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# A Democratic Catholic Church, ed. Eugene Bianchi and Rosemary Ruether

William T. Cavanaugh



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Eugene C. Bianchi and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds.

*A Democratic Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 262 pp.

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To the authors of the essays collected here, the common rejoinder "The church is not a democracy" is manifestly true and painfully obvious. This volume is designed to challenge not the "is" of that statement but the implied "ought." Why shouldn't the Roman Catholic Church be a democracy? The editors hope that these articles from a variety of perspectives — historical, ethical, Latin American, European, feminist, Protestant — will lay the groundwork for a reconstruction of the Catholic Church along democratic lines.

The most important contribution this volume makes is to historicize the debate over democracy in the church. Essays attempt to show that the church's monarchical form was adopted under specific historical circumstances and thus it need not cling to this form as circumstances change. The problem, say editors Bianchi and Ruether, is not that the church adapted itself through history to contemporary social models, but that it refuses to admit this is the case and allow change now for new realities (9-10).

The historical survey which comprises the first six essays of the book attempts to show both how the church has adapted to changing circumstances, and how democracy has been an integral part of the church's tradition throughout its history. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, claims that the earliest church imitated the democratic procedures of the Greek *polis* rather than the patriarchy implicit in the *oikos* (21). In time the church was forced to adapt to Greco-Roman patriarchy, but the dangerous memory of democracy lived on in the

church, and "neither fourth- nor sixteenth- nor twentieth-century ecclesial struggles can be understood if one does not take this democratic undercurrent into account" (22). The problem here is that the attempt to historicize the governance of the church is undermined by the use of the term *democracy* as if it had no history of its own. As a result, "democracy" tends to mean those forms of church polity of which the author approves. First- and twentieth-century democracy are very different things, and it is doubtful that "democracy" would have had any meaning at all to those contesting church polity in the fourth or sixteenth centuries. The same problem arises in Eugene Bianchi's essay. In an ambitious tour of church history, stopping inexplicably at such figures as Arius and Machiavelli, Bianchi seeks to show that we need not look to the Enlightenment, but rather to church tradition itself, for democratic sources of church renewal. Bianchi uses *democratic*, however, to mean anything from "decentralized networks of communities bound together by a common faith and similar practices" (36) to "the free and responsible action of the people" (38) to "an open exchange of ideas and experiences" (48). The language is modern, but the imprecision with which it is used allows Bianchi, for example, to claim St. Dominic's monastic chapters as a form of "participatory democracy" (39).

Charles Curran also wants reform to take its cues from church tradition, but Catholic social teaching's main contribution turns out to be the "incarnational approach," meaning that as fully incarnate in the world, the church has much to learn from secular government and the liberal political order (95). Jay Dolan illustrates how this occurred in early American Catholic history. In trying to adapt to the American landscape, parishes adopted democratic voting procedures, launching a "National American Church" in which "the voice of the people [was] the voice of God" (118), until the voice of the Vatican put an end to such experimentation.

The best historical and theological work is found in chapters by John Beal and Hans Küng. Unlike Curran, Dolan, and other contributors, Beal fully recognizes the *sui generis* nature of the church. The church is neither democracy nor monarchy nor dictatorship, says Beal, and theology, not political science, must supply models for its governance. To that end, Beal plumbs the canonical tradition, both medieval and modern, to place papal and episcopal power within the church and not above it. He cites ample precedent for consulting the local church on election of bishops, a change recommendable today "not for the sake of democracy *per se* but for the sake of an authentic realization of *communio*" (67). Küng derives the authority of both shepherds and laity from the fullness of Christ in the church. Participation of laity and shepherds together in decision-making avoids individualism, both in the form of one-person rule and in the form of one-person-one-vote rule (86). Küng provides some concrete suggestions for reviving councils and synods at the diocesan and parish levels to provide forums for communal authority.

Other chapters also supply models, some more helpful than others, for alternative church polities which increase participation in the church. Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira shows how base communities in Brazil provide a new way of being church which is more dynamic than the old parish structure. Base communities have succeeded in many dioceses in expanding active space for lay participation without bypassing, but rather sharing in, diocesan authority — though Ribeiro predicts conflict ahead. Walter Goddijn tells the brief history of the Dutch Pastoral Council, which from 1968 to 1970 tried to give the laity a voice in national church affairs which was more than consultative, though less than deliberative. Rosemary Ruether surveys a variety of Catholic grassroots organizations working on issues of justice, peace, and women's issues in church and society. Although Ruether

remarks that these groups function to some extent as "base communities," they are distinguished by their independence from the hierarchical church.

Those looking to survey everything wrong with the Roman Catholic Church in one handy volume will not be disappointed by this book. At times, some of these essays succumb to the kind of caricatures of Catholicism one might expect from the Rev. Ian Paisley. Marie Augusta Neal, for example, suggests the church bears responsibility for the Mafia and contrasts the "responsible, self-determining quality in the Protestant ethic" with a "docile, childlike character of dependency" in Catholic culture (174-75). For the most part, however, the reader senses a deep pastoral concern for the future of a church whose pastors and people drift away from each other, at least in the U.S.

At its best this book explores ways in which faithful Catholics are taking responsibility for the church and opening new spaces for participation which can challenge the bureaucratic weight of the church. Many of these accounts, however, are burdened with misguided theoretical and theological understandings of what is at stake in democratizing the church. Bianchi and Ruether emphasize that behind this collection of essays lies the conviction that the church's problems stem not from narrow-minded leaders or bad theologies, but from a basic flaw in the structure of church polity (248). Open discourse, free debate, and lay participation in decision-making is the key to putting the church right on sexuality, women's issues, and a host of other concerns involving justice and peace. Thus Ruether writes that the Women's Ordination Conference realized that procedural democracy in the church was its primary goal, with women's ordination only possible once that was achieved (194).

The defects in this approach become clear in Phillip Berryman's excellent contribution to the book. Berryman points out that progres-

sive Latin American Catholics seldom speak of democracy in the church — in part because they are a minority and would lose out in most democratic contests. In Nicaragua it was easy to see Cardinal Obando y Bravo's actions against church progressives as thwarting the will of the people; but Berryman argues that the people were ambivalent about the Sandinistas, and that democratic procedures would not necessarily have favored the revolution. What is needed is not democracy but charismatic leadership, both clerical and lay. Oscar Romero is Berryman's model for a leader who employed a collegial and consultative style, and yet *precisely because of his authority* was able to fight for the poor.

Behind many of these essays lies the assumption that the church would become a more progressive place by giving more power to the laity. The problem is that laypeople don't want power in the church; most laypeople in bourgeois societies want the church to leave them alone. We should also recall that these same laypeople are the ones who voted overwhelmingly in favor of the recently installed Congress (Bishop Newt?), of which the authors of this volume would undoubtedly not approve.

In his chapter John Coleman comments that the church can never be founded on the will of the people because it is founded on the will of Christ (227). This theological insight is lost in other essays amid complaints that church authority puts the laity in the position of children "needing a guidance they cannot provide for themselves" (176), or "dependent on outside authority and daring not to think and act as moral agents in their own right" (10). Behind the emphasis on democratic procedure is the peculiarly modern idea that the good consists in doing the will of the people without interference from "outside authority." But the will of the people, as Berryman points out, does not guarantee good results any more than does the will of one in authority. That is because, as Aquinas says (and Curran remarks, 102),

true authority or commanding is not an act of the will but of the intellect. Real authority is not one will prevailing over another, but the truth prevailing over falsehood through teaching. Questions of women's ordination and birth control will not be solved by a procedural reshuffling of power in the church, for the rule of the church is not majority rule but unanimous rule, to think with one mind: the mind of Christ.

Unfortunately, many of those in power in the Roman Catholic Church do exercise that authority as if it were dependent on their own will, ruling by edict instead of teaching and listening. As John Beal remarks, such leadership inspires individualism in both the leaders and the led (69). In other words, the hierarchy's failure to consult the laity has led to the laity's increasing refusal to consult the hierarchy in making decisions. Many of Beal's, Küng's, Ribeiro's, and Coleman's suggestions, such as the revival of diocesan synods, helpfully address the need in the church for means through which the hierarchy and laity may teach one another.

Behind this book's historical consciousness there is a progressivist narrative, a sense that the ills of the present church come from a continued identification with the politics of the Roman Empire or medieval monarchies, and a consequent failure to adapt to the prevailing winds of democracy that blow through the modern world. The reader finds little recognition that the bureaucratization and centralization which weigh down the church are very modern phenomena which have their origin in the democratic State. Bureaucracy eliminates the distinction between authority and arbitrary will. Far from curing bureaucracy, democracy propagates it; for as Hegel understood, a multiplicity of individual wills requires bureaucracies to facilitate them. In his survey of the Protestant experience with democratic ecclesiologies, Dale Dunlap chronicles the growth of ecclesiastical bureaucracies among American churches. On the other hand, Phillip Berryman writes that Latin

American bishops "have found ways of operating with a high degree of consultation, even if they do not use the language of democracy," precisely because "they are far less impeded by bureaucracy and administration than their North American counterparts" (134).

Berryman writes that Latin American reluctance to use the term "democracy" is connected to the atrocities the U.S. and its clients have perpetuated in the region in democracy's name. And yet Berryman himself does use the term, while cautioning that its meanings are complex and many. In this volume "democracy" is equated variously with egalitarianism (23), decentralization (36), pluralism (39), deliberative jurisdiction for regional conferences of bishops (46), the will of the people (118), lack of bureaucracy (152), grassroots organizing (191), and a host of other ideas and structures. Is the term *democracy* helpful in talking about the church? Ruether and Bianchi claim that what they mean by democracy has nothing to do with American-style bourgeois democracy (12). After reading these essays, however, the dome of St. Peter's on the book's cover begins to look a bit like the Capitol building.

Modern democracy is a concept with a history — one that is tied intimately to the autonomy of the individual will, the rise of capitalism, and in this century, the spread of democracy by the use of American military force. My suspicion is that the church will have little to gain by assimilation to yet another form of Empire, this time in the name of democracy. This book contains many important suggestions for recognizing voices of authority in the church that are currently muted. This goal will not be served by democratizing the church. □