

# **Magna Carta and the New Jerusalem**

A lecture by

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When Lincoln's copy of Magna Carta travelled to America for display at the New York World Fair in 1939, it was greeted by one enthusiastic member of the press as 'The ever-living fountain from which flow those liberties which the English world enjoy today'. There is no doubt that Magna Carta evokes strong reactions. It has been my pleasure to be present at the launch of exhibitions featuring Lincoln Cathedral's Magna Carta in Virginia Beach and Philadelphia during the course of this year and it is quite clear to me that it is still treated with reverence and awe by many in America right across the political spectrum.

I have argued before that the seeds of freedom and democracy that were sown in England at Runnymede in 1215 were to bear fruit in the instruments of the French Revolution, the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. For many this is an extravagant claim. The historian Geoffrey Hindley agrees that the document is of great significance. However, like many historians, he recognises an important distinction between what he calls the 'myth' of Magna Carta and the historical reality. Although a document not without significance in the early thirteenth century there is no doubt that its status as an icon of freedom and democracy stems from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century dispute between the Stuart Kings and the Parliamentarians when it was effectively re-discovered by Sir Edward Coke and others and promoted as a charter guaranteeing and restoring ancient English rights. It was argued, quite erroneously, that the Great Charter dated from a supposed 'Golden Age' before the Norman conquest of 1066. Yet it was this interpretation (or myth) of Magna Carta that traveled in the hearts and minds of the first English settlers to the New World and ultimately provided a powerful impetus towards the creation of the American Declaration of Independence and, ultimately, to the American Constitution.

Today much is determined by how texts and traditions are interpreted. One of the factors that seems most to challenge our current pursuit of freedom and democracy is

that form of terrorism that is linked to fundamentalism. Much has been written about the phenomenon of fundamentalism, and in particular its association with what we call terrorism. I admit that I was disappointed when I looked up the dictionary definition and found there just two meanings. The first related to Christianity and to the view, held by a growing number of Christians today that, 'the bible is divinely inspired and is literally true'. The second related to Islam and in particular to 'a movement favouring strict observance of the teachings of the Koran and Islamic Law'. These definitions certainly describe two examples of the phenomenon, but they don't get to the heart of the issue.

I believe that fundamentalism is extremely dangerous and represents an enormous threat to freedom and democracy but not simply because it is linked in the public's mind with religious, and particularly Islamic, extremism. The term 'fundamentalism' was first coined in the early years of the twentieth century when a group of Christian theologians at Princeton University published a document called, 'The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth'. It proposed that Christianity could best respond to modernist thought by being strict, orthodox and dogmatic. For this brand of Protestant Christianity, later to be called fundamentalist, the bible was the basis of everything and each syllable of holy writ was considered to be inspired. The Bible is seen to be literally true without any form of error. Therefore, if advances in any academic discipline such as history, science, biology or geography can be seen to question the bible, they must be rigorously opposed.

The growth of Christian Fundamentalism is of course a world wide phenomenon, but gained support and social relevance in the United States in the 1950s with the growth in popularity and significance of the T.V. Evangelist. Often on the extreme right in politics, fundamentalist Christians have exerted a greater influence on the policy of the United States in recent years through their alliance with President George W Bush.

In his book, 'Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity', the Catholic theologian Leonardo Boff also identifies what he calls 'Catholic Fundamentalism'. For him it is manifest both doctrinally and ethically. Doctrinally it is well represented by the document 'Dominus Jesus' (2000) signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. This proclaimed that the Catholic Church is the only church of Christ and the only true religion, reaffirming the mediaeval thesis that the Roman Catholic Church is the sole holder of the intentions of God. It is a fundamentalism that supports the patriarchal

centralization of spiritual power and has recently been invoked again by the Pope in recent ecumenical dialogue.

Boff also accuses the Roman Catholic Church of a moral fundamentalism in their attitude towards contraception, artificial insemination, homosexuality and remarriage after divorce. The Vatican's failure to sign up to the United Nation's Bill of Rights in 1948, their suspension of funds to UNESCO because of their recommendation that women refugees should use condoms and their ban on the use of condoms to control the spread of aids across Africa is for him symptomatic of this.

Boff is surely right in arguing that fundamentalism is not a doctrine, but a way of interpreting sacred texts and living out systems of belief. Critically, it denies that sacred texts and beliefs are part of a continuous and changing historical process requiring continuous reinterpretation. He comments rather tartly that, 'Fundamentalism represents the attitude held by one who confers an absolute status on their own point of view' (2006: 15). This attitude breeds intolerance of the other and a contempt that engenders aggression.

Although the word 'fundamentalism' has grown from an attitude within Christianity it is clearly a phenomenon that can develop within any faith community or area of academic study. It has been applied to those groups in Islam who teach a strict, orthodox and dogmatic application of the teaching of the Koran, and to those who favour the creation of a theocratic state that imposes a rigid regime of Islamic law on all its population. However, Boff is surely right in asserting that, 'all systems, whether cultural, scientific, political or even artistic, which present themselves as exclusive holders of truth and the sole solution to all problems, should be considered fundamentalist' (2006: 27).

It is also clear that various forms of secular fundamentalism are becoming more prevalent today. In epistemological terms, this largely mirrors the phenomenon in its religious counterpart although much of the rhetoric is increasingly anti-religious. It is therefore not beyond re-affirming the somewhat discredited doctrine of human progress to argue that the world needs to free itself from the banal superstition of religion, which is little more than the fossilized remains of a myth ridden past which lacks the capacity for reason.

In truth, all forms of fundamentalism, whether religious, scientific or political will promote closed systems that centralize power and are blind to the rationale of inclusiveness. And that is why I will turn briefly now to the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Habermas. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has pointed to the important ways in which the values and biases of the individual and the traditions from which they come influence our understandings and interpretations of reality. For Gadamer, understanding is to be conceived linguistically as 'dialogue' and 'conversation'. Texts that confront us must be understood in relation to the prejudices and commitments that emerge from the tradition in which we are set. Hermeneutics therefore utilises the biases and values of the individual and tradition in the creative conversation of meaning making.

Habermas owes much to Gadamer but emerges from the broadly Marxist tradition of critical theory that inspired the original Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. For Habermas, critical social science must be orientated towards emancipation and move beyond critique to critical praxis, from enlightenment to social action. He therefore grounds the norms of his critical social science in his theory of Communicative Action (Habermas 1981). This develops an ethical theory of self realisation in which consensual decision making and participatory democracy are key elements. We will return to this.

I have elsewhere developed an interpretive model that supports the discipline of practical theology that builds on the insights of Gadamer and Habermas and provides a way of engaging with Christian texts and traditions. At its heart is a process of creative dialogue between a complex (I like the word 'thick') reading of a text or tradition (usually in theology Holy Scripture) and a 'thick' or complex reading of our current context. This dialogue creates the possibility for transformatory action. It has six key characteristics. The model is *contextual* because it works with people's lived experience. It is *collaborative* because it works with people and not for them. It is *critical* because it calls upon insights from historical, literary and radical models of textual interpretation that are utilised by the academic community. It is *reflective* because it works to identify value positions and prejudices within the individual and their tradition of faith or learning. It is *transformational* because it promotes emancipatory action and at its heart is *creative dialogue* which can operate within or between traditions of faith or learning.

The values that support such a model are represented in a slightly surprising incident in the life of St Francis. It is a little known fact that St Francis of Assisi encountered Islam at the time of the Crusades and has left us with an approach to interfaith dialogue which is intriguing. In 1216 St Francis went to see Pope Innocent III to try and convince him not to launch a crusade against the Muslims. As his request was not granted he set out for Damietta in Northern Egypt where crusaders were fighting the Muslims and there he preached peace and dialogue. He was ridiculed and driven out and so he decided to go and meet the Muslims personally. He was arrested, tortured and taken to meet Sultan Melek el Kamel and formed a strong friendship with him. They prayed and talked together and as a result of this the Franciscans were allowed to settle in the Holy Places of Palestine. In Chapter 16 of his Earlier Rule, *Regula Non Bullata*, a rule not accepted by the Pope, Francis prescribed that the friars must 'join' the Muslims and to live with them the Gospel of Universal Fraternity. The friars should act as 'minors' and should avoid theological arguments and quarrels. Only after this, which might take generations, should the friars preach the Christian Gospel, and then only 'if it pleases God'.

This is a dialogue based on respect which engenders trust and leads to peaceful co-existence. Those engaged place themselves in a servile position and seek to understand before being understood. But this extraordinary incident helps to formulate a series of value positions that underpin a method of interpretative dialogue that seeks an alternative to all forms of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism breeds centralized forms of authority and systems of thought that are closed and exclusive. They lead to an intolerance that breeds contempt for the other and therefore, at its worse, engenders aggressions. In contrast, the form of interfaith dialogue represented by St Francis and by the liberal hermeneutics in the Gadamerian tradition represents a form of engagement that is inclusive, collaborative, gives value to the other and leads to peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding.

I have elsewhere coined the phrase 'walking with Magna Carta' for a process by which the thirteenth century document can be allowed to stimulate debate on issues of freedom and democracy in our modern world. In this context, the original text of Magna Carta, the events of Runnymede that surrounded its creation, and the ways that it has been interpreted through the years, must all be taken into account as we create a dialogue with the complex social, political and religious contexts in which we live our

lives today. As a Christian theologian I am also committed to creating a dialogue between these issues and the sacred texts and traditions of the Christian faith. Within the tradition exemplified by St Francis, such a process can then play a part in that broader process of dialogue with other religious and secular beliefs systems. In particular I want to spend a few moments reflecting on three important issues that I think Magna Carta raises for us today; Kingship or governmental authority and with it the use and abuse of power, the nature of citizenship, and the future of democracy in the twenty first century.

One of the key contexts that gave birth to Magna Carta was a debate about the nature of Kingship and the way in which the power associated with the authority of Kingship was exercised. Since coming to power the Angevin Kings had tried to enhance the status of their Kingship. They spent large sums of money on crowns, robes and great ceremonial feasts and promoted the rights and dignity of the crown. They used custom to support their Kingship and appealed to the adage supported, in their view, by Roman law, that 'The will of the Prince has the force of law'. They created a centralised system of government of enormous power and sophistication and to a large extent Kingship continued to define national identity.

However, their position was never secure from criticism and the idea persisted that the royal office was elective and depended on the goodwill of the magnates of the Kingdom. Schoolmen of the Twelfth Century had put forward the opinion that the King should govern lawfully and with the advice and consent of his great men. John of Salisbury's 'Policraticus' examined the distinction derived from Gregory the Great and St Augustus between the just prince and the tyrant. The just prince governs according to the law for the good of his people, the tyrant tramples on the law, oppresses his people and consults only his private will. Archbishop Langdon criticized the avarice of 'modern kings' in his Parish lectures and the Chronicle of Roger of Wendover records (though historians doubt its authenticity) that the Archbishop met with the Barons in 1213, read them the Charter issued by Henry I and suggested that a similar charter may be a way for them to recover their long lost liberties.

The historian David Carpenter notes that, as central government grew under the Angevin Kings, it was matched by 'an equally remarkable and unique critique of that

government from below'. (Carpenter 2003: 10) This came to a head in 1215 when the Barons confronted King John at Runnymede and forced him to put his seal upon a Great Charter. According to Carpenter, 'The restrictions placed by Magna Carta on the workings of Kingship were unprecedented and profound. In sixty two interlocking chapters, the Great Charter sought to limit the King's money making operations, make his justice more equitable, reform the abuse of his local agents and prevent him acting in an arbitrary fashion against individuals'. ((2003: 289)

Had King John not died of dysentery shortly after putting his seal to Magna Carta the future of the charter would have been in doubt. In the event, it was reissued three times in various forms in the reign of Henry III before being confirmed by Edward I in 1297. Although key elements of the Great Charter had found their way into English law, the issues that gave it birth would continue to resurface in the reign of the Tudors and Stuarts where, as Hindley notes, ((1990: 185) Magna Carta would provide 'a potent weapon against the myth of the Divine Right of Kings'.

The first chapter of Magna Carta proclaims the English Church free, and by that it effectively means that it should be free from the direct control of King John. In Western Christianity the struggle for political and spiritual dominance between monarch and Pope was a constant feature of the mediaeval period and the Reformation brought additional cause for conflict and bloody struggle. However, behind the warring ideologies and practices lay ideas of kingship and authority that are foundational for Christian life and experience. They informed the debates at the time and still continue to do so today.

It is clear that the life, teaching and death of Jesus of Nazareth is set in a broadly political context and this is acknowledged by Alan Storkey in his recent book, 'Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers'. Constructed within the social, religious and political contexts of first century Palestine, the teachings and actions of Jesus reveal principles that inform the political context while shaping the broader patterns of life. His recorded teachings therefore weave together the personal and the political in a holistic way.

Storkey would argue that the Christian scriptures speak into the issues raised by Magna Carta about the nature of governmental authority and the use and abuse of power in two key ways. The first is a fundamental belief, shared with Judaism and with Islam that all

human society is ultimately under the sovereignty of God. It is foundational to Jewish and Christian tradition that God's gentle rule informs all earthly forms of government and is characterized by a generous care for all, a commitment to those who are overlooked, outcaste, excluded and powerless; a demand for justice for the poor, the widow and the foreigner; and a dynamic, pro-active commitment to peace and reconciliation within and between individuals, communities and nations. Within this dynamic, political rulers become office holders or stewards with required standards of service and patterns of accountability. Leadership is never self referential on this model, nor is the accountability of government officials only to the state or to the people.

The second is that Jesus modeled a style of servant leadership that confronted the abuse of power by embracing powerlessness and expressing self sacrificial love. In so doing he challenged the powerful to discard and deconstruct their systems of control so that the powerless could become free. In the Kingdom of God, people are not required to serve rulers but rulers are required to serve people.

These principles clearly have implications for Christian communities today that are living in an increasingly secular or post Christian society where religion is removed from the public domain and treated as a private lifestyle choice. Those who belong to one of the great world religions that claim Abraham for their Father; Judaism, Christianity or Islam and who therefore believe in the ultimately sovereignty of God over all human society will refuse to accept that politics is the sole domain of the secular politician. Ways in which organised religion has interacted with government in the past and does so in the present is complex and differs markedly within diverse cultures and political systems. However, an ongoing inclusive debate will be necessary to bring the best aspirations and insights to bear from a number of different religious and secular traditions on the way in which our increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-faith global society will develop.

In this process, much will depend on how people understand citizenship. We find ourselves living in a postmodern society that is characterized by a process of accelerating change, especially in the world of technology and communication; by world wide urbanisation fuelled by the unsustainability of much rural life and the rise of the hyper city; and of course globalisation. In his book, 'Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism', Eric Hobsbawm makes three observations on the effects of what he calls



Free Market Globalisation. He defines this as a market sovereignty fuelled by transnational private firms living outside the range of state law and taxes. He argues that this system has brought about a dramatic growth in economic and social inequalities both within states and internationally and that this is the root cause of many of the major social and political tensions that exist at the present time. He also observes that its effects are felt most by those who benefit from it least. Entrepreneurs who outsource costs to countries where there is cheap labour, and high tech professionals are among the winners. Under pressure are the ordinary wage earners in the old world and vulnerable people in the third world. He also notes that the cultural and global impact of Free-market Globalisation is disproportionately large.

In this global context the nature of citizenship has changed. Over the last century there has been a transformation in the situation of women and the general status of the world's population has changed from that of subjects to that of citizens. Increased travel and mass migration has begun to change the traditional rights and obligation of citizenship. The natural obedience of people, even in the face of overwhelming military superiority, can no longer be assured by governments and the disaffected now have easy access to sophisticated and powerful weapons. The new economic order is putting the independent territorial state under pressure as states lose their autonomy as they become enmeshed in the networks of global society. Further, the breakdown of the post war balance of power represented by America and the Soviet Union has left the world, in Hobsbawm's (2007: 75) view, with a 'deeply unstable form of global disorder internationally and within states'. And in this new context there has been a globalisation of the enemy. The United States have pledged to fight terrorism in every part of the world. Nations are forced to choose whether they are with America or against her. The slogans 'The War against Terror' and the 'Axis of Evil' court the public to support the growth in agencies undertaking intelligence gathering, surveillance and detention.

Religion is clearly at the heart of most of the international disputes at this time. It has played a key role in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Kashmir, Afghanistan (the word Taliban means a theological student) and now in Iraq. In a growing secular environment it is easy to consider that religion is the problem rather than part of the solution. Samuel Huntington, in his book, 'If Not Civilizations, What?', (Huntington: 40) notes that, 'In the modern world, religion is central, perhaps the central force that

mobilizes and motivates people...What ultimately counts for people is not political ideology or economic interest. Faith and family, blood and belief are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for'. This notion that religious affiliation tied into ethnic origin and cultural experience is the most powerful form of self identity must be taken seriously. Indeed, at a time when nation states are under pressure, religious affiliation is likely to be a key factor in the way societies develop. Hence the theologian Hans Kung notes that, 'There will be no political peace if there is no religious peace at the same time'.

And this feeds into how we might understand the development of democracy as the twenty first century develops. At the beginning of this century I think it would be fair to say that democracy is the sole surviving source of political legitimacy and for that reason almost all regimes pay official tribute to the concept. Although the Magna Carta of 1215 guaranteed rights to a relatively small percentage of the population, it was used as a powerful tool in the fight for parliamentary democracy in England and was influential in the development of the American Constitution, being present, as it were, at the birth of two great democratic systems.

Hobsbawm defines what he considers to be the current understanding of a democracy (2007:76) as, 'a constitutional state offering to guarantee the rule of law and various civil and political rights and freedoms, and governed by authorities which must include representative assemblies elected by universal suffrage and numerical majorities of all citizens, in elections held at regular intervals between competing candidates and/or organisations'. However, Jeffrey Stout is surely right in making the point that, in our modern world, the word 'democracy' also refers to the spirit that both animates those institutions when they are functioning properly and is used to resist them when they are not.

And democracy is under pressure. It is true that militant Islamic theocrats pose an external threat. However the internal threats facing the democratic ideal are probably more significant. The fact that economic power is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and that this power is convertible into unconstrained political power is potentially destructive to the democratic process. Support for formal elections is falling in the West and control is exercised increasingly, at least between elections, through the power of

the press and forms of direct action. Further, in an increasingly globalised, transnational world, governments find it difficult to control the market forces which affect their people's lives. Citizens choose to participate in the market place rather than in politics with the result that the national citizen becomes the global consumer. And yet we are engaged in a process of spreading democracy. The rhetoric from the United States suggests that democracy is applicable in a standardized western form, that it can succeed anywhere, can bring peace to troubled regions, and can be imposed by military might.

In his book, 'The Divided West', Jurgen Habermas is particularly hard on what he calls American hegemony that represents (2006: 10) 'a mindset that stubbornly insists on the political imposition of its own convictions and reasons'. He argues that President Bush's neoconservative administration has abandoned America's post war role as guarantor of international rights and its support of the United Nations to adopt a position that promotes the idea that wars that make the world better need no additional justification.

In Habermas's communicative conception of reason, the validity of moral and political norms is tied to political procedures of communication and dialogue that demand openness to the viewpoints and experiences of others and a willingness to reach agreement with them on the shared interpretation of principles to regulate social interaction. For Habermas all constitutions must be seen as ongoing projects open to change and sovereignty must be viewed in procedural rather than substantive terms. For Habermas, this is key to the ongoing development of the democratic ideal and feeds into his vision that the United Nations could form the basis of a transnational Cosmopolitan Constitution (a procedural world government) that would have the status of international law. It would be a body that could mediate between nations and peoples and therefore support and promote the ongoing development of universal human rights.

The title of this essay is 'Magna Carta and the New Jerusalem and I am going to turn now to a consideration of how a Christian vision of the 'New Jerusalem' could contribute to the vision that Habermas expounds. Perhaps bravely, I am going to begin by evoking a Christian vision gleaned from the book of Revelation. I say bravely because this is a book that struggled to achieve and maintain its canonical status. It has been much beloved of millenarian groups and utopian movements throughout the ages and by those who believe that the book can be used to identify contemporary events and fashion

predictions about the immediate future. In this context, Hal Lindsey's book, 'The Late Great Planet Earth' which sold seven million copies in the 1970s helped to popularize and legitimize the use of Revelation by reactionary political groups in America like the 'Moral Majority' and the 'New Christian Right' in the 1980s. John F Walvoord's book, 'Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says about the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilization' was written in the 1970s and re-issued in the 1990s. Its strategy is to reassure the American public that Christians who believe in the bible possess ultimate truth and are divinely protected in a world full of danger. Although atomic annihilation is predicted by Revelation, the faithful elect will survive. Before the first Gulf War, even liberal congressmen alluded to Revelation when arguing that Saddam Hussein was the embodiment of evil. Indeed the 'Evil Beast' in revelation has been variously identified in recent times in a variety of publications as the Pope (keeping alive an older tradition) Ayatollah Khomeini, Sadam Hussein and, of course, Osama Bin Laden.

And yet this is the same book that inspired Martin Luther King in his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' to examine the ethics of Christian commitment and to evoke the judgement of God upon the de-humanising power of White America. Indeed his allusions to the New Jerusalem echo his most famous speech which begins of course, 'I have a dream'.

In fact, the issue is, as before, a matter of how the text is interpreted and how it is allowed to speak into the present. Many mainstream academics would acknowledge the difficulty engendered by the militaristic and androcentric nature of the images in Revelation but would also recognise the importance of its critique of corrupt empire. Rather than providing a timetable for Armageddon, the Book of Revelation provides a vision of the New Jerusalem that evokes a range of rich meanings. It is a vision of the natural world in its ideal state yet it is a city, fulfilling humanity's dream to build out of nature a place of human culture and community. It is a city where citizens have the power of self determination, where life is sacred and where rulers do not dominate. Earth and heaven, culture and nature, the sacred and the profane, Babylon and Jerusalem are all integrated in this city which is free of pain, sorrow and death. The feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1993: 114) notes, 'Revelation's final

vision imagines heaven as world, world as city and the New City, as an open inclusive place of citizenship and wellbeing for all’.

The theologian Barry Harvey has argued that the role of the Church in a post-Christian postmodern age is to be ‘Another City’. He depicts the Church as an alternative community ready to challenge prevailing assumptions about current ways of life and belief. If such a community avows the principles of the New Jerusalem it would seek to encourage those like Jurgen Habermas who are looking to build an evolving system of international law promoting self determination and human rights through open dialogue and shared meaning making. In doing so we may walk with Magna Carta, that ancient Charter that is midwife to modern democracy, and we might take St Francis as our guide, listening, serving the other, and spreading a twenty first century version of the gospel of ‘Universal Fraternity’.