THE CHURCH AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

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Abstract
The Second Vatican Council quite rightly puts a stress on the implications of the Christian faith for this world – commitment to social justice, concern for the poor, even an interest on the planet that we live in – these are indeed concomitance of a lively Christian faith. Deeply believing Christians are indeed concerned about social justice, the poor and the planet. But Christians never forget the properly super natural preoccupation of the faith (Philippians 3:20). The Christian faith also recognizes the autonomy of the temporal society. However, autonomy does not imply separation, antagonism, isolation or hostility. The temporal society has an entity of its own, with its own purposes, in dialogue with that entity, the contribution offered by Christianity, which represent the values of the Gospel, does not dim, or deny, but on the contrary exalts the autonomy of the temporal society. This write up is an attempt to draw the contours of the interplay between the Church and Politics. It is my contention that the separation of Church and State does not require the separation of religion from our public life all together, and this is true as far as it goes. It is not only the political order that is "public". The spiritual and moral order is "public" as well, in the sense that it affects all of us, it deals with the whole spectrum of life and action on which the common good depends, and through the natural law it must actually be sovereign in human affairs.
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Introduction

In catholic political theory the view is current that the Christian's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of the Christian faith, a part of the mission given by Jesus Christ.[259] Faith helps one to see more clearly the truth about human life and dignity that we also understand through human reason.[260] As people of both faith and reason, Christians are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ's commandment to "love one another" (John 13:34). According to Pope Benedict XVI, "charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as 'social charity'" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 29).

Ample historical data attest to the fact that Christians have consistently shown commitment to the world, in the social, economic and political spheres. As an expression of Christian involvement in political life for example, one early Church writer stated that Christians "play their full role as citizens" (Letter to Diognetus, 5, 5; C.f. Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2240). In recent times, the Magisterium of the Church[261] has continued to exhort her lay faithful "never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good." She further advised that:

> [. . .] it is a mistake to think that because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city that is to come, we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that by our faith we are bound all the more to fulfill these responsibilities according to the vocation of each (GS 43, John Paul II 59).

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259 The term "Catholic Social Teaching" usually refers to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on matters of economic, political, and social justice. While the teaching of the church on these issues is clearly rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and in traditional Christian philosophy and theology, its modern articulation is embodied in a series of papal, conciliar, and other official documents issued by the church since the late nineteenth century

260 Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2240; Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution Gaudiun et Spes, 75.

261 This refers to the Magisterium i.e. the Pope together with all the Catholic Bishops of the world

Consequently, "the argument that pursuing Christian beliefs vigorously in public affairs could lead to fundamentalist theocracy or a Christian 'Taliban' is dishonest at its roots".[262]

The Attitude Of The Christian Towards The State

There are certain key passages in Scripture that outline the attitude of the Christian towards the State. The one quoted with some regularity is Matthew 22: 15-21 where Jesus, after being questioned by the Scribes and the Pharisees, remarked that what belonged to Caesar, referring to the State or civil authority, should be given to Caesar and what belonged to God should be given to God. The background to this rather unequivocal response by Jesus goes back to Caesar Tiberius whose inscription or image was on the coin that was shown to Jesus. Tiberius was the adopted son of Octavian (Augustus Caesar) who himself had been adopted by Gaius Julius Caesar. Jesus lived during the Roman principate, the early years of the empire. Tiberius was, at least in theory, merely the first citizen (*princeps*) among equals, not the autocrat of later centuries. It is important to note that Roman religious and political life mixed deeply, and the gods were used to reinforce state authority. Worshiping the genius (essence) of the emperor had already started under Augustus.[263] The Jews saw this practice as idolatry and abhorred it. Rome exempted them from the practice. Instead, the Jerusalem temple offered sacrifices twice a day for Caesar and the Roman nation. But the Jews also resented the emperor's image on military standards and coins. They saw it partly as a form of idol worship but also as token of their subjection by pagan foreigners.

The story goes that Jesus asks whose image and inscription are stamped on the metal. The answer is Caesar. So, Christ tells them to give the coin to the ruler who marked it as his own. Jesus does three vital things here. First, he acknowledges that Caesar has rights; that a difference does exists between the things that belong to God and the things that belong to Caesar. Secondly, he

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262Chaput, Charles, J., Render unto Caesar. New York: Doubleday, (2008), 214.

263 See "ancient Rome." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Student and Home Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.

desacralizes or better still, demotes Caesar by suggesting that Caesar has no rights over those things that belong to God. Thirdly, Jesus stays silent about what exactly belongs to either one. This might well imply that figuring that out belong to us. Over the centuries, some Christians have used this passage as a pretext to stay away from politics altogether, fearing the taint of "principalities and powers." On the contrary, cooperation with proper worldly authority has been the constant teaching of the church supported by both scripture and tradition. Christians continued to preach respect for state authority even after Rome crucified their Messiah.

A Contextual Reading Of "Give To Caesar What Is Caesar's, And To God What Is God's" (Matthew 22:21)

For some politicians and rulers this verse ranks among the most popular verses in the Bible. Until a few years ago, Nigeria was under a military dictatorship. The military succeeded in disorganizing the labor union and the academic elite. The only viable resistance left was the church. The Bishop's Conference issued fearless and incisive statements denouncing the dictatorship. The military often replied by quoting this passage and accusing the church of interfering in politics. Didn't the Bible say to give to Caesar what is Caesar's -- meaning the whole sphere of civil, economic and social affairs -- and to God what is God's -- meaning the sphere of spiritual affairs? According to this interpretation, human affairs are divided into two areas: the spiritual side which belongs to God and God's ministers, and the secular side which belongs to civil authorities. Does Jesus really teach this kind of dualistic view of human existence? To understand the full import of this saying of Jesus we need to consider it in relation to the context in which Jesus said it originally.

The framing of the question invited a simple answer: 'Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?' (Mark 12:14). A straight 'Yes' or 'No' would set Jesus against one or other of the two groups. He could seriously offend the Pharisees who resisted the intrusion of Roman government into their nation's affairs, or he could encounter difficulty with the Roman

authorities. (According to Luke 23:2, this incident was twisted to form an allegation against Jesus in his trial before Pilate – 'We found this man opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar') Jesus, however, gives far more than a clever or slippery answer. The issue is raised above parties or alliances.

The coin Jesus asks to see had stamped on it the image of the emperor, the authority behind the currency, with the inscription: 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest'. In the context of the Jewish religion a second image comes to mind. The coin bears the image of Caesar and man bears the image of God. We have two images of two authorities, the one incomparably superior to the other.

'Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness, to have dominion over... everything that creeps on the earth... So, it was' (Genesis 1:26-30). The creation narratives were influenced in expression by the mythology of Persia encountered during the Exile in which the king was often called the image of the deity, a form of address adopted by the Roman emperors. In Genesis, royal language is used for human beings when they are given dominion over everything and this responsibility is also indicated when Adam is told to give names to every living creature (Genesis 2:19). An explanation of what is meant by the words 'image of God' is not provided directly in Old Testament scripture. We discover it by observing the qualities attributed to God, particularly in the psalms and prophets. God's justice and mercy, wisdom and power are mentioned again and again. So, it follows those human beings, if they live as they have been created, in the image of God, will also show these qualities in their actions and attitudes. As we know, and as scripture shows us, we constantly fall short of this ideal. What belongs to the image of God that we are meant to reflect is blurred and at times hardly recognizable. Repair, reconstitution, re-creation became necessary.

In the New Testament we have a hymn of the early Church which says of Jesus Christ 'He is the image of the invisible God 'with the primacy over all creation (Colossians 1:11-20; cf. Hebrews 1:3, 'He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being 'and 2 Corinthians 4:4, 'Christ who is the image of God...'). This is very like the words and thought recorded in Genesis with the creation of Adam. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the Second Adam. That is, he represents authentic humanity. He shows us what human beings were meant to be when they were described as being made in the image of God.

By the end of the first century the baptism of believers into Jesus's baptism (rather than John's) was understood as bringing about a new creation. Baptized Christians were the new body of Christ in the world. Jesus's followers were empowered to become renewed and so to live as images of Christ who was the image of God.

How does this consideration of the phrase, 'the image of God' help us to explore the narrative of paying tax to Caesar? Jesus' reply to the question lifts the dialogue far above the immediate circumstances, and, as is usually the case, we have to decide the application for ourselves for our own time.

In the answer Jesus gives, two 'deities' are mentioned — one has the self-given title, the other has it, so to speak, by definition. But they are not equals who should have our acknowledgement in equal measure: the Roman claimed to be ruler of the whole known world; God is both creator and sovereign but not by his own assertion. Therefore, whatever is rightly given to God must encompass whatever is given to Caesar, a ruler who is under God, no matter how much power he may claim for himself.

How does this become reality? Even if our lives can be divided into separate compartments, the way in which we think and act will be unified by our recognition that we are made in the image of God, just as other human beings are. Just as the first Adam was

given dominion over all things, so every Second Adam with a renewed humanity in Christ has wide responsibility. There is no justification for standing aside from involvement in the affairs of our neighborhood, nation and the wider world.

Our society has developed a variety of services and institutions for the protection and well-being of its members. Such provision enables the majority to live in freedom from want and with possibility of fulfilling their aspirations and potential abilities. This costs money. Probably very few pay tax with enthusiasm, but it is a way in which we contribute to the common good. The parallel with paying tax to Caesar is not exact, but the Pax Romana had many advantages. Peace rather than war did much to allow society to flourish.

If we pay tax, we want to have some say in ensuring the fairness of how the money is collected as well as in its distribution between numerous claims. To do this satisfactorily, voting has to be taken seriously. This is how we exercise responsibility. Some hold back from this, recognizing that politics involves compromise. A particular political party or candidate may not in every respect uphold the values we think are important. But the alternative, refusing to vote, is also the refusal to support the good that is possible.

We also have a responsibility to be well-informed. Proposals ought to be accepted only after their effects on all sections of society have been considered. Investigation into causes and means of prevention need to accompany generosity towards those stricken by disaster. Choosing policies of collaboration rather than competition would be ones more likely to enable human flourishing in a peaceful society.

The prophets of Old Testament times had much to say about the character of society in their day and some were close advisers of the king. They did not stand aside from involvement in contemporary society. The Pharisees found in the prophets a

vision of God intervening at some time, in a dramatic way, to put right all that was amiss in society (Amos 5:18-20, Isaiah 2:12-22, Joel 2, Malachi 3). What they did not imagine was that it was to be through a human intervention, which we call Incarnation. Nor did they realize that a renewed humanity would be tasked with renewing society.

The instruction to 'Give to Caesar what belongs Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God' invites us to live wholeheartedly as participants in our society, working to promote the well-being of all. In doing so we are trying to reflect a sharper image of the invisible God. Aribisala underscores this point:

> What then belongs to God? What bears his image and inscription? The answer is obvious: it is man himself. We are the ones created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Therefore, God does not want our money. He wants us. He wants us to give ourselves to him.[264]

But God is even more specific than that in what he wants from us. What he wants is our heart. He says: "My son, give me your heart." (Proverbs 23:26). Jesus reminds us that the first commandment says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." (Mark 12:30). Although God routinely hides from man, he promises that: "You shall seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13).

The Politician As God's Representatives

In recent times, the controversial claim that politicians who occupy position of authority should be seen as "God's representatives", has been made. Marshall for example, observes that:

> Having authority from God is understood, even for governments, to mean having the right and responsibility to serve others in a particular way (Romans 1:14, 13:4; 1 Corinthians 3:15, 9:19; 1 Peter 1:12, 2:16). This conception

264 Aribisal, Femi, "What Does God Want?" The Guardian Newspaper, October 16, 2016

> of servant-hood implies that governments are called not to be absolute, but to be subordinate. They are not called to be self-centered powers but rather to center their activities on the good of the people. In the biblical account of Israel, we find people who can be regarded in a broad way as, political representatives... clearly, these leaders derive their authority from God.[265]

Citing Romans 13:6, which reads that "the authorities are God's servants" (NIV), or that "the authorities are ministers of God" (ESV), those who subscribe to this view conclude that if we allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, we are in fact choosing a minister when we elect a president.

Opposition to this school of thought has been wide and varied. The proponents of this view have been accused of lack of regard for context.[266] It is observed that "Romans 13 cannot properly be understood without reading Romans 12—and the rest of the book, for that matter".[267] Romans 13:1-7 fits under the general heading of 12:1-2, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship". Paul is concerned to counter the idea that the Christian life is purely "spiritual", by insisting that true worship of God is a life of service in the real world. In our terms, one might say that he opposes the privatization of religion, by which religion and politics should be kept separate. It is the whole life of the Christian, in all its facets, which constitutes acceptable worship.[268] Curiously devoid of contextual support, however, some have concluded that the identification of the authorities in Romans 13 as "ministers" is more about the Roman rulers' self-understanding as having been divinely-ordained, and was most likely put in there to ingratiate Paul to those same-said authorities.

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265 Marshall, T. H., "Citizenship and Social Class" T. R. Marshall, Ed. Class, Citizenship and Social Development. Westpoint, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, (1973), 68.
266 Skillen, James W., and Keith Pavlischek, J., Political responsibility and the use of force. A critique of Richard Hays, Philosphia Christi 3: 421-445, (2001)
267 Isaak, Jon., "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility: Romans 13:1-7 Direction: A Menonite Brethren Forum", Vol. 32, No. 1, (2003), 44.
268 Käsemann, Earnst, "Principles of the interpretation of Romans 13" in New Testament Questions of Today. Philadelphia: Fortress, (1969), 211; Ridderbos, Herman, Paul: An Outline of his Theology. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1975), 324.

What is more, some have contended that ministry invariably goes with 'the word' as in minister the word of God." While it is true that public officials serve the common good of society, and are "ministers" in this sense, the qualifications for ordained ministries elsewhere in the New Testament must apply to such public ministers. On this score, it is therefore true that, there is a critical difference between the ordained ministers or ministers of the Word and Sacraments, and elected political office holders who render political service.

But the understanding of political power as a form of God-ordained ministry or service is longstanding within some traditions in the Church. As some have written of Romans 13:6, the Greek terms translated as ministers "pertain not (as some think) to holy services only," but indeed, "those words properly signify public offices and functions." Likewise in a prefatory letter to the king of France to his Institutes in 1536, John Calvin contends, "The characteristic of a true sovereign is to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God."[269]

Although these reformers would include some element of responsibility for religious expression as legitimately within the scope of the ruler's mandate, it is also clear from Paul's original context that even in times and places where the ruling authorities are not Christian (as in Rome) or there is a structural division between church and state (as in many democratic states today), such magistrates still act as means of God's common grace, preserving and maintaining civil order. Some have written eloquently that, the implications for this are manifold. Mouw writes that, "common grace ministries are not restricted to the political realm."[270]

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269 Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion. (Tr) by Robert White (1541 French ed.). Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (2014), 280-81.

270 Mouw, Richard, He shines in all things fair: Culture and Common Grace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (2002), 81.

The ministries of common grace are in fact as numerous as the forms that grace takes in human life, and the implication for the Christian life is clear. “We should also think about the ways in which we ourselves, in performing righteous acts that affect the lives of unbelievers, can promote the gifts of common grace,”. Another scriptural term, that of stewardship, can helpfully describe the pluriformity of God's grace, both special and common: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10 NIV).

Better attention to the overlap and varieties of these biblical terms would help us avoid a couple of errors. On the one hand, recognizing that ministry can have both a narrower and a broader meaning would help us avoid conflating or equating the kinds of service performed by ordained pastors and elected politicians. On the other hand, recognizing the validity of callings to all areas of life, including politics and business, would help us see how service in such realms can be truly other-directed and God glorifying.

The Relation Between The Church And State

In considering the relation between the Church and State, the thirteenth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans remains for Christian citizens the classic admonition of obedience to constituted authority. Most scholars, however, recognize that this admonition needs to be balanced with other biblical passages that suggest individuals will at times face a very clear choice between God and Caesar. The Old Testament prophet Daniel, rather than violate God's law, was granted permission not to partake of the King's food. His friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, went further, risking their lives rather than worship pagan idols (Daniel 1:8; 3). In the New Testament book of Acts, Peter and John refused to stop preaching the gospel even as they recognized the state's right to punish them Acts 4:5-12.

Evidently, the biblical evidence suggests that where a state either demands what God prohibits or prohibits what God demands, the believer is to obey God and graciously accept the State's imposed consequences. However, it must be observed that these principles have not been applied across the board and in exactly the same way by all Christian thinkers. John Calvin, for instance, held a somewhat narrow line, stressing the responsibility of citizens to fear and honor whatever ruler is passed over them, even "the most wicked tyrant," a Nebuchadnezzar or a Belshazzar. Though he conceded that, disobedience to the State under certain (biblically identified) circumstances was a Christian's responsibility. He also allowed for lower magistrates to take issue with rulers on behalf of the people. In any event, Calvin remained confident that God providentially works His will in all sorts of people, good or bad.[271]

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, however, saw more circumstances than the Swiss Reformer where a Christian citizen may need to question or resist civil authority. Augustine's dictum remains the most famous formulation of the broader view of a Christian's relation to the State: "An unjust law is no law at all" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1-11, 90-97). Aquinas argues that God's delegation of authority to civil authorities was linked to the fostering of virtue. When a ruler meets that test, when his laws and actions are in accord with the *lex divina* (divine law), and when human law promotes the *tranquilitas ordinis* (tranquility of order), then human law is just; but if it "runs counter in any way to the law in us by nature, it is no longer law but a breakdown of law." (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1-11. q. 90-97)

Martin Luther King, Jr. cited both these thinkers in defense of his civil disobedience in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in 1963. "A just law is man-made code that squares with the moral law of God. Unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law" (Luther 3). It is to be observed, however, that King did not

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271 Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion. (Tr) by Robert White (1541 French ed.). Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (2014), 340.

call for general disobedience or resistance to the state; only the unjust law, he argued in an important qualification, can be disobeyed. In the course of history, Christians have not been consistent in applying this principle. Sometimes, they have not roused up to resist evil government and at other times, they have.

The Pauline passage in Romans recognizes two realms: Caesar's and God's. But Scripture in general, including Paul, recognizes that Caesar rules under God's authority, with delegated power to achieve certain ends: justice, domestic tranquility, the restrain of evil etc. Christian thought throughout history has held that any government which perverts these ends is acting *ultra vires*, in violation of its delegated authority. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran Pastor who was martyred for resisting Hitler, gave what may be the clearest expression of the principle; "If government persistently and arbitrarily violates its assigned task, then the divine mandate lapses".[272] History attests that, sometimes Christians have not roused themselves to resist evil government, and sometimes, to their credit, they have.

The Church Too Is a "Res Publica", a Public Thing

For a modern secularist, religion is essentially reduced to a private sentiment that ought not to be intruded upon others, unless they happen to share the same sentiment in a specifically religious space. Dawkins, for instance, regards belief in a God who does not exists as the root of all evil. He even narrated a 2006 BBC documentary with that very title—The Root of All Evil. Consequently, for some Secularists, "given that belief in God is humanity's greatest scourge, the only legitimate business of theodicy would be to eradicate it".[273]

The idea that religious faith could be anything but private is essentially incomprehensible to those who regard religion as irrational, as a disconnected series of ad hoc ideas that happen to make some people feel more comfortable, but which has no

272 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Ethics. London: SCM, (1955), 74.

273 Dembski, William A., The End of Christianity. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Publishing Group, (2009), 4.

relevance outside of personal emotional balance (or imbalance). This equating of religion with mere sentiment was already very advanced in the 19th century. Blessed John Henry Newman argued against it constantly in England. As the twentieth century progressed, even most Christians began to lose a sense of the public aspects of their faith. In view of the immense diversity of religion, they began to reason, it must be the case that religion is essentially a private and even a peculiar thing, almost an idiosyncrasy.

Today, given the rise of the comprehensive modern State, the idea of "private" is slowly being redefined to whatever space the State considers to be essentially irrelevant. Things are private when they are isolated to individuals and small collections of individuals, so that they have no chance of exerting any influence wider than that. If unwanted ideas acquire a broader influence, then they must be prohibited in the space where their influence reaches, because by this new definition private things should not be influential things. With respect to religion, this restriction, as opposed to forthright prohibition, defuses opposition because so many are able to make the excuse that, on balance, it is only fair to limit the manifestation of private sentiments and peculiarities.

In response to all this there is some merit in the usual argument that the separation of Church and State does not require the separation of religion from our public life together, and this is true as far as it goes. But the real antidote is to insist on the fundamentally public nature of religion. It is not only the political order that is "public". The spiritual and moral order is "public" as well, in the sense that it affects all of us, it deals with the whole spectrum of life and action on which the common good depends, and through the natural law it must actually be sovereign in human affairs. Indeed, it is precisely because of this public character of religion that religious divisions are so devastating to the health of culture and society, and that the decline and disappearance of religious influence is even more devastating.

The Church in particular is a public institution, with authority to guide the entire human race in its understanding not only of Divine Revelation, assent to which cannot be required, but also of the natural law which again, by virtue of its general accessibility to all through innate human perception, provides the moral framework for the development of society and culture as a matter of basic justice.

For this reason, the first response that Christians must make when the State tries to privatize religion is to insist, against the State, that the Church also has a public claim, a claim which actually transcends and circumscribes the claims of the State. It is not the State which determines the ends of the Church or the means by which the Church may operate, but the Church which alone can determine the proper ends of the State and the legitimate means by which the State may govern. If the State (or government in a more general sense) has a public character because it is entrusted with the common good in the practical affairs of this world, the Church (or religious authority in a more general sense) has a public character because it is entrusted with the common spiritual and moral destiny of all.

By its very nature, then, authentic religion is not and cannot be a merely private thing. And regardless of how this applies to religious beliefs which lack a firm foundation in reality, we must maintain that Catholicism is not a private Faith, and that the Catholic Church is not a private institution. We need to change our attitude, and we must manifest this changed attitude publicly. It is ludicrous for the State to claim that religion is private and that the faith must be confined to the space the State assigns to it. This is like claiming that water may run only when pumped, that reality may be discussed only when nobody is present to respond, or that citizens may think for themselves only in hiding.

On the contrary, it is our contention that Religion is a public thing, and in particular the claims of the Church are irrevocably

public, especially when she explains the natural law, outlines the requirements of justice, or articulates the limits of the State. Anything less than this cedes essential territory. The Church is a public institution in possession of a public authority. The faith has serious implications for life as a whole, and for the civil authority itself. The State may persecute the Church, but the State cannot alter reality by defining the Church to be something she is not. In other words, the State cannot make the Church a private thing. Moreover, Christians commit a serious sin when they lie to themselves and others in acquiescence to this myth.

Religion And The Church Are The Ultimate Public Things

Religion in general and the Church in particular are inescapably public realities. This assertion contrasts sharply with the prevailing attitude that religion is a purely private affair and that churches are institutions which by nature cater to essentially private interests. Before developing a strict argument, it should be helpful to consider the assumptions on which the current privatization of religion is based. From both an historical and a psychological point of view, I believe our contemporaries tend to view religion as private because of three unwarranted assumptions, assumptions which are born of a mistaken accommodation with religious pluralism.

I. The first assumption is that since people have many different religious beliefs, and since genuine religious beliefs by their nature must be voluntary, then religious beliefs must be based on personal choice, and therefore religion must be private. This self-evidently confuses personal with private. Thus, for example, patriotism is certainly a highly personal quality, but by its very nature it is ordered to public ends. So too, I will argue, is religious conviction.

2. The second assumption is that because religious differences can generate conflicts, which in turn are liable to undermine the common good, therefore the only practical way to order

religious affairs is to emphasize their private satisfactions while prohibiting their public consequences. But this response privatizes religion as a matter of political expediency, which is hardly an adequate response to the issue, and which may, in many instances, be a disingenuous response—as may be seen in the next assumption.

3. The third assumption is that the normative public cultural atmosphere ought to be religiously neutral, which is taken as a mandate for the absence of religious influence. But this erroneously equates neutrality with irreligion, as if what is left in the wake of irreligion is what we all have in common—the proper basis for our common life. Unfortunately, in fact, what is left is the result of a specifically religious decision, which favors the values of some against the values of others, and which is every bit as devoid of neutrality as a theocratic—state. On this score, Weigel is right on target in observing that:

> […] a "value-neutral" democracy is a contradiction in terms and that the attempt to create such a chimera in the name of false ideas of "fairness" and "tolerance" inevitably results in coercive state power being deployed to impose relativism on the entire society.[274]

Largely under the assumptions enumerated above, this restriction of religion to home and church is a marked tendency of today's "soft totalitarian" states. Some other forms of religious association are still permitted, including some religious schools, but the overall trajectory is clear, and there is even a vast State apparatus, both financial and political, to control the education of the majority of children with religious parents. Thus, in recent history, while religion has not always been outlawed altogether, there has been a consistent legal effort to confine it ever more closely to those manifestations which are incapable of generating a wider influence.

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274 Weigel, George, "Confession of an 'Elitist', The Pilot, Wednesday 22nd June, (2016) 1.

Now of course religion does not gain a public character just because certain contemporary assumptions are dubious. The confusion of the personal with the private, the desire for political expediency, and the self-serving assertion that hostility to religion is the essence of neutrality ought to make us think twice about acquiescing in the naked public square, but these logical slips do not constitute an argument for the public character of religion.

Christianity and Politics

It is important to note that a Christian vision of government is not simply a secular vision of government with religion sprinkled on top. Secularism is not neutral. A Christian vision of government is grounded in key theological and philosophical ideas about the nature of God and reality, the importance of justice, the value of freedom, the role of the family, and a rich understanding of the human person as created in the image of God, made for flourishing, and called to an eternal destiny.[275]

It is, also, important to be clear that while Christianity gives us key insights into politics, Christianity is not a political program with specific policy recommendations. There is no single Christian model of government. Christians can hold a variety of political positions and can disagree about many things. What Christianity provides is an orientation—a foundation of how to think about politics and government—one that more often than not speaks about the limits of what politics can accomplish.

The first element of a Christian vision of government is that the state is not divine. In fact, the whole idea of the limited state is intrinsically connected to the Christian tradition, because Christianity de-sacralizes the state. The state no longer has a sacred character. This does not mean that Christians view the state and politics as evil, or even a necessary evil. For Christianity, politics plays an important role, but it is a limited

275 C.f. Mirus, Jeffrey., "Five Insights Christianity Brings to Politics" Catholic Culture.org/Accessed on the 1/11/2022. I borrowed substantially from the insights proffered by Jeff.

one. Christians view the state as important for coordination, administration of justice, and security and defense. But the state is not the source of truth and law. There is always a temptation to divinize the state, to create a new Tower of Babel. This is a recurring motif, from the ancient kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria and Rome, in modern times with the French Revolution and its ideological descendants, the 20th century totalitarians, and contemporary technocratic state. But Christianity says no: The state and its leaders are not divine, and while they deserve respect, they do not stand above natural or divine law. Christianity reminds us that the state's agents are sinners just like the rest of us.

The temptation for Christians is not to divinize the state, but to politicize religion and look to the state to implement doctrine and other tenets of their faith as policy—or even go so far as to compel belief. But this is a departure from the original vision of Christianity and its intrinsically voluntary character. This does not imply secularism or that there is no place for the church to guide and influence the moral character of the state. The attempt to compel belief turns Christianity into a political ideology which undermines the very nature of Christianity and ultimately leads to unbelief. As Joseph Ratzinger has noted, there have been periods where the church and state blended "into one another in a way that falsified the faith's claim to truth and turned it into a compulsion so that it became a caricature of what was really intended."[276]

The second main element, and a related one, is that the state is not the final arbiter of justice. The state is bound by the same moral laws as individuals. Christianity rebukes the idea that the dictator or the majority determines or equals truth and justice. Some things are intrinsically wrong, and no state power or majority vote can make this not so. Because of this, human law must always be subordinate to divine law and natural laws. As Augustine, Aquinas, and the vast majority of thinkers in the

276 Ratzinger, Joseph, Values in a time of Upheaval, Ignatius Press, 2006.

Christian tradition have always held: an unjust law is no law at all. Central to the Jewish and Christian idea of justice is that justice must be impartial. This idea is found throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. As Leviticus 19:15 states:"You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor". This is the foundation for the idea of the rule of law—as opposed to the rule of men. Law must not be arbitrary. It must be fair, accessible, and offer citizens due process. The idea of impartiality is essential and is easily lost. It differs from the crony capitalist practice of giving benefits to the rich and well connected, and from much of the contemporary social justice idea that the poor should get special treatment at the expense of justice.

The Third major element of a Christian vision of government is the commitment to the common good. The common good consists of the political and the social conditions that enable individuals, families, and communities to "reach their fulfillment." It is important to note that the common good does not equal the good of the state. Individuals are not simply cogs in the machine of the state. Further, the community cannot be reduced to the political community. This is a common error. Nor does common good equal the greatest good for the greatest number. It is not simply more efficiency or more pleasure. It is rooted in a rich concept of the good life, always keeping in mind the eternal destiny of the person. The state plays an important role in promoting the common good but cannot do everything. Its main role is in helping to create the conditions where people can flourish and to assist when necessary. As Thomas Aquinas explains, "It is contrary to the proper character of the state to impede people from acting according to their responsibilities—except in emergencies."

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277 Robert Nisbet. His book The Quest for Community, published in 1953, stands as one of the most persuasive accounts of the dilemmas confronting modern society.

This leads to the fourth main contribution: the importance of families and a rich and varied civil society. Human persons are not radical individuals. We are social beings and flourish in community. We are born into families and into cultures, and flourish in communities. At the heart of society is the family. The family is the fundamental unit of society. While the state recognizes the family and has a place in regulating it, family is not simply a construct of the state. It is a natural community and a biological and sociological reality that exists prior to the state. This is one reason why the attempts to redefine marriage in some countries, is an overreaching of state power and ultimately a totalitarian act. The state acts as the arbiter of reality itself. If biology can be redefined, what possible limits remain? A Christian vision of government recognizes both the independence and social dimension of the family and its need to have space to flourish and live out its responsibilities. As Robert Nisbet and others have noted, the Christian vision of the family in politics sits in between the all controlling *paterfamilias* of Rome and the radically individualist nuclear family of modernity.[277] Basic social and political issues such as education and private property are embedded in a robust role of the family. In education, the parents, not the schools, government, or churches are the primary educators of the children. In *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII grounds his discussion of private property not simply in economic or political terms, but in the light of the family. While families are essential, they cannot flourish on their own. The common good requires rich and varied civil society or what Alexis de Tocqueville called "intermediary institutions." These include civic and neighborhood groups, churches, mutual aid societies, charitable organizations, schools, and various types of sodalities and voluntary organizations that solve social problems and build community. One way to think about civil society is as a community of communities that promote the common good and encourage solidarity and human flourishing.

The fifth idea, and one of the most important elements of the Christian vision of government is anti-utopianism. The Christian tradition affirms the goodness of man, but it also recognizes the reality of sin. We are capable of great good. We are also capable of profound evil. This means that we need a government to protect people from harm and to punish evildoers. But it is equally important that we place limits on rulers. As Lord Acton famously observed, "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The Christian vision of government is deeply skeptical of any utopian visions. It recognizes that we cannot create a perfectly just social order. Politics has an important role, but it is limited in what it can accomplish. As Joseph Ratzinger explained in his essay, "What is Truth, The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralist Society": It is not the task of the state to create mankind's happiness, nor is it the task of the state to create new men. It is not the task of the state to change the world into Paradise. Nor can it do so . . . If it behaves as if were God . . . this makes it the beast from the abyss, the power of the Antichrist. Politics cannot solve the fundamental problems of suffering, evil, sin, and death. We cannot be redeemed by the state or technology, or the dictator or the majority. This anti-utopianism is not pessimism or apathy in the face of injustice. Nor is it false optimism that things will get better. What anti-utopianism does is put politics in its proper place and warns us that we cannot create perfect justice. In his Truth and Tolerance, Ratzinger also observed:

Within this human history of ours the absolutely ideal situation will never exist and a perfected ordering of freedom will never be achieved. An ordering of things that is simply ideal; that is all around right and just will never exist. Wherever such a claim is made, truth is not being spoken. Belief in progress is not false in every respect. But the myth of the liberated world of the future in which everything is different and everything will be good is false. We can only ever construct relative social orders which can only ever be relatively right and just. Yet this very same closest

possible approach to true right and justice is what we must strive to attain. Everything else, every eschatological promise within history fails to liberate us, rather it disappoints and therefore enslaves us.[278]

Conclusion

The purpose of politics is to serve man, not for man to serve the state. The Christian vision of government places politics in the context of our human freedom, the call to human flourishing, and in the light of our eternal destiny. The perception is quite common that in modern democratic secular states with a constitutional commitment to human rights, the battle for the Christian control of the public space and therefore of the social construction of reality has been lost. This perception is misguided and a denial of the Christian calling. As faithful and responsible citizens, Christians as believers, can turn their values into political action. The questions posed in this study are not merely for academic curiosity. The answers have big implications for how human, personal, and social life should be properly ordered. The stakes of the answers are high for implications in public policy, institutional practice and deep cultural formation over time.

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