

Introduction

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln gave a short address at the opening of the Gettysburg Cemetery. These warriors died, he said, so that “government of the people, by the people, for the people should not perish from the earth.”¹

Thus, he made “democracy” the cause for which the USA was at civil war: not just so that democracy may continue in its North American homeland, but that it should survive on the planet at all.

Now over a third of the world’s population lives in recognized democracies. But democracy’s advance is faltering. The Washington observatory Freedom House reports that, worldwide, democratic freedoms have been on the decline for eighteen years.² Three-quarters of Americans think their democracy is under threat.³

On November 7, 2024, the world awoke to news of Donald Trump’s return to the US presidency, for a second term. In the vote on November 5, he won both in the Constitution’s electoral college and in the total of votes counted (the “popular vote”). His party gained a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court has a majority shaped by three Trump nominations in his first term. The count went more quickly and smoothly than in 2020, when delay helped feed the suspicion of those ready to agree the whole thing was “rigged.” These all help confer power, legitimacy, and the ability to govern.

But many were ready to proclaim that America had elected a “tyrant” who would end democracy. Some of President Trump’s announcements during the campaign—about governing as a dictator on “day one,”⁴ deploying the military against “the enemy from within,”⁵ and saving his supporters the

1. Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address.”
2. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024*.
3. Corasaniti et al., “Voters.”
4. Michael and Agencies, “Trump.”
5. “We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics.

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trouble of ever having to vote again⁶—fed this concern. Then he chose to place the USA's armed forces under the control of a "Christian" political activist recorded saying that "our founders did not want . . . democracy."⁷

No one now shares Lincoln's fear that the fall of democracy in the USA will mean its end in the world. But America's hesitation brings comfort to those, in such places as Russia, China, and Iran, who expect their alternative systems to outlast democracy⁸.

This book proposes that, in advancing the case for a democratic revival, we face three problems. We do not know where democracy started. Related to that, we do not know what it is. Consequently, we do not know where it is going.

Leading scholars agree that democracy is "widely advocated and sought, but its meaning is widely contested."⁹ Robert Dahl found "democracy" to be a word "used in a staggering variety of ways."¹⁰ It is a "hotly contested term"¹¹ that "defies definition."¹² The topic is "confusing due to the many definitions applied." With "hundreds of definitions" in use, it is "almost impossible" to work out where academic study of the subject is heading.¹³

"Hundreds" turns out to be an understatement. Jean-Paul Gagnon, a "philosopher of democracy" at the University of Canberra, documents this "staggering variety."

Much as an archaeologist would spread out . . . the many pieces of a shattered artefact on a table, a scholar of democracy needs to identify and interrogate, and compare and contrast each description of democracy in turn.¹⁴

And I think they're . . . very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or . . . the military," he said to Fox News on Oct. 13, 2024. Groves, "Trump Suggests," para. 7.

6. "Christians, get out and vote! Just this time—you won't have to do it any more," he said in a speech on July 26, 2024. Vargas, "Trump."

7. Herman, "Hegseth."

As Robert Dahl explained, the founder Madison published an influential paper on the difference between Greek "democracy" and the Roman "Republic." Madison was trying to promote the new Constitution to those who shared eighteenth-century skepticism about "democracy." However, the Greek word for "democracy" and the Latin for "republic" mean the same thing: "popular government." (Dahl, *Democracy*, 16–17).

8. To understand the Chinese alternative, see Bell, *Beyond*.

9. Inoguchi et al., introduction to *Changing Nature*, 1.

10. Dahl, *Democracy*, 35.

11. Manville and Ober, *Bargain*, 16.

12. Lijphart, *Democracy*, 4.

13. Storm, "Elemental Definition," 215.

14. Gagnon, "Update," 93.

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By 2020, Dr. Gagnon had found 3,539 different meanings in use of the word “democracy.”¹⁵

Does this matter? There are contrasting answers to this question. One is that democracy is an “evolved gift.”¹⁶ Self-determination is a “human ability” disclosed through the Enlightenment and then enhanced in a natural process. The task of political thought is to observe, identify, and classify the “many pieces” which result.

The other view is that democracy is the *product* of thought. Giovanni Sartori warned that “wrong ideas about democracy make democracy go wrong.”¹⁷

If we wish to keep “democracy,” then we must understand what it is. The artifact “democracy” has to be conceived and constructed before being observed. Democracies exist because we have invented them, because they are in our minds, and insofar as we grasp how to keep them well and alive.¹⁸

Democracy is invented and must be reinvented in successive generations. Some of those inventions may turn out to be correct and sustainable. Others will not; they will produce effects opposite to what their inventors expect. Professor David Held agreed that it “is a remarkably difficult form of government to create and sustain . . . democracy has evolved through intensive social struggles and is frequently sacrificed in such struggles.”¹⁹

The usual story of democracy maps a route from ancient Athens and through the city-states of Renaissance Italy. Then the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution fed demand for popular sovereignty and representative government. This account is not useless. But almost every book on the subject overlooks the moment of its modern invention.

In May of 1647 the colony of Providence Plantations gave its political arrangements the name “democracy.” Up to that point, “democracy” was known to mean a system where “the greater part of the people have authority to command not only each particular citizen as such, but the minority of the people as a body.”²⁰ Providence—the province now called Rhode Island—defined theirs differently. Democracy meant rule “held by consent.” It aimed to give “as good and hopeful assurance as we are able” of “each man’s peaceable and

15. Gagnon, “Database, at 3,539.”

16. Welzel et al., “(Still),” 160.

17. Sartori, *Revisited*, 3.

18. Sartori, *Revisited*, 17.

19. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 1.

20. Bodin, *Six Books*, 72.

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quiet enjoyment of his lawful right and Libertie” notwithstanding different “consciences.”²¹ Individuals were to govern their own lives, as far as possible, according to “conscience.” Here, in rudimentary form, was the first *liberal* democracy.

The system was “held by consent.” This meant that *consent* legitimized the state.²² This was a concept of state legitimacy that replaced Christendom.

Christendom required all (or most) citizens to be “Christians.” This meant the state had to define the mandated form of “Christianity.” This, necessarily, resulted in the persecution of those who disagreed—including dissenting Christians. Refugees fled the Massachusetts version of Christendom. They established Providence Plantations. When the English Parliament gave them the right to their own government, they decided that “democracy” would be the form it would take.

Here was “democracy after Christendom.” It was a solution to the problem of religious diversity. The state should not concern itself with questions of religious truth. It should stick to “civil matters.” The mind behind this solution belonged to Roger Williams.

In America, these ideas, practiced only in Rhode Island, were considered wildly disordered. Williams was ignored until the 1840s. Then he was discovered as a father of American democracy, with its flourishing evangelical Christianity. Frontiersman, trader, intellectual, preacher, soldier, and statesman, he became a hero both of American nationalism and of Reformed Protestant Christianity.²³ At the turn of the twentieth century, his statue joined those of Calvin and Knox on the “Reformation Wall” in Geneva. Then Christianity fell from intellectual fashion. Williams was returned to obscurity. Hardly anyone now sees his importance to democratic history. The Oxford professor Teresa Bejan is a rare exception. Her title for her study is *Mere Civility*—Williams’s own term for his central idea.

Democracy developed within Christian societies as they moved *out* of political Christendom.²⁴ The United States of America flourished as a Christian people *without* a Christian state. Though not Christendom *politically*, it remained Christendom *culturally*. The abolition of political Christendom appeared, for a time, to strengthen Christian culture. This would not have

21. Lutz, *Colonial Origins*, 172.

22. See p. 108 for the difference between this notion of “consent” and the theory of state origins famously put forward by Hobbes.

23. Coyle, *Roger Williams*.

24. This does not mean that every democracy occurs “after Christendom.” For example, Japan, Singapore, and India would not fit that model. It means that democracy as we know it was first devised as a successor to Christendom.

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surprised the authors of the Rhode Island democracy. They understood that when the state mandates a form of religion to be observed by all citizens, then politics, not faith, will define the “god” to be worshiped.

However, this Christian cultural moment is now passing. In the United Kingdom, a majority of citizens say they are not Christians. The United States is on its way to that position. A rising generation says it has no religion.²⁵ The democracy we have enjoyed in the West was an interlude between the end of political Christendom and the later end of cultural Christendom.

So, after Christendom, democracy has a problem. As David Gushee explains:

It is highly doubtful whether human communities can function without any kind of shared values or a vision of what a good life and good community look like. . . . But no such substantive vision is on offer, because the individualist-libertarian vision prevails, quite intentionally. There is no collective common good; there is only the aggregation of individual goods as we each pursue our own version of happiness.²⁶

All human communities need “shared values.” But, within the modern pluralistic state, there is not one community: there are many. Christians take their definition of “good” from the Bible and a relationship they believe they have with God, since “no one is good but God.”²⁷ Other communities generate different visions of “goodness,” which may oppose Christian values.

With the end of the Christian majority, the “aggregation of individual goods” results in a moral consensus that challenges Christianity. How are Christians to deal with this? The response that has come to dominate American politics is “culture war.” Moral community is essential, but moral community between Christians and others is impossible. Therefore, political life must be a struggle between Christians and the rest over which community is to rule.

President Trump is one beneficiary of this. But its origins long precede his arrival on the scene. Many books highlight the racism, nationalism, and misogyny said to animate his political base. To focus on these sins of the

25. This trend appears to have reversed in recent years. The proportion of active Christians among the UK population is now rising, driven especially by growth among young men. Churchgoers have risen from 8 percent of the population in 2018 to 12 percent in 2025. At the same time, “those who don’t engage in practices such as churchgoing or Bible reading are less likely than ever to identify themselves as Christian.” Christianity is a small but growing minority commitment. A growing majority identifies as non-Christian. See McAleer and Barward-Symmons, *Quiet Revival*, 6–7.

26. Gushee, *Defending Democracy*, 10.

27. Mark 10:18.

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“religious right” is to take up arms in the culture war, rather than understand it. If we are to understand the problems now facing democracy, then we need to *understand* “culture war.”

The origins of culture war are found deep in the roots of American democracy. Providence defined democracy as meaning:

Government held by ye free and voluntarie consent of all, or the greater parte of the free Inhabitants.²⁸

The “free inhabitants” did not mean *everyone*. It meant heads of households owning some land. Generally, these were males. The early laws of the colony forbade slaveholding, though this ban was poorly enforced. “Indentured,” time-limited servitude was normal. Indentured servants belonged to their master’s household. They had the prospect of completing their bonded servitude and then buying land. But until then, they were not “free.”

Two centuries later, Lincoln redefined democracy as “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” The key words are three prepositions: *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people. The first, “of,” defines “the people” as *those who are governed*. The second, “by,” says “the people” are the rulers. The third, “for,” says that government exists for their benefit.

Lincoln tells us that the “people” in a democracy are *all* those subject to the authority of the state. So slaves and their descendants are “people.” This was six years after the US Supreme Court ruled that descendants of slaves brought from Africa were not “people” in terms of the US federal Constitution.²⁹ Gettysburg signalled the reversal of this judgment.

Democracy evolves through struggles. People use the resources of democracy to make their claims on the system. Since modern democracy’s inception, slaves and their descendants, working men, and women have claimed their equal right to belong to “the people.”

Equality leaves losers and winners. The losers in the Civil War were protected by Lincoln’s “Democrat” opponents in restoring their racially coded superiority. This survived for two generations before the Democrats themselves decided to become the party of civil rights and Black liberation. This left a body of white southerners seeking a voice. This body did not share the Republican right’s free-market, small-state “conservatism.” But Republican strategists learned that it was devoutly evangelical. A Supreme Court decision to ban prayer in public schools had already fed suspicion that the federal government and its Democrat-appointed judges were on a mission to suppress Christianity. Was there an opportunity to capture a bloc for the “right”?

28. Lutz, *Colonial Origins*, 172.

29. *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857).

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In a famous lecture, Professor Isaiah Berlin said that a group in society with a shared interest is like a naked “body.” It needs “clothing” to enter the political arena. A body of people without ideas is blind and directionless. The “clothing” of ideas gives that body direction and purpose.³⁰

What then is the idea that “clothes” this disaffected body of white Christians? Is there an idea that gives it a purpose beyond a grievance about racial privilege and religious education? An idea that makes it the “religious right,” with enough substance and purpose to challenge democracy as the legitimizing theory of the state?

There is. It is belief in the Bible as a legal text to be applied in civil law. The word for this doctrine is “theonomy.” The “hard” version of this was developed in the 1970s by Rousas Rushdoony.³¹ It holds that Old Testament law should be applied in full, with civil penalties for nonbelief. A more acceptable “soft” theonomy came a little later, especially through the widely disseminated work of Francis Schaeffer.³² This holds that God’s law allows religious freedom. Both hard and soft theonomy agree on the strategy of “evangelism through law.”³³ This says that arguing for civil law to conform more closely to God’s law is a way to show people their wrongdoing before God. Theonomy promises a restored Christendom: not now on the basis that most citizens are “Christian,” but on the basis that Christians can use political power to compel submission to God’s law.

Liberal democracy has freed people to follow their own conscience. J. S. Mill said this means that personal freedom may be limited only to prevent harm to others.³⁴ That raises the question of what is considered “harmful.” Article 4 of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen explains it thus:

Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights.³⁵

30. Berlin, “Two Concepts,” 193. Marxists say that a “class in itself” must become a “class for itself” before it can enter the political arena: it needs a set of ideas that identifies and expresses the nature and purpose of its interest. Berlin was not a Marxist. He did not believe that all social relations could be reduced to “relations of production” or that a correct “analysis” would lead to human liberation and the decline of the state.

31. Rushdoony, *Institutes*.

32. F. Schaeffer, *Christian Manifesto*.

33. North, “Kingdom,” 37.

34. Mill, “On Liberty,” 78.

35. Élysée, “Declaration,” art. 4.

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So “harm” refers to an action that diminishes the freedom of others. Otherwise, the “rights of every man”³⁶ are “boundless.” A liberal democratic state aims to maximize the *equal* level of individual self-government.

Is this an end in itself? Can we make this version of “freedom” the center of a revived moral community? The Christian answer is that we cannot. The highest freedom, Roger Williams said, is the “soul liberty” found in following Christ.³⁷ Liberal democracy does not itself achieve “soul liberty.” Furthermore, this liberty may be found outside democracy. Why therefore should Christians want to sustain democracy?

Here are two answers to this question.

The first is a biblical answer. God calls people to follow him and submit to him freely: not compelled, like horses, by “bit and bridle.”³⁸ Conditions of civil freedom are ones in which we may *freely* delight God by proclaiming his love and submitting to him without compulsion. Theonomy cannot achieve this liberation. Only loving and willing submission can.

The second is a political answer. Modern conditions create a technically accomplished state which can project its power into every corner of our lives. This is not a “zero-sum game” where the rights of individuals are traded off against the rights of the state. Rather, technical advances also empower individuals. This in turn demands a greater role for the state in protecting people against the harms capable of being inflicted by the power of others.

Perhaps the smartest thing I’ve read on politics was by a journalist called Claud Cockburn. In the 1930s, Cockburn exposed how sections of the British elite were preparing to submit to the waves of fascism rolling in from Italy and Germany. He wrote that government does “as much harm as it can, and as much good as it must.”³⁹ The state will do bad things, unless citizens apply themselves to creating the conditions in which it *must* do something better. The thought is along the same lines as Sir Winston Churchill’s famous remark that “democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”⁴⁰ Democracy does not necessarily produce a better outcome than its nondemocratic alternative. However, it should give those receiving this outcome—the people subject to a state’s control—the means to change it.

36. Now understood to mean “every adult human.”

37. Roberts, *Subversive Puritan*, 18.

38. Ps 32:9.

39. Cockburn, *Discord*, 204.

40. In a speech in the House of Commons on Nov. 11, 1947. Hansard, “Commons Chamber Volume 444.”

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This book appears in an After Christendom series. Our writing is by Christians who see the end of state-sponsored Christianity as a matter of both fact and celebration. We know that with that change—welcome as it is—come challenges and pressures. We need to prepare for these.

Democracy is a system “held by consent.” It legitimizes the state through the consent of all or most of those subject to its authority. This conceives self-governing power as properly lying with individuals. The transfer of power requires consent based on good reasons. “Consent” means, as Roger Williams said, *renewed* consent. It cannot mean, as his more famous contemporary Thomas Hobbes suggested, that the state is legitimized by consent given once, and never renewed.

“Consent” does not mean the same thing as “consensus.” “Consensus” means shared agreement to decisions. The “consent” that legitimizes the state still leaves room for decisions to be disputed. It confirms, however, that there is a process in place that confers the *right* to take those decisions.

This needs each of us to consider not just *our* terms for consent, but also those on which *others* are ready to consent. This needs some people ready to act not just in their own interests but also in the interests of others.

Paul told Roman Christians to be “content to do what is right in the eyes of everyone” in relating to a hostile world.⁴¹ They are to “overcome evil with good.” “After Christendom” there are new opportunities to respond to this challenge. Christianity could—and arguably should—be part of reinventing “democracy” for a new generation.

Worldwide surveys find that people think democracy consists in the “rights that give people choices in governing their personal lives, and a voice and vote to shape public life.”⁴² This makes a good starting point. Democracy confers “rights.” These apply at two levels. One is “personal.” Individuals have the right to govern their own lives, subject to protecting the equal right of others. The other is “public life”: things that, through the mechanism of the state, are made binding on all citizens. These two levels of democratic freedom are linked by two key rights. The first is the right to communicate—the right of “free speech”—through which we may persuade others to support a cause. The second is the right to associate with others to pursue a shared goal. These rights form the basis for the existence of “civil society”: the uncoerced space where we pursue common aims beyond the forces of state and market.⁴³

41. Rom 12:17, 21.

42. Alexander and Welzel, “Measuring Effective Democracy,” 272.

43. Walzer, “Civil Society,” 89.

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With the passing of cultural Christendom, we are now entering a new period after Christendom. In this democracy after Christendom, can we pursue freedom to love Christ in the framework of everyone's equal freedom to seek what is good? And how can "voice and vote" enable all citizens to "shape public life"?

The first two chapters examine the political crisis following the end of classical Christendom. New England was a laboratory for experiments in state legitimacy. Old England's Civil War became a battle for religious freedom. The invention of the first liberal democracy was an outcome of transatlantic exchange. Chapters 3 to 5 consider America's struggles for religious liberty, equality, and democracy, through the Revolution, the spread of Evangelical Christianity, and civil war. Culture war is the outcome of these struggles. "Nationalism" and "racism" do not explain the potency of the movement at work here. "Theonomy," meaning the application of God's law as civil law, is the driving idea offering to replace consent as the basis of state legitimacy. Democracy is "political," but that word is used too loosely. Chapter 6 clarifies the meaning of "politics" and what theory of the state may be found in the Bible. Chapter 7 examines the different ways in which democracy may install state government. This leads to chapter 8 and the roots of, and solutions to, the crisis of trust in mature democracies, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. Chapter 9 looks at challenges to religious freedom in modern democracies. Brief "final reflections" draw out some conclusions.