

A RESPONSE TO KENNETH MELCHIN

Kenneth Melchin has captured wonderfully both the significance and the challenge of our present historical moment. In the debate surrounding the United States' recent invasion of Iraq, we caught a glimpse of a new form of public square. As Robert Muller, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, observed of the weeks preceding the onset of U.S. military action: "Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war."¹ Whatever one makes of the eventual outcome, in focusing international attention on the role of the United Nations Security Council, these events have brought new urgency to debates over the meaning of sovereignty and accountability within global political communities. As Melchin has argued, however tentative and contested, visions of a world democracy are emerging and it seems increasingly obvious to many that, whatever our past failures, we must begin to work toward developing viable structures for global governance. At the same time, if recent debates have generated a heightened sense of awareness of ourselves as world citizens, North American political consciousness, in what we have begun to call the "9/11 era," is also permeated with a more or less vivid sense of fragility and vulnerability. Intersecting with the dawning reality of globalization is a preoccupation with national security. The same sense of being connected in vast, fluid networks that generates possibilities for a world democracy also breeds a new kind of threat of invasion, in the face of which defending borders and shoring up national identity become almost unquestioned priorities.

Melchin has asked us to think theologically about what it means to be "champions of democracy" today. On what foundations will commitment to the sort of multilateral, cooperative action on behalf of justice around the world that will be called for in the future be sustained? In a recent book, feminist political theorist Seyla Benhabib argues that in the present century,

We are facing the genuine risk that the worldwide movements of peoples and commodities, news and information will create a permanent flow of individuals without commitments, industries without liabilities, news without a public conscience, and the dissemination of information without a sense of boundaries and discretion. In this "global.com civilization" persons will shrink into e-mail addresses in space, and their political and cultural lives will proliferate extensively into the electronic universe, while their temporal attachments will be short-lived, shifting, and superficial.²

¹As quoted by Lynne Twist in "Waging Peace: A Story about Robert Muller," in *West by Northwest.org Online Magazine*, at <http://www.westbynorthwest.org/artman/publish/article_340.shtml>.

²Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 182-83.

Democratic citizenship, which requires commitment, accountability, and attachment, cannot survive in such a civilization.

One familiar way to talk about what it means to champion democracy against cultural pressures that would erode a sense of commitment is to appeal to ideals of international citizenship that join national identity with a special obligation to "take democracy" to wherever there is political instability or where nondemocratic regimes now exist. Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressed this sense of championing democracy in his charge to recent graduates of the University of Notre Dame:

I would submit that America's unrivaled position in the world, our fundamental traditions of freedom and altruism, and the desperate need for international leadership in a time of potential chaos have placed our nation in a position to determine whether the world advances or declines. The United States cannot feed every person, lift every person out of poverty, cure every disease, or stop every conflict. But only the United States can organize the world to overcome the threats to peace and prosperity in the 21st century. . . . you must have a global outlook and accept global responsibilities. I am convinced that the vast majority of American people believe that we have a moral responsibility to foster the concepts of opportunity, free enterprise, the rule of law, human rights and democracy. They understand that these American values are the hope of the world.³

Quite apart from the sense of singular and self-appointed mission that many people in the United States and abroad would find troubling, the images invoked in this charge paint just the picture of liberal democracy to which Melchin, drawing on emerging theories of deliberative democracy, has offered a compelling critique. Against the suggestion that democracy is an end to be implemented, manifest principally in the exercise of political relationships, carried out by officials on behalf of individuals, deliberative theorists invite attention to the multiple processes of negotiation and debate through which agreements about the shape of common life are made. Thus, in this view, "measures to promote and defend democratic institutions must themselves be democratic; they must embody the principles of participatory deliberation itself" (Melchin, 9). To borrow from Iris Marion Young (as quoted by Melchin),

on a deliberative understanding of democratic practice, democracy is not only a means through which citizens can promote their interests and hold the power of rulers in check. It is also a means of collective problem solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of the society.

To champion deliberative democracy in a global context, then, is to foster conditions for collective problem solving and for the exercise of cooperative

³Senator Richard Lugar, commencement address, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, 18 May 2003.

commitments across national boundaries and in transnational contexts. While "global.com" poses obvious risks to the possibilities of democratic citizenship of the sort Benhabib describes, we have already witnessed the appearance of what could be called "incipient public squares composed of active citizens in a global civil society."⁴ Young points to transnational civic organizations that have developed over the last two decades "involving millions of people in cross-border organizing, practical aid, arts exchange, and networks of civic associations working together to pressure powerful global actors to change their policies."⁵ She cites as an example of this kind of citizenship the effective, international protest in 1998 against World Bank policies on investments by transnational corporations.

Melchin observed that the Catholic tradition can be a valuable teacher of the virtue of hope necessary to engage in the open-ended processes of deliberation and negotiation that are characteristic of decentered living. There are other ways as well in which the Catholic tradition provides a rich context for the exploration of the possibilities for thinking about global democracy. Current literature on deliberative democracy uses language that is very familiar to readers of the Catholic social encyclicals: solidarity, subsidiarity, commitment to the common good. Although the terms are continually undergoing reinterpretation to take account of the realities of diversity, just as democracy is reinterpreted when it is taken up in the deliberative framework, there is much in the way that those concepts are being invoked that is compatible with the values expressed by those terms in the tradition. Moreover, as a world church, we have unique opportunities for supporting and promoting international movements for social justice—in other words, for creating public squares for living out as well as discerning commitments to one another across boundaries. We have opportunities for promoting the conditions for human security over national security, security rooted in strategic personal relationships mobilized around human needs.

At the same time, it seems necessary at least to raise the question of what an argument for deliberative democracy as a day-to-day practice means for our own Roman Catholic community as a polity. If it is the case that it is our "decentered, self-transcending pattern of cooperative living in everyday life that cultivates the habits and virtues that we draw upon when we do things explicitly political" then what are the implications for governance and discernment within our own religious institution? What would it mean to model democracy as "a means of collective problem solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of the society?"

⁴Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 270.

⁵*Ibid.*

A final note: Benhabib and others have argued that the most serious challenge to the ideal of a global civilization (a civilization that embraces respect for cultural diversity and enables the exercise of democratic deliberation and experimentation) is the rise of fundamentalist movements (versions of which are felt within every major religious tradition): "Some fundamentalisms can coexist with the pluralist ethos of contemporary democracies by finding methods of accommodation and compromise." It is the rejectionist fundamentalists whom, she observes, "find it most difficult to live in a globalized world of uncertainty, fluidity, contestation. Unable to make the daily compromises that the practice of any firmly held religious belief in the contemporary world would require, these groups declare war on global civilization or consume themselves in apocalyptic fervor; often they do both."⁶ The question of fundamentalisms is obviously complex. This concern, however, suggests a further way to think about the vocation of the theologian as a champion of democracy. As Melchin has argued here, one part of our vocation is to cultivate the resources that enable us to "move out of our own interests and learn and live out of obligations arising in cooperative living." An important part of our vocation is to make sure (to borrow from another commencement speaker) that we are "using the almost limitless power of global networks to connect *people*, and to cross boundaries rather than simply to connect money, markets and commodities."⁷

In that challenge we reach for the hope born of our confidence in the mystery of God's love and God's continued presence in our midst. The challenge of fundamentalisms calls for the cultivation of another set of equally important virtues. I am not sure that I know exactly what they are. It is hard to know how to cultivate openness to uncertainty, courage in the face of a search for truth the outcome of which is open-ended, and the ability to embrace ambiguity as a condition for wisdom. However, we stand within a tradition with great confidence in the ability of human reason, aided by grace, to grasp God's will within human history, within human experience, a confidence that is always at the same time aware of its limitations. The work of world democracy also begins there.

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⁶Benhabib, 186.

⁷Queen Noor of Jordan, commencement address, Ursinus College, Collegeville, Pennsylvania, 17 May 2003.