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Did Protestantism Create Democracy?

STEVE BRUCE

This essay assesses the contribution of the reformed strand of Christianity to the rise of liberal democracy. Insofar as it is persuasive, it illustrates the possibility of treating religion as a cause of political phenomena. The account draws attention to some complexities of causation that are often overlooked in the arguments over the role of religion in politics.

Key words: democracy; protestantism; reformation; Christianity

Introduction

This essay has a number of purposes. It assesses the contribution of the reformed strand of Christianity to the rise of liberal democracy. Insofar as it is persuasive, it illustrates the possibility of treating religion as a cause of political phenomena. And as far as space constraints allow, it draws attention to some complexities of causation that are often overlooked in the rather ritualistic arguments over the role of religion in politics.

It is common for contemporary scholars to suppose religions so flexible, malleable and variegated as to be capable of producing and justifying any form of social organization, any social action and any set of social mores. Fred Halliday quotes favourably a scholar saying of Islam that it is so broad that

it is possible to catch almost any fish one wants. It is, like all the great religions, a reservoir of values, symbols and ideas from which it is possible to derive a contemporary politics and social code: the answer as to why this or that interpretation was put upon Islam resides therefore, not in the religion and its texts itself, but in the contemporary needs of those articulating Islamic politics.¹

Bruce Lawrence takes a similar line when he writes that religion's 'pervasiveness as a general condition was matched only by its malleability as a contextual variant open to limitless interpretation'.²

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Both writers make a valid point. The great religions do indeed contain such a variety of ideas that many different outcomes can be justified as the will of God or Allah. Lawrence is right that context matters a great deal. Even so, there are certain 'socio-logics'. There is an orderliness to the world. Although there are a wide variety of possible combinations of cultures, economies and polities, some are rare and certain combinations are not found because they are impossible. It is not an accident that there are no feudal democracies; the principles of feudal economy and of democratic polity are incompatible. To return to the fish and sea analogy, it may well be the case that similar fish can be found in many seas and many seas support a variety of fish. Nonetheless, there are systematic variations in the kind of fish found in warm and in cold waters, in salt and in fresh waters, in shallow and in deep waters.

A number of preliminary asides may clarify the approach adopted here. First, the writer is not an 'orientalist' deserving of Edward Said's censure for making invidious comparisons between Christianity and Islam.³ As has been made clear at greater length elsewhere,⁴ some of the features of religions that have notable political consequences cut across the civilizations which some hold to 'clash'.⁵ Second, the crucial differences tend either to be abstract and or to form part of the deep, rather than surface, structure of each faith. For example, whether a religion mandates in detail a particular way of public life seems of much greater importance than many specific doctrines. Third, as Max Weber argued in his classic essay on the 'Protestant Ethic' (1904–1905), the major consequences of religious innovations are unintended and inadvertent.⁶ The approach taken here, like Weber's, cannot be dismissed as unsociological idealism, because its causal connections are generally ironic. They result from socio-psychological and socio-structural imperatives causing ideas to be developed in ways quite other than those intended by the people who promoted the innovations. Fourth, nothing in the approach here requires that major religions be utterly unlike. To point to the many similarities in the major religions as an objection against citing differences as causes of subsequent major political differences is a red herring: there is no reason why small differences cannot cause big differences. Fifth, nothing in the approach requires that major religions be unchanging. Brevity requires us to use terms such as 'Protestantism' with few qualifying adjectives; this does not mean we are unaware of differences within reformed Christianity. To talk of a 'Protestant ethic', as Weber does, is not to suggest that all Protestants, throughout Christendom and over four centuries, were the same. It only requires that he has correctly identified the beliefs and values of certain Protestants and that he is basically correct in supposing those beliefs and values to differ from those of adherents to other religions in comparable circumstances. Far more could be said on these points but their significance should be clearer once the specific argument of this essay is elaborated.

Spokesmen for the Loyal Orange Institution and other Protestant organizations believe that their forefathers were responsible for a variety of social virtues and social institutions that either constitute or promote liberal democracy: personal autonomy, freedom of choice, literacy, diligence, temperance, loyalty, democratic accountability, egalitarianism and the overlapping ties of voluntary association we now call 'civil society'. Hence Popery is not just the wrong religion; it is a social evil. As a former Presbyterian clergyman and Ulster Unionist MP explained,

The seeds of democracy were sown in the Reformation. The liberties of Europe began with the growth of new nations. William of Orange stood with his family motto, 'Je maintendrai' appended to the slogan 'The Protestant Religion and Liberties of England'.⁷

There is enough in the historical record to make such a claim worth considering.

British political history was shaped by conflicts between despotic Catholic monarchs and a Protestant parliament. Protestant nations were generally in the vanguard of the rise of parliamentary democracy. And there is much in the twentieth-century history of Europe to suggest some non-accidental connection between religion and democracy. There are four major Christian traditions in Europe. There are the two communal religions of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, the individualist religion of thoroughly Reformed Protestantism and, somewhere between them, Lutheranism, which promoted most of the theological principles of the Reformation but constrained them within the ecclesiastical frame of the pre-Reformation church and moderated political radicalism by encouraging a quiescent attitude to the state. With varying degrees of willingness, most of the countries of twentieth-century Europe have enjoyed a dictatorship of either the right or the left. Looking at the fascist regimes first, almost all were Catholic: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Croatia, Austria and Lithuania. Germany was two-thirds Catholic. And there were three Lutheran examples: the Quisling regime in Norway and the rather moderately right-wing dictatorships in Estonia and Latvia. The communist regimes were mostly Orthodox (the Soviet Union, Bulgaria), Catholic (Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia), Lutheran (Latvia, Estonia and East Germany) or, as in the case of Yugoslavia, a mixture of Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim. Given the very large numbers of countries that have had totalitarian or authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century, it might be easier to compile the list the other way round and ask what religion were those societies that avoided dictatorship. Holland, the United Kingdom and some of its former colonies, Switzerland and the USA were predominantly Reformed Protestant. Sweden and Finland were Lutheran.

Additional examples could be drawn from a very different setting: Latin America. In the twentieth century oppressive regimes of the right were Catholic and there is an apparent connection between the spread of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism and democratization.⁸ The matching is nowhere near perfect but there is enough of an apparent pattern for us to understand how many Protestants can believe that their religion confers some sort of resistance to authoritarianism.

The impartial observer could retort that, even in the twentieth century, militant Protestantism has produced its own authoritarian movements. In 1930s Scotland, the Scottish Protestant League in Glasgow and Protestant Action in Edinburgh won local council seats on an anti-Irish and anti-Catholic platform. In the USA, the Ku Klux Klan and various other nativist movements presented a similarly curtailed notion of freedoms and rights: democracy was to be restricted to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. And the two contemporary examples of Protestants in power – Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972 and apartheid South Africa – hardly offer models of liberal democracy. The failure of these movements and regimes actually strengthens the claim for a causal connection between reformed religion and democracy in that all were partly undermined by their own democratic rhetoric. But we can acknowledge them here simply as evidence that social reality is vastly more complex than the partisans would wish.

To state the writer's conclusion before elaborating the grounds for arriving at it, then, the general response to the Orange claim is to accept that there is a strong and non-accidental relationship between the rise of Protestantism and the rise of democracy. But to this must be added the rider that the strongest links between reformed Christianity and democracy are *unintended consequences*. The shift from feudal monarchy to egalitarian democracy was not a result of actions intended to produce that effect. Instead it was the ironic (and often deeply regretted) by-product of actions promoted for quite different reasons. The Reformation contributed to the evolution of democracy but its supporters can hardly take the credit.

The following sections work through a number of possible causal connections between Protestantism and what might commonly be regarded as necessary conditions for, or features of, liberal democracy.

Individualism and Lay Activism

The Reformation did not invent the autonomous individual; it was itself a response in the religious realm to changes in social relations that had seen many organic communities undermined. But it did give a powerful boost to two notions fundamental to liberal democracy: that people are more than their social roles and that, despite their social roles, people are much-of-a-muchness.

The Reformation raised up the individual by ending the possibility of the transfer of religious merit from the more to the less Godly. If the good could not pass on merit to the less good by performing religious acts on their behalf then each individual had to stand on his or her own feet before God. This assertion of the free-standing individual gave very little place to rights. It was an individualism primarily of responsibilities. But by ending the system in which religious officials could placate God on behalf of the community and by making every one of us severally (rather than jointly) responsible for our salvational fate, the Reformers created a powerful cat that would eventually escape the theocratic bag.

At the same time, by removing the special role of the clergy as intermediaries between God and his creation, the Reformers laid the foundations for egalitarianism. Initially this assertion of equality was confined to that small part of life concerned with entry to the next kingdom but it did mean that an important potential was created, which subsequent economic and political changes would allow to be fulfilled. They also gave a new impetus to lay activism. Medieval Christianity tended to mirror the feudal structure in expecting and allowing little of the common people; the Reformers demanded an active laity, mindful and diligent. Lay participation without the mediation of the clergy created a model in the sphere of religion for what later became the ethos of modern democracy.

Factionalism and Schism

One of the most significant inadvertent consequences of the Reformation was cultural diversity. In insisting that everyone could discern the will of God through the reading of his Holy Word, the Reformers shifted the basis of religion from an authoritarian and hierarchical epistemology (in which the truth was available only to a very small number of people) to an essentially democratic one. They did not, of course, endorse the ultimately liberal and relativistic view that what everyone believed was equally true. The long-term consequence of that was not anticipated by the Reformers because, being theists who believed in one God, one Holy Spirit and one Holy Word, they assumed that the false and dangerous cohesion previously maintained by the hierarchical church would be replaced by a true and liberating cohesion that came naturally from responding to the Creator. They were wrong. The human default position is not consensus. Removing the theologically justified coercion of the hierarchical church and permitting open access to the salvational truth allowed many competing visions to arise as different social groups developed the dominant religious tradition in ways that better suited their material and cultural interests.

Although many of the Reformers were highly authoritarian and attempted to impose their particular vision on others (Calvin's Geneva and Knox's

Edinburgh were not after all tolerant democracies) such impositions lacked core theological justification, were short lived, and did little to retard the proliferation of competing convictions. Furthermore, the theocracy version of Calvinism was only one (and the least popular) strand of Reformed thinking about the role of social order. There were at least two powerful alternatives that militated against theocracy. Christianity began by asserting the separation of church and state: Christ said that we should render 'unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's'.⁹ That sentiment was reinforced by Christianity's three centuries in the political wilderness before it moved into the seat of Roman imperial power. That combination of belief and history is quite different to the experience of Islam, which did not at its foundation preach a division between the spiritual and material world and which achieved political power immediately. Of course, when they could, many Christian church leaders attempted to impose their faith upon the world, but the older tradition of pietistic retreat to the catacombs remained a powerful resource which could be called upon when necessary. It returned with the Reformation which 'postulating two "kingdoms" insisted upon the total difference between the spiritual order and the temporal or secular world of physical beings and object'.¹⁰ The Lutheran strand easily accepted the two kingdoms and permitted the secular to dominate. The Calvinists tried to maintain a compact of mutual support between the civil magistrate (or the state, as we would now call it) and the church. For brief periods the preachers ruled their burghs. On the other side, a strong pietist tradition argued that undue entanglement with the temporal world contaminated the righteous.

That position is common in third-world Pentecostalism, where pietistic retreat is seen as an effective way of avoiding the corruption of tribal and 'big man' politics. It remains influential in American fundamentalism. When television evangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson led the New Christian Right (NCR) in the 1980s and 1990s, a section of fundamentalism associated with Bob Jones University argued that the NCR was positively dangerous. This was because it could mislead the unregenerate into thinking that social reform was an alternative to personal conversion. Indeed the pietist case can be taken to the extreme of arguing that a bad society might actually be a better environment for preaching the need for personal redemption than a good one because dire circumstances are more likely to bring the soul under 'conviction of sin'.

One cause of Protestantism's increased factionalism was deliberate, though again, the consequences were not at the time foreseen: the insistence on lay activism. The replacement of a largely passive liturgical mode of religion by one which required that every individual become personally committed to propagating the new faith inevitably increased the tendency to

schism by increasing the number of people who felt they had a responsibility to decide what was the true religion.

Factionalism led inadvertently to toleration and eventually to religious liberty. It is important for the argument here to appreciate how reluctant the early Protestant sects were to accept the implications of their voluntarism. The reason for believing there is a genuine causal connection is precisely that people were led by the logic of their own arguments and by the consequences of their actions to do things *they did not want to do*. Only after they recognized the inevitable did they rummage around in their ideology to provide a new interpretation that legitimated the initially undesired outcome. The point can be illustrated by the example of the fragmentation of the Christian Church in Scotland. The first two major schisms were thoroughly committed to theocratic rule. The Covenanters (later called the Reformed Presbyterians) refused to accept the seventeenth-century settlement of the relationship between church and state, not because they were opposed to the idea of the state coercing conformity, but because they had not been given sufficient weight in determining just what was to be imposed.

The second major wave of splits, which gave rise to the Seceders, was also theocratic. The Erskines and their followers broke away from the Church of Scotland in 1733 because they objected to the heritors (the Scottish equivalent of patrons) imposing insufficiently Godly ministers on congregations. They had no problem at all with the imposition of ministers of whom they approved. It was only with the third split (that of Thomas Gillespie in 1751, whose followers styled themselves the Relief Presbytery) that we find a movement opposed on principle to the state support for the church. Gillespie had trained with the English Congregationalists before entering the ministry of the Church of Scotland and had acquired something of their liberal spirit.

It is a mark of the times that this third split was the least popular of the three and grew markedly more slowly than the Secession. The fourth and largest split – the 1843 Disruption that led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland – was, like the first two, rooted in the intolerant idea that the state should support the true religion. However it is significant that there had, by then, been an important change in what it was thought proper for the state to do to ensure the correct religion. In the seventeenth century it was acceptable for the state to use dragoons: the Covenanters objected not to war but to losing. By the middle of the nineteenth century, social pressure, public taxation and preferential access to such means of socialization as the national school system marked the extent of what the theocrats thought it was proper to do to support the correct religion; contrast that with the current constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan that mandates the death penalty for apostasy! For all that softening, there was little recognition that people had a right to choose their religion and considerable opposition to the idea of secular provision of social services.

The irony of Protestantism is that it was its own impossible combination of an open epistemology and an insistence that there was only one truth that created pluralism. By reducing theological support for human coercion while at the same time insisting that there could be only one way to God, the Reformers encouraged a proliferation of competing groups. The result we can see in the changing attitudes to toleration displayed by the various Scottish sects. Gradually each sect came to appreciate that it had failed in its mission and that it would remain a minority. Not surprisingly, it then began to appreciate the virtues of toleration. Simultaneously the state was also coming to accept that, in a context of increasing religious diversity, social harmony required the state to become increasingly tolerant and finally neutral in matters of religion. And each sect gradually reduced the claims that it made for its unique access to the saving truth and came to see itself as one denomination among others.

This is, of course, a simplifying summary. Nevertheless a good case can be made for saying that one of the greatest impacts of the Reformation on the relationship between church and state was the line that ran from factionalism and schism to increasing diversity to increasing toleration to a finally neutral state. In different countries the accommodation developed in different ways. In Britain, there was a gradual fudge in which the state churches were allowed to retain nominal privileges but were gradually stripped of their real powers. In the early twentieth century, their funding base in public taxation was commuted to a lump sum. Thereafter, they were on their own. In the American colonies the need to devise a new political structure from scratch hastened the process and made it explicit. Although nine of the 13 founding colonies had state churches, many of those were challenged by internal diversity and taken together there could be no state church because the colonies had different religions established. In order to make one out of many, that one had to be religiously neutral (or at least very ill-defined) and that requirement was made explicit in the founding documents of the United States. In Australia, the British began by establishing the Church of England and then responded to the reality of sectarian diversity by briefly supporting a number of churches. The 1836 New South Wales Church Act added the Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches to those financially supported by the state but in 1862 the state shifted to the US position of supporting none.

Metaphor and Privatization

It is worth noting one feature of Christianity that marks it off from Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism: its stress on doctrine as distinct from ritual or way of life. Christianity (especially in its Protestant version) is a religion of orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy and this has profound social consequences. A religion that mandates a particular way of life (and in Islam that is

quite specific because its founding text contains detailed instructions for the good life) tends to be theocratic. If there is only one God and God requires that we fast during Ramadan, it is difficult for adherents to suppose that they must observe Ramadan while their neighbours do not. Muslims, when they can, impose their faith on the entire society.

All faiths have what we might call a 'bolstering interest' in imposing themselves on others; acquiring social power for our ideas is useful in reassuring us that we are right. But Christians do not have a strong theological imperative to impose on others because there is very little that their faith mandates as a way of life. To understand why that is the case we need to go back to the foundation of Christianity. As we can see in the construction of its sacred text, Christianity begins by taking the religion of the Jews and treating it *metaphorically*. The promises that the Old Testament has God making to the Jews were taken as a metaphor for the real promises that God made to the Christians. Similarly the specific requirements set on the Jews (circumcision, dietary laws and the rest) are re-interpreted as either meaning something else or as belonging only to a particular historical dispensation. Although the Catholic Church reintroduced ways of life in its mode of treating faith as a communal and organic matter, the Protestant reformation swept much of that away and reduced the Christian faith to a series of beliefs and attitudes. Holding the right beliefs did not require much of the surrounding world. The point can be seen clearly if we consider the visibility of the consequences of piety. A pious Hindu, Jew or Muslim is highly visible; an evangelical Christian can be almost invisible.

To repeat, then, Christianity (and especially its Protestant strand) has less of a need than other major religions to govern the social and political worlds. More easily than most religions, Protestantism can become privatized. This is not to deny that Christians in certain times and places have been tempted to introduce theocratic rule.

Economic Development and Egalitarianism

If we accept that the seed of egalitarianism was inherent in the Reformation, what delayed its germination for 300 years? In this regard, Gellner's explanation, which concentrates on the functional prerequisites of economic development, seems plausible.¹¹

Economic modernization brought with it an increased division of labour, increased social mobility and an increase in the extent to which life became divided into distinct spheres, each with its own values. The simple hierarchies of the feudal world, with their relatively few opportunities for social mobility, were replaced by a larger (and ever-increasing) number of task-specific hierarchies. The feudal lord could not recognize that his serf and his lieutenant

were similar beings because to have granted that degree of likeness would have threatened the feudal order. But with the proliferation of task-specific hierarchies, it became possible to see people in terms of a variety of roles, judged on a number of specific status scales. Thus the mill owner could dominate his workers during the day and yet sit alongside them and even listen to one of them preach in a Methodist chapel. Of course power based in one world could be deployed in another. In the Vale of Leven, an industrial area north of Glasgow, in the early twentieth century, it was still common to find the factory owner who was also the major landlord, the local Member of Parliament, the senior elder of the Church of Scotland congregation, a leading Freemason, a magistrate, a major figure in the Orange Order and patron of almost every voluntary association. But unlike the medieval serf, the worker who resented his employer's power could change churches, change jobs, move house or leave the county. Although the local magnate could hope that his standing in one sphere would entitle him to high status in another, he could not impose himself. And that degree of concentration of power was already rare and died out shortly after the First World War.

In the circumstances of economic modernization it becomes possible to distinguish between the roles people play and their essential selves. It thus becomes possible, at least in theory, to accord to all humanity a common worth while maintaining specific status differences in specific fields. It took a long time and much social conflict before that basic egalitarianism was translated into a language of civil liberties and human rights, but gradually the privileges of the rich were extended to all men and then to rich women and to all women and then to children. If it is the case that economic modernization and increased prosperity were crucial to the rise of democracy in the West, then it is also likely, if we accept Max Weber's argument for a causal but unintended connection between the Protestant ethic (a psychology created by a combination of popularized Reformation innovations) and the spirit of capitalism, that Protestantism played a part in that particular equation.

If we now return to the point about diversity we can see why egalitarianism is central to the story. In most societies, the response to diversity is to crush it. Enduring supra-national units as the German Holy Roman empire, the extended Hapsburg kingdoms or the Ottoman empire usually found ways of incorporating religions and nations relatively peacefully. But by and large, when two competing religions came into contact, one attempted to impose itself upon the other. Egalitarianism is an important part of the equation because it explains why Western societies gave up trying to impose conformity. The egalitarian impulse of modernization meant that, at the political level, the costs of coercing religious conformity were no longer acceptable: the state was no longer willing to pay the price of social conflict. Instead it became neutral on the competing claims of various religious bodies. In the

seventeenth-century Treaty of Westphalia states accepted the need to tolerate neighbours of different religious hue. Two centuries later they came to the same recognition with regard to variations among their own citizens. So in addition to the minority *loser's* route to toleration sketched above with the example of the Scottish sects, we have a majority route. Gradually the modern state reduces its support for the dominant religion and the state church has to come to see itself as one denomination among others.

One of the difficulties in trying to evaluate possible causal connections is that social practices that originated in one place for one reason can become attractive for quite different reasons and hence relatively autonomous. Thus it may be that the Puritans had a particular Protestant ethic that made them unusually susceptible to attitudes conducive to capitalism, but once their work practices were patently paying off, it was quite possible for those practices to become divorced from their original attitudinal base and be adopted by Catholics. The same can be said for toleration. By the second half of the nineteenth century the different routes to toleration found in France (with its cataclysmic revolution), Britain (with its peaceful evolution) and the United States (able to construct a constitution from scratch) were coalescing to form the general idea that modern democracies did not prescribe or proscribe religion. Take the example of Norway in the second half of the nineteenth century: some pressure for increased religious liberty came from dissenters, but the schisms from the Lutheran church (and even the reforming movements within the church) were far less powerful than they had been in Britain. But dissenting self-interest was powerfully augmented by political reformers who on philosophical grounds argued that religious liberty should be a fundamental plank of democratization.

The Catholic Church was extremely reluctant to accept this idea and as late as the 1960s Vatican officials could be found arguing that error should not be tolerated but in most European countries the fatal flirtation with fascism was enough to persuade Catholics to endorse democracy. After 1945, European Christian Democrat parties, although officered and voted for by pious Catholics, allowed the 'Democrat' part of their identity to constrain the 'Christian' part.

Social Democracy

The above mention of the French Revolution reminds us that Protestantism was not the only source of progressive and radical political ideas. However, there is a crucial religious difference in the environment for the playing out of such ideas. There is a very clear contrast in the development of working-class politics in reformed countries and Catholic countries (with the Lutheran states of northern Europe lying somewhere in between) that can be traced back

to the eighteenth century. Because Protestantism allowed the creation of religious diversity, movements of political dissent *did not have to be anti-clerical*. The close ties of the Catholic Church to the *ancien régime* meant that the radical forces in France, in rejecting the feudal order, also rejected the Church. But because the culture was Catholic, it did not readily allow new classes to develop their own form of the dominant religion. In contrast, the Protestantism of Britain allowed political rebels to shape their own dissenting religion. External force could be used to suppress the dissenters but there was nothing in the core ideology of Protestantism that prevented them making the psychological break from any particular form of Protestant church. Thus in France political dissent became anti-clerical while in Britain it often led to religious innovation.

This difference carried through to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Britain, the Labour movement did not oppose religion per se (but only particular privileges of its particular forms). In Catholic countries there was a clear division with a rural, conservative and clerical bloc and an equally powerful organic anti-clerical bloc. Hence it is in those European countries that remained Catholic (Spain, Portugal, France and Italy) that we also find the most powerful communist parties. In the Scandinavian countries, there was initially a split along the Catholic lines with the left-wing parties being anti-clerical and the state churches profoundly opposed to labour movements. In 1917 the Finnish parliament took advantage of Russia's weakness to declare independence. But the Finns then split. In January 1918 the left, or Reds, staged a coup, the Whites retaliated and in the ensuing civil war some 30,000 people died. The Lutheran Church by and large supported the Whites and lost considerable support among the working class. However, over the inter-war years and during the struggles of the Second World War, the Finns gradually developed a strong shared sense of national identity and the Lutheran Church came to occupy an important role as the carrier of a culture and a history that marked Finland off from its ever-threatening Russian neighbour. In all the Nordic countries, the Lutheran churches were able to switch from a strong association with the political right to back the cause of social democracy so successfully that, despite the thorough secularization of beliefs, there remains widespread popular support for the Churches as carriers and symbols of national identity. In contrast, the Catholic Church in Spain and Portugal has found it very hard to shed its historical associations with right-wing dictatorships.

To summarize, the inherently fissiparous nature of Protestantism prevents it becoming intractably associated with any particular ideological position. There is thus a case for saying that it permitted emergent class conflict to be less polarized than was the case in Catholic countries.¹²

Civil Society and Social Inclusion

There is a further sense in which Protestantism has contributed to modern democracy and that is in pioneering a particularly effective combination of individualism and community spirit. The Protestant sects constructed themselves as egalitarian self-supporting voluntary associations.¹³ Although every individual was responsible for his or her own fate, the Saints had an obligation to support each other through this vale of tears. In some sects and at times, that support could be thoroughly oppressive and even unforgiving (the English Quakers of the eighteenth century would expel a bankrupt from fellowship even if he was not the author of his misfortunes) but more often there were strong injunctions to mutual support and charity that did a great deal to blunt the harshness of modern industrial life. As Martin has argued in his explanation of the popularity of Pentecostalism in Latin America, evangelical Protestantism offered a functionally adaptive combination of new persona suited to urban industrial capitalism (the self-reliant striving autonomous individual) and a supportive community of like-minded peers.¹⁴

To the extent that Protestantism thrived, the old organic feudal community of subservience, descent and fate was displaced by a series of overlapping voluntary democratic associations: the sect's business meeting, the conventicle, the self-organizing prayer group.¹⁵ Protestant sects and denominations themselves formed an important part of the network of civil society but more than that they provided the organizational template for savings banks, workers' educational societies, friendly societies, trade unions and pressure groups. They also provided millions of ordinary people with training in public speaking, in committee management and in small-group leadership. And they provided the persona – the autonomous and self-reliant but caring individual – that could operate the new lay institutions. This was recognized by a mid-nineteenth-century historian of the Secession Churches;

They insisted on the right of popular election in its full and scriptural extent – that every member of the congregation, of whatever sex or social status, should enjoy the right of choice. Called upon in this way to perform a most important duty, the people have been trained to interest themselves in their own affairs, and in attending to their own interest have acquired that habit of exercising individual judgement, which stands closely connected with the continuance of ecclesiastical and civil liberty.¹⁶

An important part of interesting themselves in their own affairs was learning to read and write. There is a short connection and long links between Protestantism and literacy. The short one concerns the religious need. If people

were to be individually responsible for their own salvation, and if that depended more on correct belief than on correct ritual performance, then they had to have access to the means of saving grace. Hearing sermons was useful, as was learning the catechism, but reading the Bible was essential and 'the stress on scripturalism is conducive to high levels of literacy'.¹⁷ Protestants translated the scriptures into the vernacular languages and taught people reading and writing. In many Protestant lands, the state positively encouraged the people at least to read. There was some reluctance to teach writing (Hannah More, in her Mendip schools, refused to do so). If the common people could read, they could be fed a diet of conservative and improving tracts. If they could write, they might write their own not-so-conservative pamphlets. But even with that reservation, Protestantism encouraged literacy. Post-Reformation Sweden required it. In the seventeenth century full membership of the Church was open only to those who could read.

A longer route concerns the more general connection between literacy and economic development. As part of his larger project of explaining the rise and role of nationalism, Gellner makes the case that a shared literate culture was a functional pre-requisite for economic modernization. Any country serious about lifting itself out of feudally organized agriculture had to have an effective communication across the economy, between people of all stations and not just the nobility and their clerks.

We need to be cautious of claiming literacy as an especially Protestant characteristic. Religion had been associated with language long before the Reformation. In the tenth century two Greek priests, brothers Cyril and Methodius, were sent to Moravia to teach Christianity to the common people in the vernacular. They translated the liturgy and some of the Bible into Slavonic and invented a new alphabet with which to write their translations. We might also note that as a response to the Reformation the Catholic Church authorities in a number of countries promoted reading as a new means to instruct the common people against the heresies of the Huguenots and other Protestants.

Nonetheless, with those two qualifications, we can accept the causal connection between the Reformation and the spread of literacy. Cyril and Methodius had the rather limited interest of providing the material for the Church to operate. What distinguished the Protestant interest was its intensity (it was *very* important for people to learn to read) and its democratic reach (it was very important for *all* the people to learn to read). The contrast with Islam is strong. The Muslims of the Ottoman Empire opposed printing because they saw the mechanical reproduction of the sacred text as a threat to traditional methods of teaching Islam. Foreigners in Istanbul had printing presses but the only one used by Muslims was forced to close in 1730 when pietists wrecked the presses. Muslims in India embraced printing only in the

nineteenth century and then only because they feared the threat of Christian missionaries. The Koran was translated into Urdu to make it available to the masses but even then there was a Catholic Church-like fear of democratic interpretation. Those who advocated printing also insisted 'do not read any book without consulting a scholar'.¹⁸

Petards

The sense in which new ideas, when embodied in actual social changes, can then constrain actors, is perhaps made clearer by adding a few more illustrations of people being subverted by the consequences of their own actions or ideas. Various Scottish anti-Catholic movements of the 1930s foundered for reasons that can be similarly traced back to their own nature. Both the Scottish Protestant League and Protestant Action found their ability to act as political parties undermined by their members' inability to agree or to accept direction. Their activists were so committed to the idea of freedom of conscience that they constantly squabbled and voted against each other. They also found that the voting public expected ideological consistency. They built their attack on the state support for Catholic schools on the principle of equity: it was unfair for Catholic teachers to have equal access to jobs in state schools and yet have protected access to jobs in Catholic schools. To the extent that this argument from equity was accepted, it made their other platforms (such as the repatriation of immigrants from Ireland and preferential hiring of Protestants) difficult to promote.¹⁹

Activists of the new Christian right in the United States has similarly found themselves constrained by the secular embodiment of principles that their forebears promoted. Using the same term 'fundamentalist' to describe US organizations such as the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition and Muslim groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah disguises the important difference that the first two have confined their campaigns to essentially democratic means.²⁰ Even if they really sought to impose a theocracy on the American people, Falwell and Robertson have had to promote that goal with secular language. To their 'home boys', they can denounce divorce and homosexuality as contrary to the will of God, but to the electorate they have had to argue that such practices are socially harmful. To their church audiences they can argue against evolution on the grounds that the Bible says God made the Earth in seven days, but in their campaigns to influence school biology classes and textbooks they have had to show that 'creation science' is as plausible an explanation of the facts as is evolution. In so doing, they accept rules of engagement that ensure they will lose. And because they are by and large democrats, they accept the fact that they have

lost their campaign to turn America back to God, and instead campaign for conservative Christians to be treated as a legitimate cultural minority.²¹

The fate of Ulster Unionists can be mentioned in this context. For 50 years they defended their domination of Northern Ireland on the grounds that they represented a majority of its citizens. As the population balance shifted and Catholics became an ever-larger part of the electorate, some unionists openly espoused a different argument: that Ulster Protestants were an ethnic grouping that had a right to self-determination irrespective of electoral arithmetic. But even the supporters of Ian Paisley have (albeit grudgingly) accepted that they must confine their politics to democratic means.²² A narrow majority of Ulster Unionists have endorsed the new power-sharing politics. Most of the rest do not like it but are unwilling to break the law to oppose the new arrangements.

The cynic could easily say that in all these cases theocrats have simply accepted the reality of their impotence. The reason the Scottish Protestant League, the Moral Majority, or Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist party have largely confined themselves to democratic politics is that, in a secular culture, they lacked the power to do otherwise. It is *realpolitik* that prevents them acting like Hezbollah. The writer's response is the case made above: the reality to which these groups have had to accommodate is in large part an unintended consequence of the very principles that inspire them.

Secularization

The most obvious connection between Protestantism and the rise of liberal democracy has been left until last. Supporters of various Islamist political movements often point out that those movements are considerably more democratic than the regimes which they aim to displace. It is certainly true that the government in Iran is elected by an almost universal franchise. However, Islamic democracies differ from the western European model in allowing Islam to act as a trump card. Only those candidates approved by religious leaders may stand in Iranian elections; laws passed by the parliament have to be approved by the ayatollahs. The laws privilege Muslims over non-Muslims. The core principle of liberal democracy is that each citizen's vote counts the same; for that to be the case rights must be distributed irrespective of religion. Put bluntly, religion taken seriously is incompatible with democracy. Either the will of God or the will of the people is sovereign.

Essential to the liberal democratic character of western European polities is the fact that they are secular. Either few people are seriously religious or the seriously religious (and their churches, sects and denominations) accept that religious imperatives be confined to the home, the family and the voluntary sector. Religion is confined to the realm of personal preference.

Many of the strands of this argument have been mentioned above and are elaborated at great length elsewhere.²³ Simply put, Protestantism, by encouraging individualism and creating religious diversity, undermined the organic and communal basis for religion. As Martin says, ‘the logic of Protestantism is clearly in favour of voluntary principle, to a degree that eventually makes it sociologically unrealistic’.²⁴

Conclusion

This rather condensed discussion has considered various claims for the proposition that Protestantism was responsible for democracy. The conclusion is that Protestantism has been causally implicated in the development of democratic polities and civil liberties and that in many particulars the causal connection is the unintended consequence.

To return to the point raised in the introduction: what does this tell us about religious belief systems as *causes*? My conclusion is rather banal. It is worth asserting only because a decade of postmodernism has rather confused the nature of sociological explanation (when it has not denied outright the possibility). The model pursued here might be called the Robert Burns theory of social change (after his line: ‘the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglay’). Beliefs and values shape motives. Motives produce actions. Because people do not have perfect knowledge and complete control the consequences are often not what was intended. The new circumstances are interpreted in the light of shared beliefs and may cause them to be modified. That produces new motives and new actions and so it goes on. The scope and ambiguity of religious belief systems always permit a range of interpretations of God’s will and social circumstances obviously play a large part in explaining why some people prefer one interpretation to another. But this is not the same as saying that religious beliefs are either without consequences or that their consequences are limited to making those who use God as rhetorical justification for base actions feel better about themselves. Religion makes a difference and this essay has given one example of the profound difference it can make.

NOTES

1. Fred Halliday, ‘The Politics of Islamic Fundamentalism: Iran, Tunisia and the Challenge to the Secular State’, in A.S. Ahmed and H. Donnan (eds), *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.96.
2. Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: the Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), p.46.
3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).
4. Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion* (Oxford: Polity, 2003).
5. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

6. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930).
7. Martin Smyth, *Stand Fast* (Belfast: Orange Publications, 1974), p.4.
8. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: the Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
9. Matthew 22: 21.
10. Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1966), p.4.
11. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965); idem, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); idem, *Nationalism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997).
12. For the record, this is a modified version of the Halévy thesis (Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in 1815* (London: Penguin, 1937)). Instead of claiming that Methodism prevented an English revolution, I am making the weaker and more general point that Catholicism's resilience to democratic innovation ensured much greater polarization.
13. Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London: Collins Harvell, 1988) p.107.
14. Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (note 8).
15. Maddox (note 10) p.18.
16. A. Thompson, *Historical Sketch of the Origins of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh, A. Fullerton and Co., 1848), p.164.
17. Gellner, *Sword, Plough and Book*, (note 13) p.107.
18. R. Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.77.
19. Steve Bruce, *Conservative Protestant Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.98–142.
20. Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2000).
21. Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion* (note 4) pp.209–13.
22. Steve Bruce, 'Fundamentalism and Political Violence: the Case of Paisley and Ulster Evangelicals', *Religion*, Vol.31 (2001), pp.387–405.
23. Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism and Secularization* (London: Routledge, 1990); idem, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); idem., *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
24. David Martin, *The Dilemmas of Contemporary Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p.1.

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