Christianity and the sustenance of democracy

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Preacher: Philip Sampson

[0:00] Well, welcome little band. I thought I would introduce our speaker tonight by asking some quickfire questions.

! Have you ever seen that thing where somebody asks five minutes and he has a big alarm clock with him?! Have you seen it on YouTube?
And this alarm clock goes round so I've got five minutes to ask you lots and lots of questions. So, Philip and Miriam Sansom, very welcome. Thank you for coming, especially on a weekend like this. And there are lots of people coming in now so that's good. Right, so five minutes starting now. Have you any connections with Brighton?
Yes, we were both at university here many years ago. One of our daughters lived in Brighton for a number of years. We met here.
[1:01] We did. And we attended this church regularly for several years as well. Well, that's the second question. Alright, sorry. That's alright. That's very good. What have you done in the last ten years?

What have you done in the last ten years? Built a conservatory or was that before that? I've been before that. Worked in all sorts of different contexts. My job is in adult education. It involves a lot of travelling around the country.
What have you done in the last ten years? Well, I, for the, up until about three, four years ago, I was working partly as a court advisor, advising judges about children.
And partly as a writer and lecturer. And about three or four years ago, I went full time as a writer and lecturer. Very good. Why are you a Christian?
That's a good question, isn't it? Why am I a Christian? Well, I've been a Christian since I was very young. My parents were Christians and I was brought up in a Christian home.
[2:08] But I have a very clear recollection of when I was only about five years old, realising that Jesus loved me and that I wanted to love him too and to serve him.

So I have a very clear recollection of a time when I became a Christian. Then, as I grew older, I also have clear recollection of having various sort of questions and issues. Perhaps particularly when I came to university.
And having to really think through my faith for myself and realise that actually it's not just something that's part of being a family, but that's important to me. And I realised that the things in the Bible were true and were reliable.
And things that I could build my life upon. So that's why I'm a Christian. Well, I didn't grow up as a Christian, but I've always been passionately interested in what's true and what isn't.
And up until I came to university, I suppose, I believed that... I was originally trained as a mathematical physicist and I believed that a scientific worldview was true and that religion was superstition.
[3:17] But whilst at university, I changed my view about a lot of things and that was one of them. And I think that the Gospel presented to us in the Scriptures is the truth.

And that God did create the world. The world did fall away from him and he has redeemed the world and is working out his redemption in history.
Thank you. What have you done last week? Last week, I spent most of my time travelling around the country. I left home on Thursday morning last week and didn't get home until Wednesday evening.
Part of the time we were in a conference in Leeds together, but between the rest of the time I spent on British Rail, going from one meeting to another in Leicester in London and around the place. So then I got home on Wednesday night and since then I've been trying to put my life back into order

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again at home.
Thank you. Yourself, Philip? Well, I was speaking at a conference in Leeds last weekend and quite a lot this week. It's been preparing for the talk this evening and trying to get arrangements finalised for a kitchen replaced.
[4:31] It's taken quite a lot of time. We've got a couple in the audience who would associate with that one. What's your favourite film and why? Can I go first?

Yeah, you can. It's by Betts Feast and if you haven't seen it, please do see it. It's based on a story by the same person who wrote Out of Africa and I can't remember what her name is, but it's a wonderful story about using the gifts that God has given you to show appreciation and thanks to him and to other people.
So by the nods, I gather a number of people here know it, but I think it's a wonderful film. I could watch it over and over again. Yes, yes. It's very rich, isn't it? Philip? Well, it's not to be recommended as family entertainment, but it's a film directed by Peter Greenaway called The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, which uses some very graphic and strong imagery that is talking about the transformation from the natural to the cultural and the way that that in our culture is tied up with exploitation and other things.
But it's not family entertainment, so be warned if you go to see it. It's perhaps one of the stronger films. Do you like sport? I'm not a sporty person really. The only sport we follow together is cricket. So I'm afraid when the ashes was on, we were glued to the radio and we were out in the garden doing the garden and carrying our little transistor with us. But apart from that, we don't really follow sport. What do you think of Richard Dawkins?
[6:18] I'd never miss him. I'm sure he's a very nice chap, but he's wrong. Miriam, do you want to add to that?

I think he's very strident. I think he tends to caricature Christianity. I'm sorry for him really that he has such a limited worldview.
Yes, yes. What are you reading at the moment and why? Well, my main research interest is animal theology and the lost evangelical and reformed tradition of animal theology which drove animal welfare reform from the 17th century through to the mid-19th century.
But which hardly anybody now, either Christian or secular, remembers. It's very well represented in the literature.
So most of my reading is sermons and commentaries from the early 17th century through to the mid-19th as they bear upon animal theology.
[7:32] And do you read maths books? I sometimes read maths books. I've got various things I'm dipping into at the moment. One is something that's recently been published by the organisation I work for, which is called Learning Through Life, which is looking at a complete overview of education and rethinking it and particularly rethinking the role of education in later life.

I have to get my head around that for work. I'm also carrying with me on my journeys a book of Ruth Rendell short stories which I dip into when my brain is not up to anything else.
But in Christian terms, we've recently started a social justice group at our church and I've bought a number of books by Tony Campolo to sort of pass around to people involved in that.
So I've been reading some of those. And last weekend when we were at the conference in Leeds, I bought a book by Rob Bell. Has anybody come across Rob Bell? Who's a pastor who started a Mars Hill church, I think it's called, in America.
And I managed to read that on the journey from Leeds to London. What would you like to do in 2010? I'd like to finish the book on animal theology.
[8:40] What's left of it? I'm hoping that in 2010 I'm going to retire from my current job. Then I would like to try and restore some order to our house somehow.

And then I'm really praying about what God wants me to do when I've got a bit more time. Thank you both so much. That's been very good. Give a big warm clap. Probably feel exhausted by all that without going into your talk.
It's over to you. Thank you. Thank you very much for that interesting and unusual introduction.
It's a pleasure to be here again. We have a very intimate little group this evening. I want to talk this evening about religion and politics. I gathered that last week somebody from the Bible Society was talking about their work at Westminster.

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My view is going to be wider and is going to be concerned with the interaction between religion and politics.
[10:03] Now it's generally regarded as a bad idea to talk about these two subjects together. Talk of religion always raises strong opinions. And this is doubly true of politics.

So to combine them can only end in tears before bedtime. Indeed in polite company both topics are generally best avoided. But if we must speak of them, at least don't mix them together.
Far better avoid them altogether. There are in fact several ways of avoiding the theme of my lecture. Within the church authentic debate is stifled in a variety of ways.
But I want to focus here more on the secular world. Where debate about religion and politics is avoided by regarding faith as a private matter. A kind of hobby or a social support club.
Politics on the other hand is to do with the real world. If we challenge this sidelining of religion to suggest that it does indeed have a public place. And a place in the public sphere.
[11:10] Our attention will be drawn to the lamentable consequences of bringing religion into political life. The troubles in Northern Ireland. The religious right in the United States.

Or more vaguely, the role of religion in provoking warfare throughout the ages. Stephen Carter suggests that something similar happens in the United States.
When religion steps outside its box into public affairs. Now Carter is a Yale law professor. Who has written widely in this area. So he is interested in constitutional law.
And he reportedly influenced Bill Clinton during his presidency. Carter observes that the dominant liberal culture in the United States imposes, this is his words, a common rhetoric that refuses to accept the notion that rational, public-spirited people can take religion seriously.
Now of course he doesn't mean that religious groupings are unimportant politically. Plainly some are important and the religious right in the United States is of this example.
[12:22] Rather he means that there is a dominant belief in the US, in this country too, that religion has no place in rational, intelligent political debate.

To introduce religion inevitably leads us down a path of illiberal and irrational prejudice. And the religious right is often taken of evidence of that as well. So the result is that religion is marginalised to a matter of personal faith with no political implications that will concern a rational person.
There would of course be some recognition given to those areas of private life to do with personal morality and sexuality and other features.
Which, where religion might possibly have a voice, so usually it's regarded as not a very helpful one. But for the major political debate, personal faith has no political implications.
But here an interesting question arises. Does this exclusion of religion in the public sphere matter? Doesn't politics get along perfectly well without religion?
[13:35] Perhaps even better without it? Well, Stephen Carter argues that it does matter. And in a series of books which I commend to you, he documents the way that what he calls the arrogant rejection of religion by the liberal consensus has alienated many Americans from public life, not necessarily all of them politically conservative.

This is also a message that we heard from Barack Obama before his election. The marginalisation of religion in public life, especially by the Democratic Party, he is of course Democrat, as he says, has often inhibited us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms.
We need to take faith seriously to engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal. In the UK, several church leaders have made a similar case.
For example, the Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor argued when he was active Cardinal, he argued that it had been the Judeo-Christian values that have bound British society together in the past and that an aggressive secularism is undermining those values and is fragmenting the UK.
Now, I suppose there's no great surprise here. This is the sort of thing that you would expect to hear from a British Cardinal or an avowedly Christian president. Generally, however, we do not find secular commentators sharing this view, certainly not in the UK.
[15:10] The recent work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas therefore comes as a bit of a surprise. Now, I'll explain as we go along Habermas's view.

He's, as some of you may know, he's perhaps Europe's most distinguished living philosopher. He's German. He grew up in the Germany of the Third Reich.
And in common with others of his generation, he tried to understand how such a catastrophe could have overtaken the land of Barth, Kant and Goethe. And the answer he gave involved nothing less

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than a revision of the Enlightenment project to found human freedom in scientific reason.
And he has been enormously influential in Europe, certainly, and to some extent in the United States. Now, interestingly, we in Britain have generally not been so interested in this question, the question of how democracy could have collapsed, probably because we won the war.
It's as if the collapse of a well-established democracy in Europe occasions us little surprise that such a thing could not happen in England. In post-war Germany, however, the question was an urgent one.
[16:26] How could the new democracy in Western Germany, as it was then, how could it be secured? And that has been the theme, the thread running through Habermas's work, his passionate commitment to this question.

So it's against this background that Habermas has more recently made some remarkable contributions to the debate about religion and politics. He's, of course, an atheist. And those contributions include a dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, probably more commonly known as Pope Benedict.
And that's being published and, again, is a riveting reading if you're interested in this sort of thing. Benedict himself, or Ratzinger, has made some serious contributions to this area.
So what has Habermas said? Now, bear with me, because as befits a German philosopher, this is a bit compressed, but I'll explain it shortly. But I want to just consider, first of all, an extract from Habermas.
In the West, he says, Christianity not only fulfilled the initial cognitive condition for modern structures of consciousness, it also fostered a range of motivations that formed the major theme of the economic and ethical research of Max Weber.
[17:55] Weber was a European sociologist, I suppose, of the late 19th, early 20th centuries. Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst.

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, all these things are the direct heirs to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.
This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it.
And in the light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle post-modern chatter. Now, I'm going to split that up and look at each section separately and try to summarise it in less polysyllabic words.
So let's try to unpack it. Firstly, the first point that he makes. In the West, Christianity not only fulfilled the initial cognitive condition for modern structures of consciousness, it also fostered a range of motivations that formed the major theme of the economic and ethical research of Max Weber.
[19:24] Well, what's he talking about? Habermas is here referring to the modern understanding of personhood, what it means in the modern world to be a person. And he's suggesting that its origin, the origin of what we mean by being a person, lay in the biblical teaching of being made in the image of God, as taught in the scriptures and as understood in the church.

So a person made in the image of God, a person with freedom of conscience, able to relate responsibly to other people. And he adds, and this is the bit about Max Weber, that that same Bible provided motivations for ethical economic activity, namely, honesty in business dealing, hard work in the calling which God has given us, and an ethic of service towards others rather than individual consumption.
These motivations collectively are sometimes referred to as the Protestant ethic. Okay, so his first point is that in the West, what we mean by being a person, and what we mean by ethical economic activity, both have their roots in the Bible.
Secondly, egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, all these things he summarises as egalitarian universalism, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.
Well, what's he saying here? He regards modern understandings of justice and freedom, of conscience and human rights, of history and progress, of law and even of democracy itself, as the

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outworking of the biblical ethic of justice and love.
[21:18] The biblical vision, he argues, was essential to the rejection of raw power as political virtue. Now, we saw in the 1930s what happens when raw power becomes a political virtue, as we might derive from Darwinism, and indeed was derived from Darwinism in the 1930s.

But the biblical vision stands against that. Historically, he says, this biblical influence has extended over a millennium and more, but is most consistently worked out in those countries most deeply influenced by the Protestant Reformation.
For example, John Knox of Edinburgh and John Calvin of Geneva, both were two such reformers, and England and Scotland have been two such countries deeply marked by the recovery of biblical truth at the time of the Reformation.
Something he doesn't mention is the necessity to have a very long beard if you're going to be a political reformer. Thirdly, he goes further.
This legacy, substantially unchanged, he says, has been the object of continued critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it.
[22:35] Now, Habermas is saying here that these biblical themes of justice and love were not simply a jumping off point for modern social democracy, nor are they things of the past, of historical interest only.

Rather, and this is really quite surprising, he argues that the biblical ethic of justice and love are constantly drawn upon to this very day, insofar as they continue to be represented in our culture.
Astonishingly, he ends by saying that there is no alternative to it. His thesis, then, is, and this is the focus of my lecture, that democracy not only grew from Christian soil, but it needs biblical insights to sustain it.
Democracy needs a living church. Now, remind yourself that this is, Habermas is, has no religious affiliation, as far as I know.
He's a self-declared atheist, and is perhaps one of the most penetrating commentators on democracy in Europe of our age. Finally, Habermas warns us that, aside from this religious vision, everything else is just idle postmodern chatter.
[23:56] According to him, then, contemporary political debate is poised between biblical insights and postmodern chatter. Well, what does that latter phrase mean? He intends by it something that has a harmless and even an attractive surface, but which turns out, in his view, to be rather disagreeable.

He refers to the relativisation of issues of justice and truth, to the Macdonaldisation of institutions guaranteeing our freedoms, and to the victory of power over ethics.
For example, political debate in the past involved the big stories of tradition and progress, of oppression and freedom, of wealth and its redistribution.
But there have been major changes over the past 30 years. Think of the difference between the old Labour Party and new Labour. The old ideology of class was the driver of political policy, whether on the right or the left.
But the manufacturing industries, which were the site for party solidarity and political power struggles, have moved to the Far East. We now live in a fragmented consumer society dominated by service industries.
[25:06] Party policy is more likely to be honed through focus groups than union meetings. The growth of international companies and finance now form powerful economic interests outside national boundaries or regulation.

And we've seen over the past year or so some of the consequences of that national government's struggle to deal with an essentially post-national, as Harbormars calls it, a post-national constellation.
Community has changed from neighbourhood to e-communities. It's not unusual now to know more about the private life of Jordan or Jade than our next-door neighbour.
Now, I'm not arguing that these changes are necessarily for the worse, nor that the old ways were the best ways, though I think there's some sense of that in Harbormars, but that's not what I'm arguing.
I've cited Barack Obama as dissenting from the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, but he's also been a leader in the use of changes in technology and community in order to promote his religiously derived audacity of hope.

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[26:18] His book in which he sets out his political agenda and his religious roots is called The Audacity of Hope. For example, he used text and email to notify his supporters of his vice-presidential choice rather than announce it at the party's convention.

His team exploited online chats and video to include more people than a convention hall could hold. At the time of his election, Obama had one million friends between his MySpace and Facebook. Hillary Clinton had 330,000 and John McCain 140,000. Well, who won? But this same virtual community has its downside.
Four out of ten young people in the US during the election campaign watched candidates' speeches, interviews, commercials or debates online. They didn't use newspapers, TV broadcasts, news and so forth.
They made their political choices immersed in separate networks of friends, each with its own selection of news and YouTube clips. Participants in each network need never interact with anyone from a different network or be presented with alternative arguments.
[27:38] Now, this contrasts sharply with, say, the traditional media principle that all sides of an argument should be equally represented. Now, I'm not saying this is inherently bad, and I've used this example to show that it's quite a complex phenomenon, but it's a change, it's a shift, a major shift.

And it's these kinds of shifts which Arbomast is referring to as postmodern chatter. Politics used to be based on values, on ideology, on the big story of, say, progress or capitalism or socialism. Now, big stories have been replaced by a variety of little local narratives. Focus groups have replaced ideology. Customer choice drives policy. A menu of preferences displaces values.
For Arbomast, it is not obvious that anything like Western democracy can survive such changes. Now, Arbomast's voice is certainly distinguished, but I must say at once that it's very much in the minority in the secular world.
For the secular, liberal consensus, Christianity is rarely seen as a source of emancipatory values, let alone a principle source. Even less is it seen as a continued and necessary source.
[28:52] The conventional account that most of us grew up with, certainly I did, is that democracy originated in the victory of reason over faith during the Enlightenment, or that it was inherited from Athenian Greece.

Now, specialist historians have known for many years that the truth is far more complex than this. But in general debate, received wisdom tends to predominate, and better informed views are usually restricted to specialist academic commentators.
Arbomast's voice, then, is in the minority, but it's not alone. I've already mentioned that Barack Obama, he echoed Arbomast when he wrote that much of the law of the United States, and remember Obama was a lawyer, much of the law of the United States is grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
Carter, I've already cited, argues that abolitionism and the civil rights movements may never have existed, but for the freedom of the religious conscience. Religion, he says, often thumbs its nose at what the rest of society believes is right, and democracy needs its nose thumbs.
It needs independent moral voices that will stand against the potential tyranny of the majority. And he cites Martin Luther King as a prime example, noting the secular tendency to downplay King's Christian faith.
[30:15] Obama and Carter are explicit that their theologies have been informed by the black experience in the United States. You may remember the outcry when an out-of-context video clip of Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, was widely circulated on the web and in the media.

But it's not only voices from the United States. Terry Eagleton is a distinguished left-leaning British academic, and he comes from a Catholic background, but as far as I know he's not a practicing Catholic, has also noted that the liberal notion of freedom derives from Christian sources.
And, and I quote Eagleton, the Jewish and Christian scriptures have much to say about some vital questions, death, suffering, love, self-dispossession, and the like, on which the left has for the most part maintained an embarrassed silence.
Now the left wasn't always silent on these matters. It used to have much to say on the issue, for example, of self-sacrifice and suffering, for example, during the Spanish Civil War. But the language that it then used was drawn from its religious background in this country, substantially from Methodism.

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As that background has faded, so has the discussion of these vital questions. And this is the point that's noted by Eagleton. Now, of course, when we look at the evidence, it's surprising that there could be any doubt about the role of prophetic Christian insights and the formation of Western civilisation.
[31:55] For example, the ideas of a balance of powers, of political contract, and of human rights, all owe much to the biblical concepts of sin, covenant, and the equality of all in Christ, respectively.

Take balance of powers. The reformers, when drawing up constitutions, were reluctant to concentrate power in the hands of one person or one institution, seeking, rather, a balance.
The reason for this was their awareness that sin would make a concentration of power vulnerable to abuse. You can see this clearly in the American Constitution, of course.
And it was true of the Constitution drawn up by Calvin in Geneva. This insight is closely connected to the biblical separation between distinct offices of prophet, priest, and king.
And they're clearly kept separate in the Older Testament and there are sanctions for confusing them. Those three offices, prophet, priest, and king, could only be united in the person of the righteous one.
[33:02] Or consider political contracts. Political contracts, and indeed all kinds of contracts, owe much to the biblical idea of a covenant entailing obligations and benefits for the signatories.

Human rights, including their legal articulation in international treaties and conventions such as the Geneva Convention, draw heavily on the biblical doctrine that all humans are created in the image of God.
We might contrast it with the Darwinian notion of higher and lower races which cast its shadow over so much of the 20th century. But it's not only political principles that have a Judeo-Christian origin.
Most people are aware that the hospitals, schools, and social services of the modern democratic state have their origins in Christian initiatives. Fewer know that the green and animal welfare movements were inspired by biblical texts.
The British Probation Service originated with the police corps missionaries in the late 19th century.
Health and safety legislation, favourite Aunt Sally of the politically conservative, had its 16th century precedent when Calvin insisted that in Geneva there be no fires in rooms without chimneys, that houses have toilets, and that balconies have railings for children's safety.
[34:30] Calvin took his cue from passages such as Deuteronomy 22.8 which requires that all roofs have parapets. The just war doctrines of Augustine and Aquinas inspired the prohibition of mercenaries in Calvin's Geneva and found their way into the modern Geneva Convention.

As for immigration, we might do well to contemplate Reverend George Walker's observation in 1641 that, quote, even the cursed Canaanites allowed Abraham to sojourn in their land.
Had first century Egypt operated contemporary British immigration rules, one can imagine the reaction to an unknown carpenter's claim for asylum on the improbable grounds that his baby son was regarded as a threat to the royal household back home.
Given the extent of the evidence, the wonder is that the role of prophetic Christianity is ever in doubt, yet it is, and especially among die-hard secularists such as Mr Dawkins who was referred to earlier.
But even if we grant that democracy grew from biblical soil, does it follow, as Habermas and others suggest, that it needs that soil to sustain it? Isn't democracy getting along perfectly well on its own?
[35:52] Well, it's certainly true that we take democracy for granted. It has, after all, been around for a long time. Certainly, the liberal consensus has traditionally assumed that democracy is self-sustaining.

But a number of secular commentators have begun to doubt whether this is a safe assumption and to ask a previously neglected question. If the Western democratic tradition really owes so much to biblical insights, what will be the consequence of excluding those insights from the public realm?
This question has become increasingly prominent as concern has grown that not all is well with our democratic institutions. civil liberty organizations in Britain report that the past decade has seen a raft of legislation threatening freedoms previously taken for granted.
Freedom of speech, freedom from arbitrary detention. In both the US and UK, we have witnessed the shocking admission that these long-standing democracies have recently reversed the ban and state torture and evil which we used to associate with dictatorships and tyrannies.

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Freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom from torture, these are the very cornerstones of Western democracy. It's as though we are taking the foundations that democracy stands on and giving them a good shake.
[37:20] In the UK, major political figures have recently queued up to express concern about the liberties we once thought inalienable. David Davis last year resigned his position as Shadow Home Secretary in order to draw attention to his concern about the erosion of civil liberties.

He has referred to the wholesale removal of rights and claims that the counter-terrorism laws are being used oppressively beyond their intended purpose. Now, you could of course see the party political motive in that but I think it's evident to bear-minded analysis that his motivation in speaking out went beyond mere party political interest.
Stella Rimmington, the ex-head of British Intelligence Service, has similarly warned that the government has given terrorists a greater justification by making people feel that they live in fear and under a police state.
The 2009 International Commission of Jurists report observed that the framework of international law is being undermined and the US and UK have led it.
Lord Deere, former Chief Constable of the West Midlands, has said that in his experience the best course for a terrorist was to provoke a government to overreact to a threat by eroding civil liberties, increasing executive powers, and diminishing due process by the denial of justice.
[38:52] These are not the characters that you normally associate with concerns over liberty which tends to be rather emphasised by the left, not notably left-leaning figures.

The worry about detention without trial is not necessarily that the present government will abuse it, though it may, but that such powers will be available to future unknown governments.
The question is not how Gordon Brown uses it, but how Nick Griffin might misuse it. Lord Wolfe has called the recent erosion of civil liberties one of the most significant changes in the life of the nation since the end of the Second World War.
But it's not just that voices are protesting the erosion of long-established democratic rights.
Theologian Oliver Donovan, who's written extensively in this area, argues that there is a new postmodern suspicion about democracy itself.
Is 21st century democracy capable of delivering emancipatory or even sustainable policies? For example, major Western democracies seem unable to tackle environmental crises when to do so poses a significant cost to voters and therefore has little popular appeal.
[40:19] Moreover, democracies recently have found it acceptable to kill people on a scale previously associated with dictatorships. Obvious examples from recent years have been the doctrine of preemptive warfare, that is, invading other people's countries because they might pose a threat to democracies in the future.

and the assumption of our right to impose democracy on other societies by means of economic or military violence. This looks like totalitarian expansions by another name.
Now, of course, the fact that we are seeing an unusual level of concern about our democratic freedoms doesn't necessarily mean that this is connected with the loss of Christian worldview which gave them birth.
But several sober-minded academics think it more than coincidence. If the western democratic tradition really owes so much to biblical insights, what will be the consequences of excluding those insights from the public realm?
I want to take an analogy from a book by Alastair MacIntyre called After Virtue. He tells the story of Captain Cook's third voyage to Polynesia when he noted that the Polynesians strictly forbade such things as men and women eating together, but they could give no account of the reason for the prohibition.
[41:52] Subsequent anthropologists have suggested that these taboos once reflected complex religious beliefs which had long since disappeared. The taboos remained as free-floating cultural values without the foundations that gave them their meaning.

Some 40 years after Cook's visit, Kamahamaha the second abolished taboos in Hawaii, and these free-floating practices disappeared almost overnight.
There was no protest. In the absence of the underlying beliefs which made them comprehensible, they simply faded away.

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McIntyre suggests that the values of democracy are like a taboo whose religious foundations long ago disappeared and which has now been left hanging in the air.
Now one of McIntyre's points is that the long-established taboos disappeared almost overnight. And alarmingly, this is what we have recently seen in our own society.
[43:01] It's astonishing how quickly freedoms built up over generations have been abandoned. Twenty years ago, both the US and the UK regarded detention without trial and torture as cancers of democracy.

But the underlying religious beliefs which had underwritten the ban on them have long ago disappeared. Almost overnight, to use McIntyre's phrase, detention without trial became acceptable and the abhorrence of torture simply faded away in the highest levels of government.
The unthinkable happened. Torture became routine in a major democracy. Can other liberties of Western democracy survive in the absence of the beliefs which gave them meaning?
McIntyre goes on to argue that the language of morality, and he means that in a much wider sense than we're accustomed to understand the term, which is usually limited personal actions.
He's talking about these wider cultural issues. The language of morality is in disorder. We possess only disconnected fragments of a conceptual scheme, lacking the religious context which made them meaningful.
[44:16] Moreover, we are unaware that this has occurred, and rather think ourselves in possession of a more than serviceable moral resource.

So serviceable, in fact, that we regard it as justifiable to impose it on others by force if necessary. In fact, we are ourselves in moral poverty.
Over the past century, we've seen a decisive move away from Christianity in the public sphere. While we can still see around us the legacy of a biblical worldview, citizens no longer hold to this legacy because it's biblical.
For many, probably most people, the Bible is a closed book, rather than a source of nourishment for how we are to live. The question that Habermas and others are beginning to ask is whether we are safe in assuming that our democratic structure, built on Christian principles, can survive the erosion of those principles.
Now, I'm not saying that the downfall of democracy is inevitable or that it's going to happen overnight, and in fact, I'm quietly hopeful that Christians will step up and change the course of history.
[45:34] nor am I saying that Christianity needs democracy. The history of the Church shows us that it does not. I'm saying that as a mature, secularised society, the UK is entering uncharted waters.

We have been a country with a Christian underpinning for centuries, so the change is huge. So, given the issues we're facing, what can Christians do?
I suggest that we see several signs of hope. Firstly, there's an increasing recognition among serious secular commentators that there's a problem here. I've mentioned, in fact, I majored on Harbormaster's contribution is so striking, but there's been much discussion about the best way to sustain democratic freedoms, from the Conservative Party rhetoric about broken Britain to the left-leaning concerns of organisations such as liberty.
Secondly, there are signs that state agencies are forging alliances with churches to provide faith-based public services.
Faith schools have proved able to sustain an ethos which values individuals even in difficult circumstances. In social welfare, state partnerships with faith-based organisations provide a charitable choice which would otherwise be too expensive for the state to fund.
[46:56] And I understand there's work going on here which recognises that. For example, churches have been running clubs for children and young people for many years, and there's a growing recognition that these provide a valuable community resource.

A number of children's centres are now being based in churches because of their recognised links with the community. Thirdly, there are Christian think tanks seriously seeking to develop alternative political strategies.
The Jubilee Centre in Cambridge and the Movement for Christian Democracy are striking examples. In fact, there's a much longer, this talk is based on a research paper which is published on the Jubilee Centre website.

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Fourthly, there are practical projects ranging from the Haringey Peace Alliance, which is centred on the black churches and Haringey and Forges relationships, addressed principally to providing services for black youth.
[48:15] Ranging from them to street pastor schemes, from church drop-in centres to community renewal projects such as Message from Manchester or Hope 08. Practical projects.

Finally, there are Christian initiatives in providing a neutral space within which differences can be explored and peaceable resolutions sought. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a well-known national example.
Less well-known are the international peace-building efforts of Jimmy Carter, ex-president of course, President Carter. Carter states his conviction that religion can be significant for peacemaking, giving the example of himself, Menachem Begin and Anwar al-Sadat at Camp David in 1978, where the negotiations were greatly influenced by our religious backgrounds, he says. Each of the principles at Camp David recognised peace to be both a gift from God and a pre-eminent human obligation. Similarly, in Zambia, in 1991, the neutral space for debate became a literal space as the principles met in the Anglican Cathedral in Lusaka and began with shared prayer.
All the participants recognised the neutrality of the literal physical space in the cathedral. The subsequent political resolution led to the redrafting of the Zambian constitution and opened the way for elections.
[49:46] The churches, says Carter, carried the trust of the Zambian people and made a decisive contribution to the re-establishment of democracy. Carter argues that religion is of growing importance for peacemaking and a number of academic authors have noted the contribution of churches in the late 20th century to the changes that took place in Europe and in South America.

Now I've pointed to examples where the gospel can bring transformation, but there is another possibility. It may be that the secular world will reassert itself and these local opportunities will be closed down as sawn-off atheists like Richard Dawkins' wish.
If so, Western democratic institutions will be denied access to the resources arguably necessary for renewal. We will be left with modernist materialism, post-modern chatter, or some kind of moralistic fundamentalism.
It might be a liberal moralistic fundamentalism or a Christian one or an Islamic one. None of them are particularly attractive. But the world is larger than the West.
Philip Jenkins, who writes on mission studies, argues that the future of the Christian church lies with its meteoric expansion in Africa, Asia and South America. And indeed, Christian influence has already been claimed as a stimulus to the moves towards democratisation in China through grassroots reform, as well as in several African countries.
[51:27] The future for Western democracy could lie in the hands of our Southern and Eastern sisters and brothers. We are, in my view, at an important turning point in Western culture.

There are signs that Christians are recovering our heritage. It's up to us. Thank you.

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