

Paradox of Christianity in Contemporary Democracy: Presence and Vocation

The birth of Christianity is marked with a very specific attitude to morality of society and to the law of the state. From the very beginning, Christianity has had to position itself to the non-Christian state, society and way of life.

Today the Christian community faces a similar situation. Contemporary democracy seeks to develop to a universally valid non-religious state order and is not openly hostile to Christianity. It is nevertheless true that the Christian position is often not welcome in public discussions about moral and legal matters of a particular democratic society and its future.

Democracy has an inclination to place Christian life outside the public sphere: it is pushed into the private realm or can safely take the honourable role of a kind of cultural heritage that is interesting for tourists, cultural scientists and historians.

Today democracy tends to forget its Christian roots. Being in conflict with modern democracy and its latest accentuation on human rights and tolerance, Christianity in a paradoxical manner is a fundamental factor in democracy, which stabilises and preserves it from moral degeneration. For this paradoxical reason, Christians have to take responsibility for the future of democracy.

In this article I shall touch upon four subjects or questions: the relation between Christianity and state; Christianity and the morality of society; the trends of modern morality in democratic society and its compatibility (or incompatibility) with the Christian faith; and how it is (or is it) possible to be a Christian and a democrat.

I. Christianity and the Democratic State

One of the bases for discord between Christianity and contemporary democracy is the different attitude towards the state and the law of the state.

From the beginning Christianity took a very clear position towards the law of the Roman Empire, that is, the law of the state. This attitude was not confrontational, but nevertheless it was revolutionary.

Christians had to obey Roman law as a necessity. Jesus Christ clearly expressed his attitude towards the state when he was asked about the payment of taxes:

““Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a person of integrity and you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You are not swayed by people, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.”¹

The Roman state was far from a regime that corresponded with Christian values. Corruption and cruelty was not an uncommon practice in it. It had to be unacceptable to anybody who preached love for the neighbour and the Reign of God.

For a Christian, the real state is an aspect of the real word that has to be accepted with patience. Over the course of time, Christian theologians developed the idea of citizenship in the Reign of God that was superior to the citizenship of the “earthly state”. This draws a clear line between two orders and two kingdoms, that of human law and that of the “law of love”.

The idea of contemporary democracy erased the line and took the assumption that an ideal state order is attainable on Earth. The democratic state bases its actions and aims on the idea of progress.

The mover of progress is the image of the perfect condition of the state that can be reached by the will and choices of free citizens.

¹ Mt 22,16–22.

The ideals of the democratic state evolved from the Christian idea of the Reign of God. In the course of its evolution, though, it lost the transcendent level.

Immanuel KANT developed the idea of the state in progress. The aim of “perpetual peace” was closely connected with the implementation of universally valid rational morality in the life of society and the state. The moral person (and the moral politician above all) is the factor that makes a moral-civic society possible.

Thus true politics can never take a step without paying homage to morality. Though politics by itself is a difficult art, its union with morality is no art at all, for this union cuts the knot which politics could not untie when they were in conflict.

Human rights must be held sacred, however much sacrifice it may cost the ruling power. One cannot compromise here and seek the middle way of a pragmatic conditional law between the morally right and the expedient. All politics must bend its knee before the right. But by this it can hope slowly to reach the stage where it will shine with an immortal glory.²

For Immanuel KANT, Christianity as one of the world religions is only an intermediary in the process of the progress of state and society. Christianity is not universally apprehensible to every human being, because it is not “purified” from irrational beliefs and dogmas.

Immanuel KANT tried to make some improvements to Christianity and gave his own interpretation of matters of faith. He translated Jesus Christ as an exemplary moral figure. The “divinity” of Jesus Christ meant for him the perfectly realized moral duty. Jesus Christ therefore is an exemplar figure, whose life should be followed by every human being.

There is no doubt that the two versions of the perfect state – the secular-democratic and the Christian – sooner or later come into conflict. The laws of the democratic state are or have to be constantly improved in accordance with the common will.

Democratic citizens have to have great expectations toward the possible improvement of the state and its mechanisms. It is one of the duties of democratic morality to have such expectations and to be a democratic idealist, or an active creator of civil society.

The Christian has much more sober attitudes toward the law of the state and its mechanisms. The Christian may have irrational ideas, but she or he is not a democratic idealist. She or he believes

² KANT Immanuel, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (tr.: SMITH Mary Campbell). Appendix I. Chicago, 1955.



that the human being is the image (or reflection) of God, who is led by God in her or his misfortunes.

She or he firmly believes in the possibility of spiritual improvement of human life, and of creating human community based on love and forgiveness. The Christian is not very optimistic about any state.

That is why she or he will accept the failure of good state initiatives much more easily than the democratic idealist. The latter believes in constant progress and improvement, and she or he is not ready to accept the failures of good initiatives. The democrat has a great risk of losing faith in humankind and even in her or his ideals.

From the viewpoint of the requirements of democracy, the Christian is too distant from the problems and the future of the state. Today idealists of the democratic state may address to Christians the same question that was put to Jesus Christ by his provocateurs.

Christians may be accused of not being devoted enough to the state. Since democratic order is a product of common will, Christians and Christian communities could be perceived as alienated from it.

Mistrust toward Christians in the democratic state can take many different forms. First, Christianity may be accepted as a nice decorum for weddings and funerals. It is felt to be somehow important for personal life and the life of the society, but this importance is not reflected and takes grotesque or even dramatic forms.

The interior of the church may not satisfy one's demands as too modest, and the priest may not be very famous for her or his wedding ceremony. There are cases when people feel resentment, when priests refuse to serve at the funeral of a relative whom they cannot avouch for being a Christian. In a society of consumption there is a tendency to believe that the Christian Church is a kind of service sector that should be available to everyone who pays.

In Lithuania this was very obvious during the recent discussions on the national conception of family politics. The explicit position of the representatives of Christian churches in Lithuania and even of individual Christians was estimated by some members of Parliament as an anti-democratic wish to impose Christian values upon society.

Even the right of Christians to participate in public discussion on the topic was strongly opposed. This reaction, however, shows that the Christian position is very important for the functioning of a democratic state. It teaches the lessons of democracy and is the litmus test for the state of democracy in the state.

II. Christianity and Moral Law

Another ground for discord between Christianity and contemporary democracy is the attitude towards morality and the ultimate ends of human life.

From the beginning Christianity dissociated itself from the law of Judaism, that is, from the practical moral rules of the Jewish community. Love was declared as the supreme principle of Christian morality, which eliminated the absolute moral significance of the rituals of daily life. Thereby Christianity marked a revolutionary change in attitude towards practical morality. The new morality was based on faith and love, instead of being led by law and common rules.

The first Christian proponents envisaged specific dangers that could cause the Christian refusal of the laws of morality and implementation of the principle of freedom. The opposition and harmonization of spirit and flesh, soul and matter, is the fundamental problem of Christian morality.

In the winter of 56–57, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians, where among several topics he speaks about Christian freedom that surpasses the law and dangers of the “work of the flesh” (Galatians 5,13–15):

“For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.

“I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

Then he continues (Galatians 5,19–24):

“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like.

“I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Reign of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”

With its birth Christianity brought another specific moral question of the equilibrium of the moral laws of community and the freedom of a person to make choices in her or his life by her or his own will. It seems that the most positive outcome of the situation is a fragile “golden” equilibrium between moral rules of society and individual freedom.

In the course of time the conflict between common will and freedom varied, although persisted. In the XIXth century the philosopher Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855) in his *Fear and Trembling* reflected on the meaning of faith.

He comments on and interprets the biblical story of Abraham, who was ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac, because that was the will of God. KIERKEGAARD presents the situation of Abraham as absolutely unintelligible and incomprehensible for others:

“On the other hand, whenever I attempt to think about Abraham, I am, as it were, overwhelmed. At every moment I am aware of the enormous paradox, which forms the content of Abraham’s life, at every moment I am repulsed, and my thought, notwithstanding its passionate attempts, cannot penetrate into it, cannot forge on the breadth of a hair. I strain every muscle in order to envisage the problem; and become a paralytic in the same moment.”

The act of faith comes from heart and can be understood only by heart. It is a paradox for the intellect that is not able to comprehend and justify the requirements of faith:

“He believed this on the strength of the absurd; for there was no question of human calculation any longer. And the absurdity consisted in God, Who yet made this demand of him, recalling His demand the very next moment.

“Abraham ascended the mountain and whilst the knife already gleamed in his hand he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him. He was, to be sure, surprised at the outcome; but by a double movement he had returned at his first state of mind and therefore received Isaac back more gladly than the first time.”³

That is why Abraham was unable to explain his intended deed to his wife Sarah and to the others. The movement of faith and the life of faith were for KIERKEGAARD essentially incommunicable to others. For that reason Abraham was a “knight of infinite resignation”.

KIERKEGAARD interprets Abraham’s story from the perspective of Christianity. And what is more, he looks at it from the perspective of

the modern situation of Christianity. By “modern situation” we mean here the contemporary questions and problems that Christianity has to deal with.

First of all the relation between the Christian, the Christian community and the modern society is problematic. The community that KIERKEGAARD has in focus is in no way a non-Christian community or a community without faith.

It is a community that takes the will of God (and supposedly Christianity itself) as law, but not as an impulse to the movement of faith or the mandate to love. On the other hand, KIERKEGAARD identifies the act (or the movement) of faith as *absurd*. This attitude is also very modern.

KIERKEGAARD puts himself in opposition to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL’s (1770–1831) philosophy, which interprets the world of material and spiritual processes by the laws of reason and logic.

He shows that reason has its limits and is unable to clarify the reality of faith. In the contemporary world, where intellectual transparency of human life and human choices are raised above all other things, it is still relevant to formulate the question in this way.

KIERKEGAARD’s reflection on the situation of Abraham indicates two basic problems which face a Christian of the contemporary world. On the one hand, the relation between the Christian and a society that can be Christian is also very problematic.

This problem is even sharper in secularized society, whose morality can confront the Christian outlook as dangerous or discriminatory. On the other hand, Christianity is not able to justify the legitimacy of its way of life by means that could be universally accepted, that is to say, by rational means.

The contemporary democratic state forged a special democratic society and person. The latter is suspicious in regard to any kind of irrationality. It is not eager to accept any community-wide morality that surpasses the principle of tolerance and respect for human rights.

The different understanding of the origin of morality and the relation between the person and society is the first source of possible conflict between Christianity and contemporary democracy.

³ KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr.: HOLLANDER L. M.). In <http://www.ccel.org/k/kierkegaard/selections/trembling.htm>

III. Trends of Democratic Morality

The ideas that presently are understood as “democratic” emerged in the epoch of the Enlightenment. The most important of these is the idea of an autonomous individual. It is based on trust in the good of the rational and individualist part of the human being.

The purpose of the *individuum* of the liberal democratic society is to emancipate from any influence of others the habits and traditions of society that are not identified as rational or pragmatically valid. The price for this personal emancipation is weakness in social ties.

Democracy is a state order that claims to defend a specific kind of morality. It calls into question any kind of social morality and the right of society to put moral rules upon the autonomous individual. Liberal democracy takes morality as a matter of personal choice and engagement. The individual is free to choose her or his way of life and to take responsibility for the consequences.

This kind of morality echoes the basic Christian idea that faith is a matter of the free choice of a person. At the same time it neglects another basic Christian idea, that is, the importance of community for the spiritual and social development of the human being and the necessity of a kind of sacrifice for the sake of others.

Thus liberal democracy rejects morality as common law, but it hardly accepts any other basis for close solidarity. The lack of any commonly accepted limits for self-realization and self-determination is one of predictable consequences.

Suicide, euthanasia and any practices of physical, psychical and spiritual self-destruction can be claimed as the right of the person to moral self-determination. This right by no means could be injured by any common views and practices of the society.

Another consequence is even more dramatic for the integrity of the person. It is the categorical credit to the rationality of the members of democratic society. This could lead to a situation where contemporary democracy morally allows and justifies the segregation of a person who is not appreciated as rational and is not able to take full responsibility for her or his choices.

The development of the morality of democracy leads to the protection of actions that can be interpreted as the matter of “free choice” of the individual: abortion and euthanasia. Moreover, this morality provides a basis for excluding that part of society that does not satisfy the democratic standard.

Contemporary ethical thinker Peter Albert David SINGER (1946–)

suggests it is impossible to defend the claim that there is a special value in the life of a human being. He merely admits that there is a special value in a life of a “person” as a human being that has a special moral value.

“A self-conscious being is aware of itself as a distinct entity with a past and a future. (This, remember, is John LOCKE’s [1632–1704] criterion for being a person.) A being aware of itself in this way will be capable of having desires about its own future.

“For example, a professor of philosophy may hope to write a book demonstrating the objective nature of ethics; a student may look forward to graduating; a child may want to go for a ride in an aeroplane.

“To take the lives of any of these people, without their consent, is to thwart their desires for the future. Killing a snail or a day-old infant does not thwart any desires of this kind, because snails and newborn infants are incapable of having such desires.”⁴

Newborn infants do not meet this definition of *person*, nor do comatose, senile people, individuals struck by depression, and those unconscious or having no aspirations for the future, sick with dementia or other diseases that makes human beings unaware of themselves.

Fortunately, Peter Albert David SINGER’s practical ethics is not yet taken as a basis for common practice in democracy. It shows, however, the possible development of moral argumentation in democratic society. It is apparent that this morality is incompatible with Christian morality, which declares the absolute value of the life of a human being.

There is no doubt that the presence of Christianity in the life of contemporary democracy hinders the ultimate development of this kind of morality. Christian community is in constant open or invisible conflict with democracy’s radical tendencies and therefore affects its moral balance.

IV. How is it Possible to be a Christian and a Democrat?

The presence of Christianity in democracy is morally and legally paradoxical. On the one hand, democracy declares values that go beyond the Christian standpoint and even confront the Christian way of life. On the other hand, Christianity presents an existential basis for the life of a democratic citizen.

⁴ SINGER Peter Albert David, *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge, 1979. 90.

Contemporary democracy is based on common will, but it does not give to a citizen any existential motive to be a social being and to act socially in situations that are not justified pragmatically as a means to improve or maintain society as a whole.

There is no surprise that Immanuel KANT speaks about the possibility that even devils could establish a republic. It is enough in the state that the society of devils practices rational pragmatism.

The angelic love for others is an excess good for the functioning of modern democracy. Immanuel KANT and other thinkers of the modern state, however, overlooked the fact that a citizen needs more deep motivations for his action than the need of creation or welfare of the state.

Democracy steps well beyond human nature, because it is not willing to recognise the natural limits of human capacities. It pushes citizens to accept tasks that can cause them a personal crisis.

A democratic citizen is stimulated to give prominence to things that are not in her or his power. That is, she or he has to accept the possibility and even the necessity of materialising the idea of moral state order.

The power of individual to do that is limited, because the decisions about the commonwealth are taken by the common will. The idealist democrat, as already mentioned, should be constantly depressed confronting the limits of her or his individual power to influence and improve the functioning of a particular democratic state.

Today in Lithuania people are extremely disappointed with the state institutions, especially with the parliament and the government. This leads to disappointment with the democratic state as such.

Some social scientists even speak about reasons of numerous emigrations not only as material, but also as “psychological” ones. It is true that people have very great expectations towards the possibility to improve the state order, and they are not eager to accept the necessary imperfections and even cases of failure in the state.

By contrast, Christianity gives existential support to live in an imperfect democracy. The Christian will never be an “ideal democrat”, who expects the inevitable realisation of the ultimate end of democracy.

A Christian, however, can be a “democratic realist”, who will do her or his best for the goodness of the democratic state as one of the political and legal forms of society. The Christian position in regard to democracy can serve as a model for all citizens. The presence of the Christian community can keep democratic society from frustration and despair.

Furthermore, Christians should take responsibility to prevent the possible legal and moral degradation of democracy. The possibility of developing a totalitarian regime out of the democratic order is very real and tempting for the democratic elite.

The demand on the totalitarian order can arise from disappointment with the actions of the majority of fellow citizens and their ability to make rational decisions. One can be fascinated by an illusion that the absolute rule of a few could allow implementation of good ideas without long discussions and without any missteps.

Totalitarianism is more unacceptable to the Christian position than democracy, because it subjugates citizens for the sake of the realisation of the idea of a perfect democratic state. It is alien to Christianity, which accentuates the freedom of the person from the absolutism of the laws of society.

Still more, democracy is the balance of opinions and values of its citizens. Christians may not be satisfied that their moral position is not always adopted, but democracy by its definition cannot exclude any positions from its public sphere.

The principle of tolerance for all religions and moral positions makes impossible a situation where Christians are persecuted and even killed for their faith and way of life. The democratic principles of tolerance and human rights may go to extremes, but Christians have to struggle for them for the sake of Christianity. Christians have to take responsibility for the well-being of ‘democratic’ democracy.

Christians should not be so naïve to think that democracy is an everlasting order that does not need vindicators. Democracy is a fragile balance of powers that can at any time develop into an order of strong power. For Christians in the Eastern part of Europe this possibility is very real, not only in theory but also as a historic experience.