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Religion and the Rise of Mass Democracy in Britain

Abstract:

Modernity and the rise of mass democracy are intertwined. This contribution to this special issue on Christian modernities therefore focuses on how the churches responded to this key aspect of modernity. This paper addresses this through exploring the framing of ideas about democracy expressed by leading figures in the British churches, particularly Nonconformity, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the process claims about the religious roots of democracy and their role in preserving Britain from the slide to totalitarianism experienced elsewhere in Europe in the early twentieth century are critically examined.

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Keywords: Democratisation, Religion and Politics, Free Churches, Labour Party, Parliament, Totalitarianism

There was a growing consciousness in the churches in the later nineteenth century of the onset of modernity, the challenges posed by processes such as urbanisation, industrialisation and the consequent emergence of an often unchurched working class.[1] A year before he launched a movement in Methodism attempting to reach these working-class communities Hugh Price Hughes noted: 'Many of the skilled artisans are to be reached first, not by individualistic but by socialistic Christianity....How difficult it is to shake off the influence of conventional, aristocratic Christianity and to become as democratic as Christian'.[2] Democratising the churches, which Price Hughes and others sought to achieve by creating inner city missions with lots of attractive activities and no pew rents, was thus portrayed as a key technique for the churches to respond to the onset of modernity and the related challenge of evangelising the swelling urban masses.[3] By the early twentieth century this process was combined with a growing concern to demonstrate Christian engagement with the deprivation and inequalities highlighted by the developing labour movement. This thus represented primarily a response to the social and political consequences of democratisation. Indeed, democracy was often used in the churches as a catch-all term to designate the working-classes, rather than as a means of describing a political system.

It is important to historicise the relationship between Christianity and the advent of democracy for a variety of reasons. First, it provides a historical context in which to place the extensive literature that has developed in recent decades about the relationship between Islam and democracy.[4] Much of this literature seems unconsciously to assume that the relationship between Christianity and democracy is comparatively unproblematic. Certainly, far less has been written on this subject. Furthermore, much of this focuses on Catholicism's resistance to democracy before 1945, and support for it thereafter, elsewhere in Europe.[5]

There is thus a problematic normative framing within the literature on religion and democracy. This is compounded by a tendency to impose externally certain conditioning

factors which somehow determine how compatible or not Islamic societies, for instance, are with democracy.[6] This is despite the fact that many historically Christian societies, including Britain, have only transitioned to democracy in the last 150 years or so. Accordingly, across history Christianity does not necessarily seem to have been any more compatible with democracy than Islam is sometimes portrayed now. The result is that Islam's relationship with democracy is not effectively located comparatively, synchronically or diachronically, within a wider literature that also looks at the relationship between Christianity and democratisation.

Second, this neglect of the relationship between Christianity and democracy therefore needs to be addressed, in order to explore how that adjustment takes place. This is for more than purely comparative reasons. After all, religion – by defining humanity's relationship to God – necessarily plays a social and political role in framing purpose, values and the codes and mores of human society. It thereby structures the truths a society lives by and its moral economy. The advent of democracy restructured the nature of the contest over social meanings and relocated it away from civil society bodies like churches towards political parties. The overlooking of this issue, compared to recent work on the churches and national identity in Britain during the same period,[7] is curious. This deficiency needs to be addressed and how this shift was understood by those experiencing it needs to be analysed.

Third, the advent of mass democracy in Britain happened in a distinct religious setting, the specificity of which needs to be acknowledged. Britain has established Protestant churches in England and Scotland (and until 1920 also in Wales). However, in the later nineteenth century neither of these was as dominant as their Continental equivalents, Protestant or Catholic. Furthermore, Britain also had an unusually large sector of dissenting Protestant denominations that had emerged from the seventeenth century onwards. By 1900 these were commonly referred to as Nonconformity or the Free Churches.[8] They also by then

often presented themselves as democratic within their own distinctive setting. The use of such terms nonetheless has to be heavily qualified. After all, the rejection of royal, episcopal or sacerdotal control over congregations by their spiritual forebears in the seventeenth century and its replacement by some form of lay control – at least over local, administrative matters, if not doctrine – was not pursued in order to democratise but to assert spiritual independence and enforce moral discipline.[9]

Religion and politics in Britain had thus long been intertwined. However, following the Reformation this relationship was generally structured around the place of religious institutions in the state, rather than issues of representation. An alignment of monarch, state, church and nation was sought, making religious allegiances central to political debates from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The attempted imposition of conformity that this produced also ensured that political conflict centred on concentrations of power and who wielded it in both state and church. In the case of the latter, those dissenting Puritan groups emerging from the ferment of the Reformation criticised what they saw as the overweening power held by the unscriptural office of bishop. Seventeenth-century Presbyterians and Independents favoured a greater role for local congregations in church government. More radical groups among them even could and did see wider, democratic, implications in such views. Some came to perceive a connection between their insistence that the people should elect their church ministers and the view that the people, and not just the propertied classes, should elect their MPs as well.

However, these groups were defeated by the end of the 1640s.[10] The monarchical restoration that in due course followed reinforced the marginal position of these religious dissenters in the state. Nonetheless, as these groups gradually became more tolerated following the suppression of the 1660s and 1670s, they also continued to see the organisation of their churches as involving democratic elements. As parliamentary democracy became

embedded by the late nineteenth century, these religious dissenters sometimes portrayed themselves as the progenitors of these developments. For instance, the young Beatrice Webb (herself of Unitarian origins) observed in 1886 that staying with a Nonconformist family in Bacup had 'taught me the real part played by religion in making the English people, of Dissent teaching them the art of self-government, or rather serving as a means to develop their capacity for it!'[11]

This framing needs to be scrutinised. It was a cognitive reality which arguably obscured the elite and gendered power structures that often in practice obtained within Nonconformity's chapels.[12] Furthermore, there was a world of difference between some form of democratic governance within a gathered church setting of people with shared senses of religious and cultural values and the mass democracy across a national collectivity that emerged in the early twentieth century. This latter was clearly a distinctive and momentous development.

As the Primitive Methodist and former army chaplain Phil Fisher noted in 1920, '[T]he great issue that dominates the future is the social revolution, the rise of democracy'.[13] The advent of mass democracy in Britain was certainly a dramatic change. The historical literature on the subject, however, has concentrated on processes of enfranchisement and their social and political consequences, rather than the idea of democracy itself.[14] This is partly because of the imperceptible way in which the idea that Britain was a democracy was insinuated into political discourse. Even before the electorate was more than doubled by the 1918 Representation of the People Act it was instead often simply taken for granted among the political classes that Britain was a democracy. Consider, for instance, Lloyd George's invocation of a war for democracy in his Queen's Hall speech of 19 September 1914.[15]

The use of the term, however, did not necessarily indicate that the implications of democracy for social order, accountability or citizenship were also considered. Instead, elites adopted a Whiggish narrative of painless adjustment, even though arguably what happened was not so much democratisation as the growing representativeness of a Parliament in which those elites remained embedded. Parliamentary representation was, indeed, so much at the core of this process that it proved an effective guard against embarking on more theoretical debates about what democracy might be, even in exercises such as the 1908-10 Royal Commission on Electoral Systems.

As the title of that enquiry implies, the focus was on where and how people voted, and not what their possession of the vote meant for the political order. Thinking about democracy at the level of the official British state was therefore reductive and limited. It was initially more about managing risks as representation was extended. Guarding against the tyranny of majorities in some future democratic order had, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, prompted the invention globally of some 300 different systems of proportional representation.[16] The need to protect the conscience of the individual from the tyranny of the majority was indeed what attracted figures like John Stuart Mill in the 1860s to some kind of proportional electoral system.[17]

By the early twentieth century this was a diminishing concern. It was the desirability of representing coherent areas, rather than protecting the representation of minorities, that primarily animated the subsequent Speaker's Conference of 1917. This resulted in proposals that some form of proportional representation – which in Britain at the time was taken to mean the Single Transferable Vote – should be written into the forthcoming legislation extending the franchise.[18] The House of Lords was much more enthusiastic about this proposal than the Commons, yet even there references to protecting the representation of minorities were few and far between: a rare examples was Lord Balfour of Burleigh's self-

serving complaint about the under-representation of Scottish Unionists under the first past the post system.[19]

The focus by 1918 was thus on advancing representativeness as part of a steady Whiggish process of adjustment. Democracy was not primarily seen in terms of who ‘the people’ were, of how they exercised power, or how they held those who wielded it to account. Nor was it any more about protecting the interests of minorities within the system. Instead, it was simply about extension of the parliamentary franchise.

The teleological nature of this process very much fits Nonconformity’s own image of itself. From their emergence in the wake of the Reformation, the Free Churches prided themselves on their witness for liberty against an exclusionary Church of England and the conformity to it demanded by the state. T. H. Marshall’s 1950 formulation of a historic Whiggish progression as that state successively granted religious then civil then political liberty was thus already common in Free Church circles decades before, not least because they saw themselves as principal drivers of this process.[20] Indeed, Arthur Porritt, the editor of the leading Free Church newspaper, *Christian World*, in 1925 quoted the Tory Lord Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead, observing that all British liberties were won by Nonconformists trying to redress their grievances.[21] This history of exclusion might also have been expected to lead them to share Mill’s concern about the risk to conscience of majoritarian tyranny. However, many Nonconformists could simply regard the widening of the franchise as a further stage in this process of liberalisation and empowerment. The leading Unitarian divine, Stanley Mellor, recalled in 1929 that his ‘passionate-hearted Radical’ father ‘credited the ballot box with a mysterious sanctity and power’.[22]

His fellow Unitarian, H. H. Johnson, was one of a number of Nonconformists who argued that Protestantism’s emphasis on God’s love for each individual was the very

foundation of democracy.[23] Nonconformists certainly portrayed democracy as a working out both of their Protestant witness and their ecclesiology. In terms of the latter, one of many examples is the 1914 Presidential address to the Baptist Union of Charles Joseph on 'Centralisation or Democracy'. By democracy he was referring to the traditions of congregational management and independency within his denomination inherited from their founding fathers in the seventeenth century.[24] Free Churchmen, even in denominations with more hierarchical structures, could still celebrate the notional way in which the nurturing of individual human potential and the relatively important role of the laity in chapel affairs was redolent of a democratic spirit.[25] This spirit was seen as an outgrowth of a Protestant witness for 'personal religion, the unimpeded access of the soul to God, without the mediation of any hierarchy'.[26] Leading Nonconformists in the early twentieth century thus portrayed their churches as having long nurtured democratic traits in the management of their own affairs, and even in their hymnody.[27]

This self-identification continued to shape Nonconformity's reactions to reform of the parliamentary franchise into the twentieth century. It was the concerns of the working classes and the consequent realisation of 'how entirely economic interests and necessities have come to dominate politics' that impressed J. Scott Lidgett, the leading Methodist and editor of the *Methodist Times* in 1918.[28] This trend was felt to have been furthered by the First World War. The leading Baptist, S. W. Hughes, noted that the war's effects on society would see a change of emphasis towards democratisation of national life: 'Property has had a long and a big innings, and now the toilers' day is dawning'.[29] These developments, rather than the newly enacted Representation of the People Act were what shaped discussion of democracy in the Nonconformist assemblies of the spring of 1918. It was to this shift in social power relations and consequent changes to political issues that Fisher referred, rather than the mere extension of the franchise. Parliamentarians may have focused on the latter. In contrast, it was the

increasing inclusivity and altered class dynamics of a more democratic state, rather than the changing nature of the electoral system, that impressed itself on the minds of Fisher’s fellow Nonconformist clergy at the close of the Great War.

The rhetorical elision between the term democracy and the political rise of those toilers Hughes referred to spoke to another aspect of Nonconformity’s self-identity. This portrayed the Free Churches as the cradle of working-class self-advancement, an image which was also reinforced for them by leaders of the newly emergent Labour Party. J. Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, observed in 1924 shortly before he became the first Labour Prime Minister: 'Nonconformity has trained our speakers in its pulpits and fashioned our devoted workers in its Sunday Schools'.[30] This was not just tactical rhetoric but also reflected the genuine chapel-reared religiosity of many of Labour’s early leaders.[31] It was this association that promised that the rise of mass democracy the Labour Party to some extent represented could therefore be accomplished without the godlessness its Continental counterparts were often accused of.

There was nonetheless still anxiety among some Nonconformist leaders about the threat this mass democracy might pose. As Labour replaced the Liberals as the main opposition in the early 1920s voices were raised about the risk that it would lead to sectional interests holding the rest of the community to ransom. An editorial in the *Christian World* reflecting on the 1922 election warned: ‘if democracy means that all the power is to be with one section of the people, who are to make another and much smaller section pay, the failing of responsibility, which has been the foundation of trust in the people, will disappear’.[32] Even though Arthur Henderson (a Methodist lay preacher as well as General Secretary of the Labour Party) had taken to the pages of the *Christian World* four years earlier to assure that Labour were not a narrow, sectional party,[33] concerns that democratisation would led to irresponsible class-based politics clearly persisted.

Nor was this the only challenge. The inter-war period is replete with laments from Nonconformists about their marginalisation as political issues moved to the economic and social spheres centred on the concerns of mass democracy.[34] In his Presidential address to the Baptist Union in 1918 on 'The Church in the Crucible of War' J. E. Roberts may have argued that politics could only be purified by the churches' influence.[35] Roberts was by no means alone in his optimism about the potential prophetic role the churches could play,[36] but this proved misplaced. In practice exercising that influence, especially during the bitter industrial conflicts following from the economic disruptions of wartime, proved hard. As the secretary of the Congregational Union, S. M. Berry, wryly commented in 1926 at the time of the General Strike: 'What part have we to play in the controversies and struggles which have shifted from the political on to the economic plane?'[37]

Accordingly, while democratisation of the franchise was generally welcomed among the considerable Free Church print culture that remained influential – if only because it was widely read among the political classes - around the end of the First World War,[38] its consequences were more challenging. That it would likely diminish the influence of the Free Churches themselves was widely anticipated, not least as a result of the shift in political issues that Berry identified. The changes to the franchise also reduced the relative significance of chapel-goers within the electorate, while the redistricting of 1918 meant that cross-class institutions like the churches were now less important in the more socially homogenous constituencies created. Accordingly, it is perhaps unsurprising that during the inter-war years the Free Church press in particular often reflected nostalgically on the past glories of the bygone age of before 1914, instead of the era of mass parties and national programmes that unfolded by the close of the 1920s. As a result of those developments politics became steadily less susceptible to the influences of formerly significant social bodies like the churches.

Fisher's concern, however, was not about the impact of democracy on the churches as institutions, but its implications for social and political order. He was clearly anxious about the risk that this democratising social revolution would lead to populist demagoguery, warning: 'The streets echo with great programmes which can never realise their aim, but will inevitably crash in ruin and greater confusion'.[39] Similar concerns about the fundamentalism of the zealots following the various political programmes of Right and Left were expressed by the leading Baptist, Gwilym O. Griffith, in 1925.[40] This was the challenge democracy posed to the churches and other institutions: vague, panglossian visions risked producing the very irreconcilable clash of chaos that Fisher feared would result from the great programmes he wrote of. Some overarching doctrine of society – as religion sought to provide - furnishing a degree of consensus about purpose and meaning around which political disputes could be constructed was therefore needed. Shared fundamental views of the end of politics and how it is conducted were and are necessary.[41]

In Britain by the early twentieth century these views were expressed through a broadly shared understanding of and engagement with how the constitution and politics operated across the social spectrum.[42] That this even applied for those excluded from formal participation at the ballot box is apparent from the enthusiastic following of the two party system Labour's first Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, remembered his Wesleyan Methodist father expressing in the West Yorkshire of the 1870s.[43] A shared understanding of various features of the British political system had thus already commonly been accepted and internalised even before the various franchise changes of 1883-1885.

The most important constitutional innovation of this defining moment arguably proved a matter of political practice rather than legislation: the doctrine of the mandate. This built upon the pre-existing understanding of political contests as exercises in gaining a majority in parliament and thus control of the levers of power constitutionally vested in the

Crown and operated by ministers embedded in and accountable to that parliament. By 1910 the resulting effects on British political culture, according to the Royal Commission on Electoral Systems, were that general elections were ‘considered by a large proportion of the electorate of this country as practically a referendum on the question of which of two Governments shall be returned to power’.[44] Democracy, in other words, was understood at the level of popular culture as the process of choosing (or rejecting) a government.

This political culture potentially gives enormous power to those who win electoral contests. The principal author of the doctrine of the mandate, Joseph Chamberlain, indeed felt that popularly elected governments should have the authority to drive forward their agenda without being trammelled by checks and balances designed historically to rein in the power of kings. Writing to Prime Minister A. J. Balfour in the aftermath of the Boer War he contended:

> I think a democratic government should be the strongest government from a military and imperial point of view in the world, for it has the people behind it. Our misfortune is that we live under a system originally contrived to check the excesses of Kings and Ministers, and which meddles far too much in the Executive of the country.[45]

This view of popular legitimacy was fully adopted by Labour, the only major party to be founded during the era of democratisation in Britain. Accordingly, checks and balances like the House of Lords were long regarded within the party as an unwarranted, and undemocratic, interference in the programme of a government with a popular mandate.[46]

That a mandate based on a narrow electoral plurality might lead to a coercive form of what Lord Hailsham later termed an 'elective dictatorship' was one of the anxieties about democratisation which had been apparent in Britain and elsewhere during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[47] Such anxieties were less apparent, both among the parties and the

churches, at the time of the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918. The doctrine of the mandate may, indeed, have proved in Britain at the time a more effective safeguard against such an outcome than the proportional representation systems which spread so rapidly elsewhere in Europe after 1918. General elections might entail the clash of great programmes that Fisher feared, but at least they were structured around a fight to win a popular mandate. If the victors failed to deliver on that it was understood and accepted that they should in turn be slung out at the next contest. If anything, then, the inter-war years saw the consolidation of the doctrine of the mandate as party manifestoes to which all candidates at least in theory adhered became the norm in what were finally nationwide contests, rather than a co-ordinated series of local ones.[48] The incorporation of Labour into the political order by the end of the 1920s, accompanied by the marginalisation of the Far Left after the defeat of the General Strike in 1926, cemented this development.[49]

The political system that thus emerged in Britain – based on widespread identification with mass parties that competed to win a popular mandate – proved resilient in the face of the impossible programmes that Fisher feared. However, it might also be argued that the failings of political systems elsewhere in Europe owed little either to these great programmes. Instead, their collapse seems to have been prompted more by the anxious turning towards authoritarian figures for security that all too often occurs in difficult times. Accordingly, it was anxieties about the compromises of democracy and a desire instead for certainty and charismatic or authoritarian direction that, from Mussolini to Pétain, led to the demise of democracy in successive European countries between 1922 and 1940.

Britain, despite difficult crises at home and in the empire, avoided such a fate. The Coalition government formed by Churchill a month before Pétain took power in France, nonetheless gave him powers few dictators could dream of. This included a role in the direction of the Second World War untrammelled by his political colleagues. He had also

long been seen by his detractors on the Left as the political figure most likely to enjoy using such powers.[50] Churchill's celebrated backhanded compliment about democracy – 'No-one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time' – was not to be enunciated until 1947.[51] Yet Churchill's disdain for dictatorial methods and deep attachment to democracy had been readily apparent since his only novel, *Savrola*, was published in 1900.[52] Nor was parliament rendered toothless, even if Churchill's rule was endorsed by a huge Commons majority when he felt obliged to seek a vote in confidence in himself after the fall of Tobruk in the summer of 1942.[53]

The absence of a more credible strongman than the sinister figure of Oswald Mosley is not the only reason why the power the British political system gave to those who command a parliamentary majority did not then come to be used to destroy democracy. At least as important was the role of parties as civic institutions. Achieving power required the electoral machine both locally and nationally that these provided. As Mosley discovered, even in the crisis of 1931, such a body could not be easily engineered from scratch. Even if it could, it would confront the established social position of the existing parties calibrated around a parliamentary system. This is not just because they commanded the adherence of electors who identified with them, crowding out new entrants to the political marketplace. It was also because the political culture was built around the significance of party as an institution, as much as individual political figures. The few safeguards instituted in Victorian Britain to protect minority interests from democratisation, such as the Limited Vote introduced in 1867, had tended to drive the development of these party machines.[54] In Britain therefore, unlike in France, parties were not vehicles for individual political ambitions but the means whereby those ambitions were achieved. This did not prevent the same kind of anxious turning towards a national solution in Britain in the 1930s as there was elsewhere, as was apparent

among elderly Free Church leaders like Scott Lidgett.[55] It was nonetheless the political parties, under reassuringly uncharismatic figures like MacDonald and Baldwin, who managed the process.

It would be easy, if unfair, to conclude from Adrian Hastings' treatment of Britain's avoidance of an inter-war slide towards dictatorship that another explanation was the relative paucity of Catholics. Hastings was himself a Catholic. He is also hitherto almost the only historian even to mention the relation of religion to the rise of mass democracy in Britain, albeit almost exclusively in the context of the hostility to democracy of certain of his co-religionists. As Hastings shows, prominent Catholics, like Hilaire Belloc, despite his brief stint as a Liberal MP in 1906-10, were very much drawn towards authority figures like Mussolini. They were also reassured by the place given to the Church in Mussolini's new Italy by the Lateran Treaty of 1929.[56] The mediaeval-tinged distributivism Belloc championed in his *The Servile State* (1912) meanwhile suggested a political economy of small producers under a benignly authoritarian order as an alternative to what he saw as the enervating redistribution of social goods effected by social democracy and the New Liberalism he came to reject.[57]

The growing role of the state in distributing these social goods that followed from the development of nascent welfarism in the late nineteenth century not only increased the potential power available to those who seized its reins, but also impacted upon autonomous providers of welfare such as families and churches. Thinking about the advent of democracy therefore also meant addressing what an increasingly intrusive state might be made to do. Belloc was not alone in anxieties on this score. The Anglo-Catholic Tory politician, Lord Hugh Cecil, in his *Conservatism* (1912) repeatedly expressed concerns about the state-sanctioned expropriation of property.[58] There may have been awareness that a mass, increasingly urban society with growing specialisation of economic functions required more

complex and intrusive forms of management. The rise of democracy nonetheless raised very starkly for some Christians the issue of how that political economy would be managed and in whose sectional interests. Fears that it would result in Communism all too easily pushed some, not least among Catholics and High Anglicans, to instead accept Fascism as long as any threat to their co-religionists appeared, unlike in Russia, to be contained. That such tendencies were largely avoided among Baptists – the denomination with the largest number of fellow adherents in Russia – is, however, unremarked by Hastings.[59]

This is because he concentrated overmuch on elite opinion. Hastings gave little space to the reluctance of the Catholic hierarchy in Britain to follow their Continental counterparts in creating Catholic or Christian Democrat parties or trade unions. With Catholics in Britain only constituting a significant mass of the population in certain urban enclaves such reluctance was entirely understandable. This was despite the established role an ethnically based political party, the Irish Nationalists, already played in the most Catholic of these areas. Using that organisational basis to replace it with a Catholic party after the secession of the Irish Free State from the UK in 1921 would have been perfectly possible, and did indeed occur to some extent in Liverpool and Glasgow in the 1930s.[60] Its ethnic roots, and indeed the ethnic distinctiveness of much of the Catholic population, however suggested the unwisdom of such a move more generally in what was becoming a mass democracy, risking as it did hostility both from the Protestant majority and the largely working-class elements in the Catholic flock. Accordingly the hierarchy allowed the faithful to drift towards the party which most suited their predominant socio-economic composition, the Labour Party. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century Catholics were the faith community whose voting behaviour most mapped onto a class-based electoral model.[61] Although Catholics remained socially distinctive, often geographically separate and usually endogamous up until the 1960s, in terms of their political and economic interests they thus shared more politically with their

fellow citizens of similar class background than they did with their co-religionists. Labour was nonetheless clearly concerned that its supporters among working-class Catholics might be swayed towards authoritarianism by events like the Spanish Civil War, not least because of the way it was reported by the Catholic press. The party therefore in 1937 sent a deputation of Catholic trade unionists to remonstrate with the leader of the Catholic hierarchy in Britain, Cardinal Hinsley, the archbishop of Westminster.

One of the delegates reported: ‘I have seen this pleasant old gentleman almost weep over certain Press reports alleging pulpit utterances in favour of the Spanish rebels’.[62] Hinsley nonetheless had a picture of Franco on his desk.[63] This probably reflected his anxieties about the godless Communism felt to be behind the Republican cause in Spain as much as the disdain for democracy Hastings detected among inter-war Catholic elites. The fact that so many eminent inter-war Catholics were converts, attracted to authority and certainty instead of the soapy compromises with the clashing interests of capital and labour seemingly so redolent of the Anglican responses to challenges of the period may also have been a factor. Consider the robustly conservative line Hinsley took during the General Strike, in contrast to the efforts at reconciliation promoted by the archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, and various Free Church leaders.[64] Another factor, according to Hastings, was a tendency to regard democracy as an undesirable outgrowth of Protestantism.[65] This is possibly because Protestant commentators, especially in the Free Churches, often appeared to imply exactly this.

A key example is the statement by the Methodist academic W. G. Symons in 1941 that: 'It is not fanciful to connect the failure of political democracy on the Continent with the absence of a strongly religious tradition of the Free Church type'.[66] Symons thus suggested the absence of a historic witness for religious liberty helped to explain the rise of totalitarian tyranny elsewhere in Europe. In the circumstances of a total war against Nazism this was an

understandable framework through which to view democracy. Twentieth-century Nonconformists readily discerned in their history of resistance to a hierarchical and episcopal church a witness for liberty and for more democratic forms of church polity. For instance, Ramsay MacDonald, delighted a distinguished gathering of Nonconformists at the annual general meeting of the Liberation Society – founded in 1844 to campaign for the disestablishment of the Church of England – with his paean to this tradition of liberty.[67] Nor were the heirs of the village Hampdens who resisted Laudianism the only ones who detected in that history the roots of a distinctive relationship between church, people and state in Britain. For instance, the London correspondent of the German social democratic newspaper *Vorwärts*, Egon Wertheimer, in 1929 noted the contrast between the endless theoretical disputes in Continental socialist parties and the pragmatic politics of the British Labour Party rooted, in his view, in a religious idealism derived from Nonconformity.[68]

Nonetheless, Symons' formulation is far too simplistic. The distinctiveness of Nonconformity within inter-war Europe lay not in its religious tradition but in its relationship to power structures, and particularly the role of the Church of England within those structures. After all, in terms of theology and church polity Nonconformity does not differ particularly from cognate churches on the Continent. Indeed, Scottish divines, including those members of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland who necessarily became Nonconformist on their move south to England, were often closely linked to German theological training or had even completed their own studies there.[69] German theology and Bible criticism were also very influential in liberalising trends in Nonconformist training colleges in the late nineteenth century, not least through the spread of the ideas of Albrecht Ritschl on the promotion of the Kingdom of God on earth and of Adolf Harnack on the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.[70] The significant democratising tendencies of this Social Gospel were derived not from historic Nonconformity but Germany. In Germany, however, these ideas

operated in a very different political, religious and constitutional setting. There was a combination of a strong state, compliant and dominant churches within their distinctive areas of the country, weak civil society institutions and the legacy of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* era of negative integration in the 1870s through opposition to enemies within all. These all helped to undermine the efforts of the Weimar republic to embed democracy.

Britain historically had a state that was at least equally strong as that of Germany. The combination of that strong state and efforts to bolster its authority using the main form of communication to the public sphere of the early modern period, the pulpit, had also created the distinctive entity called the Church of England. It was that church - by the twentieth century diffuse in theology, order and liturgy - that was distinctive in Europe, as was its relationships with the other churches of these islands. Its failure to impose an ecclesiastical order within those isles led, after the upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century, to accommodation with a different establishment in Scotland and - to very differing degrees - elements of tolerated pluralism everywhere within the United Kingdom. The British state thus early moved from seeking to incorporate the populace into a monolithic social order through an Erastian church and instead gave a degree of rights to those who refused to conform to it. The result was that religious minorities developed their own relationships with the state.

From the early eighteenth century they also developed their own bodies for lobbying it. Gradually this led to limited incorporation in the political order. Between 1828 and 1858 Nonconformists, Catholics and Jews were successively granted by parliament emancipation on the limited franchise of the time. These developments produced in Nonconformity by the end of the nineteenth century in the pugnacious character of Hugh Price Hughes the conviction that their churches could and ought to be speaking to the nation on its Christian governance.[71] They had thus been incorporated into a public sphere that was democratic in

the sense that social groups were not generally excluded deliberately from positions either of power or influence, rather than in terms of the formal suffrage. These developments, however, reflected not the religious traditions of Nonconformity, but its changing political circumstances.

Indeed, the pugnacity of late Victorian Nonconformity was partly as a result of the franchise reform of 1867. Nonconformists were among the principal beneficiaries of a measure which also for the first time enfranchised large numbers of the urban working classes. Again, this was a structural political development to which Nonconformity responded. That same year the Royal Commission on Trade Unions was established, followed by the founding of the Trades Union Congress the following year. In light of this, R. W. Dale warned in his presidential address to the Congregational Union in 1869 that the questions working people were now discussing 'with the keenest interest affect the whole structure and order of society'.[72] He thus pointed to the need to look beyond the struggles of Nonconformity for recognition from the state to other groups who also needed recognition from Nonconformists themselves. Informed of their significance in the nation by the religious census of 1851, some Nonconformists readily embraced the opportunity to speak beyond their narrow communities to Britain as a whole. For instance, as Price Hughes reflected in 1884, the churches had 'to do their long-neglected duty in caring for the social welfare of the people', not least because in so doing they might 'bring back the alienated masses to the social brotherhood of Christ'.[73]

One consequence of the Nonconformist Conscience that Price Hughes then fostered, its confluence with the aspirations of the Social Gospel, and the concomitant shift away from a stress on individual salvation, was a growing tendency to speak to the public duties of the state.[74] Thus *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, produced by the London Congregational Union in 1883, observed that it was no surprise that slum-dwellers took to sin and drink and

that the only solution was for the state to 'secure for the poorest the rights of citizenship'.[75] Such statements indicated an abandonment of Nonconformity's traditional hostility to an Erastian state. For late Victorian pulpit policy entrepreneurs like Price Hughes, Dale or the distinguished Baptist preacher John Clifford, state intervention – far from reducing freedom – was, by enlarging the opportunities available to all in society, a way of advancing it.[76]

Similar developments started even earlier within the Church of England marked, for instance, by the emphasis on corporate effort for the common good in F. D. Maurice's *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838),[77] rather than the stress on individual salvation of much of the evangelicalism of the period. The shift in concepts of responsibility this marked was to become increasingly general in the later nineteenth century. In the process this theological shift helped to prepare the ground for acceptance of democratisation in two ways: by reducing the tendency to regard the unregenerate as irresponsible, and by stressing communities of interest wider than those respectably gathered in church or chapel. Sinners, in *The Bitter Cry*, became victims. Evil became social, as much as individual. The central Christian doctrine of Christ's atonement was subtly democratised. It was still about saving individuals as

> Jesus came to save men's souls, but salvation was a question of a man's condition *now*, and his relation to the world in which he lived. If we believed in the salvation of the soul, we must also believe in the damnation of everything which warred against the soul (Italics in original).[78]

This last point meant an increasing willingness to see state intervention to tackle such evils. This change in attitude to both sin and the potentialities of the state explained for Scott Lidgett the much more positive attitude towards democracy developing by the twentieth century within his denomination.[79]

Contrast this with 1827, when Jabez Bunting, as dominant a figure in early nineteenth century Wesleyan Methodism as Scott Lidgett was in the early twentieth, allegedly contended that Methodism was as opposed to democracy as it was to sin. Democracy was certainly seen as a distraction from the more important work of salvation, rather than the adjunct to it that it had become by Scott Lidgett's time. This view also drew on a tendency to equate political radicalism with atheism. Bunting's position furthermore reflected that of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in the eighteenth century. In that era, characterised as it was by mob violence, democracy was easily equated with mob rule, while the maintenance of social order was felt to be dependent upon the defence of church and crown.[80] The risk that the authority of that crown could be used to impose disabilities upon Methodism, most recently in Lord Sidmouth's abortive bill of 1811, was another consideration that doubtless encouraged senior figures like Bunting to avoid any political controversies as far as possible. At an official level Methodists therefore were often more inclined prudently to stress their loyalty to King and Country than to avow any disruptive democratising tendencies.[81] Anti-Catholicism and a continuing suspicion that Catholics owed their first loyalty to their religion rather than their fellow countrymen was a further factor. As one Wesleyan wrote in 1836 in justification of opposition to democracy, 'no government ought to tolerate men who cannot give any security to that government for their allegiance and peaceable behaviour'.[82]

Wesleyans at that time did not always see themselves as Nonconformists. But nor did Nonconformity more widely at this time necessarily bear out Symons' formulation either. A theoretical predisposition towards democracy in their church polities only came to expressed to wider society as well once Nonconformists came to see themselves as part of mainstream society. It also coincided with a growing realisation of a need to reach out to rather than fear the rising democracy of the industrial working classes during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Dale's friend, the Unitarian mayor of Birmingham Joseph Chamberlain put it in

1875, ‘when these people whom we have suffered to grow up like beasts behave like brutes’ rather than using this to justify repression it should instead be grounds for tackling their circumstances.[83] Democracy thus moved conceptually from being a dangerous means of empowering king mob, to being a necessary way of containing and civilising it.

A degree of democracy within Nonconformist church polities may have helped to prepare certain social groups for the transition to democracy in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It, however, was not the main driver of this process. Instead, changes in their social and political position as well as the growing importance of the often unchurched working classes led to Nonconformists like Dale and Price Hughes arguing that they needed to reach out to this rising democracy so as to incorporate them in a changing political order. Notwithstanding Symons' opportunistic appropriation of it during the emergency of the Second World War, Nonconformists indeed could readily recognise that democracy was not so much an outgrowth of their historic witness for liberty as a mechanism for managing mass society. Gwilym O. Griffith certainly recognised in 1937 that there was nothing intrinsically virtuous or Christian about democracy. He argued that the voice of the people was that neither of God or Satan, nor was it necessarily better or worse than that of despots. Like all political devices, and indeed like all theological systems, it operated on an understanding of human nature: 'For is not human nature the raw material of politics, and does it not follow that any political system that is informed by a misconception of the human stuff is to that extent foredoomed to failure?' For Griffith totalising understandings of human nature of the kind then increasingly in vogue elsewhere were just such misconceptions. Their doctrine of human nature he characterised as 'sentimental and deceptive political idealism', combined with a deplorable tendency to scapegoat outsider groups - whether Jews, the bourgeoisie or Bolsheviks - thus implying that their elimination will somehow solve the intractable problems of humanity. Here was the demagoguery Fisher warned of. Such

political creeds offered for Griffith 'the evil....of a false Millenarianism which claims for the new revolutionary programme a virtue and finality that belongs only to the Kingdom of God'.[84]

Democracy, if it was to confront such misconceptions and avoid the blandishments of the demagogues purveying the great programmes Fisher warned of, had to be based upon a different doctrine of human nature. Democracy was thus not a moral good in itself, but an instrument through which power could be mediated and held to account. That accountability applied not only to those who held power, but also to those responsible for putting them there. Accordingly, it had to be underpinned by individual moral responsibility. 'Democratic liberty', Griffith consequently warned, could not be taken for granted, for it was 'simply the political reflex of that fundamental moral freedom of man without which neither repentance nor moral life itself is possible'.[85]Additionally, like all human systems, it could readily be perverted by those who thought that they were right, rather than having the humility to recognise that they might be wrong.[86] Collectivism as an outgrowth of the mass democracy that had arrived with the Great War was thus a particular danger. As Porritt warned in a 1936 editorial:

> any appeal to idealism on the part of an organisation claiming sovereign rights over the human conscience is fundamentally specious; it is specious because the collective – be it the nation, the race or a social class – becomes in fact an enlargement of that very egotism which in the individual we regard as a sin....To exalt the collective is to degrade the spirit of Man.[87]

It was certainly to downgrade individual and collective responsibility for actions by investing the collective with quasi-religious values.

It is no coincidence that the warnings of Griffith, Porritt and others appeared against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism. Similar concerns were, however, already being expressed, including by Socialists among Nonconformity, in the 1920s. One such Socialist was the leading Congregationalist minister A. D. Belden. He pointed out in 1927 that democracy was not some mechanistic tool but a responsibility placed on all those who exercised power within it, both electors and elected. This, indeed, was how the democratic traditions of the chapel were felt to have worked. The elector's responsibilities therefore did not end at the ballot box. Instead, the elector had to 'yield....to the right spirit and take risks for his ideals if true democracy is to be achieved'.[88] A similar emphasis that a democratic state necessarily rested upon the personal responsibilities of the electorate – including holding those in power to account – informed the views of his fellow Christian Socialist, the Methodist Samuel Keeble.[89]

Democracy was not rejected: it was simply that it was not of itself enough. It is too abstract a means of managing social relations and maximising consent. Whereas the post-Reformation state had sought to use a state church as the source of public doctrine and social meaning and order, democracy can be seen as merely a range of mechanistic processes to give voice to elements in a society. As the example of Imperial Germany had then recently made clear, universal manhood suffrage is not sufficient in itself to have a democratic political order. Some Nonconformists like Mellor may have nonetheless invested the exercise of voting with value and meaning in and of itself. For most, and certainly Belden, Griffith and Keeble, it was instead more a means to the end of a more Christian society responsive to the challenges of modernity. For Fisher this could only be underpinned by 'a motive, such as Christ alone can supply'.[90]

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Field, *Periodizing Secularization*; Husselbee and Badham, *Free Churches and Society*; Inglis, *Churches and the Working Class*; Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival*; Mayor, *The Churches and the Labour Movement*; Smith, *Religion and the Rise of Labour*; Wickham *Church and People*.
[2] Cited in Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 111.
[3] Bagwell, *Outcast London*; Catterall, 'Slums and Salvation', 121-123.
[4] See, for instance, Salamé, *Democracy without Democrats?*; Tessler, 'Islam and Democracy in the Middle East'; Ciftci, 'Islam, Social Justice and Democracy'.
[5] See, for instance, Kaiser and Wohnout *Political Catholicism*; Gehler and Kaiser *Christian Democracy*.
[6] See Kubicek, *Political Islam and Democracy*.
[7] In particular see Grimley, 'The Religion of Englishness'; Williamson, 'Christian Conservatives'; Williamson, 'State Prayers'; Williamson, 'National Days of Prayer'.
[8] This grouping included Presbyterians, Congregationalists, the Methodists who emerged in the eighteenth century, and smaller bodies such as Unitarians and Quakers.
[9] Thompson, 'Nonconformists and Polity', 90-92.
[10] Manning, 'Puritanism and Democracy'.
[11] Mackenzie, *Letters*, 60.
[12] See Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, chs 3 & 4.
[13] Fisher, 'The Army and Religion', 70.
[14] A rare exception is Barrow and Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement*.
[15] Lloyd George, *The Great War*, 13-14.
[16] Royal Commission, *Report*, 13.
[17] Ostrogorski, 'Caucus in England', 287.
[18] Catterall, 'Politics of Electoral Reform', 129-36.
[19] *House of Lords Debates*, 5th ser., vol.28, c.38, 29 January 1918.
[20] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 2-8, 44-45; Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*.
[21] Porritt, *More and More*, 96.
[22] Mellor, *Liberation*, 91.
[23] Johnson, 'Fundamental Principle of Social Reconstruction'.
[24] 'Baptist Unity' *The Times*, 29 April 1914.
[25] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 179.
[26] Coats, 'The Social Problem'.
[27] Edwards, *Methodism and England*, 230.
[28] J. Scott Lidgett. Editorial in *Methodist Times*, 31 January 1918.
[29] Hughes, 'Reconstruction in Social Life'.
[30] *British Weekly*, 10 January 1924.
[31] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 153-4.
[32] *Christian World*, 23 November 1922
[33] *Christian World*, 21 March 1918.

[34] See, for instance, *Christian World*, 5 August 1926.
[35] *Baptist Times* 26 April 1918.
[36] See, for instance, Edwards, *S. E. Keeble*, 45-51.
[37] *Bolton Congregationalist*, June 1926.
[38] Porritt,*More and More*, 73-77.
[39] Fisher, 'The Army and Religion', 70.
[40] Griffith, 'The British Letter', 1204.
[41] Seleny, 'Tradition, Modernity and Democracy', 482.
[42] See A. J. Balfour's celebrated 1927 observation that 'our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker', cited in Fair, *British Interparty Conferences*, 275.
[43] Cross, *Philip Snowden*, chapter 1.
[44] Royal Commission, *Report*, 33-4.
[45] Cited in Catterall, '"Efficiency with Freedom?"', 5, 35. See also Emden, 'The Mandate', 260-72
[46] Catterall, '"Efficiency with Freedom?"', 5-9.
[47] Hailsham, *The Dilemma of Democracy*, esp. Chapter 20.
[48] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 160.
[49] See Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government*; Rubinstein, 'Britain's Elites'.
[50] See Wells, *Meanwhile*, 106.
[51] *House of Commons Debates*, 5th ser., vol.444, cc.206-7, 11 November 1947
[52] Churchill, *Savrola*.
[53] Pimlott, *Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940-45*, 462 (1 July 1942).
[54] Ostrogorski, 'Caucus in England', 293.
[55] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 39-42.
[56] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 182-3, 280.
[57] Belloc, *The Servile State*; Belloc and MacDonald, *Socialism and the Servile State*, 5-7.
[58] Cecil, Lord Hugh. *Conservatism*.
[59] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 320-1; Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 34.
[60] Riddell, 'Catholic Church', 267-70.
[61] Catterall, 'The Party and Religion, 654.
[62] Labour Party Archives, Manchester: J.S.Middleton Papers, JSM/RC/1, Memorandum attached to Middleton to Duffy, 22 February 1937.
[63] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 325.
[64] Mews, 'The Churches', 318-337.
[65] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 280.
[66] Cited in Payne, *Free Church Tradition*, 151.
[67] *Christian World*, 17 May 1923.
[68] Wertheimer, *Portrait*, pp.159-60, 196-7. See also Linden *Sozialismus und Religion*.
[69] See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 184-6; Selbie, *Andrew Martin Fairbairn*.
[70] See, for instance, Pitts, 'The Kingdom of Heaven', 253-8; Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, pp.14-15
[71] Robertson Nicoll and Robinson,*Hugh Price Hughes*, 78 (contribution by F. A. Atkins).
[72] Binfield, 'Dale and Politics', 105.
[73] Cited in Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, 114.
[74] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, ch..1; Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*.
[75] Mearns, *Bitter Cry*, 24.
[76] Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 199

[77] Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ*.
[78] W. F. Lofthouse cited in *Methodist Times*, 16 May 1918.
[79] Scott Lidgett, 'Christian Idea of God', 551-9.
[80] Noppen, *Transforming Words*; Thompson, *English Working Class*, 387-431; Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 165.
[81] Royle, 'Methodism and Politics', 265.
[82] Letter to *The Times*, 15 January 1836, p.3; see also Royle, 'Methodism and Politics', pp.271-2.
[83] Cited in Gehrke, 'A Radical Endeavor', 36.
[84] Griffith, 'Political Liberalism', 320.
[85] Griffith, 'Political Liberalism', 317-23.
[86] Griffith, 'Christian Outlook', 32-43.
[87] Editorial, *Christian World*, 8 February 1936.
[88] Belden, 'The Atonement and Democracy', 11-16.
[89] Edwards, *S. E. Keeble*, 48.
[90] Fisher, 'The Army and Religion', 70.

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