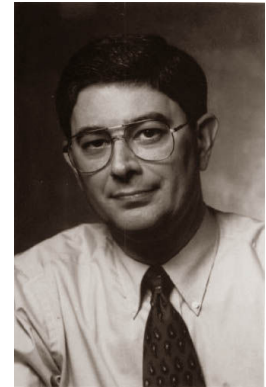




# God and Politics: Thoughts on the Democratic Future by George Weigel

*"...Though they [Christians] are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, every foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland a foreign country."*

"Letter to Diognetus", 2<sup>nd</sup> century



The first thing that orthodox Christianity does for democracy has to do with the problem of what we might call "making space for democracy."

In Matthew 22 our Lord says: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Now that, I suggest, is a truly revolutionary text, the public implications of which have been working themselves out for almost two millennia. There are two basic things to be noted about it. First, Jesus gives Caesar his due. That Caesar has authority is not denied. Nor did the primitive Church deny that authority even after Caesar, in the person of his procurator, Pontius Pilate, had executed the Church's Lord. But the second crucial aspect of Matthew 22 is that Jesus, by juxtaposing Caesar and God and thus de-divinizing the emperor, declares the priority of fidelity to God. There are things that are God's that are not Caesar's. Because God is God, Caesar is not God. And if Caesar attempts to occupy the ground that properly belongs to God alone, Caesar must be resisted.

Because Caesar is not God, the realm of the political is neither a realm of ultimacy nor totality. By 'de-divinizing' Caesar, Christianity desacralizes politics. And that is an achievement of great public importance. Why? Because it clears the social space on which a politics of persuasion can form: the social space on which a juridical state with limited and defined legal powers, whose primary function is securing the basic rights of its citizens, can be built. Because Caesar is not God, civil society is possible. Because Caesar is not God, the state is at the service of society, rather than the other way around.

The second impact Christianity has on democracy has to do with the kind of a people we are and aspire to be, as citizens of democratic states.

You cannot have a democracy without a sufficient number of democrats: without a sufficient critical mass of men and women who have internalized the habits of the heart and the habits of the mind -- the virtues, if you will -- that are essential to the conduct of an experiment in democratic self-governance. Democracy is not a machine that can run by itself. The machine can, for a time, compensate for the inadequacies of the citizenry. But over the long haul, the machine needs mechanics -- and mechanics of a certain cast of mind and soul -- to make it work such that the machinery serves the ends of human flourishing. Every two-year old ever born is a natural tyrant: a beautiful bundle of willfulness and self-centeredness who must, in our societies, be transformed, somehow,

into a democratic citizen, a member of a civil society. I do not believe, that Christian orthodoxy constitutes the only possible set of religious and moral warrants capable of making tyrants into democrats. But I believe that Christian personalism and a Christian optic on the human condition can be a powerful and positive influence in shaping the attitudes toward "the other" that are essential to the democratic experiment. C:S: Lewis explains this attitude in his sermon 'The Weight of Glory':

"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit -- immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. ... And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner -- no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. ..."

I believe that Christian orthodoxy engenders reverence toward the neighbor, the "other," as a unique subject. And it this reverence includes religious tolerance. In fact, religious tolerance is a religious accomplishment and religiously warranted.

**George Weigel is Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and director of the Catholic Studies program. Well-known author and commentator on issues of religion and public life.**

# The Only Guarantee of Successful Democracy is a Habit of Self-Restraint by Joseph Weiler

Why is it that by and large and with remarkable rapidity democracy, for many countries, even in Europe, a relatively recent phenomenon, has been so successful, in the West, and seems to be so problematic when grafted on to countries elsewhere? An election alone, even a free election, does not make democracy. The current president of Iran was elected democratically.



What makes a real democracy, is how the power that is bestowed democratically is exercised. This power can be abused: A majority of wild people can pass wild laws, there can be a “tyranny of the majority”. We thought for a long time that a way to solve this problem was to have a constitution that would protect fundamental human rights and allow constitutional courts. I’m all in favor, but we have realized that this does not solve, but only shift the problem. Suddenly we see, that instead of the risk of a tyranny of the majority, we have the risk of a “gouvernement de juges”, of a court which cannot be replaced, making constitutional decisions on issues which run against democracy. There is not an easy solution to this.

At a level beyond that, we have come to understand that the only guarantee of successful democracy is a habit of self-restraint: You have the power, but you don’t exercise it to the full.

One possible explanation for the success of what used to be called “Western Liberal Democracy” is precisely the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which persists in three ways even if our churches are empty: one, because Christianity taught us restraint in the relationship between Church and State as part of its religious self-understanding. “Render unto Caesar what is due to Caesar, render unto God what is due to God.” It may never claim the control over all aspects of life. It might have to say something about all aspects of life, but it acknowledges that there is a realm of politics where the Church may make demands, but does not pretend to rule. This is a discipline of self-restraint.

The second one is more profound: The Judea-Christian tradition teaches self-restraint in our own exercise of our liberties. We are free to do many things, but we don’t simply follow all our desires without restraint. We control our liberty in order to be truly free, which spills over into politics. Our political culture is a culture of self-restraint in the exercise of power, which – as even an atheist or agnostic would acknowledge – we owe to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Thirdly – and perhaps here that Judaic tradition has contributed even more than the Christian one – we uphold the idea of the rule of law. There is no democracy without the rule of law. This is the key to success.

**Joseph H.H. Weiler, born 1951 in Johannesburg, is Professor of International and European Law at the College d’Europe in Brugge and Director of Global Law School Program at New York University School of Law. He is the author of *The Constitution of Europe: Do the New Clothes have an Emperor?* (1999) and *A Christian Europe* (Rizzoli, Milan 2003), amongst many other publications. Joseph Weiler is Jewish.**