

## **Making the Christian Case for Democracy: A Response to Kraynak's Criticism**

Jeanne Heffernan  
Pepperdine University

*Robert Kraynak has identified profound tensions in the Christian-democratic synthesis that has been taken for granted for the past century. The best way to address what he identifies as problems associated with democracy, human rights, autonomy, and the like, is not to abandon their usage but to clarify their deepest meaning. To do so requires a work of education involving nothing less than a full-scale renovation of our public philosophy. A Christian democratic theory, informed by such thinkers as Yves Simon and Pope John Paul II, would provide the framework for such a renovation.*

Robert Kraynak's *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* marks a genuine contribution to contemporary political theory. Its merit stems from the author's commendable (and truly philosophic) intention to transcend common opinion and penetrate the essential relationship between religion and politics. To this end, Kraynak returns to fundamental questions about human nature and destiny, political order, and the relationship between eternal and temporal life. Christian political scientists, in particular, are indebted to him, for he has written a thoughtful and learned book that at once stimulates and challenges us, and his provocative thesis requires careful consideration.

Central to Kraynak's thesis is the contention that the Christian-democratic synthesis, taken for granted for the last century, in fact contains profound tensions. Modern liberal democracy, the author argues, rests upon a flawed anthropology and political vision—evident in its expansive schema of private rights—that runs contrary to the basic assumptions of a Christian worldview. To the degree that believers uncritically embrace the democratic project, he warns, they risk compromising the most distinctive Christian claims.

### **The Two Cities**

Politically the most important of these claims lies in “the Two Cities doctrine” which, Kraynak contends, “should be the guiding star for Christian reflection on the world.”<sup>1</sup> By this he

means that Christians need to recognize the fundamental distinction and distance between the spiritual and temporal realms. Though both are instituted by and accountable to God, they concern different ends, entail different means, and require different modes of activity; so different are these Two Cities that one cannot derive an imperative for a specific form of government from the tenets of Christian faith.

Professor Kraynak consciously appeals to Augustine for this guiding image. Yet, there is reason to think that he has misconstrued Augustine's metaphor. (One suspects, in fact, that when Kraynak appeals to the "tensions of dual citizenship" (Kraynak, 273) he is effectively employing Luther's notion of the Two Kingdoms, which differs importantly from Augustine's Two Cities.) Kraynak's interpretation notwithstanding, Augustine's metaphor does not denote a distinction between the spiritual and temporal realm or the worlds of religion and politics, let alone the church and the state. He is not referring to different spheres of authority or institutions; rather, he is referring to different allegiances, or as Gerhart Niemeyer put it, existential orientations. For instance, as the term arises in *The City of God* Book XIV, it pertains to Augustine's discussion of original sin, not, it is worth noting, to his discussion of politics. He is attempting to identify the most basic division among men in a fallen world. This difference is not one of culture or language or even morality; it is between basic allegiances. Borrowing the Pauline metaphor, Augustine describes human society as divided into Two Cities: "There is, in fact, one city of men who choose to live by the standard of the flesh, another of those who choose to live by the standard of the spirit."<sup>2</sup> "In one city," Augustine continues, "love of God has been given first place, in the other, love of self" (Augustine, 14.573). These cities grow up together. They are not institutionally distinct, the one having to do with spiritual things, the other having to do with temporal things; nor are the citizens of these cities distinguished by their roles: godly men assume positions of political authority, wicked men attain great stature in the church. To suggest as Kraynak does that the Two Cities refer to spiritual and temporal affairs, respectively, obscures these facts, as well as Augustine's conviction that both cities are eternal.<sup>3</sup> The City of Man, no less than the City of God, will last forever. Thus, it is not their duration that distinguishes them,

the one being temporal, the other eternal, but rather the character of their life together on earth, as well as after death. In short, contrary to Kraynak, the basic difference between the Two Cities is not the *matter* with which they are concerned, but the way in which their basic loyalties--whether to God or to self--inform their activities.

Consider the vastly different ways in which citizens of each city relate to power. As Augustine describes, in the earthly city “the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by their obedience”(Augustine *City of God* 14.593). Thus, the heavenly citizen exercises any kind of power, whether ecclesial or political or familial, in a way befitting his allegiance to the Lord. Moreover, any given polis, can by the ends it pursues reflect the allegiance of either allegorical city. In short, Augustine’s point is not what Professor Kraynak seems to think it is, namely, that there are two cities, two realms, the spiritual and the temporal, each of which has distinct ends that should not be confused. Rather, it is that there are in the end only two fundamental loyalties, to God or to self, which shape the way in which one relates to every institution and every kind of power.

This is a significant point, given the central importance of the Two Cities metaphor in Kraynak’s argument. If one uses the metaphor as Kraynak does, then it is easy to see how the rhetorical force of Augustine’s criticism of the earthly city will affect one’s evaluation of temporal matters. It will likely prompt one to exaggerate the difference between those things that are properly spiritual and those that are properly temporal. Arguably, Professor Kraynak does just this. He contends, for instance, that “[t]he ends or goods of the temporal realm are lower than those of the spiritual realm because they do not directly concern eternal salvation or the order of charity, holiness, and grace. The temporal realm deals with worldly things, such as politics, economics, social status, and war”(Kraynak, 228). This distinction between worldly and spiritual things is overdrawn. It fails to account for the way in which the spiritual and temporal realms dynamically penetrate each other. To take an example from Kraynak’s catalogue, war-making bears intimately upon the state of the soul, and hence upon salvation, for

it rests upon the distinction between legitimate killing and murder, which the Church considers a mortal sin. Likewise, we learn from the prophets that God cares deeply about the establishment of a just social and economic order. To relegate these things to the “lower” category of temporal concerns obscures their spiritual significance and risks violating the integrated character of human life that is at the heart of a biblical anthropology.

Furthermore, if one interprets Augustine’s metaphor of the Two Cities as referring to two distinct spheres of authority, then again, one will be tempted to subtly apply Augustine’s searing criticism of the earthly city--whose idolatrous allegiance is to the self--to the political order *per se*. This can’t help but color the way one views politics, for Augustine thinks that the two cities are in fundamental conflict, involve mutually exclusive loyalties, and will never be reconciled. Why would a Christian concern himself with the affairs of state, if the political realm is synonymous with Augustine’s earthly city?

### **Defending Democracy**

A second difficulty with Professor Kraynak’s argument is the way in which he sets up the basic problem. He asks whether there is an essential harmony or convergence between Christianity and modern liberal democracy. And then he sets about to see whether the Scriptures or Church tradition or its greatest theologians have anything to say about it. This way of setting up the problem is prejudicial. To ask whether Augustine or Aquinas would condone “liberal” democracy is to stack the deck, since, by Kraynak’s own definition, liberal democracy entails metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) assumptions these religious men would reject. To ask whether Christianity is compatible with liberal democracy is akin to asking whether Christianity is compatible with freedom as defined by the infamous “mystery passage” in the *Casey* decision. Of course, the answer would be “No,” but that does not mean that Christianity is incompatible with freedom--understood in a different way.

Instead, it would have been more profitable to have asked whether Christianity is compatible with democracy in its various forms, for there have been different philosophical

foundations behind the many instantiations of the regime, and these foundations have given rise to very different practices. Surely, the philosophical inspiration and activities of the French Republic under the Jacobins differs in kind from the democracy practiced by pious Christians in the New England townships. Recall that Tocqueville described the latter as embracing the spirit of liberty as well as the spirit of religion. These good people, he observed, perceived a basic difference between the fields of religion and politics. In the former, “everything is classified, systematized, foreseen, and decided beforehand,” whereas in the latter “everything is agitated, disputed, and uncertain. In the one is a passive though a voluntary obedience; in the other, an independence scornful of experience, and jealous of all authority. These two tendencies, apparently so discrepant, are far from conflicting; they advance together and support each other.”<sup>4</sup> This example of the well-catechized Christian who is also a well-educated citizen suggests that democratic institutions when animated by a non-liberal anthropology are not in fundamental tension with the Christian faith.

Profound Christian thinkers have made more robust arguments in this vein, and readers of Kraynak’s book would do well to consider them. One finds a strong case for democratic government in the political theory of Yves R. Simon, for instance. A Thomist, Simon grounds his claims in a Christian anthropology, consciously avoiding the pitfalls of liberalism. After appealing to Aquinas, Cajetan, Bellarmine, and Suarez for the foundation of his pro-democracy argument, Simon adds his own reflections. Representative democracy, he says, most effectively actualizes the *political* nature of a regime, since the governed have the institutional means of resistance to bad government readily at their disposal.<sup>5</sup> These democratic means should be available to all; popular sovereignty and representative government imply a natural tendency toward universal suffrage. As Simon explains, “That the multitude in charge of selecting the governing personnel should comprise all citizens follows from the nature of political society. Other societies are built on the basis of exclusive membership; not so the state, which is, by essence, the concern of all.”<sup>6</sup> Universal suffrage affords the common man (who has little but strength of numbers on his side) an indispensable form of power to counterbalance the many

advantages possessed by elites. But the people ought to retain this power not only as a guard against tyranny; they ought to remain actively engaged in political decision-making at various levels of government in accord with the principle of autonomy because this fosters human flourishing.

It is important to note that autonomy for Simon is not the “permissive freedom”(Kraynak, 244) rightly criticized by Kraynak. It is not the sovereign will exercising indeterminate choice in defiance of authority. Rather, it is the state of fullest freedom whereby the moral law has been interiorized and definitively guides human decision-making. For Simon, the glory of the autonomous individual is precisely his ability to reflectively evaluate in freedom a whole range of means to achieve his proper end. But this evaluation is not carried on in isolation. For Simon the quest for autonomy is pursued in community, and the moral law with which autonomy accords concerns not the isolated individual, but the person in community. Thus, autonomy is essentially related to the common welfare. To achieve the common welfare, Simon observes, requires political authority. Contrary to the assumptions and instincts of liberalism, political authority and personal autonomy do not in principle conflict but rather complement one another.<sup>7</sup> Each is necessary for a healthy polis. Some organ of the community must choose the means to the common good. This is the charge of political authority. But the exercise of this authority must respect the principle of autonomy or subsidiarity: when a task or decision can be satisfactorily achieved by the individual or small social units, it should be, so that the capacities of intellect and will in such persons or groups be developed most fully.<sup>8</sup> And a democratic form of government, in Simon’s estimation, uniquely facilitates this human development on the widest scale. Professor Kraynak pays insufficient attention to this intrinsic merit of democracy, even as he recognizes that “[s]ome version of democracy is the only practical option in the present age for the ordering of temporal affairs”(Kraynak, 244).

### **Making Democracy Better**

While Robert Kraynak and I estimate the strengths and deficiencies of democracy

differently, we would both agree that contemporary American democracy needs ennobling. How to do this is the question. I would propose that the remedy for the defects of democratic equality--especially its selfish individualism—is more, not less, democracy. As Tocqueville observed, the most effective means of combating individualism is free political institutions. He meant by this, of course, actual governance, not the biennial ballot. Tocqueville noted that Americans governed themselves at the grassroots initially out of practical necessity, not great public spirit; they had the burden of self-government. But once they participated, they developed a taste for it. They were slowly but recognizably brought out of their narrow circle of concern into the public sphere whereupon they perceived their interdependence and their membership in the body politic. In short, they became citizens. As Tocqueville describes, The native of New England is attached to his township because it is independent and

free: his cooperation in its affairs ensures his attachment to its interests; the well-being it affords him secures his affection; and its welfare is the aim of his ambition and of his future exertions. He takes part in every occurrence in the place; he practices the art of government in the small sphere within his reach; he accustoms himself to those forms without which liberty can only advance by revolutions; he imbibes their spirit; he acquires a taste for order, comprehends the balance of powers, and collects clear practical notions on the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights. (Tocqueville, Vol. 1, Ch. 5, 68).

To recapture this civic-mindedness, this attention to duties, and this clear sighted, not wild-eyed, view of rights, will require significant changes in American politics. If it's true, as Tocqueville claimed, that individualism is most effectively combated by free institutions of local government, then we will surely need a revitalization of American federalism. How to do this practically has been a topic of lively discussion in recent years, and it merits sustained reflection. In this vein, I am reluctant to strengthen political hierarchies, as Dr. Kraynak suggests, since I find the main source of the problem to be an uncultivated democratic citizenship, not an abuse of popular political power. It is worth noting in this connection that the most morally corrosive

political decision of the current age, *Roe v. Wade*, was not the product of majority will but the fiat of the least democratic organ of our government.

In closing, I submit that the best way to address what Robert Kraynak identifies as problems associated with democracy, human rights, autonomy, and the like, is not to abandon their usage but to clarify their deepest meaning. This is a work of education involving nothing less than a full-scale renovation of our public philosophy. A Christian democratic theory, informed by such thinkers as Yves Simon and Pope John Paul II, would provide the framework for such a renovation. What holds in the polis in this regard, holds also in the church. If a concept like the “People of God,” of which Kraynak is critical, were genuinely understood, it would not “diminish the mystical or divine foundations of the Church and [elevate] popular will and public opinion”(Kraynak, 177). Rather, as the Second Vatican Council intended, it would highlight the “universal call to holiness” incumbent upon every member of the Church, not just clergy and religious, by virtue of their baptismal identity. In short, good catechesis and good civic education are indispensable in creating genuinely Christian citizens. On this point, I’m sure Dr. Kraynak and I would agree.<sup>9</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 254. Subsequent references to this work will be noted in the text with the following abbreviation: Kraynak.
2. Augustine, *City of God* (NY: Penguin Classics edition, 1984), 14.547. Subsequent references to this work will be noted in the text with the following abbreviation: Augustine.
3. I am indebted to Professor Fred Crosson of the University of Notre Dame for this insight.
4. Alexis deToqueville, *Democracy in America* (NY: Vintage Classics Edition, 1990), Vol. 1, Ch. 2, 44. Subsequent references to this work will be made parenthetically.
5. He borrows Aquinas' distinction between a "political" and a "despotic" regime. In contrast to despotic rule, political rule is exercised for the good of the governed, who perpetually retain a power greater than the governing personnel; any given official can be stripped of his power in the event of misrule, whereas the people can never ultimately be stripped of the power that belongs to them by nature.
6. Yves Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 87.
7. *Ibid.*, 71.
8. Yves Simon, *General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 57.
9. Support for this essay comes in part from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinion expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts .