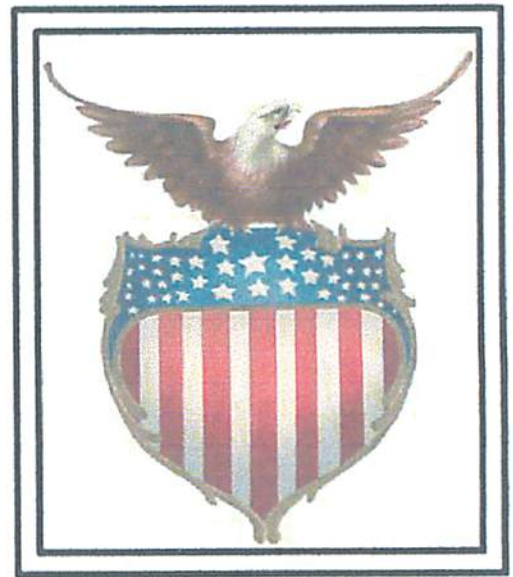
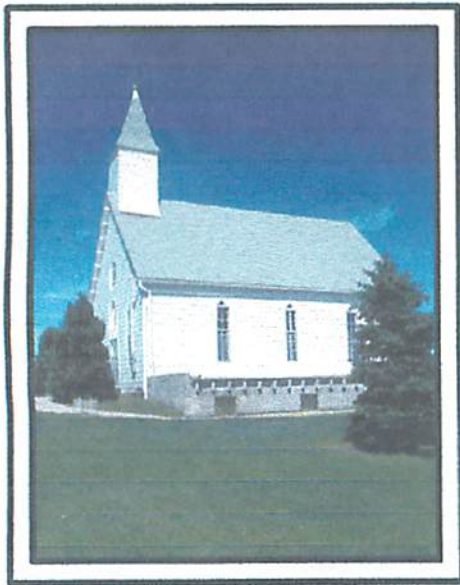


A Brief Examination of the History of
the Relationship between

Church and State



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THE RELATIONSHIP OF POLITICS TO RELIGION

There should be no confusion in our minds between the United States of America and Israel. In spite of much rhetoric on the part of our Pilgrim and Puritan fathers identifying America with the "Promised Land," it is not. This does not, however, take away from the reality that there are some ideas behind this nation and government that are theological.

Any nation bold enough to stamp on its money, "In God We Trust," has laid before the world the right to ask, when things are not going well, "Where is their God (Joel 2:17)?" Upon the Great Seal of the United States are written the words, "A New Order of the Ages." The state is illustrated as a pyramid with the eye of God overlooking the entire structure. All this says something about theology and its relationship to politics and government.

It most assuredly does not say that religion and politics should be separate, in the sense of unrelated. It shouts before a watching world that our religion and our politics are tied together in an indissoluble bond and raises the twin questions: What is that religion? and What is that politic?

These are ponderous questions for ponderous books. Both questions are opened to analysis and criticism. I would like to use Alexander the Great's sword at this point

and cut through the Gordian knot. I will suggest that the issue at stake is "sovereignty." If the data on our one dollar bill means that God, as Creator of the universe, is directly, and without mediators, sovereign over the state, ours is a "New Order" indeed.

Between Memorial Day and the Fourth of July I should like to dedicate this column to seeking an understanding of how theology has impacted politics through recorded history. What changes have taken place? What were the influences that directly effected the founding of our nation, and where do we stand today? As we toss around concepts of "culture war," "separation of Church and state," and our "Judaic-Christian heritage," it might be helpful to have some conceptual background as to how religion and politics were related in the past, and exactly why and how the United States of America saw itself as a "New Order."

We will start with the ancient empires into which the biblical religion was born. Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt.

The ten plagues were a confrontation between the nature gods of Egypt represented by the living God, Pharaoh, and the God of Moses, the great "I Am." Next week we will look at those pyramids on the banks of the Nile, and see what they tell us about the relationship of religion to politics.

THE GOD KINGS

The Great Pyramid of Khufu on the Nile near Cairo took 20 years or more to build and some 100,000 men. So far as we know there was no protest, no rebellion and no cry for justice. There was no issue of separation of church and state, no cry that religion should stay out of politics, no secular state. Khufu was the living god. His will was absolute and the state was structured to serve him.

In chapter 3 of the biblical book of Daniel we are told that Nebuchadnezzar set up an image of gold, possibly of himself, ninety feet high and nine feet wide. The entire nation was required to fall down and worship the image at the sound of music, played with the horn, flute, zither lyre harp, pipes and some other things. Sounds something like a modern rock concert. But, there were some high officials in the empire that happened to be Jewish. I'm not sure what they thought of the music, but the image was a definite "no - no." This is how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ended up in the blazing furnace. The story is only one of many that could be recalled to illustrate the distance between the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the entire rest of the world.

For Judaism the infinite personal God of creation was sovereign over all nations, all society, and all culture to the very end of history. Joel 3:2 tells us that at the end of history God will gather the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat, and they will be judged on the basis of how they treated God's people, Israel.

In the biblical view of politics God only loans his authority. In the home it is loaned to the father, as priest of the household. In the economic order it is loaned to employers who are responsible to God as stewards of the earth's resources. In government it is loaned to political structures which are permitted power and accountable to God for its use.

This thoroughly religious view of the state rejected any concept of the god-king. God ruled his people through inspired instruction which was written down and became in the nation of Israel the civil as well as the moral law. When Israel was forced to live under gentile power, she regulated community life by the law of God. Although the community was often tolerated, it was also deeply resented. The Daniel stories make this very clear, as does the book of Esther, and the entire setting of the New Testament.

The idea that there is another God who challenges the authority of the divine state and its reigning god was as difficult for the Romans as it was for the Babylonians. Alexander the Great, who toppled the Persian empire had himself declared a god by the Athenians. Alexander however was taught by Aristotle, who was taught by Plato, who, in turn was taught by Socrates. These philosophers were not at all sure about the existence of the gods, especially the so called living gods who ruled the empires. They had a somewhat different view. We will look at it next.

THE SUPREME STATE

Alexander the Great asked the rulers of Athens to declare him a god. After all, he had conquered more of the world than any ruler before him, and surely this entitled him to deity. His teacher, Aristotle, was probably not thrilled with the idea. The Athenian schools had secularized the concept of the god-king along with the rest of Greek polytheism. For the philosophers eternal ideas had supplanted the all too capricious gods.

For Plato and Aristotle the universe was divided between eternal forms and changing matter. The forms were the ideas. They were general and structural. The world of matter was individual and needed to be conformed to the eternal ideas. Applied to politics this meant that one person was not important; only humanity is important. Mankind, as a generality, is to be distinguished from other living things in that mankind has a culture and a social structure. These are expressed in the state, or as the Greeks would say, in the "polis."

In Greek philosophy individuals and lesser structures exist for the sake of the state. Families, guilds and schools only exist as part of the supreme idea, the polis, and the lesser must serve the greater. Schools must educate all children to "fit in." Private schools are illegal. The size of the family should be determined by the state. Sickly children must be killed. If the society is overpopulated healthy children should be disposed of by exposure or abortion. Slavery is a necessity, since the state needs workers.

For Plato, as outlined in his master work on Politics, **THE REPUBLIC**, all decisions for the rational ordering of the state are to be made by a ruling class made up of philosophers. The philosophers are to be supported by the state, since they need leisure to study matters of justice. In this ruling class the family is outlawed, since family interests would prejudice just political determinations.

Plato tells the story of the death of Socrates in his dialogue entitled **CRITO**, who was a friend of Socrates. The accusation against Socrates by the Athenian state was "corrupting the youth." Socrates was not only innocent but he had the opportunity to escape. Although he argued that his sentence was unjust, he quaffed the hemlock serenely, since the state must be honored, even if unjust.

In the philosophical schools of Athens the god-king was replaced by the divine state. What looks different at first glance is not much different at all. The state would have been just as totalitarian under Plato as it was under Alexander. Of course, Plato never got the opportunity to set up his perfect state. Such an experiment had to wait for many years until the advent of Communism and creeping socialism. It seems there is very little new under the sun.

Next week we will look at the Church, and see what happens to history when biblical thinking confronts the world of god-kings and philosophical totalitarianism.

THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY AND IT'S THREAT TO ROME

When Christianity was born into the world in about 30 A.D. the Church was born of a Jewish mother. Rome had licensed Judaism as a licit religion. The Jewish communities were ghetto communities. They were not overly evangelistic. They were largely ethnic. Rome did not worry about Judaism, or this new Messianic sect of Judaism, spilling over into the general culture. Not, at least, at the beginning.

When the Apostle Paul defended himself before the Roman Governor, Felix, at Caesarea, a note of apprehension is evident in the text of Acts in Felix's reaction to Paul. "And as he argued about justice and self-control and future judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summons you' (Acts 24:25)." Felix was a Stoic. He had a view of man that could be accommodated to despotism, but as he listened to Paul he understood something. There was no way this new concept of God and his Messiah, Jesus, who is Lord could be adapted to fit Imperial Rome. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar can not be.

Here Felix recognized a revolution. It was not a revolution of violence, but a revolution of ideas. Christianity included a deeply religious revolt against the sovereignty of the state. Of course this idea was taken full grown from Judaism. But, Judaism was confined within the Jewish community. This new "Way" was being taught throughout the empire, to Jews and non-Jews.

Jesus had taught, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's (Matt. 22:21)." That is to say Caesar has a limited sphere of sovereignty in the design of God. God and his Messiah are sovereign over all. Christians knew that the Messiah Jesus was Lord. That he would judge the nations upon his return. This was not an idea that Rome could accept.

After 135 A.D. and the Second Jewish Revolt under Bar Kochba Rome began to recognize that the form of Judaism that was called Messianism, or Christianity, was different from the main stream. It was spreading over the empire like a brush fire. It was not remaining in ghetto communities. It was even spreading to the household of the Caesar himself. The persecution of Christians had begun even earlier under Nero (54-68) and Domitian (81-96).

However, under Aurelius (161-180), Decius (249-251) and Diocletian (284-305) the threat to the Roman concept of the state was being felt at the highest levels of government.

The Church was finally released from the threat of persecution under Constantine in 325, and we would suspect that the biblical view of God's sovereignty over history would finally come to acceptance in the affairs of the empire. But, alas, it was not to be.

CONSTANTINE AND CHRISTIANITY

Before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312) Constantine the Great saw the vision of the cross and carried this emblem into the battle and to victory. In 313 the emperor, in the Edict of Milan, decreed full legal toleration for Christianity, and the faith of his mother, and probably his own, although he was not baptized until he was on his deathbed, became the official religion of the empire.

The first Ecumenical Council was called in 325 at the city of Nicaea, modern Iznic in present day Turkey. The council was attended by somewhere between 250 and 318 bishops, mostly from the Eastern Church. Only a few Western Bishops attended with their retinue. The council was held in the central structure of the imperial palace. The most important doctrinal issue to be settled was the so called "Arian controversy."

Apart from the doctrinal matters considered at the council it is important to note that Nicaea was called by the emperor, not by the bishops. It was in the interest of the empire that the new faith unite, and not divide, the new Rome. The deliberations began on May 20, but nothing important happened until the emperor arrived sometime later. He appointed the central committee that eventually approved the Nicene Creed on June 19.

Eusebius of Caesarea was a great friend of the emperor and a bishop in the Holy Land. He arrived at the conference committed to Arius. The definition of God seen as greater than his creation was not difficult. Neither was the definition of God seen as active in his creation. The terms "Father" and "Holy Spirit" were used in Scripture and were broadly understood. When it came to defining God as he took on human nature and human flesh in the Messiah, there was a problem. Eusebius was from the land of Jesus. He held to a very matter of fact view of the Messiah who walked the byways of Israel. Other bishops were more deeply effected by the Greek philosophical categories of being which were abstract and "heavenly."

Eusebius ended up as mediator in the controversy, and submitted his own Caesarean baptismal confession as the winning compromise, with some adjustments. It was accepted quickly precisely because it was immediately confirmed by the emperor as his own confession.

You can surely notice that although Christianity was the winner in the accession of Constantine, the victory produced no clear separation of the powers of Church and State. For hundreds of years the state and the Church fought over who was the sun and who was the moon in terms of authority in the community. The Church used secular power to enforce doctrinal conformity and the state used Church power to unify the empire.

This might not be a problem if society was enlighten and led by the King of the World. However, such is not the case. In both Church and State power corrupts.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE REFORMATION TO POLITICAL THOUGHT

When Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in 325 the biblical view of government was modified, compromised and grafted on to the view of Aristotle. The graft was impossible from the beginning. The Church, instead of being the "called out congregation" took on secular power. Eventually, this led to the Reformation, or the reform movement against Medieval Church dominated society.

However, in the sixteenth century there were two movements going on simultaneously, and they are often confused. The Enlightenment ran concurrently with the Reformation. The Enlightenment favored a totally secular view of the state and was championed by such thinkers as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbs, Rousseau, Voltaire, Lock, Bentham and Mill. The religious impulse came from the Reformation which emphasized balance, restraint and correction.

Where the Enlightenment controlled, as in the French and Russian revolutions anarchy and tyranny resulted. Where the Reformation controlled a more biblical view as in the Puritan movement led to a new birth of freedom. The founding of America provided a fertile field for these Reformation views to be planted and to grow.

There are several identifying marks of this Reformation viewpoint. The first is respect for the principle of law. Moral and civil law are given to us in view of the present brokenness of our reality. Its function is to restrain evil, not to create good. Law does not create good for God alone is good, and his character defines the good, true and beautiful. God's law restrains evil, and this becomes the function of all law.

A second principle is that since the world is fallen, all government is imperfect. There will never be a perfect society until Messiah returns and reigns.

There are practical attitudes that flow from these marks. Order is better than chaos. All change must be sought realistically as against idealistically, since the ideal is impossible in a fallen world. And, finally, The Church is to be God's people in this broken situation until Jesus returns.

The first principle - order is better than chaos - is sometimes a bitter pill for Christians to swallow. It means that bad government is better than no government at all. Christians are commanded in scripture to obey civil authority. In Acts 23:1 - 5 the Apostle Paul apologized to the High Priest after criticizing his unjust actions when he discovered who he was. This was hard for Paul, and it was not because the High Priest was right. It was because God had permitted him to hold this place of authority. and bad government is better than no government at all. In Romans 13:5 the Apostle Paul teaches, "Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience."

IDEALISM VERSES REALISM IN GOVERNMENT

Respect for civil authority and an understanding that the orders of society are damaged, imperfect and fallen are the marks of a biblical view of government. We began to look at some practical implications of these marks. We discussed the first of three: namely that order is better than chaos.

The second practical principal rising from biblical teaching is that all change must be sought realistically rather than idealistically. These two words represent two ways political change is sought. In idealism man is at the center of the effort. Ideas are the product of human thinking and the goals of the idealism are seen as achievable by human effort alone. Man is not conceived as a sinner, but as on the way to perfection and in need only of refining. Biblical realism is God centered. It knows that all systems are corrupt and that there is no perfection outside of the earthly reign of Messiah.

Jude 8 reads, "Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones." In other words, the schemes of idealists are simply dreams. They fail to understand the world as fallen. They fight injustice with more injustice, as in political terrorism. They conclude that because their self-centered ideal is good, everything that leads to it must be good. There is usually no consideration of how people will suffer in the process. They will not

acknowledge that the government they refuse to obey is not the only corrupt government. There is no such thing as an uncorrupt government. Their ideal is also corrupt.

Finally, the Bible teaches that believers are to be God's children in a broken world, until Messiah comes. Believers are not to be pessimists. They are to be realists. They are not to conclude that because the world cannot be perfect it cannot be better. Jesus taught, "You are the light of the world."

America is a historical witness that when biblical principles are applied to government it can be better. Government is to be for man. We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights. We are to be against all idols; all political, social and psychological utopias. Believers are to work and pray and live against all injustice. These thing the Apostles taught.

"First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty (I Tim. 2:1 & 2)." "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:16)."