

# Disenchantment in and of Democracy. On the Religious Roots of Democracy and on ‘Deracinated’ Democracy

— Marin Terpstra

## Introduction: Taking the Connection Between Politics and Religion Seriously?

Understanding modern political order, in short: liberal democracy, is unthinkable without taking into consideration ‘a political history of religion.’<sup>1</sup> This means we should consider the negative or positive roles religion, in all its varieties, has played in the historical formation of successive political orders. For the Western world this entails, especially, taking into account Christian concepts of community and early modern religious criticism. The future of democracy will to a large extent be determined by the fate of religion in all its forms and varieties, a fate that is entangled with <sup>o</sup>disenchantment<sup>o</sup> of the world.<sup>2</sup> There are concepts of democracy closely connected to religious imaginaries and practices. Consequently, there is either disenchantment *within* democracy as far as its essence remains religious, or, in the end, complete disenchantment *of* democracy. The concept of disenchantment refers to the process in which references to transcendent sources of social order are weakened or annihilated, and society becomes more and more secular. Although most scholars in the field of democratic theory take disenchantment, and hence the separation of state and church, politics and religion, for granted,

### <sup>o</sup>COMMENT MARCEL WISSENBURG

This is, obviously, not a neutral, descriptive term. Far from it. It cannot be interpreted other than as ‘without religion, the world loses some of its magic and that is a deeply deplorable development’.

I would expect a defense somewhere for the choice of this particular perspective on the role of magic, superstition and religion relative to civilization, but have not seen one anywhere. And the sad thing is that I believe your (as I read it) two most important claims (see below: religion as religio and as law are valuable) do not need support from such a strong, colored, scary idea like disenchantment.

### REPLY MARIN TERPSTRA

After reading Marcel Wissenburg’s valuable comments I decided to answer some of them directly and some of them in a general reply right after my conclusion. I felt I needed some space to do his remarks justice, but also to clarify my approach and presuppositions.

I will indicate the comments that I tackle in my general reply as follows: ‘See the general reply to Wissenburg after my essay.’

and therefore do not pay much attention to so called *res mixtae*, there are important exceptions, and above all, good reasons to accept the possibility of intersections between the two.

The main part of my essay will deal with two perspectives on the intersection of religion and democratic politics. Firstly, the arguments used in criticism of religion can be used against other institutions in society and their practices as they show features comparable to the criticized religion. This applies especially to the criticism of monotheistic religions connected to a theology based on Revelation, which played an important role in the construction of the modern world. 'Secularization' does not stop at merely affecting religion and its place in society, but affects society as a whole. In this sense, a parallel development in religion and politics is possible.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, and connected to the previous point, now that we have eventually arrived at a 'secularized' or 'modern' perspective on religion, the non-religious concepts which scholars use to describe religious phenomena can be used to analyze other parts of society which demonstrate similarities with 'religion'. If, for example, religion is shown to be about the formation of community, the concepts describing the formation of communities can be used to describe non-religious phenomena.<sup>4</sup> So, my aim is to attempt a description of democracy as a religious issue, and from this point to think through the process of democracy's disenchantment.

Both perspectives are based on the assumption that there are politico-theological phenomena. Politics and religion are closely connected in many parts of the world, and have been for a long time in history. Democratic ideas, practices, and institutions were proposed and established before democratic countries became 'secular', i.e. before the majority of the people became unreligious.<sup>5</sup> Since Christianity, in all its complexity and diversity, helped shape the Western world as we know it, it is plausible that specific Christian features of what we normally call religion left their marks on the development of democracy. It is even possible that democracy in its Western form is essentially determined by Christian experiments with ways of life and construction of communities.<sup>6</sup> In addition, political modernity is viewed by some as shaped by the secularization of theological concepts, as a transposition or conceptualization of God and His rule of the world to political power.<sup>7</sup> A variant of this view is that in the struggle between state and church from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, the state in its auto-construction and in its need to win the fight was forced to take over tasks of the church (jurisdiction, care, education) and to present itself as a superior alternative to the church. The state became, as a secular realm of salvation, a quasi-religious institution

or an imitation of the church.<sup>8</sup> Finally, when (in the political order) God was replaced by the absolutist monarch (ruling by divine right) and then by 'the people', the structure of political order itself remained intact. Some concepts of democracy seem to have the same or at least a similar conceptual configuration as those of theocracy.<sup>9</sup>

## Religious Roots of Democracy: Christianity

The ancient roots of democracy refer us back to a very down-to-earth political order in which citizens take responsibility for their *polis* and have the right to participate in decision-making. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle pointed to the weaknesses of popular government and coined a depreciatory notion of democracy. Nevertheless the image of people gathering, debating, and voting on public matters has remained alive to this day. For the ancient Greek citizens, religion, i.e. honoring the gods, was a natural part of social life, and apart from certain philosophic minds, nobody questioned its significance for the fate of the city.

With the advent of Christianity all this changed in a fundamental way. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ or Messiah, made an important move: detaching communal life from politics. The people constituting the Christian communities, and later on members of the Church, the body of Christ, formed a more or less egalitarian society which was sharply contrasted to the existing political order, i.e. the Roman Empire. Political order was of *this* world and involved power, interests, repression, and violence. Christians called the state 'a gang of robbers'. The new communities, whose origin was not of this world, embodied the promise of another life, based on love and peace. In short, Christianity invented a forceful image of a people saved from the burdens of secular powers. Although the notions of bad government, oligarchy, and tyranny were known to the ancient world, it is this Christian dichotomy of government attached to the evils of this world and people attached to the goods of salvation, that is still lingering in today's democratic sentiment.<sup>10</sup> That Christian-democratic sentiment is that the government is to be distrusted<sup>o</sup>, for the people always want the good for all, at least the enchanted part of it, the faithful citizens. (To be sure, this concept of religious and moral citizenship should be distinguished from the political concept of the *civis* or *citoyen*.)

Of course, this is not the whole story. The 'democratic' tendency in Christianity was present in all those places in which small communities were inspired by Christian faith and moral spirit. The Christian church itself became involved in the government of society and the

### <sup>o</sup>COMMENT LARS CORNELISSEN

That government is to be distrusted and ought to be no more than a tool in the hands of the people seems to me to be a distinctly liberal sentiment. Your statement, that there remains today a distrust of government, which stems from this Christian dichotomy, thus holds for liberal democracy – but how is democracy *en soi* connected to distrust of government?

### REPLY MARIN TERPSTRA

A disenchanted but still democratic view on 'bad' government implies that if government is seen as bad by a majority of the people, this points to a lack of political responsibility of the people themselves. A more autocritical people should ask two questions: (1) are there among us people who would be able to do a better job, and (2) why are they not in government? Distrust in the government only belongs to a specific kind of democracy, the Christian-liberal one, but there is also a conception of democracy in which the people get the government they deserve. I am inclined to follow Spinoza in saying that all societies in their internal organization are the expression of the *potentia multitudinis*, the power of the multitude, i.e. democracy, but that only a free and rationally mature people have a *potestas multitudinis*, a government by the multitude, whereas a servile, rationally immature people is governed by a minority of dominant people.

COMMENT<sup>o</sup>  
 MARCEL WISSENBURG

This is incorrect for two reasons: 1. Democracy, in line with Aristotle's definition, was understood as self-interested mob rule and a term used in polite society or in front of children; 2. The medieval and renaissance idea of government by citizens (i.e., the very limited group of financially independent men) is not an ideal of democracy but of 'the many' ruling in the interest of all, i.e., the *res publica*. What is all too easily passed over here is that the real story of democracy is that it could not become fashionable until a notion of 'enlightened self-interest' was developed to replace the classic notion of self-interest as detrimental to the common good.

REPLY  
 MARIN TERPSTRA

In democracy you always have citizens, some of them philosophers, who do not like democracy – and maybe for good reasons. Real democracy was obviously not invented by philosophers. I agree that it took a long time before the minds were set for accepting voting rights for all adults. I also agree that the notion of self-interest is important for modern conceptions of democracy, but I would add that this is an example of its disenchantment. The revival of democracy in medieval cities, however, means (as the literature suggest) self-government by citizens who consider themselves members of a (Christian inspired) community, a notion that revives in Rousseau's ideal democracy.

COMMENT<sup>o</sup>  
 MARCEL WISSENBURG

I am inclined to call this Jacobin revisionism – I am not so sure this freedom and equality rhetoric was present in the proto-liberal tradition before the great equalizer started chopping off heads.

maintenance of established order – and in doing so it shaped the basic elements of Western political order. As soon as Christianity became a political factor as the state religion of the Roman Empire and needed state protection, one was reminded of Paul's saying that all power derived from God. People are sinners, they need discipline to find the right way, and therefore government is the scourge of God, correcting the wickedness of human nature.<sup>11</sup> Dreams of salvation in this world were tempered by stressing the need to prepare for *eternal* salvation that is not of this world. Democratic inclinations (giving political rights to many, most, or all people) were countered as *utterances* of the antichrist. Lawyers and theologians in the church were also part of the development and foundation in law of political forms and a conception of society that is based on the notion of participation of different groups in society and their concerted contribution, led by 'the head' of the political body, for the total welfare of society. All this encouraged a more authoritarian-corporatist idea of political community, on the whole in sharp opposition to autonomous democratic tendencies.

Of great importance in the development of democratic order in society are the laic movements that from the twelfth century onwards played a role not only in the Reformation (and finally the schism) of the Christian church, but also in the construction of the political culture of cities, which stimulated the revival of <sup>o</sup>ancient forms of democracy (government by the citizens)<sup>o</sup>. Part of this movement was the invention of the Self, the idea of a personal conscience, and an individual's duty to relate to God. Counter to the idea that God is represented in this world by the two powers, spiritual and secular, *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, state and church, the conception gained ground that God is present in the conscience of every individual person. So, God's Word entered the world through the *vox populi*. Obviously, religious leaders of all kind tried to make themselves the spokesperson of this voice, and so did worldly leaders. Without any doubt, this conception turned the world of power upside down. Here we find the starting point of modern natural rights theory, which reinforced the religious interpretation of democracy as based on 'sacred' principles (as is shown by the eighteenth century constitutional texts), as well as the starting point of the disenchantment of political order. The concept of a people constituted by <sup>o</sup>equal and free individuals<sup>o</sup> following their own conscience is incorporated in the liberal political tradition, starting from Locke and Kant, and is still part of the orthodoxy of contemporary mainstream political philosophy as founded by Rawls and Habermas.

## The Religious Foundation of Social and Political Order

Until very recently, in the western world religion was commonly seen not only as an important part of social life but also as the foundation of social and political order. The dominant discourse created a context of justification for political actions and institutions, based on, roughly speaking, the texts of the Bible and the tradition of its interpretation on the one hand, and Roman law and Aristotelian philosophy on the other. It maintained that God created and governed the world; He intervened in the world and was the final judge of people's behavior in this world. Society and political order were part of a superior kingdom, represented by the Church, which is translated for this world by the intellectuals and lawyers of the Church. Of course, whether those in power in this world obeyed the 'laws of God' is another question. The construction itself, however, makes possible a model of legitimacy, that is: of justification of political power and positive law, in terms external to existing law and order.<sup>12</sup> The position and importance of religion as a foundation of society remained strong until the middle of the twentieth century, although from the seventeenth century onwards thoughts were developed that looked for a foundation of social and political order that was detached from – especially – biblical sources. The danger of 'atheism' was seen, first of all, as a threat to the stability of social order.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the main incentive for this religious criticism was the subversion of the Church and its leaders, which had such a strong impact on politics, society, and morals. The 'atheists' succeeded only slowly.

I have already explained how Christian thought has shaped certain elements of democratic thought, practice, and institutions. As long as social and political order is justified by reference to a Christian worldview in one of its many varieties, it is a matter of course that democratic notions are affected by this.<sup>14</sup> At least one school of democratic thought is connected to this configuration. It grounds democratic political order on moral principles that cannot be the subject of deliberation, negotiation, or decision within political life. It demands that participants justify their claims in terms of these principles. This kind of thought is typical for *liberal* democracy. °Of course°, these principles do not have to be labeled as 'religious' but the configuration of political order as founded on 'external' grounds is a strong echo of the religious foundation of social and political order. I will return to this point in the next section. The justification or legitimation of political order on transcendent grounds (like the Christian state or the liberal state based on natural right principles) can be challenged in two ways. One refers us back to the spiritual-democratic movement with its anti-power

COMMENT  
LARS CORNELISSEN

One could say that although the principles on which we ground our social and political order are no longer deemed religious, they never stopped being overtly metaphysical. Seen this way, perhaps we should say that 'disenchantment' primarily means that these metaphysical principles lose their status as inherently religious.

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

This question rightly presupposes that it is part of the process of 'disenchantment' to *neutralize* fundamental principles formerly viewed as religious (or grounded in divine order) by constructing a language in which things that were phrased in biblical terms before are now phrased in 'metaphysical' terms. In short, in the seventeenth century the metaphysical language of Christianity (its 'natural theology') is disconnected from its biblical language (its 'apocalyptic theology') and starts a life of its own. This 'disenchantment' however is not radical enough, because it keeps intact the basic religious structure of foundation itself.

COMMENT<sup>Q</sup>  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

There is a lot of fun to be had & strength to be gained by further distinguishing the two roles religion had/has in society: that of the (source of) law, substantive prescriptions (Jewish tradition) and that of form, creator of visible unity (religio, typically Greco-Roman).

Explaining and illustrating in more detail how religio and law each had their distinct influences on the development of democratic ideas would help support the otherwise too sweeping, general claim that 'religion as such' had an impact on 'democracy as such'.

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

See the general reply to Wissenburg after my essay.

tendency already mentioned (a direct appeal to the people's will against established order). The other is by adopting an 'atheist' position and rejecting all transcendent grounds of political order. In case of a democratic society, one needs an immanent design of political order – for example the idea of the self-government of the people by the people.

To complete this overview of the relevance of religion for democratic politics, we need to point also to the inheritance of Roman political thought for Western concepts of politics. This inheritance played a decisive role in the formation of modern political order, at least as a central point of reference. For the ancient Romans, religion (the word *religio*<sup>Q</sup> appeared first in this context) was most of all a practice of *pietas*: reverence and worship for the ancestors, the father, the founders of the city, and the gods. With Caesar and August, the emperor too became an object of worship – this is the context in which Christianity emerged.<sup>15</sup> By separating the profane from the sacred within society, religion obtained the social and political function of creating respect for the foundational acts and the institutional order of the city. Apart from the familial and day-to-day religious practices of piety, religion was a state cult. The Romans were particularly strict in keeping to their rites: *orthopraxy*.<sup>16</sup> This left its marks on political thought and practice up to this day: a formal attitude towards established procedures. Hence, one question for the remainder of this text will be whether there exists a democratic cult. Another question will be what happens to this religious feature of democracy when the latter is disenchanting?<sup>17</sup>

## Critique of Religion and Disenchantment: Modern Politics

The remainder of this essay will deal with a specific democratic problem: representation. This problem cannot be fully understood without understanding its theological roots. The schism in the Christian Church, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and subsequently the politics of toleration and freedom of religion, laid the foundation for a new conceptualization of society which led to specific liberal and democratic principles. It is important to notice that most critique of religion was itself religiously inspired. This critique was the expression of an inner process of purification, which became ultimately a facet of personal life styles as a result. The main target of this religious criticism was *mediation*, i.e. a specific element in Christian religious practice that installed institutional and personal mediators between God and the individual (Church, rituals, priests, theologians). During Christianity's history as a whole, in regular outbursts but especially in the developments leading to the Reformation, the conviction

grew among Christians that they were able to receive the divine message (Revelation) themselves, without mediation, be it through grace and faith, or be it through using reason and other faculties given by God to enable them to find their way. The conviction grew that God could be found in the immediate realm of each person. Finally, this turn changed into something different: the divine was reduced to a personal experience ('my mind is my church'). This reformation of Christian religion could have remained completely religious, had it not been complemented by another feature of the modern world that is connected to this religious criticism, but has a totally different aim: disenchantment.

By disenchantment I mean the impact on the structure of society of the appearance of those individuals who are totally devoted to this world, those who are leading a life based on a pragmatic and realistic approach of the things in this world, who are trying to achieve things they themselves want to achieve. Disenchanted humankind thinks and acts on the basis of empirical observation, rational calculation, utilitarian planning, and freedom of choice. The result is a society based on functional operations, performed by what is usually called the *homo oeconomicus*. Of course, people like this have always existed. Their way of life already is the main opponent in Socrates' dialectical criticism. The new event of modern disenchantment was that this kind of people became publicly recognized and rationally justified as normal bearers of adequate social behavior. The consequences of this event are far reaching. I confine myself to a brief summary, relevant for the main question of this text.

(1) Disenchanted individuals are not bound beforehand to any tradition or superior 'spiritual' order (like moral principles or the salvation of the soul): they are free, although their possible choices are restricted by what society (the decisions of other people) offers. Their social behavior and political commitment is up to them.

(2) The mentality of disenchanted people leads to a functional differentiation of society: the relative separation of sorts of social activities, or spheres, following their own rules of conduct, each of which is organized according to its own goals. Religion and politics are such domains, as are the economy and education.<sup>18</sup>

(3) Especially relevant for our subject is the transformation of (political) power, or more generally, of the way the exercise of power is conceptualized and organized. Power no longer is a *mediation* between a superior (divine) order and the real world. It has become the set of instruments used to respond to a field of independent forces in order to achieve specific ends.<sup>19</sup> Disenchanted power is a set of techniques for

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

A typically Catholic prejudice, and fairly insulting, I guess, for those who believe in a personal relationship with God as the *nec plus ultra* in religion.

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

What is insulting about James' *Varieties of religious experience*? I agree, it took some time for Christians to realize what the reformist turn really meant. The Catholic assessment is: this move is heretical and against God's order. But, indeed, I think the Church had a clear sensitivity for what was going on.

COMMENT  
LARS CORNELISSEN

How does this account of disenchantment relate to secularization, understood as the normative process of banning religious reference from public life?

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

Disenchantment can be understood as the process in which religious or theological discourse is put aside because its relevance for day to day life fades away while the awareness of autonomous control of people over their own practices grows. The public recognition of these facts as 'normal' or 'obvious' is an important factor in the spread of this mentality. Disenchantment then becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Growing trust in the capacity of men to handle their own affairs is the main line, while normative discourse that says that this is how it should be, is an accompanying matter.

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

I have no reason to believe these two conceptions of power did not already exist side by side in the good old days of the Roman Empire.

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

The Romans have the distinction between *auctoritas* and *potestas*, power presenting tradition and power referring to actual government – they never gave up the first, nor its reference to *Roma aeterna*, i.e. the historical mission of Rome.

COMMENT<sup>o</sup>MARCEL WISSENBURG

That would be *religio* – one example of a place in this text where the distinction of religion as *religio* and as *law* could be used quite fruitfully.

REPLYMARIN TERPSTRA

See the *general reply to Wissenburg* after my essay.

dealing with an environment that is contingent but also, to a certain extent, can be known as a world ruled by ‘laws’, and therefore predicted and manipulated. Uncertainty means that these techniques do not guarantee success and therefore involve risks (opposition, subversion, counterproductive affects, and so on). I call these power techniques *liberal experiments*: experiments with the management of free agents, i.e. management of people presupposed to be disenchanting.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps one of the clearest examples in modern politics is the technique of *toleration* in the field of confessional practices. People are allowed to practice religion as they want, but on the condition that they do not disturb social order. The more authoritarian solution of state religion was thus relaxed in favor of more freedom, but this freedom gave the state the opportunity to observe people’s religious behavior and evaluate its benefits or dangers.

This might seem obvious and trivial for those who are the heirs of this transformation of religion and society as a whole, and the way in which they were conceptualized. Thinking about the future of democracy, however, forces us to ask two questions. First of all, what would a society and a (liberal and democratic) political order look like if these two tendencies of religious criticism and disenchantment were followed to the extreme? And further, why did these tendencies meet such heavy obstruction in the course of history until today, and why were humans not free of religion and enchantment in the first place? The answers I will provide turn around one theme: symbolic mediation. I think that a ‘disenchanted’ view on religion shows that symbolic mediation is the essential business of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. Thus, as far as (liberal) democracy remains dependent upon symbolic mediation, <sup>o</sup>religious features<sup>o</sup> will persist. I hold that humanity, at the extreme end point of criticism of religion and disenchantment, is not able to give meaning to ‘the whole’ (the universe, the world, society, political order) in a way that could support the kind of *collective responsibility* democracy is calling for.

## **Disenchanted Democracy: Democracy Without Roots?**

What would be the consequence for democracy if its shape were completely determined by the criticism of religion and disenchantment? I will paint a picture stressing three main features: liberal experiments in politics, disenchantment of political power, and the changes in the *res publica*.

Liberal experiments in politics mean that political power and decision-making are opened up to the free choice of people. Democratic government (1) accepts the distinction between those who actually govern and their policy on the one hand, and the environment of the government, consisting of the people among many other actors and circumstances, on the other. It also (2) ensures that the people, in whatever way, takes part in the decision-making process and therefore is included either in person or by representation, within the political system. This implies that 'democracy' as such never exists (except in day dreams or imagination). Government can be more or less democratic, include more or less 'people' within its operations. Free elections, hearings, participation of people in the political system (as chosen members of parliament, as public servants, as citizen representatives and so on) are the main and best-known forms. This institutionally guaranteed presence of the people in the political system signals that decisions are made 'by the people'. In the next section, I discuss the serious problem how such participation in decision-making can be *collective* and what 'collective' might mean. Another important feature of the liberal experiment in politics is the right of opposition. This implies not only freedom of speech, of press, of organization, of gathering, and so on (in short political rights of citizens), but above all the serious *implementation* of these rights: the absence of bad consequences for those who participate in opposition. Democracy as a liberal experiment means that people do not have to agree with political decisions made in the name of and by participation of the people, in fact by a majority. This leads to another serious problem: obedience to political decision.

Disenchantment of political power means that this power no longer represents, embodies or incarnates a superior or final transcendent truth, law (i.e. a set of values, norms, and rules), or authority.<sup>21</sup> Whatever decisions are taken, they are merely the outcome of a political struggle between citizens and mainly reflect the issues and convictions involved in these conflicts. Democracy disenchanting reflects the *rule of opinion*. Democracy is 'anti-platonic',<sup>22</sup> so to speak – although many political philosophers suggest that the clash of opinions might 'dialectically' lead to consensus, or to better or more legitimate political decisions. Democracy becomes 'immanent', it does not refer to an 'outside' in the name of which what happens within democracy can be judged, justified, criticized, or rejected. Judgment, justification, criticism, protest, opposition, and so on are part of democratic politics, expressions of people's opinions and interests which have an impact on political decision-making in different degrees (depending on the

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

This may well miss the point of a fundamental feature of democracy (both from the views of modern liberals and those who now call themselves republicans): it *values* disagreement and it does so because of its many functions *before and in* the decision-making process, ranging from respect and legitimacy to access to relevant information and awareness of fallibility.

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

That can only be true if democracy entails no element whatsoever of exchange of views, of reflection or of deliberation – if it were simple opinion polling without a second for communication. *Quod non, ergo non.*

Opinion certainly plays a part in democracy, it's what deliberation begins with, but all forms of democracy with all their communicative instruments and institutions aim only to transform opinion into something else. Democracy cannot entail the rule of opinion. Opinion either rules or not.

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

That can only be true if democracy entails no element whatsoever of exchange of views, of reflection or of deliberation – if it were simple opinion polling without a second for communication. *Quod non ergo non.*

Opinion certainly plays a part in democracy, it's what deliberation begins with, but all forms of democracy with all their communicative instruments and institutions aim only to transform opinion into something else. Democracy cannot entail the rule of opinion. Opinion either rules or not.

COMMENT<sup>o</sup>  
LARS CORNELISSEN

Surely this description holds for democracy, but does it hold for liberal democracy, too? What I am aiming at is this: the liberal side of liberal democracy seems aimed precisely at curbing the nihilistic, relativistic, or realistic tendency of this process of disenchantment by placing some metaphysical principles – individual freedom, human rights, the rule of law – beyond the pale of politics. To rephrase my point: democracy disenchanting may mean the rule of (majority) opinion, but is liberalism not meant to counter this? Further on you indeed insist that our society is somewhere in between a completely disenchanting order and an enchanted one; yet what I want to know is whether liberalism as an ideology is inherently aimed at or meant to counter processes of disenchantment.

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

Disenchantment followed to its extreme consequences indeed means that there is no place outside the interplay of forces, whatever the complexity of this interplay. In fact, the whole idea of collective responsibility rests on the assumption of a position outside the interplay of forces that could govern the whole process. The same goes for anything that should counter this interplay of forces. What is the place that could incarnate this ‘counter’, except a place that is part of the interplay of forces? Human rights for example are guaranteed only when social institutions, like law courts, function as guarantees of human rights. The rest is faith, which of course may be an actual factor in upholding this function. In fact, the question points to a difficulty in this theory on disenchantment: is this process independent of what people believe? If people believe in human rights or the rule of law, this might enhance the credibility of the embodiments of these ideas and stop the process of disenchantment to arrive at its extremes. It is even possible that people believe in liberal principles and have a disenchanting view of society, and on their own beliefs. Then they might think it a good idea to be silent about disenchantment and make only public their belief in the founding principles as founded.

many factors that make an opinion or interest of influence). As I already noted, this consequence of disenchantment is hard to grasp. At least it is at odds with the way most people think about democracy. Nevertheless, <sup>o</sup>disenchantment of power means that what is more powerful will win, and what is less powerful will lose<sup>o</sup>.

Disenchantment means that society does what it does. Society can be described in its parts, in the way these parts operate and in what functions these parts have for other parts. Society is a complex network of social systems, and of people, understood as psychic and physical systems (bodies connected to minds, people acting, people having needs, desires, and something to say). I simplify to the extreme, but the point I want to make is that disenchanting society is nothing but this network. Enchantment can only come from people observing and interpreting this network. Disenchantment means a radical separation of objective description and subjective interpretation – and, of course, this provides ground for serious doubts about the possibility of disenchantment. But, suppose we accept this picture of a disenchanting society. One could then say that liberal democracy exists in society as a whole to the extent that people themselves decide how to use this network – by (re)designing, (re)constructing and implementing social systems (entrepreneurs or politicians for example), by supporting the operations of the social systems and getting an income from this support (employees), or by buying goods and services supplied by social systems (consumers, clients and so on). Democracy exists here in as far as people ‘vote with their feet’. That is: as far as they make choices that impact society as a whole. All these decisions (how people transport themselves, what books they read, what jobs they prefer, and so on) create society again and again. So, if the total sum of all these decisions lead to welfare, public health, and artistic flowering, or to financial, ecological, or cultural crises, than that is <sup>o</sup>what the people want<sup>o</sup>. The ‘collective decision’ of the people is present in the overviews given in and by society (‘statistics’), but is no longer ‘reflective’ in the sense that the people as a whole decides about its outcome. It is only afterwards that ‘we’ see what ‘we’ have done.

This conception of democracy affects the traditional distinction between private and public matters. Above all, it affects the status and content of the *res publica*. To put it in the terms of Oakeshot: disenchanting society has become a complex of *enterprise associations*, while the role of the state as *civic association* has become problematic.<sup>23</sup> The *res publica* is reduced to the goods publicly supplied and paid for (taxes), distinguished from goods and services privately supplied and bought (an interaction between a supplier and a consumer). Because people pay taxes, they have a say in the amount, the content, and the costs of public goods and service supplied. In this sense, there is

only society, and in this society there is among other social systems a system called the 'public domain'. The distinction between private and public matters is merely in the way goods and services are exchanged. Democratic debate and decision-making are partly about the division between private and public matters: what kind of things in what quality and quantity should be distributed by the public domain?

This leaves us with the question whether this reduction of the *res publica* to a way of supplying goods and services (and redistributing income) is tenable. How can we conceptualize or justify the continuation of the fact that government has *the right to enforce* the law? How can we conceptualize or justify *collective* decision-making when it comes to public goods and services: the power of the people present in the elected parliament, government or president? Can enforcement and collective decision-making be conceptualized in an 'immanent', disenchanted, non-religious way?

## The Future of Democracy – as a Cult?

Is it arguable that all ideas of democracy that entail some form of collective decision-making are still enchanted and religious (or magical)? And is it possible that forms of collective decision-making will disappear as soon as the critique of religion and disenchantment have succeeded completely? Christian religion played an important role in early modern society as a common point of reference for discourse on society and political order: it helped to justify established political power, but also to correct, criticize, or subvert it. It provided the symbolic order that enabled all people to (dis)agree on political issues without falling apart. The different roles Christian religion could play in European societies were due to the fact that the Christian Church, and later on churches and communities of Christians, were relative, independent forces. In fact, political order took its identity from a source independent of itself. The schism in the Christian world, starting in the sixteenth century, posed serious problems for political power and citizens. Different solutions appeared. On the one extreme we find attempts to stick to one religion as a common ground for social and political order (*cujus regio ejus religio*) or, more viably, to pronounce one religion as the standard and tolerating deviances from this standard to a certain extent. On the other extreme we find attempts of marginalizing religion by making it the object of free choice (freedom of religion or even freedom from religion), and attempts to find a new identity, religiously neutral but with a substantial content, for social and political order. Nationalistic and ideologically totalitarian states in our parts of the world can be seen as authoritarian societies that have

COMMENT  
MARCEL WISSENBURG

It seems inconsistent to first imply that Liberal Democracy is a system of separate individuals and then ascribe them a general will – you do not call the results of free market processes the will of the people either (unless you do not mind category mistakes).

REPLY  
MARIN TERPSTRA

Why not? We, the people, may mean the totality of the people (collective will), but also the people as a mass of individuals who vote 'with their feet' in many different ways (the will of people). 'Give the people what they want' is the democratic principle of all mass-oriented commercial enterprises – democracy completely disenchanted.

COMMENT<sup>Q</sup>

MARCEL WISSENBURG

The word dominant may be out of place here – while certainly artificial and certainly fallible, it is not necessarily based on the 'rule of opinion' and the strength of the loudest voice.

Nothing in a de-Christianized democracy denies the possibility of (approaching) *Herrschaftfreier* consensus – in fact, as I indicated above, all democratic models, real and imagined, aim in their variously imperfect ways to transcend opinion and power. In that sense constitutions are the perfect *denial* of 'the people's dominant world view'.

COMMENT<sup>Q</sup>

MARCEL WISSENBURG

We seem to have different associations for the term republic. For me, republic is the (or rather a) denial of democracy. Where democracy is rule of 'the people' in their individual self-interest (the way the term has been understood since Plato up to this day – we have only adopted a more positive appreciation of self-interest), republic is a mixture of elements (democratic, oligarchic, sometimes others) where the opposition of self-interested groups results in a form of government that promotes the good of all.

replaced Christianity with some other worldview. This can be seen as a return to the extreme solutions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The critique of religion and disenchantment however tend to a privatization of *all* worldviews or life styles, which leads to an absence of a common ground of social and political order.

We live somewhere in between the two extremes. Reminders of religious elements still play a role in liberal democratic society. To take one important example, basic principles of society are laid down in a constitution, which plays the role the Bible or its church-authorized interpretation once occupied, but in a different mode. The source of the constitution is the people, although there are still interpretations which connect the constitution to divine or natural law or another transcendent source. A fully-disenchanted view on the constitution says it is a transitory document<sup>Q</sup> reflecting the dominant worldview of the people<sup>Q</sup>. It is not an absolute standard, but open to interpretation and change. But as long as it reflects the views of the majority of the people, it will look like an eternal or divine order.

A disenchanted view on the constitution as a basis of social and political order, in this particular case a liberal democratic order, must deal with its reduction to a social system with its own form of operation and its own function in society. The paradox is that in order to operate and function in this way, people must act and think *as if* this is not what it really is. People must believe that the constitution is not just a device enabling social and political dispute and conflict to remain within limits that can themselves not be a disputed or contested matter. In some way this device must become enchanted, it must be interpreted as if it mediates transcendent values or norms on the one hand and social and political practice on the other hand. Living after the critique of religion and after disenchantment, we could argue that religion once had an important and still valuable function because it installed hierarchy or verticality within society. Since we do not believe in the existence of a transcendent ground of our liberal-democratic social and political order, we must come to terms with the idea that the theatre of liberal democracy must itself be respected. This is what I referred to earlier as the 'Roman solution' of the problem of the religious side of political order: accepting symbolic mediation as a *cult*.

It is my view<sup>24</sup> that democracy as a political order can only survive in a<sup>Q</sup> republican<sup>Q</sup> form, which means, in the strongest sense, favored by Rousseau, that 'the people', i.e. each individual in a democratic society, has to split himself up into two 'characters', his private self (*bourgeois*) and his public self (*citoyen*). Playing the role of a citizen – the public self – means taking responsibility for the whole of society in moments of decision – as voter, as member of the parliament, as participant in

public discussion, and so on. A weaker cultic interpretation, however, is connected to representative democracy. It gives the citizen the choice between voting and being represented. According to this cultic idea of democracy, an election is a 'machine' transforming private opinions into public fact: the result of the elections is, for example, a parliament having specific competences for a set amount of time, like the formation of democratically legitimized government. In the previous section I made clear that critique of religion and disenchantment have eroded the concept of the *res publica* by emphasizing private matters. If people forget more and more about the public side of their choices, for example by changing their mind about the party they vote for and taking back their support for the government resulting from the elections (meaning not taking serious anymore the 'voice of the people' which was expressed in the elections), government will be in trouble all the time. The *demos* will be present only in its private forms, and the *kratos* of the *demos* loses its legitimacy. So, in this particular sense, democracy will only have a future if *democracy* is put on stage as a *public matter*, i.e. as cult, or what the Romans called *religio* and *pietas*.

However, the other religious root of democracy – the people, led to their salvation by a divine promise and by their spiritual leaders – is still present in continuous rebellion against existing political order, be it an authoritarian or a liberal and democratic one. This rebellion is often led by the Gnostic thought of an escape from the evil political world ('the empire' for leftist groups, or the 'cosmopolitan elite' for nationalist or populist groups). It remains a strange survival of the enchanted idea of a people escaping from their slavery, a religious tale still told in our disenchanted society. Once, the church tried to neutralize its Gnostic believers by finding a compromise between this world and the promised world in heaven, and today it is still a heavy task for democratic politicians to neutralize and integrate the continuous threat of popular imagination. The future of democracy, if religious criticism and disenchantment come to their conclusion, will no longer be based on the belief that 'the people' exist and reveals to us its will through the voices of its prophets. We can only hope for a democratic political order that is able to do justice to all its members.

## General Reply to Wissenburg

Two points I like to stress answering the many interesting objections made by Marcel Wissenburg. (1) I think it is a thought-provoking move, within the context of a political philosophy that sees itself predominantly as secular, to defend a hypothetical discourse as I did, stating, not proving, that the roots and basic ideas of liberal-democratic

### COMMENT LARS CORNELISSEN

Does democracy as a cult similarly imply an unwavering and universal attachment to democratic practices – even if one does not believe in the fundamental goals behind these practices (popular sovereignty for instance)? In other words: does it require unquestioned orthopraxy? If so, is there still room for intellectual and/or public criticism of democracy and democratic practices?

### REPLY MARIN TERPSTRA

I agree that there is at least one big problem with this concept of democracy: it presupposes the acceptance of a distinction between acting and thinking. Theories of rituals make clear that orthopractical religions make a sharp distinction between the reverence showed in the acts that constitute the ritual, and people's personal thoughts and feelings concerning these ritual. More orthodox religions, for example Christianity, instead emphasize belief, inner faith and conscience, and see rituals as expressions of this. This difference between orthopraxy and orthodoxy in religion is still present in the discussion on democracy: is it a matter of believing in its founding principles or of adhering to its rituals or procedures? The big problem then is whether it is possible for a democratic cult to survive if many people lack the proper reverence for its procedures because they stopped believing in it? I say this is *not* possible, the reason *however* being that people take their beliefs too seriously, and therefore conclude that they cannot act sincerely if they do not believe in their acts. However, disenchantment might lead to a world in which people do no longer believe in their beliefs in this way.

### COMMENT LARS CORNELISSEN

Can liberal democracy ever be fully disenchanted without ceasing to precisely be *liberal democracy*?

### COMMENT MARCEL WISSENBURG:

Sounds a bit like Maggie Thatcher's alleged (!) claim that there is no such thing as society. Just because 'the people' would cease to be a *mystical* union of individuals does not mean that it will also end being a *meaningful* union of individuals. So I would say: case not proven, defendant is free to go.

politics are not secular at all, but part of religious traditions and its residues (I do not talk about 'religion as such' or 'democracy as such'), and that these roots and ideas are in the process of deconstruction or even destruction.

I agree with Marcel Wissenburg that what I call 'religion' should be presented in a more discriminating way than I could do within the limits of my paper. I think the distinction between religion as faith, belief or confession, and religion as cult or ritual, the distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, is very important – precisely to understand the role of law in modern politics. Maybe I have not been explicit enough in articulating my position in favor of a cultic conception of democracy. Modern political philosophy has emerged partly by returning to its Roman roots against the Christian usurpation of political thought. I only need to refer to Rousseau's famous chapter on civil religion,<sup>25</sup> which is the *exemplum* of a discourse I try to develop further. In the beginning all government was theocratic, Rousseau states, and the question is on what grounds man can become free enough to govern himself.

Of course, one could start with people as secular creatures that have been misled by religious nonsense for some miserable centuries but ultimately came back to their real essence, being *homo oeconomicus*, and to find their luck finally in a liberal and democratic society. But I happen not to be a believer in this kind of story. In my view, people are *homo religiosus* or animals with too much imagination that (in the western part of the world) became believers in this-worldly happiness.

(2) Although I agree that a neutral description of the history of political order is problematic, I do not see why using the term 'disenchantment' should be so strongly defended. I have no clue why someone would be scared by the term. In my view, there is evidence enough that political speech today more often refers to this-worldly matter than to other-worldly entities (not only Gods or angels, but moral principles or visions as well). Nevertheless, this kind of speech might be misleading and may obscure a still religious-like background. I would rather say that the paradox of writing a history of religion or of political order as 'a history of disenchantment' might even be a kind of enchantment. Every history is a story, obscuring the naked truth of the course of the human form of life in this world, which remains in substance a physico-bio-sociological affair, by making it sound more 'magic' or 'wonderful'. As a matter of fact, if feminists or African Americans had only defended their case in terms of their survival against that of

their oppressors and had not referred to something more symbolic or 'magic', they would not have been so successful in the end. I am inclined to think that the way people imagine or represent the course of things makes a difference for the course of things itself. That is what my '(his)story' is about. Does it matter if people think of democracy in a more 'disenchanted' way or if they stick to more religious concepts of democracy?

- 1 Gauchet, Marcel, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard 1985).
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Marx, Karl, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung', in: *Marx/Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1976): 379: Now that religious criticism is completed, we should move on to the criticism of politics and law ("Die Kritik des Himmels verwandelt sich damit in die Kritik der Erde, die *Kritik der Religion* in die *Kritik des Rechts*, die *Kritik der Theologie* in die *Kritik der Politik*").
- 4 Debray, Régis, *Les communions humaines. Pour en finir avec «la religion»* (Paris: Fayard 2005).
- 5 Casanova, José, 'The Problem of Religion and the Anxieties of European Secular Democracy', in: G. Motzkin & Y. Fischer (eds.), *Religion and Democracy in Contemporary Europe* (London: Alliance Publishing Trust 2008): 63-74.
- 6 Buijs, Govert, 'Christianity and the Vicissitudes of European Burgher Culture: an Anamnestic Exercise', *Religion, State & Society* 41 (2013) 2: 103-132, and literature suggested there.
- 7 Schmitt, Carl, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1985 [1922]); Kantorowicz, Ernst H., *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1981).
- 8 Gauchet, Marcel, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité* (Paris: Gallimard 1998); Carl Schmitt deplors that the state is moving away from the model of the Roman Catholic Church: Schmitt, Carl, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2008 [1923]).
- 9 Lefort, Claude, 'Permanence du théologico-politique?', in: J.B. Pontalis (ed.), *Le temps de la réflexion* (Paris: Gallimard 1981); it remains a little unclear whether with the empty seat of God's power was emptied or whether the whole structure of political order changed.
- 10 Taubes, Jacob, 'On the Symbolic Order of Modern Democracy', *Confluence*, 4 (1955) 1: 57-71. Taubes's work tries to reveal the continuity of messianic, apocalyptic, and Gnostic movements in modern and contemporary emancipatory movements. See especially Taubes, Jacob, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Bern: A. Francke Verlag 1947).
- 11 Stürner, Wolfgang, *Peccatum und Potestas: der Sündenfall und die Entstehung der herrscherlicher Gewalt im mittelalterlichen Staatsdenken* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke Verlag 1987).
- 12 Fukuyama, Francis, *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2011): 245ff. Fukuyama sees the strong presence of religion in society as a main source of the 'rule of law' as essential part of political order.
- 13 Israel, Jonathan, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001).
- 14 Today, you can find a Christian justification of democracy in Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2005): 175ff.
- 15 This confrontation entered democratic thought with Rousseau's final chapter on civil religion in his *Du contrat social*; see Beiner, Ronald, *Civil Religion. A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 2011).
- 16 Scheid, John, *Religion et piété à Rome* (Paris: Albin Michel 2001).
- 17 Terpstra, Marin, *Democratie als cultus. Over politiek en religie* (Amsterdam: Boom 2011).
- 18 Luhmann, Niklas, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1984).
- 19 Weber, Max, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundrisse der verstehenden Soziologie* 5th edition (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck 1972): 28 (Kap.1, §16): "Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht."
- 20 Most of political science is based on the analysis of power defined in this sense: rational choice theory, game theory and so on. Liberal experiments can be seen as a continuation of what Michel Foucault called 'pastoral power': Foucault, Michel, 'Omnes et Singulatum: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason', in: J. R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and culture. Michel Foucault* (New York & London: Routledge 1999).
- 21 This is one way of formulating the famous notion of Claude Lefort, "le lieu vide de pouvoir" (see note 9).
- 22 Terray, Emmanuel, *La politique dans la caverne* (Paris: Seuil 1990).
- 23 See the second part of Oakeshott, Michael, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975).
- 24 Cf. Terpstra, Marin, 'Kritiek van de monotheïstische waarheidsaanspraak. Naar een "reflectieve ritualiteit"', *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 73 (2011) 1: 75-107.
- 25 Beiner, *Civil Religion*.