Faith in Democracy

Alternative Perspectives and Global Concerns & Faith in Democracy

With the proposed partnership with UNESCO

Initial Project: International Expert Meeting on *Faith in Democracy*

Place: Volos Academy, Greece, August 22-24

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Who to invite?
Some 20 to 25 participants who are willing and able to contribute, not only to the expert meeting, but also to the book volume that we are planning to publish afterwards.

18 scholars have confirmed their contribution to the project. The geographic distribution of the contributors includes (in alphabetical order) Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Iran, Nigeria, the Netherlands, and Turkey. The rest is to be determined via consultation with UNESCO. The list of confirmed scholars is attached.

Academic Output
Book Volume. 2019

Publisher: We propose first UNESCO publication, if not Routledge, Ashgate, or Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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About the Theme
This prospective program for an expert meeting in Volos Academy will explore the spiritual potential of faith as an answer to the dangers of the myth of the state and the political religions concerning first liberal democracies, second the transitional states. Along this line, it also explores the importance of spirituality for international democratic cooperation, politics and law. The project sets dialogue for social inclusion as a means of cooperation.

UNESCO has as one of its key tasks to promote reflection on democracy through *dialogue of cultures* and *social inclusion* which are the fundamentals of *deliberative democracy*. UNESCO has always supported “the peaceful development of societies by contributing to the construction and *consolidation of democracy*, and the development of *democratic institutions*”, especially in transitional societies. Democracy both as a normative space of participation, and as a goal, improves mutual understanding on the road to a sustainable peace for all. That is the reason why UNESCO has announced the *International Day of Democracy*. Therefore, faith in democracy is a leading intellectual center for the interdisciplinary study and discussion of the issues related to philosophy, religion, society, culture, and politics. In order to prepare a deeply rooted insight into the importance of faith in democracy, Volos Academy of Greece has welcomed the expert meeting proposal by APGC and FIN (August 2019) to prepare the road toward a global forum in 2020. For these reasons, it will be a credit to have the support and partnership of UNESCO for the project. UNESCO would also be an outstanding place for a second and more comprehensive (global forum) on the subject of Faith in Democracy in 2020.

Introduction
Are free elections and transparent decision-making based on rational deliberation really sufficient as foundations for the political legitimacy of democracy and international democratic institutions? UNESCO’s response to this question is very challenging. Democracy should be more than this. Rather, it is supposed to be a cultural practice improving the spirit of a healthy society. That is why
UNESCO confirms and encourages democracy as the “belief that more is obtained through dialogue, consultation and mediation than through coercion and arbitrary practices”. Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, further argues that “The democratic ideal is inextricably linked to a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and an aspiration for peace. UNESCO bears this aspiration like a standard”.

In spite of the aforementioned ‘thick’ ideal of democracy, totalitarian regimes tend towards a so-called ‘political religion’. That is: a political religiosity known to us from the French Revolution, fascism in Germany and Italy, communism in the Soviet Union, or its most recent model; the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Yet, this opposition between ‘democracy’ and ‘political religion’ should not blind us to a fundamental similarity. Apparently, if not properly understood, democracy can also assume such totalitarian characteristics and it seems to be equally inclined to a self-compromising religiosity, in whichever form. A certain ‘political religion’ seems to be the product of democracy also: as a consequence of democracy, it seems to undermine and eliminate its potential. Much has been written about this, among others by Cassirer, Voegelin, Talmon and Bellah. Additionally, well-known advocates of deliberative democracy (Amy Gutmann, Seyla Benhabib, Amartya Sen, Joshua Cohen, Charles Taylor, and Mahmoud Masaedi, for instance) have criticized these pitfalls of liberal democracy.

**Political Religion: A Naïve Belief**

Political religion can be defined as a more or less conscious belief in some one or other political system, in its institutions, activities and machinations. Such a religiosity also seems to be characteristic of democracy: both of democratic thinking and of democratic practice. We only mention a few aspects here (as an introduction).

In common sense understanding, democracy believes in the opinion of the majority in seemingly ‘religious’ ways; its major creed is the electoral process. It is a belief in and appeal to the social consciousness of the masses who are above all engaged in promoting what is to their own self-interest. In addition, the political religion surrounding democracy appears also to involve a seemingly unsuspecting belief in rational deliberation as central to political decision-making. Rational deliberation is, or so it seems to be, the primary source of legitimacy for the law.

Democracy in general implies a religion of values. Equality, logic, instrumentality, objectivity, impersonality, predictability, certainty, legality, laws and procedures are object of a tight ‘belief system’. These characteristics of democratic rationality are sometimes respected as if they were holy shrines, if not idols. The democratic state is supposedly something like the divine Spirit on earth. In addition, the rationalistic dogma of the strict separation of church and state and its practice (the laicity in France) also testifies to such a political religious conviction and orthodoxy. Democracy promises that only through these the sacrosanct sanctities of freedom, equality and brotherhood will be safeguarded and realized.

**Religion and Faith in Democracy**

With this democratic political religion outlined in the roughest brushstrokes, we come to the goals of the expert meeting in view.

The expert meeting on ‘Faith in Democracy’ examines the above-mentioned phenomena and wants to relate critically to this political naivety: this democratic ‘enthusiasm’ (Gr. en-theia: ‘being in God’).

However, the expert meeting is not only intended to signal, analyze and critically examine these very diverse phenomena. It also wants to search for alternative perspectives. This is (self-evidently) not about alternatives to democracy per se, but about looking for alternative beliefs that can correct this democratic naivety and fanaticism. This alternative belief would not necessarily have to be faithful in the strict sense of any ecclesiastical faith. It may very well be a secular conviction or faith that could be introduced as a valuable remover or antidote against dogmatic atheism.

So, although the alternative itself might not necessarily be faith in the strict sense of the word, it still is very interesting to study to what extent the Jewish-Christian traditions of the West, as well as the
spiritual traditions of the East (especially Islamic mysticism), can inspire to such an alternative belief: to a religious or quasi-religious alternative to the political myths surrounding democracy.

One of course is not to use religion as a political instrument. Doing so has all too often brought damage to religion as well as to politics. But what possible antidotes are in store within the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity? What religious inspirations, derived from these religions, can be played out against the current, gullible over-confidence in the democratic system.

**Faith and Aristocracy**

That brings us to at least one important hypothesis that would deserve to be researched and tested. Only a certain ‘authentic’ faith, it seems, can prevent or even cure the sickness of the political religion of democracy. ‘Democratic enthusiasm’ can only be fought against by another religious passion or faith. It could also be done by some other faith in a less religious and more existential sense.

This goal cannot be accomplished by ‘religion’ exclusively. In so far as religion itself is democratic, it would seem that it cannot offer the antidote to the political religion of democracy. Faith as a core existential concern of human being, on the other hand, is aristocratic and as such might be beneficial to the limitations and dangers of a democracy in itself (left to itself). For instance: the temptations and dangers of a so-called ‘civil religion’, a belief that we see (for example) in America, but which was already found in ancient Rome and (in philosophy) in Rousseau, should perhaps best be combated by faith.

**Morality and Beyond**

What is necessary for democracy is an ethics that is trans-moral. It judges not in obedience to abstract moral and judicial laws, but according to its participation in a reality that transcends the sphere of commands and rules. The unbearable tensions within the sphere of the law drive us out of and beyond the sphere of any given morality. They lead beyond good and evil in the moral sense. To the wholly other. To a mysticism of the event. To a metaphysical or mystical justice that is in unity with life universal. What sort of trans-moral conscience is needed to accomplish a sustainable democracy? Can it benefit from the aforementioned religious traditions? In what sense? An ethics of Kairos, beyond the alternative of absolute and relative ethics? An eschatological ethics: open to the ‘to come’, which has not yet appeared? Ethics as a work of art: as the creative realization of the principle of love, or as a new and authentic response to the call of the other? Surely laws and institutions are necessary in order to maintain the actual ethical process: necessary as ‘the strange work of love’. But faith is always able to break through them, to suspend them in view of a new Kairos. Love is able to create new laws and new systems of ethics.

Justice in democracy is the secondary and derived principle, while the mystical participation in life is the creative and basic principle. Mysticism and spirituality have the benefit of transcending ethical distinctions of good and evil: abstract distinctions and categories that keep us apart and divided. Through faith democracy might be able to overcome the self-destructive forces that reside in rational ethical categories.

**Questions**

What faith is needed for a vital and resilient democracy? What alternative spiritual foundations of legitimacy, which other democratic values and virtues can be distinguished? What religious courage is necessary for democracy? What to do against the autoimmunity of the democratic system: against the spiritual leveling that is inseparable from democracy, according to (among others) Kierkegaard and Tocqueville?

What are the ‘aristocratic’ conditions of a democracy that successfully opposes anti-democratic tendencies in and of democracy itself: spiritual conditions that democracy itself is not able to guarantee and organize? What politico-religious courage, what spiritual sovereignty is needed here: implied in democracy?

What is the practical importance of these questions for the life-world in the condition of globality? How could faith in democracy improve the quality of democratization of global institution? In what
way, may faith in democracy contribute to a sustainable global development? How might it improve mutual understanding, ethics of recognition of difference, and deliberative cooperation on the road to a sustainable security? And, how might it address the world of agony effectively?

The list of participants (alphabetical order)

Anozi, Stanley (Rayerson University, Canada)
Asproulis, Nikolaos (Volos Academy, Greece)
Bula, German (LaSalle University, Colombia)
Kalaitzidis, Pantelis (Volos Academy, Greece)
Kumar, Saroj (Delhi University, India)
Masaeli, Mahmoud (APGC, Ottawa, Canada)
Mouzelis, Nikos or Antonis Liakos (Volos Academy, Greece)
Slootweg, Timo (Leiden University, Holland)
Sneller, Rico (Leiden University, Holland)
Virvidakis, Stelios (Volos Academy, Greece)
Eight more from various universities in the Netherlands