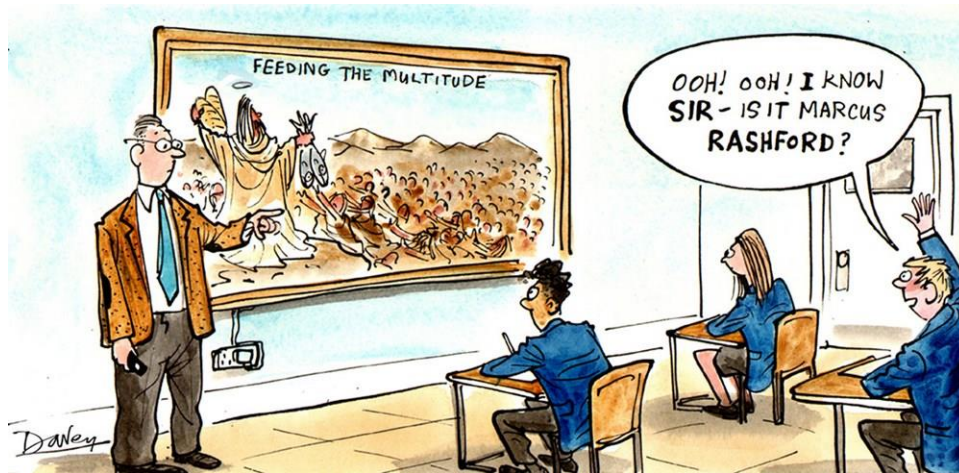


Keep the stories of faith and freedom alive

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It has never been more urgent to support democracy — and religion has an important part to play, says *Alan Smith*



WINSTON CHURCHILL famously described democracy as “the worst form of government, except for all the others”. Mostly, the transition from one elected government to another occurs in an orderly and peaceful fashion. But, as recent events in the United States demonstrate, Western-style liberal democracies may not be as robust as we like to think.

Just hours before the storming of the Capitol in Washington, more than 50 pro-democracy politicians were arrested in Hong Kong. If we are tempted to think that such events could happen only in other countries, let us remember that the decision of the British Prime Minister, in 2019, to prorogue Parliament (evading parliamentary scrutiny, or so his detractors claim) had to be overturned by the courts. Supporting democratic government has never been more urgent. But how?

Stronger controls on elections, such as identity checks, provoke heated debate. Do they limit or enhance democracy? What about policing social media and the growth in “fake news”? Attempts to ignore the truth in the hope that if a lie is repeated often enough people will think that it is true could be more effective in undermining democracy than Guy Fawkes’s attempt to blow up Parliament. The challenge is compounded by the well-documented attempts of foreign powers to subvert general elections using social media.

Lawyers and politicians monitoring the resilience of our democracy’s checks and balances might reasonably conclude that it is pretty easy to hijack the definition of sovereignty, bypass the scrutiny of Parliament, and self-limit the investigative powers of the press through partisanship. If democracy is about the power of the people, what power do “we, the people”, have to secure it?

ALL of us who seek the common good have a stake in this conversation. We need to strengthen the fabric of togetherness, which is the life-blood of democracy, out of which society is made. In this, religion has a part to play.

Human beings are storytelling and story-hearing creatures. It is how we understand our origin, our identity as individuals, communities, and nations, and imagine our future. Some of these stories, such as those that are rooted in the Christian Gospels, have had enormous power in shaping our outlook and laws. Passed down faithfully through the generations, they transcend culture, and, for

billions of people, mediate reality and truth. They are not just narratives of events: they are the wellspring of our values, our hopes, and our identity.

Although democracy predates the advent of Christianity, it has found its fullest expression in the cradle of Western Christendom. Here, in St Albans Abbey, Archbishop Stephen Langton signed the first draft of Magna Carta in 1213, two years before the final signing by King John at Runnymede. Centuries of power struggles ensued, and some would argue that we are still far from the ideal of democracy.

The prerequisites for democracy to flourish are trust and consent. Those who lead and those who are led have to make choices about how we order our common life. Democracy requires a social contract that relies on the willingness of everyone to play their part and accept electoral results.

Perhaps some of the enduring power of democracy in the West derives from shared values rooted in such ideas as "Love your neighbour as yourself," "Forgive and you will be forgiven," and "Blessed are the peacemakers."

With the decline of Christian adherence in the West, we need to develop common stories to sustain and nurture our democratic life. It is here that Christians still have a vital part to play, although it will not be from a position of dominance, but through service.

WE HAVE to find new ways to tell the "old, old story". A starting-point might be to reflect on the esteem in which NHS staff have been held during the Covid-19 pandemic, because of their extraordinary examples of self-sacrifice. Or we might look to those who are concerned about the environment as a way of sharing in a common cause. Both of these areas have deep resonances with the Christian faith.

Such stories can fertilise the seedbed where democracy can flourish and grow. The alternative is its slow erosion through disrespect, distortion, disinformation, and corruption. The task is pressing. President Reagan recognised this, saying "democracy is only ever one generation from extinction."

So, perhaps, a good first step would be to introduce compulsory citizenship classes in our schools, providing opportunities to tell stories of the common good and to celebrate the fruits of centuries of democracy.

We need to do the same in our churches, building social capital and affirming the vital importance of trust, which underlies a vibrant democracy.

Let us keep the stories of history, of faith, and of freedom alive.

We cannot leave it to the politicians: it is the people's task.

Dr Alan Smith is the Bishop of St Albans.

Listen to an interview with Dr Smith on the Church Times Podcast.