Religion and Power - for the Political Sustainability of the World

Rudolf von SINNER

Introduction

The combination of religion and power gives at least a highly ambiguous, at most a highly explosive mixture. History is full of examples were religions have used power to dominate and have not refrained from destroying people they identified as enemies. Religious fanatism is to be found in probably all religions, but it becomes most visible in the great World Religions which sometimes assume power together with a ruler or ruling class that belongs to them. In contrast, a positive notion of power has to be clearly distinguished from violence, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out so clearly.

A relatively neutral definition of power comes from Plato, for whom dynamis is the effective force of every human being, and, moreover, the potency of every being to accomplish something. Max Weber's famous definition has it that "power is every chance to carry through, within a social relationship, one's own will even against resistance". Paul Tillich insisted on the intrinsic relationship of power - as power of being which strives beyond itself - with love and justice. In feminist and ecumenical circles empowerment has become a key term precisely for those who have, historically, been deprived of any power. Power is a most complex "thing" to define - and at the same time indispensable as humans live together in never totally symmetric relationships. Power is always power over somebody. Its legitimacy depends on whether it is used to serve a commonly agreed purpose.

In this modest contribution, I shall speak of power as political power, acknowledging its necessity and recognising its ambiguity, and of empowerment of women and men as citizens as an important contribution of the churches, especially in societies which recently underwent a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. I shall concentrate on Christian churches as this is the form of religion I best know and which is the main object of my research. However, it seems to me that the same aspects could be highlighted in other religions and comparable results be found. The use of power as inspired by the Triune God - and always bound to Godself - provides, as I shall argue, an important reference for empowering action under the present circumstances. Being the place where I live, work and research, Brazil will be the primary context of the following reflections, but glances on other countries will not be totally absent.

1. Political Theology

Under the growing constraints of the ascending Nazi empire, Erik Peterson, a Lutheran theologian recently converted to Roman Catholicism, declared the end of any "'political theology' which abuses Christian proclamation to legitimise a political situation". He saw the development of a trinitarian theology in the first four centuries of Christianity de-legitimising the use of a monarchical imagery for God

being reflected on earth by a human monarch, seeing "One God, One Empire, One Emperor" in the same line. It was a thesis on the theological interpretation of the reign of Augustus under the sign of the birth of Christ, which Origen and, especially, Eusebius of Caesarea had used to exalt the Roman Emperor and Empire. However, what Peterson aimed at was the religious legitimation of the German Reich under the Nazi ideology, which had been readily provided by both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians at the time. He especially wanted to counter the 'political theology' of his friend Carl Schmitt, a professor of law, according to whom "all important concepts of modern state doctrine are secularized theological concepts" - as God is almighty, so the political Sovereign holds all powers, including the power to call a state of emergency. For Peterson, a trinitarian God could not be reflected in human life, and so no state could claim for itself to be God's image.

Some fifty years later, the 'New Political Theology' came into being, spearheaded by Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann. The latter took up explicitly the thesis defended by Peterson, but only in its critical stance against a monarchical political theology. According to Moltmann, the doctrine of the Trinity did not put an end to any political theology, but precisely provide the ground for a democratic notion of politics, de-legitimising any monopolisation of power. Leonardo Boff has taken a similar line a few years later, seeing the Trinity as a critique against the accumulation of power in politics and in the church as experienced in the Brazilian context and "as a model for any just, egalitarian (while respecting differences) social organization", postulating "a society that can be the image and likeness of the Trinity"8.

Both this new type of Political Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology have made it clear that there is no such thing as a political neutrality of the Church. The Church is either on the side of those in power, or on the side of those without power, or in a dialectical position between the two. The basis for this position is both a particular belief in God and a particular reading of the context. We should beware of easy analogies, as if the image of God were readily deductible from human reality - as thought Feuerbach - or we could easily deduct a particular form of society from our image of God. Rather, our image of God derives from a complex interaction between text and context, Gospel and culture. However, Moltmann, Boff and others are right in insisting that a God who is three persons-in-relation, who manifests Godself in diverse forms but maintains the same identity, who is loving and dynamic rather than a distant ruler, has much to tell to human persons who are deprived of their rights and lack even the most basic items for survival, longing for respect and a decent living. This is not to say that a strictly monotheistic image of God could not resist the abuse of power and incite its correct use - on the contrary, it was precisely Israel who dissociated rule and salvation, differently from Egypt, and thus demythologised the king, depriving him of any divine character. But in a Christian context, it is most meaningful to explore the trinitarian image to think about life in the household of God.10

2. A new task in a changed context

Political theology, as I understand it here, is an explicit theological reflection on

the political positioning of the Church within a given context. Liberation Theology is such a political theology, inasmuch as it forged resistance against political and economic domination. Under the military regimes in Latin America, Christian Base Communities, inspired by a liberating theology, provided a basis both for resistance against the State's repression and for the struggle to improve everyday life - the conquest of power and water supply, proper sewerage, schooling and leisure facilities, and the like. Especially in Brazil, they received the backing of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In South Africa, resistance went against the racist system of Apartheid, backed both by the local churches and international church bodies like the World Council of Churches. Those churches which continued to defend Apartheid as a system of racial separation willed by God where discredited by the Reformed World Alliance and their membership suspended. In South Korea, minjung Theology assembled "the people" for resistance under dictatorship. In these and many other cases, churches were, in differing degrees, both part of the problem - inasmuch as they supported the regime - and provided important, sometimes unique spaces of opposition.

Thankfully, in all the cited - and, indeed, in many other - countries, the political situation has changed radically. A transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy has taken place, organizations of civil society were (re-)admitted. This has meant, on the one hand, a loss of influence on the side of the churches. They are no longer the most prominent, let alone the only space for critical political activity. At best, they are one among many actors of civil society. On the other hand, a new stance in a political theology is needed for this new situation. What Walter Altmann, taking up a concept developed by Ulrich Duchrow, has named a "critical-constructive participation" of the churches in politics, is now no longer possible only in "old", Western democracies, but has become a real option in post-transition countries. Liberation Theology, as it makes its "option for the poor" and strives to liberate from all oppression, based on social, economic, gender, ethnic or other hierarchies, has to leave mere opposition and contribute actively towards the well-being of society - not rarely being in a position of considerable political power, as a member of the Government or government-related agencies, the leader of a powerful NGO or even as a church leader. In an influential article, the Brazilian Hugo Assmann called for a "Theology of Solidarity and Citizenship" as the continuation of Liberation Theology. At the dawn of a post-apartheid society in South Africa, Charles Villa-Vicencio claimed a "post-exilic theology as a theology of reconstruction and nation-building". He states that

"Utopian dreams are important, but not enough to create something that is qualitatively different from the structures of oppression. (...) For the dreams of the oppressed to become a reality they are to be translated into political programmes and law-making that benefit those who have longed for, and fought for, the new age, while protecting the new society against the abuses which marked past oppression. This ultimately is what a liberatory theology of reconstruction is all about." 14

This is not an entirely new position. Theologies of nation-building have been developed in Europe, India and in the broad ecumenical debate since before World

War II, giving birth to the *Life and Work* movement 15. However, they have assumed varied importance in different times and places, presupposing a moment of "awakening" after a deep crisis or devastating disaster which is to be overcome through a democratic process in which a variety of actors are being invited to contribute.

In my reading, the time of "big phrases", be they in favour of a glorious utopia or simply opposing a reigning power, qualified as evil, is over. Certainly, the need for hope, fuelled by a vision of what is to come, continues, and a critical identification of oppressing powers is still important. However, it is urgent to contribute to changes that make a concrete difference to people´s lives, empowering them to be bold citizens, conscious of their place in society with the right to full participation and the possibility to effectively exercise it. One way to understand this process is the construction of cidadania (citizenship), to which I shall turn now 16. We find similar struggles in other countries.

3. The churches as schools for citizenship

Citizenship means the belonging of a person to a particular State, implying certain rights and duties. Beyond this technical definition, it has become customary to use the term to denote the effective access to and exercise of these rights and duties by citizens. In a more ample sense, as it has become customary in today's Brazil, it can also be seen as the subjective side of democracy: If the latter is a system of government formally guaranteed by a set of representative institutions subject to a regular and competitive vote, and through legal texts that describe its basic purposes and the rules for its functioning, cidadania means the actual participation of citizens in democracy, being conscious of their citizenship and striving to exercise their rights and duties.

This, of course, presupposes that citizens know about their rights and duties. Moreover, it is necessary that people believe that their abiding by such rights and duties as foreseen by law is actually doing them some good. It is precisely this aspect which cannot simply be taken for granted. In Brazil, for instance, democracy brought excellent law texts, but old power structures have remained, as has a widespread distrust in the functioning of the public apparatus. There are good historical reasons for such lack of trust. Law was corrupted during the military regime, although formal legality continued throughout the authoritarian phase in many aspects. Even after the return to democracy, many citizens experience the difficulty to exercise their rights unless they have a "godfather" in the right place at the right time. According to Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, there are two cultural systems operating at the same time. The traditional one interprets human beings as "persons" related to a particular "family" headed by the father, an entrepreneur, a politician or another powerful patron. It is through their relationship with such a patron that persons receive what they need, differently from others who do not have such protection. On the other hand, the law is based on "individuals" with equality. These, however, are regarded as inferior, as the saying goes: "for the friends, everything, for the enemies, the law". That is: The "individuals" which depend on the law have no friends and are, effectively, excluded from "real" society

because they do not belong to a "family". While providing some form of integration and advantages, family-type relationships are an obstacle to the recognition of equality and difference of the individual, as well as to a more general and universal reliance on commonly agreed rules which are crucial for a democracy that is worthy of its name.

The churches do play an important role in the formation of citizens, both because of their influence on moral behaviour and because they reach a considerable part of the population, even in very poor areas. It seems that the most effective there are those who least speak about cidadania and the conquest of rights: The so-called crentes (believers), mainly pentecostals. To cite a concrete area where their relevance becomes most obvious, let me cite the omnipresent crime, especially around drug trafficking. The author of the book on which the much appraised Cidade de Deus (City of God) film was based, Paulo Lins, during his anthropological studies wrote an article, together with a colleague, on Bandits and Evangelicals. There, he argued that "the myth that the way into banditism does not have any way out meets its safe exception in their conversion to the Gospel". Similarly, Drauzio Varella, who served for some time as a doctor to the enormous São Paulo Carandiru prison, said that the Assemblies of God represented, most probably, the only real project of re-socialization existing in the prison. This is because those who convert in prison are exempted from the rigid law imposed by the inmates and gain respect and protection. Moreover, they might find a stable network of relationships when they leave the penitentiary, which can help them into a non-criminal life. This is precisely what this church itself claims: It restores lives in transforming women and men from the margins of society, who become visibly "decent and honourable" persons.

This might sound utterly moralistic and distant from real cidadania. Indeed, the basis for the church's positioning over against the state is clearly based on Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...", although a small window for critique is opened through Acts 5,29: "We must obey God rather than any human authority". The Assemblies of God insist much more on duties than on rights. Nevertheless, this church does restore a feeling of dignity to women and men, so that they may perceive themselves as true citizens. They are empowered to live their lives as respectable subjects.

The rapid growth of pentecostal churches in Brazil as in other countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, shows that they have also become a political force. In many places, they are courted by politicians to gain their votes. Obviously, empowerment here mutates easily into power politics with all its ambiguities, not seldom sliding into corporativism and, worse, into corruption. But this should not lead us to overlook the important benefits these churches provide for their faithful, apparently in ways more effective than those adopted by the Christian Base Communities.22

What I want to underline here is that a democracy to be consolidated needs citizens with a positive - not positivistic - notion of law and a basic trust in each other. This is crucial for a sound balance of power in public space. Churches and, more broadly speaking, religions can provide both a critical-constructive partnership

with the authorities and be a school for democracy. Of course, their own organisation cannot be exempted from the challenge of cidadania, lest they would loose their credibility. Luther was right in insisting on Church and State as two different kingdoms, in the sense that their realms and specific responsibilities must not be blurred. However, he also insisted that both kingdoms come under God's judgement, and that the church does have the duty to be a guardian of the State's realm. Romans 13 has to be read together with Revelation 13, clearly showing the ambivalence of public authority. We should, however, not forget that, not rarely, it was the churches who accumulated and misused their power, and that, historically, human rights had to be conquered against rather than with the churches' will and power. Churches do not have something to offer because of their own perfection, but because their power - and, indeed, their notion of power - is intrinsically bound to God's power, in which it finds its most profound inspiration and its most severe critique. Their trust is grounded in God, from where it can be expanded to other people, offering insights for an ethics of vulnerability rather than violence.24

4. Conclusion: Religion, Power and Sustainability

Power is highly ambiguous, as stated earlier, but it is indispensable. Political power - sometimes combined with, sometimes against religious power - affects everybody. It is not helpful to see it in a merely negative, demonizing way, lest there remain only two options: Move to a remote "island" or build up cells of resistance, thus missing the chance of a constructive co-operation, which I believe is what is most needed today. Power should be seen as something necessary, whose quality is to be constantly controlled by, ideally, the whole population. For it to be sustainable, healthy for humans and for the natural environment, it needs the critical-constructive collaboration of all.

To this end, from a Christian standpoint, theological references are needed for measuring the quality of the power exercised. Much is to be found in the Bible which can ground a sound notion of power; Hans-Ruedi Weber made it even a focus for a Biblical Theology. In a Christian perspective, human power is always bound to God's power, which empowers human beings to be co-creators, but limits their exercise of power through values like love and justice. Whosoever wants to exercise power, should first and foremost serve. Then there is the central fact that Christ humbled himself by becoming human, using his divine power to heal and empower people, especially those on the margins. The paradigm of power is God who becomes human and forgoes his power. God is a dynamic (sic!) and compassionate God, diverse in Godself as a community of persons-in-loving-relationship. On the basis of this trinitarian image of God, Christians can make an important contribution to the sustainability of the word, continuing a liberative theology through a theology of cidadania.

The Author:

Rudolf von Sinner, born in 1967 in Basel/Switzerland, Dr. theol., is

Professor for Systematic Theology, Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue at the Escola Superior de Teologia in São Leopoldo/Brazil and a minister of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil. He has published a variety of articles and chapters on ecumenical hermeneutics, contextual theology and ecumenical political ethics, as well as the book Reden vom dreieinigen Gott in Brasilien und Indien. Grundzüge einer ökumenischen Hermeneutik im Dialog mit Leonardo Boff und Raimon Panikkar (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 2003). He is currently working on a major research project on the Brazilian churches' contribution to cidadania (citizenship), supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Address: Escola Superior de Teologia, Cx. Postal 14, 93001-970 São Leopoldo-RS, Brazil, r.vonsinner@est.com.br, www.est.com.br