

Protestantism as Conducive and Syncretism as a Hindrance to South Africa's Democratic Development

Nicola de Jager

Abstract

Previous research has examined the link between political culture, as a manifestation of Protestantism, and democratic development. Arguments include that Protestantism generates a political culture that values individualism, liberty, egalitarianism, tolerance, pluralism, and civic association. These values, in turn, are conducive to the development of a liberal democracy. However, much of this research has been conducted in countries associated with the first wave of democratization. The question remains whether there is a relationship between Protestantism and democratic development in transitional states, as found, for example, in southern Africa. This essay seeks to investigate this influence by comparing South Africa with sub-Saharan Africa. The essay addresses three questions: Is there a positive association between Protestantism and democratic development? If so, what has its influence been in South Africa, which has a predominantly Protestant population? In the light of South Africa's limited democratic development, what have the hindrances been? It is argued that syncretism is a possible hindrance to democratic development in South Africa. Survey data from the Pew Forum are used to understand South Africa's political culture in comparison to that of sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Democratic development, political culture, Protestantism, South Africa.

Nicola de Jager is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Southern Africa Head in the Transformation Research Unit (TRU): Democracy Globally, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa. <ndejager@sun.ac.za>

A version of this essay was presented at the International Political Science Association (IPSA) 2016 World Congress in Poznan, Poland. This work is based on research supported, in part, by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. Any opinion, finding, conclusion, or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the author, and the NRF does not accept any liability in this regard.

In South Africa, religion matters—a lot. Eighty-one percent of South Africans self-identify as Christian, 73 percent identify as Protestant,¹ and 86 percent state that “God is important in their lives.”² Religion, as a carrier of beliefs and values, informs culture, which in turn influences democratic development. It is recognized that “religion makes a difference,” “beliefs and values shape motives,” and motives produce particular actions.³ Where religion has made a contribution to democratization it has been largely in its Christian form.⁴ But we can go further and recognize that, in the development of Western democracy, it was a specific form of Christianity that contributed to the West’s democratic development, namely, Protestantism.⁵ This highlights the importance of understanding the influence of this social dynamic on South Africa’s democratic development. This essay is divided into two sections. The first section reviews the literature on the relationship between Protestantism and democratic development, and the second is an investigation of the South African case. The question guiding the research is: If Protestantism, in general, has been positively associated with democratic development, what has its influence been on South Africa’s democratic development?

Culture refers to the “inner values and attitudes that guide a population.”⁶ Protestantism, as a carrier of such values, is understood to be reformed Christianity, comprised of adherents of those Christian bodies that separated from the Church of Rome (Catholic Church) during the sixteenth-century Reformation and groups descended from them. Democratic development is recognized as the socio-economic and political conditions conducive to the establishment of a liberal democracy, for example, mass literacy, an independent media, economic development, and the growth of an independent and vibrant civil society. Liberal democracy is understood as a form of government that allows for genuine participation, competition, rule of law, and the recognition of individual and minority rights.⁷ *Democracy* means that political parties access power through multiparty elections, while *liberal* denotes restraint of

¹ Pew Forum, “Christian Population as Percentages of Total Population by Country” (2011), <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian-population-as-percentages-of-total-population-by-country/> (accessed May 11, 2016).

² World Values Survey, “WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014): South Africa” (2013), <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp> (accessed May 11, 2016).

³ Steve Bruce, “Did Protestantism Create Democracy?” *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 3-20.

⁴ John Anderson, “Introduction: Religion, Democracy and Democratization,” *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 1-2.

⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Civilisation: The Six Killer Apps of Western Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 264.

⁶ David Landes, “Culture Makes Almost All the Difference,” in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, ed. Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 2.

⁷ Anderson, “Introduction: Religion, Democracy and Democratization,” 2.

that power for the benefit of civil and political liberties. *Democracy* is thus understood within the tradition of Robert A. Dahl,⁸ Samuel P. Huntington,⁹ and Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell¹⁰ in reference to how political power is accessed, namely, through selecting governments on the basis of regular, competitive elections and political equality. Fareed Zakaria recognizes the *liberal* dimension (also referenced as constitutional liberalism) as emphasizing the protection of individual liberty.¹¹ The term is derived from the philosophy of liberalism, which regards “limitation of arbitrary government by institutional controls ... and guaranteed specified rights of the individual against encroachment by government” as cardinal values.¹²

A liberal democracy has both intrinsic social and political ideas.¹³ The primary social ideas of democracy are equality and freedom, pluralism, and tolerance. Huntington highlights that “liberty is ... the peculiar virtue of democracy.”¹⁴ Ideally, a democracy, therefore, should confirm the individuality and equality of persons and their intrinsic freedoms of life, belief, and expression. It affirms the diversity of persons and values, and protects the freedoms of family, church, school, and civil associations. The fundamental political idea of democracy, then, is a limited and self-limiting government to ensure that the above-mentioned liberties are protected and not violated. The jurisdiction of political office is thus to be defined within a constitution or customary law. In turn, these social and political values historically have drawn to themselves a variety of institutions—a constitution, a bill of rights protecting civil and political liberties, rule of law, commitment to majority rule with minority protection and representation, regular, contested political elections, institutional separation between church and state, and a preference for market economies.¹⁵

Protestantism and Democratic Development in the Literature

We were asked to look into what accounted for the ... pre-eminence of the West over the world At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than

⁸ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 4-9.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (1984): 195.

¹⁰ Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell, “What Is Quality of Government? A Theory of Impartial Government Institutions,” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions* 21, no. 2 (2008): 169-170.

¹¹ Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 24-25.

¹² Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government III: Empires, Monarchies and the Modern State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1574.

¹³ John Witte Jr., “Christianity and Democracy: Past Contributions and Future Challenges,” *Emory International Law Review* 6, no. 1 (1992): 55.

¹⁴ Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” 194.

¹⁵ Witte, “Christianity and Democracy,” 55.

we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realised that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.

—Anonymous Fellow of the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences¹⁶

The literature shows a positive relationship between Protestantism and democratic development in both the West¹⁷ and in the developing world.¹⁸ Despite this positive association, one to which Robert Woodberry¹⁹ refers as probabilistic rather than deterministic, three caveats are highlighted: Protestantism's positive influence on democratic development has been imperfect, over time, and unintentional.

The Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) may have started as a religious movement, but it came to have significant, far-reaching political consequences. The catalyst of the Reformation, Martin Luther, taught there was no hierarchy before God. Instead, Protestants emphasized the need for individual engagement with Scripture, which eventually would lead to the broader recognition that the individual had both intrinsic value and personal responsibility. Although by no means a liberal himself, it is no accident that Luther's Protestant culture would give birth to liberal political philosophy.²⁰ This philosophy was certainly born out of a concern for not only the abuses of ecclesiastical hierarchy but for governing hierarchies, too. In 1523, Martin Luther wrote “worldly government has laws which extend no farther than to life and property and what is external upon earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but Himself.”²¹

A century after the start of the Reformation, religious civil wars would take place, decimating the populations of many European nations. The Reformation's immediate effect was thus not freedom, but the increased limitation of it. In 1200, one could count on not being persecuted so long as

¹⁶ Quoted in Ferguson, *Civilisation*, 287.

¹⁷ Bruce, “Did Protestantism Create Democracy?”; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vols. I and II (New York: Bantam Books, 2000, first published 1835); Ferguson, *Civilisation*; Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?”; and Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2005, first published 1930).

¹⁸ Kenneth Bollen and Robert Jackman, “Economic and Non-economic Determinants of Political Democracy in the 1960s,” *Research in Political Sociology* 1 (1985): 27-48; Rollin F. Tusalem, “The Role of Protestantism in Democratic Consolidation among Transitional States,” *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 7 (2009): 882-915; and Robert D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 244-274.

¹⁹ Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy.”

²⁰ David Schmidt and Jason Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

he or she followed Catholic orthodoxy. However, by 1550, one was at risk of persecution regardless of what he or she professed.²² Even so, the desire to ameliorate these conflicts eventually led to the recognition of religious liberty and a neutral state as arbiter and protector of religious freedom. The result of more than a century of bloody religious wars was an utterly transformed Western world, with the Protestant nations often forging ahead in the creation of new social, cultural, and political forms. Paramount among the Reformation's long-term results is that, "in the twenty-first-century western world, one is at little risk of persecution regardless of what one believes."²³ And this religious freedom forms the bedrock of broader civil and political liberties.

Protestantism and Democratic Development in the West

Steve Bruce notes that "Protestant nations were generally in the vanguard of the rise of parliamentary democracy."²⁴ A correlation has been noted between Protestantism and democracy, where virtually all countries with a European population and a Protestant majority have democratic governments.²⁵ Bruce goes on to identify four key Christian traditions in Europe, each having a specific political outcome:²⁶ the two communal religions of Orthodoxy and Catholicism; the individualist religion of Reformed Protestantism; and in between, Lutheranism, which advocated most of the theological principles of the Reformation but limited them within the ecclesiastical frame of the pre-Reformation church and a quiescent approach to the state. Most of the countries of twentieth-century Europe experienced a dictatorship of either the right or left. In Europe, almost all the fascist regimes were Catholic: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Croatia, Austria, and Lithuania, and Germany was two-thirds Catholic. The communist regimes were mostly Orthodox, Catholic, or Lutheran. Bruce thus asks what religion was dominant in those societies that avoided dictatorship. Holland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the United States were predominantly Reformed Protestant, and Sweden and Finland were Lutheran.

Reformism associated with early Protestantism, according to Bruce, led to an emphasis on egalitarianism, formation of civil society, social inclusion, mass literacy, and, subsequently, economic development. Due to its individualistic nature, factions and schisms arose within Protestantism, leading to various sects. Over time, these sects realized that their own liberty to practice their beliefs depended on allowing others to differ, which eventually led to religious liberty, tolerance, and pluralism. Although Protestantism encouraged each

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 100.

²⁴ Bruce, "Did Protestantism Create Democracy?" 5.

²⁵ Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" 207.

²⁶ Bruce, "Did Protestantism Create Democracy?" 1-15.

individual to be responsible for his or her own religious growth, it also promoted an obligation to support each other. It thus pioneered a particularly effective combination of individualism and community spirit, which would lead to the creation of civil society and social inclusion. There is also little doubt that Protestantism encouraged literacy. Since each person was individually responsible for his or her own salvation, and this depended more on correct belief than on rituals, it meant that people had to be able to read the Bible for themselves. And, in encouraging literacy, Protestantism inadvertently spurred economic development. Ernest Gellner²⁷ argues that a literate culture is a prerequisite for economic modernization. To effectively move out of a feudally organized society required effective communication. “What distinguished the Protestant interest was its intensity (it was very important for people to learn to read) and its democratic reach (it was very important for all people to learn to read).”²⁸

Through a historical approach, in his book *Civilisation*, Niall Ferguson seeks to understand why and how, beginning around 1500, a few small polities in Western Europe would eventually come to dominate the rest of the world.²⁹ He recognizes “six apps” that explain Western dominance, the last being of relevance to this research: competition, science, property rights, medicine, a consumer society, and the Protestant work ethic. Ferguson notes that peculiar to Protestantism was its ethic of hard work and thrift.³⁰ This is not a new thought. Max Weber, the father of sociology, was one of the first to note this relationship between Protestantism and economic development in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. His thesis was that Protestantism, especially its Calvinist form, led to the rise of modern capitalism. Weber argued that Protestantism did this by defining and endorsing an ethic of everyday behavior conducive to economic success: to save, to work hard, and to be honest.³¹ The driving force behind economic growth was thus not the attainment of riches, but a way of living and working which inevitably produced riches.

Following the Reformation, which led many northern European states to break away from the Roman Catholic Church, there was an evident shift in economic power away from Catholic countries such as Austria, France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, toward Protestant countries such as England, Holland, Prussia, Saxony, and Scotland. As Ferguson identifies, “until the Reformation, Christian religious devotion had been seen as something distinct from the material affairs of the world,” but beginning in the sixteenth century, its values would come to have significant social, political, and economic effects.³²

²⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965).

²⁸ Bruce, “Did Protestantism Create Democracy?” 16.

²⁹ Ferguson, *Civilisation*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

³¹ Landes, “Culture Makes Almost All the Difference,” 11.

³² Ferguson, *Civilisation*, 260.

Unlike other religions associated with holiness, which renounced worldly things, Protestantism upheld industry and thrift as expressions of a new kind of hardworking godliness. Religious belief (as opposed to formal observation) appeared to be associated with economic growth, in particular where concepts of heaven and hell provided incentives for good behavior in this world. It tended to translate into hard work, mutual trust, thrift, honesty, and openness to strangers—all economically beneficial traits. Ferguson emphasizes that “economic viability require[d] a serious moral ethos ... more than just hedonistic consumerism and dishonest strategy.”³³ After the Reformation, Protestant countries in Europe grew faster than Catholic ones, so that by 1700 the former had overtaken the latter in per capita income, and by 1940, “people in Catholic countries were on average 40 per cent worse off than people in Protestant countries.”³⁴ Again, because of the central importance in Luther’s emphasis on individual reading of the Bible, Protestantism encouraged literacy as well as printing. And, these two factors, together with a moral ethos of hard work, encouraged economic development and scientific study.³⁵

In the West, Protestantism was therefore a key instigator of conditions conducive to democratic development, namely, mass literacy, printing, economic development, and the growth of civil society. Empirical research confirms that the countries of the West with predominantly Protestant populations largely avoided dictatorships, encouraged parliamentary democracies, and were economically more successful than their non-Protestant contemporaries.

Protestantism and Democratic Development in the Developing World

It has been forgotten that African and Asian Christianity is ancient, with Christians predominating in North Africa, and with many of the Christian Fathers—Tertullian, Cyprian, Cyril of Alexandria, Athanasius, and Augustine—being North African.³⁶ Violence, conversion, and emigration would come to wipe out most African and Asian Christianity. Thus, Christianity often has been perceived on these continents as a European religion, which was introduced to the developing world through colonization. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christianity again has become an increasingly non-Western religion, having grown in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, in particular, in its Pentecostal form.

Kenneth Bollen and Robert Jackman were among the first to conduct an empirical assessment of noneconomic determinants of democracy. While

³³ Ibid., 287.

³⁴ Ibid., 263.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Robert D. Woodberry, “Conclusion: World Christianity, Its History, Spread and Social Influence,” in *Introducing World Christianity*, ed. Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 259-260.

recognizing that economic development remained a significant determinant of democracy, they found that Protestantism and British colonial experience had substantial positive effects on political democracy.³⁷ Their research showed that, in the 1960s, the percentage of the population that was Protestant had a significant and positive effect on higher levels of political democracy among postcolonial states.

Similarly, in his research concerning missionaries, Woodberry³⁸ concluded that there is a relationship between Conversionary Protestants (CPs) and intermediate mechanisms associated with democracy, namely, mass education, mass printing, the development of civil society, and colonial reform. A key finding of his is that “cross-national statistical literature consistently finds a positive association between the percent of Protestants in a society and both the level of democracy and the stability of democratic transitions.”³⁹ The relationship between missions and colonialism was complex, meaning “easy generalisations about missions as the handmaiden of colonialism cannot be sustained.”⁴⁰ Where the state financed and chose missionaries (in particular, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies) missionaries tended to function like government officials and seldom challenged the colonizers. However, where the state did not finance or choose missionaries (for example, in British and American colonies) the missionaries were more likely to critique both the colonial state and the white settlers. These missionaries mobilized campaigns against slavery and forced labor and promoted indigenous land rights (for example, in Bechuanaland, today’s Botswana) and punishment of those who abused indigenous people.

Wherever Protestant missionaries went, similar to the pattern in the West, they stimulated mass education and literacy, with measurable long-term benefits to the societies they sought to educate. The Protestant missionaries believed people needed to be able to read the Bible, read it for themselves, and read it in their own language. This does not mean that there were not native elites who already had a good education, but they tended not to transfer their skills of knowledge to others. Instead, the Protestants developed techniques for mass classroom education, produced textbooks, and trained teachers. According to Woodberry, “societies, regions, and ethnic groups with more exposure to Protestant missionaries still have higher educational enrolments and literacy rates.”⁴¹ Protestant missionaries were responsible for school enrollments in British colonies being four to five times higher

³⁷ Bollen and Jackman, “Economic and Non-economic Determinants of Political Democracy in the 1960s,” 27-48.

³⁸ Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” 260-264.

³⁹ Woodberry, “Conclusion: World Christianity,” 264.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 260-261.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴² Ferguson, *Civilisation*, 263-264.

than in other countries' colonies. For example, in 1941, over 55 percent of the people in what is now Kerala were literate, a higher proportion than in any other region of India.⁴² In addition, Protestantism generally tends to have a positive association with longer life expectancies, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, more voluntarism, and greater education than experienced by areas absent their presence, although such relationships are complex.⁴³

Also, drawing from cultural theories, Rollin Tusalem empirically tested the question whether transitional states with large Protestant populations were more likely to strengthen their democracies than other states.⁴⁴ Looking at more than sixty transitional states that attempted to or did democratize since the third wave of democratization, his findings confirm that transitional states with larger Protestant populations have been more likely than others to enjoy higher levels of voice and accountability, political stability, citizenship empowerment, and pluralism in civil society. His research concluded that Protestantism is correlated to strengthening democratic politics—particularly, preservation of basic freedoms, a guarantee of political stability, civil society that supports the growth of pluralistic society, and a check on authoritarian forces in a government.

It should be noted that the Catholic Church, too, has become an important factor in many post-1989 democratic transitions. Historically, Catholicism was not positively associated with democratic development, possibly due to the “legacy of the close connection between Church and state in most Catholic societies prior to 1965”⁴⁵ and its communal, rather than individual, orientation. However, Catholicism transformed significantly during the twentieth century, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), during which the Catholic Church officially recognized the validity of religious liberty, separation of church and state, democracy, and vernacular Bible reading by the laity—values consistent with those of Protestantism.

Protestant Values

In agreement with Huntington, “it seems reasonable to expect that the prevalence of some values and beliefs will be more conducive to the emergence of democracy than others.”⁴⁶ Huntington argued that “a political culture that values highly hierarchical relationships and extreme deference to authority presumably is less fertile ground for democracy than one that does not.”⁴⁷ Following this line of argument, it is expected that individualistic cultures,

⁴³ Woodberry, “Conclusion: World Christianity,” 264.

⁴⁴ Tusalem, “The Role of Protestantism in Democratic Consolidation among Transitional States.”

⁴⁵ Woodberry, “Conclusion: World Christianity,” 264.

⁴⁶ Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” 209.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

which value civil and political liberties, will require greater accountability and limitation of state power. On the other hand, communalistic cultures tend toward deference to authority and hierarchical relationships, resulting in individual rights being subordinate to those of the community.

It is possible, and is convincingly argued by Larry Siedentop⁴⁸ in his seminal book, *Inventing the Individual*, that recognition of the sovereign individual is a Christian construct. Emanating from early Christianity, the recognition of the intrinsic value of the individual ran in contradistinction to the Ancient Greek and Roman conception of society as an association of families. The family was not only a civil institution but also a religious one, with the *paterfamilias* acting as high priest and intermediary with the ancestors. These religious beliefs had consequences for the ordering of society and government, as there was an assumption of natural inequality. Citizenship was available to only the *paterfamilias*; women, slaves, and foreign-born were excluded. Hierarchy was the norm. With the coming of Jesus Christ came a faith based on choice and conscience, in which the act of faith required an internal acceptance on the part of the individual. These beliefs also would have social and political consequences. And so came the Christian understanding of society as a free association of individuals; morally equal agents. It emphasized personal freedom, responsibility, and agency. While recognizing other societal formations such as the family, church, and state, the first value was that of the individual.

Similar to ancient Christianity, the Protestant Reformation brought with it belief in the human capacity for personal contact with God through Jesus, rather than the necessity of instruction and interaction through a hierarchy. By encouraging individualism and creating religious diversity, Protestantism undermined the organic and communal basis for religion under Catholicism, which had replaced the early influences of Christianity. Thus, the understanding of society as an association of individuals was reawakened with Protestantism. Two values inherent to Protestantism and conducive to the development of a liberal democracy are thus identified, namely the value of the individual and the value of liberty.

The Value of the Individual

To understand the value of the individual, it is important to recognize that Protestantism is a voluntary religion whose adherents, ideally, are not forced to confess belief in something which they do not support. This means Protestantism places emphasis on orthodoxy, referring to an internal decision of faith—in other words, respect for the conscience of the individual. A person cannot be compelled to true belief in anything by outward force. This type

⁴⁸ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

of religious faith is based on the ability to independently rationalize. In the words of the philosopher John Locke: “True and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind,” which only God can touch and tend.⁴⁹

The Protestant Reformation elevated the individual by advancing the notion that people are more than their social role, and by “ending the possibility of the transfer of religious merit from the more to the less Godly.”⁵⁰ By removing the intermediary role of the clergy between God and man, the Reformers laid the foundations for individualism and egalitarianism. If there could be no human intermediary, an individual had to stand on his or her own two feet before God. It thus affirmed an individualism of rights, responsibilities, and accountability. With Protestantism’s concept that individual souls could and should have an unmediated relationship with God through Jesus, the status that hierarchy had enjoyed began to wane. Thus, the old hierarchy, through which requests for mercy had to move up the ladder through priests, popes, and angels, began to be dismantled. Medieval Christianity was similar to the feudal structure that expected and allowed little of the common people, whereas the Reformers demanded an active laity, one that was mindful and diligent. This lay participation created a model in the sphere of religion, which would later become the ethos of modern democracy. In asserting that everyone could discern the will of God through reading the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Reformers shifted the basis of religion from authoritarian and hierarchical to essentially democratic. Furthermore, in placing emphasis on literacy and individual responsibility, Protestantism probably influenced citizen converts to question hierarchically organized political authority, to demand accountability, and to seek greater civil and political rights. Thus, Protestantism may have started as a religious reformation, but in its recognition of the individual, it also instigated a political reformation.

The Value of Liberty

In their book, *A Brief History of Liberty*, David Schmidtz and Jason Brennan⁵¹ survey the history and instigators of liberty. In doing so, they argue that “Protestant culture gave birth to liberal political philosophy.”⁵² Although the Reformation initially led to increased religious persecution, this was because there was contention over religious freedom. This tension led to increased attention to the topic and calls for both the separation of church and state, and religious freedom. Thus, the origin of the concepts of tolerance and basic civil liberties arguably is found in the calls for religious liberty. The authors suggest

⁴⁹ John Locke, quoted in John Witte Jr., “Facts and Fictions about the History of Separation of Church and State,” *Journal of Church and State* 48, no. 1 (2006): 25.

⁵⁰ Bruce, “Did Protestantism Create Democracy?” 6-7.

⁵¹ Schmidtz and Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 99.

that the seeds of religious liberty were planted in the Reformation, but that it would take time for them to grow.

Measures of religious liberty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries consistently indicate that predominantly Protestant societies have the most religious liberty,⁵³ which historically has been established through separation of the church's and the state's authority and jurisdiction. Other liberties tend to follow religious liberties. John Anderson recognizes that some scholars claim the liberalism inherent in a liberal democracy fundamentally challenges the role for religion in the public sphere.⁵⁴ This, however, reflects a failure to understand the role of Protestantism, specifically, in instilling liberal values in the first place. Ironically, Protestantism became the bedrock for the evolution of democracy because of its sectarian nature and the decision of the sects to not dominate one another.⁵⁵ Again, Protestantism's promotion of democracy and its context of liberty were inadvertent. The early reformers of the church were truly conservative, authoritarian, and reluctant to accept change in doctrine—especially regarding nonseparation of church and state. But due to doctrinal fights and factional splits, the way was paved for their recognition that, for the sake of their own existence, they had to tolerate differing perspectives. Liberty thus emanated from the pluralism within Protestantism, which was a function of both the recognition of the individual and tolerance of diverse opinion.

What makes Protestant states more likely to democratize? The answer appears to be that Protestantism historically has promoted democratic values—including both respect for the individual and belief in liberty. A review of the literature on Protestantism, liberal democracy, and the individual shows that liberal democracy and its intrinsic valuing of the individual are not necessarily Western constructs, although they have been nurtured there, but instead are essentially the fruits of the Protestant form of Christianity. Ghanaian theologian, Bediako, agrees as he argues there is a need to realize that liberal democracy is not inherently indigenous to the Western world, nor is it exclusively the preserve of the West, for it largely emerged under the influence of Christian political ideas.⁵⁶

South Africa

Oh! how I long for that day, when the darkness and gloom shall have passed away, because the “Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in His hand.” This shall be the dawning of a brighter day for the people of Africa. Christianity will usher

⁵³ Predominantly Muslim societies have the least religious liberty. Woodberry, “Conclusion: World Christianity.”

⁵⁴ Anderson, “Introduction: Religion, Democracy and Democratization,” 1.

⁵⁵ Bruce, “Did Protestantism Create Democracy?”

⁵⁶ Kwame Bediako, “De-sacralization and Democratization: Some Theological Reflections on the Role of Christianity in Nation-building in Modern Africa,” *Transformation* (January-March 1995):10.

in a new civilization, and the “Dark Continent” will be transformed into a land of commerce and Christian institutions. Then shall Africa take her place as a nation among the nations: then shall her sons and daughters sing aloud: “Let us arise and shine, for our light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.”

—John Langalibalele Dube, first president of the ANC, 1892⁵⁷

Christian missionaries arrived in South Africa beginning in the eighteenth century. The pioneer among them was Georg Schmidt, founder of the first Protestant mission (Moravian Brethren) in Southern Africa, who arrived in Table Bay on July 9, 1737. He established a mission station for the Khoi-Khoi, instructing them in the Christian faith, as well as in planting and sowing crops. His baptism of some of the Khoi-Khoi met with resistance from the colonialists as it challenged their differential treatment of those who were now fellow Christians. This antagonistic relationship would come to characterize future relations among missionaries, colonialists, and, later, the apartheid regime. As more missionaries arrived, for example, those sent by the American Mission Board, they codified the indigenous languages for the first time, translated Bibles into these local languages, and established schools, hospitals, and mission stations.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new class of educated Christians, black intellectuals known as the *amakholwa* (Zulu for Christian converts). Almost all the education received by Africans at that time was at missionary schools⁵⁸ such as Inanda Seminary, Adams College, and Tigerkloof. Many progressed to complete their studies in American and British universities; among these were John Langalibalele Dube (he established the Christian Industrial School at Ohlange and started the Zulu/English newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*), Pixley ka Isaka Seme (after studying abroad, he set up a law practice in Johannesburg), and Richard Msimang (son of the founder of the Independent Methodist Church, who opened a legal practice after his studies).⁵⁹ All three of these men would become founding members of the South African Native National Council (SANNC; after 1923, the African National Congress, or ANC). Dube, first president of the SANNC, was convinced that the realization of political and economic equality for black South Africans lay in becoming economically self-reliant, educated, and Christian. Dube always was motivated by the desire to see the full and equal participation of blacks in all spheres of society, but he remained convinced that this could be achieved only through a negotiated, peaceful solution. Many years later, in 1994, Nelson Mandela chose to cast his vote in South Africa’s first democratic election at the

⁵⁷ John L. Dube, “A Talk upon My Native Land” (1892), <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/talk-upon-my-native-land-pamphlet-rev-john-l-dube-1892-extract> (accessed July 14, 2016).

⁵⁸ Meghan Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women’s Education* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Information gathered during a research trip to the Inanda Seminary Museum, KwaZulu-Natal, March 2016.

Ohlange High School, in honor of Dube, after a largely peaceful, negotiated settlement. After casting his vote, Mandela went to Dube's gravesite and said: "Mr President, I have come to report to you that South Africa is today free."

Despite the promising start of early missionaries' producing the first cohort of black, middle class, moderate leaders and initiating a chain reaction of socio-economic development as graduates from the missionary schools established their own schools and civil society organizations,⁶⁰ many hindrances arose to the permeation of the Protestant values of honoring the integrity of the individual and liberty, and thus to democratic development. Instead, South Africa has a history of limited liberty, evident in three periods. The first was the colonial period, during which the settler population resisted the liberalizing effects of the missionaries. As noted earlier, Woodberry's research found that Protestant missionaries promoted democratization—at least when the Protestant missionaries were not supported primarily by white settlers (as happened with the South African Dutch Reformed Church). Indeed, "white settlers consistently opposed the extension of democratic rights to Africans."⁶¹ Apartheid was the second period, during which missionary schools were closed in 1953 under the Bantu Education Act. Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs, made the claim that missionary schooling, "by ignoring the segregation or 'apartheid' policy, was unable to prepare [learners] for service within the Bantu community... . There is no place for [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour."⁶² Furthermore, the Dutch Reformed Church and the apartheid state infringed on the separation of church and state in their collaboration to create and promote a racially segregated society. This led to the severe limitation of political and civil liberties for the black population. The post-apartheid period, under the leadership of the ANC, is also checkered. Until the 1960s, the ANC's values were largely influenced by the afore-mentioned missionary education. With the banning of the ANC, however, the values of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, which, during this period, provided military and financial support to the ANC, came to heavily influence it. These values continue to influence the contemporary ANC in its national project, the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), which emanated from the Soviet Union. There currently is a tension between these collectivist, hierarchical values which disdain critique and the limitations posed by accountability, and the values within the 1996 constitution that endorse civil and political liberties.⁶³

⁶⁰ See Scott Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010).

⁶¹ Robert D. Woodberry, "Ignoring the Obvious: What Explains Botswana's Exceptional Democratic and Economic Performance in Sub-Saharan Africa," Project on Religion and Economic Change Working Paper #005 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2011), 3.

⁶² Quote taken from a plaque at the Inanda Seminary Museum, March 2016.

⁶³ See Nicola de Jager and Cindy Lee Steenekamp, "The Changing Political Culture of the African National Congress," *Democratization* 23, no. 5 (2016): 919-939.

The above provides a brief overview of the influence of Christianity in the case of South Africa's democratic development. The analysis now moves to an investigation of the contemporary influence of Christianity, in particular Protestantism, on South Africa's democracy.

An Empirical Overview of the Contemporary Views of Democracy in South Africa

South Africa's checkered past has left its mark on the political culture of contemporary South Africans. Although a predominantly Christian nation, it does not have an overwhelmingly democratic political culture. This political culture is studied using survey data from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶⁴ More than 25,000 face-to-face interviews, using more than sixty languages or dialects, were conducted in nineteen sub-Saharan countries between 2008 and 2009, under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International.⁶⁵ In the case of South Africa, the survey was a stratified random sample⁶⁶ of all nine provinces, proportional to population size and urban/rural population.

According to the 2008–2009 Pew Forum survey, 87 percent of South Africans identified themselves as Christian, with the largest groupings being Protestant (including Pentecostals), totalling 40 percent of the population, and the African Integrated Churches (AICs)⁶⁷ representing 30 percent (see table 1). South Africa, therefore, has a fairly large Protestant population, and the expectation, in terms of the literature and historical precedent, is that this Protestant population should have a positive influence on the country's democratic development. Given Protestantism's focus on uplifting the integrity of the individual and liberty, it is further expected that the predominantly Christian population would favor a democratic form of government that espouses the equal rights of citizens to select their own representatives. This assumption was tested using a question that measures preference for democracy versus a strong leader: "Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country's problems. Others feel that we should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your opinion?" The respondents were asked to select either a democracy, a strong leader, or don't know/refused.

⁶⁴ Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

⁶⁵ See Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, "Appendix C: Survey Methodology" <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-appendix-c.pdf> (accessed July 14, 2016).

⁶⁶ Random sampling is a technique by which a sample from a larger group is selected for study. Stratified random sampling involves the division of a population into smaller groups known as strata, in this case, the nine provinces and urban/rural divide.

⁶⁷ African Integrated/Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs) exhibit African cultural forms together with aspects of Christian belief. These religious movements thus demonstrate syncretism or partial integration between Protestant Christianity and traditional African religion. The Zionist Christian Church is an example of an AIC.

Table 1. Religious Affiliation of South Africans in 2009

Religious Affiliation	%
Christian total	87
Catholic	10
Mainline Protestant	31
Pentecostal	9
African Independent Church (AIC)	30
Other Christian-affiliated groups	7
Muslim	2
African traditional	4
Other	7

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life/ Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

Contrary to what was expected, only 55 percent, barely a majority of South Africa’s *Christians*, were supportive of a democratic regime (with 41 percent supportive of a strong leader), thus not exhibiting a particularly high demand for democracy. This unexpected finding needed to be tested for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa to determine whether the expectation that Christians (Protestants, in particular) are more favorable toward a democratic form of government is valid. South Africa was then compared with its democratic neighbor, Botswana, one of the southern Africa region’s democratic successes, and with sub-Saharan Africa. The expectation of greater support for democracy was evident among Christians both in Botswana (77 percent) and in the sub-Saharan region (71 percent). See table 2. Similarly, Christians in Botswana and the sub-Saharan region exhibited little appetite for a strong leader, 20 percent and 26 percent, respectively.

Table 2. South Africa’s Political Culture in Terms of a Demand for Democracy in Comparison with Botswana and Sub-Saharan Africa

	Democratic Government %	Strong Leader %	Don’t Know %
South Africa (Christians)	55	41	4
Botswana (Christians)	77	20	4
Sub-Saharan Africa (Christians)	71	26	3

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life/Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

The intention was to break the analysis down further and investigate whether there were differences among the Christian denominations, with an expectation that individuals from Protestant churches and their Pentecostal derivatives would be more supportive of a democratic form of government than other Christians. Again, in South Africa, the expectation did not hold. There was very little difference among the Christian denominations, with Pentecostals (49 percent) expressing the least support for democratic government. Among all the denominations, there also was fairly high support for a strong leader; above 40 percent for all denominations, except for Protestants, with 39 percent.

Table 3. Support for Democracy in South Africa
According to Christian Denomination

	Catholic %	Mainline Protestant %	Pentecostal %	African Independent Church %
Democratic government	54	57	49	56
Strong leader	41	39	46	40
Don't know	5	4	5	4
N	126	444	147	487

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life/Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

How did South Africa compare with sub-Saharan Africa in terms of religious affiliation and preference for democracy? As expected, Pentecostals in the sub-Saharan region are more supportive of a democratic government than counterparts in South Africa (74 percent, compared to 49 percent in South Africa). Other Christian denominations in the sub-Saharan region also are more supportive of a democracy, with Catholics and Protestants following Pentecostals, with 70 percent support, and AICs with 67 percent (see table 4). Further, Christian denominations are more supportive of democracy than sub-Saharan people who are religiously unaffiliated (64 percent supportive of democracy) and those following ancestral/traditional religions (53 percent supportive).

It thus appears that South Africa is exceptional in there being no obvious relationship between Christianity (especially among Pentecostals and Protestants) and support for a democratic form of government rather than a strong leader. Why? What makes South Africa different?

Syncretism as a Possible Hindrance to South Africa's Democratic Development

Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, argues that traditional African religion and its concomitant values of solidarity and the sacralization of authority are

Table 4. Support for Democracy According to Religious Affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa

	Pentecostal	Catholic	Protestant	AIC	Unaffiliated	Ancestral, traditional
Democratic government	74	70	70	67	64	53
Strong leader	24	27	28	30	31	39
Don't know	2	3	2	3	5	8
N	2,368	5,724	3,041	1,256	551	444

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life/Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

incompatible with liberal democracy.⁶⁸ Traditional African culture (similar to Orthodox Christianity and pre-Second Vatican Council Catholicism) values communalism or collectivization over individualism, and sacralizes political authority. Traditional solidarity and sacrilization of authority and political office have inherent tendencies toward authoritarianism and hierarchy, values contradictory to the Protestant values that promote democracy. Thus, Bediako argues that Christianity has an important role to play in African politics, as education and the value of the individual (versus the collective) have a liberating and empowering force.

To unpack Bediako's argument, authoritarianism in Africa must be understood in religious terms. Its legacy concerns certain aspects of the traditional African worldview as it relates to authority, power, and political governance, most especially the tendency of traditional society to sacralize authority and political office. Bediako cites a study of eight traditional African societies, in which the study's anthropologists note: "An African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is the axis of their political relations, the symbol of their unity... and embodiment of their essential values. He is more than a secular ruler His credentials are mystical and are derived from antiquity."⁶⁹ Traditional belief holds that the well-being of society depends upon ensuring good relations with the ancestors, and the ruler fulfills the role of intermediary between the ancestors and the living. Followers of the traditional worldview believe that royal ancestors are not "dead" but continue to participate in the affairs of society through mystical intervention by the appropriate channels. Accordingly, the authority of the ruler in the traditional political system is essentially the authority of the ancestors. This critical role played by the ancestors in traditional political organization means

⁶⁸ Bediako, "De-sacralization and Democratization."

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

that, beyond sacralizing the office of the ruler, the whole realm of politics and of society is sacralized, as the traditional worldview makes no sharp distinction between the secular and the sacred. Where the social system and the mystical plane are not distinct, governance becomes a “system of sacred values beyond criticism or revision.” In blending the authority of the living rulers with that of the ancestors, the African traditional worldview turns challenges to political authority into attacks upon the sacred authority of the ancestors on whose goodwill the community’s future prosperity depends. Radical political challenges are thus seen as the subversion of tradition and custom and ultimately as attacks on the foundations of identity and the continuity of the state and society itself.

It appears that where there is a human intermediary, dead or living, between society and God, human authority tends to become sacralized and moves out of the boundaries of accountability and limitation. Authority also tends toward hierarchical relationships. As noted earlier, a key contribution of Protestantism to the development of liberal democracy was the separation of the secular from the sacred, enabling human institutions to be held to account and limited in their scope. The collective/communal approach tends to negate individual agency and responsibility, with greater focus and dependence on a “strong” leader.

It is therefore argued that the democracy-producing values of Protestantism are possibly hindered by syncretism in South Africa. While over 80 percent of South Africans self-identify as Christian, of these, 50 percent still engage in ancestral veneration (see table 5). Fifty-four percent of Christian South Africans believe that sacrifices can appease the ancestors, compared to 36 percent in Botswana. Similarly, 50 percent of Christian South Africans participate in ancestral veneration, compared to only 26 percent in Botswana.

Table 5. Syncretism in Botswana in Comparison to South Africa

	Botswana (Christians) %	South Africa (Christians) %
Do you believe that sacrifices to spirits and ancestors can protect you from bad things happening?		
Yes	36	54
No	53	37
Don't know	11	9
Do you participate in traditional African ceremonies or perform special acts to honor or celebrate your ancestors?		
Yes	26	50
No	68	48
Don't know	5	2

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life/Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

How then does South Africa compare with sub-Saharan Africa in terms of ancestral veneration and among the different Christian denominations? As was expected, in sub-Saharan Africa, Pentecostals (15 percent) and Protestants (18 percent) are the least likely to participate in ancestral veneration. They are followed by Catholics with 28 percent and the AICs with 38 percent (see table 6). There also is a significant difference among these denominations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa; 35 percent of South Africa’s Pentecostals are syncretic, compared to 15 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, and 52 percent of South Africa’s Protestants are syncretic, compared to 18 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, South Africa’s Christians, relative to Christians in sub-Saharan Africa, are highly syncretic, less supportive of democracy, and more willing to consider a strong leader. In sum, there appears to be a correlation between syncretism and less support for democracy.

Table 6. Syncretism within Christian Denominations in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa % (SA in parentheses)	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Pentecostal	African Independent Church	Sub-Saharan Christians %
Do you participate in traditional African ceremonies or perform special acts to honor or celebrate your ancestors?					
Yes	28 (58)	18 (52)	15 (35)	38 (63)	24 (50)
No	70 (40)	73 (46)	83 (65)	73 (36)	74 (48)
Don’t know/refused	2	9	2	2	2 (2)

Source: Compiled by author from data derived from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life/Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008–2009).

Conclusions

The literature and history show a positive, though complex, association between Christian Protestantism and democratic development. It is argued that the attitudinal and cultural sources of liberal democracy are found within Protestantism, through the religion’s valuing of the individual and liberty. To protect these two key values, a form of political authority that remains limited, is held accountable, and honors civil and political liberties is required. Besides the early missionary influence (which also is complex) promoting education, literacy, the formation of civil society, and economic development—conditions conducive to democratic development—it was expected that contemporary Christians in all African societies would value a democratic form of government (which protects civil and political liberties) over a strong leader (who can infringe upon individual liberties).

In the case of South Africa, however, even though it has a predominantly Christian and Protestant population, the political culture is fairly undemocratic.

Forty-one percent of the self-identified Christian population is willing to forgo a democratic regime for a strong leader. This counters the above expectation. South Africa also has a less democratic political culture than sub-Saharan Africa, where 71 percent of its Christians favor a democratic government over a strong leader, compared to South Africa's 55 percent. These data lead to the question: Why? Syncretism may be a possible reason. The collectivism and sacralization of authority, evident in traditional African religion, are in contradistinction to the values of the individual and liberty, which historically and of continued necessity require separation of the secular from the sacred, and a limitation of human authority. South Africa's Christians practice a high level of syncretism (50 percent) and express a low level of support for democracy (55 percent), compared to sub-Saharan Africa's Christians, of whom only 24 percent engaged in syncretistic practices and 71 percent of whom support democracy. Thus, there appears to be a correlation between a low rate of syncretism and support for a democratic form of government. Accordingly, Christian syncretism with traditional African religions, which are communalistic rather than individualistic religions, is a possible explanation for the low level of support for democracy in South Africa and may explain the country's inability to date to make significant progress in democratic development. The question now remains: Why is syncretism so much more evident in South Africa compared to sub-Saharan Africa?