Does the Ballot Box Lie Outside the Perfection of Christ?

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Three typical ways of resolving conflicts in this world include negotiation, violence, and voting. Now, granted that voting is actually a form of negotiated settlement, I think it has certain aspects about it that warrant separate treatment. Notice that violence, and especially killing, is the ultimate way of privileging one's own values. Negotiation, by contrast, may often take the other's views into account to varying degrees. Negotiation offers a wide range of possibilities, much of which involves coercive power, or at least advantaged positions.

Voting is a relatively peaceful form of conflict resolution, but as the 2000 and 2002 American elections make clear, voting is still about resolving conflicts, or at least deciding between conflictual partners. For, as we have often heard, reasonable people differ. And they differ first and foremost about their vision of the ideal world and how we ought best to get there. So to participate in an election, in a modern, stable democracy, is to take part in a (relatively peaceful) power struggle to define a nation's vision and path for getting there.

But I should like to make three points before I turn again to voting. First, while violence privileges one's own values, standing aside likewise privileges the values of the violent. This is important to consider if we have values of our own that we wish to advance in the public marketplace of ideas or a vision of the world that we wish to further. Second, I do not wish to imply that I am advocating relativism. On the contrary, I think it is entirely possible and advisable to accept the fact of pluralism, respecting and appreciating our

differences, while remaining committed to our values in a way that is both humbly open to reconsideration and intelligently opposed to the notion that all values are equally matters of taste.

Third, when conflict leads to violence, especially in the form of war, it is invariably the winners who think they have justice and indeed just cause on their side, believing that they are being responsible in their actions. Invariably, both sides of any conflict think this to be the case, the winners as well as the losers. *Newsweek* recently reported that Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, has a plaque on his desk that reads, "Aggressive fighting for the right is the noblest sport the world affords." One astute reader responded, "Maybe Osama bin Laden has the same plaque on his desk. Some sport!"[1] It ought to be troubling to anyone that both sides of any war think their actions justifiable, and more than likely, if they are religious, that God is on their side. If nothing else, this should give us universal grounds for a prima facie bias against violence and war.

But it is to voting that I will now turn. Does the ballot box lie outside the perfection of Christ? This is not a question Mennonites ask themselves. Apart from no longer thinking in terms of "the perfection of Christ," participation in republican government has become an assumed practice of the modern [American] Mennonite. Yet this is a very important question for us to be asking at this juncture in Mennonite history.

Four modern trends make this discussion timely: humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, democracy, integration of Mennonites into surrounding society, and non-ethnic Mennonites with increasingly diverse cultural (and religious) background understandings. The first two of these have done much to erode our traditional position on peace and government respectively. Divided on the role of government, the more optimistic of us think the state can have real Christian values, supporting human rights and opposing the death penalty. The pessimists think the state is not to be "Christian" at all but rather a realistic force in the world, and therefore they do not criticize the state for employing lethal force in international affairs, even to advance narrowly nationalistic interests or to enforce the law locally by employing capital punishment. These pessimists we can identify with "Two Kingdom" ethics, most notably of the Schleitheim Confession of 1527; the optimists advocate a more universal understanding of ethics, both public and private.

Probably the most important text for defining the Anabaptist understanding of God's will in the world, at least with regard to violence and the state, is the Schleitheim Confession. The author Michael Sattler and those who met with him believed that the witness and model of Christ Jesus, as attested to in Scripture, called them to a different way of understanding the world and a different way of relating to others. This revolutionary way of being in the world involved setting aside violence as a means of relating to others or settling disputes. They went so far in following Jesus' admonitions that they would not take others to court, since that involves an adversarial coercion in asserting one's own will.

Still, wanting to be faithful to the full biblical record, they attempted to find a way to accommodate the seemingly contradictory witness of passages such as Romans 13, where Paul's admonitions include the apparent claim that God intends the government to employ violence on behalf of justice. Article Six of the Confession thus reads, "The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death, and the secular rulers are established to wield the same." On the issue of Christians being rulers, the Confession makes clear that Christ was asked to rule as king, but fled instead and taught his disciples to follow his example. It adds, "the rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the spirit."[2] This neatly divides Anabaptist ethical understandings into two kingdoms — the state, and the reign of God as exemplified by the community of believers.

In the history that followed, a contrast has often been made between effectiveness and obedience. What deeply troubles me is what the emphasis on effectiveness inevitably does to diminish the gospel of peace, and what the reality of obedience has historically (and quite ironically) meant for the compounding of injustice in the world. According to one sociological study of Mennonites published in 1994, "As political participation rises, support plummets for nonresistance, for peacemaking, and for activism."[3] So much for effectiveness. As for obedience, an earlier study found that "although 87% of MC members believe a Christian should take no part in war, only 50% denied that the Vietnam War was necessary. . . ."[4] Presumably, their separatist understanding led far fewer than that to actually oppose the war in any way other than performing alternative service. Again in the 1994 study, the authors

found that Mennonites of all denominations, in both Canada and the United States, vote overwhelmingly conservative.

Again, reasonable persons will (and obviously do) differ on the propriety of this [pattern], but for our purposes we could benefit from an examination of what it means concretely. In the United States, it means a majority of Mennonites vote for the Republican Party. The platform most commonly advanced by Republican candidates has normally included (or even emphasized) support for the death penalty and a strong military, in addition to various pro-business policies and a bias towards tax cuts for the wealthiest 20 percent of the population. Republican candidates also tend to have a poor record in enacting or enforcing environmental protections. Picking out just the issue of the death penalty, it troubles me that the secular humanist organization Amnesty International has done more than the aggregate body of voting Mennonites to oppose the gross injustice of the death penalty as it is applied in the United States.

Yet, on the face of it, this voting record is entirely in keeping with the Two Kingdom understanding from Schleitheim forward. Those governing are obliged by the necessity of ordering the fallen world to employ weapons to defend and penalties to punish. It seems, however, that both sides of the Mennonite response run the real and manifest risk of losing our witness to the gospel of peace in relativism and irrelevance. As we emphasize effectiveness, the witness is lost in the realism of Just War arguments; and as we emphasize personal obedience, that either eschews or does not impinge upon our political involvement, that obedience becomes just one more personal choice in a world where freedom of choice is more important than substance of choice. If your ethics are not applicable to my world, why should I listen? Or worse: If even you don't apply your ethics to the world (except in your personal life), you are contributing to the relativism that fails to take ethics seriously as an obligation rather than a lifestyle choice.

By way of comparison, consider the Jains of India. The strictest observers take their principle of "ahimsa" or non-harming to an extreme that does not merely prohibit violence against people but adheres to such a strict vegetarianism that they will not personally farm because of the violence done to the worms, the plants, and the soil itself. They sweep the ground in front of them, wear masks to avoid accidental inhalation of insects, and do not boil their own water because of the microbes they would be killing. Yet, they seem

to have no theoretical difficulty with someone else doing these things for them. They will drink the boiled water and eat the farmed produce. These things do not hinder the spiritual purity — in their terms, the clarity of their karma — that they need for their eventual release from this world of suffering. The question, of course, for ourselves, is whether our Jesus ethic is merely a personal way of keeping our hands clean for our own salvation. If not, then why do we not apply our nonviolence more directly to our engagement with the world?

Recall the argument of Schleitheim: Though violence is necessary for the state to maintain order and enact justice, our personal faith understanding of how God wants us to relate to one another prevents us from participating in that necessary violence. This reasoning has kept all but a very small number of Mennonites from holding political office — and most of those have not remained in the church because of that decision.[5] What seems less clear is the relation between voting and the actions of officeholders elected by the ballot, despite the prominent rhetoric of "government by the people." The sentiment quoted by John Roth in *Choosing Against War* seems now to be exceedingly rare: "'One of the responsibilities of the president is to serve as commander in chief of the Armed Forces,' one member stated. 'If I could not in good conscience serve in that position, how can I then cast my vote of support for someone else to serve in my place?'"[6] But for those who hold a strong Two Kingdoms view, this argument should be considered much more compelling than it is normally taken to be.

Restating the argument, we have: (1) Violence is necessary to the just function of government. (2) The example and teaching of Jesus Christ call his followers to a life of nonviolent, loving relations with others in all cases. Or, in other words, Christians cannot participate in violence. (3) Therefore, Christians cannot participate in government. The argument as stated is obviously valid, so to avoid the conclusion one would need to either deny a premise or construct a secondary argument distancing voting from actual participation in the violence of government. I am quite certain that the majority of voting Mennonites who might be bothered by the prospect of participation in government vote on the basis of some unarticulated form of the distancing argument; I am also quite convinced that this is an uncomfortably hypocritical stance to take, making those opposed to personal involvement in violence ultimately complicit in the approval of it.

Taking the other approach of denying a premise, those who wish to privilege effectiveness need only deny that Jesus taught an absolutist nonviolence — or alternatively deny that Jesus' teachings are normative. Those who wish to privilege obedience need only deny that violence is necessary to justice in this fallen world. My contention is that the traditional Anabaptist interpretation of God's intent for human relationality as exemplified by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ is exactly correct and is universally normative. I therefore deny the first premise — that violence is necessary.

I have, however, one final argument to consider concerning pacifists voting before I continue on to a closing discussion on the notion of responsibility and necessity. As noted above, voting is a form of negotiated settlement. To use a social-contract concept, those voting have a conflict they want resolved (specifically there are various parties competing for an elected office), and they therefore agree to the binding arbitration of a vote. There is a definite element of promise implicit here: if all parties did not agree to be bound by the decision, there would be no point in voting to determine the resolution. This is why, despite much bitterness and rancor, Al Gore and the Democrats conceded the results of the disputed 2000 elections when the process had run its full course. They did not set up their own government and try to implement their vision for the nation. In the same way, one who participates in an election is bound by the results, including the decisions made by those elected, whether the voter cast a ballot for the winner or the loser. For those of us who then anticipate encountering laws we cannot in conscience follow, such as draft registration or war taxes, fundamental issues of integrity should arise.

Returning finally to the question of necessity: the main support for the notion of effectiveness and indeed for all Just War thought is the supposition that violence is sometimes necessary. But this begs the very important question, Necessary for what? This is not the categorical necessity of the laws of physics; it is rather a hypothetical necessity, which we can formulate something like the following: If (that is the hypothetical) you want to be responsible, violence is sometimes necessary. But "responsible" here must be further drawn out: How are we to define responsibility? And can it be defined in a way that both sides will agree to? Any definition given would most likely contain within it the conclusion that the side defining it would like to reach — either accepting violence as an inevitable part of being responsible or excluding violence from the realm of responsible acts.

I want to stress that I agree with the need for our ethic to be effective and aware of consequences. Those who think violence to be necessary privilege their desire for a certain *end* state of affairs (which might even be a peaceable world). I prefer to privilege the peaceable *means*. Moreover, we are both confronted with the same empirical data in our world experiences and the history we read. Yet, unlike the naive hermeneutics of Luther's *sola scriptura* and the early Anabaptists' "literal biblicism," we know that scripture does not interpret itself, nor is it interpreted in a vacuum. And neither do we understand the world apart from the paradigm we bring to it.

The dominant paradigm for understanding the world today tells us unequivocally that violence is effective. We see it happen all the time; it is all throughout our history. A small, but revolutionary voice says that nonviolence can also be effective, from Gandhi's "satyagraha" to the American civil rights movement.[7] We could go on at length, listing the many ways we can be effective in nonviolent, socially responsible action, from MCC to VORP to Christian Peacemaker Teams, from fair trade marketing to microlending, but it will never be enough to convince the self-identified realist who thinks that there will always be legitimate need for violence as a last resort.

And violence taken is never truly done as the last resort. The problem with the Just War tradition is that the last resort is always interpreted by those who still hold the world's vision of "necessity" and the violence used itself perpetuates the culture of violence, the system that breeds violence. John Roth is correct to point out that there is nothing distinctly Christian about the Just War criteria.[8] Not only did the roots of the Just War formulation come from the pre-Christian, Latin thinker Cicero, but the Chinese Confucian tradition has historically also recognized a need to limit the use of military force to the minimum necessary for order. Moreover, we have real reasons to question the ultimate effectiveness of violence. J. Denny Weaver reminds us that since the effectiveness of violence depends upon winning, it is effective only half of the time, since both sides presumably intend to be effective at something.[9]

Violence may indeed create better results in certain instances, but the violence we think we need to protect innocents is arguably a symptom of injustice in our society or in the world as a whole. Indeed, we must also take into account the damaging injustice caused by maintaining that standing army and the culture of militarism that is not usually included in the calculation for the single, isolated event. We need to ask how effectiveness is being measured,

what other priorities the money spent on military might better serve, and what the long term effects of our governments' various expedient alliances will be. The bandage approach of applying material resources to remedy injustices is itself highly commendable and effective, but systemic injustices require political and structural remedies of the sort that historically Mennonites have not publicly advocated.

Our Two Kingdom ethics obstructs us from articulating to the rest of the world an alternative vision for living, and we no longer fulfill the role of living that vision in separate communities of withdrawal. If our interpretation of Jesus is correct (both who he was and what he meant), then his ethic is normative for all humanity, not just for those who choose our interpretation. If we take seriously the example of Jesus, the way to catalyze the world's paradigm shift is to do as Jesus did: to teach repentance, to embody humility, to live love for our neighbor, to speak truth to power, and to overturn temple moneychangers' tables where necessary. We fail as followers of Jesus unless we articulate an alternative vision for human relations that we can both live out in justice and speak in the halls of power.

Notes

[1] Sept. 30, 2002: 19.
[2] *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. and ed. by John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 39-40.
[3] Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 236. I have omitted the correlation number from the quotation.
[4] J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975).
[5] Driedger and Kraybill, 191.
[6] *Choosing Against War: A Christian View* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002), 191.
[7] See for example, Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).
[8] Roth, *Choosing Against War*, 49.
[9] "Responding to September 11-October 7 and January 29: Which Religion Shall We Follow?" *Conrad Grebel Review* 20.2 (2002): 92-93. Weaver here makes an excellent case against the effectiveness of the world's realism.