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Christianity and Democracy

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THE FIRST DEMANDS for religious freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and universal male suffrage arose in England in the middle of the 17th century in the radical wing of Protestantism. Michael Farris produced a comprehensive study regarding the early sources of religious freedom in the USA, which included countless sermons and tracts.[1]

Sebastian Castellio, a former student of John Calvin, spoke out in 1554 against Calvin advocating a still rudimentary form of religious freedom (which would continue the punishment of the 'godless', i.e., the atheists). The English Baptist Thomas Helwys[2] (1550-1616) subsequently wrote the first known tract that called for complete religious freedom in 1611. Another English Baptist, Leonard Busher,[3] followed with further tract in 1614. The idea spread among Baptists and other 'dissenters' in England, the Netherlands, and later in the US.

It was the Baptist and spiritualist Roger Williams (1604-1685), co-founder in 1639 of the first American Baptist church with a Congregational structure, who in 1644 called for complete religious freedom.[4] He established on what later became Rhode Island the first constitution in which church and state were separated, assuring religious freedom—also for Jews and atheists, despite the fact that he was a friend of Christian mission. In 1652 slavery had been already abolished on Rhode Island. Rainer Prätorius hit the nail on the head when he

1 Michael Farris, *From Tyndale to Madison* (Nashville: B & H, 2007).

2 Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London: n. p., 1611, reprint: London: Kingsgate Press, 1935).

3 Leonard Busher, *Religious Peace* (Amsterdam: n. p., 1614, London: Sweeting, 1644).

4 Roger Williams, *The bloody tenent, for cause of conscience* (London: n. p., 1644), see also *Christenings make not Christians* (London: n. p., 1645).

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said: 'Not in spite of the fact, but rather because he was deeply religious, Williams called for a separation of politics and religion.'[5] The same applies to William Penn's (1644-1718) subsequent 'holy experiment' in Pennsylvania.

I Step-children of the Reformation

The Protestant theologian and philosopher of religion, Ernst Troeltsch,[6] supported the view that the codification of human rights was not due to the established Protestant churches, but rather to Free Churches, sects, and spiritualists—from the Puritans to the Quakers—which were driven to the New World. 'At this point the stepchildren of the Reformation finally had their moment in history.'[7] In the United States of America a number of factors combined and merged: the hard-earned freedom of religion and conscience that had been pioneered by the deeply religious Williams and Penn, the separation of church and state, the constitutional drafts (initially without freedom of religion) developed further by the Puritans and other Reformers, and the implementation of democracy for the territorial states by enlightened and deistic politicians, who translated the religious guidelines into secular law.

The birth-hour of religious freedom—to exaggerate somewhat—represents therefore the struggle for freedom by Christian minorities against the Christian majority churches. In some non-Christian countries it represents the struggle for freedom of the religious minority movements versus the majority religion, as was the case with Buddhists versus Hindus in India. This also explains the ambivalence of historical Christianity with regard to democratic developments, 'the ambivalence of Christian tolerance'[8] which makes it impossible to draw a straight line historically from Christianity to democracy.

Still too few studies exist regarding the question whether the close relationship between democracy and minority churches is purely historical or whether it still applies today. Jeff Haynes has presented an extensive analysis in which he discusses which religious groups and trends in present-day Africa promote or impede democracy.[9] He comes to the conclusion that the large, established churches frequently have bigger problems with democracy than the smaller, new churches. Although the latter are seemingly more 'fundamentalist', they are more democratic within, provide more prospects for internal promotion and are not as determined by a striving for hegemony. Haynes comes to similar conclusions regarding Islam in Africa.

5 Rainer Prätorius, *In God we trust, Religion und Politik in den USA* (Munich: Beck, 2003), 35.

6 Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 'Puritanische Sektenfreiheit versus lutherische Volkskirche', *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte*. Vol. 9 (2002) 1, 42-69.

7 Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt* (Munich/Berlin: Oldenbourg, 1911), 62.

8 Rainer Forst, in Manfred Brocker and Tine Stein (eds.), *Christentum und Demokratie* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006).

9 Jeff Haynes, *Religion and politics in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1996).

II Judaism as a Minority Religion

The statement that it was religious, especially persecuted minority groups, which demanded democracy and freedom of religion, does not apply only to Christianity, but also, and particularly to Judaism, or—to choose a much more recent example of a religion which emerged only in the 19th century—to the Bahá'i. Whether one should go so far as to state with Hannes Stein, 'the modern constitutional state did not originate in Athens, but in Jerusalem'[10] is debatable. However, the idea of a federal constitution and a separation of priest and king did indeed originate from the Old Testament. It is not a coincidence that it was the eminent Jewish philosopher and reformer Moses Mendelssohn (1728-1786) who was the first in Europe to advocate the separation of church and state and freedom of religion—even if that did not yet include tolerance of the irreligious. The Jewish enlightenment emanating from Mendelssohn affected both secular enlightenment as well as Christianity and has a permanent place in the history of democracy.[11]

III Christianity and the Enlightenment

The anticlerical enlightenment of the French Revolution and the American Revolution, shaped by very devout and deistic individuals, are linked by a profound commonality which one would not suspect at first glance. Both were directed against the ruling, mainline churches. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) in his famous work on democracy in America posited that here deeply religious, mostly reformed movements had entered into an inseparable symbiosis with enlightened views.[12]

The interplay between Christianity and the Enlightenment operated, as far as the emergence of democracy in America was concerned, with significantly less friction than in Europe, where it occurred only following numerous violent and bloody conflicts. This continues to have an effect even to the present, and perhaps explains the often-experienced lack of understanding between Europe and America.

IV Christianity and Democratisation

Neither would the Enlightenment have led to democracy had it not been able to draw on Christian concepts in western civilisation, nor would Christianity have changed its political ethics or relinquished its comfortable position in the alliance between throne and altar without the enlightenment, since according to Manfred G. Schmidt, 'democracy has its roots primarily, yet not exclusively, in countries which were culturally influenced by Christianity and, in spite of a prolonged

10 Hannes Stein, *Moses und die Offenbarung der Demokratie* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1998), 10.

11 S. Christoph Schulte, *Die jüdische Aufklärung* (Munich: Beck, 2002).

12 Alexis de Tocqeville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gosselin, 1835, 1840), additionally Manfred G. Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien* (Wiesbaden : Verlag für Sozialwiss., 2008), 113-131.

strained relationship between democracy and the Christian religions, received and further developed their guidelines for ordering social life from Christianity.'[13] Schmidt is referring here to one of the most distinguished Australian political scientists, Graham Maddox.[14]

Whilst he, as well as the American historian Page Smith[15] do not speak on their own account, the best known German representatives of this thesis are theologians such as William J. Hoye or politicians such as Hans Maier.[16] This thesis has naturally not been left unchallenged.[17] The 19th century state churches on the European continent were all too obviously allied with the monarchies against revolutionist aspirations or against the 1848 movement, to draw a mono-causal line from Christianity to democracy.

In 1993 Samuel P. Huntington drew up the widely accepted thesis of the four waves of democratisation.[18] In addition to sociological and economic factors, he observed an accumulation of the role of religious majority religion or denomination. Subsequently in a first wave (1828-1926) particularly Protestant countries became democracies. During the second wave (1943-1962) particularly Protestant, Catholic and Far Eastern countries, during the third wave (1974-1988) predominantly Catholic and Orthodox countries became democracies and during the fourth wave (after 1989/1990) all religions mentioned were affected again.

Today, of the 88 free democracies worldwide, 79 or more than 90 per cent are predominantly Christian. Besides this there exists one Jewish democracy and seven made up of predominantly Far Eastern religions, whereas in Mauritius and South Korea Christians constitute the second largest population segment. Mali is the only free, democratic country with a majority Muslim population.[19] One could also refer to Turkey and Indonesia, even though they are not ranked as 'free' countries on the lists mentioned.

Is it coincidence that the correlation between religious orientation and the ability to democratise repeated itself after the fall of the Soviet empire? Is it coincidence that the secular, Protestant and Catholic countries formerly under the influence of the Soviet Union

13 Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien*, 422-423.

14 Graham Maddox, *Religion and the rise of democracy* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996).

15 Page Smith, *Rediscovering Christianity. A history of modern democracy and the Christian ethic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

16 William J. Hoye, *Demokratie und Christentum* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1999); Hans Maier, *Demokratischer Verfassungsstaat ohne Christentum—was wäre anders?* (St. Augustin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2006); see also in: Brocker/Stein, *Christentum und Demokratie*; cf. as early as Hans Maier, *Kirche und Demokratie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979).

17 Cf. the collection of essays with pro and contra, Brocker and Stein, *Christentum und Demokratie*.

18 Samuel P. Huntington, *The third wave* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1993); cf. Samuel P. Huntington, 'Religion und die dritte Welle', in: *Europäische Rundschau* 20 (Winter 1992) 1, 47-65; Samuel P. Huntington, 'After twenty years', in *Journal of Democracy*, 8 (1997) 4, 3-12.

19 Classification according to www.freedomhouse.org,; for quality cf. Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien*, 381-386; 392-398 and further studies, 417, 422.

fairly quickly became functioning democratic states, the Orthodox countries did so only partly (democracy remained incomplete in Russia, Georgia, Montenegro and Macedonia) and the Islamic countries did not at all?

V Islamic Countries

This is not to say that Islamic countries cannot in principle be democratised (Mali has refuted this since 1991). The point here is not that we want to find reasons for a sense of superiority because of some historical advantages of Christianity. The failure of large parts of Christianity during the period of National Socialism[20] is a reminder to Christians of the words of the apostle Paul: 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12). Democrats, including Christian democrats, can only be filled with the wish for Muslim states to also become democratic states.[21]

Research to date has neglected to examine more precisely what obstructs the establishment of democracy in the Islamic cultures, and what type of impact different theological and cultural versions of Islam have on the political structure. Naturally, it can be assumed that the configuration of the Turkish, Persian, Arabic and Asian expressions of Islam influenced the degree of democratisation and freedom in the countries which they dominated.

However, the question of whether parallels to intra-Christian development exist in Islam has barely been pursued, that is, whether Islamic minorities and sects do display greater openness towards democracy when compared to the respective majority representation of Islam

VI Political Ethics and Denominational Structures

John Witte referred to the fact that as a general rule support for democracy in political ethics preceded the major waves of the democratisation of states with a certain denominational majority.[22] Is it coincidence that the turning point of the Catholic Church towards freedom of religion and democracy during the Second Vatican Council, between 1974 and 1990, was preceded by a third world-wide wave of democratisation, which included many Catholic countries in Europe and Latin America? I do not want to establish a direct inter-dependence here, but surely nobody would seriously dispute that the theology of the largest religious community in the world influences the political realities of its supporters.

Since Orthodox theology found it most difficult to adopt a post-enlightenment ethic, it would hardly be sur-

20 See Thomas Schirrmacher, *Hitlers Kriegsreligion*, 2 vols. (Bonn: VKW, 2007).

21 Moataz Fattah, *Democratic values in the Muslim world* (Cairo : The American University in Cairo Press, 2006); Frédéric Volpi, *Democratization in the Muslim world* (London: Routledge, 2007); Larry Diamond (ed), *The Spirit of Democracy* (New York: Times Books, 2008); as a plea, Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation* (London: Pocket Books, 2008); cf. critical analysis Franco Burgio, *Export of democracy to the Arab world* (Munich: Grin, 2007).

22 John Witte (ed.), *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

prising to find that amongst the Christian countries, it was the Orthodox ones that struggled most with the concept of a free democracy, although in the meantime parliaments (and governments) are freely elected there too. Some of these countries still show significant defects in democracy, for instance autocracy (in Russia), or restricted freedom of religion (in Greece). At the same time, the recognisably progressing reform of theology and the political ethics of Orthodox churches towards human rights and democratic forms of government[23] would give reason for hope that democracy in the Orthodox countries will become stronger and more free.

A perusal of the outlines of ethics by German-speaking Christian theologians of all denominations for the last twenty years reveals that no one advocates an undemocratic form of government or a form of Christian theocracy. I consider democracy as characterised by an election of parliament and government through free elections, a constitutional state, i.e. the separation of powers and the verifiable adherence of governmental action to law and justice, independent courts and an effective opposition. It is also a situation in which the constitutional state affords and protects human rights and the rights of all citizens, including minorities, and the separation of church and state, including freedom of religion.[24]

The survey of equivalent English-language documents reveals the same. Concepts of political ethics by Christian theologians, who do not depict democracy as the best form of government, originate either from countries that are not free or from an Orthodox context, and fortunately, according to my understanding, no new examples have been added to the list in the 21st century. The fact that in its ethics the largest religion in the world became almost completely involved in the most complicated and youngest form of government in history, is an as yet unwritten success story.

Added to the question of political ethics, must be that of the internal structure of Christian confessions. The French political philosopher Montesquieu (1689-1755), in his magnum opus, already held the view that the monarchy tended to suit Catholicism, whereas the republic suited Protestantism better.[25] For a long period of time he seemed to be correct, but an increasing democratisation of Catholic countries gradually made a differentiation necessary.

23 Cf. for the Greek Orthodox Church Konstantin Delikostantis, 'Die Menschenrechte im Kontext der orthodoxen Theologie,' Ökumenische Rundschau 56 (2007), 19-35; Konstantin Delikostantis, 'Hē orthodoxia hōs protasē zōēs syllogikos tomos,' Akritas 1993; for the Russian Orthodox Church Rudolf Uertz, 'Menschenrechte, Demokratie und Rechtsstaat in der Sozialdoktrin,' in Rudolf Uertz and Lars Peter Schmidt (ed.), *Beginn einer neuen Ära?* (Moskow/Bonn: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2004); Rudolf Uertz and Lars Peter Schmidt, *Die Grundlagen der Lehre der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche über die Würde, die Freiheit und die Menschenrechte* (Moskow: KAS, 2008).

24 Cf. the numerous versions of democracy and the question of what constitutes it in Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien* and Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy* (London: Yale Univ. Press, 1999).

25 Schmidt, *Demokratietheorien*, 77, on Montesquieu in general 66-79.

However, at this point we have to return to the role of the minority and free churches. The first constitution in history on which a state was founded was that of what later became Connecticut (1639) in the United States of America (USA). This happened only a few years before Rhode Island was founded. It is an obvious example of the influence of Congregationalism, to which the majority of the inhabitants belonged.[26] The pace of the development of democracy was more rapid in Reformed countries with Congregational or Presbyterian Church structures, such as the USA, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

The evangelicals were, according to Marcia Pally, the 'backbone of the civic-democratic development'[27] in the 18th and 19th centuries in the USA, because they themselves were congregationally structured, and promoted communal development. They were anti-authoritarian and characterised by a strong individualism. And finally by virtue of their anti-racist past[28] they emerged as supporters of black churches and female preachers.

It is evident that as part of the overall impetus of the waves of democratisation, the more alike the internal structures of Christian denominations were, the more expeditiously they came to terms with enlightened democratic states. The more lay people participated in the decision-making and the more the churches were organised through elections from bottom to top, the sooner denominations did an about-face on a global scale. In only one instance does this equation fail: theoretically the Catholic countries should have been seized by the democratisation wave *after* the Orthodox countries.

Lest this be understood as one-sided, confessional partisanship, it should be pointed out that, in the case of the German constitution, the above mechanism did not apply. One must differentiate between the official teaching of a denomination on the one hand and the acts of the laity on the other: Catholic laypersons frequently acted much earlier than their church in favour of the separation of church and state. Especially through the Centre party political Catholics supported the Weimar Republic. Many committed Catholic laypeople contributed formatively to the development of the constitution of the German Federal Republic.

This was not the case in the same way with Protestants. Although it can be said about the Anglo-Saxon countries at the time of World War II and before: 'In the churches of the USA, but also of Great Britain, democracy and Christianity were practically viewed as being synonyms.'[29] This view naturally

26 See also Prätorius, *In God we trust*, 32-34 and Hoye, *Demokratie und Christentum*, 143-145; Willam J. Hoye, 'Neuenglischer Puritanismus als Quelle moderner Demokratie', in: Brocker/Stein, *Christentum und Demokratie*, 99-102.

27 Marcia Pally, *Die hintergründige Religion* (Berlin: Berlin Univ. Press, 2008), 46, 88 et al.

28 Chuck Stetson (ed.), *Creating the better hour* (Macon: Stroud & Hall, 2007); Ian Bradley, *The Evangelical impact on the Victorians* (Oxford 2006; cf. Thomas Schirrmacher, *Rassismus* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, 2009) and see also *Multikulturelle Gesellschaft* (Holzgerlingen, Hänssler 2006).

29 Martin Greschat (ed.), *Christentum und Demokratie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), p. VIII.

reached Germany via the Allied Powers, with the exertion of more or less gentle pressure. Yet, at the time of the development of the Constitution, the Protestant Church still struggled to accept democracy. It was not until 1985 that the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), in a famous memorandum[30] accepted liberal democracy without 'ifs and buts'.

VII Evangelicals and Christian Fundamentalists

Martin Riesebrodt maintains that all fundamentalists are hostile towards democracy: 'True fundamentalists are never democrats on principle, but from expediency.'[31] However, this hypothesis cannot be proven by either an historical or an empirical investigation. Neither does the history of democracy prove him correct—numerous fundamentalists formed part of its inception—nor does the present. One must look at each group individually to assess its capacity for democracy. Conceding that the concept of fundamentalism is hardly suitable for scholarly purposes—fundamentalists are always 'the others'—I would nevertheless agree to presuppose the fundamentalist character of certain movements.

Let us for instance take Brazilian evangelicals, who are largely influenced by Pentecostalism. According to research undertaken in Brazil in 2003 by the sociologist Alexandre Fonseca,[32] 25 of the 57 evangelical members of congress belonged to opposition parties, while 32 belonged to the ruling labour party. They represented 11 per cent of the members of congress, which corresponds approximately with the percentage of evangelicals that make up the country's population. In Brazil it is possible to accumulate votes for designated candidates. Fonseca established a high degree of backing for democracy, something that is not always found with the Catholic Church. The fact that *all* democratic parties are regarded as places for Christian involvement shows that the secular character of the state and the parties has been accepted.

In South Korea evangelicals constitute 15 per cent of the entire population, accounting for the largest section among Protestants. When benchmarked against German standards, it was found that they are predominantly fundamentalist-orientated, both among the Presbyterian and the Pentecostal wings. They live peacefully in a society in which the majority of the population is Buddhist, stabilising the secular democracy.[33]

Recently sociological studies inves-

30 *Evangelische Kirche und freiheitliche Demokratie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986), 1985; cf. in addition Eberhard Jüngel, *Evangelische Christen in unserer Demokratie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986).

31 Martin Riesebrodt, *Die Rückkehr der Religion* (Munich: Beck 2001), 89.

32 Alexandre Brasil Fonseca, *Evangeélicos e mídia no Brasil* (Rio de Janero 2003); see also Religion and 'Democracy in Brazil,' in Paul Freston (ed.), *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America* (Oxford, New York: OUP, 2008).

33 Donald N. Clark, 'Protestant Christianity and the State,' in: Charles K. Armstrong (ed.). *Korean Society* (New York 2006); David Halloran Lumsdaine (ed.). *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (Oxford, New York, 2008).

tigated the relationship between evangelicals in the global south and politics, particularly with reference to democracy.[34] The outcome was altogether very positive; the support of dictators or tyrannical regimes remained the exception. This also shows that the 300-400 million evangelicals living outside the USA cannot be equated with the 50 million living in the USA. In addition, it should be considered that among the evangelicals in the USA, a significant number are Afro-Americans and Latinos and that even under George W. Bush 40 per cent of the evangelicals voted for the Democrats.[35]

Evangelicals throughout the world, are politically divided into radical evangelicals and conservative evangelicals, with the radical evangelicals inclined towards liberation theology in Latin America and India,[36] and in the USA (e.g. Ronald Sider and Jim Wallis) belonging to the strongest critics of the politics of George W. Bush.[37]

If, to choose a different tool of assessment, one investigates the Christian ethics of evangelical theologians—according to Riesebrodt's definition also 'fundamentalists'—all of them, for multiple reasons, advocate democracy, and that not only as a pretence. Richard Hempelmann has documented his hypothesis, that German evangelicals are predominantly not fundamentalists and that Christian fundamentalism has no basis in Germany. He proved this by, among other things, stating that Christian minority parties such as the Pentecostal Party of Bible-believing Christians (Partei Bibeltreuer Christen [PBC]), or the Catholic Christian Centre (katholische Christliche Mitte) receive hardly any votes.[38] Added to this is the fact that their respective churches do not support these parties.

A similar principle applies in the USA. The *Christian Reconstruction* movement is considered to be the only movement which theoretically wanted to create a Christian republic with binding biblical laws, as had been the case during the times of the founding fathers of the USA. The movement remained insignificant and barely survived the death of its founder.[39]

The problem of the evangelical movement in its history and partly up to the present day, lies rather in the

34 See e.g. David Halloran Lumsdaine (ed.). *Evangelical Christianity and democracy in Asia* (Oxford, New York, 2008); Terence O. Ranger (ed.), *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford, New York, 2006); cf. also Paul Gifford, *African Christianity* (Kampala: Fountain Publ., 1999; London: Hurst, 1998).

35 Pally, *Die hintergründige Religion*, 54, 57.

36 Cf. e.g. the evangelical forerunner of the Indian ecology movement Ken Gnanakan, *Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2004).

37 Ronald J. Sider, *Scandal of Evangelical politics* (Grand Rapids, 2008); Jim Wallis, 'Dangerous Religion. George W. Bush's Theology of Empire', in Bruce Ellis Benson, Peter Goodwin Heltzel (eds.), *Evangelicals and Empire* (Grand Rapids, 2008); Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come. How the religious right distorts the faith and threatens America* (New York, 2006).

38 Reinhard Hempelmann, 'Fundamentalismus', *Materialdienst der EZW 71* (2008) 7, 243-244; cf. Thomas Schirrmacher, *Feindbild Islam. Am Beispiel der Partei „Christliche Mitte'* (Nürnberg: VTR, 2003).

39 E.g. Pally, *Die hintergründige Religion*, 55; for details see Thomas Schirrmacher, *Anfang und Ende von‚Christian reconstruction'* (1959-1995) (Bonn: VKW, 2001).

fact that evangelicals shy away from politics and leave the shaping of society to others. For this very reason they are no threat to democracy (as long as one does not view the high number of non-voters as a threat to democracy). The Russian-German evangelicals living in Germany, for example, often do not even work together with other evangelicals. As they descended predominantly from the completely or partly pacifist Mennonite and Baptist traditions, they are, as far as violence and the malpractice of politics are concerned, 'harmless' churches. In a religious sense they may be fundamentalists, but in the political sense they are certainly not.

If fundamentalism is defined by its attempt to re-establish the original condition of religion in the face of modernity, what emerges in the Christian realm with the ideal of the altogether a-political first church in Jerusalem, is a rather pacifistic movement.

VIII Conclusion

Despite much ambivalence in the relationship between Christianity and democracy, there are reasons why determined Christians and minority churches have called for secular democracy, have advanced it, and have helped to stabilize it.