

## **From Aristotle to Jefferson: Christianity and the Separation of Church and State.**

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In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle teaches that politics is the most authoritative and most architectonic activity because its end includes the ends of all other activities. According to Aristotle, the inquiry into ethics is a political inquiry, just as military strategy, economics, and rhetoric, are political inquiries. Since politics is the architectonic art, all other arts are subordinate to politics. Politics is the art that directs men to the highest good achievable by action, and the highest good achievable by action is a life according to virtue. It follows that the inquiry into what virtue is and what virtue is not is essentially a political inquiry, which is what Aristotle teaches.

It follows also that religion is subordinate to politics, for if politics is the most authoritative and architectonic art, then the political authorities shall direct the religious life of citizens. In Book VI of the *Politics*, Aristotle says that, in a properly constituted polity, appointment of the priests and custodians of the temples, as well as the management of public sacrifices, are political concerns. As Aristotle conceived it, religion was a civic function; religion was an integral part of the polity and subordinate to political rulers.

Aristotle's teaching in this regard is not an innovation on his part: so far as we know, all ancient regimes subordinated religion to politics. The apotheosis of the emperors by the Romans illustrates the point.<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, religion was ordered to the good of the polity, and hence political authorities directed the public sacrifices, the auguries, and other such religious functions. While the Romans tolerated a multiplicity of cults, they tolerated them only so long as the cults were subordinate to the political order.

Speaking of the political philosophy of both Plato and Aristotle, Ernest Barker says:

A state which is meant for the moral perfection of its members will be an educational institution. . . . Its chief activity will be that of training the young and sustaining the mature in the way of righteousness. That is why we may speak of such a state as really a church . . . . Political philosophy becomes a sort of moral theology. . . . Whatever has a moral bearing may come under moral regulation. . . . Their state, we have always to remind ourselves, was a church as well as a state . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Now, it is or should be obvious that Christianity cannot easily be accommodated to this ordering of life. Christianity, unlike the pagan religions, transcends the political order. Christianity teaches that men have a supernatural end; that Christianity itself has a supernatural source of authority; and that Christianity, in principle, includes as members or potential members men from every polity. Therefore, Christianity, in principle, cannot accept subordination to the political authorities, for the end to which it directs men is higher than the end of the political order; the source of its authority is higher than the political authority; and the church is responsible, not only for those within any given polity, but also for those outside the polity. Hence, the presence of Christianity creates, as the pagan religions did not, a tension in regard to the proper relationship between religion and the political order.

If we ask what is the proper relationship between Christianity and political order, it seems that there are three possibilities, four at the most. The first possibility is the one we have had under discussion, *i.e.*, that Christianity be subordinate to the political authority. The second, arguably, is that Christianity would be co-extensive with the political order, or that the political order would be co-extensive with Christianity, so that one would make no distinction between the two. The third is that political authority be subordinate to the religious authorities. The fourth is that Christianity and political authority be assigned

separate spheres of jurisdiction. We will comment briefly on each of these four possibilities.

First, the natural instinct of political rulers is to subordinate all aspects of life to political order. Thus the pagan Roman emperors, who generally were tolerant of the multiplicity of cults, would from time to time persecute Christians precisely because Christians denied that their religion was subordinate to the political order. After the conversion of Constantine, the construction of Constantinople, and the relocation of the Roman emperors to the east, the emperors – we should pause to say, Christian emperors – again attempted to subordinate the Church. They appointed bishops and attempted to decide doctrinal controversies. To take one example, the Emperor Constantine in 313 promulgated an imperial edict stating:

Since our habitual concern is to seek at every turn the well-being of our Christian state and in particular of whatever touches on our precious religious beliefs . . . , we, inspired by Almighty God, resolve to quench the flames of discord. Wherefore, we decree that all our subjects henceforth are forbidden to dispute about the one or two wills of Christ. Whoever disobeys this command will incur the terrible punishment of Almighty God and also the penalties of imperial law – a bishop will be deposed, a noble will have his property confiscated, an ordinary subject will be flogged and exiled.<sup>3</sup>

The Byzantine emperor claimed to be, and was recognized in the east as, the bishop of bishops – hence the term caesaropapism: caesar is the pope. Still later, when east and west had separated and the emperors had lost their control over Italy, kings of Europe and the popes struggled for hundreds of years over such issues as who would control the appointments of bishops. In our own day, the Communist regimes have attempted, and at least in China continue to attempt, to subordinate the Church to their authority.

We have already noted that, in principle, Christianity cannot permit itself to be subordinated to the political order. When political rulers have attempted to subordinate

Christianity to their authority, the results have been disastrous. When such political rulers were Christians, as in the days of the Byzantine emperors, the result inevitably was the teaching of heresy, corruption in the ecclesiastical authorities, and persecution. Hilary wrote, "The Church was persecuted, the bishops exiled, priests deprived, people terrified, the Faith threatened and the decrees dealing with divine teaching submitted to merely human authority."<sup>1</sup> The Byzantine emperors exiled such men as Chrysostom and Athanasius; and they kidnapped, imprisoned, and murdered popes. When we read about the corruption in the Church in the middle ages, we should bear in mind that much of the corruption can be attributed directly to the fact that the political authorities seized control of the appointments of bishops, priests, and in some instances the popes.

Theoretically, as a second possibility for structuring the relationship between the Church and the polity, one might say that the Church and the polity should be one and the same thing, so that one is not subordinate to the other. No Christian has ever seriously defended this as a possibility. The Church has always recognized two swords, *i.e.*, two authorities. Membership in the Church has always exceeded the bounds of any particular polity, from the day of Pentecost forward, and so the Church cannot simply be identical with any particular polity. Conversely, no polity has ever had persons or subjects one hundred percent of whom were Christians. Moreover, in practice, it seems that an effort to make the Church and the polity one-and-the-same would inevitably result in ordering one to the other, which in turn would inevitably mean ordering religion with a view toward political interests, as the Byzantine emperors attempted to do.

The third possibility for structuring the relationship between Christianity and the political order is to subordinate the political order to the Church. St. Thomas defends a version of this idea that the political order should be subordinate to the Church. In *On*

*Kingship*, he says, following Aristotle, that the end for which men live together is the virtuous life. Through virtuous living, men are ordained to a higher end, the enjoyment of God. This end is attained by divine power. Therefore, the task of leading men to the last end pertains not to human government but to divine government. The king of this divine government is Christ. To quote:

Thus, in order that spiritual things might be distinguished from earthly things, the ministry of this kingdom has been entrusted not to earthly kings but to priests, and most of all to the chief priest, the Roman Pontiff. To him all the kings of the Christian people are to be subject as to our Lord Jesus Christ himself. For those to whom pertains the care of intermediate ends should be subject to him to whom pertains the care of the ultimate end, and be directed by his rule.

Because the priesthood of the gentiles and the whole worship of their gods existed merely for the acquisition of temporal goods . . . , the priests of the gentiles were very properly subject to the kings. Similarly, since in the old law earthly goods were promised to religious people . . . , the priests of the old law, we read, were also subject to the kings. But in the new law there is a higher priesthood by which men are guided to heavenly goods. Consequently, in the law of Christ, kings must be subject to priests.

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Therefore, since the beatitude of heaven is the end of that virtuous life which we live at present, it pertains to the king's office to promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly happiness, that is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

One may question how many kings, even Christian kings, actually would be willing to subordinate their authority to priests and the Pope; but the practical question may be moot since no Christian kings exercise sovereign authority today, nor do we see any on the horizon. The crucial question we must ask Aquinas, and anyone who speaks as he does, is whether he means to say that political power is a suitable instrument for directing men toward the enjoyment of God. As the Sermon on the Mount makes clear, Christianity can make demands that are beyond the reach of law. The power proper to government is the

power to coerce; yet faith, hope and charity cannot be coerced. A sledgehammer is a great tool; but it is not the tool you would choose for opening a can of beans.

The fourth and, so far as we can see, final possibility for structuring the relationship between Christianity and the political order is to assign them to separate spheres. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Christians have long interpreted this statement of our Lord to refer to two spheres of jurisdiction. Thus, Pope Nicholas I wrote to Emperor Michael III in 865:

We beg you not to resist the church of God. In no way is she opposed to your empire; she prays ceaselessly for the empire's greater stability and devoutly for your well-being and eternal happiness. Do not interfere in her affairs; do not claim what is entrusted to her. It is fitting that one who governs worldly affairs stays clear of religious affairs; equally, the clergy and ministers of God should not involve themselves in politics.<sup>6</sup>

Now, this notion that Christianity and the political order should be assigned to separate spheres is the solution offered by modern liberalism, certainly by Locke and Jefferson, who deny that government should be concerned with directing men to their final end. Leo Strauss attributes to Machiavelli the idea that the ends of political life should be lowered. Strauss explains:

By Machiavelli's time, the classical tradition had undergone profound changes. The contemplative life had found its home in monasteries. Moral virtue had been transfigured into Christian charity. Through this, man's responsibility to his fellow men and for his fellow men, his fellow creatures, had been infinitely increased. Concern with the salvation of men's immortal souls seemed to permit, nay, to require courses of action which would have appeared to the classics, and which did appear to Machiavelli, to be inhuman and cruel: Machiavelli speaks of the pious cruelty of Ferdinand of Aragon and by implication of the Inquisition, in expelling the Marranos from Spain. Machiavelli was the only non-Jew of his age who expressed this view. He seems to have diagnosed the great evils of religious persecution as a necessary consequence of the Christian principle, and ultimately of the biblical principle. He tended to believe that a considerable increase in man's inhumanity was the unintended but not surprising consequence of man's aiming too high. Let us lower our goals so that we shall not be forced to commit any bestialities which are not evidently required for the preservation of society and freedom.<sup>7</sup>

This lowering of the goals of political life is apparent in Locke's teaching in *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, but it is most explicit in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. A part of Locke's teaching is stated concisely by Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.<sup>8</sup>

By this reasoning, Christianity and the political order are assigned separate spheres, separate jurisdictions. To the political authority is assigned the duty of preventing and punishing acts that are injurious to others; but the political authority has no jurisdiction over the issue of whether there are twenty gods or none. That issue is a private matter, as are all religious issues.

The Church has come to a teaching that sounds much like that of Locke and Jefferson. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote, "the political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields." (76) This teaching is defended, in *Dignitatis Humanae*, in part by an argument which, like Jefferson's argument, is found in Locke's *A Letter On Toleration*. Here is what the Council said:

One of the key truths in Catholic teaching, a truth that is contained in the word of God and constantly preached by the Fathers, is that man's response to God by faith ought to be free, and that therefore nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will. The act of faith is of its very nature a free act. . . . It is therefore fully in accordance with the nature of faith that in religious matters every form of coercion by men should be excluded. [10]

Tocqueville defends this notion that Christianity and the political order should be assigned to separate spheres in *Democracy in America*, where he says that the Americans are the most religious people on earth precisely because they separate Christianity and

politics. He explains why it happens that Christianity is stronger where it is separated from politics:

When a religion seeks to found its sway only on the longing for immortality equally tormenting every human heart, it can aspire to universality; though when it comes to uniting itself with a government, it must adopt maxims which apply only to certain nations. Therefore, by allying itself with any political power, religion increases its strength over some but forfeits the hope of reigning over all.

As long as a religion relies only upon the sentiments which are the consolation of every affliction, it can draw the heart of mankind to itself. When it is mingled with the bitter passions of this world, it is sometimes constrained to defend allies who are such from interest rather than from love; and it has to repulse as adversaries men who love religion, although they are fighting against religion's allies. Hence, religion cannot share the material strength of its rulers without being burdened by some of the animosity aroused against them.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible to ignore the strengths of Tocqueville's argument. It was true in the 1830s, and it is still true today, that the Americans are a more religious people than any of the Europeans, who for centuries were subjected to regimes in which the political order and the Church were intertwined. The secularization of Europe, which has proceeded so much faster than the secularization of the United States, may have been caused, or at least accelerated, by the resentment built up over the ages against Church's alignment with political rulers. The peoples who grew to resent their political rulers *ipso facto* resented the Church, which was aligned with those political rulers. When the Church allies itself with a political power, the enemies of that political power will regard the Church as an enemy.

Even so, we are left with some unease about this notion that Christianity and the political order should be assigned to separate spheres, in part because it seems unavoidably ambiguous. Precisely what does Jefferson mean when he refers to "the wall of separation" between church and state? Or when the Vatican Council says, "the political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields"? We

may assign Christianity and the political order to separate spheres, but what of the man who is simultaneously a Catholic and an American? He is one man, not two, and can hardly bifurcate himself so that part of him is American and part of him is Catholic. He must, somehow, be wholly Catholic and wholly American. Despite the example of Europe, we wonder whether the secularization in American life is not due, at least in part, to this assignment of Christianity and the political order to separate spheres; for it seems to be a part of human nature to regard that which is public as more important than that which is private, so that when religion is assigned to the private sphere, as time passes it becomes difficult for the average man to see it as something important. We note that Americans get more exercised over political differences than over religious differences, more anxious when someone is wrong about public policy than about eternal salvation.

Of the possible ways to structure the relationship between Christianity and the political order, two come to us sanctioned by authority that we must, at least, respect – the Common Doctor and the most recent ecumenical council. St. Thomas follows Aristotle in saying that the end for which men live together is the virtuous life. Yet, because St. Thomas believes men are ordered to a supernatural end, he denies that politics is the architectonic art. For St. Thomas, politics is subordinate to religion. The Second Vatican Council likewise denies that politics is the architectonic art, not because political authority is subordinate to religious authority, but because the two are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields.

We began by noting that classical political philosophy saw politics as the architectonic art, the master art, to which all other activities, including religion, are subordinate. We then noted that Christianity cannot accommodate itself to this view, because Christianity transcends the political order in origin, in goal, and in constituency,

and the effort to place it beneath politics has been disastrous at every turn. On the other hand, every effort to subordinate politics to Christianity encounters similar difficulties, both because the coercive power proper to government is too blunt an instrument for the work of converting the heart, and because the Church is inevitably identified with and treated as the merely earthly power she has chosen to use. Finally, we pointed out the problems inherent in the separation of Church and State given the impossibility of separating the two in the individual man. To summarize, we have examined each of the four possibilities for relating Church and State, and have found each of them problematic.

So, where does this leave us? Let us say two things.

First, in this fallen world, it may not be possible to find a flawless manner of structuring the relationship between Christianity and the political order. Had Adam not sinned, he would have passed down original justice along with human nature: he would have been the source of nature, the source of holiness, and the source of all society, and so he would have had over everyone an authority at once familial, religious, and political. His unfallen heart never wavering from the right, he would have governed all affairs of all sorts with an even hand and divine authority. The seminal separation of Church and state therefore took place in the separation of human nature and original justice. The head of the human race is no longer our earthly king or our earthly father. Christ is able to take societies into the Church, but He Himself is not the natural root of them. Christ makes us supernatural children of the Father, but He Himself is not our earthly father. This separation of human nature and original justice was also the moment when our inclinations divided, and the human heart of the ruler became unreliable for guiding certain affairs. The final reunion of Church and state will take place at the end of time, when Christ will claim definitive political power over all creation, inaugurating an entirely new society based

on the supernatural. The structure of husband-wife-child will cease to function as the basic cell of society, and the duties of children to parents and parents to children will take second place behind the strict ranking according to how much each has loved. And not until then will our inclinations reunite, the natural with the supernatural, so that there will be no more trouble with the unreliable human heart.

Secondly, while we can learn a great deal from Plato and Aristotle, and while we may think them superior to the moderns in many ways, we cannot adopt uncritically the whole of their teaching, for they knew not the new man – the man born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Endnotes:

1. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, pp. 25, 113 (Oxford Univ. Press: 1977).
2. *The Politics of Aristotle*, Introduction by Ernest Barker, pp. li-ii (Oxford Univ. Press: 1946).
3. Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, p. 233 (Ignatius Press: 1892).
4. *Id.* at 213.
5. *On Kingship*, 110-110, 115.
6. *Church and State in Early Christianity*, p. 293.
7. *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, pp. 43-44 (Bobbs-Merrill Co.: 1975).
8. *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, p. 210 (Viking Press: 1975).
9. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 297 (Anchor Books: 1969).

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