

SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY

by Ward Parks

1.

As man is a spiritual being, it is natural for him to attempt to define his varied enterprises in the light of spiritual ideals. The creation of community and the establishment of frameworks that uphold community have always been urgent human concerns; and for this very reason, human social orders have repeatedly been construed, in the eye of a spiritualizing awareness that seeks to find God in all things, as mirrors to the divine order. As history shows us, of course, social and political systems change through time, yet amid these changes the innate human disposition to find divine archetypes within the patterns of human community life persists. Early Germanic tribal societies, for example, conceived of God as a kind of tribal chieftan. Medieval theologians supposed that feudal hierarchies mirrored a "great chain of being" that exists in God's mind. Monarchists asserted the "divine right of kings"; enlightenment-era fashioners of the new "social contract," who tried to rationalize human relations, took reason to be a ray from the sun of God's pure intelligence. All the while, the actual patterns of human community were evolving, molting old shells, reversing themselves. Yet at each stage there were those who saw in the patterns of human interrelations around them the face of their beloved God. I do not doubt that those who saw their societies in this way truly saw what was best within them.

In this age -- which is the age of the Advent -- the dominant social and political ideology is that of democracy. Derived from Greek roots that mean "the people rule," democracy is originally and primarily a political vision that, like other political visions, turns its eye toward matters of power, governance, the negotiation of authority. At the same time, democracy entails a view of man; and this view is in many respects a noble one. Perhaps the greatest contribution that democracy has wrought in the domain of values has been to accentuate the uniqueness, dignity, and worth of every individual. This great theme taps into a profound and immortal truth, that God is the real in-dweller within everyone. God Himself in all His glory abides within "the least of these"; and because of this, no one should be scorned or reviled. The high and the low, the rich and the poor, the dominant and the oppressed are all fundamentally akin, since each is a drop within God's Ocean. Ultimately, as Meher Baba has revealed to us, each drop is the Ocean; but this is a truth beyond the ken of contemporary political intellection.

Attuned as they are to these mighty resonances, many lovers of God in this age take democracy to be the consummate vehicle for the expression of higher spiritual values in the domain of politics and community governance. But at this juncture, to speak for myself personally, reservations arise; and I would like to express some of these reservations here. It is not my purpose either to endorse or contest the view that Baba groups and centers ought to be run in democratic fashion. That is as it may be; what matters most is that the people involved work together harmoniously; and whatever best commends itself to my brothers and sisters in Baba I for my own part am content to go

along with. What concerns me is not governance as such but rather the politicizing of spiritual vision. Democracy is, even in its highest present-day redactions, a distinctly political refraction of the truth. By nature, politics orients itself toward power. But the magnetism of power distorts, and the eye deluded by power sees false colors. The pristine truths of spirituality are best observed in themselves and not through a lens of political philosophy.

In this age when democracy is rising toward ascendancy the world over, the God-Man has generally discouraged His lovers against political involvement. And indeed, the perils and pitfalls of political life are now parading themselves across the world stage in bold display. Nations denounce one another, within states and communities political parties are perpetually at loggerheads, individuals and groups trumpet their claims and grievances and in the process disregard the entitlements and sufferings of others. I do not say that democracy or another other political system is responsible for this state of affairs. What I do mean to suggest is that this is not an auspicious season for lovers of God to be seeking spiritual guidance in the political sphere. However groups and organizations may choose to administer their affairs, they would do well to avoid dogmatism and intractability in their evocation of "democratic principles." What really matters is love, which can exist in any context. When spirituality is identified too narrowly with any particular political system or philosophy, a loss of perspective and a diminution of universality ensues.

I am among those who feel that democracy -- like all political systems -- has weaknesses as well as strengths. If, as increasingly seems to be the case, Baba groups are going to embrace democratic forms of self-governance, we should proceed with our eyes open and remember to use to revelations of the God-Man, and not something else, as our compass. From my perspective, democracy needs not to be repudiated but transformed -- utterly transformed -- so that the divine intuitions that have inspired it many manifest in all their glory and the old shells may be discarded. In what follows I would like to outline, first, what I take to be some of the flaws inherent to the democratic process as it now exists, and next, the greater possibilities that a reconceived and reoriented "democracy" could admit. I do not wish to offend and would be saddened if this contribution merely stimulates more political discussions. Whether these observations are accepted or rejected, I will be satisfied by a clear consensus and determination that political conceptions be modeled on community understanding of divine truths and not the other way around.

2.

Scholars tend to overvalue knowledge and products of the intellect; businessmen are susceptible to a habit of reductiveness that measures worth in terms of money. In politics, the prize is political power, and political involvement tends to breed craving for power. Even political idealists who consciously resist temptations to abuse power personally nonetheless tend to presume that human felicity depends upon the proper

exercise of political power more than is really the case. This kind of distortion occurs within any political system. Yet the particular delusion that democracy feeds is the delusion of numbers. In a democracy one gains power through the support of a majority. As soon as this happens, a majority-minority configuration springs to life, in the sense that the community starts to think of its internal divisions in this way, whereas before it might have thought of itself differently. In the real history of democracy, majority-minority configurations have repeatedly institutionalized themselves through political parties that are unceasingly at war with each other. The see-saw of public opinion tilts first one way, then the other; and as it does so, leaders must glean votes or disappear from the public arena. In short, fractiousness and unremitting competition are one consequence of a system that creates governments on basis of a division of numbers.

Persons reared in democratic environments sometimes forget that, in the spiritual domain, one can be greater than a million. Take the case of a wise man in a crowd of fools. Measured in terms of truth, the words of the wise man carry more weight than do those of all the fools put together; but in terms of numbers, the wise man is a straw in a hurricane. Thus the saints and Perfect Masters and Avatars have often been persecuted in their own day; only in retrospect does the real worth of what they gave become visible to humanity at large. Yet the gainsaying of a multitude cannot alter a reality, nor can an act of real greatness be measured by its applause. Infinity is not to be attained through additions and increments, but through simplifications and surrendrance and loss of self. The touchstone does not reside in what most people say but in the Word of the All-Knowing. Reality itself is undemocratic in the sense that it is not many but One.

Democracy is the great leveler, for in its insistence on equality, in its unwillingness to recognize "high" and "low," in its determination to range each and everyone on a common plane, it sets out to demolish artificial barriers that are the residue of dead traditions. Thus it provides a superb instrument for the work of the present age. Yet hierarchy constitutes the very warp and woof of creation, and it is as futile to deny this as it is to shout at the top of one's voice that one is keeping silence. For one could not even be as one is if the elements of one's nature were not differentiated by levels. Moreover, hierarchies exist not on a single axis only, but along the trajectory of every imaginable variable. The evolved and the unevolved, the eaters and the eaten, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the intelligent and the dull, the spiritual and the worldly, the enlightened and the ignorant -- every conceivable opposite and difference makes its appearance in God's great play. Amid such multidimensional variability, how can all things be equal? How can an ant be made equal to an eagle, or a song to a tractor? For it is God Himself who is the author of these inequalities. Why? Because, as the sole Dreamer of the great dream, He needs to experience every possible condition on His great journey to Himself. Love needs distances to cross, and so it has breathed forth a vast symphony of infinitesimally differentiated tones and tempos and timbres through whose harmonious interplay is the sense of unity achieved. A tuba cannot be made to clash like a cymbal, nor a nightingale to crow like a rooster, nor a rose to burn like a lamp. The demand for equality can, at its worst, become a procrustean tailor who cuts off limbs to fit the size of his clothes, a jailor to the spirit, whose soaring flights into ever-

new and previously unthinkable realms of beauty and perfection would have mocked his drab platitude that all things are the same. Glum prisoners in their cells may enjoy a certain equality of condition. Yet it was not for this that man was made.

Democracy prizes the individual, whom it seeks to reclaim from a long history of degradation and oppression. Indubitably love has inspired much of what democracy has undertaken in this respect, and those of its works which conduce to human ennoblement and upliftment should be gladly welcomed and accepted. At the same time we must remember that the ego, which is the very seat of individuality in illusion, must eventually be destroyed. Many synonyms for "oppressor" shine forth from the jewel-box of names and titles by which the Divine Beloved has been known down the ages. God's creatures do not usually like this terrible aspect of divinity, yet it is through His merciful mercilessness that in the end we are set free. Yet politicians on the cruise for votes have every incentive to promote the delusion that the ego can endure forever and that its claims and desires are supreme. "You need this, you deserve that, you have a right to thus-and-such, you should claim and demand your due": by such insinuations and half-truths do flatterers garner support for their vault into power. The full truth with the other half restored would balance each stroke with a counterstroke: You do not need this, you do not deserve that, you should yield and let go. But when the ego is only affirmed and never pruned or retrenched, it becomes an almost impregnable fortress whose separative existence is sustained by an army of desires. And a community aggregate of such individuals becomes a wide plain where such fortresses glower at each other across unbridgeable distances, joined by the commonality of gnawing and unfulfilled desire yet fearful of love's leap that leaves in rubble the walls marking the perimeter of "not you but I."

Greater than equality is oneness. Greater than self-assertion is harmony. Greater than "my individuality as me" is "my individuality as God." If democracy is to succeed in moving from the shadow of mighty truths into their direct light, it will need to transform itself through awakening to the higher values of love in the springtide of the new Advent.

3.

Yet there are valid reasons why democracy has emerged with such insistence at this particular stage of history. Over the centuries, as traditions that were once expressions of living perceptions of the truth gradually rotted and died within, the spirit of coercion has come to prevail more and more in human affairs. There is nothing inherently evil in one person serving another. Yet at heart this service should be willing. When service is forced, conditions are unpropitious for that inner maturation which would in due course release to the world the bloom and fragrance of spontaneous giving. Democracy is the political response of the modern world to an inward spiritual withering. When a tree that once bore sweet fruit has become black and leafless, it needs to be cut down.

Reacting as it is to the tyranny of a servitude that is not inspired by love, democracy celebrates freedom. Unfortunately, from the outset its understanding of freedom has been politically conceived and therefore superficial. Since bondage is really an internal spiritual condition and not something externally imposed, the freedom to "do what you want" is merely the freedom to go on wearing your chains and shackles. Mankind is now being given the opportunity to drink this cup to the lees, and hopefully its disillusionment with false freedom will ignite a new determination to regard the human condition with a more penetrating eye. For outer freedom is a mirage. Real freedom is the outcome of Self-Knowledge. Only when God awakens to His infinite Identity is He free from the dream.

One mark of a spiritual truth is that it contains its opposite; and spiritual freedom is a case of this. One can win freedom only by becoming a slave; the road to mastery lies through servitude. Of course, the world showcases many forms of servitude and many forms of slavery. One of democracy's most vaunted achievements has been the abolition of slavery in the political sense. Yet what distinguishes the slave of love is that his slavery is voluntarily embraced. Indeed, as the glory of the Beloved dawns over his life's horizon, he comes to experience all circumstances and situations as manifestations of the Beloved's will. Since nothing that he can do can add to or detract from what the Beloved has wrought, his passionate longing in every breath is to serve the Beloved's pleasure, so that each act of service might become a tiny cup catching a sun-ray of His wine. Such is the "fortunate slave" whom even the angels envy. Yet the road toward this exalted state is embarked upon the moment one makes the great, transforming, liberating choice, which is voluntarily to surrender one's freedom in order to become a slave of God. This choice, I submit, is the consummation of democracy as it should be, democracy divested of its political trappings. It should be the goal of democracies to entice and encourage each and every one to the threshold of this choice, though of course, the actual determination to step across that threshold is an intimate and private affair between God and the individual concerned. In that intimacy resides true individuality. In that abdication of self-will resides true freedom. And in the community of common enterprise supporting such acts of ultimate heroism resides true democracy.

There is nothing new under the sun, but garments change with the changing season. The dust-way of slavery through love, though it has been known by many names, has always been available to mankind, and in its fundamentals it never changes. Yet democracy's distinctive accent -- in which it registers its special attunement to the needs of the present age -- is that this opportunity should now be for everyone. No longer do priests and kings and philosophers enjoy favored access, for the doors of the wineshop have been flung open for one and all. Even the meanest of outcasts at the bottom of the social hierarchy, even the simplest of children, even the worst of sinners after a lifetime of degradation -- in short, absolutely anyone -- can at any moment fling himself or herself before the feet of the Merciful One and cry out, "You are my Beloved, I give my all to you. Accept me and make me Yours." And in a democracy as democracy should be, this self-offering will be honored as the one free act whose dignity cannot be impeached, the one "vote" that is the birthright of every man and woman. "The people rule" -- but this

can be only when "the people surrender": for God alone can rule, and he rules best who best knows this and tries to efface himself so that God can rule in him uncontested. But now the clarion call to this high road of surrender rings in the ears and hearts of all "the people" at large. It is for each and every one of us among humanity to rise to this opportunity and to accept this invitation that the Beloved has extended.

Democracy as it now exists in the world is not an institution worthy of the Divine Beloved. For too long has a politicized social consciousness been fixated on lesser truths, and in the shadow-fall between these lesser truths the ego's spider has been spinning its webs. If democracy is to become a fitting vehicle for the New Humanity, it needs to be transformed and uplifted to a plane illuminated by the direct light of primal realities. Nothing exists but God, and nothing matters but love for God. It is toward God that the energies of our individual and collective life should be directed. The purpose of governance is to create and preserve a framework in which the Goal of life can be pursued. It is now high time that our social and political conceptions be measured by this standard.