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Ethical assessment of democracy

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ETHICAL ASSESSMENT OF DEMOCRACY – WITH MORE HOPE

The ethical assessment of an object inevitably depends on the amount of hope that has been invested into this object. People of Europe invested a lot of hope into democratisation of their lives, especially from the mid 20th century. The ethical assessment of this process, of its results and its goals, is surely neither simply a matter for those intoxicated by this hope, nor for those closed to any big hope in this field.

We will have to assess here the hope invested into democracy: a) **political** hope first, directed to setting up democratic processes; b) **uncompleted** hope then in relation with decisions to be taken; c) **universal** hope finally, with visions of a desired society. Behind the expectations held by communities about managing their society there are deeper expectations about social life and so about human existence itself.

Democratic processes are subject to crises of confidence; decisions taken are subject to oppositions; and visions of an intended human society are exposed to fears and resistance of groups of citizens. Some sociological perspectives may try to assess democracy by putting in brackets the hope and hopes behind its development, but Christian ethics can only pay attention to this hope itself.

Through hope and development of democratisation a collective identity is emerging. We will have to ask finally which identity can play here the human and social role it is expected to play.

(A) POLITICAL HOPE

1. As people made effort to get out of constrained submission and silence, to delegitimize powers and to build up new democratic processes for government, they were driven by a diversity of hopes, a plurality of projects and expectations. This diversity belongs to the making of democratic structures: so the crises of confidence too are constituent of democracy itself.
2. Ethical assessment will inevitably discover good and bad things among the expectations and projects of the political actors of democratisation: constructive and destructive things, those which fortify and those which weaken the society in construction. Democratic processes, even refined by centuries of experiences, always remain under the threat of uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable uses of power and are never absolutely reliable.
3. A perspective of Christian ethics has to recognise and underline necessarily this ambivalence of every human action and of political action in particular. It sees democracy as an instrument under construction and tries to assess whether the processes established are fulfilling the invested hope or whether it is still possible to broaden them more, to hope for more.
4. Uncontrolled uses of power show failures in organisation and form of power (whether executive or popular); they recall bad memories of tyrannical times; they may intend to resist to the effort of democratisation itself and to the hope behind it. Together with

other democratic ethics, Christian ethics is supporting civic values, recognising political failures and creating changes and new chances to open up. An imperfect instrument like democracy requires that its use is constantly controlled and its forms improved.

5. In a democratic society it cannot be that the Christian vision would itself take or use power in an uncontrolled way: it would be incoherent to impose itself as a single collective culture, since Christian spirit shows respect for diversity and for everybody's role and freedom in community. Political hope for democratisation, in its fight against tyrannical ideologies in the 20th century, inevitably included a certain "Christianity" under these ideologies. But a Christian perspective may not be identical to this "Christianity" and may take distance from it in respecting democratic efforts. It will not accept in a democracy to impose some cultural positions or values, so called religious, or particular legislative options. This option is Christian in that it keeps respect to partners and to their own resistance to social evil, even partners with a diversity of opinions.

6. In cases where political powers inspire no confidence any more, this real crisis would not get an adequate answer from a new ideological power trying to come with an authoritarian expression of its options. True Christian ethics, when assessing the work out of democracy, will preferably look at society as it is, with its open processes and the rights of all actors in their plurality. And it will broaden and not reduce their scope of action. It will look at politics as it is, with enduring conflicts and negotiations, inevitable crises of confidence, counter-powers and power games, and to maintain and reinforce the political hope of social actors.

7. Assessment means then proposal for improvements, for refinements of the democratic instruments. Processes should be revised and reorganised along the needs of the social groups and of their actions, reactions and the balance of powers. The weight of each group will then depend on how active it has been in the power game, and how influential it can be in the shaping of better processes for the general future balance in the community.

(B) UNCOMPLETED HOPE

8. Assessing democratisation of a society means not only assessing its processes but also its choices, decisions, laws and criteria of judgement. Democracy has been implemented and reflected in acts, whether good or bad. Christian ethics knows that such human acts will by nature remain distant from their goals; they are acts of persons making their decisions in the midst of power games. Never are they pure reflection of a desired ideal democracy. The decision makers actually hold a part of authority, but the democratic quality of this authority remains variable, depending on their position in politics: legislative or executive body, judicial or administrative function, party voice or expert... And processes leading to a law or to a decision are not always a true democratic expression.

9. Christian ethics will not give to any human political decision an absolute value. It is heir of the biblical and Judaic ethics, of its messianic expectation and intrinsic "incompleteness". But its particularity consists in its capacity to reopen messianic hope by listening to Christ. It sustains the hope to act with justice over against any failure, and tries to assess along this hope just and unjust acts with the goal to open new perspectives to get out of crises of confidence about decisions made. In such way the hope invested in an incomplete democratisation will not fall condemned, the limited and imperfect political acts will not get

out of value: even an "incomplete" democracy can still allow for just acts – as true as Christian faith can trust liberated sinners, forgiven imperfect actors.

10. Christian ethics is not offering itself here as a basis for decisions and laws, as a set of values to be elected and implemented by political decision makers. It offers itself to the whole society as announcing a way out of failures, forgiveness of injustice, liberation in the midst of "incompleteness". It is not playing the role of a power, but of a counter-power, opening up new ways, discerning chances, calling for renewal and so restarting democratic action.

11. To actors in the public scene ethics is setting or recalling limits intrinsically linked to their function: they can never be allowed to set their own rules as absolute rules.

Limits set to the **economy**: expert in managing investment, production and exchanges, it has no keys to the distribution of goods or to the satisfaction of needs.

Limits set to the **media**: expert in questions of society to itself, they don't have the answers, necessarily plural and diverse.

Limits set to **local authorities**: responsible in their field of competence, they are called into account for transparency in their management.

Limits set to **services**: expert in their field, they have no final knowledge about the weight and role of this field in the whole of social life.

12. Democracy remains incomplete as long as these big social powers are living under an authoritarian management and – instead of being open to citizen's action – refrain from public debate about their goals and priorities. Democratic effort cannot be satisfied with its minimal conquests of the 20th century: the election of a parliament or similar representative body at each level of government. Other issues in society than elections require a democratic approach, and are provoking it already. The 21st century is witnessing the difficult birth of a democracy in economic production, a democracy in information, a democracy in public services. Ethical assessment underlines and values such new hopes.

(C) UNIVERSAL HOPE

13. Beyond processes and decisions democracy is about building up a collective identity. Ethics has to assess democratisation not only in terms of processes and principles, but also in terms of goals: which society is in project? As social groups try to democratise their community, they intend to realise **visions** of society, to satisfy **needs** of communication and exchange, to support **economy** and **culture** and finally perhaps to build up a society of persons able to speak **with all other** human societies.

14. The development of democracy in Europe was linked with the hope for a collective identity universally open to all humankind. The universality of human rights and the worldwide community of nations are intrinsically part of the values and visions of society that moved our democratic evolution. A democracy can be assessed as incomplete if it is lacking this universal openness: to allow every person to find a place in the community of all. This dream and hope is actually moving the actions conducted, even when other more restrained intentions seem the only visible.

15. A Christian perspective cannot keep only with the more restrained intentions: it holds on this issue a value judgement and criteria deriving from its own universal attention.

This orientation drives us to assess democratisation not only inside a community or a group of states, but in view of the universal communion called in the Bible "kingdom of heaven" and promised to all humankind, so closed and limited human beings may have been. Such a universal communication is still the vision of society which is in construction in spite of much resistance in this 21st century. And in this sense the Christian perspective is still one of the present ethics of universality.

16. Christ keeps inviting his auditors to forgive and serve and so to contribute to an open collective identity. All cultures touched by the Gospel of Christ have been opened in such way by him and simultaneously brought to resist and close up: Christian ethics is a challenge, but gets also under challenge. So there is no human culture which could be called "Christian", surely not the European one which got touched first.

17. An open collective identity, free of self interest and competition, managing particularities without protectionism, is presently in construction, still incomplete, in Europe and on the whole planet. This unsatisfied universal hope – not specifically Christian by itself, but recognised and expressed by Christian ethics – is working under the surface of our present society and of their power structures, even when they close up, as long as worldwide exchanges are actually intensifying and liberalising more and more. An ethical assessment of democratisation in Christian perspective leads so today to relativise the acquirements in respect to the goals not yet achieved, even in Europe.

18. Europe will remain unable to build up its own democracy fully as long as it keeps in particular for itself an undue part of the world resources and provokes envy and rush of poorer people. Mechanisms of democratic voting are by themselves incapable to overcome the xenophobia of a community refusing to share its wealth gained. Only a deeper force of democratic spirit will in this situation make possible the openness that the circumstances require in this time of globalisation.

19. Christian ethics contributes to this if it is able – in accordance to the teaching it has received – to respect the distance between the particular and the universal, between the limited and the completed, between our protected particular safety and our desired universal salvation. In a perspective of service, as defended notably by Christian ethics, the particular contributes to the universal, giving to others what it requires for itself and sharing with others what it desires for itself. This is also true for the democratic construction: such a vision of society exceeds its particular realisation, and its collective identity gives space to the other peoples (and to future generations too).

20. Our European democracy can be proud of its processes, although perfectible. It can be glad of its laws and other decisions, although debatable. It is not alone with its vision of society and therefore needs a broader human and social identity. We are given our identity to serve: it is consciousness of the universal. Our democracy too. Showing more hope!
