DEMOCRATIC FAITH

Publisher: Princeton University Press, 2005
ISBN: 978-0-691-16339-0; Price $26.96, 365 pages
Author: Patrick J. Deneen

REVIEWED BY: Wessel Bentley

To speak about democracy is a risky business. It is precarious because there are so many different expressions of democracy, that it is very difficult to pin down exactly what is meant. Democracy seems to have morphed according to context, location, the intentions of those who pose as representatives of this system, and has become for many the hope to which all should aspire. It is strange how election campaigns have taken the tone of religious worship services; how the political leader (priest) stands before the community (of faith, may we say congregation?), setting before them a vision of 'what could be'. Casting a vote in this direction is a vote of faith in more than the 'priest', but is the exercising of a 'sacrament' in 'worship' of the 'truth' of democracy.

This publication by Deneen is both timely and relevant. It asks what humanity has done with a socio-political system such as democracy, that in modern discourse it is no longer seen as an instrument but has moved to a place of veneration, if not worship itself. The book starts off with some good pointers, open statements, which draw the reader into questioning where he or she stands in terms of their devotion to democracy. Some which stood out for me, are:

1. *'If faith is a belief in that which is unseen, then it may be that democracy is as justifiably an object of faith as a distant and silent God'* (p. xvi). Admittedly the locality of God in this statement will be debated in theological circles, but I believe the author intended to portray the idealistic distance of both what

UNISA university of south africa

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
Volume 41 | Number 1 | 2015
pp. 239–242

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265 /2015/v41n1a17
Print ISSN 1017-0499 | Online 2374-3689

humanity sees as the divine, but also the ideals of democracy. Democracy itself does not dictate, it is silent, promoting the idea that democracy does not happen 'from above', but is the movement 'from below' towards the distant ideal.

2. *'Is the faith in democracy finally as susceptible, or possibly even more susceptible, to the very kinds of dangerous extremes of belief that the democratic faith otherwise claims to avoid or forestall?'* (p. xvii). This statement exposes human weakness; the seduction to extremism. The search for ultimate truth is humanity's Achilles heel, an ever-evading rainbow or horizon, which stands openly before us, but can never be reached. Therefore, the reason that humanity cannot contain it or sufficiently define it, leads to the perception of transcendence, of Plato's (chapter 7) division between form and substance, eternal and temporality. The eternal is deified by the temporal, form is preferred over substance. The extremist choice of one over the other misses the point of the beauty where the one does not 'exist' without the other (there would be no sense of permanence if it were not for temporality and vice versa − and equally, there would be no form if there were no substance and vice versa).

3. *'...an inquiry into how a political system designed to minimize claims of faith itself rests on faith'* (p. xvii). It does not matter how much humanity tries to construct systems which evade the need for worship, it is always inclined to subject itself to a truth greater than itself.

The book is then divided into three parts. In the first, democracy is described as being essentially rooted in religious frameworks and language. It is first and foremost utopian, drawing its 'worshippers' (using religious terms), to an eschatological vision of what the world should look like. By default, democracy has an implied but strong ethical framework; a vision of the perfection of society which can only be brought about when the balance of power, as exercised by the will of the people, finds equilibrium.

Perhaps it is fitting to raise here an issue in the first chapter which is spotted sporadically throughout the text. This would be the author's tendency to employ exclusive (specifically gender exclusive) terms such as 'Man', where inclusive terms such as 'Humanity' or 'Humankind' would have been more useful. See for instance the title of the first chapter, 'Faith in Man'. Perhaps, seeing that world politics is dominated by men, it might also highlight the way in which men specifically have shaped society through power, economics, religion and politics?

The point of the first section is, in my understanding, that democracy places high value on the morality, maturity and wisdom of humanity, or those who participate in democracy. Because there is such an emphasis on human worth, democracy is widely embraced as an instrument of hope and self-fulfilment. Note the word 'self', to which we will come back later. Democracy is also, as instrument of hope from the bottom-up, not the maintaining of any status quo. There is no status quo in democracy

– it is a system which facilitates the expression and realisation of different beliefs and convictions. Who is in power today may not be in power tomorrow, thanks to democracy! Besides the obvious change brought about through democratic elections, there is a higher ideal. Democracy seeks to bring about 'democratic transformation'. To use some more theological terms; as democracy is idealistic (eschatological), it asks of its participants to undergo a process of change in which the ideals of the utopian vision can be achieved. Does this not sound like a form of soteriology? The religious appreciation of democracy, especially how it is employed in the United States of America (USA) (chapter 6), is uncanny. The work of Prof. Joerg Rieger would be of particular interest to the author in this regard; how religion has been appropriated in democratic political exploration.

The question that must be asked, however, is the following: Is the shift to faith in democracy testimony to the general belief that religion has somehow failed society? Has religious belief in the power of God to transform society given way to a belief that transformation does not come from a God who is objectified and worshipped, but can only come when the power is shifted into the hands of people; self-governance? Note the word 'self' again.

In chapter 3, Deenen argues the point that for many, democracy has become the domain of transcendence. It makes sense, for as humanity is 'hard-wired' for transcendence (see the work of Prof. Cornel du Toit), it needs to find some form of transcendent concept in which to place its trust. The god of democracy is the deity of the common good of humanity. Taken on average, the collective wisdom of society will make for a world where there is a mutually agreed upon ethical basis, moral understanding and standards of living which benefit the largest amount of people.

It is strange, however, that in countries and contexts where democracy is held before the world as the guiding factor of principles and goodness, it is precisely society's contention that the largest portion of society does not necessarily benefit from the democratic system. Take for instance the Occupy-movement's mantra that 'We are the 99%', an indicator that the spin-offs of democracy as embodied in, for instance neo-liberal capitalism, benefit few while the majority are used to strut up the democratic Golden Calf. The 'priest' becomes wealthy, while the 'congregation' is perpetually kept in poverty, holding on to the promise that respite will come – they need only to 'have faith'.

What exactly does democracy 'transform' and why do we not see transformation, but more and more civil protest against the outcomes of democracy? Perhaps democracy has some blind spots. It would be interesting to see how the author engages with the following:

1. *Democracy's assumption of the communality of its 'worshippers'*. Democracy depends on some form of common will, some form of homogeneity. The 21st century world is by definition not as culturally, economically or even geo-politically homogenous as it was, say a century or two ago. The level of diversity

in society has increased so exponentially that the common base of the democratic hope of a common will has decreased substantially. The 'faith' in human co-investment and the understanding of a common ethic now need to make way to political icons (whether parties or individuals) who seem to represent the general intuition of society's needs and desires. Unfortunately these political icons are coloured by economics, power, vested interests and party policy, and they do not merely represent the 'Will of the People'.

2. *The objection to democracy being 'the only way'.* If the tenets of democracy were so pure and undefiled, then why do large portions of human society object to a democratic form of governance? Why are so many bitter wars fought against the instituting of democratic governments? Why do so many African countries, the Middle-East and Asia insist that if it were to employ democratic forms of government, it will not be based on the model proposed by the traditional West; for there is a general fear of democracy serving no other interests but that of the West?

3. *Democracy's overestimation that humanity would invest in the well-being of the general population.* Political affiliation shows that individuals are more concerned with the addressing of issues relating to own needs than the express needs of the masses. Self-interest precedes all-interest. This means that the premise of democracy is in conflict with the exercise of democratic practice by individuals. If we were to speak about democratic faith, then perhaps the god of democracy here has to face the same problem as the gods of religion – idolatry of self-interest. The author points to this topic in the discussion of Tocqueville in chapter 8.

In the second part of the book, Deneen gives expression to the 'voices of the democratic faithful'. Protagoras, Roussouw, and the translation of religious faith into democratic faith in the USA are explored, with counterbalances offered in the third section of the book. Although sections two and three of the book provide very helpful discussions on the pros and cons of democracy, it is my opinion that it is indeed the first part of the book which carries the most profound exposition of democracy as we experience it currently.

Without giving away the conclusion offered by the author, it is of vital importance that humanity, for its own sake and the for the sake of sustainability of our planet, keep in tension the privilege for humanity to exercise 'power and dominion' (more theological terms), and the wisdom of exercising such privilege to the true benefit of society as a whole without killing our home, Earth. The tension between self-interest and sustainability will for the foreseeable future determine the longevity of democracy as a political system. If not replaced, it may find itself more and more defined and transformed to ensure a good life for all.