

RELIGION AND THE STATE.

PART I: THE POSITION TODAY.

CHAPTER 4.

Christianity has always had an uneasy relationship with the State. Jesus himself had no time for the secular society of his day; he gave Nicodemus, whom one could describe as a good man and a good Jewish leader, short shrift. And the Church, during the early centuries of its life, looked forward to the Second Coming of Christ, at first with imminent expectancy, and later I imagine with growing disillusionment. This effectively prevented any official collaboration between Church and State. And the Church was a reasonably well-behaved and intolerant society within the State. But when Constantine was willing to make Christianity the religion of the Empire, partly because it was intolerant, the Church fathers either overcame their reluctance for worldly power, or were outmanoeuvred by Constantine. Having tasted power, they must have been torn between loyalty to their Founder and safeguarding the future of the Church. They chose the Church; but they seem to have lacked much political wisdom, or Christian states would have put up a more spirited resistance to the Arab horsemen of Islam centuries later.

Mohammed regarded Jesus as a prophet, but judged correctly that he left no political philosophy behind him; his was an other-worldly Gospel. Mohammed's message was very different, and was most certainly concerned with success in this world. And a century after the prophet's death, Islam must have seemed almost unstoppable. Despite the shame of this debacle, the Church in what remained of Christendom never worked out a political philosophy. It dabbled in politics; indeed much later it vied with the Holy Roman Empire as to who was to be the ultimate power in Europe, but it never thought things through. And today its Gospel to the secular world is still, "Love solves all problems"; which is so naïve, that any educated man of the world has to try not to laugh. If it were not so desperate for England to recover its religion, before such cohesion as exists in society disintegrates, the performance of the C.of E. vis-a-vis society or the State would be good entertainment.

It is fair to say that during the decline of the Roman Empire, the Church hastened on the coming of the Dark Ages, which it alone was able to survive. As its Gospel is unchanged, it is trying to do the same today. It is vital for us that it should fail. Religion is too important to be left to priests. In the early 1900s Professor Eucken, who was professor of philosophy at Jena, was saying that though Christianity was much the best religion the world had known, the clergy of all denominations had led it down a cul-de-sac from which it would be difficult

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to extricate it. When you consider how illiterate most clergymen are in their understanding of science and modern knowledge, there is a good deal to be said for Eucken's view. In the 1960s a committee of the Church of England prepared a Report called "Putting Asunder", which was meant to give wise advice to the secular world on marriage and divorce, a subject which the Church should have known all about. Unfortunately its proposals were enacted in the Divorce Reform Act 1969 (later re-enacted in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973), which in my opinion was a disaster from which it will take generations to recover. And in my book "Man's Relationship with God", I attempt to show at considerable length how poor the Report was. It was a shambles of imprecise woolly thinking; and the consequences were as bad as the drafting. The Church is not fit to advise on such matters; on eschatological matters maybe, but not on practical matters. Unless we are all to become monks in monasteries (which was very much the attitude of the Church when Rome was falling apart), the clergy have made religion a delightful world of dreams, which has nothing to do with ordinary life. Whereas my view is that the companionship of the Almighty should influence (though not necessarily dictate) every single thing one does, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night; and of course He should influence one's attitude towards the State. And this should be so, even if it makes the clergy's influence irrelevant. As Cranmer says in his elegant prose, "...mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts"; but not necessarily dictate our conduct.

For centuries it has been assumed that one's duty to the State demands that one must be prepared to sacrifice one's life for the State, if called on to do so; for instance in time of war. Ultimately, one obeys God rather than the State, if one believes in God, and if there is an incompatibility of duties; a priority with which I imagine all devout Muslims would agree. But that only means one may have to sacrifice oneself; I emphatically deny it justifies the sacrifice of others. It means one is entitled to be a martyr; not a butcher. And the general opinion is that you should not seek martyrdom; it should come to you, not you seek it.

Short of self-sacrifice, the question is whether one willing to accept the Rule of Law, as one of the greatest blessings human society has ever devised? If so, one must be prepared to use force to make it effective. Similarly, one may have to resort to war, and be prepared to use even greater force. There is little difference, save in degree. The significant point is that one must be prepared to act; there is little point either in attempting to enforce a law, or in declaring war, if the force required to make either effective is not available. The likely result will be either contempt for the law, or catastrophic defeat in battle. And probably the failure will be due to the "do gooders", preventing proper preparations being made whilst there was

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time, although they will immediately disclaim responsibility when disaster supervenes. It is arguable that all the disarmers and appeasers of the 1930s achieved was to make it impossible to stand firm at Munich; which made war inevitable in which around 60 million people died.

So before it is possible to link up religion with the State, and still more before it is possible to begin to construct a religious view of Nature and the Universe, it is necessary to consider the relationship between religion and ordinary conduct in the secular world. This is something that Jesus not only did not do, he did not even attempt to do. I make no criticism of him; he set out to found the Kingdom of Heaven, and his “good news” was that this kingdom was at hand. He was not interested in training his followers to be good citizens. Confirmation of this is to be found in the refusal of his followers **for centuries** to live the lives of public-spirited citizens. Furthermore in all the centuries since then, the clergy have failed to sort out the relationship between religion and ordinary conduct in the secular world; for example, when Sunday Trading was first mooted, I do not remember hearing one word from the pulpit, or reading one word from the Church in the press, condemning the idea. Yet it has dramatically changed social life, many people would say for the worse. Such laziness would be almost unbelievable, except for the sad fact that, with two exceptions, on every church committee on which I have ever sat the clergyman in the chair has wangled to get his own way. Most of them have no conception that on committees what is necessary is to speak the truth, be moderate in one’s views and respect the views of others, and above all to be willing to compromise, unless some matter of overwhelming importance is in issue, and at stake. This is not the Kingdom of Heaven; but it is the beginning of a civilized secular society, which is better than nothing at all!

So forgetting about institutional religion, which is irrelevant to secular life; let us go back to the beginning, and consider the Creator, if He exists, the world of the Spirit as it affects individuals, and ordinary conduct in the secular world.