nations brought together under a Christian ethic of peace and dialogue – more persuasive, and ultimately more possible. Several of these are geopolitical, factors that are important, but outside our direct context: the obvious need to dismantle empires, even by hawkish conservatives, the pressing necessity to rebuild and refashion states badly torn apart by the war, and, of course, the new American leadership in that context, given Britain's own serious battle damage. Much more on this can be said. It is important when considering the influence of things like Biblical text to avoid overcompensating for a lack of attention to spiritual and religious sources by overstating or exhausting their influence. Scripture was read *within* this context, and that context matters a good deal, but so – naturally – does the source material.

Because some of these shifting factors were also religious. The Federal Council of Churches<sup>7</sup>, the main, liberal, Protestant body of advocacy in the early twentieth century, and an ecumenical association of thirty two denominations, had fought for years the drift into intervention in the Second World War. Much of its membership had a hybrid pacifist and isolationist political theology, one which was seriously critical of the force of arms, and more critical still of adventurism in European wars. The effect of the Pearl Harbor, therefore, was salutary.

*“the shift to an apocalyptic, atomic politics was one that enabled more, rather than less, Biblical reflection”*

By 1942 the FCC had organised a petition to support the war signed by nearly a hundred of the nation's leading Protestant figures, and a year later even declared that peace could only come through total military victory.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic hierarchy in America, initially quite hesitant about the war, followed suit. It seemed, for a time, that religious America had reached a détente on the question of internationalism and

war, a quiet consensus that it took not Wilson's Presbyterianism, but a Japanese pre-emptive strike to reach.

But all was not so quiescent in Biblical America as it may seem. Indeed, writes Andrew Preston,

The war should have been a time of unbridled, triumphalist nationalism. Given that the United States achieved victory on two fronts on two separate continents a world apart, all without suffering any physical damage itself, and given how well the nation emerged after fifteen years of war and Depression, it would not have been a surprise had Americans treated world events as a total vindication of their way of life. And of course, many if not most Americans felt exactly this way, and celebrated accordingly. But many others did not, and most of those who questioned that the war provided confirmation of America's goodness or disagreed that it had come at a worthwhile cost were religious Americans. Religious belief is often a source of dogmatic moral certainty, but it can also cause profound doubt and self-reflection, even



among the most devoted. This seems to have been the case during World War II, for a sizable number of religious Americans did not support the war.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from the war, several issues stood out as troublesome to American Christians: the draft, the Allied strategy of total war and unconditional surrender, Japanese internment, and the use of atomic weapons.<sup>10</sup> Atomic weapons, and nuclear disarmament generally, quickly became a celebrated cause of liberal Protestants in America. "The greatest concentration of critical comment on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings," writes Paul Boyer, "came from the churches."<sup>11</sup> In fact, writes Preston, "for many of them the war's culmination in a mushroom cloud reignited their drive for world peace."<sup>12</sup>

The shift to an apocalyptic, atomic politics was one that enabled more, rather than less, Biblical reflection. For fundamentalists like Carl McIntire, the atomic bomb "makes seem more real the Biblical statements of the earth's destruction."<sup>13</sup> Even *Fortune* magazine predicted that the bomb would cause a "religious awakening" and a "reaffirmation of Christian values" across America.<sup>14</sup>

So, in a sense, the geopolitical terrain also shifted the religious-political terrain. Books like *Revelation* were no longer read as wide-eyed mythologies. Some began to read them as literal, certainly credible, futures.

It was within this moment in history that the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) advanced its ecumenical agenda of a communion of nations with striking, even startling success. This American-led Council was in fact so successful that its leader reported with characteristic flourish and some small exaggeration that, "If it were not for the churches of this country, there probably would not be a United Nations today."<sup>15</sup>

That leader was appointed in 1940, when the FCC established the Commission on a Just and Durable Peace. This was yet another Presbyterian, John Foster Dulles. Like Wilson, Dulles grew up as the son of Presbyterian minister. Like Wilson, Dulles experienced the Presbyterian culture as a young undergraduate at Princeton, where, in fact, Wilson was president during his time. He chose international law, arguing "I could make a greater contribution as a Christian lawyer and layman than I would as a Christian minister."<sup>16</sup> His foreign policy credentials certainly helped. His grandfather and his uncle had both been secretaries of state, and through their connections the young Dulles attended both the Second Hague Peace Conference and the Paris Peace Conference itself.

So when Dulles addressed the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work Conference in Oxford in 1937, he was ready to make a passionate legal, not merely religious case, for the ending of war. The solution, he argued, was not merely to outlaw war by "mere declaration" but to provide other, more productive, outlets for human energy.<sup>17</sup> He called for the dismantling of inviolable sovereignty. He called for a federal world model. He called, in short, for the resurrection of a powerful League of Nations. In every respect, writes Preston, his worldview was that of an "ecumenical internationalist."<sup>18</sup>

Dulles put his Christian faith at the centre of this internationalism. If such peace was to be "just and durable," he argued, it would also have to be Christian, or at least based on Biblical principles and

could be applied more broadly.<sup>19</sup> International order without a Christian ethics would lack a moral foundation, the very substance of his argument against fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union.

And like much of religious America, though not a pacifist, Dulles had serious doubts about the war until the attack on Pearl Harbour. But while that attack may have galvanised his support for the war in 1941, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending it similarly animated his spirited conviction that war itself must be put to an end. War, as the atomic age made plainly clear, had become so total and so destructive that it could no longer be tolerated.

The FCC under Dulles therefore made its main goal to arouse Christians to their “responsibility” for world peace,<sup>20</sup> and specifically drawing up an “ethical, peaceful world order that was both workable and palatable to most Americans.”<sup>21</sup> The audacity of a religious group drawing up this kind of candid social and political framework is almost unintelligible to the contemporary mind, but churches did it. The Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace met in New York in March of 1941, and a week after had printed 450,000 copies of a handbook.

When Roosevelt and Churchill responded in kind, issuing the Atlantic Charter in August of 1941, a list of eight common principles, Dulles complained it was “tentative and incomplete.”<sup>22</sup> Challenged to provide a plan of greater depth and specificity, he did so. The FCC launched a major book at the Rockefeller Center’s RCA Building in March 1943: *Six Pillars of Peace*, which, in Dulles’ mind, captured the essential elements of Christian internationalism. These were:

1. An international organization, which makes all further principles possible;
2. Economic justice through coordinating and limiting the domestic laws of states;
3. Political reform to allow permanent forums for treaty negotiations;
4. Decolonization;
5. Disarmament;
6. The protection of individual freedoms, especially religious and intellectual liberty.<sup>23</sup>

*Six Pillars* was an enormous political success. The FCC met with the President and a range of secretaries, and eventually found itself at both Dumbarton Oaks and in San Francisco. Pope Pius XII issued his own program, *Six Conditions of a Just Peace*, which dovetailed with both the Atlantic Charter and the FCC’s *Six Pillars*. The world took notice, and so, indeed, did the American public, a crucial missing piece from Wilson’s plan. The publicity generated from the FCC through sermons, pamphlets, and lobbying was rapidly absorbed into American public perception. In a Gallup poll in 1941 “international freedom” and “reformation or reformed something based on toleration and Christian principles” were the two most popular solutions for war. In April of 1945, thanks in part to the FCC, some polls recording as high as 90 percent approval ratings in the United States for the establishment of the United Nations. And when the Commission did attend the San Francisco Conference, it proposed nine items for the United Nations Charter, of which four – a statement on moral aims; codification of international

law; decolonization; and a declaration of fundamental human rights – were simply accepted. Writes Andrew Preston, “rarely had religious lobbying been so effective, or so consequential.”<sup>24</sup>

Finally, as I have laboured to show, while the Bible and liberal Protestants through the FCC did have influential and decisive influence on the U.N. and its approach to peace and diplomacy, it’s also true that many Bible-believing Christians were less than impressed with this approach. Protestant fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals were among its fiercest critics. M.G. Hatcher, a fundamentalist Baptist preacher from Iowa argued, “Scripture does prophecy” the establishment of a world government, which “will make it possible for the World Dictator, the Anti-Christ, to take over control.”<sup>25</sup> This United Nations was, in his mind, a first step to creating a “reign of suffering and terror as the world has never known.” William L. Blessing equated the “God-denying, Crist-rejecting, Holy Ghost-blaspheming, Bible-hating atheistic” FCC with the same “anti-Christ world order” of the U.N.<sup>26</sup> Dan Gilbert mounted a protest against the evils of the U.N. which he considered parallel with those of the FCC. The FCC’s organizational structure, he argued, ignored the great company of Bible-believers who were denominationally tied to the organization, robbing them of their autonomy. This, he said, is exactly what the U.N. would do to Americans.<sup>27</sup>

*Scripture and the meaning of a truly Christian international order, were of serious and enduring importance*

Enthusiasm for international institutionalism and global governance generally remains muted in many pockets of Christian conservatism not only in the United States, but abroad. And these criticisms, it should not be overlooked, are rooted in interpretations and political-applications of the same Scripture that inspired liberal Protestantism in the twentieth century to build those same institutions. The political-theological debate, in other words, rages on, just as it did for Wilson, and just as it did for Dulles. Far from settled, it recurred again under American presidents like Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. But in each of these cases, Scripture and the meaning of a truly Christian international order, were of serious and enduring importance. While the exegetical debate may not be settled on postwar order, the clear conclusion that we can draw is that the Bible certainly was, and continues, to fuel significant parts of this debate.

## The United Nations and the Suez Crisis: How “just” and how “durable”?

Few might have predicted that this “just and durable peace” of the FCC and the United Nations would undergo one of its greatest hours of trial because of NATO-allies. This was the crucible that forged

what has become known as United Nations Peacekeeping. It all began on a rather inauspicious day in July, at a canal.

On that day, July 26 1956, Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company. The Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean to the African and Asian world has been, and continues to be, one of the most significant pieces of trade infrastructure in the world. The nationalization of that canal, while hardly a surprise to attentive observers given Nasser's nationalistic policies, was therefore a crisis to almost all of the world's largest economies. It was an immediate economic emergency.<sup>28</sup>

Here we meet again, now U.S. Secretary of State under President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles. It is reported that Dulles' meeting with Nasser went so badly, and that President Nasser was so insulted, that when Dulles withdrew any possibility of American funding, Nasser simply responded by seizing the assets in question.<sup>29</sup>

One of the reasons this was such a dangerous test of the just and durable peace is that, not for the last time, it placed major powers on opposite sides over an essentially post-colonial question. And there was every possibility that former colonial powers, especially Great Britain, would (and did) respond in a time-tested manne invasion. Early negotiations largely proved a ruse. When on October 10 Israel launched retaliatory raids into Jordan, work was already afoot to cement its alliance with France, Egypt firmly in both their sights. In the Paris suburbs on October 22 Israel and French foreign ministers were joined by two British representatives, and a formal document was signed by all three nations to invade Egypt.

It was at a failed October Cabinet meeting that the idea of a U.N. Emergency Force was first discussed. It was an idea championed by an inauspicious and unsuspecting corner: Canada's Minister of External Affairs, Lester B. (Mike) Pearson. The Suez crisis and the man Pearson would give practical shape to Dulles' just and durable peace, and to the future of peacekeeping in the United Nations.

When Pearson first flew to New York on November 1, he thought that the British and the French were the obvious partners to form the balance of the emergency force. He realized immediately this would be impossible. He arrived to find an American resolution for a ceasefire under siege at the General Assembly, and seized the opportunity to press for the establishment of a U.N. force.

By November 3, Pearson introduced the Canadian resolution which would win him the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>30</sup> The politics of shaping that resolution into a plan in forty-eight hours are worth a chapter to themselves, but by November 6 the Secretary-General had put practical principles to the just and durable peace of the United Nation's ideals:

- The great powers would not be included in the force.
- There would be an advisory committee in New York.
- The force would not be a fighting army and would not impose its will on anyone.

- It would be neutral.
- The sovereign rights of the nation on whose soil it was stationed would be respected.
- A nation providing troops would be responsible for paying them and providing their equipment. Other costs would be borne by the U.N.<sup>31</sup>

Ceasefires followed, withdrawals after that. On November 11 the Secretary-General announced that Egypt agreed on principle to the entry of the U.N. force. Thus was the United Nations Emergency Force born. Within 14 days troops were on the ground.

This was a real success translating the U.N.'s principles of international dialogue as a foundation for world peace into a practical deployment of emergency forces, of *peacekeepers*, as the world would come to know them. It showcased the belligerence of major powers, the frustration and even irrelevance of bodies like the U.N. Security Council, and yet, at the same time, the slow, proximate diplomacy which the FCC championed in San Francisco. True, it was not swords into ploughshares, a dream which armed peacekeeping seems to contradict, but it was an international experiment in fewer swords *drawn*. And that, in a world of proximate justice and seemingly intractable conflict, is an impressive victory.

Proximate as that dream has been, not all peacekeeping missions in the history of the United Nations have been as successful as that first, which translated its early ideals into practice. While the principles have remained constant, the challenges have not. Peacekeepers today not only maintain security, but also facilitate political processes, demobilize and reintegrate combatants, promote human rights, restore the rule of law, and participate in disarmament.

But the truth of the matter is that United Nations peacekeeping in the present day is in a state of crisis. George Moose, Vice Chairman of the United States Institute for Peace, writes that "the alarming state of the overtaxed United Nations peacekeeping system endangers human rights, genocide prevention, development and the prospects for sustainable peace."<sup>32</sup> Moose describes peacekeeping as the United Nation's "signature brand," (something which itself earned the U.N. the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998), and one very much in danger because its capacities have been stretched to their absolute limits. This, despite the fact the U.N. ranks first in the number of operational forces deployed around the world, with 130,000 peacekeepers assigned to 16 missions (as of June 2015). The challenge, Moose argues bluntly, is political. Peacekeeping is no longer seen as a primary vehicle for many nation's foreign policies, and some countries, like Canada, have opted for regional military alliances and deployments like NATO, partly because they no longer see the UN as the obvious or most effective instrument for peacekeeping. Significant players in world politics, especially the United States, have simply not invested in the process the resources necessary to sustain the goals of peacekeeping.

Part of this is also because of the perceived *limits* of U.N. peacekeeping in many of these hot spots around the globe. Clearly, when one considers the many hot spots around the globe, these peacekeepers are no silver bullet. Peacekeeping missions have been deployed, and in some instances badly failed, in places like Somalia, Congo, Central African Republic, Rwanda and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> The truism of politics

has long been that there is no police force robust or powerful enough to enact justice and the rule of law *only* by force. Failed states, in other words, as some of the latter most certainly are, test the boundaries and possibilities of this kind of peacekeeping. It is difficult to imagine a peacekeeping force deployed to Syria, or Iraq, that would not quickly be caught up in the front lines between the Islamic State and the Iraqi Army, or Shi'a militias from Iran.

This is one of the key reasons why it is important to remember that Dulles and the FCC's just and durable peace did not merely rest on the innovation of armed emergency forces, invented a decade after those San Francisco negotiations. The Biblical invocation of justice is not a simple call for police, but a civil and social cry for indissoluble and indivisible human rights, for freedom of commerce and of trade, for forums of negotiation and debate, however broken and proximate these may seem, as shown in Suez. *Peacekeeping* therefore is *part of* but hardly the totality of international justice. It is one tool in the box of international diplomacy. It does not, and cannot, suit every situation.

The same, naturally, could be said for the United Nations. Pearson himself was more than a little critical of the fallout of the peacekeeping mission in Egypt, a mission he thought could never succeed if root causes were not addressed with a significant Middle East peace process. If this was the aim, Suez as an opening salvo to stabilization of the Middle East was a spectacular failure.

This was one of the reasons that Pearson's (and Dulles') internationalism ultimately adopted the United Nations as *one* vehicle. Certainly the Cold War and its potpourri of vetoes on the U.N. Security Council also convinced people like Pearson that other treaties and organizations would be necessary to bring to fruition a just and durable peace. One of those organisations, which Pearson was a vocal supporter of, was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And lest Pearson's legacy be badly represented here to suggest he was hawkish on peace and security, his most lasting legacy is almost certainly in foreign aid, and the Commission on International Development, prepared for Robert S. McNamara at the World Bank.<sup>34</sup>

The U.N., in other words, is not the panacea for global governance. The influence of Scripture and of the Church on these forums and procedures was substantial, but the Gospel was also more widespread than that. It shows up at Colombo, in development and aid agendas, in truth and reconciliation commissions, in dialogues on human security and maternal health, not only at the United Nations but in NATO, at the G8 and G20, and at the host of plural forums tackling the *simultaneous realization of norms* necessary for any 'just' or 'durable' peace.

Dulles' idealism, and that of the FCC, suffered setbacks by the Cold War, and Dulles himself

*“if we are to invoke Isaiah's vision for human security, armed peacekeepers may well be a part of it, but they would be the smallest, maybe even the least significant part of it.”*

became famous in many respects not for his role as a key architect of the United Nations, but for his aggressive stance against communism. Pragmatism and *realpolitik* colored his later career in a way that furious idealism did his younger self. But the point is not that one dismissed the other, but that this vision of peace and security lived on through institutions, through systems, that persist to this day. To say they are not ideal, to say they need change and reform, is not to say anything Dulles, or Pearson would be surprised by. But to say they are here at all, is a testimony not only to these great architects of global governance, but also to the Biblical vision that guided and inspired them.

## A Just and Durable Peace: What Does it Mean Today?

Peacekeeping is an important tool in the box of global governance, but it is only one tool, and it neither exhausts the vision of the just and durable peace that inspired the United Nations, nor does it exhaust the very real needs of a world with international terrorism, religious violence, climate changes, trade and currency wars. If we are to talk of the *Biblical* vision, if we are to invoke Isaiah's vision for human security, armed peacekeepers may well be a part of it, but they would be the smallest, maybe even the least significant part of it. Peacekeepers have done, and continue to do, significant work in places like the former-Yugoslavia, but they cannot *make* peace. And the meaning and origin of that peace drives us very quickly back to the original source material of the U.N. and its internationalism: the Bible.

The context of the "Isaiah Wall" becomes all important when we attach adjectives like just and durable in front of peace, because while it is true that the prophet calls for a future where swords are beaten into ploughshares, he is unambiguous about the context for this pacific utopia. Scott Thomas, in fact, makes a very long argument for what he considers to be the essential *failure* of Israel's political leadership during the Assyrian and later Babylon crises. That failure is not one of political or economic acumen. First and foremost Isaiah, paraphrased later by Dulles in his advocacy through the FCC, names that failure as unwillingness to trust in the LORD; that any just and durable peace, must have its foundation not only a Christian ethic and principle, but a covenantal relationship with Yahweh. That same covenant is the basis of what any Biblical understanding of *peace*, whether in making or keeping, must invoke.

This is why some Christian theologians have found common cause with the human security literature, in calling for things like positive peace, stable peace, or sustainable peace. Such a peace is not defined merely by an absence of war (a 'kept' peace), by cease-fires and peace treaties. It is an idea as part of an entire political-theological imagination of good, international society. The somewhat overused, and occasionally abused Hebrew *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם), is the word Old Testament scholars use to communicate this. It invokes not only restoration, but public justice, a peaceful and ongoing conciliation of diversity rooted in a balanced covenant between God, people, and the whole creation. Sustainable peace, in



other words, is about "good governance"<sup>35</sup> rooted in right relationships. And that is a peace that Dulles rightly coveted and which our own pale attempts at global governance aim to capture.

But what should also be clear by this grand and sweeping vision of peace is that approaches like peacekeeping are *small* and *narrow* ones. They are, exactly as Pearson named them, emergency options that are exercised only after a series of significant failures have taken place.

*“a just and durable peace means more than peacekeeping and emergency aid. It means stopping the wheel of injustice and poverty; it means a renewed global architecture”*

This is the reason that some Christian leaders, like Gary Haugen and Victor Boutros, have argued that we must attend more deeply to causes of conflict and injustice in the world than mere 'peacekeeping.'<sup>36</sup> They invoke what Abraham Kuyper called an *architectonic critique*, that "we must courageously and openly acknowledge that the situation calls not only for the physician [for the peacekeeper] but most certainly for the architect as well." Any

Christian picture of international peace must take seriously, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer does, that "we are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." A just and durable peace means more than peacekeeping and emergency aid. It means stopping the wheel of injustice and poverty; it means a renewed global architecture.

Such an argument for the simultaneous realization of norms is already emerging in the social science. Paul Collier for example, the famous economist and author of *The Bottom Billion*, gives us a reasonably readable and academically sound picture of what that architecture might be. Public justice and the rule of law is one of four critical pieces (his list comprises foreign aid, security, trade, and laws and charters). Any approach to peace, argues Collier, that focuses solely on only one or two pieces of this package tends to fail. Haugen and Boutros, for example, cite Hernando de Soto at length in their book, *The Locust Effect*, making a persuasive argument that no development can take place apart from the basic settlement of property rights, or the rule of law which tells you who owns what and how legitimate buying and selling can go on.

The point of these new Christian thinkers is to elicit the *architectonic* aspects of Isaiah's vision of human security: that Christians, especially Christians thinking globally, must think not only about 'helping' in emergency ways, but must think long and hard about structural transformation.

The marvelous thing about developed public justice is not merely that it keeps my neighbor from stealing and raping; by far the more marvelous thing about developed public justice is that such an inclination almost never passes my neighbor's mind. The astonishing metric of success is, in fact, not enforcement itself but the relatively thin level of enforcement needed. There is no police state large enough to coerce its citizens into moral behavior; coercive power is a blunt, last resort. If citizens in England or Canada

wanted to overthrow the police, we certainly could: our officers of the peace have neither the numbers, the mandate, nor the firepower to resist such an onslaught. No, what is marvelous is that we (or most of us, at any rate) do not *desire* to overthrow our police; they are our public servants, and we respect and obey them not only out of “fear of the sword” but also a formed desire for peace, order, and good government (at least in her Majesty’s Dominion). Therein lies a culture that is the benchmark for a highly functioning architecture of peace.

A Biblical model of international peace is therefore neither reductionist, leaning on merely one or another institution, even the United Nations, nor is it consumed merely with “global” governance, recognizing as it does that local justice enables global justice, and that these two global/local aspects are not rivals, but partners in peace and development. Nor is the Biblical work of global peace merely concerned with the outward manifestations of outright violence. It is concerned with the *simultaneous realization of norms* – security (including peacekeeping), economic growth (trade, investment), the rule of law (rights), and charity (aid) – which make possible good societies, grounded first and foremost with the preaching of the Gospel. Development, says Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate*, “needs Christians with their arms raised toward God in prayer, Christians moved by the knowledge that truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced by us, but given to us.”<sup>37</sup> The Bible, then, gives us a picture of non-reductionistic peace and development, a picture of what it means to be a human being in political covenant, and then drives us back to the first covenant which makes this possible: God himself, with us.

This is why Dulles and Pearson insisted that peacekeeping would be only one piece of a Christian picture of global governance, why indeed they insisted that a Christian ethic and principles would need to be at its basis, and their, at times, nearly naïve optimism that such a thing could come to fruition. These were the audacious internationalists of another age, and we need not only their institutions in our day, but their legacy and inspiration for new generations consumed with the problem of global governance, and with peace in our day. That is how the Bible was read, and that is how we are called to read it today, pointed toward Isaiah’s vision of human security, of a world made safe from war, and of swords made into ploughshares.

## When the Kings Come Marching In

This chapter has done three things. First, it has shown the power of the Bible and people of Christian faith in shaping the international order after the Second World War. Second, it has shown how that Biblical vision for peace was *translated* into *practical* action in a moment of crisis, the Suez of 1956, through the persons of Dulles and Pearson, and through what became United Nations Peacekeeping. Third, it has contextualized both peacekeeping and the United Nations as *part* of but hardly an exhaustive account of a Biblical understanding of peace. These institutions are only a piece, vital as they may be, of the call of Scripture and of the vision of Isaiah of human security.

It is by way of conclusion, then, that revisiting Scripture for a Biblical theology of global governance is not only essential for Christians of faith but for the times in which we live. Neither is the work of peacemaking in global governance *merely* a proximate work on this side of history. Writing on Isaiah 60, Richard Mouw argues that the coming "Holy City is not wholly discontinuous with present conditions. The biblical glimpses of this City give us reason to think that its contents will not be completely unfamiliar to people like us."<sup>38</sup> Challenging too often over-spiritualized Biblical interpretations, he writes that not only "souls" will participate in the New Age. Isaiah 60 gives us a picture of corporate structures, of trade and economics, of art, and of culture brought into the Holy City as an offering to the LORD. Mouw is especially delighted by Isaiah's several mentions of the ships of Tarshish, beautiful, power, commercial ships of Isaiah's day. They too, are brought into the City, "broken," says Mouw, "like the breaking of a horse rather than the breaking of a vase," harnessed for service in the Holy City; cargo container ships, and the canals that pass them, in the new heavens, and the new earth.

Even politics, even the "kings of the earth" come marching into the City, bringing the "wealth of the nations" in their wake. Mouw calls this baffling sanctification of the political one of the greatest encouragements we have in our present day. For one thing, he writes, "we can act politically in the full assurance that our political deeds will count toward the day of reckoning that will occur in the transformed City."<sup>39</sup> Christian people may be a people in wait, but they are busy in wait, building systems and institutions, governing, today more justly than yesterday, doing the proximate work of peace that will one day be brought as honours into a Holy City. The Bible itself is more all-encompassing, says Mouw, than the mere hearts and minds of human persons; there must also be an evangelization of culture, of the structures and patterns of human interaction,<sup>40</sup> whose justices will endure.

Our conclusion is not that the Bible teaches human beings *alone* will build this City up brick by brick. It is that we are its heirs and its workers, and things like the United Nations, even like peacekeeping, like the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, *are* the things of the LORD. Like the ships of Tarshish, they will be brought into the Holy City, and broken, to be made vessels of service for the nations.

That is the day that Christian internationalists, that diplomats and lawyers, trade and finance economists, and corporate C.E.O.'s keep as a north star. And that is the day when that the Isaiah Wall, too, which so often seems to stand as pitiable protest against the United Nations in New York, will be sanctified and commissioned anew, our swords into ploughshares, the learning of war no more. Dulles' dream come true.

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# The Contribution of the Bible in Addressing Social Conflict<sup>1</sup>



## Abstract

*What, if anything does the Bible have to say about social conflict? How can words which were written between two to three thousand years ago still speak into the complex problems faced by societies around the world today? This paper briefly discusses the perspectives of theologians and psychologists on the possibility of reconciliation and conflict resolution. It outlines the points of difference between theologians and psychologists in relation to the necessity of 'forgiveness' in the reconciliation process, before digging into two modern day conflicts to show how the Bible continues to be a valuable tool for healing societies which have been torn apart by extreme social conflicts. The first country explored is Rwanda, where the genocide committed over one hundred blood-soaked days brought international outcry and where the work of knitting back together the deep wounds it caused, continues. Cambodia is the second country discussed. The deep pain brought about by the work of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s still festers in a society unused to forgiveness, yet the work of the growing Cambodian church in bringing reconciliation using Biblical stories, is having a profound impact by bringing closure from the past to many Cambodians.*

## Introduction

Back in 1956, the sociologist Lewis Coser published his seminal book *The Functions of Social Conflict*.<sup>2</sup> Coser highlighted the importance of 'social conflict' as an issue by pointing out that the central paper of the inaugural American Sociological Society (ASS) meeting in 1907 was about that very subject. He underlined the importance of 'social conflict' as a subject by noting the fact that the other members of ASS did not argue with this issue was a valid choice as the first subject for their discussion.<sup>3</sup>

It is a subject which examines the processes which govern, or contribute to, the making and remaking of society. As such, it speaks to the very nature of human interaction and order. For that reason, it is a subject on which any who wish to make sense of the world at a community, national or global level will want to express their views. So, in looking back and developing theories or narratives about how human society developed lies the basis for proposing how society might, or should develop in the future.

Such fundamental issues, which take in questions of identity and belonging, require all-encompassing explanations which cover not simply the theories or philosophies the narratives spawn, but foundational questions concerning the nature of our humanity: our needs, desires and our purpose. For that reason, over thousands of years, the doctrines and dogmas of all the major faiths have offered explanations of human relationships to the metaphysical, which also encompass the ideal shape of human society.

In the Bible this is embodied in the Ten Commandments as found in the book of Exodus: the first five commandments cover the relationship of humans with God and the second five cover human interaction. These ten commandments are enlarged upon in Leviticus where the Jews, fresh into the



land which God had promised them, were told by God how their society should function in order to reflect His ideal and nature. God's direction covered not just how the newly formed Israel was to worship Him, but also how justice should be administered and the inevitable conflicts in society resolved.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Enlightenment, explanations of human society which omitted the metaphysical have proliferated. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both Carl Marx and Max Weber developed theories of social conflict which explained the development of society (particularly western) as a series of conflicts between competing interests in society. For Marx, the focus was upon competing class interests, such as the struggle between barons and the peasants who lived under their control during the mediaeval period. Weber characterised it differently: his theory of social conflict centred around the competition for financial gain in a market economy which, according to Weber, produced the different levels in society depending on financial 'winners' and 'losers'.<sup>5</sup> Both of these thinkers have been rightly recognised for the contribution they have made to helping humanity to understand the nature of its social development.

The explanations found in religious systems as well as theories proposed by Marx, Weber and others offer us an explanation for the broad tensions faced by all societies. The particular value of Coser's work is to remind us how important issues of 'social conflict' are both historically and currently. As already briefly cited above, the Bible speaks into this most fundamental area of human interaction and the rest of this paper will dig further into this. In particular, it will ask what the Bible has to offer in terms of bringing about reconciliation between competing groups at the most extreme end of 'social conflict', when the conflict becomes more than simply competition or struggle, but turns violent.

Violence can break out for a variety of reasons in any society: the French and Russian Revolutions could be seen in terms of extreme class conflict. Whilst the violence in Nigeria could be ascribed to religious tension. The conflicts which racked the Balkans in the 1990s could be put down a renewed assertion of national or ethnic identities. Whatever the reason, the suffering is deep and the wounds on both sides cannot be easily healed. So this paper will look at the healing work of the Bible in places where this extreme social conflict has brought such deep wounds that it would be natural to wonder whether those societies could ever be revived again. Work described as 'reconciliation'.

To do this, we'll need to move quickly through a discussion of the Biblical perspectives on reconciliation and resolving conflict before moving into discussing specific incidents from the recent past where Biblical principals have contributed directly to national healing. In illuminating the Biblical contribution in these events, we will also need to contextualise the part played more broadly by the Bible in the societies under discussion so that we can understand whether the Biblical contribution in each case was an understanding which was being 'parachuted in' from outside, or whether the society in question had already been deeply impacted by the Bible. This is an important distinction to make, for if the Bible had already left an imprint on those societies, then there was already a common basis from

“building bridges, rather than the walls which exist between differing communities changes mindsets from fear and hatred to peace and cooperation”

which the Bible could be applied in the situation. If not, then it would be an instance of Biblical impact without previous engagement with it.

The two main case-studies for this paper will be Cambodia and Rwanda, but there will also be reference to several other countries such as South Sudan and Ireland. These countries have not been chosen at random: they have all have very bloody recent pasts, although in slightly differing circumstances each time. Of the two principal case studies, one, Rwanda, has been

significantly impacted by the Bible, whilst on the other hand, Cambodia has had very little previous contact with the Bible.

## 2. The Bible and resolving the aftermath of extreme social conflict

In his chapter ‘The Cross and Reconciliation’ Graham Tomlin describes the world that Jesus came into as “deeply divided”. A world in which the Roman Empire had stamped its authority over a multitude of ethnicities, religions and cultures.<sup>5</sup> Tomlin cites ancient Antioch as one example of the segregation which occurred, as different communities put up walls (sometime literally) around their sections of the city. One of the clearest divisions was that between the Jews and Gentiles. The rituals associated with Old Testament law created a need for separate baths and food so that Jews were not ‘tainted’ by non-Jewish peoples. Not surprisingly, other groups, including the Romans themselves viewed Jews as strange and at other times saw them in a more threatening light, such as when the Jews rebelled, as they did in 66C.E..<sup>6</sup> Yet, the remarkable work of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels brings together not only human opponents (Jews and Gentile Romans), but also bring about the ultimate reconciliation of mankind with God through Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Jesus himself said, this work of eternal reconciliation was also something to be mirrored by his followers. Indeed, Christ very specifically states that we cannot approach God until we have first been reconciled with each other.<sup>7</sup> So in the words and work of Christ we see how central reconciliation is to the thinking of God, not just in relation to humanity’s connection to God, but also for the benefit of societies in and of themselves. For, as Alan Storkey states in his book *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* “The principle of reconciliation builds bridges where none existed.”<sup>8</sup> Building such bridges, rather than the walls (metaphorical and physical) which exist between differing communities changes mindsets from fear and hatred to peace and cooperation.

This theology of reconciliation is highlighted by the apostle Paul where he talks about the fact that, through the work of Jesus, both Jew and Gentile have the opportunity to be reconciled to God. “His

[Jesus'] purpose was...to reconcile both of them to God through the cross through which he put to death their hostility."<sup>9</sup> The *New Bible Commentary* describes this passage as the jewel in the letter where Paul first articulates Jesus' "vertical reconciliation", before moving on to "horizontal reconciliation" between Jew and Gentile.<sup>10</sup>

On a macro level, resolving conflict, or reconciliation could reasonably be said to be the core theme of the Biblical narrative from Genesis through to Revelation. Right from 'original sin' described in Genesis chapter three through to the end of time prophesied in Revelation, the Bible tells the story of God putting into action His plan to end the effects of that original sin. The end of the final book of the Bible, Revelation is a beautiful picture of people's from all differing races once more living in harmony with God.<sup>11</sup>

We could say therefore that the centrality of reconciliation in the Bible is beyond contestation. Yet, the place of forgiveness, or the necessity of forgiveness in reconciliation is more controversial in scholarship. This is significant because, as we shall see when we discuss the case-studies in the section which follows, forgiveness plays a significant role in the process that brings about reconciliation. So, if it is not Biblical, why is it included in the Christian approaches to reconciliation we analyse in both Rwanda and Cambodia?

In 2010, Frise and McMinn published an article which surveyed Biblical scholarship in an effort to understand how central (if at all) forgiveness was to the process of reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> Their conclusion was that theologians were convinced that forgiveness was an essential element of the reconciliation process, whilst psychologists did not think that it was. For example, Rapske, Boon, Alibhai and Kheong (2010) approached the issue of forgiveness from the perspective of asking whether it can actually be beneficial not to forgive.<sup>13</sup> Their conclusion was that whilst not forgiving had some benefits, overall, it was better to forgive. But whilst this rather tepid endorsement of forgiveness as an important component of reconciliation had been given by the psychologists, Kim and Enright endorsed the importance of forgiveness in divine reconciliation, but argued that human forgiveness does not follow the same pathway.<sup>14</sup> In one sense of course, Kim and Enright are perfectly right insofar as, even with the best

*“forgiveness is an important and underrated element of justice which has suffered from an institutional confusion over the purpose of punishment”*

intentions of Christians, forgiveness and reconciliation are frequently in short supply, even within the church community, let alone towards others outside it. Yet, there have also been a significant number of outstanding examples of Christians forgiving those who have perpetrated appalling crimes. For example, on 17th June 2015, Dylan Roof murdered nine members of a bible-study at the Emanuel African Church in Charleston. At Roof's initial court appeal, which had heavy publicity, family after

family of his victims told him that they had forgiven him for what he had done. This did not mean that they did not want the process of the law to be followed, but they were able to view him on CCTV and were able to tell him to his face that even though he had caused immeasurable hurt, they were still able to forgive him. That powerful story received coverage all over the world.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the extraordinary witness that court footage became, it also demonstrated an important dynamic which was unrecognised by Kim and Enright's observations: that even though human forgiveness does often not follow the same pathway as divine forgiveness, Jesus taught that in forgiveness, as in all things, his followers were to imitate his words and actions.

In his chapter on forgiveness within the criminal justice system in Enright and North's book *Exploring Forgiveness*, Walter Dickey argues that forgiveness is an important and under-rated element of justice which has suffered from an institutional confusion over the purpose of punishment. That said, Dickey also sees hope for the future (the book was written in 1998) in the developing concept of 'restorative justice' in which crimes receive the justice they require, but through which work with both victim and perpetrator are able to result in healing which brings long-term peace.<sup>16</sup>

This construct of forgiving yet allowing justice to take its proper course is important in both case studies which follow.

## 3. Two Case-studies

As was outlined in the Introduction, we shall be focusing on Rwanda and Cambodia, both of whom experienced terrible conflict, one of which was based on ethno-tribal divide (Rwanda) and the other was based upon a clash of ideologies (Cambodia). Its worth bearing this difference in mind as we explore the Biblical impact in resolving the wounds of the past, for it is important to highlight that, even when the Bible is the blueprint for healing in any given situation, this does not mean that the same methodologies, or 'Biblical approaches' can be applied in all cases.

### 3.1. Rwanda

Back in 1994, the world watched in horror as this predominantly Catholic country (Catholics 56.5% Protestants 37.1% of the population), saw large portions of the Hutu majority massacred the minority Tutsi tribe. This brutal 'ethnic cleansing' was the ultimate expression of an inter-tribal rivalry that had existed for many years. The minority Tutsi's had been the dominant political force for decades and when the new President, Habyarimana, (Hutu) was elected in 1992, he quickly sought to increase fear of the Tutsi minority through a coordinated propaganda campaign. Habyarimana's plane was shot down, that action served as the trigger for the genocide which began shortly after. According to the website of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) some 200,000 took part in what appears to have been a coordinated killing: roadblocks were set up to prevent any Tutsi's from

escaping and, over 800,000 were killed, including many from non-Tutsi background who opposed the killings.<sup>17</sup> In one sense, the web of paranoia concerning Tutsi plots to take over the country politically that the Hutu had been drawn into became a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the violence only came to an end when the Tutsi controlled rebel group, the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) managed to defeat the Hutu government and put a new President, Paul Kagame (a Tutsi) into power.

It is estimated that over 100,000 Hutu's were put in prison for their crimes, many of whom languished there without trial for nearly a decade. Part of the problem was that judges and lawyers had been specifically targeted for death by the perpetrators and so, once peace had eventually been restored, the vast majority of those who would have had the expertise to administer justice were simply not available. The Rwandan government therefore took the pragmatic decision to use a traditional Rwandan conflict resolution process called '*gacaca*'; a meeting chaired by a 'person of integrity' who was locally elected, who would try prisoners and would be able to impose a penal or community service (or both) sentence. '*Gacaca*' is a word in the Kinyarwanda language, and is derived from '*umugaca*' which means "a plant so soft to sit on that people prefer to gather on it". It was applied to a person of standing in local communities who would hear any complaint and mediate it unless it needed to be referred up to the king. The idea was therefore to bring justice, but also restore harmony in the community.<sup>18</sup>

But whilst the process was successful on many levels, the long period in prison, coupled with the deep scars of mistrust and hatred which had built up amongst both tribes, meant that, whilst the violence itself was stopped and justice administered, a desperately divided society remained.<sup>19</sup> So, whilst the work of the *gacaca* courts was ongoing, other initiatives began which attempted to heal the wounds of the past. A number of NGOs turned to the Bible as a tool for bringing long-term peace and solidarity to the country, amongst them was the Bible Society (BS) and Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR).

In 2007 the Bible Society (BS), in partnership with African Enterprise (AE) set up a reconciliation and forgiveness programme which seeks to bring together victims and perpetrators in order to study what the Bible says about forgiveness, peace and reconciliation.<sup>20</sup>

The PFR adopted a similar approach to that of the BS: their concern, as the name suggests, was particularly to stop the negative cycle that had the potential to rise out of the resentment which the predominantly Hutu prisoners would feel following their long incarceration and 'informal' trial. After some discussion on the best strategy to combat this negative cycle, the PFR decided to adopt

*“the methodology required prisoners and victims to meet each other over the course of eight meetings, the first six of which discussed Biblical teachings”*

“Rwandan Justice Minister Jean de Dieu Mucyo asked the PFR to expand the project into the community, particularly into churches and schools”

the ‘Sycamore Tree Project’ methodology which had been developed by Prison Fellowship International. The methodology required prisoners and victims to meet each other over the course of eight meetings, the first six of which discussed Biblical teachings in the areas of a) responsibility, b) confession, c) repentance and d) forgiveness, in order to get to the final two elements: e) amends and f) reconciliation.<sup>21</sup> However, given the numbers of both prisoners and victims involved, the RPF decided to trim the project to six meetings rather than eight and to

have small group meetings rather than one-to-ones. This revised strategy was renamed the ‘Umuvumu Tree Project’ because the indigenous Umuvumu tree was seen as the closest equivalent to the Sycamore tree; the tree which was used by Zacchaeus to climb up to see Jesus in the account in Gospel of Luke chapter nineteen.<sup>22</sup> For the methodology adopted by the UTP was extrapolated from that account: Zacchaeus is confronted with the truth, to which he confesses and seeks to make amends.

Such was the success of the UTP that then Rwandan Justice Minister Jean de Dieu Mucyo asked the PFR to expand the project into the community, particularly into churches and schools.<sup>23</sup>

One of the interesting changes following the genocide and the shift in culture which followed it was the rapid growth of Pentecostalism across a country which had, before the genocide, been largely untouched by the advance of Pentecostalism in the countries around it. For Rwanda had retained its Catholicism up to the violence, but saw Pentecostalism impact it significantly following the genocide. Before the violence the Catholic Church accounted for 62.6% of the total population and Protestants had 18.8%. This means that in the twenty years since the massacres took place, there was an 8% decrease in the Catholic population and a 20% increase in the Protestant one. The reasons for this Pentecostal surge are explored in Anne Kubai’s article for the peer reviewed journal *Exchange* and many of the reasons she proposes for the growth are insightful, yet she fails to discuss the work of reconciliation which we have been outlining above.<sup>24</sup> This, it seems to me, is a vital missing piece of the jigsaw for the ministry of the Bible Society, PFR and others NGOs which we have not covered here was a vital component in stitching-up the old wounds of the country; a process which was not only good for the country, but also showed the social value which could be gleaned from the teachings of the Bible. A value that was recognised and helped enhance the attraction of the evangelical, or Pentecostal message that came with that work.

### 3.2. Cambodia

On 3rd August 2010 the Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (Georgetown University) hosted a conversation between Rev. Heng Cheng, (General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia) Katherine Marshall, (Senior Fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs) Augustina Delaney (Project Associate, World Faiths Development Dialogue) and Ethan Carroll (Fellow, World Faiths Development Dialogue, WFDD) as part of a stream of work initiated by the World Bank and Georgetown University which looks at the work of development, including reconciliation, that is being done by the major faiths around the world. This particular discussion centred around the impact that the church was having in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.<sup>25</sup>

Back in 1975 the newly empowered dictator of Cambodia began a systematic and brutal extermination of a class of people, urban Cambodians, in order to pave the way for the agrarian utopia which lay at the heart of Khmer Rouge's 'Year Zero' policy.<sup>26</sup> Urban middle classes were initially evacuated from Phnom Penh and other urban centres, before being taken to rural sites, forced to help develop the land for farming (on a starvation diet), before digging their own graves and then were murdered either by being buried alive or clubbed to death. Pol Pot did not want 'bullets to be wasted' on the killings. Pol Pot saw no use for the urban middle classes particularly. He is quoted as saying "To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss."<sup>27</sup> Over the next four years millions died in what became known as 'the Killing Fields', immortalised in the film of that name.

Even when the Khmer Rouge were ousted in 1979 (Pol Pot eventually died in 1998) the long-term wounds of that era could not begin to be healed because the victorious Vietnamese army maintained a strict control over the country. Religion, including Christianity was suppressed under the Vietnamese communist government. Indeed, the wounds of victims of the genocide and wounds across the whole of Cambodian society quickly surfaced or really began to resurface when the country began to open-up once again from the late nineteen-eighties onwards. The Berkley Centre event reflected on the work which was ongoing to try and mend the effects of Khmer Rouge policies from that period onwards.

What therefore would be the place for the Bible in helping to heal a country which did not accept, or acknowledge the Biblical narrative or viewpoint?

The Rev. Heng Cheng, described a slow and often painful process in which the growing Cambodian church itself had needed to deal with its own division and hurts before it began to turn outwards and engage with wider Cambodian society.

Cheng himself had become the leader of an underground church when he had been displaced to Vietnam 1978. When he returned to Cambodia in 1985, he helped found an underground church, which became an open church as restrictions on Christianity were loosened in the early 1990s. With a growing church and competition between differing denominations Rev Cheng reflected that the years between 1996-2000 had been a difficult time: people were spiritually hungry after so long in darkness

and there was a lot of fear, but there was little church engagement with these more social issues. The focus was more on growing congregations. This accent changed in the 21st century and the realisation of the need to meet everyday problems has shifted the focus of the more than 3,000 churches in the country to helping people with issues such as HIV/AIDs, Women's work and poverty alleviation. Amongst this social work is also now a 'peacemaker' strand which seeks to heal the hurts of the past. It is interesting to note that this work of reconciliation has begun after a relatively long period in which the church has been embedding itself and it has not been until its numbers and confidence had grown to a point at which it feels that it can look around at society and seek to engage with it that such programmes have begun to be developed. This is almost certainly a result of the non-Christian culture which the church grew within. For in Rwanda, Christian perspectives and ethics were already established within society. No such platform existed in Cambodia; it needed to be developed to a point where the contribution of the church to Cambodian society could be acknowledged. Only then could such social programmes be welcomed.

Having established the church and its programmes as a benefit, rather than a hindrance in society, what has been the focus and methodology deployed by the church (ecumenically defined) in the area of reconciliation and healing?

Much of the work has revolved around the inauguration of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (also known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) in 2007. As Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist country, the prevailing mindset of the country metaphysically centres around the Buddhist conception of *kamma*, which, in essence, is the responsibility of the person for the action that he or she has taken. A cause and consequence relationship. People can choose to do either good or bad and that has a direct influence on both their present and future existence.<sup>28</sup> This exists at both an individual and a community, even national level.

The effect of this doctrine in relation to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT) was an implacable requirement for justice to be done. Such a requirement is entirely reasonable. Furthermore, it is one which would not be out of sync with the Biblical demand for justice which brought Christ to earth to

face the inescapable judgement which mankind's disobedience towards God demanded. Yet, the Biblical story of Christ's death and resurrection went further than the judgement which formed the heart of *kamma* and allowed for 'grace': the doctrine of justice avoided and reconciliation through forgiveness offered. It was this that the Cambodian church and NGOs were able to offer as a salve to the wounds in Cambodian society.

*“the Khmer way is to remain angry and not forgive, which causes many problems in society”*

There are a number of indigenous and non-indigenous Christian NGOs who, along with the Cambodian church, are seeking to bring a deeper healing to the country. For example, the Cambodian Association



of Auckland Inc. (CAAI), posted an article in 2010 which, amongst other things talked about the dedication of a new church which was lead by a former member of the Khmer Rouge, to which more than 200 people turned up, including those who had been former victims.<sup>29</sup>

Amongst several initiatives which are ongoing, the Bible Society developed a play in conjunction with ten Cambodian churches. The play sets Biblical stories of reconciliation and forgiveness in a modern Cambodian setting, switching by using Cambodian names, dress and poetry to deliver the message in a culturally relevant style. It was performed on the 40th Anniversary of the Khmer violence at the Diamond Island Theatre: a 3,000 seat venue which was filled to capacity. The play had a very specific aim:

“The Khmer way is to remain angry and not forgive, which causes many problems in society as well as in the church...”<sup>30</sup>

Said Pastor Bin David, one of the pastors whose church was involved in the project. The performance had the desired effect: eyewitnesses said that there were many tears shed and a number of people commented on the power of forgiveness which they had not thought about before. Another performance is planned for October 2015.

At the same time, it is not only through interventions by Christians that past wounds are being healed. The ‘Forgiveness Project’ is a non-religion-specific NGO which seeks to heal conflict memories through a focus on forgiveness, whether the perpetrators are also brought to justice or not. On their website they have collected stories of the power of forgiveness from conflicts all over the world, including Cambodia.<sup>31</sup> A former victim

*“Himm’s route to forgiveness lay through the Biblical account of Jesus’ forgiveness of those who had crucified him”*

of the Khmer, who saw his family murdered at the age of 14, was Sokreaksa Himm, who managed to flee from the same pit in which his relatives were clubbed to death, to Thailand, where he spent a further five years in terrible conditions in one of the many refugee camps. He describes his personal journey in which, as he discovered and learnt more about Jesus through the Christians he met when he got to Canada, the hatred that he had felt towards those who had murdered his family began to ebb away. He vividly described the painful process that he went through:

“For years I cultivated elaborate fantasies in which I tortured and murdered the killers again and again, projecting all my rage and pain I bottled inside myself in my plans for what I would do to the men when I found them. I realised that I would never know true peace until I had dealt with this as well. I had to find a way of forgiving them, before the bitterness inside destroyed me.”<sup>32</sup>

Himm's route to forgiveness lay through the Biblical account of Jesus' forgiveness of those who had crucified him. Himm was deeply moved by the fact that, even though there had been a profound miscarriage of justice, Jesus was still able to forgive those who had perpetrated the actions against him. It was this action which forced Himm to acknowledge that, whether there was ever to be justice or not in his situation, he needed to forgive those who had wronged him and his family so grievously in order to be able to move on in his life. It was a 'letting go' of something which he had cherished and nurtured for so long: a desire for revenge (justice in his mind) which he had believed had helped him to keep going, but instead was gnawing away at him. He concludes:

"In the years that followed, I began a new mission: one that still included finding the men responsible for the deaths of my loved ones but for a new purpose. I no longer wanted to seek their deaths, but to tell them of the life and hope that I found.

I eventually found two of the men involved in my family's deaths, in the very village and among the very people they terrorised over two decades before...To the surprise of the men and most of the villagers, I shook hands with the two men and forgave them."

So whether it be in relation to grass-roots community work by NGOs or local churches, or through the spiritual searching of individuals who sought an alternative to revenge as a way to draw the sting of the awful memories they will always carry, many in Cambodia have found that the message and narratives found in the Bible remain as potent for healing the divisions of today, just as much as when the teachings of Christ brought a new way to the Roman Empire two thousand years ago.

### **3.3. Summary**

Both of the case studies we have briefly explored have demonstrated the power of the Bible to reach into the hurts of today and bring long-term healing between victims and perpetrators. Neither the Rwandan nor the Cambodian experiences were easy, or 'quick fixes' to deep wounds, but the combination of faithful churches, personal searching and a sense of 'closure' which came with the opportunity for revenge, or justice, yet taking the Bible-inspired choice of forgiveness, clearly provided the opportunity for lasting cohesion within societies in which the possibility of inter-generational conflict resulting from a cycle of past wrongs could have been not only a possibility, but even a probability.

Furthermore, in drawing these two case-studies to a close, there are two particular points which are worth highlighting: firstly, it is clear that differing Biblical narratives spoke more to different peoples (or groups) in different situations. For example, in the story of Himm in Cambodia, it was the forgiveness of Jesus on the Cross which spoke to him, whereas in the UTP process we discussed in relation to Rwanda, it was the story of Zacchaeus which seemed to be of most relevant to the situation. This highlights that there can be no 'one size fits all' methodology when it comes to the application of Biblical reconciliation in each situation, but it also speaks to the fact that the sheer range of

accounts, teachings and anecdotes contained in the Bible contains more than enough material to enable reconciliation process to take place in any given situation. Secondly it was interesting that even in cultures that were relatively untouched by Christianity, once the confidence of the church had been established, and wider society had accepted its presence, the Bible was able to be used even in situations where those who engaged with it had no cultural background with it.

Clearly the case studies discussed are only two examples of work that has taken place, and continues to take place in many parts of the world. Work in which the Bible speaks to issues of the present and brings not simply a set of stories, but a toolbox from which the particularities of any given situation can be spoken into. Other notable post-conflict situations in which the Bible has been used extensively to bring cohesion and long-term healing also include Ireland, Liberia perhaps most famously, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up in South Africa in the 1990s which attempted to unravel the long-term hurts caused by Apartheid. Meghan Shore, in her article on the TRC highlighted the uniqueness of the Christian formula that was used in South Africa by the TRC.

“In many respects, the TRC was an unconventional modern political mechanism. There was, for example, little or no mention of justice in the formal mandate of the Commission; yet in the TRC hearings there was an explicit appeal to religion, especially Christianity, as an authorised and legitimate method of truth-telling, and as a way to foster reconciliation among former enemies.”<sup>33</sup>

So the work being done in Cambodia, Rwanda, South Africa and Ireland highlights the power of the biblical narrative and message to bring about real, lasting and positive change in societies where little or no such expectation was present.

## 4. Conclusions

The Bible offers real solutions for those societies in which the tensions between groups, classes or communities have boiled over into violence.

Social conflict is a central issue in any society and, it was something that was very familiar to the world that Jesus came into two thousand years ago. His work of ‘vertical reconciliation’ and exhortation to ‘horizontal reconciliation’ is something which has frequently been poorly mirrored by his followers. But the solutions that God has given us in the form of the Bible have been successfully used at differing times and places in order to bring harmony, or restore harmony, when it had been lost. Sometimes, as we have seen, the biblical toolbox has been used in situations where there is a ‘Christian heritage’ as in Rwanda, or in South Africa. At other times it has been used in situations where there has been little or no pre-existing Biblical culture, as in Cambodia. But, in these, and other situations we have not had the space to discuss, the Bible has been able to be used to knit back together what had unravelled for a time.

So this relatively brief engagement with the impact of the Bible in relation to post-conflict reconciliation work has highlighted that the macro-level narrative of God's desire to reconcile humanity to himself found in the Bible, offers both hope and practical steps towards a harmonious society. Whilst, on a micro-level, individual stories of the processes of reconciliation, such as Zaccheus' offer valuable insights for specific situations, such as the UTP in Rwanda.

The power of the Bible to bring transformation in society lies not only in the empathy peoples of all backgrounds and cultures can feel with the flawed characters and situations found within its books, but also in the overarching message of hope, healing and the possibility of an alternative, better way, that is offered through its central character; God himself.

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# The UN and its Expansion of Democracy Around the World: Does the Bible Support it?



## Abstract

*The Bible has an ambiguous relationship with democracy. On the one hand, it is largely disinterested with structures of governance, or indeed passively supportive of hierarchical and authoritarian forms of political authority. On the other, it is highly engaged with the moral content of governance, and committed to a series of political and legal concepts from which the raw materials of a (critical) support of democracy can be drawn. This article begins with a brief overview of the relationship between Christianity and democracy, before outlining four key commitments – to the depth of law, the rule of law, the demands of the good, and the limits to power – from which a positive and measured Christian engagement with democracy can be forged. From this analysis, it proceeds to offer qualified support for the UN's engagement with democracy, recognising in this (a) a critical awareness of the need to support contexts and cultures of democracy as well as just processes and structures; and (b) a commitment to objective ethical criteria, in this instance to "human rights", which can guard against the besetting sin of populism in democracy, which imagines that vox populi, the voice of the people, is vox dei, the voice of God. It concludes that with these reservations in place, the Bible does support attempts by the UN to extend democracy around the world.*

## Introduction: Christianity and Democracy

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It can come as quite a shock to contemporary Christians to discover how vigorously prominent churchmen once opposed the spread of democracy. Democracy, we often assume today, is *self-evidently* a good, and the gospel is *self-evidently* a force for freedom. That being so, discovering that many Christians opposed extending the franchise, and sometimes even did

so on explicitly theological grounds, can rather perplex the contemporary Christian mind.

Bishops of the Church of England, for example, were almost unanimously opposed to the great democratic Reform Act of 1832, in which the UK's electoral processes were comprehensively revised and the franchise (slightly) extended. It took a furious mob response to change their mind (and then only partially). Seventy years later, Pope Leo XIII, the great pontiff who stands at the head of the modern tradition of Catholic Social Teaching with his reforming encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, defended Christian Democracy but did so in terms that sound distinctly undemocratic:

“the natural and the Christian law command us to revere those who in their various grades are shown above us in the State, and to submit ourselves to their just commands.”<sup>1</sup>

If we seek democracy's intellectual roots, Christianity does not appear to be the obvious place to look.



Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that democracy has been nurtured in Christian cultures, those countries in which the majority of people ascribed to Christian beliefs, belonged to Christian churches and lived – at least in theory – according to Christian ethical principles. Taking their cue from the political scientist Samuel Huntington, people sometimes talk of three waves of democracy or “democratisation”.<sup>2</sup> The first dates between 1828 and 1926 and saw at its height 29 democracies, predominantly in Europe or North America. The second, between 1943 and 1962, saw the figure rise to 36 democracies (having fallen precipitously during the inter-war period). The third, since 1974 has seen more than 60 countries worldwide make the transition from (some form of) autocracy to (some form of) democracy, this last wave spreading out from Europe to include many Central and South American countries.

By no means all of these countries in all of these waves were ‘Christian’. However, the fact that the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index shows that the vast majority of the countries it classifies as “full democracies” have a Christian heritage and culture (the main exceptions being Japan and South Korea; a partial one is Mauritius) is surely indicative. There is clearly *some* kind of connection between Christianity and the spread of democracy, and trying to understand this will help us navigate the question of whether the Bible supports attempts by the UN “to extend democracy around the world” – or, more precisely and using the UN’s own words, to “assist parliaments to enhance the checks and balances that allow democracy to thrive”, to “provide electoral assistance and long-term support for electoral management bodies”, and to “provide various forms of electoral assistance” to over a hundred countries worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

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## Christian Democratic Traditions

Nearly 200 years ago, the French aristocrat and thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the new nation of America. His resulting publication, *Democracy in America*, argued that Christianity was the foundation for democracy in America, rather than its irreconcilable antagonist, as it had been in his native France.

More recently, the South African theologian John W. De Gruchy has identified five “trajectories within Christian tradition that have made significant contributions to the development of democratic theory and praxis.” The first is what he calls the “egalitarian communal experience and example” of the earliest church, an example that was imitated, with greater but usually lesser success in subsequent monastic and radical movements throughout Christendom. The second is mediaeval Catholicism’s

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engagement with Aristoteleian political thought, which generated “key political notions, such as subsidiarity and the common good”, which lent themselves (eventually) to social democratic theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The third lies in the Reformed tradition, which stressed human personal responsibility before God and turned its face against ecclesiastical hierarchy in favour of ministry that was grounded in the authority of

the congregation. Fourth, de Gruchy highlights the contribution of liberal Christianity “which affirms that dignity of the individual, human rights, the freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and religious toleration.” Fifth and finally, he mentions Christian socialism, with its emphasis on solidarity and the fact that there cannot be just democracy without a just economic order.

This is a capacious, overly-schematized and arguably somewhat generous list but it may be taken to illustrate that democratic ideas have been present in some form in most Christian theological traditions, even if sometimes rather faintly. It omits, however, perhaps the single most significant contribution Christianity has made to the spread of democracy, namely the existence of the Bible in vernacular languages.

This is an example of the law of unintended consequences. Many of those who first translated the Bible into European languages in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were anything but democrats. William Tyndale, the genius behind the English Bible, wrote one book of political theology which was called, bluntly, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*. His political theology, however, was rather undermined by his evangelical passion. By putting an accessible copy of the scriptures in the hands of every man, woman and child in the country, *and* encouraging them to read, understand and absorb its message, he was engaged in the most significant, most subversive act of spiritual democratisation that early modern Europe could have contemplated. It should hardly surprise us to learn that no sooner had the Bible been translated into English and placed in every parish church in the country, parliament started to pass laws forbidding the wrong sort of people from reading it.

Nor should it surprise us that, three centuries later, early democratic radicals often argued that this act of *spiritual democratisation* legitimised the kind of political democratisation for which they were calling. If God considered even the humblest man competent to judge for himself the means of eternal salvation, the argument ran, and good laws were simply the means of *temporal* salvation, it followed that the national constitution should involve the people in legislation. This was the logic that underpinned what de Tocqueville found in young America, where many early settlers had brought with them ideas of the equal priesthood of all believers and the localised, quasi-democratic forms of congregational government which ultimately shaped this pioneering if imperfectly democratic new nation.

## Democratic building blocks

For all that Christianity could and sometimes did create the foundations for this kind of democratic culture, as we noted in the introduction, it very often didn't. We should not overlook this inconvenient truth, for it is in precisely this tension within Christian attitudes to democracy that we construct a nuanced and robust answer to the presenting question.

It is a tension that can be traced right the way back into the Biblical text itself. It is certainly possible to take texts and stories with a democratic flavour from the Bible. 1 Samuel 8 recounts how the people insistently chose a king to rule over them when Samuel's sons were not following in his ways. In the New Testament, after the Ascension, the apostles return to Jerusalem and choose a 12<sup>th</sup> man to replace Judas.

Nevertheless, for all that the people of Israel wanted to choose their king, that choice was clearly made under divine duress and understood as an example of rebellion *against* God – “it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” – to which God reluctantly acquiesces. Similarly, the apostles might have chosen Mathias but they did so by casting lots, not by inviting the view of the other hundred or so believers. Subsequent chapters in Acts hardly give the impression that the early church functioned as a democratic body.

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If these democratically-flavoured stories are, in fact, democratically ambiguous (to put it kindly), there is much else within the scriptures that seems to reject democracy outright.

The famous texts pertaining to political authority in the New Testament, such as Romans 13.1-7 or 1 Peter 2:13-17 are not in the least democratic. When choosing is mentioned throughout the Bible, it is usually God who is doing it. Perhaps most tellingly, the only uses of the word “elect” or “election” in the New Testament are used of those people who are elected *by* God. It is not the people themselves who are doing the electing. God will cut short those tribulations “for the sake of the elect” we hear in Matthew 24.22. Paul “endures everything for the sake of the elect.” (1 Tim 2.10) Peter urges his brothers and sisters to “make every effort to confirm your calling and election.” (2 Peter 1.10) There is lots of election in scripture, and precious little of it is done by God's people.

All this might seem to amount to a straightforward rejection of democracy in the Bible, making any Christian support for global democratisation somewhat problematic. But, as de Gruchy's categorisation mentioned above intimates, the biblical journey towards the idea of democracy is more circuitous, taking a longer, more complex but ultimately richer, subtler and safer approach to the idea

of democracy than is afforded simply by the idea of people getting to choose who wields power over them. I would like to highlight four key stops on this journey.

## Depth of Law

Key to any biblical analysis of democracy, government or power is the absolute centrality of Law. Indeed, it is almost impossible to overstate the significance of law within the Bible.

The Law is a gift of God. It is central to Israel's understanding of who God is. "The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king." (Is. 33.22) It is the central identity marker of his people, standing at the root of their existence and constitution. (Exodus 21:1; Exodus 24:3; Deuteronomy 7:12; Deuteronomy 31:12; Isaiah 26:8) It is a reason for joy and celebration (Ps. 19.7), an endless source of contemplation and wisdom. (Ps. 119) It is the envy of other nations. (Deuteronomy 4:8) Central to who they were before the exile (at least in theory), the law lost none of its significance to Israel as a people returning after that national trauma. (Ezra 7.10, Nehemiah 8)

For all that it served as a kind of national constitution, however, we are wrong if we therefore imagine the law as something of significance for only lawyers or for constitutional experts. On the contrary, the law was for everyone, a deeply and profoundly *personal* institution.

The commandments were to be impressed upon children, talked about throughout the daily routines, tied as symbols on hands and foreheads, written on doorframes and gates. (Dt. 6.4-9) Above all, they were to be engraved on the people's hearts (Psalm 37:31; Psalm 40:8). This was the hope for Israel, that the tablets of stone on which the law had, by necessity, once been written would one day be redundant and God would write the law directly onto people's hearts where it would remain without decay or corruption. (Ezekiel 36:24-28; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8.10)

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Moreover, and refining this sense of the people's ownership of the law still further, the law was to be *done*, not just *known*. Knowing the law was necessary but not sufficient. As some of Jesus' encounters underlined, knowing the law could even blind people to its meaning, a meaning that was about performance and action just as much as study and contemplation. When that longest and most law-centric of Psalms opens with the words, "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord" (Ps 119.1) it uses a dynamic verb – "walk" – as a means of underlining how the law should motivate and shape life. Paul makes precisely the same point in Romans 2.13: "For

it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous."

The centrality of law, then, for the whole people of Israel, is beyond question. More precisely, it was its universality and pervasiveness that, in effect, instituted a kind of government of the people by the people. This was certainly not democracy as we understand the term, meaning the people's choice of who is to exercise political power over them. But it was the kind of democracy seen in our discussion of the translation of the Bible into the vernacular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Just as that translation of the scriptures was feared (or celebrated) as a supreme act of spiritual democratisation, so putting God's law in the hands of every man, woman and child in Israel and commanding them to read, learn, study and discuss it was an act of spiritual – and practical – democratisation. We will return to this important point when we arrive at the important distinction between systems of democracy and cultures of democracy.

## Rule of law

A second crucial factor pertaining to the law demands attention. This is the fact that, although the law was *for* all people, it was also *above* all people, and that included the king. Once again, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this.

In the ancient world, kings and emperors themselves were often law-givers rather than law-takers, setting themselves above the law in the process of authorising it. This would persist into the Christian era, not least among Christian polities themselves. The *Corpus iuris civilis*, a codification of laws that was begun at the command of the emperor Justinian in 527, baldly declared that the Christian emperor derived his authority directly from God, claimed jurisdiction over all affairs within the unified entity of church and empire and was "exempt from all our provisions, because God has subjected the laws themselves to the emperor, by sending him as a living law to men."<sup>4</sup>

This was not so with Israel (again, at least in theory). Here the king was placed firmly *under* the law. The key text in all this was Deuteronomy 17.14-20, in which the rules and regulations pertaining to kingship are set out. As well as legislating for his national and religious loyalty

("he must be from among your fellow Israelites"), the text limits his economic powers ("he must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold"), his military strength (he "must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself") and his moral life ("he must not take many wives"). More symbolically, but surely more powerfully, he is told that when he takes the throne

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“he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left.”

The king is under precisely the same law that was to be written on doorframes, told to children and discussed by his subjects, above whom he was not to place himself.

Something of the power of this is seen at the other end of Israel’s history as an independent nation, when Hilkiah the high priest finds the book of the law in the Temple. King Josiah is traumatised to discover what his people had forgotten and personally leads the act of national repentance, reading the words of the Book of the Covenant to all the people and renewing that covenant “to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul”, after which the people pledged themselves to the covenant. (2 Kings 22-23) Israel was founded as a people on God’s law, which entailed the rule of that law.<sup>5</sup>

## The Demands of the Good

At one point in his defence of political authority in Romans 13, Paul calls the one in authority “God’s servant for your good.” This is perhaps a somewhat hopeful statement given what we know of the reality of emperors in Rome, but it was certainly central to Israel’s conception of the purpose of political power, and leads us on to a third key factor in our biblical analysis of democracy.

The law was not simply an arbitrary series of commands that God put before his people to test their obedience. Rather it was *for their good*. The phrase, “that it may go well with you”, is repeated within the book of Deuteronomy, in the context of both general and particular laws. So it is that the Israelites are commanded to honour their father and mother “so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you” in Deuteronomy 5.16, and even to protect nature’s productivity (Dt 22.6), “so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.”

On a grander scale, they are instructed to “keep [God’s] decrees and commands” (Dt. 4.40), to “be careful to obey” him (Dt. 6.3) and to “do what is right and good in the Lord’s sight” (Dt. 6.18) “so

that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey.” (See also Deuteronomy 27:3 and 30.10) Obedience to the law was directed at ultimate ends of serving the human good. The theoretical model of an Old Testament king – there were precious few real-life ones – was the servant-king who “speak[s] up for those who cannot speak for themselves,/ for the rights of all who

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are destitute./ [Who] Speaks up and judges fairly;/ [and] defends the rights of the poor... [and] disadvantaged." (Proverbs 31.4-9)

The link of the law and the good is preserved in the New Testament, in spite of the harsh things Jesus has to say about the teachers and so-called experts of the law, and Paul's troubled wrestling with what the law was and could achieve. Thus Jesus wholeheartedly affirms the law (Lk 16.17; Mat 5.17-19) and also its goodness (John 15.9), just as Paul does in Romans (e.g. Romans 3:31 and 7.11-12: "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.")

The point made here is not to enter into the vexed debates about law and grace so much as to make the less contentious point that the biblical idea of law was connected resolutely with the good. This was not, we should be clear, some kind of proto-utilitarianism: the law was not just because it increased the total level of happiness in society. Being of God, the law was good, because God was good, and the demonstration of this came in the fact that faithfulness to the law resulted in human goodness.

It is from this association that we see the fundamental idea that the legitimacy of political rule therefore comes in its securing the good of its people. Political power is legitimised – in effect, it becomes genuine authority rather than mere power – by its fidelity not just to law but to that law which truly serves the good of the people. Power is only good when made accountable to true justice.

This was a vitally important part of the Christian concept of democracy but it also proved perhaps the biggest stumbling block. We shall turn to this tension but only after looking at a fourth and final element of Christian engagement with democracy.

## Limits to power

The power of the king of Israel was self-evidently limited and chastened by the law under which he placed himself, but it was also limited in a more practical way. As noted above, one of the reasons why God is so reluctant to grant the request of a king in 1 Samuel 8 is that he prophesied how any monarch would be inclined to accumulate vast, unnecessary and ultimately destructive reserves of wealth and power. Given power's ability to feed off sin and corrupt the best of intentions, a degree of political decentralisation becomes essential.

Old Testament Israel operated (once again, in theory) a multipolar political system that

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encompassed six independent sources of authority, each with its own geographic jurisdiction. These were the individual, the family, the community, the Levites, the tribe (or region), and the nation. Between them they formed a network of concurrent authorities each instituted by God and protected, limited and empowered by the national 'constitution'.<sup>6</sup>

This multipolar structure of political power in which different authorities were responsible for different areas was non-hierarchical. Individual or family authority was not automatically compliant to the edicts of larger state units. Marriage took precedence over military service for a year. (Deuteronomy 24.5) The family's criminal justice right to exact blood vengeance was mitigated by a national system of 'vengeance free zones' known as Cities of Refuge, and also by the sphere of Levitical authority, which would grant sanctuary to the criminal who grasped the horns of the altar. (Deuteronomy 19.4-7; Exodus 21.13)

These various authority units reflected a concern for governance to operate on a variety of levels, being not simply a distant or abstract entity but an immediate and concrete fact of life, usually based on the natural ties of locality, community and family, and intended to give a positive incentive to maintaining productivity, social integration and individual worth.

Moreover, lurking somehow in the background of all biblical articulations of power, whether political, personal or ecclesiastical, is the divine conception of the true exercise of power, seen in Christ and, in particular, his life of *kenosis* or 'self-emptying'.

The idea of *kenosis* derives from Philippians 2.7 which describes how Christ "made himself nothing, / taking the very nature[a] of a servant, / being made in human likeness." This has been and is understood in different ways, relating to what abilities or qualities Christ divested himself of when he became incarnate. In terms of governance, however, it can be interpreted in the light of statements like Christ's comment to his disciples in Mark 9.35: "if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." Christ, as the example of what a human being should look like, empties himself of power or deploys it through service rather than domination. That is the example to which humans should aspire. Although there is no sense in Scripture that governing authorities should therefore relinquish their capacity to govern – in fact, governing authorities have a specific call to govern – this idea of political 'kenosis' suggests a need for governance to avoid accumulating undue power.

## The Objective Criteria

It is from these four building blocks – the depth of law, the rule of law, the demands of the good, and the limits to power – that we might develop a critical attitude to the Bible and the spread of democracy. It should be reasonably clear that the Bible has limited interest in the *form* and *structures* of governance – none is obviously favoured throughout the biblical narrative, each patently having its limitations – but has rather more concern in its *content*.



More precisely, one might say that the biblical story encourages us to come at the former – the question of form and structure – by way of the latter – the question of content. It orients us towards *systems* of governance that better serve our four key criteria: systems that are law-governed, decentralised and localised, rich in associational activity, trusting of people, and predicated on some sense of the good rather than aspiring to some kind of imaginary moral neutrality.

It is the last of these qualities – that government is in service of the good – that long served as the biggest stumbling block to Christian advocacy of democracy and which is worth noting at this juncture. This was the objection that English bishops – among many other leading Christians – had with democracy. The good, they believed, was defined by God, his revelation and his Word, *not* by what the people happened to think was good. It wasn't that a political system should be indifferent to the good of the people. On the contrary, political authority was legitimised in large measure by the extent to which it served the good of the people. However, the true nature of that good was determined by objective criteria, such as the Bible or the Church, rather than subjective ones, such as people's own opinions.

This is precisely the objection that many people today have to religious engagement with politics. Deep down, they contend, it harbours anti-democratic sentiments and however much Christians might try and wriggle free of it, it is an accusation which does stick, to a certain extent. *Vox populi*, the voice of the people, cannot, by the Christian understanding, be *vox dei*, the voice of God. That doesn't mean the voice of the people shouldn't be heard; only that it cannot be the final word on what is right and good.

Before this admission consigns the Christian contribution to the global democratic debate to the dustbin, it is worth making two points that rather change the debate. The first is that it is striking how many great democratic pioneers of modern history have made precisely the same point, without any particular Christian motivations or reasons.

James Adams, the American founding father, worried about what the unpropertied classes would do to democracy. James Madison, who drafted the US Constitution and Bill of Rights, claimed that examples of "pure democracy", in which there was no restriction on suffrage, "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention... and have, in general, been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." No lesser figure than John Stuart Mill, one of the greatest democratic thinkers of the nineteenth century, wrote in his *Considerations on Representative Government*, that "no arrangement of the suffrage...can be permanently satisfactory in which any person or class is peremptorily excluded", but then went on to say that "there are...certain exclusions, required by positive reasons, which do not conflict with this principle". "I regard it as wholly inadmissible," he stated, "that any person should participate in the suffrage without being able to read, write, and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic." Mill favoured universal education to address this problem but, in the meantime, the illiterate and innumerate were to be excluded from democratic processes. What the people wanted was not enough; it had to be what the sufficiently well-educated people wanted.

One might be tempted to respond to these examples by saying that democratically-minded as Adams, Maddison and Mill might have been, they were still figures of a different, essentially pre-democratic age. Things are different now. But that takes us to a second point which brings us right up to date with the UN.

The phrase of choice for the UN, and indeed many other transnational or national institutions, when they talk about their geopolitical objectives is “democracy and human rights”. Indeed, so often do we find these two items elided that we are in danger of seeing them as different sides of the same coin – democracy entails human rights and human rights entail democracy – and thus becoming blind to the inherent tension that exists between them.

On the one hand, the connection seems straightforward and undeniable. A respect for someone’s human rights is highly likely to require a respect for their democratic freedom. The alternative – respecting someone’s rights but not their right to have a say in who exercises political authority over them – is indeed incoherent.

However, the same cannot be said in reverse. Respecting democratic freedoms is not *naturally* compatible with securing human rights. Were it so, democratic majorities within countries would naturally support human rights and it is painfully obvious that they don’t.

It doesn’t take much of an imagination to illustrate the problem here, with regards, for example, to unpopular minorities. As Frances Stewart, Professor of Development Economics at Oxford University has said, “Democracies are often run by ethnically based groups prepared to do terrible things to other ethnic groups.” One needn’t even raise the spectre of genocide and ethnic cleansing to see the problem. How do you, for example, square the consistent preference for the death penalty for certain crimes among many Western populations and the basic human right to life? Only, it seems, by consistently ignoring the democratic view of the former in order to honour the human rights of the latter.

The UN itself rather skirts round this problem, claiming that “democracy, and democratic governance in particular, means that people’s human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, promoted and fulfilled, allowing them to live with dignity.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere it says that “democracy provides the natural environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights.”<sup>8</sup> This, however, seems like a triumph of hope over reality. If politicians genuinely think that democracy naturally or necessarily fosters respect for human rights, they need to spend more time with voters.

In reality, this second point differs little from the historic Christian objections to democracy – we would support it if we could guarantee it respected certain, non-negotiable objective goods – the only difference residing in how and where those goods are defined and grounded. More generally, it points to a faint but ineradicable fault line that runs through liberal political settlements, tracing the tension between the popular and the good. As long as the two coincide everyone is happy. It is when they don’t that serious questions must be faced.

## Democracy and Sin

Having shown how the Christian attitude to democracy – supportive with reservations – is not, in fact, so very different to other mainstream views on democracy, including that of the UN, it is important to show also how, within the tradition of Christian thought, there are ways of overcoming, or at least living with, these reservations. The biggest theological reservation with democracy – why risk allowing the people to choose the wrong options – does have a theological answer.

This is an answer that takes the idea of sin seriously. While it is clear that, in Christian thought, political power is legitimised by its fidelity to justice and the good, rather than to the popular will, it is also clear that those responsible for administering that political power are finite and fallen. This has two important practical outworkings.

The first is that those in power are limited in what they can know. Serving the good of the people is only made possible by knowing that good and quite often that is simply not possible. A concrete example might clarify this point. Amartya Sen is a highly-respected philosopher and Nobel-winning economist. One of his most quoted assertions, made in his 1999 book *Democracy as Freedom*, is that “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy.” This, subsequent research has confirmed, is factually correct.<sup>9</sup> Democracy, it seems, creates a system in which signals from people concerning the reality of their good (i.e. not starving) are *clear* and *strong* enough to secure that good, when under other forms of government those signals may remain invisible. An autocratic ruler may recognise that not allowing his people to starve is an objective good, and may genuinely seek to secure that good, but nonetheless remain deaf to the depth or breadth or particular challenges of the problem because the political system in which he operates cannot *listen* to what the people are saying with sufficient attention. A functioning democracy helps rulers hear the reality of the good.

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Sinfulness not only limits our capacity to do the good, however, but also our will to do it and this is the second point at which democracy recommends itself to Christian thought. Put another way, leaders, no matter how much they are under God’s command and judgement for serving the good of their people, often do not. And democracy makes the abuse of power more difficult, if not, of course, impossible.

This is essentially the logic of political decentralisation noted above. It is not that political decentralisation is, in and of itself, a good thing, any more than strong leadership is *necessarily* a bad thing. Decentralised societies can be systemically corrupt just as strong leaders can be morally admirable. It is more that the dispersal of power in a decentralised polity, such as a democracy, makes its abuse more difficult and less impactful. Or, as the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr

memorably put it in his wartime book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

For these closely-linked reasons, therefore, Christians can and should give support to democracy – not because democratic systems are salvific, still less because the will of the people legitimises the exercise of power – repeat: *vox populi* is not *vox dei* – but because the decentred nature of its power system allows political rulers to hear the needs of their people and puts better checks on political abuse than other systems. In Samuel Huntingdon's words, "democracy is a solution to the problem of tyranny but not necessarily to anything else."

## The Bible, the UN and democracy

It is time to move towards an answer to our presenting question about whether the Bible supports attempts by the UN to extend democracy around the world. That answer is, in effect, a 'qualified yes'. The 'yes' is based on the Bible's strong support for a system of governance that is law-governed, decentralised and localised, rich in associational activity, and respectful of people's agency. The 'qualification' is based on the question of what concept of democracy and what form of extension are in question.

“although Christians would have some difficulty in arguing that a nation should not become democratic, they would have an easier job arguing that a nation should”

Christian thought and reflection on the Bible does not see democracy as salvific. It is not, in and of itself, the solution to a country's problems. *Imposing* it – the word is chosen deliberately – on nations that have no pre-democratic conditions or tradition can risk being as much of a problem as a solution. For that reason, although Christians would have some difficulty in arguing that a nation should not become democratic, they would have an easier job arguing that a nation should not become democratic *today*, or that a nation should not be *made* democratic.

True democracy, of the kind of which Christians could give more secure support, honours the rule and depth of the law, the demands of the good, and the limits to power outlined above. It requires an independent judiciary, clear property rights, and a clear and a robust constitution. It requires some level of educational infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> It requires some substantial notion of shared morality among its people, a sense of national culture that is based on more than convenience or procedure; loyalties and commitments in which parties can vigorously dissent from one another (i.e. form governments and oppositions) without fracturing the entire body politic. (It is surely not irrelevant that democracy and

the nation state developed in tandem.) It requires a rich ecology of 'associational activity', including freedom of worship, speech, and association among (unpopular) minorities just as much as (popular) majorities. But it also requires a *limitation* of associational loyalty as loyalties to family, clan, tribe, ethnic, or religious groups whilst being part of civil society, can radically destabilise democracy when they usurp political loyalties (witness the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring').

One should not set the bar too highly and require that a country fulfils all these criteria before it democratises. None of this should be taken as an admission that John Stuart Mill was correct and that the illiterate and innumerate, for example, should be excluded from democratic responsibility *until* they can read and count.

Rather, it is to say that support for efforts to extend democracy around the world will hinge on whether those efforts are to develop democratic structures and processes within a country – itself a substantial job but an insufficient one – or whether they are to nurture and protect the culture and wider social commitments within which a just and stable democracy may develop.

Does the UN satisfy this criterion? In as far as its possible to give a definitive answer to this question – and the answer will ultimately depends on what you read or who you ask – it seems to be yes.

At times, UN discourse on democracy can sound a worrying note, such as when it proclaims in its literature on 'Democracy and the UN', that "the will of the people is the source of legitimacy of sovereign states and therefore of the United Nations as a whole."<sup>11</sup> As we have noted throughout this essay, this is not a belief that Christians can countersign: the will of the people may be *an element within* the legitimacy of sovereign states but it cannot be *the* source of legitimacy.

However, as noted above in the discussion pertaining to human rights, this does not appear to be a sentiment that even the UN itself holds in any straightforward way. If the "will of the people" tends towards ethnic cleansing or the dehumanisation of minorities within a nation, that sovereign state can – arguably *must* – ignore it without de-legitimising itself. Once again: *vox populi* is not *vox dei*.

That noted, as a rule the UN's discussion of democracy sounds a more balanced note. Democracy, the UN claims "is based on the freely expressed will of people and [is] closely linked to the rule of law and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms". It is "the process of creating and sustaining an environment for inclusive and responsive political processes and settlements." Its processes are "based on inclusive and fair rules, institutions and practices that govern social interactions." It requires women to be seen as "equal partners with men in private and public spheres of life and decision-making", and demands "that all people are free from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other attribute".<sup>12</sup> This is a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of democracy, which does not fall into the *vox dei* trap, and allows for Christian support (although one might justly query why the non-discrimination list does not name religion as a separate attribute when so much discrimination globally is precisely on grounds of religion).

Overall, therefore, we might conclude that the Bible – or at least biblically-rooted thought and reflection – does offer support for attempts by the UN to extend democracy around the world, but support of a qualified nature, grounded in the *content* rather than the *system* of governance. It is support, in the words of the UN itself, not so much “for a specific model of government” but for “democratic governance as a set of values and principles that should be followed for greater participation, equality, security and human development.”<sup>13</sup>

## References

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2. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991)
3. <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/>
4. Quoted in Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought* (Routledge, 1996), p. 8
5. It is highly instructive that one of the influences in the background of the Magna Carta – 'the Great Charter of England' which first set out rights and liberties of all free men and whose 800th anniversary the English have been celebrating in 2015 – was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, who had been a highly respected biblical scholar in Paris and had written a great deal on rule of law in his commentaries on the Book of Deuteronomy. It is by such circuitous means that the Bible influenced European and thereafter global culture.
6. See B. G. B. Logsdon, *Multipolarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards*, (Jubilee Centre, 1989).
7. [http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/democracy\\_and\\_un.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/democracy_and_un.shtml)
8. [http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/human\\_rights.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/human_rights.shtml)
9. Although, importantly, Sen's own country of origin, India, shows that a functioning democracy doesn't mean that people don't go hungry
10. It is interesting to note that education, at least up to a primary level, does appear to be a determinant for democracy. By some way the clearest predictor for sustained and successful democracy is wealth, GDP per capita and living standards correspond most closely with democratic success. Barro, Robert J. 1999. Determinants of democracy. *Journal of Political Economy* 107(S6): 158-183.
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# Catholic Social Teaching and its Contributions to the Democratization of Latin America





## Abstract

*This essay explores how Catholic social teaching has contributed to the democratization of Latin America. It begins by narrating the introduction of Catholicism into Central and South America in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century with the Spanish conquistadors. The historical context is highlighted to convey how Catholicism at the time worked with monarchy and empire, as Amerindians were conquered and colonized. Moreover, in subsequent years Catholicism reacted against the rise and spread of classic liberalism in Europe, which emphasized separation of church and state, freedom of religion, and other human rights that come to be associated with democracy. In Latin America, Catholics were expected to remain loyal to the Spanish monarchy instead of participating in or supporting revolutions and independence. With the Industrial Revolution, though, Catholic popes began to write about the problems of urbanization, dangerous working conditions, and poverty, so that with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891, the tradition of Catholic social teaching blossomed. Critical both of laissez-faire capitalism and collectivist communism, papal writings and other official documents addressed issues of the day having to do with faith, politics, and economics. In the face of fascism and communism, the Catholic Church began to recognize, without endorsing, positive virtues of democracy. At the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), in addition to emphasizing the importance of the Bible and calling for a number of liturgical and other reforms, Catholicism officially supported freedom of religion and other human rights associated with democracy. This development had significant repercussions in Latin America, with the bishops shifting their stance to identifying with and working on behalf of the poor. Small Bible study groups appeared, as did liberation theology. The preferential option for the poor became part of Catholic social teaching. Since then, Catholic social teaching has contributed to the democratization of Latin America.*

## Introduction

Some readers of these thematic essays on "Democracy, Conflict & the Bible" may be surprised to see included in this collection an article on the contribution that Catholic social teaching has made to the democratization of Latin America. After all, in comparison with Protestant denominations, Catholics have historically had a reputation for a lack of biblical literacy. Also, given its hierarchical structure adopted from imperial Rome, the Roman Catholic Church, with the pope assuming what was formerly the emperor's title, *Pontifex Maximus*, traditionally has been associated with monarchy and, thus, at odds with democracy. Moreover, a number of human rights that are

**Catholic social teaching, drawn in part from Scripture, has indeed contributed to the democratization of Latin America**

commonly connected with democracy—such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and the separation of church and state—were condemned by Pope Pius XI in the infamous “Syllabus of Errors” in 1864. As for Catholic social teaching, that too may be an unexpected topic for “The Bible, Democracy and Conflict” for it has often been referred to as Catholicism’s “best kept secret.”<sup>1</sup> Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M. writes, “There is a history concerning the relationship of the Catholic Church to democracy that is quite complicated and filled with left turns, right turns and a few U-turns! And the actual practice of the church has not always been the same as its formal teaching.”<sup>2</sup> As Thomas Massaro S.J. asks: “How can an institution like the Catholic Church, long associated with a ‘conservative’ approach that resists change and looks to the past, have been delivering for so long a progressive message that challenges the global economic and political order?”<sup>3</sup> And this question seems especially pertinent if one’s attention is focused on Latin America and Catholicism’s role there since Columbus’s “discovery” of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) in 1492.

Nevertheless, as this essay will show, Catholic social teaching, which is anchored on a theological anthropology, or understanding of the human person, drawn in part from Scripture, has indeed contributed to the democratization of Latin America. Catholic social teaching refers to official (from the *magisterium*, which is Latin for “teacher”) documents that deal with challenges and questions about political and economic life in the contemporary world, addressing events or social concerns demanding attention. In addition to Catholic social *teaching*, which is sometimes referred to as Catholic social “doctrine,” there is also Catholic social *thought*, which includes the scholarship and activism of the laity as well as clergy, theologians, members of religious orders, and the laity as individuals and as social movements.<sup>4</sup> The essay includes six parts. The first section offers a brief history of Roman Catholicism’s introduction into Latin America in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the years that followed, along with an account of how democracy and human rights were at odds with Catholic teaching at the time as well as the subsequent several centuries. In the next section, the rise and development of Catholic social teaching is described. This is followed by a section highlighting the significance of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) with regard to the importance of the Bible and to the place of human rights and democracy in Catholic social teaching. The fourth section considers key themes or principles of Catholic social teaching and notes their connections with passages from Scripture. The fifth section notes some ways that Catholic social teaching has contributed to democratization in Latin America. Finally, the conclusion reflects on how Catholic social teaching and democratization are consonant with, and contribute in turn to, peace-making in Latin America.

## 1. Roman Catholicism’s Introduction into Latin America and Its Reactionary Period to Democracy and Human Rights

Only a few decades before Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed ninety-five protesting theses onto the church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the “new world.” Along with Spanish conquistadors who conquered Caribbean islands, Central and South America

(i.e., Latin America), and portions of southern North America (e.g., Florida), Roman Catholic missionaries—including priests, friars, and monks—planted the cross on beaches and spread Christianity across lush rain forests, ancient cities and civilizations. As J. Milburn Thompson puts it, “In reality, Christian Europe did not so much ‘discover’ a ‘new world’ as *invade* an *old* one, in the spirit of the Crusades and the Inquisition.”<sup>5</sup> Political power and gold-inspired greed motivated the Spaniards (and the Portuguese) as much as the charitable hope of sharing the faith with the indigenous inhabitants of these lands.

Catholic monarchs Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon had sought to unify Spain under one faith, expelling the Jews and reclaiming territory from the Moors, and Columbus had sailed under the Spanish flag as part of what these rulers regarded as their God-given destiny.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, with *Inter caetera*, a bull issued by Pope Alexander VI on May 4, 1493, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand had his blessing to colonize and Christianize Latin America and Amerindians. The latter, if not killed, were conquered, forced both to indentured labor on *encomiendas* (plantations) and to being baptized. From 1532, at which time the Caribbean inhabitants had been almost depleted, the Amerindian population dropped from approximately 17 million to slightly over 1 million—according to Thompson, “almost certainly the worst genocide in history.”<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted, though, that some Catholic voices respected the human dignity and rights of the native population. For instance, the Spaniard Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566), who initially served in the military and went to Santo Domingo, Hispaniola as part of the conquering Spanish army, even receiving an *encomienda* as an award, came to recognize the oppression and exploitation of the Indians. Upon this epiphany, he got rid of his plantation, became a Dominican priest, and began preaching in defense of the human dignity and rights of indigenous people in the Caribbean and Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately he became bishop of Chipas in southern Mexico and came to be recognized as “protector of the Indians” by the court of Charles V. Another shining example was Dominican friar Antonio de Montesinos who on the last Sunday before Christmas in 1511 preached during Mass to the Spanish settlers of Hispaniola, “...[Y]ou are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery?”<sup>9</sup> As Ondina E. González and Justo L. González observe, “Montesinos was a Christian. The settlers were Christians. They all belonged to the same church. But they represented two different and contrasting faces of the church.”<sup>10</sup> These voices lifted on behalf of the dignity and human rights of the Amerindians, however, paled in comparison to the majority of those who settled in the New World. Nor was the democratization of Latin America at all on anyone’s mind or agenda at that time.

Such notions as democracy and human rights surfaced more than two centuries later in Europe with the Enlightenment period. However, the Enlightenment made less of an inroad into Spain and, by extension, Latin America than elsewhere in Europe and North America. The rights language employed by some of the aforementioned Catholics was based more in Aristotelian and Thomistic natural law philosophy that at the time did not explicitly call into question monarchical government or hierarchical

“Classic liberalism which emphasized individual freedom, human equality, freedom of religion and conscience, was regarded by the Catholic Church as a grave threat.”

relations between persons as manifest, for example, in the system of feudalism. Indeed, these were considered “natural.” Also, not long after the Roman Catholic Church had to counter the Reformation begun by Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it “struck a reactionary posture, deeply suspicious of modernizing political and economic trends and new ways of thought” arising from the Enlightenment, especially when the French Revolution of 1789, with its motto of liberty, equality and fraternity, resulted in the stripping of much of the Church’s land and privileges.<sup>11</sup>

Not only in France but across Europe as well as, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Latin America, tensions arose between states and Catholic religious orders, with many, like the Jesuits, being ousted by governing authorities who no longer wanted to be subordinate to the pope and the Church. Thus, the political philosophy of classic liberalism (not to be confused or equated with how “liberalism” is commonly understood today, particularly in the United States)—which emphasized, for example, individual freedom, human equality, freedom of religion and conscience, and the separation of church and state—was regarded by the Catholic Church as a grave threat.

According to Thompson, “The church saw itself as a bulwark of order and authority under attack from the forces of liberalism and revolutionary chaos.”<sup>12</sup> Between 1740 and 1878—what Thompson labels “the reactionary period”—popes issued letters, called encyclicals, which are highly authoritative Catholic teaching, with many of them condemning the ideas of these major political and social developments which came to be referred to as modernism. Perhaps the most well-known is the famous “Syllabus of Errors” that was promulgated in 1864 by Pope Pius IX, identifying eighty errors, including the view that the “Church should be separated from the state, and the state from the Church.”<sup>13</sup> Faithful Catholics were expected to avoid such modernist errors. A few decades earlier, in 1816, Pope Pius VII’s encyclical, *Esti Longissimo Terrarum* (“Submit and Be Good”), targeted such developments specifically in the New World, calling on Catholics instead to stay loyal to the Spanish crown, which was Catholic, during the wars for independence occurring throughout Latin America.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in 1899, also in response to these challenges (including the growth of Protestantism) in Latin America, Pope Leo XIII convoked the First Latin American Plenary Council, which met in Rome. It should be noted, though, that although the Church was regarded with contempt and at times persecuted by revolutionary governments, at the same time “even after independence the church was very often supported by those who had been in power during the colonial period.”<sup>15</sup> That is, a number of these newly independent states were neither liberal nor democratic, but rather were dictatorships or oligarchies in which the rich and powerful came to rule. The Catholic Church in Latin America accordingly was more aligned with the wealthy class during this time and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. The Reform Period: The Rise of Catholic Social Teaching

In addition to these political developments, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Industrial Revolution was happening in Europe. Accompanying advances in manufacturing, transportation, communications, and energy production, however, the working class—unlike owners and management—suffered miserable working conditions and received insufficient remuneration to support their families. In addition to the previous revolutions that were tied to classic liberalism, now revolutions were influenced more by Marxist thought. In the face of these developments, papal encyclicals began to address economics as

well as politics. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* ("The Condition of Labour") was issued in 1891, and this "landmark encyclical" is often considered to be the genesis of modern Catholic social teaching.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, a body of social teachings having to do with "the intersection between faith and politics" has developed over the past century, which includes not only major encyclicals by popes, but also statements from bishops' conferences (gatherings of bishops in nations and regions), statements by Vatican offices and commissions, as well as documents from the Second Vatican Council.<sup>17</sup> It should also be noted that prior to *Rerum Novarum*, besides the earlier papal encyclicals that treated political problems, there were thinkers such as Archbishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811-1877), Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853), Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854) who contributed to the Catholic social tradition and, at odds with the Vatican, who advocated human rights and democracy, though not in the individualistic and anti-clerical way that classical liberalism did.

In contrast to the identification of the Catholic Church with the wealthy in Latin America, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was critical of both individualistic laissez-faire capitalism and collectivistic socialism. This encyclical defended the right to private property, but emphasized the social responsibilities that should accompany ownership, including providing workers with what is now referred to as a "living wage" and respecting their right to organize in unions. Subsequent social encyclicals have built on this one, addressing a number of social issues, including economics, politics, war and peace, capital punishment, and the environment. Among these social encyclicals are: Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* ("The Reconstruction of the Social Order," 1931); John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* ("Christianity and Social Progress," 1961) and *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth," 1963); Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* ("The Development of Peoples," 1967) and *Octogesimo Adveniens* ("A Call to Action on the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*," 1971); John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work," 1981), *Sollicitudo*

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“democracy was not endorsed as the only or best form of government”

*rei Socialis* (“On Social Concern,” 1987), and *Centesimus Annus* (“On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*,” 1991); Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (“On Integral Human Development in Charity in Truth,” 2009). The most recent social encyclical is *Laudato Si’* (“On Care for Our Common Home”), by Pope Francis.<sup>18</sup>

On democracy, the Church’s earlier opposition to it as a form of political governance began to fade around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still, democracy was not endorsed as the only or best form of government. In Catholic social thought, human beings are social beings. Society, however, requires political authority, although its historical and particular expression can vary. As Himes notes, “Monarchy, aristocracy, democracy have all been suggested as acceptable and at different times one or the other has been deemed preferable.”<sup>19</sup> It was with the pontificate of Pius XII that democracy came to be preferred over other forms of political organization. This was in response to the atrocities of totalitarianism and fascism during World War II. In his Christmas message of 1944, Pius XII’s theme was democracy. Even though the Catholic Church does not support (or condemn) one particular type of political organization or government, Pius recognized that the trajectory was in democracy’s favor, and he regarded it as more consonant with the dignity and liberty of the citizen.<sup>20</sup> Yet, even then, “[t]he papal endorsement of democracy, while real and significant, is qualified and cautious.”<sup>21</sup> Pius XII called for genuine democracy that would involve participation of the common people. As Dorr notes, “This leaning of Pius toward democracy had what would now be called a geo-political dimension: it identified the pope with ‘the West’ in the struggle against communism as a world power.”<sup>22</sup> This is why at the time Catholicism was less critical of capitalism as an economic system, for it “was seen as the economic face of political democracy.”<sup>23</sup> This shift in the Church’s view of democracy and, by extension, human rights would be magnified with the papacy of John XIII and his calling for a Second Vatican Council of bishops from around the world.

### 3. Vatican II on the Bible, Democracy and Human Rights

Thompson describes the years from 1958 to the present as the “period of transformation,” in which the Church “began to dialogue with the modern world in a process of mutual transformation.”<sup>24</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was pivotal in many ways with regard to reform in the Roman Catholic Church on many fronts, including on the Bible and on democracy and human rights.<sup>25</sup> Pope John XXIII, who in his encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* recognized human rights and responsibilities as essential for world peace, convened this gathering of bishops, calling on them to open the closed window of the fortress, reactionary Church and to “let some fresh air in.”<sup>26</sup> After John XXIII’s death in 1963, Pope Paul VI completed and implemented the reforms of the Council. The Council produced sixteen documents (four constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations) on a

range of topics, including liturgy, ecumenism, and the role of the laity. Three especially relevant for this essay are the documents dealing with Scripture, the Church in the modern world, and religious freedom.

Although the Bible has always been of utmost importance in the Roman Catholic Church, during much of the Church's history most Christians could not read and did not possess their own copy of it, especially since the printing press did not yet exist. Also, for much of this time, the Bible was in Latin rather than its original languages of Hebrew and Greek, and it was not yet printed in the vernacular languages of most Christians, such as Spanish, German, or English. With the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, much of this changed. However, at the Council of Trent (1545-63), the Catholic Church reacted by decreeing that the Bible should be read within the context of the community of faith, with the

*although the Bible has always been of utmost importance in the Roman Catholic Church, during much of the Church's history most Christians could not read and did not possess their own copy of it*

Scriptures interpreted via the teachings and tradition of the Church. Many regarded this stance, however, as depriving individual Catholics from reading the Bible and, by extension, from literacy in general. According to Mary C. Boys, "Many apparently thought Trent was forbidding personal reading of the Scriptures; an unintended consequence of this decree was that generations of Catholics grew up unfamiliar with the Bible."<sup>27</sup> Thus, for instance, during most of Catholicism's existence in Latin America, most Catholic Christians did not read or study Scripture, and although some Bibles were available in Spanish, "these were so expensive that only the wealthy could afford to have one of them."<sup>28</sup> The situation continued for most Latin American Catholics well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With Vatican II's document, *Dei Verbum* ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation"), however, the bishops declared, loud and clear: "Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful."<sup>29</sup> Boys reflects, "Thanks to Vatican Council II, biblical study came of age in Catholicism after the 1960s. People flocked to Bible studies and courses, new books flooded the market, and a nearly fifteen-hundred-page analysis by Catholic scholars, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, appeared in 1968 (with a revised edition in 1990)."<sup>30</sup> The bishops expected the Bible to be crucial for the homily during Mass. According to *Dei Verbum*, "the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture."<sup>31</sup> The impact of this development is also evident in the reliance upon Scripture—and not only or primarily natural law, which was predominant in Catholic social teaching prior to Vatican II—in the encyclicals of later popes such as John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis.

Two other documents from the Second Vatican Council are also important to consider. *Gaudium et Spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World") opens with the following words:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. ...Hence giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole People of God gathered together by Christ, this Council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with the entire human family with which it is bound up, as well as its respect and love for that family, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems. ...To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.<sup>32</sup>

No longer reacting against the world, the Church hoped to engage it and to be mutually transformed for the sake of humankind, especially those who are suffering or poor. Among the many topics covered in this document there is a section titled, "The Political Community and the Church," with a passage that states: "The Church...does not rest its hopes on privileges offered to it by civil authorities, indeed it will even give up the exercise of certain legitimately acquired rights in situations where it has been established that their use calls in question the sincerity of its witness or where new circumstances require a different arrangement."<sup>33</sup> As Massaro summarizes this section, "Religious values in general, and the moral teachings of the Church in particular, are to serve as important guides to the political activities of lay Christians and others, but ultimately the political world operates in ways that are independent of religious authority."<sup>34</sup> Thus, here the Catholic Church recognized the separation of church and state. Moreover, according to Dorr, because of this passage, "the Church...gained the freedom to adopt a *prophetic* role. So long as Church authorities sought patronage, protection, and privileges from the State, they remained dependent on those who held power in civil society. This dependence inhibited the Church from offering an effective challenge to oppressive governments and unjust social economic structures. It even allowed the rich and powerful to 'use' the Church by giving an aura of religious legitimation to the existing structures of society and a certain approval to those who held power."<sup>35</sup> This was especially the case in Latin America.

The other document, *Dignitatis Humanae* ("Decree on Religious Freedom"), reinforced the Church's newly found commitment to the separation of church and state along with the right to freedom of religion and conscience. As the American theologian John Courtney Murray, S.J. observed in his introduction to this document, which was published in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott, S.J.:

In all honesty it must be admitted that the Church is late in acknowledging the validity of the principle [of religious freedom].... The course of the development between the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and *Dignitatis Humanae Personae* (1965) still remains to be explained by theologians. But the Council formally sanctioned the validity of the development itself; and this was a doctrinal event of high importance for theological thought in many other areas.<sup>36</sup>



During the previous decade, Murray was censured by the Vatican for writing on this topic, but now his efforts were vindicated. This document, along with *Gaudium et Spes*, were pivotal developments in Catholic social teaching. And, in tandem with the renewed emphasis on the Bible, they would make a major impact on the Catholic Church in Latin America. Before considering that, though, a synopsis of the principles of Catholic social teaching, with some attention to their links with Scripture, is in order to provide further context.

## 4. Principles of Catholic Social Teaching and Links with the Bible

Catholic social teaching draws from divine revelation (the Bible), tradition (magisterial teaching, councils, theologians' writings), reason (natural law philosophy), and experience (personal experience, insights from human sources of knowledge such as the social sciences). Here several key principles of Catholic social teaching will be surveyed, with brief consideration given to their links with Scripture. At the outset, because Catholic social teaching pertains primarily to social justice, the Bible is relevant. From Scripture, key ingredients in the recipe that cooked to become part of Catholic social teaching include justice, especially social justice (Hebrew words *mišpāt* and *sēdāqāh*, often translated into "loving-kindness," "mercy," "steadfast love," and "righteousness"), the prophets' critique of injustice against the marginalized (the poor, the widows, the orphans, the stranger), and Jesus's preaching of the good news of the kingdom of God (God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven). All of the principles of Catholic social teaching can ultimately be traced to these central thrusts of the Bible.

Depending on the text or source about Catholic social teaching that one reads, the list varies, but what follows are some key principles or themes.

1) The *dignity* of each and every human life is the foundational principle of Catholic social teaching. Each person, regardless of race, sex, age, ability, has inherent dignity. Commonly tethered to this teaching is Genesis 1:26, which refers to humans as *imago Dei*, in God's image. Human life therefore is *sacred*. All persons equally have a right to life, therefore. This is the fundamental human right from which other rights are derived. Especially since Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, Catholic social teaching has employed the language of human rights, although rights from a Catholic perspective also are ultimately grounded in God and always are coupled with reciprocal *responsibilities*.

2) Human persons are *social* beings called to *family*, *community*, and *participation*. Society and all of its institutions should reflect and promote human dignity, enabling individual persons to flourish in community with others. Persons have a right and a responsibility to participate in society, to work for the *common good* of all. Instead of excessive individualism or extreme collectivism, the common good, according to Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra*, is "the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection" (no. 65). A Bible passage related to this is 1 Corinthians 12:26 where Paul writes, "if [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it" (quoted by Pius XI in par. 137 of *Quadragesimo Anno*). Also, the Christian doctrine

of the Trinity means that God's very self is relational, and if we are made in God's image, then we too are relational beings. Another word that relates is *solidarity*, which is a virtue having to do with our interdependence with one another, committing us to the common good. The role of government and other social institutions is to protect human life and dignity, as well as to promote the common good. According to Massaro, "The ordinary way for people to participate in the *political life* of a society is through democratic activity that allows them to determine and influence the structures of government. When it is fulfilling its proper role, government is the instrument of a people, not something that drains their resources or threat-

“human rights from a Catholic perspective are ultimately grounded in God and always are coupled with reciprocal responsibilities”

ens to control them. Government is legitimate when it assists our efforts to pursue a happy, prosperous and meaningful life without undue interference with our God-given liberties, including freedom of religion and conscience.”<sup>37</sup>

3) The principle of *subsidiarity*, which is derived from a root Latin word meaning “to help” or “to serve,” or “to assist.” In response to Cain’s question to God, yes, we are one another’s keeper (Genesis 4:9-12). Subsidiarity initially appeared with Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*. In short, it means relying “as much as possible on those solutions that are closest to the people affected and which employ the smallest groupings and mechanisms that are still effective.”<sup>38</sup> As Massaro sums it, “as small as possible, but big when necessary.”<sup>39</sup> Society consists of many levels and spheres, from the family to local city government, and it includes the state but is not synonymous with it. Bernard Brady describes it this way: “The principle serves to compel groups to take responsibility for their own well-being while at the same time limiting larger bodies, like government, from undue interference. Yet when conditions are appropriate, the larger groups must act on behalf of the smaller” when the latter are insufficient to the task.<sup>40</sup>

4) We are called to care for creation and to be good *stewards* of the gifts we receive from God. As the Psalmist declares, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it...” (24:1). Humankind’s vocation is to “serve and protect” the garden that is our planet (Genesis 2:15). This has important implications for how we treat the environment, as Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* emphasizes. It also relates to what we own and how we use it. Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* wrote that “private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his [or her] exclusive use what he [or she] does not need, when others lack necessities” (par. 23). Massaro observes that the pope probably had in mind wealthy landowners in Latin America who had estates that they would let lie fallow while nearby, poorer landowners were close to starvation.<sup>41</sup> John Paul II referred to this view of private property as being “under a social mortgage” (*Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, par. 42). Our *work* is also a form of participating as created co-creators in God’s

creation, and this work also has dignity. Workers therefore have rights, and the Catholic social tradition has supported the right to organize in unions.

More principles of Catholic social teaching could be listed, but the four highlighted above clusters most of them together. There is one more, however, that was implicit in the opening statement from *Gaudium et Spes*, where it refers to the Church's identification with "especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted," and became explicit in Latin America, initially, as the *preferential option for the poor*.

## 5. The Contributions of Catholic Social Teaching to Democratization in Latin America

"The second half of the twentieth century," write González and González, "was a period of political turmoil and social unrest in Latin America."<sup>42</sup> Particularly to blame was the wider separation between the rich and the poor, with most of the wealth in the hands of a few. During the 1970s and 1980s a number of military dictatorships, sometimes with the support of the United States, cracked down forcefully against anyone perceived as a threat. Many thousands of people "disappeared"—that is, were killed or imprisoned and tortured. It is within this context that Latin American Catholic bishops, inspired by Vatican II, began to shift their stance toward identifying with the poor and oppressed, and that theologians also began to offer a "theology of liberation" as many worked among the people, some of whom were participating in small Bible study groups.

According to Dorr, "The notion of an option for the poor developed in Latin America, as Church leaders there began to implement the renewal sparked off by Vatican II."<sup>43</sup> Although the actual phrase was not yet used, the impetus for the Church's efforts grew to resist injustices such as oppression and exploitation, a commitment to work for justice "from below," with the marginalized (the poor, the oppressed), and a dedication to doing the same in the Church itself, making it "more just and participative."<sup>44</sup> The Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Council of Bishops, known by the acronym CELAM) gathered in Medellín, Columbia, in 1968. This was a significant turning point because "it reverses a centuries-long pattern that had warped the proper understanding of the mission of the Church. As long as the Church was perceived as aligned with the wealthy landholders of Latin America, it would remain a hindrance to the full human development of the poor in that region."<sup>45</sup> Not only did this transition impact the Catholic Church in Latin America, but the wider Catholic Church, too, was profoundly affected.

In 1971, Pope Paul VI invited bishops from around the world to a synod in Rome exploring the promotion of social justice. More than half of the bishops came from third-world countries. The resulting document, *Justicia in Mundo* ("Justice in the World") announced, "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Christian mission for the redemption of the

human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (no. 6).<sup>46</sup> Social justice is not optional, but an essential part of the good news and of Christian discipleship. The Church should play a transformative role in culture and society. Also in 1971, Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic letter (not officially an encyclical, but still an important document) *Octogesima Adveniens* ("A Call to Action"), commemorating the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. This document devoted more attention to politics, including democracy. It called "for the devising of new forms of democracy, of a type that will not merely make it possible for all to be informed and to express themselves but will also involve everybody in a shared responsibility."<sup>47</sup> Democracy refers to the Catholic social teaching principles of participation and responsibilities (not only rights) for all, not only in politics but also in economics and beyond. For the pope, "The aspirations for equality and participation promote a democratic type of society."<sup>48</sup> In close proximity to this is a reference to the preferential option for the poor. Paul VI wrote, "The Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society."<sup>49</sup> A just society, which fosters equality and participation, will include everyone, including those who are poor.

“democracy refers to the Catholic social teaching principles of participation and responsibilities not only in politics but also in economics and beyond”

The term "preferential option for the poor" was coined by Dominican theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. From Peru, he was a theological adviser to CELAM in Medellín. He published his most well-known book, *Teología de la liberación*, in 1971. In addition, lay Catholics gathered in *comunidades eclesiales de base* (Base Ecclesial Communities, also known as CEBs) to study the Bible with an eye toward their situation. One such group met in Solentiname, which is on an island near Managua, Nicaragua. However, this commu-

nity, comprised mostly of poor people, "was practically wiped out by government forces."<sup>50</sup> Father Ernesto Cardenal wrote about this CEB in his book, *The Gospel in Solentiname*,<sup>51</sup> and he later became Secretary of Culture for the new Sandinista government.

Liberation theology was criticized by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would later become Pope Benedict XVI, for allegedly being too Marxist and political. Pope John Paul II, too, worried about it for these reasons. In 1979 CELAM met again in Puebla, Mexico, and most observers note that even though, because of John Paul II's concerns, it "sought to soften the declarations of Medellín,"<sup>52</sup> the Latin American bishops still basically promoted the "preferential option for the poor." Oscar Romero, who was Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador, exemplified this stance for the church: "The church, then, would betray its own love for God and its fidelity to the Gospel if it stopped being the 'voice for the voiceless,' a defender of the rights of the poor, a promoter of every just aspiration for liberation, a guide, an empowerer, a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society, a society that prepares the way for the true kingdom of God in history."<sup>53</sup> He was assassinated while celebrating

Mass on March 24, 1980, in a chapel at a hospital, and on February 3, 2015, Pope Francis declared him a martyr, further paving the way for Romero's sainthood. And Romero is not the only Roman Catholic in Latin America who has promoted the cause of human rights and dignity, especially for the poor—many nameless persons have done so, including too many whose blood was also spilled for the sake of justice. Thus, the “preferential option for the poor” has gained traction and acceptance in the Catholic Church as well as other Christian denominations. In Thompson's estimation, “It has become a defining characteristic of contemporary Catholic social teaching.”<sup>54</sup> With the papacy of Francis, who is from Argentina, this trajectory toward identifying and working with the poor and marginalized has become more pronounced.

## 6. Conclusion

In 2005 the Vatican issued *The Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*. In its section on “the political community,” it has a subsection devoted to “the democratic system,” which states:

An authentic democracy is not merely the result of a formal observation of a set of rules but is the fruit of a convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life. If there is no general consensus on these values, the deepest meaning of democracy is lost and its stability is compromised.<sup>55</sup>

The key principles of Catholic social teaching that have been surveyed in this essay are now associated with “authentic democracy.” As we have seen, the Roman Catholic Church's position on democracy and human rights has changed and developed significantly over the last century, as evident in Latin America. It has come a long way.

Scholars have noted that violent conflicts tend to be accompanied by “the absence of democracy, the denial of human rights, and the lack of empowerment of the people.”<sup>56</sup> Critical components of peacebuilding include, according to one of these scholars, “tenets of Catholic social teaching, such as the option for the poor, solidarity, respect for human rights, and indeed subsidiarity....” Catholic social teaching, by emphasizing these key tenets, has contributed—and continues to do so—to the promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as to peacemaking, in Latin America.

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8. Thompson, 25; González and González, 32-36; Marvin L. Krier Mich, *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 146-49. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).
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10. *Ibid.*, 2.
11. Massaro, 64; Thompson, 26.
12. Thompson, 27.
13. Quoted on Massaro, 65; see González and González, 139.
14. González and González, 92.
15. González and González, 92-93.
16. Thompson, 27.
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37. Massaro, 123,
38. Massaro, 128.
39. Massaro, 130.
40. Bernard V. Brady, *Essential Catholic Social Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 14.
41. Massaro, 134.
42. González and González, 169.
43. Dorr, 8.
44. Dorr, 8; see also Thompson, 31, 90.
45. Massaro, 160; see also Dorr, 180.
46. Quoted in Massaro, 21.
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48. Quoted in Brady, 149.
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55. *The Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 407, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html#IV](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#IV). THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM.
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# Conclusion



Goya's *Third of May* painting reproduced on the previous page challenges us to a responsible political reading of the Bible. In this painting, two formations of men face each other at close proximity. Contrasting the darkness of the background is the light illuminating the peasants about to be shot. The stable lantern at the centre of the picture is the only source of light. Baroque artistic techniques interpreted light as an emanation of God. However, in Goya's painting, the light is not divine but man-made and merely focuses the targets for the executioners. Also telling is that the massive church buildings in the background participate in the darkness. No light emanates from them, and they appear located on the same side of the painting as the soldiers. The other Christian motif in the painting is the central figure of the peasant in white and yellow, the canonical colours of the Catholic Church. The posture of the peasant is reminiscent of Christ in Gethsemane, crying out in the midst of terrible darkness. It's this cry, the terror on the peasant's face and his stigmata that challenges us to responsibility in reading the Bible politically.<sup>1</sup> As Craig Bartholomew rightly cautions, too often the church has been a source of the darkness, complicit with oppression rather than a source of light.<sup>2</sup> It is through the Bible that God addresses us and there is a long Christian tradition in which the church has taken the witness of the Bible for politics with the utmost seriousness.

This research has traced a tiny part of that historical witness, by showing the Bible's positive contribution to democracy, peace-keeping and post-conflict forgiveness and reconciliation. Although each author has used a wide range of arguments and exemplified them from different international contexts, the common thread is an evidence-based conviction that the Scriptures have been and continue to be a force for good in any society that is willing to explore its key tenets and internalise them. As discussed in the first chapter, Biblical ideas of justice influenced the principle and ideas for international order and peace. However, as Joustra argued, a Biblical model of international peace cannot lean on merely one institution like the United Nations at one extreme, or be consumed merely with "global" governance at the other extreme. Local justice enables global justice, and these two global/local aspects are not rivals, but partners in peace and development. Nor is the Biblical work of global peacekeeping merely concerned with the outward manifestations of outright violence. A just and durable peace means more than peacekeeping and emergency aid. It means stopping the wheel of injustice and poverty; it means a renewed global architecture.

Moreover, we are reminded in the second chapter that while the Bible can be said to be supportive of democracy, it is less concerned with the form and structure of governance, and more with its content. This content includes notions of subsidiarity and common good, human personal responsibility towards God, individual dignity, human rights, freedom of conscience, church-state separation or religious toleration. As Spencer argued, in as much as the U.N. is extending around the world a democratic form of governance which entails this content, the Bible is supportive of such efforts. Nevertheless, it would be flawed to argue that democracy equates with the biblical vision for human life. We are reminded of this fact by Niebuhr's admonition about "man's inclination to injustice". There are limitations in any democratic system, whose utopian vision will never be fulfilled and realized by a human form of governance. The Bible speaks of a Christian community that is pledged to see the

advance of the Kingdom of God; its vision is consequently unlike any social, political or economic order. As Richard Bauckham stressed, governments cannot be the rule of God, because they would be bound to absolutize themselves, deny the moral ambiguities of its policies and practices, suppress dissent and cause self-justifying oppression.<sup>3</sup> Good governments recognize fallible human limits, and the gap between human politics and the Kingdom of God. However, while resisting the temptation of theocracy, human governments can imitate the principles of God's rule, as far as circumstances allow.

As we've seen in chapter three, the biblical doctrine of atonement can have a profound influence in healing communities torn apart by conflict and genocide. This is particularly obvious in the story of Himm in Cambodia, where the forgiveness of Jesus on the Cross spoke and enabled him to forgive. However, while the biblical narrative of Christ's death on the cross does promote a model for forgiveness, it should not be confused for cheap grace. In his 1937 book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined "cheap grace" as "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, and communion without confession".<sup>4</sup> The emphasis is on the benefits of Christianity without the costs involved; hence, the adjective cheap to describe it. Communities which have been shattered by conflict shouldn't simply forgive, if that forgiveness is not followed by reconciliation. Catholic theologian Robert Schreier cautioned that social reconciliation "... is not only a matter of healing memories and receiving forgiveness, it is also about changing the structures in society that provoked, promoted and sustained violence".<sup>5</sup> Whereas political forgiveness is the moral response of one person, group or nation to injustice perpetrated by another, reconciliation includes at least two parties coming together in mutual respect. One may forgive and yet not reconcile. This idea is best articulated in Miroslav Volf's "theology of embrace" where he differentiates between the "will to embrace" and the "embrace itself".<sup>6</sup> Whereas the former is not dependent on the other party, the latter involves two parties in agreement. Applied to the Cambodian context, it means that the churches should work with the government on devising a genuine process of reconciliation and restoration of justice.

Of course, we cannot assume that the churches will have a coherent voice in the political realm; at best, a partnership could be developed between theologians, civil society and political leadership, in the sense that the former could become the interpreters of the efforts and achievements of civil society and politicians. As we have seen in chapter four, the Roman Catholic Church's position on democracy has developed to the point that it found a new appreciation for good governance. Catholic social teaching enables churches and theologians to reflect on those key components of the so-called "authentic democracy"; values such as human dignity, respect for human rights and a commitment to the common good. Keeping politicians in check, creating the needed public debate around questions of social justice, and stressing the preferential option for the poor, enable the churches to play a transformative role in culture and society. Moreover, it provides churches with the opportunity to adopt a prophetic role. Ultimately, no human form of governance or international order determines or defines Christian freedom. The freedom of the Christian is derived from faithfulness to God's justice and the implications this has to the prophetic witness to human justice and equality. Only in exercising

this biblical understanding of freedom is the Christian contributing and supporting the establishment or the consolidation of the democratic social order.

Cristian Romocea

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The relationship between democracy, conflict and the Bible is of utmost significance today. The Bible has had an indelible influence on international order and the extension of democracy around the world. In an era of increased globalisation and erosion of the ethical foundations of institutions, the Bible remains a constant source of values and ethics which undergird the very fabric of society. The rule of law, the limits to absolute power, human dignity and the care for the refugee and the homeless, as well as the reconstruction of societies broken by war and conflict, all find their source in the Scriptures. I commend this publication because it makes an important contribution in informing and reminding readers about the Bible's positive contribution to the conversation between religion and society.

*James Catford, Group Chief Executive, Bible Society*

Does the Bible have any relevance on international affairs? So often we speak from our own personal situations of shame and honour or tribe and territory. This research reminds us that the Bible provides us the opportunity to speak INTO situations with confidence. This confidence comes from us knowing who we are, what we stand for and who we serve.

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Over the last 30 years or so, far too many Western political and other leaders have attempted to push the Bible to the margins. In doing so they have not only lost sight of the simple reality that for literally billions of people around the world identity and purpose is deeply rooted in the Bible – but also that our democracy, international institutions and the way we manage conflict are collectively and equally rooted in our Biblical heritage. I thoroughly commend this analysis, which any serious political leader needs to absorb and acknowledge.

*Major General Tim Cross CBE*

A highly informative and sometimes surprising volume that reminds us again that ideas have consequences. The history of global engagement had been and will be driven by visions and values, and it is clear that, at least in the West, the majority of these have biblical roots.

*Elizabeth Oldfield, Director of Theos*

One of the great stories of the twentieth century is Christianity's recovery of a prophetic role within the very loss of the privileges associated with 'Christendom.' The influence of the Bible on processes of democratization, conflict resolution, and the expansion of human rights has often been quiet, subtle and indirect, but as these essays demonstrate, it has continued to be substantial. With a series of vivid and accessible case studies, *Democracy, Conflict & the Bible* offers a valuable introduction to this important field of study.

*Dr Dominic Erdozain, Visiting Research Fellow, King's College London*



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