# The Influence of the Christian Idea of Paradox on Democratic Though

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**Abstract:** The current crisis of Western democracy was caused, at least in part, by the citizens' ignorance regarding this political regime. Western democracies are indebted to four traditions: ancient Greece, Roman republicanism, Judeo-Christian thought, and Modernity. This work studies democracy's debt to the Christian idea of paradox. I begin by examining the exchange between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank on whether Christianity is best understood in terms of Hegelian dialectics or as essentially paradoxical. Building on Milbank's defense of paradox, I explore the concept more deeply in the works of Henri de Lubac and then apply it to democratic theory, arguing that without a proper understanding of the place of paradox in democracy, it is difficult to see how powerful this political regime is for protecting human beings from autocracy, oppression and, eventually, tyranny.
**Keywords:** Paradox; Democracy; Authority; Power.

## ᴱˢ La influencia de la idea cristiana de la paradoja en el pensamiento democrático

**Resumen:** La actual crisis de la democracia occidental se debe, al menos en parte, a la ignorancia de los ciudadanos sobre este régimen político. Las democracias occidentales son deudoras de cuatro tradiciones: la antigua Grecia, el republicanismo romano, el pensamiento judeocristiano y la Modernidad. Este trabajo estudia la deuda que tiene la democracia con la idea cristiana de paradoja. Comienzo analizando el intercambio entre Slavoj Žižek y John Milbank sobre si el cristianismo se entiende mejor en términos de dialéctica hegeliana o como esencialmente paradójico. Suscribiendo la defensa de Milbank de la paradoja, estudio el término más profundamente en las obras de Henri de Lubac y luego lo aplico a la teoría democrática para mostrar que, sin una comprensión adecuada del lugar de la 'paradoja' en la democracia, es difícil ver lo poderoso que es este régimen político para proteger a los seres humanos de la autocracia, la opresión y, eventualmente, la tiranía.
**Palabras clave:** Paradoja; Democracia; Autoridad; Poder.

## 1. Our democratic crisis

We live in dark times. Ours is a time wherein the whispering voice of truth is crushed under the hubbub of blatant lies, simulation, and fake news; a time wherein the face of democracy is distorted by the return of radical politics, from far-right activists and their racist dystopia to far-left reactions to globalization and even to democracy, which have brought to life a new messiah-like kind of despot; a time wherein civic spiritedness is ignored, despised, or even opposed by anomic, nihilistic, and self-centered individuals who willingly cede their political rights for the mess of pottage of private comfort and consumerism, happily paying the price of being ruled by ignorant populists who dismantle democracy under a business-as-usual mask; a time wherein religions are distrusted because some of its members have failed to live up to their own standards, or

have even lowered themselves to commit atrocious crimes, sometimes under the complicit mantle created by their superiors; a time wherein education is synonymous with mass-produced professionals, individuals endowed with technical tools for the endless production of commodities... A time, in short, where citizens are scarce because the fabrics of citizens are desolate.

That democracy[1] is in retreat is not news but rather a sad certainty. In its last report on democracy in the world, *Nations in Transit 2024*, Freedom House reported 2023 as the eighteenth consecutive year of democratic decline, with more countries worsening the quality of their democracy than those improving it. In 2023, 52 nations had losses in the quality of their democracy while only 21 improved their democracy (Freedom House, 2024). The same tendency is reported by The Economist's democratic index (2023), which shows that, of the five main categories considered by the index, four of them–civil liberties, electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, and political culture–all fell between 2008 and 2023. Only political participation improved in the world. The report claims that «the year was not an auspicious one for democracy», with the global average index falling to 5.23, down from 5.29 in 2022.

Latin America's de-democratization is an interesting case for study. Latinobarómetro's (2023) survey reports that, between 2020 and 2023, countries with a moderate democratic culture saw a dramatic fall in the number of people supporting democracy in Latin America: Costa Rica lost 11 points, going from 67 in 2020 to 56 in 2023, and Mexico lost 8 points, from 43 to 35 in the same period. As for the question whether an authoritarian government may sometimes be preferable, Mexico saw an increase of 11 points in the period, going from 22 to 33 percent of the population welcoming an authoritarian regime; Guatemala went from 14 to 23 percent of support for authoritarian rule.

What can be said of the fact that the first convicted former president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, has become the forty-seventh president of that country? What should we make of the success of Latin-American autocratic leaders such as Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Javier Milei in Argentina, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, to say nothing of the Middle East, Russia, or China? How did the democratic dream wane in the first decades of the third millennium?

This work suggests that the answer to the democratic crisis is partly due to the widespread ignorance regarding this political regime. People do not know what democracy is, nor what it is *for*, and consequently do not care about that political regime. Many are fooled by demagogues who promise quick, radical solutions only to fell short on their promises or, worse, turn against the people to consolidate autocratic power. Schools and universities have tragically abandoned their responsibility as centers for the education of democrats (Nussbaum, 2010), opting for the easy way of turning themselves into fabrics of docile, acritical, painfully ignorant technicians.

This work studies democracy's debt to the Christian idea of paradox[2]. I begin by examining the exchange between materialist philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, and Radical Orthodoxy theologian, John Milbank, on whether Christianity is best understood in terms of Hegelian dialectics or as essentially paradoxical. Building on Milbank's thesis about the place of paradox in Christianity, I explore the concept more deeply in the works of Henri de Lubac (one of Milbank's main influences) and then apply it to democratic theory, arguing that without a proper understanding of the place of paradox in democracy, it is difficult to see how powerful this political regime is for protecting human beings from autocracy, oppression and, eventually, tyranny. This is, of course, but a first step to revitalize an understanding of democracy that could become attractive to many people who today may see this political regime as unimportant, inefficient, or blatantly useless. Much more is surely to be done, but perhaps the paradoxical character of democracy may be a good place to start.

It must be stressed that I have no interest in presenting democracy as a Christian product. Democracy is too complex a phenomenon to support such a claim. What I stress is rather that democracy drew from the Christian vocabulary and imaginary in such a way that a proper understanding of this political regime would be incomplete should we ignore Christianity as *one* of the pillars upon which democracy was built.

## 2. Žižek contra Milbank

The book *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* presents us with an exchange between Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. At the heart of the debate is the question whether Christianity or, more precisely, the Trinitarian mystery, is best understood as a dialectical process or rather as a paradox.

Žižek claims that Christianity is best understood when translated into Hegelese. In this account, the Trinity involves a dialectic process that culminates with the Holy Spirit, understood as the reconciliation of

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[1]  By the term "democracy" I understand a more robust idea than that defended by political theorists like Giovanni Sartori (2008, 29-69) and Robert Dahl (1998, ch. 4 and 8), who see democracy mainly as an amalgamation of institutions and laws. On the contrary, I subscribe to Alexis the Tocqueville's claim that democracy is, first and foremost, a *social arrangement*, that is, a set of habits, intuitions, beliefs, traditions, and cultural elements that *produce* a very specific kind of community, one which can or cannot held together liberal democratic institutions. Secondly, I subscribe to Claude Lefort's distinction between "the political" [*le politique*] and "politics" [*la politique*], understanding the former as understanding that the former underlies and establishes the very possibility of the latter. Democracy is thus a complex social arrangement that includes habits, *mœures*, perspectives, beliefs, and other cultural aspects, by means of which a society understands itself. This arrangement, in turn, is at the basis of any institutional engineering and has priority over it.

[2]  Other non-Christian accounts of the idea of "paradox" can be found in the works of Jean Bodin (1992) and Carl Schmitt (2005), who identify the founding of sovereign power as paradoxical, as a power that requires itself to be founded. Contemporary theorists have described the idea of democracy as containing paradoxes, such as Claude Lefort (1998), Chantal Mouffe (2017), and Jacques Rancière (2014).

the negation the man-God Christ made of the Absolutely-other Father: «Christ as God-man is the externally presupposed Unity/Reconciliation: first the immediate unity, then the mediate one in the guise of the Holy Spirit–we pass from Christ whose predicate is love, to love itself as subject (in the Holy Spirit, 'I am where two of you love each other')» (Davis, 2011: 74-75). Through this dialectical process, Žižek affirms, God is dissolved and ultimately identified with the community of believers by means of a movement whereby the radical *otherness* of God is negated by the *nearness* of the incarnated Christ, pushing forward the Holy Spirit as the self-identification of the God-community with itself:

> [T]he mystery of God is man, 'God' is nothing but the reified/substantialized version of human collective activity, and so on. What is missing here is the properly Christian gesture: in order to posit the presupposition (to 'humanize' God, reduce him to an expression/result of human activity), the (human/subjective) *positing itself should be 'presupposed,' located in God as the substantial ground-presupposition of man, as its own becoming-human/finite.* (Davis, 2011: 75)

Žižek's strategy is fully consistent with Hegel's idea of the Absolute Spirit, which rejects the Christian idea of God's creation as an utterly free act, which implies that God needs nothing of His creatures, that His creation is the freest act moved solely by love[3]. For Hegel, on the contrary, God is dependent on His creation. As Charles Taylor (1975: 107) explains, in Hegel's philosophy «[t]he absolute goes on living through both the affirmation and the denial of finite things. It lives *by* the process of affirmation and denial; it lives *via* the contradiction in finite things. Thus the absolute is essentially life and movement and change». Hegel's Absolute can only live through and by human beings, who are, in the last analysis, the agents of the former's unfolding in history. God is therefore *not* the radically other who creates and sustains life out of love, but rationality incarnated in time and space, a spiritual movement by means of which humanity or, more exactly, some exceptional cultures, discover their relation to the Absolute, which is nothing but rationality's self-development in and through human culture. Hegel's *Geist*, which unfolds dialectically, is thus the condition of possibility for Žižek's identification of the Holy Spirit with the human community.

John Milbank opposes Žižek's Hegelian Christianity affirming that the latter «endorses a Whiggish, Protestant metanarrative», and that, in this narrative, «Hegel is the fully fledged Protestant consummation of Christian metaphysical logic» (Davis, 2011: 113). Thus, against Žižek's atheist-dialectical version of Christianity, Milbank advocates for «a radically Catholic humanist alternative to this, which sustains genuine transcendence only because of its commitment to incarnational paradox. Such a humanism is diversely found in Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Chesterton, and Henri de Lubac» (Davis, 2011: 117).

Milbank defends a paradoxical formulation of the Trinity that makes possible to avoid Žižek's conclusion, namely, that Christianity necessarily leads to an atheistic confession:

> Christian Trinitarian logic has a mediating structure which is *not* dialectical. The key point here... is that that which lies 'between' two poles is paradoxically 'extra' to those two poles, itself indeed the procession of the love that lies between Father and Son (as Augustine put it)–yet the arriving externality of this thirdness is still guaranteed by the fact that Father and Son... *are* in their mutually constitutive relationship only through this additional constitutive relationship to the Holy Spirit–which is not so much their 'child' as the very womb of desire of truth in which the Father has originally conceived the Word of reason. (Davis, 2011: 145)

For Milbank, therefore, the Holy Spirit cannot be understood as the overcoming of the Father-Son antithesis but as a loving relationship that cannot be thought as *produced*, that is, as a byproduct of the Father and Son. The Holy Spirit's role in that relationship is essential to the Godhead as the unquenchable love that creates the very Christian unity-in-diversity that constitutes not only God's essence but also characterizes His Creation. Fulgentius of Ruspe, an African bishop who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries of the Christian era, offers a beautiful description of the Holy Spirit:

> Rightly do we ask that this [charity in the unity of Christ's body] should be brought about in us by the gift of the Spirit, who is the one Spirit of the Father and the Son: because that Holy Unity in Nature, that Equality in Love, that is the Trinity, the one true God, sanctifies in unanimity those whom it adopts. In this one substance of the Trinity there is unity in the origin, equality in the Son, but in the Spirit of Love a fusion of equality and unity: the unity knows no division, the equality no difference, the love no shadow of dislike. There is no discord there: for the equality, which is love and unity, and the unity, which is equality and love, and the love, which is unity and equality, continue for ever in one unchanging nature. (Lubac, 1998: 390)

The Trinity is depicted here not as a dialectical process by which the radically other will eventually be negated by the absolutely near (*Mt* 1:23; *Is* 7:14) and ultimately reconciled in the community of men and women the very being of which *is* the Spirit. God is rather the mysterious composite of unity, equality, and love, each one of which is already expressed in the other while being different from the others. God is *not* the community of believers, cannot be identified with the created order, but is rather the source of being constantly attracting everything to Himself by means of an absolute love.

This is thus the ground upon which Milbank criticizes Žižek's Hegelian reduction of Christianity to atheism and affirms that Christianity is paradoxical rather than dialectical. The next section delves into the notion of paradox as presented by Henri de Lubac.

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[3]    Cfr. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* 1a, a.3: «A naturally contingent cause must be determined to act by some external power. The divine will, which by its nature is necessary, determines itself to will things to which it has no necessary relation».

## 3. Henri de Lubac's understanding of 'paradox'

Henri de Lubac, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century and perhaps the single most influential of the architects of Vatican II's dogmatic constitution, *Lumen gentium*, provides us with a provocative reflection on the notion of paradox, claiming that not only Christianity is paradoxical but rather that «man is himself a living paradox» (Lubac, 1987: 8). In the first pages of his *Paradoxes*, first published in 1945, he offers a succinct though dense meditation of the meaning of paradox.

Paradox, de Lubac claims (1987: 9) is, first, the opposite of synthesis, because *quamdiu vivimus, necesse habemus semper quaerere*, as long as we live, we deem it essential ever to seek. Secondly, and here we find Milbank's inspiration, «paradox has more charm than dialectics; it is also more realist and more modest, less tense and less hurried». In sum, de Lubac asserts that

> paradox exists everywhere in reality, before existing in thought. It is everywhere in permanence. It is forever reborn. The universe itself, our universe in growth, is paradoxical. The synthesis of the world has not been made. As each truth becomes better known, it opens up a fresh area for paradox. Thought which failed to leave it its place then, which in other words did not recognize this universal place that it has, would be paradoxical in the bad sense. Paradox, in the best sense, is objectivity. (Lubac, 1987: 9-10)

How can the paradoxical be paired with, or even be synonym with, objectivity? An example can suffice to better understand this idea. In a discussion of the idea of 'person' in theology, Joseph Ratzinger, who was deeply influenced by de Lubac, delves into Augustine's exploration of the seemingly contradictory claim Jesus makes: «My teaching is not my teaching» (*Jn* 7:16). This is as contradictory as a statement can be. What is mine cannot at the same time be *not* mine. What pertains to me cannot be said not to be mine, for it would violate the principle of contradiction.

Augustine explores this apparent contradiction by turning to anthropology, asking: *Quid sum tuum quam tu, quid tam non tuum quam tum*–What belongs to you as much as your 'I', and what belongs to you as little as your 'I'? This new apparent contradiction opens a road to clarify the idea of paradox. First, human existence is beautifully defined by Augustine's idea: My own self is at the same time the clearest thing to me–I *am* myself; no one knows me better than myself–and the most obscure of mysteries. That every human being is a mystery is one of the most recurrent themes in the history of philosophy: the life of every human being is a quest to understand who we are and what is the purpose of our being here. Human beings are also the only known creature for whom existence is a source of anxiety.

Ratzinger (2013: 111) furthers this analysis claiming about our own selves: «[It] is most of all not your own, because it is only from the 'you' that it can exist as an 'I' in the first place». This is the central claim of Personalism: human beings are ontologically incomplete; the other cannot be understood as someone 'useful' or even 'necessary' for achieving my ends. The other is the place where I find myself. As Martin Buber (1970: 69-59) claims: «In the beginning is the relation». My encounter with a 'You' implies my entering into herself, becoming part of her while she becomes part of me: «Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his *light*».

By means of an analogy, we can now understand Jesus' words as a paradoxical expression. If we now turn to chapter 17 of John's gospel, we find the key to understanding his words. The chapter offers us one of the few places where we are allowed to contemplate the intimate dialogue of God with Himself. The Son, radically dependent to the Father, can do nothing but what the Father commands; at the same time, the Father is pure responsibility towards the Son (*Mt* 3:17; *Mt* 17:5).

> I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. (*Jn* 17: 6-8)

Jesus' teaching is not His but the Father's because «the Son cannot do anything of himself» (*Jn* 5:19). Dependence, on the other hand, is no obstacle to Jesus' radical identification with the Father: «I and my Father are one» (*Jn* 10:30).

What all of this says is that the Christian idea of the person means pure relationality. Just as the Trinitarian Mystery is understood in terms neither of substance nor accident but rather as *relation* (Ratzinger, 2013: 107-111), the human person, insofar as *imago Dei* (*Gen* 1:26), must exist in terms of the same relationality.

What would then be an objective anthropology? The certainty that existence does not end in me as a closed self but extends to the other, making it possible to say that my 'I' is what mostly belongs to me *and* what belongs to me the least. In other words, that I am *for* others and that in this very movement towards a 'You' I am, paradoxically, mostly myself.

To close this section, it may be useful to insist on the profound differences that the use of a dialectical or paradoxical framework entails. De Lubac (1987: 12) explains:

> Paradoxes are paradoxical: they make sport of the usual and reasonable rule of not being allowed to be *against* as well as *for*. Yet, unlike dialectics, they do not involve the clever turning of *for* into *against*. Neither are they only a conditioning of the one by the other. They are the simultaneity of the one and the other. They are even something more–lacking which, moreover, they would only be vulgar contradiction. They do not sin against logic, whose laws remain inviolable: but they escape its domain. They are the *for* fed by the *against*, the *against* going so far as to identify itself with the *for*; each of them moving

into the other, without letting itself be abolished by it and continuing to oppose the other, but so as to give it vigor.

The purpose of dialectics, as developed by Hegel, is not the simultaneity of thesis and antithesis but rather its overcoming into a deeper layer of self-awareness and knowledge of the spirit. Here is present, with its outmost strength, the modern ideal of *progress*. According to Hegel, history must be seen as the progressive unfolding of *Geist*'s self-awareness in and through human consciousness. It is only when human beings become aware of their destiny as, to use Heidegger's formulation, 'shepherds of Being', that *Geist* becomes actualized. Paradox, on the other hand, does not describe a progression but rather the ultimately mysterious essence of reality, the very impossibility of ever achieving the 'synthesis of the world' (Lubac, 1987: 10).

The paradoxical character of reality is, moreover, expressed not only in human cognition but in reality *as such*. In other words, the final impossibility of a synthesis is not due only to the deficiencies of human reasoning–as it is the case with Kant's distinction between noumenon and phenomenon–but to the fabric of reality itself, to the way things are made and express themselves. This is, for example, what the 'law of superabundance' implies (Schall, 1991). As Ratzinger (2004: 262) explains,

> Christ is the infinite self-expenditure of God. And both [the miracle of the loaves (*Mk* 8:8) and the changing of water into wine (*Jn* 2:1-11)] point back... to the structural law of creation, in which life squanders a million seeds in order to save one living one; in which a whole universe is squandered in order to prepare at one point a place for spirit, for man. Excess is God's trademark in his creation; as the Fathers put it, 'God does not reckon his gifts by the measure'.

## 4. Christianity and democracy

From its very inception, Christianity challenged accepted wisdom, disrupting societies by announcing a new life (*Jn* 11:25) often at odds with the beliefs and practices that held communities together for centuries. In the second century, for instance, Celsus (1987: 54) was already aware of Christianity's assault on the classical idea of reason: «'The wisdom of this world,' they say, 'is evil; to be simple is to be good.'» In a conversation with Lucien Jerphagnon, Luc Ferry (2010: 69) insists in the scandalous character of the Christian faith: «The *logos* was made flesh. What does this mean? It means that it became in-carnate, something that now becomes completely scandalous for the stoics».

The *event* of the incarnation and resurrection of the Son of God–upon which the whole edifice of Christianity is built upon–is described by the old Simeon as «a sign which shall be spoken against» (*Lk* 2:34). This disruption of old values was precisely the basis for Nietzsche's (1996: §46) assertion that «Christianity promised a revaluation of all values of antiquity». And fulfilled this promise became. Celsus (1987: 58) paraphrases the challenge the chief priests threw at the crucified Jesus: «[W]ould it not seem reasonable that if you are, as you say, God's son, God would have helped you out of your calamity, or that you would have been able to help yourself?» (cfr. *Mt* 27:42-43). This unreasonableness, the very contradiction Christian revelation is to human understanding, is summarized by Paul: «unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness» (*1 Cor* 1:23).

Christianity radically altered the landscape of human societies, and this was particularly true in the West, where Christian ideas entered a dialogue with Greek philosophy (Benedict XVI 2006), begetting a whole civilization the imprint of which we see in arts, politics, economics, and in the social arrangements of its societies. Western civilization or, in a figural sense, 'Europe', is thus a composite, the point where Greek philosophy, the Roman tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the critique Modernity made to Medieval imagination converge (Ratzinger, 2012: 167).

Democracy is, to be sure, an offspring of Western imagination and, as such, indebted to Christian metaphysics. As Carl Schmitt (2005: 36) famously claimed almost a century ago, «all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development... but also because of their systematic structure». His dictum is completed by the claim that «the metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization» (Schmitt, 2005: 46). Schmitt illuminates the intimate relationship between political form and metaphysical imagination, reminding us that, to use an image familiar to Machiavelli and Rousseau, when the legislator sets herself to found a people, she finds herself bound by a space of intelligibility that is *external* to her, which constrains what is politically thinkable.

Filiation is, however, not a prison; children often abandon their parent's worldview (Schmitt, 2017: 56). Just as the metaphysical image of the world was radically modified by the crisis of reason triggered by the Second World War, the answer to the question whether democracy needs today Christian ideas and values is unclear to say the least. Take, for example, the case of human rights. In *Christian Human Rights*, Samuel Moyn traces the Christian origins of post-war human rights, focusing particularly on the concept of *dignity*, an idea saturated by Christian ideas. Notwithstanding this history, Moyn (2015: 167) closes his book with a startling suggestion: «If human rights should remain central to collective politics, they would have to come in a version that would finally transcend their Christian incarnation». In what follows I broaden Moyn's question beyond human rights, inquiring whether democracy, as it is understood in today's postsecular societies, can transcend its Christian incarnation. Contrary to Moyn's insight, I argue that the very attempt to renounce the Christian metaphysical space as the foundation of democracy would imply renouncing democracy altogether. This, because democracy's core is a composite of Christian ideas that are knit together with other elements from the

Greek, Roman, and Modern traditions of thought. It is precisely the forgetting or even the rejection of these foundations that is in part responsible for the widespread crisis in democratic societies.

With this I don't mean, to be sure, that democracy should commit to salvation in Christian terms, or that it should strive to convert as many citizens as possible. To the contrary, secularity is itself a Christian invention, as Christ's famous dictum attests: «Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's» (*Mk* 12:17). What I am implying is that democracy cannot properly function when forgetting the fertile ground upon which it grew, the insights and presuppositions that make it possible for the whole democratic enterprise to become intelligible. I do not, therefore, promote a Christian Republic, and idea which is self-contradictory (cfr. *1 Chro* 29:15; *Mt* 8:20; *Heb* 11:10, 16; *Phil* 3:20) and anti-Christian, as Augustine's distinction between the two cities suggests.

The following sections study how the Christian idea of paradox throws light to some fundamental ideas of democracy.

## 5. Christianity and power

> It is easy for many to be hemmed in by few, for in the sight of heaven there is no difference between saving by many or by few. It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from heaven. (1 *Macc* 3:18-19)

Christianity is not alien to power. From its very inception it stood in relationship to, and often against established powers. The very notion of redemption creates a paradox when confronted with that of worldly power. In his analysis of Jesus' trial, Giorgio Agamben (2015: 44-45) offers a paradoxical understanding of the earthly and celestial dimensions of human existence:

> He–who has not come to judge the world but to save it–finds himself, perhaps precisely for this reason, having to respond in a trial, to submit to a judgment, which his alter ego, Pilate, in the end will not pronounce, cannot pronounce. Justice and salvation cannot be reconciled; every time, they return to mutually excluding and calling for each other. Judgment is implacable and at the same time impossible, because in it things appear as lost and unsavable; salvation is merciful and nevertheless ineffective, because in it things appear as Unjudgable.

Power is, for Christianity, a God-given *tool* to humanity, but one that, as with every other tool, is Janus-faced: when ordered toward its proper goal–or, in Augustine's words, when governed by *caritas*–it is an instrument for good, but when disorderly aiming towards lesser goods (*cupiditas*), it becomes destructive. This is evident in the story of creation. Romano Guardini's (1963: 40) reading of Genesis is helpful here. While human beings were given power to dominate (*dominamini*) the created order, the story of the fall warns us regarding the abuse of that ability: «Human power and the dominion that comes with it have their roots in man's likeness with God; because of this man does not have power as a self-given, autonomous, right, but as a feud… Dominion therefore becomes obedience and service». Power is thus a veritable God-like capacity that human beings exercise, insofar as through power human beings govern, sustain, and judge the created order. But it is *also* a constant temptation, for the compulsion to become *like* God (*Gen* 3:4-5)–to be autonomous, bound by no law–often turns power into an instrument of domination, violence, and oppression. It is not fortuitous that the third of Satan's temptations to Jesus refers to political power. Satan–the 'prince of this world' (*Jn* 14:30)–promises Jesus' power over all the kingdoms of earth if the Son of God kneels and adores the devil. This temptation goes to the heart of the problem of Christian existence: to win the world for themselves, human beings will have to relinquish God, and vice versa (*Mt* 16:26).

From this it is obvious that power is essentially paradoxical: on the one hand, it comes from God, for power (δύναμις) is His, as the doxology asserts: *Quia tuum est regnum et potentia et gloria in sæcula sæculorum*, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever; but, on the other hand, earthly power, when perverted, relates to Satan and his works.

What happens with the notion of power can be better understood by taking a look at Aristotle's famous typology of political regimes. In his *Politics*, political regimes are organized by the number of those ruling and by the good every regime pursues. It is this second distinction that interests us: «*True* forms of government», Aristotle claims, «are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest; but governments which rule with a view to the private interest… are *perversions*» (Aristotle, 2009: III.7.1279a, 70). From this definition we can see that the notion of 'power' must be understood analogically as the anthropological paradox discussed above: just as my 'I' is at the same time mine and not mine because, to be authentically myself, I need to be *for* others, power becomes rarefied and ultimately perverted when used for selfish interests. It is thus in the very essence of power to be *for* others or, in Aristotle formulation, for the common interest. This seems to be the basis of Hannah Arendt's (1970: 42) distinction between power and violence:

> power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements… The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.

Modern theorists of democracy, moreover, considered democracy the best of political regimes not because of its power or efficiency but, paradoxically, because of its weakness. For the same reason Aristotle considers tyranny the worst political regime, namely, because of its strength, preference for democracy is due to its weakness, which makes tyranny less likely. Modern democracy adopted Machiavelli's (1994: XV.48) realism,

focusing not on how human beings *should* be but rather on how they actually *are*, understanding power as a necessary evil that must be controlled and countered by means of institutions[4]. A brilliant example is found in the *Federalist Papers*, wherein James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, writing under the pseudonym of Publius, defend a republican regime–today's 'democracy'–by taking advantage of democracy's weakness. In Federalist 10, Publius gives a counter-intuitive solution to the problem of factions, namely, to multiply them so that not one of them can ever gather enough control so as to tyrannize the rest; the same insight is used in Federalist 51, where Publius defends the system of checks and balances between the three branches of government asserting that «[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place» (Hamilton *et al*, 2003: 252).

Modern democracy's conception of power clearly draws from both the Aristotelian and the Christian warning regarding the dangers associated with the personalization of power and its use for private interests. The reality and necessity of power is acknowledged, while at the same time power is presented as an ever-present danger for the citizens' freedoms. Democracy's true strength is brilliantly described in Winston Churchill's famous defense of democracy, when on November 11, 1947 he asserted that «democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time».

## 6. Democracy and authority

> Authority is ultimately based on charity, and its *raison d'être* is education. The exercise of it... should then be understood as pedagogy. (De Lubac, 1987: 26)

The paradoxical character of authority becomes particularly clear in the analogy between the minister and the public servant. Aquinas claims that *minister est sicut intrumentum intelligens*, the minister is an intelligent instrument. The minister is an instrument insofar as power is not his but God's, but he must freely choose his servitude. This is why, as Nicholas Heron (2018: 91) explains, the efficacy of sacraments is independent of the moral quality of the minister: «the sacraments maintain a strictly *ex opere operato* efficacy. That is, they remain objectively valid, and hence efficacious, absolutely independent of the personal worthiness of the agent who concretely confers them». The minister's authority is not a personal attribute; it is a gift bestowed on the condition that the ministry submits freely and willingly to God as the source of all power and authority. Heron (2018: 91-92) points out the evident debt that the modern concept of authority has with Christianity: «[I]n it it is formulated that exemplary modern notion that asserts the independence of the institution from the persons who represent it».

The paradoxical character of authority emerges pristine in the scene of the washing of the feet. We find many stances where the disciples ask themselves who is the most loved one, who should rule after Jesus (*Lk* 22:24). In the Last Supper, Christ shows the apostles what authority really means. Instead of starting with a discourse, «he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist..., he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him» (*Jn* 13:4-5). The Son of God does not stop at the Incarnation, he becomes a servant, debasing himself in the eyes of ancient wisdom[5], Only then, he explains himself:

> Ye call Me Master and Lord; and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. (*Jn* 13:16)

Democracy subscribes to the Christian critique of authority. In *Du Contrat Social*, Rousseau (2010, III.1.5: 83) makes every effort to alert the reader on the common confusion between the idea of the Sovereign and that of the government, defining the latter as «[a]n intermediate body established between subjects and Sovereign so that they might conform to one another, and charged with the execution of the laws and the maintenance of freedom, both civil and political». In distinguishing between the two, Rousseau puts Hobbesian absolutism on its feet[6], conferring all authority to the community of citizens and thus creating a government the power of which is utterly dependent on the former. Democracy renounced the classical solution of education in virtues, trusting instead in institutions as mechanisms to *check* power. Far from waiting for the excellent one who will save her people, democracy commits itself to the production of divisions and separations (Manent, 2004: ch. 1), a fragmentation of power that will prevent one single person to hold enough power as to oppress the rest.

Democratic authority inverted the–also Christian–model of Medieval power, wherein the king/queen was modelled as an *alter Christus*, sharing analogously in his double nature (Kantorowicz, 2016: 44). For, just as in Christ a divine and a human nature harmoniously coexist (what Christian theology calls hypostatic union, from the Greek ὑπόστασις), in the king/queen two bodies coexist: «For the King has in him two Bodies, *viz.,* a Body natural, and a Body politic,» the former subject «to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident», while

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[4] This is precisely Rousseau's reading of Machiavelli. Far from an ally of tyrants, Rousseau (2010: III.6.5: 95) saw the Florentine as gifting citizens with the tyrant's playbook.

[5] «The Christian view boldly denies the Greek axiom that love is an aspiration of the lower towards the higher. On the contrary, now the criterion of love is that the nobler stoops to the vulgar, the healthy to the sick, the rich to the poor, the handsome to the ugly, the good and saintly to the bad and common, the Messiah to the sinners and publicans. The Christian is not afraid, like the ancient, that he might lose something by doing so, that he might impair his own nobility. He acts in the peculiarly pious conviction that through this "condescension", through this self-abasement and "self-renunciation" he gains the highest good and becomes equal to God» (Scheler, 1961: 86).

[6] Cfr. Hobbes, 1994: xvii.13-14: 109.

the latter «is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the *public weal*» (Kantorowicz, 2016: 7, my emphasis). While Medieval political theology solved the problem of political power by infusing the king/queen with a transcendent divine grace that helped her rule wisely, modernity, renouncing the possibility of an *incorruptible* wise ruler, opted to restrain power to allow the maximum space for personal freedom in a non-tyrannical political order. This inversion, however, should not obscure the continuities between the two models. First, both the Medieval sovereign and the modern public servant had a mediated relationship with power. In the case of the former: «Christ was King and *Christus* by his very nature, whereas his deputy on earth was king and *christus* by grace only» (Kantorowicz, 2016: 47) while in democracy, as Claude Lefort's (1988: 17) asserts,

«[t]he locus of power becomes *an empty place*... this apparatus prevents governments from appropriating power for their own ends, from incorporating it into themselves». Secondly, in both models politics is directed to the common good. In the monarchic case, as we saw above, political rule is established by God for the 'public weal'; in the case of democracy the common good is redefined in terms of the symbolic emptiness of power: the non-tyrannical character of the regime allows for a system of freedoms by means of which citizens can collaborate to produce common goods. In democracy, therefore, power is relocated so as to be found neither in society nor outside of it:

> We would be wrong to conclude that power now resides *in* society on the grounds that it emanates from popular suffrage; it remains the agency by virtue of which society apprehends itself in its unity and relates to itself in time and space. But this agency is no longer referred to an unconditional pole; and in that sense, it marks a division between the *inside* and the *outside* of the social, institutes relations between those dimensions, and is tacitly recognized as being purely as being purely symbolic (Lefort, 1998: 17).

So, what is this 'People', which is neither identical nor different from society, the one from which all power and authority emanates and, at the same time, a veritable ghost of which only its accidents are visible? This is the third, and last element we will analyze.

## 7. The 'People'

From its very inception, Christianity opposed civil religions. Jesus' distinction between the political and the spiritual realms (*Jn* 18:36, *Mt* 22:21) articulates a critique of the political instrumentalization of religion common in his time. Civil religions were designed to produce obedience and civic spiritedness. Augustine (2014: VI.5: 246) reports the Roman scholar Varro distinguishing between mythological, civic, and natural religion, being the last one that of the philosophers, the one aiming for the truth. The bishop asserts, on this matter, that the Roman authorities «have done this (i.e., create civil religions) in order to bind men more tightly, as it were, in civil society, so that they might likewise possess them as subjects» (Augustine, 2014: IV.32: 184). Civil religions considered the whole people as its subject rather than individual human beings. The goal was not so much to promote an encounter with the gods but to render the subject obedient to political rule. A people subsumed under a civil religion is quickly transformed into a faceless mob or, in its best form, an acclamatory device. What is missing here is the Judeo-Christian idea of a *personal* God who speaks to human beings, calling them by their name (*1 Sam* 3:10; *Acts* 9:4; *Mt* 16:18). Christianity thus rejects the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes or, on the contrary, the use of political means to accomplish religious ends[7].

In his encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est*, pope Benedict XVI (2005: §1) synthesizes the beginning of Christian life: «Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction». Encountering the Person of Christ demands this encounter to happen in the sphere of personal intimacy. The Buberian relation occurs between an 'I' and a 'You', never between an 'Us' and a 'You'. But here Christianity seems to be getting itself into the liberal problem, namely, how to bring about the community out of the model of the individual?

As a young theologian, Joseph Ratzinger (2004: 249-250) would provide the theological basis for the claim he would made decades later, as a pope: «Christianity lives from the *individual* [*einzelne*] and for the individual». Ratzinger oddly prefers the German notion of 'individual' to the more theological 'person'. However, his choice is explained a few lines after. The primacy of the individual is explained in terms of the confrontation between an individual and the mob: Jesus of Nazareth «was crucified by the milieu... on his Cross [he] broke this very power of the conventional "everyone", the power of anonymity, which holds man captive». Christianity opposes the anonymous power of the mass because of its lack of responsibility and accountability. A mass transforms the individual into the umpteenth element of a faceless group, stripping her, while part of the mass, of her personhood. These nameless subject lacks what it takes for a true relation, being capable only of mass behavior, a kind of mimicry imposed on her from the outside. For Ratzinger (2004: 252), however, beginning with the individual cannot mean shutting herself to the world; to the contrary, the (obviously personalistic) principle of 'for' implies that «[b]eing a Christian means essentially changing over from being for oneself to being for one another». The anthropological paradox provides for us an explanation: one cannot

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[7]     That this tenet has not always been respected is obvious to anyone with the faintest idea of the history of Christianity: «The use of the State by the Church for its own purposes, climaxing in the Middle Ages and in absolutist Spain of the early modern era, has since Constantine been one of the most serious liabilities of the Church, and any historically minded person is inescapably aware of this. In its thinking, the Church has stubbornly confused faith in the absolute truth manifest in Christ with insistence on an absolute secular status for the institutional Church» (Ratzinger, 1966: 144).

just remove the individual to access the communal, nor destroy the latter to privilege the former. Between individualism and collectivism is Christianity, which stands for the transformation of the pure individual into a *person*, that is, a human being who is aware of her ontological dependence of others and, correspondingly, of her responsibility towards others.

While agreeing on the paradoxical character of the relationship between the part and the whole, De Lubac (1987: 331, 333) would dismiss Ratzinger's use of the notion of 'individual', claiming that «the person is not an idealized individual nor a transcendent monad». Quoting Jacques Maritain's *Humanisme intégral*, De Lubac asserts that «"a person is a whole world", but it must also be added at once that this "world" presupposes others with which it makes up one world only».

This paradoxical relationship between the part and the whole characteristic of the chole church, the 'People of God' (Vatican Council, 1965: §6). As Paul claims, Christ is the head and the church is his body. The body, moreover, is characterized by plurality, so that «the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you» (*1 Cor* 12:21). The multiple parts of the body remain different from each other, making it possible for the body to properly function. This is what Charles Taylor (1999:14) calls *unity-across-difference*. This pluralism is important because its rejection is at the very root of the totalitarian nightmare (Balthasar, 1987: 13).

The People of God is also said to be *infallible*, that is, to have some kind of instinct, the *sensus fidei*, which is a «sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith» (International Theological Commission, 2014: §3). The People thus has the power of discernment, a power Carl Schmitt (2008: 115) places at the very origin of the political problem, namely *Quis judicabit? Quis interpretabitur?* Who decides? Who interprets? This power is paralleled by the pope's own infallibility, a topic that confronted conciliarists and ultramontanists for centuries and which received a final definition in the last two ecumenic councils, Vatican I (in the 1870 dogmatic constitution *Pastor aeternus*), and Vatican II (in the 1965 dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, §25). Now, the infallibility of the pope is not a personal possession, because it «resides also in the body of Bishops, when that body exercises the supreme magisterium with the successor of Peter». We thus speak of Peter's infallibility as *one* of the twelve rather than his infallibility *against* the eleven. This infallibility is thus paradoxical: individual as well as collective. More important is, for our purposes, the way the church solves the possible confrontation between the two infallibilities, that is, between the *sensus fidei* and papal/conciliar infallibility. The International Theological Commission, as well as theologians such as John Henry Newman clearly establish that the infallibility of the People of God is *subsumed* under the authority of the magisterium. For Newman (1849: §2), «the gift of discerning, discriminating, defining, promulgating, and enforcing any portion of that tradition resides *solely* in the *Ecclesia docens*». The Commission (2014: §47, my emphasis), on the other hand, asserts that «it is the task of the Church's pastors to "promote the sense of the faith in all the faithful, examine and *authoritatively judge* the genuineness of its expression, and educate the faithful in an ever more mature evangelical discernment"». The 'People of God' is thus, at the same time, infallible and in need to be mediated by another authority, which is in turn also mediated since, as we saw above, the minister's authority is not his. This system of (evidently paradoxical) mediations is resembled by modern democracy's deactivation of the tyrannical impulses of the mass, one of the core worries of the American Fathers.

Democracy rejects the very notion of 'unity' in any substantive sense, settling instead for the institutionalization of conflict, that is, the transformation of sheer violence into political competition[8]. In order to do that, democracy works with a 'ghostly People' (Miller, 1988) that is incapable of any *direct* political action. In *The Federalist* 63, Publius makes an almost scandalous claim: the difference between ancient democracy and modern republicanism «lies in the *total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity from* any share in the *latter*, and not *in the total exclusion of representatives of the people*, from the administration of the *former*» (Hamilton *et al*, 2003: 309). It is the 'collective capacity' of the people what Madison and Hamilton feared the most, that is, the very possibility of the tyranny of the majority theorized by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. The 'People' in modern democracy is paradoxically the sovereign *and* a disabled agent. The People as sovereign «is displaced from view, lingering at best as a mere abstraction–popular sovereignty–but not capable of any concrete action» (Kahn, 2011: 32). The people is thus at the very foundation of all democratic political power but, at the same time, prevented from any concrete action upon the body politic. It is, as Paul Kahn claims, a 'mere abstraction' which is nonetheless necessary for the stability and continuity of political life.

## 8. Conclusion

> Those who have no other concern than to 'move with their times', adopting its tastes, ideas, passions, crazes, prejudices, fads–will soon be out-of-date, left behind. (De Lubac, 1987: 107)

Power, authority, and popular sovereignty are fundamental concepts in the theoretical construction of a democratic regime. As we have seen, when looking at them closely, all of these ideas behave in a paradoxical way, giving with one hand what is taken with the other. Paradox, as understood by Christianity and, specifically, by Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, helps us understand the very tragedy of human existence, namely, the impossibility of ever making human life transparent to itself. Life and, more precisely, *political* life in an

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[8]    See Urbinati, 2019: 199.

Arendtian sense, has a complexity such that any attempt to *solve* the political problem once and for all immediately slips into authoritarianism or, worse, totalitarianism. Lefort (1988: 19-22) describes this process:

> When individuals are increasingly insecure as a result of an economic crisis or of the ravages of war, when conflict between classes and groups is exacerbated and can no longer be symbolically resolved within the political sphere, when power appears to have sunk to the level of reality and to be no more than an instrument for the promotion of the interests and appetites of vulgar ambition and when, in a word, it appears *in* society, and when at the same time society appears to be fragmented, then we see the development of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division.

Evidently, Lefort is alien to de Lubac's language of paradox. However, it is not difficult to see how a sense of the paradoxical is present in his thought. It is when power 'sinks to the level of reality', that is, when it embraces a radically pragmatic understanding of it, dismissing the symbolic dimension that portrays power as inapprehensible, that the fantasy of uniformity starts looming in the human heart. Fear is often the vehicle of this disordered passion, convincing human beings that only in becoming part of a homogeneous whole can society survive. As Benito Mussolini (1932) asserted in *The Doctrine of Fascism*: «Anti-individualistic, the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal, will of man as a historic entity».

We live in dark times. Millions of people are abandoning the democratic ideal, opening the door to the return of an authoritarianism presenting itself in a multiplicity of forms. Democratic societies seem to have sunk to the level of reality, returning to xenophobic, racist, and classist policies. Fear seems to have become the core passion in our societies–fear of climate change and planetary destruction, of otherness as a permanent danger, of losing our social standing should we dare helping others to survive.

Democracy is an idea and, as such, it exists only when shared by enough people so as to become something worth fighting for. Understanding this idea is but the first step for a restauration of democratic regimes. In this work I have meditated on three fundamental democratic concepts, suggesting that we can better understand them having in mind the Christian concept of paradox and the debt Western democracy has towards this notion. Unlike dialectical reasoning, paradoxical thinking resists premature synthesis, preserving the tension between opposing terms as a constitutive feature of democratic life. Paradoxical thinking sees the complexity of existence as demanding an act of intellectual sobriety, keeping seemingly contradictory ideas in tension so as to preserve objectivity and freedom. Paradox, however, rejects relativism as our final destiny; truth is not abandoned in paradoxical thinking but rather preserved in all its force. Christianity professes that our relationship with Truth–that is, with the ultimate truths about our existence–is not productive but rather receptive. Human beings do not *discover* the truth but *receive* it. Christianity claims truth has come to humanity as a person (*Jn* 1:1, 14; 14:6; *Jn* 18:37). This definition of truth is also paradoxical, as de Lubac (1987: 114) explains: «It is a fine thing to seek the reign of truth. It is dreadful to declare that it has come». Christianity can never pretend to have solved the problem of the political existence of human being, it can only throw light on the subject as a tradition of though rather than as a revealed religion. This limitation notwithstanding, failing to acknowledge democracy's debt to Christian political thought will only lead to more obscurity regarding the anti-tyrannical force of this political regime that seems to be fighting today a war for survival.

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