

Democracy Paradox Podcast

Kate Baldwin Explains Why Christianity Fights for Democracy in Africa

(1/21/26)

Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Kate Baldwin. She is an associate professor of political science at Yale University. Kate is the author of the book *Faith in Democracy: The Logic of Church Advocacy for Liberal Democratic Institutions in Africa*.

Before we move onto the interview, I want to introduce a few ideas. First, it's important to acknowledge there is a lot written on the negative relationship between religion and democracy. From Christian Nationalism to Hindu Nationalism, many religious movements have had antidemocratic tendencies. Last year, Katherine Stewart's book *Money, Lies, and God* was a *New York Times Best Seller*. The message is largely that religion is a threat to liberal democracy.

But at the same I have found many inspiring stories of democratic activists who found inspiration in their religious faith. The Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, detailed in his autobiography how he drew courage through his religious faith to stand up to tyranny. Hong Kong democracy activist, Jimmy Lai, is a devout Roman Catholic who draws religious images from his prison cell. Throughout history many have fought for justice, because of their religious faith and devotion.

This brings us to the work of Kate Baldwin. Her research finds religious institutions in Africa are among the most steadfast defenders of democracy. However, their support depends upon institutional incentives rather than ideological or spiritual beliefs. Her argument fits neatly into pluralist theories of democracy. Pluralism finds democracy thrives when there are multiple independent sources of power and authority. Ultimately, Kate finds so long as religious institutions remain independent, they have incentives to speak out against democratic backsliding.

What I like about my conversation with Kate is it gets us away from the pessimistic views of religion. But let me be clear. I'm not naïve. I know religious belief is also used as an excuse to undermine democracy. Nonetheless, I don't like how one-sided the dialogue has become. Hopefully, the episode

introduces new research that allows us to reflect on the meaning and purpose of democracy.

The *Democracy Paradox* is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check out the link in the show notes for more information. But for now... here is my conversation with Kate Baldwin...

Interview

Justin Kempf: Kate Baldwin, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Kate Baldwin: It's such a pleasure to be here.

Justin Kempf: Well, Kate, I've been looking forward to your most recent book, *Faith in Democracy: The Logic of Church Advocacy for Liberal Democratic Institutions in Africa*. I've been looking forward to it for a couple years now, because when you wrote your article in the *Journal of Democracy*, "Democracy's Devout Defenders," you implied that you had a book in the works and so I've been waiting for it. I've been looking for it and was excited to come across it and have a chance to read it and now I'm excited to get the chance to speak to you. So, thanks so much for getting that book out and having written it.

Kate Baldwin: Well, thank you so much. I was also very happy that it is finally in press.

Justin Kempf: Well, Kate, let me start out with a very basic question for you then. The book involves the role of the church in defending democracy and cases where churches do not defend democracy. What steps does a church take when they do defend democracy? What does it look like and can you maybe give us an example?

Kate Baldwin: Yeah, this book is mainly based on my research in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is the region of the world that I know best. The motivation for starting it was the observation that there were all of these actions that churches were taking in order to defend or push for stronger liberal democratic institutions and they can look very different. The extreme example is the Catholic Church in the DRC. It was involved in many different actions towards

the end of Kabilla's second term when it looked like he might not step down willingly. In this case, they provided the framework that legitimated a series of Sunday protests with people turning out to force elections to finally be held.

But in many more cases, they engage more directly with politicians themselves. An example here would be in Zambia, there was a constitutional proposal that was going to increase the power of the president and decrease the power of the legislature and the judiciary. In this case, a coalition of the major churches, including major Protestant and Catholic churches, came together to educate politicians about the contents of this bill, to call them up and tell them 'Don't vote for this bill.' That was really important in ensuring the parliament itself didn't pass this bill, which would've really increased presidential power and resulted in further democratic backsliding in the country.

Justin Kempf: So I know that within the 20th century that the Catholic Church and other Christian churches have fought for democracy, particularly within the Cold War. For instance, in Poland, Pope John Paul II was a very vocal critic of the Communist government and a very vocal critic against the Soviet Union. But in the longer span of history, I don't usually think of churches as being very democratic. I think of them as siding with more traditional authority, resisting reforms that are liberal and also resisting reforms that are democratic. Was that your initial feeling that this was something of a revelation and a surprise to you that churches were fighting for democracy within parts of Africa or was it something that you understood and that was a natural topic for you to research?

Kate Baldwin: I think I came more from the idea that this is a surprise. Especially from the perspective of political science, we typically think of democracy resulting from these interactions between social classes, so it's unions or it's business associations. Although certainly, there are many examples of church leaders engaging in activism for democracy going back to the eighties in Africa as well, I didn't feel we had a very good theoretical explanation for why that occurred, and so that was what motivated me to take a deeper dive into explaining this.

Justin Kempf: What does motivate a church to defend democracy? Why is it that they would take that step to say we're supporting democracy in this case and maybe at the minimum staying quiet or even defending a dictator in some other more extreme cases?

Kate Baldwin: I contend that the reason why churches do this is that liberal democracy is a pretty effective way of ensuring that the state cannot impinge too much on their activities. And so the idea here is that they are trying to

prevent the dominance of the state and they want to have the freedom to engage in their main activities, which are mainly related to evangelization and having protections from the state allows them to do this more effectively. You know, historically, you're right. We think the way the churches try to shore themselves up is to have alliances with particular political parties. But that is not always a great strategy because political parties and political rulers have their own interests, and once they're in power, they may try to reduce some of the church's prerogatives.

In the contemporary context, liberal democratic institutions often offer a pretty good alternative for guaranteeing that the state can't impinge too much on your activities. So, under a liberal democracy... and I think about liberal democracy in sort of a minimalist way. A liberal democracy is a system in which you have both elected leaders and then these elected leaders have some constraints on their power. There are opportunities for influencing the policy process. You don't have just one ruler. You have parliaments and you have other mechanisms for influencing the policy process. You can lobby for your prerogatives that way, but also you have a judicial system.

And so, if you can come to any arrangement with the regime, then there is a much greater chance of it being upheld. For those reasons, I argue that liberal democracy can actually work pretty well to defend the autonomy of churches in engaging in their activities.

Justin Kempf: So your book and really your article, and really all your research seems to be focused primarily on Africa. Do you think that Africa is different than other places in terms of the way Christian churches respond to the state because it feels like the Christian churches might be a little bit more tenuous. I mean, I think of the Catholic church.

For instance, Catholics are very devout within Africa, but at the same time, they're usually not a widespread majority the way that they were within Europe during its first wave of democratization. It's not something that's accepted by nearly a hundred percent of the population. It's something where they're contending with other Protestant churches. They're contending with Islam and they're even contending with some traditional modes of religion, I would assume. Do you think Africa is different than it might be in another place where the Catholic Church or other forms of Christianity might have a more dominant position within society?

Kate Baldwin: I think you are right that due to many of the contextual factors that you've mentioned that churches in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinct from

elsewhere around the world in that during the post-independence period, they really haven't had political party allies on which they can rely to advance their interests. There have not been strong Christian Democratic Parties that have emerged anywhere. I think the reasons for that are precisely as you're describing that churches in Sub-Saharan Africa are working in a very fragmented environment. You have only maybe two countries where one church has a clear majority of the population.

And at the moment of independence, which is when many parties or predecessor parties formed, the church was not considered to be a viable partner for political parties because of how these churches were still all perceived, and in fact, many Europeans were still in leadership positions within them. So, as a nationalist party, you couldn't all align yourself with a church at that time. As a result, you don't have these strong coalitional allies that exist. For that reason, the alternative of trying to lobby for stronger liberal democratic institutions in order to protect yourself was maybe a more obvious strategy. But that said, I think the coalitional allies of churches, Christian Democratic parties, in Latin America and Europe have for a variety of reasons moved further and further away from church interests in recent years, especially with the secularization of the population.

So I think that the idea that liberal democratic institutions can provide input into policy making for diverse voices and that strong judicial systems can protect agreements that you arrange with the state is something that churches around the world may consider as a good strategy for protecting interests, even in places where coalitional allies have historically existed.

Justin Kempf: I kind of challenged you a little bit in terms of churches in Africa, because they're not the dominant religion within any of the countries within Africa. However, it's also surprising that Africa would be a place that we see this happening because my understanding of the Catholic church within Africa is that it's one of the most conservative regions of the Catholic church. So we're seeing people who probably lean towards the political right pushing liberal democracy as a way to defend their interests. It's something that's both heartening and at the same time surprising in some ways.

Kate Baldwin: Yeah, so you're right that for the most part the churches that are engaging in this liberal democratic activism would not be considered liberal in the North American context. I think that is precisely why this also presented itself as an interesting puzzle to explain. Their interests are primarily in further evangelization and spreading their own ideas, which not all of them are going to accord with liberal ideas on things like gender and things like that. But at the

same time, they are concerned about state overreach and they want to ensure that there are these opportunities for themselves to influence the policymaking process through these checks on the power of rulers. In doing that, they create openings that, not just they themselves can use, but that other civil society groups that may or may not be more conservative or liberal can also use.

Justin Kempf: In the book, you make the case that when churches provide education, when they're providing schools, taking care of the poor, when they actually have functions that they're providing, the state can actually step into and actually interfere with that. Those are the cases when they're most likely to defend liberal democracy. Why is it that the church is engaging in some of those activities in environments that might be the most dangerous to do so I would imagine.

Kate Baldwin: So you've nicely summarized the argument, but just to go back to that, we'll break to the second part of your question. As I've been saying, this is why liberal democracy might work to defend church activities and then how we explain variation in which churches get involved and which don't. Church activities are differently exposed to risk of being suppressed by the state. The state has more regulatory tools to restrict some activities than others. In cases where churches are doing things like education, healthcare, things that the state also does in the contemporary period are easier for the state to regulate or even nationalize those activities in the extreme. So, there's more of a risk of an unchecked ruler taking over those activities as compared to focusing on doing evangelization during Sunday sermons.

This is something that is actually very hard for the state to crack down on in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially if you're a church that has been around for more than a few decades. It's almost impossible for the state to have enough coercive power to crack down on that. If you're doing things like education in particular, the state can do things much more easily to take over these activities, to regulate the kind of education that's going on in these schools. That's what creates autocratic risk and it's these churches with greater autocratic risk that engage in more activism.

Justin Kempf: At the same time, anyone that lives in the United States is familiar with Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals. I mean, it's not something that the Catholic church is doing just in Africa. But at the same time, I would imagine that in the most brutal dictatorships, those are environments where it's extremely difficult to try to provide those types of services for their congregations. And to be honest, my experience with Catholic schools has been that students are not necessarily always Catholic. They're providing services for

the community as a whole, oftentimes, especially with hospitals. So why is it that they continue to provide those services instead of pulling back when a government becomes incredibly repressive?

Kate Baldwin: So that's a great point. There are real costs to these kinds of adjustment strategies. In cases where a Mobutu regime comes in and they want to take over the Catholic schools, it's not so easy for the church to just pivot away from that and say, 'Sure, you take the schools. We'll engage in other kinds of evangelization activities.' Typically, those schools have served as meeting places for their other activities. It's true that the populations that they serve are very religiously diverse, but the teachers themselves are often core to their evangelization activities. In addition, there's strong expectations from the people who have patronized those schools and they usually are quite popular. So, there's a lot of pressure to maintain these schools. It's not so easy for them to pivot.

That is why if you've done this historically in the past, you want to continue to defend this activity. You're willing to defend liberal democracy in order to continue to do these activities like healthcare and education that you have historically done. On the schools, themselves, one thing I also look at in the book is the effects of attending religious schools rather than secular schools at moments when there have been transfers of these schools in Zambia and Tanzania in particular. Overall, the church has an interest in people attending their schools because they are more religious when they go to these schools in the long run. And so even though they are serving more diverse population, it helps to ensure that people grow up to have stronger religious beliefs.

Justin Kempf: I think of churches and hospitals being very connected to the Catholic church, whether it be within the United States, whether it's in Europe, even in Africa and other places. I don't normally think of those as associated with Protestant, Evangelical or Pentecostal churches. I know that sometimes they are, but it's not something I normally associate with them. Do you feel that there's a big difference in terms of the way that Protestant or non-Catholic churches pursue religion in terms of adopting these different services compared to the Catholic church and does that affect their defense of democracy within Africa?

Kate Baldwin: So, when you think about the Protestant church in Sub-Saharan Africa, it's a very diverse church and it's often helpful to make a distinction between mainline protestants. So, it would be Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptists, and then those Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches, and also some African independent churches. The mainland Protestant churches engage

in a lot of social service provision as well. I think that's also partly a colonial legacy in that they also received a lot of funding in the colonial period to start schools and hospitals, and so they've continued to do that.

Interestingly, even some newer Pentecostal churches in Sub-Saharan Africa do provide a fairly large number of schools compared to elsewhere in the world. In part because I think in these contexts, there's become an expectation that this is something that churches do. For these Pentecostal Churches, if people who are coming to their church say the Anglicans are all providing a school, then they also have more pressure to provide these schools in a way they don't necessarily do in other regions of the world in the same numbers.

Justin Kempf: Now, what happens when the autocratic government steps in and says, we like what you're doing. We're going to provide you the resources to be able to manage these schools, these hospitals. We're going to let you continue to run them, but we're going to provide the money to do it and maybe just occasionally have a say within how you make your decisions. What happens when that's the case? I mean, do they continue to speak out or are they a little bit more reluctant?

Kate Baldwin: I think that many church leaders recognize this to be a very tricky offer. Many church leaders I spoke to in Ghana would use this phrase, whoever is paying the piper calls the tune. They are very concerned that once they start taking more money from the state to support this, they are simultaneously going to lose some influence over their schools and so this can be something that in some circumstances they're reluctant to do. But obviously when there's big financial crises that can also be an attractive thing to consider. In general, the more churches can rely on independent financing for schools, so where parents still pay a lot of school fees, those are the churches that are most active in and speaking out in defense of liberal democratic institutions.

When they become highly dependent on the state for financing at their institutions, that can depress the activism. In most cases they do receive some funding from the state. It's when they get this very, very high level of financing and are almost completely dependent on the state that that can suppress their willingness to engage in activism because they are concerned that the institutions will fall apart if the funding is removed.

Justin Kempf: So, in terms of the changes within the church that we've seen within recent years, have you seen that a change in the Pope has had any difference in terms of how the churches, like the Catholic church in particular, has actually responded to liberal democracy? I mean, the Catholic Church

within recent years has had some pretty significant changes from Pope Benedict to Francis and now to Leo. Do you see that there's any effect on political behavior within the Catholic Church itself as the message changes coming from the Vatican?

Kate Baldwin: Pope John Paul II's message was very, very important in the first wave of democratic activism by churches in the late 1980s in Africa. You can see in their writings. They are all referring back to his messages and encyclicals. That was really very important. In more recent activism, I feel it is a little bit more determined by local circumstances. Now that the precedent was set in the eighties, this is something that the Catholic Church should engage in, that that is now available for any Catholic Church, so it's more dependent on local circumstances whether they actually engage in the activism and what's going on locally at a particular moment, rather than these shifts in Popes in recent years.

Justin Kempf: Why'd you focus on Christianity? I mean, Africa has different religions throughout the continent. Islam is one that has a very strong footing within the African continent. Why did you focus exclusively on Christian religions rather than considering Islam or other faith traditions?

Kate Baldwin: So at the end of the day, this is a book about the engagement of national level churches with the state. It's a pretty high level story and other religions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Islam and also more traditional religions, are much more decentralized. They do not tend to have the same national platform with which to engage with the state. They also have a different history of social service provision. So certainly, there is a lot of Islamic education that takes place in Sub-Saharan Africa, but only in more recent years has that really happened through formal schooling. Both the way that democratic activism takes place within Islamic communities and the factors that trigger it are likely quite different. So that was the reason for narrowing the scope to focus only on Christian churches.

Justin Kempf: Now, some of the Christian churches are decentralized as well. In particular, I think of Pentecostal churches as being highly decentralized. Do you find that they behave more like the Islamic faiths within the region or do they behave differently because of the Christian tradition?

Kate Baldwin: As an empirical matter, I focus only on large churches in my study, and so the churches have to be at least 5% of the country, which does not totally exclude Pentecostal churches. There are surely a decent number that do meet that threshold. But the idea here is I'm focusing on churches as institutions.

So, the scope conditions for the argument I'm making is that there is a church beyond one leader. If you have a really, really fragmented church that is really, really small, there might not be much institutionalization beyond one leader. I think that that's a very different kind of institution. It does not have an institutional interest beyond that one leader.

The opportunities for co-optation are much greater than in a case where you have a Catholic, a main line Protestant, even a large Pentecostal church that has this institutionalization where all of a sudden the president could make an offer to one particular leader. But there are other leaders and they have an incentive usually, an institutional interest, beyond one leader and so that creates more interest in defending church assets more generally. So, I think the dynamics are different.

Justin Kempf: But do you think leaders make a difference within these environments, or do you think that the institutional incentives override any decisions that individual leaders might make?

Kate Baldwin: Obviously leaders always play some role, but I think the institutional incentives are paramount. That is certainly the argument I'm making in the book and I think what you can see in some of the cases is you can have a very brave and courageous leader take some position, but if they get too far ahead of what is judged by the rest of the bishops or the church more generally as to what's good for the church, sometimes they get pushed out. Similarly, you can have a leader who's a little conservative and if they're not willing to advocate for their interests, then sometimes they get pushed out in a different way.

So, I do think there are mechanisms in the Catholic Church in particularly, but also in these large Protestant churches for making sure that institutional interests are considered in both avoiding leaders who are too activist in a way that puts the church potentially at greater risk or not activist in a way that puts them at risk in a different way.

Justin Kempf: What about bottom-up demands where the congregations might have expectations for priests, for bishops to make statements about democracy, even if the institutional incentives aren't there? Let's say that the government is providing an overwhelming support in terms of the schools, in terms of the hospitals, and the church feels that they can't really say anything, but the people who go to the church, who belong to the church really expect them to do something. How do they deal with that kind of tension?

Kate Baldwin: Bottom-up demands are not that important in generating this kind of activism and, in fact, it's the activism by the leaders that in some cases really helps to mobilize people to take action. In the past couple of decades where in moments of democratic backsliding it can be really hard for citizens to decide how to judge single acts by the government. To give an example from the case of Zambia, there was an incident in 2017 where then opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema was thrown in jail for what was a traffic violation, failing to pull over for the presidential motorcade. Interestingly, the Afrobarometer was doing a survey at that time and you can see that this anti-democratic act of throwing the opposition leader into jail on treason charges for a small act didn't initially change views of how democratic their country was.

But then a couple weeks later, the churches come out with statements that says in a democracy, we don't throw our opposition leaders in jail. Then you start to see in the polling data, people are digesting that this is not a democratic thing to do. I think especially in the context of democratic backsliding where there can be all of these little actions that are difficult for people to interpret, you need to have institutions that coordinate people, that help to frame particular actions as anti-democratic. That's why I think we do need to have institutions whether it's churches or other civil society organizations leading and coordinating activism.

Justin Kempf: So, you're saying that leaders in institutions are driving public opinion and even driving opposition to regime actions that are anti-democratic?

Kate Baldwin: Certainly, I think it had a really important role in coordinating it overall. I mean, we know that data suggests that people in Sub-Saharan Africa value democracy a lot. They want to live in democracies, but in interpreting single acts by an autocratic regime. I think that it is really important that we have this framing.

Justin Kempf: Now when churches do take pro-democratic positions, do you think it draws different types of people into the church that maybe wouldn't have been drawn into them previously?

Kate Baldwin: That's a really interesting question and I don't have an empirical answer for that. It's something that would be really interesting to look at in the long run. Anecdotally, it's interesting that in many countries, churches speak first and foremost to their members, but they seem to also be able to speak to other people. Sometimes they just become trusted, because they have an interest in defending liberal democracy. The statements that they make become quite credible, not only to their own members, but to people who don't belong to their churches as well.

One of my former students was doing interviews in the DRC and there was this individual who was saying, 'I'm a Protestant, but on politics I follow the Catholics.' It clearly hadn't induced him to convert. But they are able to speak to people outside of their churches and whether it significantly changes who belongs to churches. It's a really interesting question that I can't answer right now.

Justin Kempf: Do you think maybe it draws different types of people into leadership though? I can imagine certain types of people wanting to be leading a church if they think that they're leading a movement, as opposed to if they think that they're complicit in terms of how the government's acting.

Kate Baldwin: That is also a really great question. I will say that at the end of the day, this is a story about the church engaging in activism for liberal democracy in order to do other things. So, even for the most courageous church leaders who have put themselves out there the most, I don't think any of them would primarily identify as pro-democracy activists. They would identify as church leaders. And so, I don't know if it really changes the people who are interested in joining church leadership.

Justin Kempf: We've been talking a lot about the church defending democracy. What are some examples where a church falls short, where they have the incentives not to defend liberal democracy and they don't? What are some examples of that? How did that play out?

Kate Baldwin: One example I might give would be the Catholic Church in Benin, which people often talk about as being really, really involved in brokering the transition to multi-party democracy in the early 1990s. So, a lot of people think this is a church that has this history of political engagement. But I think mediating a transition is a little bit different from engaging in activism for a change towards more liberal democratic institutions. In this case, there were not a lot of Catholic schools in Benin compared to other parts of Africa and in the contemporary period, they are very few in numbers. So, as there's been backsliding in Benin in the past decade, there really just hasn't been that much advocacy by the Catholic Church.

Of course, at moments where it looks like there's going to be a crisis, they'll make statements about wanting peace and things like that. But there isn't the push for reforms for how elections are held, legislative power is respected, you know, and these things are not happening the same way they've happened elsewhere. So that would be an example.

Justin Kempf: When studying this phenomenon and trying to learn about the role of churches and its relationship to democracy, what have you learned about democracy itself? What has it really taught you about the meaning and purpose of democracy and maybe even liberal democracy?

Kate Baldwin: One thing I would take away from the book is that the group of people who have an interest in defending liberal democracy might be broader than many academics, and maybe even liberals more generally would've shown. I think that's important to consider and it is true in this instance that some of these church advocates for liberal democratic institutions in Africa may also simultaneously be pushing policy decisions that are considered to be less liberal on gender issues on LGBTQ+ issues. So, on the one hand, that is a tension, but on the other hand, so far as they are effective in defending these liberal democratic institutions, the institutions themselves create opportunities for other groups to potentially use legislatures, use judiciaries to advance their own goals, and so I think that that is what's really powerful about an institutional solution.

Institutions are available to a wide variety of people. It's not a personal relationship. It's an institutional relationship. I think that that's what makes them so valuable.

Justin Kempf: So, I know that the book makes a very strong institutional argument, but at the same time, religion is something that's very personal to people. It can convince people to do things that many other incentives wouldn't normally inspire somebody to do. Do you find that people that are highly devout, very religious, that then become defenders of liberal democracy, do you think that they treat it differently at all? Are they more inspired? Are they fighting harder because they connect it to something that's so personal and so different than something like a trade union or something else like that?

Kate Baldwin: Certainly, it takes a lot of courage and patience to be at the front line of fighting for liberal democracy around the world. But I do think that for a large number of people, religion can provide a source of support there. I don't necessarily think it's the only source of support, but it can be useful. On the other hand, if people's views on their own religiosity can change over their life. Right now I'm thinking about the example of Robert Mugabe, who I think by all accounts was an extremely devout Catholic, especially during the decade he was in jail and then when he comes to power is really quite interested in having all power for himself and quickly comes into conflict with the Catholic Church and his desire to dominate the entire political scene in Zimbabwe.

That's why I lean more on the institutional rather than the personal explanation. But it's not to say that it can't be extraordinarily powerful at particular moments for particular individuals.

Justin Kempf: Well, Kate, thanks so much for joining me today. I really do want to recommend your book again. It is called *Faith in Democracy: The Logic of Church Advocacy for Liberal Democratic Institutions in Africa*. It's a really great read. It falls into a genre that I've seen that's connecting the intersection between religion and democracy. I've seen a few books do that really even over just the past year. So, thank you so much for joining me today. Thank you so much for writing it.

Kate Baldwin: Thank you, Justin. It's been a real pleasure to chat with you.