



Christians
in Politics

**The Story of the Church and
the State**



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When the church was born, the idea that there could be any official bond between church and state was a million miles away. The 'Christians', as they soon became known, were just a small sect within a slightly larger group, the Jews, who were themselves a fairly obscure and ignored group within the mighty Roman empire. Paul in Romans 13 begins to sketch how Christians were to relate to the state, however, his was a fairly conservative approach because it had to be. There is little sense of revolution in this account, but it does have a ringing affirmation that God controls the fates of emperors, not the other way round. Other texts in the New Testament endorse prayer for the emperor, obedience to him as the appointee of God, and just occasionally, the call to suffer for the faith at the hands of the authorities if need be.

This approach carried on into the earliest writings of the church fathers. The church in the second century gained a reputation for social subversion, largely because it included within its ranks (with remarkably little sense of distinction), people that otherwise would not have mingled on the same social level – masters,

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slaves, freemen, women and children. However the public apologists for the faith largely tried to shun this subversive image. Tertullian, the Latin-speaking rigorist theologian of the second century challenged this misapprehension by arguing that Christians are the first to pay their taxes, and pray for the authorities because the rulers belong to God, throwing this taunt at his pagan opponents: "Caesar is more ours than yours, appointed as he is by God!" Some early Christian apologists did take a more oppositional stance, such as the critical denunciation of the empire that seems to lie behind the apocalyptic New Testament book of Revelation. Tatian was an early Christian apologist who railed at what he saw as the evils and moral depravity of North African Roman culture as deeply abhorrent to God and his people. During these first few centuries of the church's life, Christian writing assumes the sectarian nature of the church – it was a group existing by itself, separate from the organs of power. Christians could expect occasional persecution, more likely coming from the local mob rather than the magistrate. There were no laws to protect Christians, but there were no laws banning them either.

Yet all this was to change. Towards the end of the third century, the Christian church was surely growing. In 303, the emperor Diocletian, recognising the threat posed by potentially dissident groups such as the Christian church, issued an edict calling for the end of Christianity. This was his last ditch attempt to try to hold together an empire that was falling apart economically, culturally and socially. The attempt failed. The Christians were too numerous and dedicated (even though they still only represented less than 10% of the population of the empire). Diocletian died shortly afterwards, and the resultant power struggle threw up a new emperor in 312: a military commander who had recently marched from his outpost in York to Rome. His name was Constantine.

FROM THE EDGE TO THE CENTRE

Most emperors dedicated their imperial victory to one of the gods. Constantine surprised everyone by dedicating his victory to the God of the Christians, the god of his mother, circulating a story later on that he had had a vision of a cross in the sky before the final battle at the Tiber in Rome. His regime soon began to remodel Roman life and legislation in Christian terms, outlawing crucifixion, giving tax breaks to clergy, and starting a church building campaign across the empire, especially in the 'Holy Land', commemorating the sites of Jesus' life. This was a sea change, perhaps the most significant event in the history of church-state relations. The church was now ushered into the halls of power, invited to mould and shape a new kind of society – a Christian version of the Roman empire, before long to be known as the Byzantine Empire after Byzantium, the small town Constantine chose as his capital (with characteristic modesty he renamed it 'Constantinople' – Constantine's city – now Istanbul). Constantine's own religion was a strange thing – it seems to assume a personal contract with God where at times it seems as if Constantine is the true saviour of the church rather than Jesus, with the real turning point of history in Rome in 312 rather than outside the walls of Jerusalem in AD 33. It is hard to know how deep his own personal faith went, however his impact upon church-state relations ever since is incalculable.

The church was never to be the same again. Bishops now found themselves consulted and courted. At times, courageous Christian leaders could oppose the imperial powers, such as Bishop Ambrose of Milan who refused entry to his cathedral to the emperor Theodosius after he had massacred 7000 people in Thessalonica in 390 AD. The church was now seen not as a minor irritant, a small group to be tolerated or swatted away as appropriate, but as potentially the glue that was to hold society together. Paganism had failed to do just that, so the church was offered the opportunity to create a Christian civilisation, an attempt that was to last for over a thousand years.

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The Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire covered what had been the eastern half of the Roman Empire. In the western half, still focussed on the old capital of the empire in Rome, Christian influence grew as well. In the fifth century, when the empire really was falling apart and barbarian tribes were ransacking the revered building of Rome and other major European cities, there was one institution that had the capacity to step into the breach, organise poor relief and give basic structure to life – the office of the Bishop of Rome, the papacy. The Bishop of Rome had long claimed to be a kind of primus inter pares within the Christian world, based on the city's claim to hold the bodies of Peter and Paul, and with Peter being the first Bishop there, after Jesus had predicted that he would build his church on him as his petros or rock. The sixth century Pope Gregory the Great had a genius for organisation and leadership, and not only pulled together the shattered fragments of Rome but also managed to send missionaries to far-flung parts of the empire like Britain. The papacy grew in prestige, not just in the matters of prayer and the spiritual life, but in 'temporal' or political life as well, owning increasing territories around Rome and beyond and

evolving a growing body of law to regulate life in Christian western Europe – Canon Law, administered by the papal curia in Rome. The ‘Dark Ages’ in Europe, with the fall of the Roman empire, the breakdown of cultured, economically prosperous life in the continent, coincided with a remarkable Christian expansion, with the church spreading westwards and northwards with remarkable missionary success.

POPES AND EMPERORS

The year 800 saw a significant new development. Stirred by the memory of the greatness of ancient Rome, a new empire was founded, this time a Christian one, centred on a new key figure, Charlemagne, the Frankish king who was crowned head of the new Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day of that year. This development only led however to centuries of dispute over the relative extent of ‘temporal’ (political) and ‘spiritual’ (church) powers. Was the emperor or the pope the highest authority in Christendom? In the C11th, Pope Gregory VII tried to release the papacy from its ties to political powers and re-assert the primacy of the church over the state, with no aspect of life free from papal jurisdiction. This only brought on a long battle with the existing emperor Henry IV, who marched on Rome and banished Gregory who found he had bitten off far more than he could chew!

The Crusades, a papal idea that lasted through the C12th to the middle of the C13th, were an initial triumph for the church’s claims to power over both western and eastern halves of Europe, but their eventual failure to hold onto lands they had initially won in Palestine and Greece were a potential blow to the claims of the papacy to be the undisputed power broker in the known world. Undeterred, Pope Innocent III, one of the most imaginative and inspired of medieval popes, put forward the famous idea that the emperor was the moon to the pope’s sun. Innocent codified and collated canon law, a body of legal rulings that extended over vast areas of medieval life. This expanded papal prestige and established the papal curia, despite the failure of the Crusades, as the chief arbiter of disputes and social life in medieval Europe. Under Innocent, the Medieval Papacy probably reached its highest point.

At the end of the fifteenth century, temporal government was becoming increasingly local and national. The Holy Roman Empire (now roughly co-extensive with Germany) still existed but within it lay a whole patchwork of princedoms, territorial states, episcopally governed lands etc., that made the actual exercise of government more fragmented and complex. At the same time the papacy retained its international claims to power, which did not always sit well with new political realities on the ground.

THE WRITING ON THE DOOR

All of this took a new turn after the Reformation. One of Luther’s critiques of the medieval church was its confusion of the roles of church and state. He felt that the church had become too embroiled in political matters such as fighting papal wars and owning land (matters properly kept for princes and governments) and had lost its proper focus on the ministry of the word, the sacrament and faith. Out of the Reformation came a number of different configurations of the relationship between

church and political powers. Luther's famous teaching on the 'two kingdoms' does not suggest that God has no interest in the 'secular' realm. For him, there are two kingdoms – the kingdom of this world (inhabited by all people) and the kingdom of God (inhabited by true Christians). God governs these two kingdoms in two different ways – the first by the Sword and the second by the Word. God is in charge of both and the author of both, and both in different ways are expressions of his love and desire to preserve and bless human life – he just oversees and rules them differently. This doctrine was really a device for trying to separate out the proper roles of clergy and laity within the church. If the bishops won't, Luther favoured the possibility of godly princes reforming the church and determining the religious make-up of a region, while leaving the actual ordering of the church to the clergy.

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In Zurich, Zwingli saw state and church as two sides of the same coin, and saw no contradiction between being a political leader and a church minister at the same time. In Geneva Calvin envisaged a delicate balance between minister and magistrate. The

magistrate is to make sure the law is kept so that society flourishes and is not undermined. The minister's role is to ensure that the law is kept as far as possible from the heart, willingly out of love and gratitude to God rather than out of compulsion. In England the Reformation produced the oddity of the Monarch as supreme governor of both church and state at the same time, replacing the pope as head of the church, and enshrining the idea that a member of the commonwealth is effectively also a member of the church by virtue of the fact that his or her monarch is head of both.

A more radical wing of the Reformation wanted to sever the ties much more severely. Small groups of reformers centred around figures such as Menno Simons and Balthasar Hubmaier wanted gathered congregations that lived out a distinct Christian life, unencumbered by the inevitable compromises that came with political power. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli etc., the 'Magisterial Reformers' – so-called because they saw some kind of co-operation between church and magistrates in the enactment of the reformation of the church – wanted to retain the Constantinian link between church and political power. These more radical groups saw that as the chief problem of the church and believed it was the very thing that had led to its decline and need for reform in the first place!

The Reformation took a long time to bed down. It is arguable that in England at least, it did not reach fruition until 1689, when the Catholic monarch King James II was deposed in the 'Glorious (Bloodless) Revolution' and replaced by the Dutch Protestant William III of Orange, establishing a Protestant monarchy in England ever since. This same year also saw the 'Act of Toleration', the Act that brought to an end the Church of England's monopoly on church attendance, allowing for dissenting congregations to meet lawfully and without hindrance. The rise of these independent churches provided a different vision of the church-state relationship, often being 'gathered' by nature and suspicious of too close a link with government and the political process. They offered an

alternative to the established church with its close ties to the state in England, an alternative that stressed the calling of the church to be distinctive and set apart from the rest of society.

THE LIGHT OF REASON?

By this stage the Enlightenment was beginning to gather pace in England, France and Germany. Taking different forms in each country, it produced some new lines in the relationships between church and politics. Starting with Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and taken further by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), the idea of the divine authority of monarchs came under attack from a new notion that power to govern came from a social contract between the people and the government. The idea that God validated government was gradually replaced by the idea that the general will of the people gave it its legitimation. This of course paved the way for the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. After all, if God did not authorise kingly authority and the people wanted to throw aside unjust rulers, they had every right to do so.

Countries such as France experienced a strong wave of anti-clericalism and a consequent erosion of church power. The United States offered from the start a model of a strict separation of powers between church and state. Its Puritan forebears wanted tried as hard as they could to escape from what they perceived as the old abusive controlling alliance between government and church in old Europe. The USA is a fascinating model of a disestablished church within a still deeply religious society, much more so still than Europe where many countries still retain church establishment, ecclesiastical taxes in countries such as Germany and Denmark which means government money support and aids church life, yet have experienced extensive secularisation. Britain still has a constitutional monarchy and an established church, with its (Protestant) monarch still as supreme governor of both church and state, although of course it is quite possible that the stipulation that the Monarch should be Anglican might well change in time.

WHAT NEXT?

Now in most European countries, despite the formal place of churches in national life, it is arguable that they are minority groups with little actual influence over legislation and government. Are we back in the days before Constantine, and need to adjust our mission accordingly? Are we living in post-Christendom? And if so, should we rejoice that it is over? Or are the Christian frameworks of our societies much more significant than that? Should we seek to re-assert the Christian foundations of western societies, reminding our contemporaries that this culture would not have the order, the respect for law, the values of trust, honesty and virtue if not for their Christian heritage?

The history of the relationships between church and politics tells us that there have been many attempts to configure this relationship effectively. It suggests to us that the two need to relate in some way. If Christians have a strong doctrine of creation that tells us God is interested in the whole of life, not just the church, then Christians have a

calling in some sense to interact with those who have the responsibility for shaping the life we live together as God's image-bearers within God's world.



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