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A Very Brief Discussion of Religion and State in the New Testament

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What should be the Christian attitude to government? Members of Christian congregations are asking themselves this question once more in our own day, when God is increasingly invoked by parties on all sides of international conflicts, and when so many invoke patriotism and godliness in the same statements and with the same zeal. Is there a single, faithful, Biblically-based attitude to government?

There was certainly no love lost between most early Christians and the one, overwhelmingly-present state that governed their lives and sometimes their deaths. Readers of the Hebrew Bible can point to a time – however brief and golden with myth – when Israelite faith and politics were one. However, the New Testament, unlike the Old, has no “holiness code” which once may have had the state-sanctioned force of law. Early Christians dreamt of no holy state other than that which the trumpets would announce, and no blessed assembly other than that final world council when they would meet their Lord in the air.

Neither is there any real early church equivalent to “official Yahwism” of either the tribal or later monarchical stamp, and this for one simple reason: New Testament Christianity never had a state. So-called “Christendom”, where Christian dogma would eventually take on the weight of law and Christian institutions would be undergirded by state support, was far in the future for those who wrote the New Testament. It is doubtful that many of those earliest writers, eschatologically-focussed as they were, would have recognized the legitimacy of the humanly-imposed Christendom which later arose – and to which we are the heirs – in any case. The very earliest Jewish-Christians lost their state with other Jews at the destruction of Jerusalem. Most of the rest of early Christianity lived and worshiped

and spread its gospel in an uneasy coexistence, marked by suspicion, apologetics, sporadic persecution and occasional martyrdom, with the only state most first century Christians knew, namely the Roman Empire. In effect, this means that the attitude of the New Testament to the state is simply the attitude of the texts to Rome.

While the New Testament doesn't speak with a single voice on this or any other issue, early Christian attitudes to the state are rarely positive. They range from ambivalence (i.e. like bad-tasting medicine, the state may be necessary now but will pass away quickly) to out-right hostility (the monstrous depictions of Rome as Beast and harlot in *The Revelation to John*).

Twenty-first century Christians wanting to know how to act as citizens of a changing world and looking to their scriptures for guidance, have some major interpretive distance to overcome. At the nub of any discussion of faith and government is the relationship between religion and the social order. But that relationship is precisely what is missing in the New Testament. The "problem" of the New Testament texts and the Christians who produced them is that they did not, and could not, either present or represent a civic religion. Two of the most fundamental questions of political life are simply not addressed by Christianity: (a) What is the nature of the public good? (b) What should be the relationships between individuals and groups in civic society?

As later Romans such as Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius quite rightly recognized, Christianity was a "superstition" in that it was both new and novel to the Roman mind, and wherever it took root it created divisions between citizens (witness the riot accounts in *The Acts of the Apostles*) and took its adherents' loyalties away from Rome. And yet while earliest Christianity was not a civic religion in the sense of being supportive of the mechanisms of state, neither does it seem to be fully engaged with issues of polity as a critical or prophetic voice. It simply had other concerns.

Paul, who is our earliest reliable witness to Jesus, is famous for telling us little about the latter. So it is not surprising that he similarly has little information on Jesus' attitude to church and state. But there are interesting hints elsewhere that perhaps Jesus engaged the issue of church and state in a way different from the immediately succeeding generation of Christians. Despite efforts by early Christian apologetics to do just this, we cannot escape the mute

eloquence of Jesus' crucifixion – a Roman judgment. Being put to death by a government is hardly a ringing endorsement of a relationship with it. And the Gospels contain other tidbits. There is Jesus' extremely dry ridicule of Rome in the chreia about the whole empire owning just its coins: "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". There is the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel of John, standing before the might of the empire, bloodied and yet telling a subdued Pilate that "you would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above" (in which pericope, the Gospel writer makes the political point that, as with Samuel and Saul the people again choose a King over God with the words "we have no King but Caesar"). The words of Jesus to his disciples are about the inversion of power relationships in the kingdom of God: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them [but] whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Mk 10:42-43).

All these passages and others imply that Jesus' teaching was critical of the state. But the point should be made with equal vigour that Jesus is no reformer of the state, for to engage in political discussion on that level is ultimately to recognize the state as legitimate but flawed, and I believe that Jesus' (and certainly Paul's) concerns lie elsewhere.

Was the attitude of the first Christian writers toward the state uniformly negative then? Some might point to the oft-quoted words of 1 Timothy 2: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions", as a sign that the earliest Christians practised at least a minimal civic responsibility. That may or may not be so. All we have is the admonition, not the response. But the very next words in Timothy are perhaps more telling: "so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity". Unlike the character Maximus in the movie *Gladiator*, whose familial piety was entirely wrapped up in his vision of the true nature of Rome, early Christians may have practised their civic duties only as a practical and minimal means to the end of worshiping in peace and spreading their faith without overt or systematic persecution.

Likewise with the text that is perhaps the most often quoted as a support to secular power. Our history is replete with those who have quoted Paul's words in Romans 13:1b: "there is no authority except

from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God”, as proof for everything from the divine right of kings to the crushing of reform movements. Yet Paul’s reasoning points toward a higher authority than that sitting among the seven hills of Rome, and what appears in his words to condone earthly authority in fact contains a stinging analysis of its limitations. Paul is using a simple enthymeme to show the following reasoning: (a) all authority is from God; (b) Rome exercises authority; therefore (c) Rome’s authority is from God. The rhetorical purpose of the enthymeme is not to justify Rome’s power, but to suborn it. Implicit in this syllogism (which is remarkably similar to Jesus’ words to Pilate) is the early Christian belief that Rome has no authority other than that which God has given it, and also that, when God would withdraw that support, as Paul and others believed would soon happen, Rome would have no legitimacy at all.

A dictionary definition of quietism has that it is “a passive withdrawn attitude or policy toward the world or worldly affairs” (*Miriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*). In our day the term has become pejorative, since the assumption is that quietism gives those who would use government to oppress a green light to go ahead. I raise the term here because I do not believe that the very earliest Christians were quietists, unless that term can be applied to all apocalyptic communities. Rather, at least some early Christians, who have left us records of their thoughts, had a very definite opinion about what would happen to Rome when Jesus returned. To describe the fate of Rome they used what must have seemed revolutionary, even seditious words: “[at the resurrection], Then comes the end, when Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24). What would make Rome an enemy of the early Church (and more importantly to the early Christians, of Christ) was that process by which Rome began to compete, more and more consciously, with Jesus for the allegiance of the first believers.

It is illuminating and entertaining to explore with some of those who have written on the bestial representations of the state in *The Revelation to John* (see, for instance, Harry Maier’s recent book, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). The whole range of human emotion and judgment are here, from devastating comedy and parody

to bitterly-tasted revenge. Democratically-minded as we westerners are, it is also instructive to note that there is no universal suffrage at the Parousia. Quite the opposite: the age-old dream of a theocracy comes back at the re-creation of the world, a new covenant community with the *lamb* providing its light (Rev 21:23), where the city centre is not a parliament but a temple.

But as fascinating as the *Revelation* is, I maintain that the most complete condemnation of the state comes from Paul. Although his writings are much less vitriolic than the apocalyptic depictions of Rome in the Apocalypse, there is implicit in Paul's few references an almost casual dismissal of government. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for taking each other to civil court. Where we might reasonably expect that he would use a rationale from love or proper ethical behaviour, Paul justifies his admonition that the Corinthian Christians should solve disputes among themselves with the following: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" (6:2).

The basic problem with Rome, for the earliest Christians, was that it was in competition with Christ, and no Christian could serve two masters. Moreover, in a world which was already beginning to pass away, government good or bad was equally destined for destruction, and of little or no account in the brief period before that was to happen. Only in our exegesis of Luke and from other later writers (for example, 1 Peter 2:13-17) do we begin to see the long and often rocky process of mutual accommodation between the new faith and the master of this world, that would eventually culminate in Constantine and Christendom. Even so, a long line of Christian writers from Augustine to Gutierrez have remained critical of the state, sometimes for prophetic, sometimes for apocalyptic reasons.

For no New Testament writer are God and the State one and the same, and theocracy is not envisioned this side of the re-creation of the world. Contemporary Christians would do well to remember the hierarchy Paul and other early Christians inherited from Judaism, a hierarchy that has the state, like all of creation, existing only as long as it is supported by the creator of all. This conception allows for a critical distance in our own discussions of faithful attitudes to government. Finally, New Testament writers, and especially Paul, in their attitude to the state illustrate the magnificent unconcern of a community which already hears itself lifted by the eschatological

trumpet, and the “arrogance” of those who plan on ruling with Christ – and that very soon.