

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Democracy and Christianity: Common Ground?

History demonstrates that a democracy is very fragile and the American democratic-republic is no exception. As we begin 2018, it is important to remember several salient facts about the American experiment. In a non-ideological way, I believe the case can be made that the American experiment is unique and exceptional, both in terms of its origin and its development.

Permit me a review of several important historical developments in American history. America is exceptional and unique. Its exceptionalism has a moral, an ethical, a spiritual and a political dimension to it. There really is no other nation quite like the US—and that is at the heart of its exceptionalism. The United States was birthed as a nation when two powerful forces came together in the 18th century—political liberty and religious liberty. The 13 colonies of Great Britain were each planted separately and for different reasons. Each developed uniquely with diverse institutions. The first unifying event in the colonies was the First Great Awakening, which occurred during the 1720s through the 1760s. Virtually every person in the 13 colonies was affected by this revival, especially through the ministry of George Whitefield. Historians have long documented the enormous impact of this revival—denominationalism, a desire for the separation of church and state and a strong sense of the spiritual significance of life. Religious liberty emerged as a core value of the colonies as every expression of the Protestant Reformation came to America. The pluralism of choice ensured that there would be no established church and that religious conscience would be protected. The commitment to political liberty came from the European Enlightenment and the Declaration of Independence, penned by Jefferson, offers the best example of this. As historian Henry May has argued in *The Enlightenment in America*, the revival of the First Awakening buffered the Enlightenment's radicalism producing what he called America's Moderate Enlightenment of balance, order and freedom. There was no guillotine in America. Further, Abraham Lincoln, in the Emancipation Proclamation and in his Gettysburg Address, applied these life-changing principles to slavery and declared that the Civil War was not only about preserving the Union; it was about applying "all men are created equal" to the African-American slave. They would be freed. This same understanding was applied to women in their enfranchisement through the 19th Amendment. America is something new in human history and it is quite exceptional. That is why tens-of-millions of human beings have sought passage to America, the land of freedom. People are not beating down the doors to get into Russia; we still have millions of people who would do anything to come to America.

Many of the early leaders were deists (or Unitarians), while others were committed evangelicals. Historian Thomas Kidd, in his important book entitled *The God of Liberty*, argues that by 1776 five religious ideas connected both deists and evangelicals across British North

America. There was both a commitment to political liberty and to religious liberty. The bishop controversy in which the British Empire sought to place a resident Anglican bishop in the colonies and the Quebec Act (1774) were central in deepening these five convictions:

1. The disestablishment of all state churches.
2. The idea of a Creator God who is the guarantor of fundamental human rights.
3. The reality of human sin as a threat to the new republic.
4. The republic would be sustained only by virtue.
5. God, through his Providence, moved in and through nations.

In short, both groups believed that God was raising up America for some special purpose; a civic spirituality developed which believed that God had a special purpose for America. There was a redemptive aspect to the Revolution; the cause of America was the cause of Christ many believed.

Using language that accommodated both deists and evangelicals, the founding documents of the American Republic evidence a commitment to these convictions. You see it in the soaring language of Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence when he addresses “nature and nature’s God” who is the source of human rights, and “that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” But you also see it in the language of the First Amendment, which guarantees that “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion” or “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Because the founders distrusted concentrations of power, they established a plan of government that separated power (legislative, executive and judicial) with the result being a system of checks and balances to preserve human liberty.

In a series of lectures in 1938, Thomas Mann boldly declared “The Coming Victory of Democracy” in the face of the growing threats of fascism and communism challenging the world’s democracies. He made several key points (as summarized by columnist David Brooks) that are worth reviewing:

- “Democracy begins with one great truth, he argued: the infinite dignity of individual men and women. Man is made in God’s image. Unlike other animals, humans are morally responsible. Yes, humans do beastly things—Mann had just escaped the Nazis—but humans are the only creatures who can understand justice, freedom and truth. This trinity ‘is a complex of an indivisible kind, freighted with spirituality and elementary dynamic force.’”
- Democracy, he argued, “is the only system built on respect for the infinite dignity of each individual man and woman, on each person’s moral striving for freedom, justice and truth. It would be a great error to think of and teach democracy as a procedural or political system, or as the principle of majority rule.”

- Democracy is a “spiritual and moral possession.” It is not only rules but a way of life. “It encourages everybody to make the best of their capacities—holds that we have a moral responsibility to do so.”
- Monarchies produce great paintings but democracy teaches citizens to put their art into action, to take their creative impulses and build a world around them. “Democracy is thought; but it is thought related to life and action.” Democratic citizens are not only dreamers; they are thinkers who sit on town councils.
- Democracy is not only about politics; it is “about the individual’s daily struggle to be better and nobler and to resist the cheap and the superficial.”

In conclusion, it seems imperative to close with a comment about the importance of ethics in a democracy. The unique combination of religious liberty and political liberty that produced the Independence movement and the gradual expansion of what “all men are created equal” really means, is deteriorating into a destructive embrace of Postmodern autonomy, relativism and radical pluralism. Our values, morals and ethical standards now resemble the socialist nations of Europe. Individual initiative and trust are being replaced by an entitlement mentality that eats away at liberty and freedom. Our nation is a product of unique forces, including the providence of God. But that identity is no longer accepted by many and we have become a nation firmly anchored in mid-air. Our democracy cannot long endure without a strong ethical foundation.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (15 December 2017).