

WHAT DID PROTESTANTS DO FOR DEMOCRACY IN CHURCH AND STATE?



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ABSTRACT

Democracy and freedom in the modern sense took root for the first time in history on Protestant land (Netherlands, England, Scotland, USA), since the Reformers also had significant teachings on public policies, including government. Both in society and the Church, democratic elements can be traced back to the teachings of Luther, Calvin, Knox and their contemporaries. The Reformers believed that everything on Earth, including the people, rulers, and the clergy, is under the unlimited sovereignty of Christ. Political activity in public affairs has always belonged to Protestants to a greater extent than to other denominations. This short essay provides a reflection on these fundamental teachings, looking at Protestant thought on democracy in both Church and state.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that democracy and freedom in the modern sense took root for the first time in history on Protestant land (Netherlands, England, Scotland, USA). Although in some monastic orders, leaders had already taken elected positions, democracy became the main form of government in Protestant church organization. Democracy is still present in the Protestant Church: instead of infallibility and dogma, this is the binding material of church organization. The Reformers, however, did not only deal with their Church: they always had something to say about public life. Major Protestant manifestos usually have a separate chapter on public issues such as civil government.

The pulse of the Reformation spread first from Wittenberg and then from the Swiss city states to far-away lands, to England, Scotland and the Low Countries. And while the social context was different – the establishment of a city republic in Geneva, conflicts of royal power and succession in England and Scotland, independent statehood in the Netherlands, feudal interests in Germany – there was a common, solid foundation on which the responses of the new faith could be built.

The reformers believed that everything on Earth, including the people, their ruler, and the clergy, is under the unlimited sovereignty of Christ. Likewise, Church and state are in this same position: both were ordained by God for the benefit of fallen humanity, and both are God's servants. Furthermore, political activity in public affairs has always belonged to Protestants to a greater extent than to other denominations. In Protestant thought, not all democratic government is Christian, but all Christian government is democratic. The legacy of Protestant political theology is now embedded in the modern constitution and state, and has become the public minimum for all Christians.¹

PROTESTANT DEMOCRACY IN CIVIL GOVERNMENT

In socialist historiography, the birth of modern democracy is assigned to the French Revolution – and this is deeply entrenched in today's public thinking. Constitutional and state theory – at least in Eastern Europe – is still slow to recognise and acknowledge that another, much earlier event had a much greater impact on the founding principles of modern, Western democracy: the Reformation. The constituent elements of the constitutional canon (the rule of law, popular sovereignty, separation of powers, equality of rights, fundamental

¹ Antal Birkás: *Reformáció, államhatalom, politika*, Luther Kiadó, Budapest, 2011; Zsolt Szabó (ed.): *Szabadság, hatalom, lelkiismeret – fejezetek a protestáns politika gondolkodás történetéből*, Kálvin Kiadó, Budapest, 2024.

rights) are in fact rooted in the Reformation. The constitutions of the Protestant states (parts of Germany, England, and the USA) were built on these principles – and these are the countries that have put them into practice successfully.

A decisive impetus for the development of modern, civil constitutionalism and politicisation was undoubtedly provided by the Reformation, which became a constitutional factor in Protestant states. Political history identifies the first civil constitution as the constitution of the Union of Utrecht of 1584, and Rousseau, who came from Geneva and who respected Calvin not as a theologian but as a Genevan legislator, takes his idea of popular sovereignty from Calvin's referendum on the constitution of the Church of Geneva in 1541. The provisions of the Huguenot constitution, according to Abraham Kuyper, live on in the Constitution of the United States of America. The optimal balance (parliamentary sovereignty, the formula of 'the king rules but does not govern') reached after the drift of the English Revolution – which also weighed questions of faith – provided a model for a whole series of European constitutional monarchies. By the 19th century, Protestant states (Germany, Britain, the USA) had taken the lead in shaping world history and politics.

The Reformation was not only a theological movement. Beyond theology, the Reformers also had something to say about public life. Based on their own experience, Protestants were sensitive to questions of power and, with differing emphases, but firmly in favour of the subordination of the monarch to God and the limited power of the ruler, limited by parliament. The revival of republicanism, another distinctively Protestant idea, triumphed in the world as the antithesis of absolute monarchy. At the dawn of the modern age, in the early 16th century, the dominant form of government in Europe was absolute monarchy. And the Church, after the power struggles of previous centuries, supported and allied itself with it.

The Reformers affirmed that everything on Earth, including the people, their ruler, and the priesthood, is under the unlimited sovereignty of Christ. The sovereignty is not of the ruler, nor of the people, but of the Lord. Church and state are in the same position: both are ordained by God for the benefit of mankind fallen into sin; both are servants of God. The power given to them cannot be abused and the ruler must obey the laws of the land (the law is a silent supremacy, the supremacy is a living law – John Calvin); he must respect the covenant of God with his people (John Knox).² The centuries-old idea of the state bound by law, the rule of law, is reaffirmed here. Citizens owe absolute obedience to the ruler, who, like the hand of God, is the one who implements the will of the Lord. The penal power of the state also executes the just

² Stanford W. Reid: John Knox's Theology of Political Government, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 19 (1988/4), 529–540.

punishments of God. From a firm starting-point of obedience, however, the Reformers, according to the different historical situations of their nations and their own temperaments, arrived at different degrees of exception, of disobedience to the tyrant, or even of rebellion. The first – but not the last – regicide in modern Europe was also Protestant in origin: the Reformation took the right to dethrone out of the hands of the Pope and the Church and put it into the hands of political elites seeking autonomy.

Protestant movements also reinterpreted the idea of freedom. The Christian man depends on Christ alone – that is, he is dependent neither on the state nor on the Church. Protestant thought liberated man to be free to have direct contact with God, without intermediaries. The free practice of religion, and the freedom of thought and conscience that go hand in hand with it, can be considered as the first modern freedoms, among the first generation of fundamental rights. Thus, the Reformation can also be seen as the first modern civil rights struggle, two and a half centuries before the slogans of ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’. By freeing faith and thought from ecclesiastical – and secular – control, it placed man solely and directly under the sovereignty of Christ and the laws of the Bible. This struggle for the free exercise of religion opened the way to the development of fundamental human rights, and led to the development of political freedoms, through freedom of expression (printing books, Bible translations). It sparked the German and English civil revolutions, and it was no coincidence that the 20th-century Martin Luther King took the name of the German reformer: it was not only a Christian gesture but also a political one, and a political program at the same time.

Abraham Kuyper, the Reformed pastor-turned-Dutch Prime Minister from 1901 to 1905, and founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, stated: ‘the guarantee of our rights and liberties is in Calvinism.’ This is the root of Christian liberty, the key to which is a return to the Bible and a rejection of the secular and ecclesiastical powers that hinder God’s plan. This does not mean revolution and resistance to government: the gospel does not overrule but rather underlies the laws of the world and calls for obedience to authority. The rule of law, however, as opposed to the unlimited rule of rulers, is also a leading Protestant idea. The basis of ‘rule of law thinking’ is here displayed.

The Reformation raised man’s head not only towards God, but also towards his fellow man. Grace extends to all, that is, all can equally attain salvation, with no ecclesiastical or secular privileges. State and government are elements of common grace, as concluded by Calvin.³ The Calvinist stands at eye level with his fellow man, not above him. But neither does he put himself below: according to Kuyper, only Calvinism has reached the stage where it accepts,

³ John Witte: Moderate (religious) liberty in the theology of John Calvin. The original Genevan experiment, in *The Reformation of Rights*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, 39–80.

and even approves, the criticisms made by believers of their own religious leaders, which is not characteristic of the Catholic Church in this form, let alone of Islam.

True equality of rights is based on the idea of equality before God, which includes the idea that ministers, though more educated, are not above believers in matters of faith, and that their relationship with God is no more direct than that of believers. The Protestant man stands up for his own rights as well as the rights of others, within the bounds of the law.

The Reformers used the Bible as a basis for the principles that underpin democracy today. Calvin, himself a lawyer, put his ‘church constitution’, which still governs the Reformed Church today, to a referendum. He did not go as far as elective offices, but he was an advocate of republicanism and the exercise of power by others at a time when most of Europe still had monarchies.

The division of power is explicitly stated in Calvin’s magnum opus, *The System of the Christian Religion*, in which he devotes a whole chapter to questions of secular government: ‘where power is divided in the hands of many, there is less danger of it degenerating into arbitrariness.’ The Calvinist idea, however, is that the majority is not always right: Christians have often been and currently are in the minority, and there are many stories in the Bible of the Lord using one man or a small group against the majority to accomplish his plan. As a great student of Calvin, John Knox, said: ‘one man with God is always the majority’.

In the Protestant view, it is not right for Christians to withdraw from the world, seeking only each other’s company and not taking the fate of their country to heart. It is free, even right, for a Christian to be a politician, and politics can take on a Christian agenda, for the benefit of the people and with their authority. The well-known saying of the 20th century Hungarian legal and political scholar István Bibó – who also came into closer contact with Protestantism through his father-in-law, the Reformed Bishop László Ravasz – that ‘a democrat is the one who is not afraid’ also holds true: he who is a Protestant is not afraid. ‘If the Lord be with him, who can be against him?’ is the hymn of Martin Luther. In the cataclysm of the Reformation, many sacrificed their lives for true Christian freedom.

In the Protestant understanding, a Christian nation is both a congregation and a political community. No one can exclude himself from the law of God or from the affairs of his own community. Protestants have always been more active in public affairs than other denominations. The matter of faith is not a private but a public and political matter, *res publica*. In the Protestant conception, there is no sharp distinction between the private and the public sphere. There is no separate political life, family life, or professional life – in the fullness of the believer’s life, faith embraces all spheres. Faith is private, public and political at the same time. And there can be no contradiction between

them. If there is, this represents a serious crisis of credibility and trust. The real question and conflict of faith was again pointed out by the Reformers: life or death, salvation or damnation. And wherever these questions arise, politics rears its head and tries to turn the direction of thinking in its own favour. It must also be seen that, in the midst of the violence and power struggles of history, religious questions have never been the cause of wars in themselves, but rather the means of politics in its power games. Religious wars were typically fought by competing elites seeking to consolidate their power against their rivals. Protestant religious wars are no exception.

Calvin considered participation in public office and politics to be one of the highest vocations, to which one should say yes only by God's calling. Protestants did not withdraw from public life, but participated in it. This is why Protestants have always been over-represented in politics. But they have always been Christian rather than party politicians – which is why there has never been a sustained successful Protestant political party or formation, despite attempts to create one. Protestants, in whatever party they were active, represented Christ above parties, fighting as faithful followers of Christ rather than of party discipline.

PROTESTANT DEMOCRACY IN THE CHURCH

Protestant churches, to differing extents, are based on congregational autonomy and democracy. Any centralised organisational structure would enable the development of power clusters, which, by their very nature, gravitate towards making pacts with other, especially secular, centres of power. Protestant churches are built bottom-up and not top-down.⁴

The idea of a Christ-centred church can be deviated from in two directions: towards a pastor-centred church model on the one hand, and towards a lay-centred church model on the other. Both are dangerous temptations, because they both place people, though at a different scale, at the centre of the church's action, instead of the right worship of God. The range of Reformed churches in the world, with some simplification, covers these two directions geographically: the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and Switzerland see the pastor as an employee of the congregation, who does not (or cannot) always participate in the deliberations of the presbytery (church board) that actually leads the community. In contrast, the centre of the ecclesiastical network of the Reformed Churches in Hungary and Transylvania is, firmly and

⁴ Fazakas, Sándor (ed.): *Kálvin időszerűsége: Tanulmányok Kálvin János teológiájának maradandó értékéről és magyarországi hatásáról*. Budapest: Magyarországi Református Egyház Kálvin János Kiadója, 2009.

unquestionably, the pastor, who is not only a member but also the chairman of the main decision-making body of the congregation. Thus, he becomes the maintainer of his own status – which is, in my view, a contradiction, or even a conflict of interests. The degree of deliberation, therefore, very much depends on the personality of the pastor: in the presence of an autocratic pastor, there is usually little room for wider discussion and decision-making within the community. This situation of church organisation is therefore little different from the clergy-centred governance structures of the Roman Catholic Church.

The book of Proverbs (15:22) says: ‘Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.’ God’s plan and will, according to the Protestant creed, is usually carried out through the vision of others, through consultation. More people see more perspectives and have more to add to the issue on which they seek God’s guidance. And the principle of universal priesthood makes pastors and non-minister church members partners in principle.

Another question is how these principles translate into practice. The practical operation of the Hungarian Reformed Church, mainly due to the influence of the predominantly Catholic environment, is characterised by the dominance of pastors and church offices, while the decision-making bodies are purely formal, and based rather on loyalty-centered interests rather than merit-based selection. This is linked to the fact that civic thinking has not taken deep root in Hungarian society. In the storms of history, it was the central state, rather than an association of independent, responsible citizens, that gave people security and protection. This had tremendous effects on the Church: the supposedly legitimate, elected bodies become inward-looking; clique-like, they often prolong their own mandate, preventing their own renewal through personal filtering mechanisms. Meanwhile, the formal church structures follow their own purpose functions in their cloud sphere, without feedback or accountability, and while on the surface the unity and identity of the Church is increasingly emphasised at the level of slogans, the church structures are increasingly disconnected from the community of church members, and the actual reality of the Church.

To live universal priesthood and ecclesial democracy, active, non-interested, autonomous, and willing church members are needed, similarly to the people of civil democracy. The leadership of the Hungarian Reformed Church – the ‘clergy’ – dominated by clergymen, who hold monopoly on information, often provides little real encouragement or means to empower and increase the numbers of such church members. In Protestant theology, however, the Church is the body of Christ, made up of mature believing members who are able to come to the Saviour on their own, in which we all come ‘to the unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.’ (Eph. 4.13.) Many pastors, however, are more interested in the existence of a flock kept in infancy, in

which they need not fear the emergence and strengthening of rivals. Likewise, the accountability of the state requires self-conscious, adult citizens, but the state is disinterested in their empowerment.

Like parliaments, for presbyteries (church boards) to become real deliberative and decision-making bodies, it is essential that their members are put in a real decision-making position, based on sharing information and building partnerships, which are often missing in the daily life of Protestant churches. This can be achieved by preparing board meetings more thoroughly, based on prior information sharing, by enabling real, responsible decision-making, by increasing public and congregational involvement in decisions, and by consciously sharing responsibility. The decision-making order should be based on a pastor-presbyter partnership and shared responsibility rather than on custom and unconditional trust. Church boards, if they function properly, can serve as schools of democracy in society.

It is a well-known phenomenon that the Western Christian churches are ageing, with few active, energetic, family-oriented and servant church members. One reason for this may be that they, especially the younger generation, are used to responsible participation in organisational decisions in secular bodies and workplaces, and demand to be informed as active participants in their church life. Many of them, although their spiritual hunger is undeniable, cannot be sucked into a centralised, authoritarian order that labels disputes as devilish. The main difference between the structure of the Catholic and Protestant Churches lies in the way in which pastoral status is created. In the Protestant Church, it is the exercise of a ministry established and maintained by the parish. In simple terms, the congregation has a pastor; it is not the pastor who has a congregation.

Throughout the course of Hungarian history, which has been characterised by Catholic dominance, the powerful office of bishop has also appeared in the Protestant churches because of their relations with the secular power. Its function in the 19th century was to participate in secular power (as members of the upper house) or to compromise with it (the 20th-century socialist political system, the Kádár-regime). Without this office, in my view, the Church would not be poorer, but richer, since an overweight power sphere would disappear. Internal power, on the other hand, calls into being closed decision-making forums of the chamber or central-committee type, whose contact with the public is contingent and arbitrary, and whose main purpose is to conclude power deals aimed at consolidating the existing structure.

The Protestant church ideal is a transparent and accountable, self-governing, Christ-centred church of adult, mature church members, whose communities are in close contact with publicly functioning church governance structures, free of power centres, stripped to the bare essentials, with boards as the real

decision-makers. And offices are filled by community selection, not by distribution along loyalty-centered lines of interest.

Protestants have recognized that in the relationship between politics and the church, as in everything else, the standard can only be the harder path. By dishonest offers of politics, wrapped in the ‘protection of faith’, the only answer can be to renounce perceived benefits. No living and life-forming Protestant church has been established where it operates at the mercy of the state and relies on it. The Church can only unfold the spiritual gifts of God freely, growing towards Christ, out of the shadow of power, as a free Church in a free state. The German-Scandinavian Protestant state religion and church is an institutional structure with a cultural function rather than a spiritual current. The Bekennede Kirche in Germany did not emerge within the official Protestant Church during the period of National Socialism, but against it.

Remarkably, participation and deliberation have not only appeared in the Protestant domain. The main elements of the Synodal Process, launched by Pope Francis in 2018, includes ‘the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.’ In the synodal Church, ‘the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions.’⁵

As the final document of the Synodal Process states, ‘The way to promote a Synodal Church is to foster as great a participation of all the People of God as possible in decision-making processes. This ecclesiological framework shapes the commitment to promote participation based on differentiated co-responsibility. Each member of the community must be respected, with value placed upon their gifts and abilities in light of the goal of shared decision-making.’⁶ The Roman Catholic Church is seemingly moving towards a participatory, transparent, and accountable institutional framework.

EPILOGUE

In the Protestant conception, there is not a single foot of land that is not under the rule of Christ (Kuyper). Accordingly, in the world and in the Church, there are citizens of His kingdom, living under His laws. Christ’s teachings reveal an approach in which pastors and non-ministers, Christians and non-Christians, men and women, people of different professions and different material situations serve one another at eye level, in equal proximity to God, for the benefit

⁵ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018)

⁶ XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document* (2–27 October, 2024), 87–79.

of one another. This principle is put into practice through democratic decision-making, which is a tool for both lay and church government. Listening to one other, honest and open debate, accepting one other's opinions are all expressions of Christian love. It would be great if the coming of His kingdom could be signalled by the putting into practice of as much of this as possible.

Do various nations' Protestant political ideas have anything in common? If so, this cannot be anything other than an unswerving and uncompromising faith in Christ alone and in the authority of the Bible. The various Protestant currents of thought have all placed the Word of God at the center, above questions of power and politics, in the Church as well as in society. For these are all under the unlimited sovereignty of Christ and not in the hands of earthly powers.

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