

**The Christian Duty to Defend Democracy**  
**May 2018: The Vaughan**

Despite the attempts of every man-made ideology to persecute and annihilate it, Christianity has survived.

From Nero and Diocletian to Hitler, Stalin and Mao; from Roman dictatorship to Nazi and Communist atheism; it has survived. Paradoxically, as Tertullian observed, persecution has proved to be the seed of the Church.

Christianity, then, does not need democracy to survive.

Yet, as I shall argue, democracy *does* need Christianity.

I will say something about the alternatives to democracy; what happens when democracy becomes detached from religious impulse and conscience; and why, instead of the flaccid language of rights and entitlements, we must cultivate a belief in duty, virtue, and servant leadership.

At the heart of this is the proposition that democracy is at its best when animated by Judaeo-Christian ideals; it flourishes when Christians commit themselves to it; and, conversely, democracy provides an environment in which Christians can argue for principles and priorities informed by the teachings of Jesus Christ – and for that alone, despite any reservations, they should give at least two cheers; withholding the last for the new Jerusalem.

Having travelled in the former Soviet Union; in North Korea; Communist China; Burma, and in African countries like Sudan and the Congo; I have no doubt that we are enormously privileged to live in a democracy like the United Kingdom and, as the title of this talk insists, we have a *duty* to involve ourselves in it and to defend it.

It was Edmund Burke, a great Irishman, who sat in the House of Commons for a Bristol constituency who, tellingly, reminded us that evil triumphs when we sit back and take things for granted: when good men do nothing.

Even in the last month, from Slovakia to Armenia, to Malaysia, we have seen examples of people demanding the basic rights that we often take for granted – and from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the ending of military dictatorship in South Korea and the ending of apartheid in South Africa, we have been privileged to see many examples of people in faraway places refusing to let evil triumph and admire their courage in working for just laws and the fair and free election of leaders and legislatures.

Not that democracy is itself a perfect system of government – hence two cheers rather than three.

The first time I visited Parliament was as a 14-year-old school boy when millions of us walked past the coffin of Winston Churchill, which had been laid in State in Westminster Hall.

**Winston Churchill (1874-1965) – and about whom you will hear more this evening - said that, for him, the sight of the little man freely casting his vote made it worth fighting for – but the two-time British prime minister, whose name is synonymous with the defence of this country’s democracy, in Britain’s darkest hour, didn’t wax lyrical about democracy, recognizing that other values were needed to underpin it.**

**In 1947, in the wake of Adolf Hitler’s atrocities, and even as Joseph Stalin continued to murder his own people, Churchill told the House of Commons:**

***“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....”***

**So, let’s not delude ourselves into believing that democracy is perfect – and certainly, politicians are hardly the Communion of Saints.**

**But even when you are at your most exasperated with the political classes just remember that it’s not the system that is dirty, rather, that some of the players have dirty hands; and that the politicians we get are the ones we vote for (or don’t bother to vote for or against); and that ultimately, they are only as good as the people who have put them there.**

**I was first elected, while a 21-year-old student, to a City Council – representing an impoverished inner city community where half the homes had no inside sanitation. I subsequently went to Westminster nearly 40 years ago, as the youngest Member of the House of Commons and was later appointed to the Lords.**

**Churchill was right, it is far from perfect but, compared with everything else on offer, we should count our blessings and play our small part in animating it and renewing it.**

**I have seen two kinds of people in my political life – those who want to be things and those who want to do things. The former usually end up climbing Disraeli's greasy pole and falling back down it – often embittered in the process; the latter, who pursue causes, follow their consciences and serve their communities and countries, never becoming mere Party apparatchiks, are the ones I admire most.**

**Take a man like Wilberforce – who led the parliamentary campaign against slavery but never rose to high office.**

**He was less interested in Left and Right and more interested in Right and Wrong – proving also, that for the pearl to emerge from the oyster, you need a bit of grit to enter in.**

**Motives for entering politics rapidly become apparent: judge people by their causes. If they don't have any, it becomes obvious why they are in politics.**

**We need more bits of grit; and yet Christians do not always see it as their duty to be active participants.**

**In every generation democracy must be renewed and democracy needs more than votes to sustain it.**

**Without the solder of commonly held values welding together its constituent parts, democracies can easily disintegrate into competing interest groups and warring factions.**

**This “*least worst form of government,*” in this “*world of sin and woe*” – impaired but always preferable to dictatorship or totalitarianism – cannot function without virtue and commonly held values.**

**When the well of public virtue runs dry, democratic countries are in deep trouble.**

**Yet, who can doubt that today, in a bout of self-loathing – and at a time when it is susceptible to new threats to its democratic institutions, particularly resurgent forms of nationalism and populism – Europe has taken to denying its Christian roots?**

**And the angry atheist tells people of Faith they have no right to be involved in political life – let alone a duty.**

**As we try to airbrush out this essential part of our story, we are in grave danger of forgetting what makes us who we are.**

**We turn our back on our identity at our peril. And let us be clear about what alternatives are waiting in the wings.**

**Recall Churchill again.**

**He was not known as a great churchgoer. When he was once described as *“a pillar of the church,”* he corrected the speaker by interjecting: *“No, no, not a pillar, but a buttress, supporting it from the outside.”* He understood that the *“least worst form of government”* was dependent on Judeo-Christian values.**

**He argued:**

***“The flame of Christian ethics is still our highest guide. To guard and cherish it is our first interest, both spiritually and materially... Only by bringing it into perfect application can we hope to solve for ourselves the problems of this world and not of this world alone.”***

**In his *“Finest Hour”* war speech to the House of Commons, on June 18, 1940, Churchill insisted that: *“Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization.”***

**But, in every generation, new threats, new ideologies, and new fanatics emerge.**

**Take atheistic Communism.**

**2017 saw the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution, which paved the way for totalitarianism, social engineering, state terror and mass murder, leaving a legacy of prison camps and unmarked graves.**

**It was also the 80th anniversary of Russia's "Great Terror," a 1936-1938 purge campaign conducted by Stalin's secret police that led to the arrest of 1.5 million "anti- Soviet elements," of whom 700,000 were murdered.**

**Over the three decades that Stalin ruled, it is estimated that up to 30 million people were executed, starved to death or perished in labour camps.**

**But Stalinism lives on.**

**Incredibly, it was reported that in the anniversary year a dozen new statues have been erected in Vladimir Putin's Russia, celebrating Stalin's achievements.**

**And not just in Russia.**

**I once visited North Korea's Palace of Gifts, where a bulletproof railway carriage presented by Stalin to**

**North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung is the prize exhibit. The Russian despot's memory and example are equally celebrated in that benighted country's labour camps, in its purges, executions, its reign of terror and its brazen threats.**

**And this is to say nothing of the other mass murderers of the 20th century: Mao Zedong of China, Pol Pot of Cambodia, and Adolph Hitler of Germany.**

**It is always worth reminding ourselves of these horrific acts of barbarism that claimed hundreds of millions of lives as we see new forms of totalitarianism threatening our hollowed-out democracies.**

**This calls to mind Hilaire Belloc's *"Cautionary Tales for Children"* and the story of Jim, eaten by a lion after refusing to stay close to his nurse: *"And always keep a hold of nurse for fear of finding something worse."***

**As angry voters become increasingly disillusioned with their leaders and institutions, there is a real danger that they will also let go of nurse and find something infinitely worse.**

***What Hitler and Stalin failed to do by force of arms we, in the comfort of our twenty first century attitudes, are in grave danger of permitting by enfeebled***



***indifference: a hollowed-out democracy does not flourish.***

**In a form of collective Alzheimer's disease, we first forget who we are and then angrily try to eliminate the memory and identity of those with whom we disagree.**

***We have seen crucifixes removed from classrooms; Christian midwives lose their jobs because they refuse to abort a child; universities deny free speech to Christian speakers; political leaders forced from office because they are told their beliefs are incompatible with ascendant angry atheism – like a secular illiberal mirror image of Sharia law.***

**Symbols and representations of who we are matter. They represent continuity and identity. Winston Churchill knew what he was talking about when he insisted that “[t]o guard and cherish it is our first interest, both spiritually and materially...”**

**The removal of this framework of commonly celebrated values that underpin our democratic life has other consequences, too.**

**The Pew Research Centre, a renown independent think tank, found that more than eight in 10 people in the world identify with a religious group. When 84 percent of the globe's inhabitants say they cherish religious beliefs, the liberal elites who govern them need to understand and harness those impulses for the common good – not side-line and denigrate believers.**

**If a democracy's religious citizens are actively discriminated against – and even persecuted – the whole society becomes eviscerated. Co-existence and mutual respect are cornerstones of a genuinely free society.**

**Indeed, without such careful stitch work, the fabric of society can easily be torn. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain saw Christianity as intrinsic to the survival of democracy.**

**In *Integral Humanism*, Maritain explored ways in which, in a pluralistic society, Christianity should enter the Public Square to inform and affect political discourse, without which democracy cannot thrive. Maritain wrote that “*Christianity taught men that love is worth more than intelligence.*”**

**His contention that natural rights are rooted in the natural law led to his involvement in the drafting of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a classic example of how a religious dimension is central to how more than three quarters of the planet's population see the world, and how religious values can enrich and inform.**

**It used to be said by Britain's Left that the Christian Methodism of John Wesley (1703-1791) saved Britain from the Marxism of the Communist Party. The masses on whom democracy relies certainly need something more than online gambling, pornography and consumerism.**

**Democracy that simply depends on who gets the most votes leaves itself open to populism, opportunism, xenophobia, fake news and manipulation – especially in the era of social (or rather antisocial) media and the Twittersphere. I think we need an eleventh commandment for politicians: “*Thou shall't not tweet*” – it's a medium that lends itself to rabble rousing and populism.**

**But this is not an entirely new phenomenon.**

**In 1933, after all, Adolf Hitler took 43.9 percent of the German popular vote.**

**An inherent weakness of majoritarianism is that with the adept ability to affect election results through manipulation, fake news, scaremongering, appeals to greed, self-interest and the lowest common denominator, the interests of society can easily suffer.**

**It can, as John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argued in 1859 in *On Liberty*, lead to oppression by majorities comparable to the oppression of tyrants or despots.**

Since ancient times, we have been well aware of the dangers of scaremongering and scapegoating to win popular acclaim. Plato insisted that the uneducated couldn't possibly be on a par with the intellectuals and that those best qualified to govern were the philosophers and intellectual elites.

Plato's fear of the masses found an echo in the views of the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797), who said "*the tyranny of a multitude is a multiplied tyranny*"; in the words of American Founding Father James Madison (1751-1836), who described "*the violence of majority faction*"; in the 19th century writings of the Whig historian Lord Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859); in Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805-1859) epochal *Democracy in America*. And it was the Victorian Liberal historian, Baron John Acton (Lord Acton, 1834-1902), who wrote: "*The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority.*"

The antidote that tempers the excesses to which this tyranny can lead must surely be the cultivation of virtue and the harnessing of religious faith as a powerful force for good. It is essential to the good working of society and the energising of democracy.

De Tocqueville understood this when he insisted that "*Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.*"

**In observing American democracy, he noted that “[the] Americans combine the notions of religion and liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other.”**

**But as we have disassociated religion and liberty, democracy and faith, we have unstitched the fabric that holds a society together and endangered its future.**

**Too many of our Western elites preen themselves like peacocks while they reject and ridicule the values that offer the best defence against self-serving populism.**

**It is those timeless values – the cultivation of true beauty rather than sharp elbowed self-interest - that will save democracy.**

**Consider, finally, this tale of two princes:**

**Prince Lev Myshkin, the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s masterpiece novel *The Idiot*, famously stated that “*beauty will save the world.*” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian Nobel prizewinning author, put a lot of stock in this particular quote in his 1970 lecture sent to the Nobel Committee.**

**Contrast the credulous, faith-inspired naivety of this afflicted Russian nobleman with the received wisdom that only power, politics, wealth and weapons will save the world.**

**Contrast the counterintuitive, gentle and insightful profundity of Prince Myshkin with the shallow, populist rhetoric that saves no one, but puts the world at risk by threatening social order.**

**Not that Dostoyevsky was suggesting that beauty alone can save the world. The point was rather that when we allow beauty to touch our hearts, our baser instincts can be tempered – which can be true for both individuals and institutions.**

**In the battlefield that is the heart of man, a small victory occurs when our self-serving is replaced by a love of the common good: giving a life to gain a life.**

**Through the purity and lack of guile that characterizes Prince Myshkin, Dostoyevsky is telling us that the beauty which will save the world is the love of God; that His beauty must change us if we wish to change our families, our communities and our societies.**

**This otherworldly view squarely contradicts a more common belief, best summarized in the 16th century by Niccolo Machiavelli: that princes, the antithesis of Myshkin, can justify all means in politics understood as the pursuit of glory, power, prestige and survival.**

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli tells us that the ruler should not hesitate to deceive and be prepared to choose evil as the price of power.

The Italian despised many traditional Christian beliefs, turning on their head Christian words such as virtue, believing that real virtue emanated from the pursuit of ambition, glory and power.

This, of course, represented a fundamental break with Aquinas and medieval scholasticism and the Aristotelian belief in the pursuit of virtue.

Aristotle – the father of democracy - identified the many virtues that enable a person to be a good citizen – and without which the individual and the *polis* will not thrive. And he said that *aidos* – shame – would attach to the citizen who refused to play their part; that we are not solitary pieces in a game of chequers.

Cicero said that we each have a duty to participate; John Donne reminded us that we are not islands entire unto ourselves.

And the great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer – executed by the Nazis – warned us that “*not to speak is to speak; not to act is to act.*”

What was true in ancient Greece and Rome; what was true in eighteenth century England and in a Europe faced by Nazism remains true today. We each have a duty to act.

**If the imperfect system of democracy is to function and survive, there must be a continuous cultivation of virtue and an upholding of those values that enrich and underpin a system that can so easily be subverted.**

**In rendering unto Caesar, we must offer our Faith as a source of enrichment; speak clearly about the beliefs that have stood us in such good stead for two millennia; and recognise, in the words of the title of tonight's talk, that everyone of us has a duty to play our part.**