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THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS: CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT FOR THE DEMOCRATISATION OF AFRICA

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s we have witnessed in Africa a new interest in democratisation and new openings for its implementation. These openings are one of the most significant consequences for Africa of the ending of the Cold War. During the Cold War the main interest of the great powers was not in democratisation but about which ideological block the African countries supported. The superpowers would support their allies in governments or in the opposition, be they democratic or not. Now the international community tends to use its influence more to support movements of democratisation, even if this support remains very partial and still depends on political and economic interests.

This new interest in democratisation has provoked fresh reflection in the churches. It concurs with the central evangelical interest in liberty, and it is a natural consequence of the participation of Christians as responsible citizens in the developments in their nations. At the same time, it has many characteristics of a new fad, partly provoked by forces outside Africa. On the one hand, there is the economic pressure of the "Structural Adjustment Programs" of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and, on the other hand, the support

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This article is a translation and revision of: Benno van den Toren "L'Engagement chrétien pour la démocratisation en Afrique", in: Nupanga Weanzana (ed.), *Le Chrétien et la Politique: Actes du Colloque Interdisciplinaire 06-10 janvier 2004* (Bangui: FATEB, 2004), pp. 9-35.

by the worldwide ecumenical movement for the process of democratisation and the strengthening of civil society in Africa.

Among the African theologians related to the All Africa Conference of Churches, there has been significant theological reflection on this process of democratisation (e.g. Mugambi, 1997; Magesa & Nthamburi, 1999; Njoya, 2003), but the theological reflection in African evangelical circles on this issue has been very limited. What is most lacking is reflection on this question: how can we arrive at a serious theological evaluation of the relationship between democratisation and our Christian calling? This question may be asked, but not always with sufficient rigour. Too often we have already determined our sympathy or antipathy to this new fad on other grounds, and our theological reflection limits itself to a search for the biblical passages that support the position that we have already taken up in advance. Serious theological reflection does not demand that we try to forget the contemporary world and our interests in it, but it does require that we make a conscious effort to read the Bible on its own terms and try to understand the inner logic of revelation. It is this revelation that should determine our approach to political reality, rather than letting our political interests determine our reading of Scripture.

In our search for the will of God for our political involvement, we here concentrate particularly on the theme of "Jesus and politics". We ask ourselves what are the implications of the work and message of Jesus Christ—the cornerstone of God's revelation—for our political involvement. "Political involvement" itself is still a very large concept, for the political responsibility of God's people has varied a lot from one situation to another. In biblical times this political responsibility was very different when God's people were a nomadic clan, as under the patriarchs, from when they were an independent kingdom. It was different again when the people of Israel lived as a minority under great empires, be it Babylonian, Persian, or Roman (Wright, 1995). In the same way the political responsibility of Christians is different when they constitute a minority under a dictatorial anti-Christian state, compared to a situation where they can be represented in the government. Of course, we cannot here address all of those possible situations, and resulting answers would not always even make sense for our present circumstances. In this article we will limit ourselves to the situation in which the majority of the churches in sub-Saharan Africa find themselves nowadays. The question we need to ask is the following: *What do the message and work of Jesus Christ imply for the involvement of Christians in the young democracies of our continent?*

In this article, we will first of all deal with the hermeneutical questions that surround the theme of Jesus and politics. This will help avoid hasty answers that

sidestep the real questions we need to address. The next section treats the central question: What is, in fact, the political significance of Jesus? These considerations form the basis of the last section, in which we ask what this implies for Christian involvement in Africa's emerging democracies.

1. Hermeneutical Problems

According to the Christian faith, it is Jesus Christ who most clearly reveals to us the goal and the will of God for our human existence. This revelation should therefore be our starting point for all of our refection on the Christian life. Yet, if we try to derive the political implications for our life from the example and meaning of the life of Jesus, we will soon encounter a number of difficulties that make a right interpretation of its political meaning difficult. There are at least three hermeneutical difficulties related to these questions that we need to consider.

The first difficulty is that the different declarations of Jesus concerning the involvement of his disciples in civil governance and in politics seem to contradict each other. The consequence has been that Christians historically have been able to appeal to words of Jesus in order to defend political attitudes that are in outright contradiction to each other.

On the one hand, we find declarations that seem to propose a complete separation between the affairs of the state and those of the Kingdom of God, declarations like "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36)[1] and "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mk 12:17). Those who defend this separation often also appeal to those texts that seem to entirely oppose the desire for this world and the desire for the Kingdom of Heaven: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:19f). Such texts form the basis of much of the resignation of evangelicals towards politics. For me, these texts are one of the reasons to be interested in the theme "Jesus and politics": how should we understand this message, when the rest of the Bible proclaims the lordship of God over all of life, spiritual as well as social?

This interest in the socio-political side of our existence is, however, not foreign to Jesus himself. The same person who said that we should not collect treasures on earth had a radical message concerning the socio-political realities of his time. In his coming to earth, God revealed Himself as the One of whom it is said: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the

[1] All Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless otherwise indicated.

humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." (Lk 1:52f). Jesus said that the prophet Isaiah was talking about him, when he said in strongly political terms: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Lk 4:18f; cf. Isa 61:1f). We should moreover not forget that a good deal of the language Jesus used to describe his mission had its background in the socio-political domain. We perceive this in expressions like "Kingdom of God", "Lord" and "Messiah". The spiritualization of those terms in the history of the church and the history of theology makes us forget too easily that this terminology has its primary meaning in the socio-political realm.

The second hermeneutical difficulty has to do with the relationship between the work and message of Jesus Christ and the remainder of biblical revelation. We perceive this problem when we compare the ideas of John Howard Yoder with those of Richard Mouw. Yoder (1994) takes his starting point in the message of Jesus Christ, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Jesus' example of accepting the cross rather than resisting it. On this basis Yoder opts for pacifism and non-violence. His book raises the question about the relationship between these options and the rest of the Bible, with all the wars fought in the name of the God of Israel, and the language concerning the legitimate use of force by a government which is called the servant of God (Ro 13:4). Mouw (1976) rather takes his starting point in the rest of Scripture and asks about the place of civil government according to the will of God for His creation and about the function of such government in the world after the fall. In doing so he gives little attention to Christ. Here the question should be asked what Christ has in fact to teach us as the supreme revelation of God's plan with us. The question to ask here has to do with the role of Christ. Is his role entirely unique and special, because of his coming to reconcile us with God (Mouw, 1976, 112ff) or is Christ rather the model for all Christian involvement after him (Yoder, 1994, 105ff).

The third hermeneutical difficulty originates from the socio-political context of the life of Jesus Christ. Political life in the time of Jesus was radically different from the current situation, in which many Christians live in democratic states where their contribution to politics is not only permitted, but even solicited. How can the example of Jesus help us when he lived in a dictatorial empire and under a religious aristocracy?

These hermeneutical problems, together with the different political interests of those who wish to have Jesus on their side, form the basis for the fact that we

encounter extremely varying and even contradictory interpretations of his political significance. There are those who proclaim Jesus the revolutionary.[2] There is Yoder's Jesus the prophet of non-violence. There is the Jesus who is the teacher of a personal morality that goes well with the interests of a capitalist society. And there is the spiritualised Christ who proclaims the Kingdom of Heaven and a withdrawal from the world.

From the consideration of these hermeneutical problems we can draw a preliminary conclusion concerning the method to approach our question. We can conclude that the main problems will not be encountered on the level of exegesis, but rather on the level of hermeneutics. And the hermeneutical question is not in the first place how to interpret certain difficult passages, but is rather how to interpret the person, work and message of Christ in relationship to the whole of biblical revelation and as part of God's total plan for us. Our main questions are therefore not exegetical, and not even of the competence of biblical theology. Rather we will need to enter here into the field of systematic theology. In order to bridge the distance between the Scriptures and the contemporary world, the exegetes cannot do without the systematic theologians, and this article will concentrate on these questions of systematic theology.

2. Jesus and Politics

Jesus as socio-political fact

Before we look more closely into the message of Jesus, we need to start by drawing attention to the simple fact that his activity was perceived as a factor in the socio-political field. The political and religious authorities of his time perceived him as a challenge to the *status quo*. The religious authorities, who considered themselves specialists in the interpretation of the law, the scribes and particularly those of the party of the Pharisees, saw him as a menace to their authority, for he criticised their interpretation of the law. The life of Jesus was a social reality that was ill viewed, for he invited people into his company whom the Pharisees wanted to exclude or to minimise, like women, pagans, Samaritans, prostitutes, and tax collectors (cf. France, 1989, 95ff).

The religious authorities who were in charge of the Temple, mostly of the party of the Sadducees, considered him a threat to their authority, because he minimised the importance of the Temple and criticised their management of Temple worship.

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[2] See for example Bammel, 1984, and for a negative answer to the question whether Jesus was a revolutionary Richardson, 1973, 44-48.

Herod the Great felt threatened by Jesus when Jesus was still a baby, for he could not accept that anyone else should be called "king of the Jews". A second Herod, his son, wondered if Jesus might be a resurrected John the Baptist whom he feared because of John's criticism of his marriage. Pilate in turn feared the words of the Jewish leaders about Jesus, for he did not want people to reproach him that he had let go of a man who did not recognise the Roman emperor. The political challenge that Jesus represented was even clearer in his official charge, fixed to the cross, that said that he called himself "the king of the Jews".

Even if we could try to interpret the message of Jesus Christ as an entirely a-political one, we need to recognise that the reality of his life placed him in the middle of the social and political tensions of his time, and that he played a role in those tensions, willingly or unwillingly.

Even setting aside his message, the socio-political impact of Jesus is also apparent in the fact that he formed a group of disciples. This group had the explicit purpose of being an alternative community that could replace an older community that did not function as it should. In the choice of twelve apostles, Jesus formed the kernel of a renewed Israel that should replace the old Israel of the twelve tribes. In the same line, the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the second Moses, who again on a mountain (Mt 5:1) gives a new law which should guide a new people that are called to influence an old society as "salt and light" among them (Mt 5:13-16).

Human existence is always socio-political. Every life and every message in a society influences that society. By our lives and our words we criticise the society of which we are a part, and if our lives are not a criticism, they implicitly support it. Let us consider in this respect the fact that many denominations and Christian institutions have in their constitution an article that they will refrain from political activities. Sometimes governments of states ask for the inclusion of such articles before they will officially recognise a denomination or international Christian organisation that wants to work within their borders. However, the idea of non-political institutions is a contradiction in terms. The existence of a denomination, para-church organisation or of an educational institution is by itself a socio-political fact; if they never criticise the government, they support it by their very existence under its governance. They may opt not to be explicitly involved in politics for the sake of politics itself, or for the sake of other interests that they may consider more important than to follow critically the activities of the government, but in every case their existence is by itself a socio-political factor. We would do better if we would consciously ask ourselves as Christians what form we should give to this political influence.

If even a religious institution is a political factor, even independently of its message, so much more was the life of Jesus that rocked the world. Let us now turn to the political character of his message.

Jesus' socio-political message

In our considerations of the socio-political message of Jesus, it is revealing to start with the two great commandments, which ask us to love God more than anything else and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In order to understand the social implications of the ethics of Jesus, it is not even necessary to turn to the explicitly socio-political passages. These social implications are already implicit in the two great commandments.

Let us consider the love for the neighbour. To explain the extent this love should have, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The story shows that for Jesus the question is not: who is my neighbour and to whom am I obliged to show neighbourly love? The question should rather be: for whom should I become a neighbour? The question should be: who needs my help, even if this person does not belong to my extended family, not even to my ethnic group or to the people of God. If I ask how I can exercise love to those who need my help, social questions can no longer be excluded. If the Samaritan was a trader who travelled that road every week and he would regularly find people who were mugged, would the same love that made him help the first one not imply that he would go see the mayor of Jericho to ask if it would be possible to improve the security of those that travel on that route? (Williams, 1989, 268ff).

To love God also implies that we love that which He loves and that we share his interests. The Old Testament shows even more than the New Testament that social and political structures are not marginal in God's plan and interests. He gave his laws in order to facilitate a good organisation of society. He sent his prophets like Amos and Hosea to criticise the leaders of Israel who abused their authority for their own interest, to criticise judges who did not consider the interests of widows and orphans, but were easily corrupted, and to criticise the rich who enriched themselves even more at the expense of the weak and the poor.

This interest of the Mosaic Law and the prophets brings us to those parts of Jesus' message which deal explicitly with socio-political questions. Some sections of Jesus' preaching follow this line of the indignation of the Old Testament prophets over social injustice. Jesus said to his disciples that they should be different from the heads of the nations who rule as masters and who

seek to make their power felt. Jesus' disciples should rather seek to serve, even when they are called to lead others. They should follow the great example of their Master who came himself in order to serve (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:12-16). Luke is the evangelist who was most sensitive to this side of Jesus' message. His gospel gives the beatitudes for the poor along with the curses concerning the rich (Lk 6:24-26). It is Luke who passes on the parable of the rich man who is condemned for not taking care of poor Lazarus who lived on his doorstep (Lk 16:19-31).

We need to recognise, however, that socio-political themes receive less attention in the New Testament in comparison with the Old. What could be the reason? Is it that in relation to the preparatory stage of the Old Testament, the message of Jesus is spiritualised and thereby perfected? This is very unlikely. The New Testament recognises, just as the Old, the Lordship of the God of Israel over every aspect of reality. Therefore "[t]here is not an inch in the whole area of human existence of which Christ, the sovereign of all, does not cry, 'It is Mine'", as the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper said (quoted in Van Til, 2001, 117). The central confession of the New Testament that "Jesus is Lord" (Ro 10:9; Php 2:11) implies also the contestation of all other lordships that claim to be absolute, such as the absolutist and divinised authority of the Roman emperor (Blocher, 2002, 76). The New Testament is moreover interested in the renewal of the entire creation and of the human being in his entirety, body and soul, individually and as a social being.

If the New Testament placed less stress on socio-political themes than the Old, this is rather because of the particular vocation of Jesus and because of the particular theological context in which his ministry and the ministry of his apostles unfolded. The New Testament confirms the socio-political content of the Old Testament, but without the elaboration of the Old Testament. In this sense we can speak of a "surplus of the Old Testament" (with an expression of K.H. Miskotte, 1967, 271ff). The Old Testament is richer when we consider concrete social-political teaching, but we need to understand its full meaning in the light of its confirmation in the message and the work of Christ. We turn now to the special contribution of the revelation in Christ to socio-political theology.

Jesus' particular vocation

In a very practical way, the focus of the New Testament on the ministry of Jesus Christ has as one of its consequences that the New Testament covers only a period of two or three generations. During this entire period the community of his disciples had very little political influence. Through the many centuries covered by the Old Testament the political influence of the community

belonging to Yahweh varied widely: from the age of the patriarchs, through slavery in Egypt, the judges, the monarchy, the exile, until the period under the different great empires after the exile. Each period required a different relationship between the religious community and the political powers (Wright, 1995). We still need different attitudes to the state in different situations, and we cannot treat the situation of Christians in a democratic country that is in majority Christian in the same way as the life of the small first Christian community without political influence in the pagan Roman Empire. The fact that the New Testament gives moral guidelines for different authorities, such as masters of slaves, heads of families and church leaders, but not for governors is probably occasioned by the simple fact that those authorities were not (yet) present in the Christian community. It is not necessarily an indication that Christians could not take up such positions (against Yoder, 1994, 183).[3]

The relative silence on socio-political issues surrounding the person of Jesus is not only related to this particular political context, but even more to his unique vocation. Jesus is greater than Moses, who gave the law for the personal, religious, and social life of his people. He is greater than David, the exemplary king and warrior who freed Israel of its oppressors. Jesus is greater than Solomon, the wise king who left his model and proverbs for individual and political life. He is greater than the prophets who condemned the sins and the sinful social structures and who announced the eschatological reign of God who would come in order to re-establish Israel.

Jesus Christ is the inaugurator of the eschatological Kingdom of God in the fullness of time announced by the prophets. He is the inaugurator of the Kingdom, but shows as such also the bankruptcy of all human religion and of all human socio-political efforts to create a better world. This becomes clear from the reception he received. This representative of the reign of God was not well received by those whom he met; even more, He was condemned and crucified by the representatives of the purest religion of his time, the Jewish religion, and by the representatives of the best judicial system of his time, the representatives of Roman law. If the best representatives of humanity murder the One sent by the Creator, the bankruptcy of all human religious and social projects becomes evident (Niebuhr, 1949, 143f). This failure of humanity and even of the people of God to save themselves and to arrive at a personal and social life that agrees with the will of the Creator was already noted by the

[3] This does not exclude that in certain circumstances all involvement of Christians in public offices becomes impossible, for example if this involvement demands participation in idolatrous worship. Because of this practice, many Christians in the Roman Empire were of the opinion that a Christian could not serve in the Roman army.

prophets. It was because of this failure that they concluded that there would be no individual, religious or political salvation if God himself would not intervene decisively for the redemption of humanity.

Jesus not only shows this failure of all human effort, but also opens a new phase in the relationship between God and humanity. He inaugurated the eschatological presence and reign of God because of a double representation: on the one hand, he represents God among men, while on the other hand, he represents humanity before God (O'Donovan, 1996, 120ff). He is the final representation of the reign of God among men: He shows the authority of God over illnesses, over nature, over demonic powers, over Satan, over sin, and over death. He battles with those forces which oppose the reign of God in a way that no one before him could do; he meets them and triumphs decisively over them. Jesus is at the same time the final representative of Israel and in this way also of humanity. He represents Israel in the perfection of his life and of his obedience in which he substitutes himself for humanity.

Precisely as representative of God and of humanity, Jesus is rejected by the world as exemplified by the political and religious authorities of his time. It is in this way that he brings divine judgement on the world. By his death and resurrection he is victorious over Satan, sin, and death. In this way, he decisively inaugurates the Kingdom of God.

There is therefore no opposition between the Jesus who proclaims love and the Kingdom of God, and the Christ who died for us. Many theologians oppose these two sides of Jesus' work and consequently feel that they need to choose one of these two options: either a political Jesus or a spiritual Christ. The two images are impoverished versions of what the Bible teaches. Either of the images is by itself too poor to answer the needs of our lives. On the one hand, a political Jesus—political in a narrow sense—cannot save us from sin, nor from demonic powers, nor from death. Without a salvation that touches those realms, every political project remains a marginal correction of our lives which cannot change human beings as they are. Moreover, such a project will never reach the real evil and the real hopelessness of our lives and our communities. On the other hand, a spiritual Christ—spiritual in a narrow sense—can only guide our souls to heaven, but cannot change our communities, our countries and the world in which we live and which remains his creation.

The Christ who died for us is the same as the Jesus of Nazareth, the one who proclaims the Kingdom of God with all its political connotations, who broke through social barriers, who called for a love without distinction, and who denounced social injustice. He inaugurated this Kingdom in destroying the main barriers that hinder us from living as the people of God, including in our socio-

political existence. He decisively inaugurated this reign of God, even if we wait for its accomplishment when he returns, and even if we can only see its traces in the world of politics. Though we still wait for the final coming of the Kingdom, he inaugurated it by defeating its enemies. We can therefore invest ourselves more confidently in the socio-political sphere that was at the centre of Israel's law, its judges and kings, its prophets and its sages.

Two confrontations with political authorities

In the light of this particular role of the person and vocation of Jesus Christ, we can now understand two passages in the teaching of Jesus which played an important role in the discussion concerning the political significance of Jesus and to which some Christians appeal in order to defend an apolitical Christ. We start with the passage in Mark about the trick question concerning the payment of taxes to Caesar. As we know Jesus answers enigmatically: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mk 12:17) This text is probably a good candidate for a contest for the most abused Scripture verse. This text is often used to justify an obedience to the state and service of the state that are contrary to our belonging to the Kingdom of God. One can find Christian government officials and employees who use this verse to justify the need to obey their government even when this means disobeying the law of God.

Is it really possible that Jesus said that these two areas—God and Caesar, the spiritual and the material, the church and the state—have their own independent jurisdiction? This sounds improbable when we consider the Old Testament background of his message, which declares that God is King over all creation and over all of life. Such a separation of the two spheres is also not in agreement with Jesus' own behaviour over against political authorities. When questioned at his trial, he did not submit himself to the authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Neither did He submit himself to Pilate, who asked that Jesus defend himself so that Pilate could find a good reason to liberate him. Jesus obeyed his Father in spite of the pressure of human authorities. This principle is later formulated explicitly by his disciples (Ac 4:19) and seems a good reflection of the attitude of their Master, and in fact of all great biblical examples.

If we should give to Caesar what is his and to God what belongs to God, the biblical message in its entirety helps us to understand that the authority of the creature—Caesar—can never be at the same level as the authority of the Creator himself. Only the Creator has absolute authority, and the authority of all human governments is derived from Him and therefore submitted to Him (cf. Rm 13:4; Jn 20:11). Caesar's authority is therefore limited. This authority includes for example the right to collect taxes and to punish wrongdoers (Rm

13:1-7). This authority of the government, however, can never go beyond God's authority and has therefore never the right to go against the will of God, which is supreme. This is even clearer if Jesus' calling attention to the image of Caesar on the denarius is an implicit reference to the image of God, that the human being bears (Trocmé, 2000, 302). If we owe to God which belongs to Him, we owe Him our entire lives, for we are created in his image. The authority of God can therefore easily conflict with political authority, and if we know who we are, it is clear what our supreme allegiance should be in such a situation.

This relationship between divine and civil authority is also upheld by the second text that is often used to interpret Jesus' message apolitically. We refer here to his statement before Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). Pilate is here confronted with the accusation of the Jewish leaders that Jesus made himself King of the Jews. He therefore asks Him: "Are you the king of the Jews?" This question resembles the question of this article, which is to know if Jesus really has something to do with the political powers. As when asked before the High Priest if he were the Messiah and the Son of God, so before Pilate he answered indirectly "You say that I am a king"[4] and for the same reason. He could not deny that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, but neither could he accept these titles without clarification of their meaning when applied to him. Otherwise his interrogators could understand his being the Messiah and his kingship in the terms to which they were used: as a Messiah principally for the Jews with his main mandate to destroy Israel's enemies. That is why Jesus explains with regards to his political project: "My kingdom is not of this world" (v. 36). With this he does not say that his Kingdom is the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore does not concern the earth. "This world" should in this context be understood in line with its more common use in the Gospel of John: it is the world as fallen into sin, in darkness, the world existing in enmity with God (cf. Jn 1:10; Barrett, 1978, 536). This opposition is clarified in the explanation which follows directly: in this world, the authorities maintain themselves by force and if Jesus' authority would be the same, his disciples "would fight to prevent [his] arrest by the Jews." (v. 36)

The authority and kingship of Jesus are thus different from those of Pilate, for Pilate's authority rests on power, but Jesus' authority rests on truth: "for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (v. 37). We can recognise both types of authority in our world, but often those who live according to the measure of their power can only recognise one sort of

[4] This translation of the New Revised Standard Version (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1989) follows the Greek more closely here than the New International Version.

authority. The authority of truth means nothing to them, even if they encounter it, as exemplified by Pilate who asks sceptically: "What is truth?" (v. 38; cf. O'Donovan, 1996, 140). He doesn't consider it a reason to condemn Jesus, for it is a challenge to his authority that he does not discern.

The Kingdom of Jesus is therefore a real challenge to the political and other powers of this world. Yet, at this moment in his unfolding plan of salvation, God restrains his power in order that his authority can show itself by its truth. To testify to this authority and to this truth, Jesus went to the cross. At the cross He unmasked the powers of this world to show their true nature and to inaugurate a Kingdom which does not follow the power principles of this world

3. Christians and the Young African Democracies

We have concluded that the message and work of Jesus Christ do have important socio-political implications. We cannot limit his message to the spiritual domain or to individual life as if it would not touch on society and politics. At this point, we need to take one further step and ask what are its more practical implications for our Christian involvement in the development of the young African democracies, which represent a context to which Jesus of course never made allusion.

Democracy as we know it was unknown in the time of Jesus. In the Greek city-states before the rise of Alexander the Great, there existed some form of democratic government, but it was still significantly different from democracy as we use the expression. Only free males, a small portion of the total population, could participate in the democratic process, thus not the slaves, not the women, nor the foreigners. The city was a limited political entity with a limited number of participants. They could therefore all directly take part in the political process without the intermediation of chosen representatives and political parties. In Jesus' day this form of democracy was already only a phenomenon of history. The great empires were governed by emperors with only a very few people having any influence on the choice of the emperor.

The fact that modern democracy did not exist in the days of Jesus, and that He did not explicitly address the subject, does not of course imply that democracy does not have any specific value for Christians or that they cannot develop a Christian opinion on the question. Different forms of government have been developing since the existence of human societies. The political structures of Jesus' days were not ideal and should be evaluated in relation to their own social context. We need to ask if the forms of government which we

encounter today are adequate for our context, and more importantly, if they agree with the Christian view of the world, the human condition, and society.

In what follows, we trace what light the message and work of Jesus Christ throws of the Christian view of the world, humanity and society. We will, first of all, see how Christian involvement in the democratisation and in democratic structures is legitimate and in our times part of our vocation as disciples of Christ. We will, secondly, see that there are important reasons to consider this involvement as a relatively important task, yet not as an absolute obligation. We should not expect too much of democracy, contrary to the tendency to present democracy as the panacea of all problems or as the new Gospel for Africa. Finally, we will ask ourselves, what forms of involvement are right for Christians and more particularly for the church.

Legitimacy and importance of involvement in democratisation and democracy

In the contemporary Christian ethical debate, we encounter two basic approaches to defend democracy that seem at first sight diametrically opposed.[5] On the one hand, we encounter a defence of democracy based on the value of each human individual created in the image of God. This is why, it is said, each human being should have the liberty to take responsibility for his own destiny and this is why he has the moral resources to do so. We should not force anyone to accept a government if he has not had any voice in its formation.[6]

We can also find defenders of democracy who argue on the basis of the corruption of the human being rather than on the basis of his goodness and moral capacities. We should recognise that power corrupts. Democratically elected governments have the same tendency to be subject to the corrupting force of power. However, democracy is the lesser evil compared to other forms of government, for it shares power among a community as large as possible, and it installs procedures that provide that governments cannot be too corrupted by power without loosing it soon afterwards.

> For certainly one perennial justification for democracy is that it arms the individual with political and constitutional power to resist the inordinate

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[5] Concerning the variety of theological argumentations in favour of democracy, I am greatly helped by the overview in an as yet unpublished paper of Jonathan Chaplin, 'Christian Theories of Democracy: The Contemporary Relevance of a Neglected Legacy' (2006). Chaplin distinguishes three main theories of which I only refer to the last two which are more used in contemporary debates.

[6] Cf. the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, §75.1 of the Second Vatican Council (Flannery, 1975, 982).

> ambition of rulers, and to check the tendency of the community to achieve order at the price of liberty. (Niebuhr, 1945, 38)

If, moreover, the democratic process in a nation receives a certain prestige and moral dignity, conflicts of interest in a society can be solved in less bloody battles than those that are solved by military power (cf. Niebuhr, 1960, 5f).

The best defence of democracy takes the two sides of the coin into account (cf. Stott, 1984: 40). In the teaching of Jesus, we encounter both lines: he saw a creature of God in every person he encountered, whatever that person's state; and He received detested groups like prostitutes and Samaritans in his company. At the same time, He was deeply conscious of the corruption of the human heart and of the corrupting nature of power.

The Christian considers each human being as created in the image of God, but does not conclude from this an optimistic view. In Scripture the dignity of the human being in the image of God is not based on a confidence in his moral and other capacities, but only on his divine calling, setting aside his corruption. If God gives such a high place to the human being by creating him in His image, we should also treat him with respect and place him in a situation in which he can give direction to his own life and participate in the government of his own society. As an image bearer of God, the human person is called to such governance while recognising God as his supreme authority and as the Creator of whom he is only the image and representative (cf. Blocher, 1984, 79ff). The value of democracy lies in the fact that at the same time it limits the abuse of power. The best democracies are those in which the democratic processes are conceived in order to detect, reveal, and limit such abuse.

Defending democracy does not necessarily imply that the current forms of democracy are divinely legitimated (cf. Turaki, 1901). Democracy as a political system needs to deal with a number of possible deformations of the system. Among these we should consider the possibility that democracy can become a tool for collective egoism at the cost of minorities within the community, of foreigners, and of the non-human creation. This also shows the limits of what we can expect of democracy and should show the relativity of the value of our democratic involvement.

The relative value of this involvement

In some evangelical circles, political involvement is still highly suspect or even condemned outright. We therefore need to defend the legitimacy of political involvement. At the same time, however, where democracy is sometimes presented as a solution for all political problems and even as the

most important battle in which the Christian can be engaged, we have reason to show that the value of this involvement is only relative. Democratisation can even become an idol if we expect too much of it and sacrifice too much for it!

The limits of democracy become apparent when we consider the realities of democratic decision-making. Just as there are benevolent dictators, great democracies can be profoundly corrupted. Democratic societies, which offer democratic liberties to their own population, can use the support from their own people to keep other populations in a situation of oppression and economic and political deprivation. We see this in the external politics of a number of large North-Atlantic democracies. Showing the relative value of democracy is also important considering the fact that the efforts of Western churches to engage African churches in the movement for democratisation gives the impression of being the new political fad. Democratisation is not necessarily more biblical for being more fashionable. Caution is needed considering certain indicators that the interest of western states in the democratisation of Africa is at least partly ideologically motivated. Why was there so little interest in democracy before the end of the Cold War in the 1990s? Why is it that this interest in democratisation is so strong in our time of globalisation, where democratisation supports globalisation and therefore the economic interests of the rich countries? It would show discernment were western churches to show a more critical attitude towards the programmes of democratisation of their governments, and ask: "Which democratisation, with what goal?" (cf. Mugambi, 1997, 4).

In the African context moreover, multiparty democracy can easily become a tool in the hands of those who look for power for their own interest or for the interests of certain ethnic groups. The possibility of abusing democratic structures for the hegemonic interests of the contestants in the political arena is, in Africa, also related to the reality that a democracy needs certain supporting structures in order for it to function properly. Democracy can only function properly when there is freedom of press and a population which is sufficiently educated and informed to be able to evaluate who among the candidates looks out for the interest of the population and whose vision for the future of the society they can share. Democracy also needs a civil society that is sufficiently developed to be able to function as a counterweight to the structures and interests of the state. Without these conditions, it is virtually impossible to develop a quality democracy.

As Christians, we have even more profound reasons to show the relativity of the value of democratisation, reasons that originate from a biblical understanding of human nature and the human condition. Biblical anthropology

considers the human being as a unified entity, even if we can distinguish different aspects of his being. The human being exists as physical and spiritual reality, in relationship with the non-human creation, with his fellow human beings, and in relationship with God. A definition of a good and blessed life—that is, of living in "shalom"—should encompasses life in all these aspects and in all these relationships. At the same time biblical anthropology also sees a certain order of importance among these different aspects. Our relationship with God is more important than our relationship with fellow human beings: we need to be ready to leave even our closest relatives for the sake of our relationship with God, as Abraham and Jesus' disciples needed to do. Similarly, relationships between human beings are more important than our relationship with the rest of creation, and our spiritual health is more important than our physical health.

According to the biblical view, the root of all our problems does not lie in economic and socio-political structures, as Marxists and certain forms of liberation theology make us believe. Our deepest problem is our separation from God and our enmity towards Him. This is one of the reasons that placed the question of sin at the centre of Jesus' message rather than the political questions of his time. He knew that the corruption of humanity was more profound, than man's political condition. And he knew that it was his particular calling to touch the deepest problems of the human condition. It was his calling to reconcile us with God and to obtain the Holy Spirit for us, who can radically change our attitude to our fellowmen and our attitude towards God. We therefore need to be conscious that democratisation can contribute to the flourishing of human life—to our "shalom" in the biblical sense, but that it cannot be the solution for the most profound and critical problem of the human condition. Democratisation without a repentance of the citizens will always remain superficial in its effects. Such a democratisation is a gift to the community to which Christians can contribute, but it is not the greatest treasure which we have received from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Showing that democratisation only has relative value also has a positive corollary: if Christ came to reconcile us with God, and if this relationship is more important than all other relationships for which we were originally created, attaining the goal of our life does not depend on our political environment. We can live with our God and attain what gives us supreme fulfilment in our lives as slave or as free citizen and under whatever government: Roman, colonial, or democratic. We can already celebrate the decisive victory of Christ over the powers, even while his victory is not yet complete. We can invest ourselves so that people may be changed by the Gospel and by the power of the Spirit, so that oppressed people can be free in

the Lord, even while they remain in socially unjust situations (1Co 7:22f). This will contribute to a change of socio-political structures, but even if that may still take generations, people may already experience a real freedom and the most important freedom in Christ (de Coninck, 1992: 182ff).

The form of our involvement

So far we have seen that the message and the work of Christ encompass the whole of reality and therefore also political life. We have also concluded that this message touches at a much more profound reality than politics and democratisation can hope to reach, and that therefore the Kingdom of God can never be identified with a political programme, whatever it may be. The form of Christian political involvement should correspond with this double reality: the Gospel touches upon our political existence, but democratisation should not be welcomed as a new Gospel. In this section we want to show, in four points, what this implies for the form that responsible Christian political involvement should take.

In the first place, the church can influence the wider society by living an *exemplary life* as a community. As we saw, Jesus called his disciples to be the new Israel, which as salt and light could influence the surrounding world (Mt 5:13-16; cf. Stott, 1992, 57-68). The Christian community is able in the power of the Holy Spirit to live the life of the Kingdom, as the world cannot do. When the community of disciples lives its renewed life, they are a living invitation and at the same time a judgement on the world. It is invitation and judgement in its internal social relationships, in its relationship with the wider world, even with its enemies, in its attitude to possessions and with the non-human creation. The church should also specifically model the values on which sound democracy is based: the sharing of responsibility, the open and serious consideration of differences of opinion, accountable leadership, and a caring attitude to every member of the community (cf. Magesa 126ff).

In the second place, the church can take up its political responsibility by its *prophetic message* in which it denounces socio-political injustice and calls the state to its responsibility to use state power for the general good, respecting all human beings, and obeying the God whose servant the government is called to be (Stott, 1984, 71ff; Tinder, 2001, 7ff). We call this a prophetic message, for by it the Christian community accepts the heritage of the Old Testament prophets who denounced the abuse of government authority and who called governors to respect God's supreme authority. In Africa, the Catholic and Anglican Churches have been most explicit in raising this prophetic voice. On the Anglican side, one can think of the examples of the bishops Festo Kivengere

(Uganda), Desmond Tutu (South Africa), and David Gitari (Kenya; Gitari, 1996).

To call on political forces with such a prophetic language is a relatively new phenomenon among evangelical denominations.[7] The use of this form of political expression has, additional to its biblical antecedents, two advantages, which make it an important tool for the exercise of political responsibility by the church.

On the one hand, the church in this way can keep its distance and avoid being identified with one or another government or political movement. For the church it is a great risk to become too close to the state. We see this for example in the Eglise du Christ au Zaire, which profited largely from government support under the Mobutu regime and found it therefore difficult to denounce its totalitarianism. If the churches go too far in courting the government, they may easily be associated with some of its actions for which it would rather not be held responsible. In those conditions, the Church can easily loose credit or even be abandoned by those who align themselves with the opposition.

On the other hand, this distance between the church and the government is required because, although the church has her own competence, she is not equally competent in everything. It is true that the church is competent in the most crucial aspect of the human life: the relationship between God and humanity, the church, and history. This aspect touches on all other aspects of life. However, as an institution, the church is not necessarily the most competent body concerning all aspects of life. There is need for appropriate bodies, such as the government, the legislature, and the judiciary. All these bodies need to submit to the sovereignty of God, just as the church should do, but they are called to live out the will of God in other spheres of the human life.[8] Such a distinction may be hidden behind Jesus' refusal to answer the

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[7] A recent example is the "Lettre pastorale à son excellence Monsieur le Président de la République, Chef de l'Etat", written on March 31 2003 by the Alliance of Evangelicals in the Central African Republic to François Bozize, who took power two weeks before by a coup d'état.

[8] The attentive reader can discern here an understanding of the separation between church and state which does not imply that the state should be non-religious, atheistic, or at least not considering God. It seems to me that, in the light of Scripture, there is a place for the secularity of the state in the particular sense that the structures of the state and the church should be independent from each other. Both have their specific competence and sphere of authority. Yet biblically both spheres are submitted to the supreme authority of God, and in the state as well as in the church Christians are called to search for the will of God for these particular spheres of life. (Cf. van den Toren, 2004, 175ff.)

question on how two brothers should divide their inheritance (Lc 12:13). This question concerns the judiciary, and Jesus says to the one brother that this is not his vocation (v. 14). This answer does not, however, imply that Jesus, or the church after Him, has nothing to say about the issue. Jesus draws attention to the root of the problem, when he says: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (v. 15). This reality of human greed is why many debates within the functions of the judiciary cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all participants. In the same way, in the political arena the church can and should remind the political actors to do their work with a good attitude, respecting the right priorities. Beyond that, the church can leave the details of governance to the specialists.[9]

We come now to our third consideration concerning the form of Christian political involvement. Even if the church as an institution should maintain a certain distance in its relation to the state, individual Christians or Christian groups can and should invest themselves directly in the government and in wider socio-political activities. In order to guard a healthy distance, it is better when pastors who more directly represent the church as an institution would not accept political posts, unless they resign from the pastorate. Lay Christians can, however, participate, for these are legitimate structures given by the Creator for the organisation of our communities and in order to judge between right and wrong (Mouw, 1976).

Even individual Christians and Christian groups who want to contribute in this area need to keep a certain distance. Politicians have the tendency to find their personal identity in their political activities. It is for this that they live and it is in this that they find their fulfilment. A Christian, however, receives his identity from Jesus Christ, in whom and for whom he lives. His political vocation is only a secondary vocation, as are all other vocations—including the vocation of some of us to be pastors; all such vocations are secondary compared to our calling as children of God. This distance helps Christians to retain their integrity. If they find their identity in Christ rather than in their political existence, they can be ready to leave a political function, if this function asks them to compromise their primary allegiance to Christ. I am always impressed with the attitude of biblical figures that God called to very influential positions in different pagan governments, such as Joseph and Daniel and his friends. They were thankful for the fact that God gave them this place. Yet, because

[9] I came across this application of this passage in a sermon by Stephen N. Williams, now professor at Union Theological College in Belfast.

they knew it was God who gave them this place in order to serve Him, they were ready to leave their position if it was no longer possible to serve God there with integrity. One main problem with certain Christian politicians is that they want to remain at all cost in the position they have obtained. Only the freedom to leave a position allows the liberty to work there with integrity and in the spirit of Christ, an integrity that will certainly encounter resistance, but that will also demand respect. This political activity should therefore, following the example of Jesus, be done in truth (Jn 18:37), in a spirit of service (Mc 10:43-45; Jn 13:14), and in a spirit of willingness to follow Him even on the way of the cross (Mt 16:24-26).

Such a Christian spirit, which is the spirit of Christ, goes radically against mainstream political life, which is a life of pragmatism, compromises, of short-lived alliances for one's own interest, of a hypocritical use of moral language and of ideals. In order to help Christian politicians to survive in a context that is unfavourable to such behaviour, the church needs to accompany them pastorally. Such pastoral care is not easily given and accepted, and asks often for a conversion of the church itself. If a Christian rises to a position of political importance, his church will often be quick to show a renewed interest in him or her. Too often, however, this interest is not motivated by the desire to help this person in his new ministry and his personal calling, but more by the hope to profit from his influence and from the resources to which he now has access. With such an attitude, the church risks adding to the pressures towards corruption and towards the loss of integrity that this position already brings with it. A true pastoral accompaniment envisages rather the salvation, the sanctification, and the spiritual health of the person in the particular context where God has placed him or her.

We want to conclude this article, and our reflection on the forms of Christian political involvement, by underlining, in the fourth place, that the Church already plays a crucial and irreplaceable political role when she invests herself in the task, which is uniquely hers: the proclamation of the Good News of the victory of Jesus Christ. This proclamation has a political impact, for if a significant segment of a population changes, the society will also change. Moreover, this proclamation of Christ's victory reminds the state, democratic or not, that it should not go beyond its mandate in claiming an absolute authority. Too many presidents and governments behave as if they have an absolute authority, and as if they themselves are above and outside the legislation which they establish. Such problems may have their roots in misconceived worldviews, such as the traditional African idea that the authority of the chief is absolute and sacred (Bediako, 1995), in the lack of separation between governmental and religious authority in Islam, or in the elevation of the

individual in the modern Western world (van den Toren, 2004). If the church functions, therefore, simply as a community with her own goal, which is to proclaim the victory and lordship of Christ, she therefore already contributes decisively to the democratisation process on four different levels that are currently particularly crucial for democratisation in Africa.[10] She forms critical and responsible citizens; she provides channels of information which are not controlled by the state; she is part of the civil society that provides a counterweight to the state; and she shows the relativity of political authority when the latter has a tendency to make itself absolute.

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[10] See for an analysis of some of those problems Ongong'a, 1999.

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