

American political culture, a comparatively solid crust of common language and rules of thumb, floats on a moving magma of unresolved debate between two contradictory views of what the state is about. Divergent attitudes toward the moral meaning of the electoral process follow normally from these divergent implicit definitions.

Since the fourth century, the dominant style of historical analysis by morally concerned thinkers has been to see Caesar as God's primary instrument. If history moves in favorable ways, it is seen in that Christian sovereigns find their regimes being blessed by peace and prosperity. If God sees fit to chastise, we see it in the infidel armies. Since the churchman-historian Eusebius and the theologian-of-history Augustine, the discernible movement of God's will for the earthly "city" is carried by the civil hierarchy more evidently than by the body of believers.

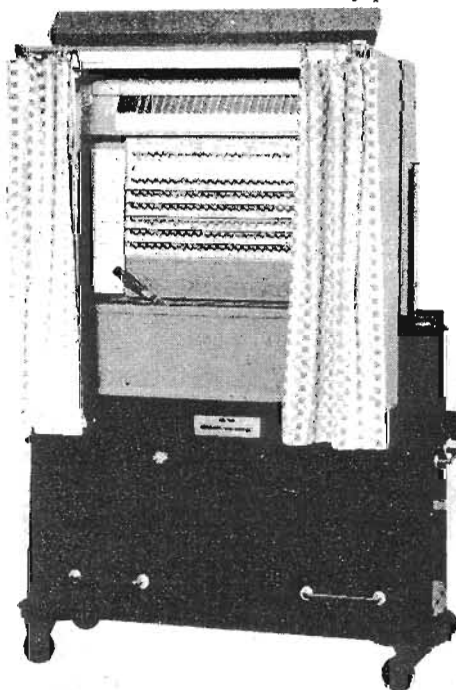
One meaning of democracy in modern times is that this high vision of sovereignty-under-God has been universalized. Renaissance, enlightenment, and the revolutions from 1689 to 1848 reshaped this view in numerous ways:

- The unit called "people" is now no longer Christendom or the Holy Roman Empire, but one "nation" defined in terms of dynasty, geography, language, bureaucracy, and a shared interpretation of their recent common history.
- The moral values represented by the "nation" need no longer be explicitly Christian, yet they have similar "religious" overtones and similarly claim to unify the nation/people in a morally transcendent cause ("liberty, equality, fraternity" or "blood and soil").
- It is argued that the advent of popular franchise has transferred integrally to "the people" the attributes of the former king-by-divine-right. It is now said of *populus*, as it had been said of the king (cf. the standard pagan acclamation formula in Acts 12:22), that his voice is the voice of God. It is now said of the "people", as Louis XIV had said of himself, "I am the State". Yet this "people" can be perceived and can act only through a regime. Lincoln told the crowd at Gettysburg that that new reality was so integrally incarnate in his government that if the Union had lost the war against the South, "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" might have perished from the earth.

Thus for two centuries they have been telling us that we, the people, were

governing ourselves, and we have been believing it. Through our elected representatives, who speak for us, we translate into public policy our ideals and restrain one another's selfishness. If we don't like what they do in our name, we can get into the same arena to change things. It is both our privilege and our duty to do so. It follows that the biennial and quadrennial electoral events are the major landmarks in "the people's" history, and that to militate within this process as candidate, party worker and voter is to discharge a near-divine civil mandate.

The activism and protest of the 1960's was still at home within this inherited idealism. The civil rights movement appealed to the egalitarian potential of the federal constitution against the racist laws of the states, and the "higher law" usually came through in the crunch in the form of a Kennedy phone



The other view is the only one that was conceivable for Christians in the first centuries. It is the explicit understanding of the New Testament, despite the efforts of scholars to drive a wedge between Jesus and Paul or between Revelation 13 and Romans 13. It is the only view which today makes sense for the vast majority of the world's population whose forms of government are moving not from the North Atlantic democratic heritage but from other pasts. And it is the view which will increasingly make sense in the North Atlantic world as well, as our realism deepens and the vestiges of post-Constantinian humanist idealism crumble.

The exercise of government is by nature oligarchical and domineering. Democracy does not differ from other forms of government fundamentally, but only in shading. Democratic safe-

call. Even the more strident protest against Viet Nam appealed to America's higher self-image: it is only meaningful to scold the man in the White House for his callousness or his cheating if one holds him responsible to do the right.

It is salutary that the Christian-in-the-street, especially the socially concerned believer, has discovered through recent months some of the cruder truths that political scientists and practicing power brokers have known all along. The classic high view of the urgency of the electoral process is unexplainable in terms of empirical social science. It is not the case that most elections are crucial or that my vote matters much. We must find the roots of this myth and rediscover the alternative.

The National Ritual

Biblical realism and the elections...

by John Howard Yoder.

guards (wherein constitutionality, free speech, and the separation of powers are more important than the vote) mitigate the oppressiveness, and they facilitate the replacement of one oligarchy by another with less violence than in other systems. But they do not fundamentally change the meaning of "lording it" over others. When the myth of rule by the people combines with short elective terms to undercut continuity and foster demagoguery and the spoils system, some kinds of exploitation in democracy may even be worse than in other systems.

Jesus does not condemn the fact of "lording" as if it could cease to be. He is no anarchist. He does not promise that his coming, or the presence of the church, or the evolution of democracy, will change the meaning of ruling. Nor does he approve of this arrangement as providential or as the order of creation, divinely mandated, as Christians since Constantine have done. He speaks only empirically: "that's the way it is." Our decisions about whether to try to be lords in our turn, i.e., about whether to believe in "popular sovereignty" as a divine mandate to us all, like Jesus' own decision to be not lord but servant, belong in the context of this realism about power.

The exercise of lordship always makes moral claims for itself. Jesus does not say that the rulers *are* benefactors but that they claim to be, undergirding their control with a scaffolding of moral justification. This is as true of all dictatorships, of right and left, as it is of democracies, in that the moral claims of the contenders in the power process (party identities, platforms, campaign promises, appeals to consensus backing) deepen the dialogue between rulers and ruled.

Within the realism about the power game which these words of Jesus reflect, we can be sober about Washington and about the electoral process. The vote does not mean that we are governing ourselves. It is not true in most cases that the concerned person's first duty is to push, in the party and at the polls, so that his particular minority view may poll just a bit stronger, and have a better chance of gaining ground four or eight years hence. Christians in the North Atlantic world must develop a chastened relativism about democracy to save us from scolding our brothers under other regimes for not being rebels, and from pitying them.

If the vote does not mean that we are ruling ourselves, then we can rejoice that it does mean that the rulers regularly consult their subjects. A system in which the subjects are consulted, and in which the oligarchy

can be changed non-violently, is better than other systems, so we shall participate gratefully, though with low expectations, in the plebiscite, to the extent that real options, such as real platform integrity or technical competence of major figures, are at stake.

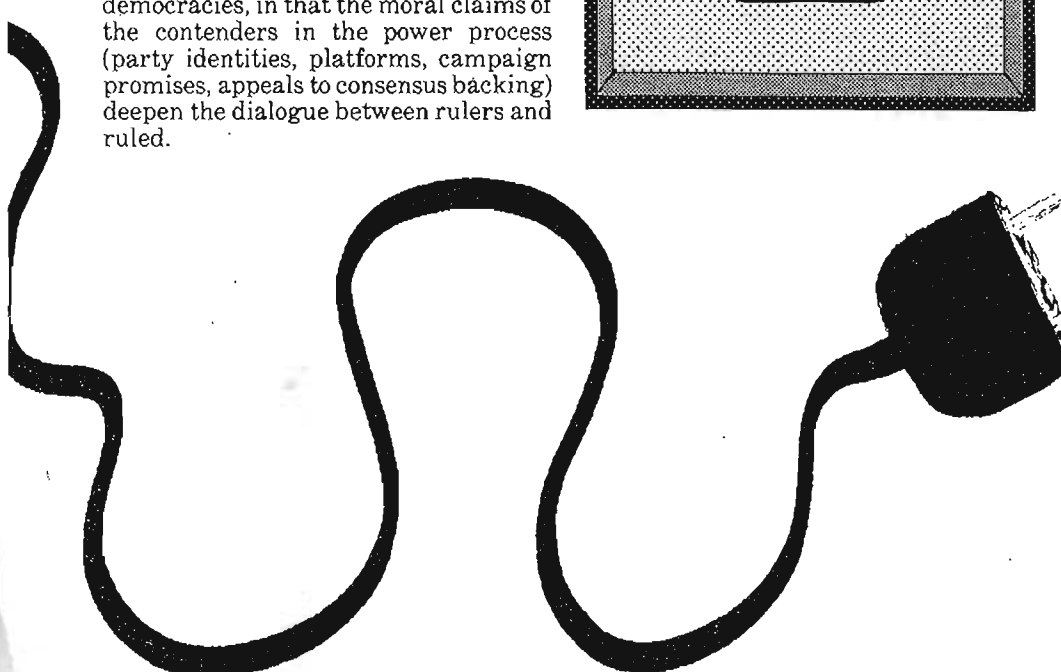
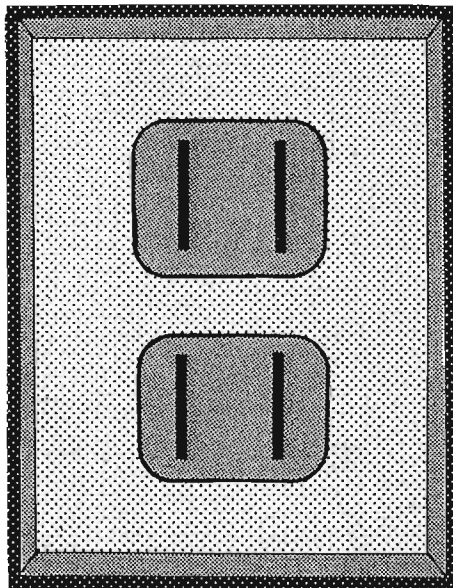
Within these thus lowered expectations as to real control, we can be less tense about which side to take, for the criteria which guide us may be more varied. We need no longer assume that as little Constantines we must always decide on "The Right." Other things being equal, we may vote for the weaker side in order to counteract the winner's margin of selfrighteousness. We may vote for Nixon in 1968 on the grounds that the country needs the humiliation to which his proud nationalism must lead. We may ask to be counted against the system by abstention or by a throw-away vote, supporting a hopeless cause like Prohibition or Dr. Spock.

Each of these approaches seems "irresponsible" within the standard "of the people by the people" myth, yet each may make sense in the context of verbal explanation and integration in non-electoral styles of witness such as conscientious discharge of local vocational duties including willingness conscientiously to resign therefrom, pilot enterprises with alternative solutions, occasional nonviolent obstruction, prophetic pastoring of honest persons in high places, lobbying for the unrepresented "widow and orphan," and the molding of consciousness through information.

We shall remain open to the possibility of single-issue vote where Christians across the nation ought to unite with one voice, but we shall not expect this case to be frequent.

We shall expect more (relative) effect, as witness and as power-for-change, from the non-electoral modes of presence than from the franchise.

To go the polls is then not, as the Hutterite and the hippie on one side and the superpatriot on the other contend, a ritual affirmation of moral solidarity with the system. It is one way, one of the weaker and vaguer ways, to speak truth to power. We may do well to support this channel with our low-key participation, since a regime where it functions is a lesser evil (all other things being equal) than one where it does not, but our discharge of this civil duty will be more morally serious if we take it less seriously.



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