XXI. Democracy and the Kingdom of God

The Israel of the early days in Palestine was not at all a nation as we would understand the term. On the contrary, she was a tribal league, a loose confederation of clans united to one another about the worship of God.... Society exhibited no class distinction, no wide rift between rich and poor, ruler and subject, but that rather complete democracy characteristic of nomadic life. —John Bright, The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom ideal contains the revolutionary force of Christianity. When this ideal faded out of the systematic thought of the Church, it became a conservative social influence and increased the weight of the other stationary forces in society. If the Kingdom of God had remained part of the theological and Christian consciousness, the Church could not, down to our times, have been salaried by autocratic class governments to keep the democratic and economic impulses of the people under check.... Reversely, the movements for democracy and social justice were left without a religious backing for lack of the Kingdom idea. —Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel

This symbol [of the kingdom of God] utilizing kingship metaphors is no longer appropriate for bridging faith and public life. In the revolutions of our time kingdom metaphors have lost their savor. They no longer can nourish us in a post-monarchical life, whether politically or religiously. In the decline of kingship images we gain new appreciation of the covenantal and conciliar themes embedded in the symbol of a Federal Republic. The clarification of the meaning of this symbol can have enormous impact not only on Christian faith and worship but on public life as well. —William Johnson Everett, God's Federal Republic

William Johnson Everett presents would-be democratic Christians with an interesting and timely challenge: Isn't the whole idea of a “kingdom,” which is pivotal in the Christian faith, so overladen with
historical images of centralization and limitation of people-power, that it is in the final analysis inimical to the development of the democratic ideal? Can a Christian whose guiding motivation is to bring about the absolute rule of God over all be committed in even a moderate, “republican” degree, to constant consultation with, and input of, the will of the people, so that the people can in fact rule themselves? Did not the idea of a “City of God” lead in Catholicism to a transformation of the biblical idea of covenant into hierarchy and Empire? And did not the Protestants in their turn reinterpret the communal covenant under God’s kingship in terms of a detached, legal, social “contract” between individuals?

Hegel, as we have seen, would want to add that, since the kingdom of God became arrested and fossilized as an ecclesiastical kingdom in Catholicism, Catholicism is ipso facto alien to modern concepts of free society. But Auguste Comte, countering Hegel’s bias towards Protestantism, would certainly want to point out in addition that the traditional Protestant admiration for the Israelite theocracy, and for the Zion-inspired identification of religious commitment and political power, has had its own share in producing some of the obscene collusions of Christianity and politics in history—shockwaves from which the world is still recoiling.

If we were to take such criticisms seriously, we might have to conclude that either Catholics or Protestants, or both, must make a choice between democracy and the kingdom of God; that to be dedicated to democracy and the kingdom of God is out of the question. Or, if we were in a more “mediating” frame of mind, we might conclude that either democracy or the Kingdom would have to be relativized, subordinated to its rival; or else radically revised in concept—which is Everett’s proposal.

But Everett may be over-hasty in dismissing the “kingdom” symbol as no longer relevant and viable. As has already been noted, the original idea of the kingdom of God was anything but autocratic. Even if the Old-Testament “guilty conscience” about monarchy is an

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1William Johnson Everett, God’s Federal Republic, pp. 107-110.
2Ibid., p. 115.
3See p. 114 above. Since the present chapter will be drawing together many points from preceding chapters, the reader should steel him/herself for a multiplicity of cross-references.
5See p. 29 above.