

# Census and Consensus

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It may be one of the signs of a healthy mind that it sets no store by statistics, and another that it has a rooted preference for consensus to census. When we are faced with a national Census we might take some comfort from the realisation that both of these “ignorant prejudices” are supported by scripture; but there, the Christian scriptures are always on the side of sanity, which is one good reason to suspect that they might be true. (No, I don’t mean “after all”.)

The first evidence I want to bring to bear is found in Kings and also in Chronicles. In 1 Chron. xxi we are told that Satan tempted King David to carry out a general census, to number all the children of Israel, and that this incurred God’s wrath. Though we are not told why this was offensive to God it is quite obvious from Joab’s extreme reluctance—openly expressed—to do the king’s bidding in this matter that he knew perfectly well that it was a wrong thing to do. However, he obeyed and carried out much of the work; but he left it uncompleted because of God’s anger.

Then in 1 Chron. xxvii some of the statistics are recorded in spite of the terrible punishment that had been visited upon David and his people. They are not complete; for verse 23 says, “But David took not the number of them from twenty years old and under: because the Lord had said he would increase Israel like the stars of the heavens.” The allusion here is to Genesis xv. 5.

That is (I think) God had promised that they would become innumerable; yet David had presumed to number them, thus doubting or challenging the unbreakable word of God: obviously a grave offence. Perhaps there is also a sense in Genesis that *innumerable* is, as one of our idioms has it, *not to be counted*, carrying with it the force of a prohibition.

1 Chron. xxvii. 24 says, “Joab ... began to number, but he finished not, because there fell wrath for it against Israel; neither was the number put in the account of the chronicles of king David.” This is not precisely the same as in xxi. There Joab did not complete the census; “for the king’s word was abominable to Joab. And God was displeased with this thing.” That is to say again that Joab felt it as the breach of a divine prohibition quite apart from the actual *manifestation* of God’s wrath.

That would settle the matter for a good Israelite like Joab, though we may say, *But why? What was wrong with it?* (We are like that, I’m afraid.) It must by now be clear that the first reason is that it was a flouting of God’s word: a disobedience much like “man’s first disobedience”. A second answer might be given thus: the first answer should be enough; that it isn’t is an indication that we share David’s sin of pride. Even God, it appears, is required to justify

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himself to us. However, since this will still not be considered a satisfactory answer, there are some points that I shall try to make clear.

By this means David was instituting the beginnings of an all-powerful centralised State. His statistics (State-istics) would make the people a resource of the State—especially for the purposes of war. Frederick the Great and other modern rulers have understood this well. In all his military successes before this David had given God the glory. From this point on, if he had gone unchecked, his own wisdom and might would have been the consideration both before and after battles: just like the great powers around him. The king would have been above God. In taking that very stance (Statolatry) the great ones of our time have reduced God to a polite fiction to be continually refashioned according to their convenience.

Not only in war but also in peace the centralised State views *its* people as a labour source, receiving the means of subsistence at *its* discretion and by *its* favour. Yet, for the Israelites, the ideal kept alive by the prophets was of a king serving God and his people, distributed property being often symbolised as “every man under his own fig-tree”. Here we may recall the words of Christ on the true greatness not of dominion but of service. After this salutary episode David became again a godly king: even, later, accepting with humility a temporary deposition. Held up to the light of his example most, though not all, of his successors must be judged failures.

Of course, our own governments justify their own numbering of the people in censuses and other forms of statistical survey by saying that they need to know so that they can make provision. Sometimes it is called “good housekeeping”. Mrs Thatcher was fond of the expression, as are all Chancellors of the Exchequer. When a housewife has guests coming to dinner she likes to know how many are coming, to make sure she cooks enough food, but only in a general sort of way—a small joint of beef or a large one or a very large one. A shopkeeper lays in what seems a reasonable stock of his wares, and if it turns out to be too little or too much he’ll make sure he has more, or less, another time—learning by experience to get it about right.

The feeding of the multitudes in the Gospel accounts is rather general too. Get them to sit on the green grass in companies of fifty or a hundred. How many would you say there are? Shall we say four thousand then? And on another occasion five thousand. It is extremely unlikely that a “multitude” would be exactly four thousand or exactly five thousand, but casting an eye over the “ranks” these would be good enough approximations. Nor is there any mathematical ratio in the amounts of food available on these two separate occasions. According to Mark vi. 38 for the five thousand there were “five [loaves] and two fishes” and to Mark viii. 5–9 for the four thousand “seven loaves” and “a few fishes”. Who in his senses would believe a politician claiming to be concerned for the people? But when we read that Jesus said he had compassion upon the multitude we believe him absolutely. I know too that my wife can provide something to eat from what she “has in” for anyone who

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turns up, and that my local shopkeeper can generally satisfy my requirements when I go to him.

In Jesus' case there was rather more to it, admittedly. A good wife's ability to provide is not miraculous; but it seems to me a species of "sub-creation". It seems to me that the very lack of any mathematical proportion shows he was not a magician with a magic formula. I remember being impressed to hear the late Enoch Powell say in a television programme, "But, of course, we Christians are the children of the children of Israel." If so there are some highly important lessons in all this for Christian rulers to learn from. (And I do not think that David would have incurred the same wrath for numbering the aliens entering his kingdom.)

And one for the rest of us too. If anyone says, "Are you prepared to stand up and be counted?" we should reply, "No, we are like the stars of the sky, and not to be counted."

I opened by distinguishing census from consensus. The former, of course, is something based on a belief in cold mathematical logic, statistics, which, since it is something supposed to give infallible information, is taken as a justification for all sorts of things people don't want forced upon them. Consensus, on the other hand, is based on general beliefs—including moral ones—that are the basis of accepted ways and accepted behaviour. Consensus is a proposition to which sensible people readily consent. It has been well observed that it is equivalent to common-sense, and it has been judged, usefully but not quite accurately, that the common-sense has been replaced with "a new common-sense"—a belief that black has become white, wrong right. It's my belief that the old consensus still stubbornly persists in the minds of the people of the British family of nations around the world. It is a Christian consensus (or, as I said at first, sanity) and it is the Christian churches' duty to clarify and reaffirm it. If all the established political parties pander to the beliefs of an eccentric minority it is little wonder that the common-sense majority by and large do not consent to vote in their stage-managed elections.