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Zsolt Szabo

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# Contemporary Interpretations of Christian Freedom and Christian Democracy in Hungary

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by Zsolt Szabó

## *Introduction*

It is well-known in Western Europe and the United States, but less so in Central Europe, that Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, had a great impact on the development of liberties and democracy in general. The possibility of a political interpretation of Christianity was recently raised by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, making the concept of Christian freedom a governing principle. In this

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Dr. Zsolt Szabó is Associate Professor of Constitutional Law at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church (Budapest, Hungary), and Bolyai Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

paper, I attempt to present this concept, as well as the Christian origins and approaches to the concept of legal-political freedom, and today's interpretation of Christian democracy. My thesis is that all Christian governance is necessarily democratic, but not all democratic governance is Christian.

## *Christian freedom*

Freedom in the Bible appears mainly as freedom from sins, available by personal repentance. We can talk about Jesus in this regard as a “liberator,” saving us from the captivity of our sins: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). From among the multiple Bible verses we quote here, those from Romans (7:24-25) are the most significant: “Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The theological principle of determinism, expressing the omnipotence and omniscience of God, does not contradict the free will of created humans or their responsibility related to this freedom, based on which man must live by the law of God. Christian freedom is predominantly freedom from our own self and our sinful nature through Christ.

The Reformation revived this spiritual freedom when it was under the same pressure and

control as it had been, over and over again in the course of history, and was particularly faced by the early followers of Jesus. Luther wrote a book titled *The Freedom of the Christian*, expressing that the secular power cannot act as judge over conscience. The Reformation unbound and liberated the individual from the power of the official church and subjugated it only to the authority of Christ.<sup>1</sup> A person following Christ is therefore free of the burden of sin and the resulting subjugation—only God is above him. There is no place for the hierarchy of subordination, in the Calvinian way of thinking, among persons, services, or position holders.<sup>2</sup> This holds true for the relationship between the state and the individual: a person is given this freedom by God, not by the state; therefore, the state cannot restrict that person's freedom in order to provide the same freedom for others.

Liberated persons are on the same level as their fellow human beings or the state, concerning their position before God. They make decisions about their lives and possessions, based only on their responsibility before God; they do not expect the state to help them, care for them, or finance them. Freedom as a Christian concept also means everybody is equal before the law<sup>3</sup>: they are given no special privileges in secular society or in reaching salvation. The state simply defends these freedoms by limiting the freedom of everybody.

As our freedom gained in Christ does not mean unlimited freedom in all matters, the task of the state is to provide social peace, provide and maintain public order, and defend the rights of citizens. This means not only self-limitation for the individual but also self-limitation on the part of the state: freedom is threatened from all sides—by other people or even by the state itself. The state must limit certain freedoms to preserve freedom; otherwise, anarchy will result.

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Calvin said that civil government is not a penalty, but the goodwill of God: it is a bad thing to live under a monarch who does not permit anything; but it is even worse if everything is permitted.<sup>4</sup> In the case of freedoms from a legal perspective, the protestant movement brought about religious freedom first, which means that no state power can prevent a believer from abiding by God's law in faith.

Freedom can only be experienced by free people who can take responsibility on their own—because the Lord is responsible for the deeds of the servant. Freedom comes with responsibility; this freedom requires responsible, mature people who are proficient in public affairs. The situation is the same within the church: only responsible members of the church can be free, so teaching the word of God is crucial. It can protect the congregation in childhood, but it can also help believers to reach maturity, with the capacity of critical thinking.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the church board may be considered in practice as a “school of democracy”<sup>6</sup> because its members (can) obtain experience in the open negotiation of public affairs and the making of decisions in consensus.

A mature, free person obeys the laws of God and laws of the world, not because of fear of punishment but on his own volition, recognizing the glory of God in obeying those laws.<sup>7</sup> Calvin considers freedom and (self)-restraint two sides of the same coin: “there is not a happier type of government, when freedom comes with appropriate restraint and it is rightly furnished for permanence.”<sup>8</sup>

Freedom, however, cannot be interpreted only on the level of the individual. The realization of freedom on the level above the individual, on the community level, is well exemplified by what Abraham Kuyper, in his 1880

lecture “Sovereignty in the Sphere of the State,” at Princeton University, called the principle of “sphere sovereignty,” which he also called “differentiated responsibility.” The essence of this differentiated responsibility is that all groups and spheres of society (family, education, profession, church, etc.) have their own scope of action and responsibility, with the same rights as all the others, none of which are above the others. This differentiated responsibility is harmonized by the leadership and sovereignty of God. These spheres are free of domination by each other, as their autonomy is under the authority of God, not human beings. This principle of God’s sovereignty and human liberation only by Christ results in a free people, a free church, a free state. This freedom also means that following Christ is an option not only for church officials and institutions but also for any organization, be it state-owned, artistic, or professional. Each can fully experience this benefit of Christianity. The Holy Spirit works not only in the church but also in the world!

The relativization of the omnipotence of the state,<sup>9</sup> in light of the unlimited sovereignty of God, is a frequently returning Calvinist idea. It can be shown in the case of Calvin that he overstepped the Lutheran principle of “two Regiments” (meaning that the church abides by Scripture, the state abides by the law) and put everything under the sovereignty of God, in a fashion similar to that of Kuyper in the 19th-20th century, who famously said, “there is no square inch” on earth, where the sovereignty of Christ would not prevail. This idea is also expressed in his principle of common grace: the gospel is fundamental not only for the soul but also for society and the nation, he explains in “Calvinism and Politics,” from his *Lectures in Calvinism*, 1931. Calvinism was not only the official principle of the church but also a movement and system of ideas which gave a full answer to all important questions of earthly existence, truths to be followed by “civilians” and open for everyone, just like mercy. According to Ferenc Szűcs, based on the tradition of Calvinism, the church must be the living conscience of power and politics.<sup>10</sup> (We may add: it is expected in

a Christian democracy that the practitioners of power also have their own conscience and do not solely rely on that of the church.)

Let us take a further step toward a new dimension of Christian freedom. The idea of a community-political dimension of freedom also appeared in the time of Jesus: the Jews expected Jesus to liberate them from the Romans; they wanted freedom on a national level when Jesus was offering liberation in the personal-spiritual realm. Disillusionment in this realization, along with Roman apprehension, became the trigger point in the crucifixion of Christ.

“Christian freedom,” in a Hungarian public speech in 2019, can also be seen as related to the community dimension. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán highlighted the national dimension of freedom, not individual liberation, when repeating the concept. The Prime Minister first talked about Christian freedom, on June 27, 2019, as the basis of government for upcoming years. He again expressed his thoughts about this concept on September 14, 2019, at the 12th Congress of Association of Christian Intellectuals, in Parliament: “*Christian freedom is originally a theological category, but we use it as a political category. It summarizes politics, which defends the Christian way of life. It means that we have the right to defend our Christian way of life, which created a Christian culture in two thousand years, [the two, life and culture] layering on top of each other throughout generations. We are free to defend this.*”<sup>11</sup> According to this belief, Europe has a civilization mission, the safeguarding and protection of the European way of life, based on Christianity, in opposition to neutral liberalism or Islam. He highlighted: “*the danger threatening Christian freedom from the outside, migration, was successfully controlled in Central-Europe.*”

His argument keeps developing the national-community realm: “*According to Christian freedom, that individual performance deserves recognition which also serves the interest of the community: self-subsistence and work, the ability to create one’s own existence, learning, healthy lifestyle, paying taxes, establishing a family, raising children, the ability to find one’s way in the things*

or history of the nation, participation in national self-reflection.”

He also explains how the Christian command, which relates to the individual, would apply to the relationship between the member states and the European Union: the difference between liberal freedom and Christian freedom is that “according to the former, everything is permitted which does not violate others’ freedom, while the latter teaches that you should not do something to others which you would not want to be done to you.” In this train of thought, Christian freedom is not an individual goal but a national program: “According to Christian freedom, the world was divided into nations, and the nation is the community of individuals, determined by culture and history, an organized community, the members of which must be protected and must be prepared to stand jointly in the world. According to the teaching of Christian freedom, nations are free and sovereign just like individuals; they cannot be forced under the laws of one global government.”

The search for and following of God’s will on national and community levels is not so much a Christian as an Old Testament idea. The chosen people of God move together in close proximity and follow the Lord. God often puts them under trial, but He preserves them, sometimes broken, amongst all vicissitudes. This idea is not contradicted by the fact that with the New Testament, salvation by Christ has become an individual reality for members of all people. His followers do not come from one particular group of people; rather, they are present in all nations (“make disciples of all nations”). But one may ask how this new community meaning of Christian freedom is connected to the original, “theological” meaning. It can be stated as evidence that there are not simply Christian individuals but also Christian communities and nations. But it must also be stated that Christianity means the following of Christ,

which is predominantly based on the conscious decision of the individual and only secondarily refers to the community’s decisions, acts, rites, and traditions.

As per the specific Hungarian situation, Calvinism gave a standing to the nation “between the heathens”—the Catholic Hapsburgs and the Muslim Ottomans. Even Gáspár Károli—a Hungarian pastor who first translated the Bible into Hungarian in 1586—drew parallels between the Jewish and the Hungarian people, and István Bocskai—the Calvinist Prince of Transylvania and Hungary between 1605 and 1606—was called the Hungarian Moses or Gideon by his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup>

Undoubtedly, it is possible to draw parallels even today, at the time of the Hungarian Christian democracy, born between western secularization and migration from the East.<sup>13</sup> The teachings of Calvinism, which are universal and can be applied to specific communities,

can have a national and nation-preserving power. The problem occurs if Calvinistic principles are secondary, or simply political; for then, the community dimension takes the place of the missional, personal level of following of Christ.

To put it differently, all Christian government is democratic, but not all democratic government is Christian.

#### *Christian democracy today*

After the question of whether to live this freedom on the personal or the community level, let us examine the apparent community realization of democracy, from a Christian perspective. Is Christian democracy possible? As we talked about Christian nations and communities, the only answer to this question is this: real democracy can only be Christian. To put it differently, all Christian government is democratic, but not all democratic government is Christian. Let the train of thought below serve to prove this point.

The starting point of the human image of Christianity is human dignity, originating in humans having been created in the image of God, which results in the legal equality of all

people.<sup>14</sup> Modern democracy and the church organization of the Reformation add the right to participate in decisions, as the right of all members of a community. Government based on subjugation or tyranny cannot be Christian theoretically and cannot be to the liking of God; it is enough to think of the bad kings of the Old Testament, who were oppressing their people. Democracy, however, is not an absolute value: without divine lead, it will become a democracy controlled from above, the tyranny of the people, or a people's democracy. The protestant idea of the universal priesthood derives from this stem: people cannot be separated into a priestly and a working layer, as they were in the Middle Ages. All believers receive the word of God in equal proportions, and they all have the same closeness to God, including pastors. God is the lord of all spheres of our lives, not only the religious sphere. Therefore, we can talk about the universal priesthood and kingdom.

Originally, the essence of democracy—in opposition to various polarized and discrediting views—is not the direct power of the people, but the legitimization of the election of the executors of power and the participation of the people in the disputes and decisions of public affairs. Even for Calvin, standing on the ground of theocracy, the sovereignty of the people was not at the forefront; rather, decision-making based on consent<sup>15</sup> was at the forefront. It is not right to identify democracy with one of its types, mass democracy, which is simply the validation of those in numerical superiority. The division of power, the rule of law, and equality are also parts of democracy, even if they conflict with one another at times. Limiting democracy to the sovereignty of the people is like limiting Christianity to going to church or the practicing of other cultic activities. The categories above presume the existence of one another. If everyone is equal, offices must be filled by election. If the executor of power is elected, then it is not the person who is constant, but the office. If the office is primary, then authority is not primary, but the law.<sup>16</sup>

The cradle of modern democracy is the United States of America, where Christian faith

played a crucial role when the constitution was created. The essence of the created system is a controlled exercise of power, legitimated by the people. The president is not directly elected by the people but by electors; and laws passed by the democratically elected Congress can be found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, etc. Therefore, democracy does not mean the people's continuous exercise of power; it does mean the people's freedom to make the most important decisions, including the election of representatives, and the free negotiation of public affairs required for that. A decision is democratic if the affected people are involved, an involvement which is based not on the will of one leader but on the will of the community.

One source of modern democracy can be found in the Calvinist church system: the filling of church positions by election, previously unheard of, and approving the Ecclesiastical Ordinances by referendum in Geneva. In the background of this initiative, we may also find the direct democratic traditions of large areas of Switzerland. The follower of the law is also a lawmaker, who abides by the law, not because of fear of punishment but because it is his own. Calvin's Ecclesiastical Ordinances, approved in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, exerted their influence over the democratization of the city's leadership. The Geneva pattern, then, influenced the constitutional development of Holland and Scotland, the Huguenots, and the U.S.A.

It can be understood that equality, freedom, and democracy mutually assume the existence of one another in political theory. Democracy cannot end in "mass democracy," in the "rule of the many." It also presupposes freedom and the atmosphere of freedom to debate public affairs, which enables actual appointment of persons to certain positions. The appointment can be approved, and the appointees have the chance to state their opinions. The principle of majority must be based on public awareness of issues and criticism, and respect for minorities. These same assumptions can be seen in the Calvinist church: this religion reached the point where criticism could be formulated about the reli-

gious leader. The Calvinist view about this criticism is that it is not always the majority that has the truth. Christians were often in the minority. Also, the Bible often mentions God as using the minority: sometimes only one person fulfills His plan. Finally, in a democracy everybody is entitled to change their view; however, issues of credibility may result from too frequent changes in the realm of politics.

These same assumptions appear even more concretely in protestant Christianity. The Reformation was not only a theological but also a political movement right from its birth.<sup>17</sup> Calvinists turned the focus of political ideas from the monarch to the saints, thereby forming the basis of political action, which is independent of the state and based on divine call.

Finally, it is important to mention the seventh amendment (June 28, 2018) of the Fundamental Law of Hungary. The following text was inserted into the document (Article R, section 4): “*The defense of the constitutional self-identity and the Christian culture of Hungary is the obligation of all authorities of the state.*” Christian democracy here appears not as the guardian of Christianity but as the guardian of Christian culture. Practice has not yet shown its significance; it belongs to the future to reveal what a culture closely connected to Christianity, but still different from it, means and how such a culture can be defended by the state in the era of the separation of the state and the church—maybe in such a way that the state lets it live and prosper.

### *Conclusion*

Freedom is not only a biblical but also a legal and political category—and one of the most important and oldest efforts of mankind. Christian freedom can be interpreted primarily as the following of Christ by believers, but it can also be understood on a community and national level, but only if we consider the former the starting point.

The right form of  
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Democracy is a result of historical development, but technically it is only one type of power-exercise and legitimization-method among the many, such as the system of ancient tyrants or the feudal states. There is one common point in all of these: the executor of power is under the sovereignty of God, whether that executor be a sole leader or a mass of people. Democracy is not closer to God than other forms of exercising power, and democracy also needs to be renewed from time to time, until it gives way to another form of government as a result of a paradigm shift in history. Until that point, democracy keeps being renewed and needs to be renewed, just like the church. It would not be right to originate modern democracy in Protestantism or to dedicate today’s political concepts to the Reformers. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Calvin renewed the church and adapted the teaching of the Bible to the situation

of his era. As Calvinists searching for the will of God, we can rather walk the way of renewal and development rather than conservation. The Reformation, based on the Bible, was the freshest and most innovative idea of its time. It should gain ground today because of its transforming nature, not because of its conserving nature.

The situation is the same with Christian democracy: it was formed by a given era and a given geographical location. Sin is present in Christian democracy, just as it is in all other human constructs. It must be seen that neither democracy nor Christian democracy is a system ordained by God but is only a human trial, which can be successful only by the grace of God. It is true that modern democracy became operational first in those countries where Calvinism prevailed, but as we have seen, it cannot be seen as directly originating from the theology of Calvin.<sup>18</sup> Its polishing, however, is definitely due to the followers of Calvin, the Calvinists.

The form of today's democracy cannot be directly traced to the Bible; neither can many achievements of the modern world, like social security, public education, or mass communication. But these concepts and practices do not oppose the Bible. The changing and continuous developments of the created world do not conflict with the finiteness and perfection of creation, as the unlimited sovereignty of God still prevails over them. Calvin—in opposition to today's global standardizing and uniforming tendencies—did not believe in a “catholic” government, which can be adapted to all countries as a template. Instead, “Divine providence did order it such a way that different territories would have different forms of government.”<sup>19</sup> This view opposes that of the West in its prideful educating of younger or different democracies and its fueling of several international organizations. However, today's accepted, canonized, “constitutional” or liberal “democracies” are not the only right forms of government, even though their historical achievements are indisputable. Christian government should not oppose other forms of government just because it recognizes God's sovereignty over everything.

The right form of Christian democracy is not superficial; it is Christ-following policy-making. As a result, it cannot be Christian in rhetoric only or attempt to gain votes of Christians only; it cannot appeal only to the transcendent-minded and the church. It needs to form and articulate a comprehensive program, affecting all areas of earthly life. If the following of Christ is taken seriously, the executors of Christian democratic politics know that the state is not above everything else; rather, God's power is above everything else. It is also personally above them, so their primary task is to serve the people they govern. Their call to a political position should be preceded by a call to community service, says Max Weber, adding that the former position should be entitled to only those who are in the possession of a charismatic internal call.<sup>20</sup> If that internal call does exist but the leaders deviate from the call of service to others, resistance may be necessary, as it was for Calvin and his followers in the western

exercise of power following absolutism in the Roman Empire (Magna Charta: 2015, Golden Bull of Hungary - 1222).<sup>21</sup>

It is evident, based on the explanation above, that Christ-following government, based on the teachings of Holy Scripture, cannot be tyrannical; it should be based on brotherly love; therefore, it must be democratic. However, a secular position can also lead to democracy. For that kind of democracy to succeed, people must fight over issues day by day, just as people have fought over issues in every historical period. If the non-Christian-based democracy gets rusty, it must be relearned. It must be relearned because democracy is worth only as much as it serves the glory of God and the good of the people. It shall be as people make it—either people's liberal or—ideally—Christian democracy.

#### Endnotes

1. Szathmáry Béla: Kálvin és a kálvinizmus aktualitása a világban és az egyházban, in Napkút, 2009, elérhető: [http://www.napkut.hu/naput\\_2009/2009\\_09/071.htm](http://www.napkut.hu/naput_2009/2009_09/071.htm)
2. Szűcs Ferenc: Exegézis és dogmatika kapcsolata Kálvinnál a predestinációtan és az ekklezológiá tükrében, In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): Kálvin időszerűsége (MRE Kálvin János Kiadója, 2009), 79-103.
3. According to Calvin, men are only equal in the legal sense; otherwise, their spiritual presents are different, and their social positions also differ. Fazakas Sándor: Kálvin szociáletikája, In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): Kálvin időszerűsége ..., 130.o.
4. John Calvin, *The Institutes*, IV, 20. (Kálvin János: A keresztyén vallás rendszere, Pápa, 1910). II., 759.
5. Reformation in Hungary was delayed also in this respect: the first “church boards” (*presbitérium*) were set up one hundred years later in the Hungarian church organization, and their role was mainly technical; they were in practice “managers” of the church vault, rather than owners of its material and spiritual goods. Gergely András: Kálvin időszerűsége, In Magyar Tudomány, 2010/2. szám. Similarly, Imre Révész states that the reformed church in Hungary never was really as Calvin described the church—feudal structures hindered that. Szűcs, 2007, 5.

6. Szűcs, 2007, 5.
7. Szathmáry Béla: Kálvin a kortársunk? In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): *Kálvin időszerűsége ...*, 386.
8. John Calvin, *The Institutes*, IV, 20. (Kálvin János: *A keresztyén vallás rendszere*, Pápa, 1910). II., 754.
9. Fazakas Sándor: Kálvin szociáletikája, In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): *Kálvin időszerűsége ...*, 130.
10. Szűcs, 2007, 3.
11. The whole speech is available (in Hungarian) here: <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-kereszteny-ertelmisegiek-szovetsegenek-esz-xii-kongresszusan/>
12. Szűcs, 2007, 3.
13. Tőkéczi László: A Kálvin hatása a magyarságra és a magyar politikára. In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): *Kálvin időszerűsége ...*, 367-376.
14. See the speech delivered by Tőkéczi, László about democracy (in Hungarian) on 2014.02.07: [www.refpasaret.hu](http://www.refpasaret.hu)
15. Szűcs, 2009, 100.
16. Szathmári Béla: Kálvin a kortársunk? In Fazakas Sándor (szerk.): *Kálvin időszerűsége ...*, 384.
17. James K.A. Smith: “The Reformed (transformationist) View,” *Five Views in the Church and Politics*, Zonderman, 2015.
18. Szűcs, 2007, 5.
19. Calvin, *The Institutes*, IV. 20., 14.
20. Idézi Szűcs, 2007, 5.
21. *Ibid.*, 2.