

Challenges to Religion by New Political Realities

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At the beginning of his magnum opus, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) makes the following striking assertion about the advance of democracy:

“The various occurrences of national existence have everywhere turned to the advantage of democracy: all men have aided it by their exertions, both those who have intentionally laboured in its cause and those who have served it unwillingly; those who have fought for it and even those who have declared themselves its opponents have all been driven along in the same direction, have all laboured to one end; some unknowingly and some despite themselves, all have been blind instruments in the hands of God.

The gradual development of the principle of equality is, therefore, a providential fact. It has all the characteristics of such a fact: it is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress”.

De Tocqueville's explanation of what is driving mankind towards ever-increasing equality and democracy is the hand of God; and his Christian faith played a particularly important role in his understanding of democracy's expansion.

However de Tocqueville fully understands that despite his belief in an inevitable advance towards greater human freedom in our world, it is by no means a linear process. In the second part of the Introduction he describes how the French Revolution led gentle and virtuous men to oppose civilization and innovation, and even men of religion to become enemies of freedom. At the same time, democracy itself can be terribly abused to the defeat of its own Divine teleology.

As is well known, one of his most important insights is that voluntary associations and people's ability to work with one another in groups based on shared norms and values, are critical to the proper functioning of a modern democracy. In this regard he gives a special pride of place to religion

Nevertheless for all the dangers and the setbacks along the way, De Tocqueville sees the broad march of democracy as an ultimately irreversible development in the history of humanity.

De Tocqueville has been embraced by many contemporary thinkers, among them Francis Fukuyama.

But there has also been severe criticism of this position by the likes of Chilton Williamson in his book “The promise and failure of democracy.” While Williamson makes many compelling and damning criticisms of modern western consumerist and self-obsessed society, it is questionable whether he makes any serious dent in De Tocqueville's fundamental contention. Moreover, the latter appears to be overwhelmingly supported by contemporary socio-political analysis. I might also add that his religious view of this process is a call if not a challenge to us.

As indicated, De Tocqueville would not have been surprised to note that the march toward political freedom has been an erratic process, coming in waves and then often partially reversed or interrupted.

Modern sociological studies (such as the work of Fabrice Murtin and Romain Wacziarg, published in VOX 5 October 2011) have demonstrated how political institutions have progressed from autocracy to democracy over the last 200 years, despite fits and starts – notably, the interruption of the march to democracy during the period between the two world wars.

The question as to what factors determine both a transition to and the durability of democracy, is a long standing matter of debate in political economy that is not unequivocally resolved.

On the eve of the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson declared that mass education was the “the most effectual means of preventing tyranny”.

In line with the Founding Fathers’ vision, the US turned into a leading country in terms of educational attainment.

Accordingly de Tocqueville noted that “the education of the people powerfully contributes to the maintenance of the democratic republic”.

However an alternative claim that it is actually the accumulation of human capital and economic modernisation that really create the conditions for sustained democracy, has been espoused by many in more modern times - notably by Seymour Martin Lipset, who in 1959 introduced the ‘modernisation hypothesis’, arguing that economic development is a precondition for democracy.

While it remains a matter of debate as to whether the institutions of democracy facilitate development rather than vice versa; whether democracy affects education and income or whether the causality runs the other way; it is clear that they both play a significant role in this process.

The work of Murtin and Wacziarg (cited above) found empirical support for the hypothesis that in the long run both income and education - in particular *primary* education - affect democracy.

The global transition towards full literacy in most developed countries at the end of the 19th century, largely explains the historical rise in democracy.

One of their interesting conclusions in this regard was that the Arab Spring was partly predictable, as Middle Eastern countries displayed levels of democracy that were lower than those predicted by their level of education and income.

Yet income and education have to develop substantially in order to sustain the move to democratisation and perhaps more often than not, this is a slow process. Murtin and Wacziarg thus indicate that Middle Eastern countries will not achieve high and sustained levels of democratisation until they more fully embrace economic development for their society at large.

If you have been wondering where these musings of mine have been going and their relevance to the topic I have been asked to address, I hope you will now be picking up my thread.

However my thesis, if it may be described in such grand terms, would not be credible without adding another key factor and the most contemporary of them – namely the impact of modern technology.

Peruvian scholar Hernando De Soto, author of *The Other Path*, has chronicled the myriad feedback mechanisms that Western democracies have built into the most mundane political processes, such as rule making. By inviting criticism, hearings, debate and revisions by interested parties and ordinary citizens, even the bureaucracy produces rules that reflect a dynamic reality and yield some social benefit.

To a large degree this is simply the extension of de Tocqueville's understanding of social capital – but today it is magnified overwhelmingly by modern technological tools which transcend all boundaries.

Where society, technology and culture are so dynamic, dictatorship and totalitarianism are inevitably on the retreat. Moreover even where one sees reactionary responses to such a process (and I will return to this point shortly) such authorities today are at paradoxical pains to claim if not prove their democratic credentials. Russia's Putin is a case in point.

So my foundational argument here, following de Tocqueville, is that democracy is an inexorable process and indeed one of **religious** significance.

I would echo those who affirm that Divine Providence is to be seen precisely in the greater affirmation of the dignity of the individual, whom we here believe to be created in the Divine Image ; and thus the more that Image is empowered , the greater the glory of God in our world. Moreover as Jews we should have a particular pride is the struggle for universal freedom – a concept which Israel brought to the world through bits ethical-monotheistic faith. In the words of Heinrich Heine “ever since the Exodus, freedom has spoken with a Hebrew accent !”

However not only does de Tocqueville strongly acknowledge that this process can be and indeed has been severely abused; but that there is a moment when it is particularly vulnerable. Looking back on the French Revolution, de Tocqueville noted that the time of maximum danger for despotism is precisely when it begins to relax its pressure: "The most critical moment for (societies that have had) bad governments, is the one which witnesses their first steps toward reform."

In addition Murtin and Wacziarg confirm the obvious point that the civil institutions of democracy are particularly vulnerable at times of economic difficulty. In the European context this has been intensified by the significant immigrations of recent times - the consequences both of past colonialism and above all of the increased opportunities for human mobility.

The potential scope of this theme I have been invited to address, is vast. There are political developments taking place all over our globe. I will thus confine myself to two regions where the infancy of democracy and economic recession or stagnation impact particularly in their own way on the Jewish community.

While the Soviet Union collapsed more than twenty years ago, many countries that emerged or re-emerged from under its domination, are still in many places and respects taking “their first steps”; and often for every few steps forward there is a step backward. In keeping with the above observations, there have been reactionary responses either to the very democratization process itself, or to the globalization that comes with it; compounded by harsh economic conditions (even though as mentioned, there is still paradoxically an overwhelming interest in being seen to be democratic in one form or another.)

The correlation between the rise of extremism and the economic crisis has been well documented and presented most recently by Dr. Ronnie Stauber of the Tel Aviv University's Kantor Centre for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry.

Thus we have seen the resurgence of an insular nationalism and xenophobia in many central and eastern European countries, as well as in the Balkans and the Aegean.

The brunt of contemporary racism in these regions is born by the Roma and immigrant communities, but the most traditional target of bigotry in these lands is the Jew.

While hostility towards the “other” has led to an Islamophobia which in many places is far more venomous than anti-Semitism; a resurgent anti-Semitism has been fed both by these fears concerning globalization and increased economic challenges (often intertwined), posing an old-new challenge for the Jewish community and its ability to live a full and open Jewish religious life.

I will not encroach too much on the discussion of the workshop on this subject, but I might just mention Hungary as an exemplar, essentially negative of course, but with a silver lining of significance for us here.

The openly anti-Semitic party Jobbik has become the third biggest party in Hungarian politics in recent years, campaigning on a ticket to “reduce the “Zionist” influence” in the country and spewing forth rabidly anti-Semitic rhetoric and imagery such as Jobbik-supporting bikers’ groups holding “step on the gas” rallies ! It is noteworthy that as opposed to many other eastern European forms of anti-Semitism that distinguish between Jews (viewed negatively) and Israel (viewed positively especially where hostility to an increasing Islamic presence is the major driver); not only is Jobbik as hostile to Israel ,using the term Zionist pejoratively, but it actively courts Israel’s enemies within the Muslim world. Thus Jobbik controlled municipal councils have gone out of their way to establish twinning arrangements with towns in Iran (apparently to the bemusement of most local townsfolk, many of whom have little idea where Iran is, much less about its ideological hatred of Israel.)

The good news here and in particular for us in this meeting, is the clear stand condemning such rhetoric and activity taken by the Catholic church under the leadership of Cardinal Peter Erdo; demonstrating the imperative religious response to xenophobia and bigotry, to demonstrate solidarity with those who are the targets of such prejudice and to stand together for human dignity. This is surely a continuous religious imperative for us all

It would appear that while a democratizing process will continue its march in this region as elsewhere, the aforementioned reactionary spirit will still be around for quite a while, nurtured as mentioned, by the on-going economic difficulties compounded by immigration from lands even more deprived.

Of course as we know well, in other parts of Europe, Jews encounter real threats from elements within Muslim immigrant communities that often seek sublimation for their own frustration with their socio-economic position; and - galvanized by images of the Israel-Palestinian conflict on their television screens – violently target the local Jewish communities.

On the other hand there is a culture of “political correctness” in certain quarters (and I would say anti-Americanism as well) that is hostile to those who care for Israel, portraying *the latter* as a colonial oppressor and thus making it a convenient and even tactical target and rallying point for its own interests (and perhaps even historical guilt complexes.)

However it would be difficult to argue that these reflect national attitudes as a whole, let alone policies. Indeed surveys seem to demonstrate the contrary in both cases.

But arguably the most dramatic changes over the last couple of years have taken place in the Arab world from the Maghreb to the Gulf – changes which are in continual flux and shrouded in uncertainty.

These too reflect the inexorable march of empowerment for the individual in our contemporary world and the conditions that facilitate such as mentioned above.

These changes were described at the time as an “Arab Spring” and its detractors have now mocked its outcomes as an “Arab winter”. This however reflects a failure to appreciate the uneven progress of democratization throughout its history; and obviously the more repressed and deprived the context from which this process emerges, the more uneven if not erratic, the progress will be. Moreover as Murtin and Wacziarg note, democratization will not be able to flourish in the conditions of economic underdevelopment and poor infrastructure that prevail in these countries (and which were probably the main reasons for the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). In addition democracy is sustained by civil society as de Tocqueville observed; and such organizational development in these countries is still in its infancy.

Indeed the period that he describes as the “first steps” in democratic advance, he notes as most dangerous; and certainly the immaturity and volatility of the process have had many deleterious consequences. This has been especially the case for religious minorities –above all Christians - in these countries; though the further west in the Maghreb the more the situation appears to be more stable. For the remaining small Jewish communities in Morocco, life does not appear to have changed significantly; and the tiny Tunisian community seems to be weathering the storms, albeit not without difficulty.

However the major Jewish community in the region (and indeed in the world) is in Israel. I would be the last to claim that Israel does everything it should do for the flourishing of its Christian communities; but there is no doubt that as a bishop in Jerusalem said to me a year ago, “there is absolutely nowhere in the Middle East where Christians are more secure today than in Israel” (I suppose that means if we exclude Mediterranean islands like Cyprus and Malta.) This of course is a direct product of the democratic character of the state, notwithstanding its limitations, some of which may be inevitable for a society that finds itself in continuous conflict.

Even for so-called experts on the Middle East, there is no unanimity on what the upheavals in the Arab world will mean in the short term for Israel’s welfare, or even what they require. There are voices that insist that Israel can and must do no more than to weather the storms as quietly and as passively as possible; and others that believe that these upheavals have created new windows of opportunities for Israeli initiatives to break through the walls of hostility against her that have been erected in the Arab world and to a degree the Muslim world over the last generations, precisely by authoritarian and dictatorial regimes.

Paradoxically however, though not surprisingly, Israel serves the manipulations of parties involved in this process as a scapegoat or deflection, much as hostility to Jews has done over the ages.

In Syria, both the government and the rebels accuse Israel of being behind the other; just as recently both Sunni and Shia combatants in Lebanon accused each other of being Israel’s lackey. And according to Turkey’s Erdogan, Israel was behind the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

Inevitably for the majority of Israelis, still in the throes of the trauma of the second intifada compounding longer and lasting trauma, the unfolding political developments around us are a source of much anxiety.

Above all there is horror at the scale of violence that has taken place and continues.

To talk of “*the role* of Religion” in any geo-political context may be rather presumptuous; but this is especially so where Religion not only has many forms and varieties, but elicits extremely varied responses.

Yet the different messages of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible may be of guidance to us. Prophetic literature contains an overwhelming message of comfort and hope, above all to the exiles, i.e. the vulnerable. The Prophets also challenge the Children of Israel when they are secure, to live up to the highest ethical values and affirm the dignity of the human person – though they do this of course when the people live securely. Above all however, the Prophets confront the world’s despots and tyrants who trample that dignity.

I believe that the inexorable struggle for human dignity and freedom that de Tocqueville sees as “the hand of God” is indeed unfolding in the Middle East. But it is at a dangerously fragile inception.

However, Religion or more specifically Religious Institutions have clear prophetic responsibilities. They have the responsibility to provide succour, comfort and hope; and to encourage provision of assistance to the suffering and vulnerable.

We here should note in this regard both the important role of Catholic welfare agencies and also the rather remarkable assistance, shelter and medical services, provided by Israel for refugees, especially from Syria. One remarkable example took place last month when over 100 Syrian wounded (including children) with notes from Syrian doctors asking for help, made their way at night in a truck over the Golan Heights to a waiting Israeli medical unit which treated them and took the more seriously wounded to Israeli hospitals.

Not least of all, Religious voices should be leading the call that has come to be described in United Nations parlance as the Duty to Protect. In particular it should be demanding that those who show such terrible disregard for human life and trample human dignity be held to account.

There are surely legitimate differences of opinion regarding what actions must be taken by the international community and what their possible consequences might be. However to take the moral stand for human dignity, to raise the voice for human life, freedom and dignity; to condemn those who sacrifice the innocent on the altars of power; that surely is a fundamental role for Religion, for its representatives, in the context of such political transitions upheavals and conflicts.

Finally, let me share a frustration with you that I have in the Israeli-Arab context and which I believe is just as relevant if not more so to the greater region as a whole.

Religion often *is* part of the problem in these conflicts and upheavals. But the solution is not to disregard religion nor to see it as the enemy, for that will only become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If one does not want religion to be part of the problem, one must make it part of the solution. If politicians and diplomats do not engage and thus do not empower responsible mainstream religious leadership, then they are playing into the hands of the hostile extremists, even if they don't realize it. For as a result, the only “religious voice” that is being heard is that which opposes their path. In effect they, ipso facto, empower a “hostile religious opposition”, by failing to engage the constructive religious voices. The failure on the part of the West and western minds to understand this, is stunning. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the US has still never engaged Jewish, Muslim or even Christian institutional religious leadership in dialogue, let alone in seeking support for peace initiatives.

The way to combat political Islam in the Arab world is not by portraying religion as the enemy; but by seeking the engagement and support of religious leadership in the civil and democratic process.

Interfaith dialogue is also critically important in this regard; because it can offer a vision and a picture that can send powerful constructive messages to the societies at large. I think that King Abdullah of Jordan's recent conference of intra-Arab Christian-Muslim leadership is an excellent case in point. The failure of the western media to highlight it adequately, is another lost opportunity.

But surely more can be done on an inter-faith and even an Abrahamic level and I dare to suggest that the Holy See is in a unique position to take initiatives in this regard.

Above all, it is incumbent on religious institutions, leadership and individuals, to show that as important as it is to do all we can to protect ourselves and others from violence and hatred; as important as it is to give succour and support to those who are suffering; as important as it is to challenge despotic evil and disregard for human life and dignity;

it is possible to live in mutual respect not only for our common humanity, but also as different religious traditions that seek in the words of the prophet Micah (6:8) "that which is good and which the Lord requires of you; but to do justice and loving kindness and walk humbly with your God."