Cath. World v. 192

The Emerging World of the '60's:

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Russell Kirk

The Best Form of Government

Is democracy really the best form of government for the underdeveloped countries? This is an important question today.

Russell Kirk says that Americans are fools when they ignore history. Governments, he insists, are the outgrowth of religion, morals, philosophy, and social experience. Hence no one form of government can be considered the best: "Good government is not of uniform design."

He is the author of THE CONSERVATIVE MIND *(Regnery, 1953) and* A PROGRAM FOR CONSERVATIVES *(Regnery, 1954) and has recently written a long article on the present state of American Protestantism, which is scheduled to appear in a forthcoming issue of* FORTUNE *magazine.*

The editors of THE CATHOLIC WORLD *consider "The Best Form of Government" to be a valuable contribution to our series on the problems of "The Emerging World of the '60's." Next month* THE CATHOLIC WORLD *will have an article by the former news editor of the London* DAILY WORKER, *Douglas Hyde, who has recently visited many of the underdeveloped countries and pondered their problems at close range.*

POLITICS BEING THE art of the possible, I venture to suggest here the general lineaments of the kind of government which seems reasonably consonant with true human happiness. I think that in this problem we need to refer to two principles. The first principle is that a good government allow the better and more energetic natures among a people to fulfill their promise, while ensuring that these persons shall not tyrannize over the mass of men. The second principle is that in every state the best possible — or least baneful—form of government is one in accord with the traditions and prescriptive ways of its people. Beyond these two grand principles, there is no rule of politics which may be applied, uniformly and universally, with any success.

Men are not created equal, Mr. David Riesman remarks somewhere: they are created different. This recognition by an eminent latter-day liberal of the necessity for rethinking our postulates about human nature in politics is typical of the growing awareness, among the livelier minds of our generation, that variety—not uniformity—gives any nation vigor and hope. Thus my first principle of good government — in which I am much indebted to Professor Eric Voegelin—takes on some urgency in our time. For the overmastering tendency of the past century and a half has been social egalitarianism. "One man is as good as another, or maybe a little better": this secular dogma has done mischief to the preservation or establishment of good government. Equality in political power —established out of expediency—has tended to lead to equality of condition, established out of deference to ideology. "Everyone belongs to everyone else"—this is the motto of society in Huxley's *Brave New World;* and that society is a life in death. For these assumptions fly in the face of nature. One man is not as good as another, and everyone does not belong to everyone else. The first assumption is the denial of Christian morals, the second the denial of the Christian idea of personality.

AYE, MEN ARE created different; and a government which ignores this ineluctable law becomes an unjust government, for it sacrifies nobility to mediocrity; it pulls down the aspiring natures to satisfy the inferior natures. This degradation injures human happiness in two ways. First, it frustrates the natural longings of talented and energetic persons to realize their potentialities; it leaves the better men of its time dissatisfied with themselves and their nation, and they sink into boredom; it impedes any improvement of the moral, intellectual and material condition, in terms of quality, of mankind. Second, it adversely affects the happiness, late or soon, of the mass of men; for, deprived of responsible leadership and the example of the aspiring natures, the innumerable men and women destined to walk in the ordinary ways of life suffer in the tone of their civilization, and in their material condition. A government which makes a secular dogma of the Christian mystery of moral equality is, in short, hostile to human happiness.

Remember that there are two parts to this first political principle of mine: not only should a just government recognize the rights of the more talented natures, but it should recognize the desire of the mass of men not to be disturbed and bullied by these aspiring talents. The prudent statesman en-

THE CATHOLIC WORLD

deavors to maintain a balance between these two claims. There have been ages in which the aristocracy — natural or hereditary — has usurped the whole governance of life, demanding of the average man a tribute and an obedience that deprive the majority of their natural desire to live by routine and prescription, and often damaging their material interests. Such a regime, indifferent to the happiness of the majority, is as bad a government as a domination indifferent to the claims of the talented minority. But nowadays the danger is not that the stronger natures—and I refer to moral and intellectual qualities, not merely to domineering and acquisitive abilities — will lord it over an abused majority; rather, the curse of our time is what Ortega called the "revolt of the masses," the threat that mediocrity may trample underfoot every just claim for the elevation of mind and character, every decent talent for leadership and material improvement. Therefore the sagacious statesman of our age must be more acutely concerned with the preservation of the rights of the talented minority than with the extension of the rights of the crowd.

FOR A GREAT while the conservative has tried to preach this truth, though of late years he has spoken, more often than not, to deaf ears. The swollen empire of a leaden collectivism, however, now frightens intelligent liberals to defend the claims of the talented natures. Professor R. M. MacIver, an influential political scientist and rationalistic liberal, has an interesting aside in his recent book, *Academic Freedom in Our Time*. Democracy in the United States, he writes, "has been associated with a kind of loose egalitarianism, a leveling of standards to the measure of the 'common man.'" This is a false premise, he continues, mischievous to the scholar and the nation; and it is connected with a great misunderstanding, the notion that equality in citizenship implies equality in everything. "Since the many never rule, and since any form of government — monarchy, dictatorship, or any sort of oligarchy—may be in accord with the will of the majority, and even of their suffrage, democracy cannot be identified along this line. The distinctive feature of democracy is not the rule of the majority but the fundamental rights it assures to the minority."

Whether or not Mr. MacIver is right concerning "the distinctive feature of democracy," he touches here upon the threat of dull mediocrity to all the higher achievements of humankind. A domination which identifies popular government with equality of moral worth, equality of intellect and equality of condition is a bad government; and thinking conservatives and thinking liberals ought to put their heads together that they may resist this tendency. For a good government respects the desire of unusual characters to find expression for their gifts. It respects the right of the contemplative to his solitude. It respects the right of the practical leader to take an honest initiative in the affairs of the commonwealth.

It respects the right of the inventor to his ingenuity, the right of the manufacturer or merchant to the rewards of his industry, the right of the thrifty man to retain his savings and bequeath them to his heirs. It respects such desires and rights, this good government, because in the enjoyment of these rights, and in the performance of the duties to which these rights are joined, men fulfill themselves; and a considerable measure of justice—"to each his own"—is achieved.

Now the balance between the claims of the unusual natures and the ordinary natures, in some ages overthrown to the advantage of aspiring talents, today is injured by the extortionate demands of a doctrinaire egalitarianism. Communist Russia is the most thorough example of the triumph of this degradation of the democratic dogma. I am aware that Soviet Russia is governed by a clique of party intriguers and successful administrators, paying little more than lip service to their own secular dogma of egalitarianism; but this does not alter the fact that, obedient to the ideology of dialectical materialism, the Soviets have suppressed the claims of the nobler natures to do the work natural to them. What we see in the new elite of Communism is not a predominance of the higher natures, but a domination of Jacobin fanatics—devoid, nearly all of them, of high moral endowments. This is the regime of a host of squalid oligarchs. Among them are no prophets and no priests; the only qualification for entry into this elite is ruthless cunning in the struggle for pure power. Not the higher natures, but the lower, in terms of moral attainment and independence of mind, are recognized and rewarded by the Soviets.

IT IS NOT American "democracy," as such, that stands at the antipodes from the Soviet undertaking: American moral and political tradition, rather, and American constitutionalism, are the forces of resistance. It is possible for a political democracy to attain a tolerable balance between the claims of the talented natures and the rights of the average natures. But it is also possible for a monarchy to achieve that balance, or an aristocracy, or some other form of government. Respect for natural and prescriptive rights is peculiar to no single set of political institutions. But the kind of government which seems most likely to appreciate and defend the claims of either interest in the commonwealth is what Aristotle called a "polity," a balancing and checking of classes in society. The United States remains, in high degree, a polity: *pure* democracy was not intended by the founders of this Republic, and it has not yet triumphed among us. It ought not to triumph. For the good government does not grow up from mere protection of entrenched property, nor yet from the "victory of the proletariat."

As one of its principles, the good government has always the safeguarding of two bodies of rights: the rights of the aspiring talents and the rights of the settled citizenry. No ideology (and ideology, strictly defined, means a body of

a priori secular doctrines, fanatically held, that are meant to create the Terrestial Paradise) will serve to maintain this balance. A reflective conservatism is the negation of ideology, for it denies the possibility of realizing the Terrestial Paradise: it settles for man as he is, substantially; it aspires only to reconcile for their common good the chief interests in a nation.

If it accomplishes this reconciliation, a government has brought its people as close to social happiness as they are likely to come. The good government lets people find their own happiness. It permits the gifted natures to find their happiness in putting their talents to work; it permits the majority, who prefer security and routine and quiet satisfactions to the excitements of risk and discovery, to find their way to tranquillity. Within the bounds set by decency and good order, this prudent government leaves every man to consult his own humor. It does not propose to force the happiness of the statistical Bentham upon the romantic Coleridge; for one man's happiness, even among the talented natures, is another man's misery. By a salutary neglect, this government allows private happiness to take care of itself. We may call this government "democracy," if you like, though I think we would be twisting the word. I call it simply a government which prefers principle to ideology, variety to uniformity, balance to omnipotence.

NOW FOR MY second principle of good government: that it accords with the traditions and prescriptive ways of a people. This is the view of Montesquieu and Burke. A good government is not an artificial creation — no invention of coffeehouse philosophers, got up upon *a priori* abstractions to suit the mood of the hour. Governments hastily designed upon principles of pure reason ordinarily are wretched dominations. The longest-lived of these poor governments has been that of modern France, which never has recovered from the hacking and chopping that the constitution of French society received at the hands of rigid metaphysicians from 1789 onward. Very much shorter, because they had a smaller reservoir of tradition and strength to exhaust, were the artificial governments set up in central and eastern Europe after the First World War. Now the good government, very different from these, is the growth of many centuries of social experience. It has been called organic; I prefer the analogy "spiritual." Trusting to the wisdom of our ancestors and the instinct of the species, it puts its faith in precedent, prescription, historical trial and error, compromise and consensus of opinion over generations. Not infatuated with neatness, it prefers the strength and majesty of the Gothic style. The government of Britain, because of its age and success, is our best example of this type. And the government of the United States is nearly as good an instance of the triumph of this principle, that society is an august continuity and essence, held together by veneration, prescription and tradition.

Nominally, of course, we created our federal Constitution by deiberate action, within the space of a few months. But in actuality that formal Constitution, and our state constitutions, chiefly put down on paper what already existed and was accepted in public opinion: beliefs and institutions long established in the colonies, and drawn from centuries of English experience with parliaments, the common law and the whole complex social order. Respect for precedent and prescription governed the minds of the founders of this republic. We appealed to the prescriptive liberties of Englishmen, not to *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. The philosophical and moral structure of our civil order was rooted in the Christian faith, not in the worship of Reason.

THE SUCCESS OF the American and British governments, I am suggesting, is produced by their preference for growth, experience, tradition and prescription over a closet-metaphysician's grand design. The great lessons of politics are taught a people through their historical experience; no nation can sever itself from its past and still prosper, for the dead alone give us energy; and whatever constitution has been long accepted in a nation, that constitution is the best its people can expect. True, that constitution may be improved, or restored; but if it is discarded like wastepaper, every order in society suffers terribly.

The American and British constitutions have worked very well; but, being living essences, they cannot easily be transplanted to other states. One of the cardinal errors of the French revolutionaries was their endeavor to remake France upon the model of what they thought English politics to be. Though any people have something to learn from the experience of any other people, there is no single form of government calculated to work successfully everywhere. For the political institutions of a people grow out of their religion, their moral habits, their economy, even their literature; political institutions are merely part of an intricate structure of civilization, the roots of which, very old, go infinitely deep. Attempts to impose borrowed institutions upon an alien culture generally are disastrous, though it may require some decades, or even generations, for the experiment to run its unlucky course. Randolph of Roanoke, in opposing Clay's design for encouraging revolutions upon the American pattern, cried out in his sardonic way, "You can no more make liberty out of Spanish matter than you can make a frigate out of a bundle of pine saplings." Though this is somewhat hard upon the Spaniards, it remains true that parliamentary government, Anglo-American style, rarely has been secure in Spanish lands; Spaniards' liberty, when they enjoy it, is secured by different institutions and customs.

Yet still our political theory and our foreign policy are plagued by the delusion of the coming universal ascendancy of American institutions and manners — the American liberal's conviction, in George Santayana's phrase, that "the nun

must not remain a nun, and China shall not keep its wall." We forever expect to find liberal, gradualist, middle-of-the-road, temperate, rational, parliamentary-minded political factions—quite like forward-looking Americans, though perhaps not so even-tempered—in China, or Morocco, or Croatia, or Senegal: people who will disavow either "feudalism" or Marxism, behaving as if they had gone to some American state college, if not to Princeton or Vassar. Then we fail to find such people, and grow vexed; but our hopes spring eternal. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Marshal Tito, President Syngman Rhee, Colonel Nasser, fall from our favor; they have strayed from the paths of righteousness; they have not been good Americans. We never are, but always are to be, blessed with some statesman or party, east of Suez, who will have enough common sense to install the American Way immediately.

THIS FOND HOPE is the illusion of a political universalism. For individuals, as Chesterton said, are happy only when they are their own potty little selves; and this is as true of nations as it is of individuals. To impose the American Constitution upon all the world would not render all the world happy; quite to the contrary, our Constitution would work in few lands, and would make most men miserable in short order. States, like men, must find their private paths to order and justice and freedom; and usually those paths are ancient and twisting ways, and their signposts are Tradition and Prescription. Without the legal institutions, rooted in common and Roman law, from which it arose, the American constitutional system would be unworkable. Well, take up this constitutional system, abstractly, and set it down, as an exotic plant, in Persia or Guinea or the Congo, where the common law (English style) and the Roman law are unknown and the bed of justice rests upon the Koran, or upon hereditary chieftainship — the thing cannot succeed. Such an undertaking may disrupt the old system of justice, and may even supplant it, superficially, for a time; but in the long run, the traditional morals, habits, and institutions of a people, confirmed by their historical experience, will reassert themselves, and the innovation will be undone—if that culture is to survive at all.

Ignoring history, we Americans tend to assume that the states we call "underdeveloped countries" are mere primitive aggregations of population, lacking only our political theories and practices for the triumph of a domination of sweetness and light. But, we, not the inhabitants of the underdeveloped regions, are fools in this matter. That many states of Asia and Africa and even Europe, suddenly exposed to the revolutionary influences of modern technology and increased population, now must do something more than conform to old routine and custom, certainly cannot be denied. But I am suggesting that these nations, for the most part, must work out their own reforms; and that their reforms, if they are to bear a satisfactory relation to the search for human happiness, must be in the line of the prescriptive ways of a country.

Can't impose our Const. on rest of the world

For the Asiatic or African who attempts to convert himself and his nation, suddenly and wholesale, to Western institutions must end in disillusion; we will be fortunate if he does not end in violent reaction. Like the Lebanon Arab in Cunninghame-Graham's story "Sidi bu Zibbula," he will crouch sullen upon his dunghill, saying, "I have seen your Western cities; and the dung is better."

GOOD GOVERNMENT IS not of uniform design. Order and justice and freedom are found in divers ways, and any government which intends to shelter the happiness of its people must be founded upon the moral convictions, the cultural inheritance and the historic experience of that people. Theory divorced from experience is infinitely dangerous, the plaything of the ideologue, the darling weapon of the energumen. Though their social functions may be similar, the justice of the peace cannot supplant the cadi; and no James Mill, however learned, can rightfully make laws for India.

I am saying this: governments are the offspring of religion and morals and philosophy and social experience; governments are not the source of civilization, nor the manufacturers of happiness. As Christianity embraces no especial scheme of politics, so various forms of government are best — under certain circumstances, in certain times and certain nations. And, far from being right to revolt against small imperfections in government, a people are fortunate if their political order maintains a tolerable degree of freedom and justice for the different interests in society. We are not made for perfect things, and if ever we found ourselves under the domination of the perfect government, we would make mincemeat of it, from pure boredom.

Comparisons

BY JOHN TRAVERS MOORE

I STOOD beside a sycamore tree.
"This," I said, "is good for me:
To know that tree and I may share
A little bit of earth and air,
A little bit of rain and sky
And sun and seasons scattered by.
A man, like any tree, may keep
The hope of something after sleep,
The faith in every dawn to bring
The promise of another spring.