

Freedom, Equality, Dignity of the Human Person:

The Roots of Liberal Democracy

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Robert Kraynack argues that Christian thought for the past century has seen democracy and Christianity as highly compatible, but that the actual tradition of Christian ethical and political thinking has been suspicious and even hostile towards the democratic form of government as it appeared in the West. But the Christian tradition has not based the dignity of the human person principally on man's freedom; rather it finds human dignity on man's special status in the universe because of his spiritual soul and his obedience to the divine providence governing him towards his God-given final end. The emphasis has been not on the rights of man, founded on his freedom, but rather on his obligations toward God and his fellow humans. Freedom has a considerably stronger role in the Christian tradition, both religious and philosophical with respect to the grounding of human dignity, than Kraynack seems willing to recognize.

After reading the latest book of Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Christian Democracy*, there is no doubt in my mind that he is a powerful and insightful Christian political thinker. His indictment of our current form of liberal democracy as proclaiming the values of freedom, equality, and dignity of the human person as the foundations of democracy, but unable to ground them adequately in their secular liberal philosophy of the human person, is a serious and in many ways insightful critique. And his sober portrayal of what he considers the inevitable drifting downward of any democratic form of culture toward the lowest common denominator of values and taste is worth serious reflection by the many contemporary Christian enthusiasts for democracy as the form of government most congenial to the expression of the equally Christian values of freedom, equality, and the dignity of the human being. I think his critique of the inability of liberal democracy to vindicate philosophically the grounding values of democracy, the freedom, equality, and dignity of man, which they so proudly proclaim as their new contribution to human political history, is right on target. But I am not convinced that the only form of democracy is the liberal one, still too much of an optimist to be convinced that every form of democracy, even one rooted in man's relation to God, necessarily implies a drift

toward a lower level of values and taste. He has a challenging point here which requires further discussion, and I am not interested in doing that here.

What I am concerned with here is his further more controversial point that the recent development in the late twentieth century of a strong alliance of Christian political thinkers, including several popes, with the human rights movement, based on the fundamental democratic values of freedom, equality, and dignity--an alliance which leads them to claim that the democratic form of government is the one most appropriate for giving full expression to the Christian vision of the human person--is seriously misguided, even dangerous. This is the claim he makes quite explicitly in Chapter 3:"The Opening of Christianity to Democracy and Human rights."

His point here is that liberal secular democracy has made freedom itself and the resulting autonomy of the human person the absolutely central pillar of human dignity. But not only has it not been able to provide any adequate proof either that we humans truly possess this attribute, or that it is capable of adequately grounding human dignity. For, understood, as the radical, self-explanatory autonomy of the human will, without any further ordering to God, freedom itself becomes intrinsically ambiguous and can lead to the very undermining of the human dignity it wishes to promote.

On the contrary, Kraynak claims, the actual historical tradition of Christian ethical and political thinking has in fact been principally suspicious, even hostile, towards the democratic form of government as it appeared in the West. The Christian tradition has not based the dignity of the human person principally on man's freedom at all, but rather on his special status in the universe as an *image of God*, because of his spiritual soul, and his obedience to the divine providence governing him towards his God-given final end. The emphasis has been not on the rights of man, founded on his freedom, but rather on his obligations toward God and his fellow humans, based on his human nature as having its origin and final end in God.

This is the point I would like to examine critically. In my judgment freedom has a considerably stronger role in the Christian tradition, both religious and philosophical with

respect to the grounding of human dignity, than Kraynak seems willing to recognize.

The Ground of Human Dignity in Christian Thought

The first root of human dignity in this long tradition, as Kraynak well shows, is that of the human person as *image of God*. This appears in the first book of *Genesis* itself, 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' So God created man in his own image...male and female he created them." This theme is echoed down through all the Fathers of the Church and its great spiritual writers, and also by the great medieval philosopher-theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas.¹ Aquinas, summing up the common opinion, roots this image in the possession by the human being of a spiritual soul, endowed with intellect and free will, which allows man to know and love God directly--beyond the power of any non-rational animal. Notice, however, that freedom of the will is already central, with intellect, in this image.

The second root of dignity in the human is the fact that each human person is ordered, as to his final end to direct personal union with God himself, in the "beatific vision," for philosophical as well as theological reasons.² This means that there is a very special providence of God over each human person that is not true of lesser creatures not capable of such immediate personal union with God. Hence, since this is God's own providential ordering of each person's life, no created being has the right to interfere with this divine ordering of the very nature of the human being, by using him as an instrument for its own created purposes, whether this be king or state or human group of any kind.

Therefore the human person, as regards this aspect of his journey, transcends the claims of all human authority, political or otherwise, although this does not deny a certain subordination of the individual person to the common good of a political society in certain purely temporal matters. This accords a special dignity to the human person which all other created persons must respect and not deliberately interfere with. But note again the central role of freedom, of freely given response of love, in this providential ordering of the human journey to God. Mere

obedience to God without this element of freely given consent is not part of God's plan for drawing human persons to union with himself.

There is a third root of human dignity which St. Thomas gives special attention to--one that is not as well known in the Christian tradition outside of Thomism itself--but which I consider an especially powerful one for motivating human response; and freedom is absolutely central in this one. As he begins the Second Part of his *Summa Theologiae*, on the return of man to God through the moral life, Thomas prefixes it with a special Prologue to the whole moral life of man, in which man acts as an image of God:

Since, as Damascenus says, man is made to the image of God, according as he is

intellectual, endowed with free choice, and having dominion over his own self (*per se potestativum sui*), therefore, after having spoken about God the exemplar, it remains that we consider his image, i.e., man. according as he is the originating principle of his own actions, as he possesses free choice and dominion over his own operations.³

In a word, the human person is the image of God in his moral life, not by obeying the commandments of God (as many Christian moralists maintain) since God himself does not obey the commandments of anyone else, but precisely by freely *exercising providence* over his own life. For just as God is provident over the whole universe, so man is his image by actively exercising providence over his own little turf, that part of the universe that he controls, namely, his own life (and also, we must add, over those put in his charge, for example, his children, and those who work under him in the office, in the government, etc.).

This is an extremely revelatory text. It makes clear that freedom itself is the central piece of man's imaging of God in the moral sphere, and in this is rooted a central part of his dignity as an image of God. So freedom is after all, despite the reservations of Kraynak, one of the central pillars of the human person's dignity before God and man in the Christian tradition, and of his corresponding right to respect from all. But, of course, this special dignity of freedom follows only from its rooting in our special relation to God. Thomist moralists have always been proud

of the fact that moral evil does not consist essentially in disobeying the commandments of God, but rather in deliberately diverging from our final end and thus rejecting God's call to us to act as his image in freely exercising providence over our own journey toward our final end, union with God.

If we turn now to liberal democracy's attempt to ground the dignity of the human person, we discover first, that its central pillar is a purely secular notion of freedom, as the radical autonomy of the human will over its own choices and actions, intrinsic to human nature itself, without reference to any authority outside itself, higher or lower. Freedom is a self-grounding value. This is the fundamental affirmation of Immanuel Kant, whom Kraynak takes to be the key philosophical spokesman for the Enlightenment and the political philosophy of liberal democracy. The key to the dignity of every human person, for Kant, is that he is an end-in-himself, thus not an instrument for anyone else to use for his own ends. No reference to any further good or value, even divine, is apparently needed.

But such a notion of freedom by itself, without reference to any further good or value, is intrinsically ambiguous. For if autonomous freedom is cut off from any reference to truth and the good in the context of our God-given human nature, it can easily be radicalized, pushed all the way, to become the right to autonomous choice of the very meaning of our own human life itself, what constitutes authentic human happiness, what is the final end, if any, appropriate to our God-given nature. This in turn leads easily to a radical relativism about human values, then finally to a skepticism as to whether we can really know what objective human values and appropriate goals for human action really are at all.

Not a few thinkers in this tradition now draw the obvious conclusion that the moral attitude most congenial to the spirit of liberal democracy is a relativism, even skepticism, about anything like a God-given human nature or any ultimate human values or built-in final end to be pursued. But any society where the majority of its members come to think that way, will soon slip into moral chaos. But then liberal democracy itself will not be able to survive, having lost the shared unity needed to agree on enough common good for the society to be rationally self-

governing and not just a battle ground for conflicting special or individual interests.

In a word, human freedom is meaningful, intelligible, not in isolation, but only in the context of our human nature as freedom for value, freedom to pursue authentic human goods. In the last analysis, it means the power to freely govern ourselves in the journey toward our God-given final end and total fulfillment, union with God himself. Freedom is not a self-sufficient, self-explanatory value by itself. It is *freedom-for-the good*. It does not make sense, for example, to value an act of rape and murder simply because it is done freely. The present Pope has gone out of his way on numerous occasions to warn against the tendency in our modern culture to separate freedom from truth, from objective human goodness, thus leading a person or society that practices this into a self-centered, self-destructive relativism of all human values.

Thus freedom, as understood by liberal democracy and its principal philosophical spokesman, Immanuel Kant, is in the last analysis, unable to ground adequately its own actual existence and meaningfulness, and especially unable to ground authentic human dignity. This cannot be done without grounding human nature itself in its relation to a transcendent divine Source as both its origin and its final end. In all this I think Kraynak is right on target.

But he insists on going further to suggest that the enthusiasm of so many contemporary Christian thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain and Pope John Paul II, for democracy's proclamation of freedom, equality, and the dignity of man as the basis of human rights, with the implication that a democratic form of government is the one most compatible with a Christian vision of the human person (even a moral imperative under certain conditions, as Jacques Maritain holds), is actually drawing too heavily on the Kantian notion of freedom as the central pillar of human dignity, contrary to the authentic Christian tradition. Thus he believes that what these new Christian thinkers have in fact attempted is to construct a synthesis of Kant and St. Thomas. This he considers naive, somewhat like trying to arrange a happy marriage between two incompatible--or at best uncomfortable--bedfellows. The children will not be healthy.

What I have tried to show is that freedom has in fact been one of the central pillars grounding human dignity in the Christian tradition itself, clearly enough expressed in St. Thomas

himself, and that we do not need recourse to Kant or any others in the secular Enlightenment tradition of liberal democracy to bolster this up, nor is it wise to do so.

I still willingly concede to Kraynak that he is justified in warning us that it is unwise for Christians to tie themselves too closely to any particular form of government as the only one compatible with, or appropriate to the expression of the Christian vision of the human person and its dignity before God and man. It can adjust itself practically to many different forms, though not to all. But it still transcends them all.

However, I still think that with all we know now from history, and deeper understanding of the authentic roots of human dignity under God, we can make a good case that the form of government that is most congenial to the expression of the Christian vision must be one that allows some significant measure of active participation of the human person in his government, to fulfill the call of God to act as his image in maturely and freely exercising providence over his own journey toward his final, God-given end.

Notes

1. See his *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 93, art. 7-8.
2. See the whole first 63 chapters of the *Summa Contra Gentes*, Book II.
3. *Summa Theologiae*, Prologue to The First Part of the Second Part.