

A Vision of Desired Society: Political Dimensions¹

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I am very grateful to FTL and Ruth Padilla for their kind invitation to share with you all today. The sessions yesterday and today have been very interesting and thought provoking.

This presentation is arranged in three parts. Part I briefly examines the biblical and theological foundations of my vision of a desired society from a political perspective. Part II presents the reasons why I believe representative democracy is an appropriate system of government for a desired society. Part III describes an empirical problem that Christian churches are currently experiencing in Latin America. While my expertise as a comparative political scientist is limited to the Latin American region, I honestly believe that this is a problem that can affect Christians in any region, particularly in many countries of the two thirds world, where democracy remains fragile. The last part of the essay explores the insights that democratic theory provides to address this particular challenge.

Part I: Biblical and Theological Foundations

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When FTL had asked to reflect on the question: What is your vision of a desired political system for Latin American societies? My first response was to affirm that it is a political system that reflects the values of God's kingdom. I am convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has much to contribute to every single sphere of human life, such as the arts, sports, business and the economy, in our relationship with the rest of creation, and of course in the political arena.

While we await the second coming of our Savior to establish a perfect government, my vision of a desired political system for Latin America is one of democratic consolidation. My goal as an educator and as a human rights lawyer is that individuals develop their own political convictions in an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance; and remain motivated to keep an open dialog between God's eternal revelation and the realities of their communities, acting as full citizens in their respective societies. Let me just highlight a few fundamental concepts from the Bible that I find particularly relevant for our discussion of a desired political system.

The biblical notion of humans as fallen beings (Gen. 3) who are deeply loved by God and for whom He has provided everything they need to be redeemed through the sacrifice of His Son (John 3:16) is a core foundation for us as we engage in the analysis of social and political issues. God has given all human beings a moral character and talents that reflect His image (Gen. 1:26-27) although this is done in very imperfect ways due to the presence of sin in our lives.

On the one hand, the fact that all humans have being created in the image of God provides a solid foundation for the affirmation of human dignity and the defense of human rights without distinction based on ethnicity, sex, political convictions, or social

or economic status (Galatians 3:28). The biblical explanation of the reality and effects of sin in the human heart, on the other hand, warns about the dangers of power, which according to His revelation is not only delegated by God to humans (Romans 13), but also limited. Therefore, those who hold political power are accountable to God in the exercise of such power (Psalm 2:10-11) and are called to use their power to promote peace and justice, which includes religious freedom, in order for society to experience *shalom* (Is. 32:16-17; 1 Tim. 2:1-3).

This theological interpretation illuminates political science approaches in the study of peace, conflict resolution, and the pursuit of restorative justice (Luke 19:2-10) and development, from a distinct Christian perspective that understands government and non-government institutions and the public arena as areas where the values of God's Kingdom are not only applicable but also essential in efforts to build just and peaceful communities (Galatians 5:13-14).

Part II: Representative Democracy as a Desired Political System

Despite all the criticisms that have been articulated against democracy as a form of government,³ and acknowledging that some of them are justified and deserve careful consideration,⁴ representative democracy—with its many limitations—is the system of government that in my opinion has more potential to better reflect the values of God's kingdom.

There are several reasons why I believe this assessment is correct. First of all, no other political system embraces the need to establish clear limits to political power. By

³ See for example Baradat (2009) and Kirk (1964).

⁴ For an excellent argumentation in defense of democracy as a system of government see Dahl (1989).

establishing several branches of government and limited terms of service for the most powerful actors, representative democracy is a model that opposes the concentration of political power in few hands. Secondly, by establishing free and fair elections as the way to determine who will be the next group in power and determining before hand the line of succession in power, representative democracy decreases the likelihood of violent outbreaks in the transfer of power. Third, the principle of political accountability, both vertical (through electoral mechanisms), as well as horizontal mechanisms (O'Donnell 1999; Schedler 1999) also known as mechanisms of intrastate accountability (Mainwaring 2003) through the oversight of the exercise of power performed by other agencies of government,⁵ recognizes that political power is not absolute and affirms the dignity of the people who are citizens and not mere subjects.

Finally, the respect of the fundamental freedoms of individuals and the respect for the rule of law in a way that not even those in government are above the law are at the core of the representative democratic system of government.

Part III: The Challenge of Christian Political Participation in Latin America

With the exception of Uruguay, Costa Rica and Chile, democracy is still very fragile in Latin America. To different degrees, democratic government in the region tends to be identified only with electoral mechanisms that take place every four, five, or six years to determine who will be in power for the next presidential or congressional term. The current political crisis in Honduras is a very good illustration of the fragility of the democratic system and the dissatisfaction with the delegative nature of democracy

⁵ See "Conceptualizing Accountability" in Schedler 1999: 13-28.

that prevails in the region (O'Donnell 1994).⁶ The notorious authoritarian tendencies of several national leaders make us wonder whether democracy is still practiced in their countries, while corruption and impunity still characterize the exercise of politics in Latin America. It is precisely in this context of democratic fragility that Christians in Latin America are waking up to the opportunities and temptations of the political world.

In Latin America, the population identified as “Evangelical” has gone from being a rather small and relegated minority a few decades ago, to becoming a significant percentage of the population in several countries.⁷ In some cases, the growth in the number of Christians has opened room for certain Christian leaders to exercise some presence in some circles of influence in their countries. This numeric growth and the position of prominence that some pastors have gained in their societies have motivated several Christian leaders in the region to become presidential or congressional candidates. These leaders, many of whom are motivated by the best intentions, enjoy the encouragement of enthusiastic church members but tend to lack consistent political platforms and government plans, as well as the support and accountability that well established political parties are expected to provide. While these efforts have not led in most cases to a coherent articulation in word and praxis of the values of God’s kingdom in a way that can contribute to building up societies that are more just and merciful; in

⁶ According to O'Donnell (1994) *delegative democracies* are grounded on the plebiscitary assumption that whoever wins an election has the right to govern the nation as he or she sees fit, with very few limitations to his or her power and will.

⁷ In Guatemala, for example, the most conservative estimates consider that evangelicals represent close to 30 percent of the population, with Christian sources reporting more than 50 percent (Mesoamerica, Vol. 26, No. 6, June 2007). Even when current statistics are not available for El Salvador, a recent article in the Christian Science Monitor reported that “Evangelicals [were] key to El Salvador elections.” (Sara Miller, March 13, 2009). Evangelicals in Peru are considered to be between 12 and 18 per cent of the population (Agencia Latinoamericana de Noticias - ALC), while in Argentina it is estimated that they are close to 12 percent, and in Colombia over 15 per cent (US Department of State 2008).

many occasions they have caused the manipulation of congregations, using the church as a substitute for a political party, with slogans from both pulpits and electoral machineries that demand church members to vote for a particular candidate “because he is a man of God,” or “because as a Christian you must vote for a Christian candidate,”⁸ etc., independently of the specific political convictions of the candidates or the voters.

On the other hand, there are several Latin American Christian groups that remain convinced that political participation or activism in the public arena is sinful and only reflects a person’s or a group’s “worldly priorities.”

The political involvement of Christians in Latin America and elsewhere needs to be grounded in a clear understanding of both our personal and social responsibilities according to God’s revelation, and of the realities of the political world, in order to go beyond the prevalent opportunism, pragmatism, and the affirmation of the “rights of evangelicals” in Latin America, as the organizers of this Consultation have noted. There is a great need for more serious theological reflection based on Scripture about the administration of political power and the role of local churches and Christian individuals in the public arena.

In addition to the opposing attitudes concerning political participation I described above, it should also be noted that the leadership models that prevail in many Latin American churches have very little to contribute to the transformation of political leadership in the region—something desperately needed—and in the participation of Christian as full citizens in their respective societies. Far from reflecting the characteristics of the Servant King (Mark 10:35-45), power battles, vertical hierarchies,

⁸ These slogans have been common in evangelical circles during recent electoral campaigns for the presidency and Congress in Ecuador, Guatemala and Peru.

rigid patriarchalism, and blatant expressions of authoritarianism are more honest descriptions of the politics that prevail inside many churches. If Christian churches are going to contribute to the mission of reconciliation God has entrusted His children (2 Co. 5:16-21) applying this call to the public arena in Latin America, Christian leaders need to examine critically and with a repentant heart the way in which believers should exercise their 'dual citizenship,' that is, as citizens of God's kingdom (Phil. 3:20) and as citizens of their respective countries (Acts 22:27-28).

Part IV: Contributions of Democratic Theory to These Challenges in Latin America

The discipline of Political Science and democratic theory in particular provide important concepts and tools that can be useful in the analysis and the praxis of full citizenship among Christians.

Among the various factors that play an important role in the strengthening of democracy and the defense of human rights, the role played by civil society is extremely important. In fact many political scientists measure the level of democratic development of a nation based on the degree of organization of its civil society.

Confronted with the insufficiencies and frustrations of the democratic process in Latin America, many Christian leaders assume that their responsibility is to become candidates in order to take control of government through elections. Very few of them, however, have done much to contribute to the consolidation of democracy through civil society, and basically ignore the important role that Christians can play as citizens.

What do we mean when we refer to *civil society*? I will not discuss here the historical evolution of this term –not because it is not interesting (I actually find it fascinating!) but because of our limited time—and will directly focus on what *civil society* means today in contemporary political science.

A democratic system of government clearly involves more than the government apparatus. The logic of the democratic system is that there are different groups in society from which competing opinions, organized political activity, and candidates for office emerge (Keane 1988). In other words, “democracy presupposes a certain kind of civil society” (Grigsby 2009: 169), that is, a domain of public life that is neither part of the government nor part of the economy. Civil society is the domain where civil associations, interest groups, academic and faith institutions, and individuals in general interact in ways that are relevant for the political dynamics of the country.⁹ The role that civil society organizations play concerning strengthening democracy was very clear, for example, in the 1990s during the Third Wave of Democratization.¹⁰ In particular, the Catholic Church and the Union movement in Poland; human rights groups in Hungary; and the dissident group Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia, were important vehicles for citizens to challenge authoritarian government structures and demand political reform.

As we can see, the concept of civil society is associated with places or forums where citizens can explore, debate and participate directly in the analysis of public policies. These are associations of individuals that motivated by their citizen responsibilities, their research interests, and/or their faith; invest time, effort and

⁹ For a discussion on the interesting but difficult question of whether a democratic civil society is a cause or effect of democratic government, see Muller and Seligson 1994.

¹⁰ Huntington (1992) identified the period between 1970 and 1990 as the “Third Wave of Democracy” in a wide-ranging and influential study that presented his findings regarding the transition of 35 countries from authoritarian to democratic political systems.

resources in examining what the government is doing. The main functions of these associations—from a political perspective—is to articulate streams of public opinion and participation that allow for the voices of citizens to be heard by the government, and in doing this, these diverse organizations empower citizens to play a vigilant role concerning the use of political power and against its undue concentration in the hands of the few.

The presence of citizens that are organized according to their interests and capacities in institutions of civil society prevents that matters of public interest remain exclusively in the hands of a few powerful individuals. When citizens are adequately informed and organized, they can confront the abuse of power of leaders with authoritarian tendencies.

The perspective I present here is completely opposed to a position that considers that only politicians should know how to guide the people towards the common good. On the contrary, a strong civil society leaves no room for government paternalism, which in Latin American has proven to be detrimental for the enjoyment of human rights. A strong civil society provides opportunities for free deliberation about issues of public interest, allowing individuals to confront their ideas and behave as citizens, promoting the existence of independent voices vis à vis potential abuses of governmental power. This is when the government has no alternative but to be relatively more transparent in the decision-making process, facilitating in this way more accountability.

In order for individuals to act as full citizens it is necessary that they are encouraged to invest time and effort in getting reliable information about the particular policies they are interested in. It takes energy and resources to analyze and exchange

ideas and to identify other voices that they can ally with. But this is key, when different groups of citizens join their voices, they can be heard more clearly and more persuasively. This is when they can achieve an impact in the public arena.

A dynamic civil society is essential for the realization of political freedoms and where constructive criticism of the exercise of power takes place. It inspires civic commitment among the participants. Civil society is a domain that is built and even conquered step by step; it is not a gift from the government. A vigilant spirit of citizens who are organized according to their visions of common good is an indispensable condition to keep the government and the political parties in the democratic course. Christian leaders who aspire to contribute positively to public affairs in their respective countries should consider participating more actively in the strengthening of civil society in their communities, with clear positions on matters that are at the core of Christian orthodoxy, and with a spirit of pluralism on issues that are not.

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