



Christianity and Politics

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In this talk I would like briefly to comment on what Christianity is essentially and then refer to 3 specific historical 'moments' of Christianity's relation to politics. I will then identify two major roots of modern atheism that have combined with a secularised notion of politics that challenge the political freedom of Christians today. I will finish with a few suggestions for what Christians can do to survive and respond to this challenge. Again, at the end, I would be happy to answer any of your questions and comments.

When we look to explain the Christian Faith we perhaps spontaneously refer to the 'Creed', that is, the short summary of the essential contents of the Christian Faith, as distilled in the two great Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). This is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church does to explain Christianity. There in the Creed we find reference to the Trinitarian God, to creation, to the unique event of God becoming man, the strange way of the cross through death and

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resurrection to eternal life, reference to the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, and the coming end of times with judgment, the communion of the saints and 'the life of the world to come'.

All I would like to point out here is that Christians do not say the Creed but *pray* the Creed. That means that for Christians the truths of the Faith are not just like a chemical formula that you can know and recite, but rather that we not only acknowledge them to be truths of reality, but we also desire them to be truths for us, real truth that guides and shapes our lives and all our personal decisions. As St. John Henry Newman said, they are to become not just *notional* truths but *real* truths, truths by which we live and die.

I would just like to add a few things to how we understand the Christian Faith. The earliest Christian images found in the catacombs included the shepherd and the praying person (the *orans*), with arms raised in prayer, but there was also the image of the Christian as philosopher, the teacher of truth. This is because philosophy back then meant finding answers to the fundamental questions of human life; not just what we find curious or enigmatic, but the dramatic question that is the drama of human life itself. Christianity offers true answers to the question of life.¹

Christianity is also *life* within us. St. John compared this experience to 'a spring of water, welling up to eternal life' (John 4:14). A Christian is someone in whom a new and greater source of life (the Greek word for life is *zoe*, not *bios*) has been planted. That is why the early Christians were known as *hoi zontes*, the Living. There is something different, greater in the life of a Christian. You could say that a Christian is simply a person in whom God lives.

And then Christianity is mission. We spoke earlier of man as a subsistent relation; now, with this new source of *zoe-life*, the human person is impelled outwards to the Other and to others as a bearer of Divine Life. The Italian theologian L. Melina summarises Christian life in this way:

¹ This point is explained by J. Ratzinger in *The Nature and Mission of Theology. Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy*, 13-29. It is not difficult to understand how today, as knowledge is narrowed down to empirical and verifiable facts, these fundamental questions have disappeared from the philosophical horizon.

‘In encountering Christ, the rational creature receives a unique name, a singular task and mission. In this way it becomes – in the terms of Balthasar’s anthropology – truly a ‘person’ in the theological sense’.²

II

With this very patchy picture of what Christianity really is, let us try to understand its impact on the world of politics, on civil public authority. As Christianity was born into this world at a particular time and place let us look at a few historical moments of its birth and development and the politics that surrounded it.

Christ and Christianity were born into a Greco-Roman polytheistic and pantheistic religious culture, which meant that religion was political, and that politics was a religion. The emperor was considered to have divine status and represented divine rule on earth.³ The adoration of his person was a necessary political act of obedience. The Jews were, in fact, the only people in the Roman Empire who were not obliged by law to perform this act of cult (because the Romans knew they never would).⁴

The God of the Judeo-Christian Faith is above and independent of his creation. What did this mean politically? J. Ratzinger describes the difference in this way:

The fact that God stands apart in freedom, and that his power is independent of the world, limits the power and possibility of man,

² L. MELINA, «The ‘Truth about the Good’: Practical Reason, Philosophical Ethics, and Moral Theology», *Communio* 26 (1999), 660. The reference is to H.U. von Balthasar’s *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol.2.

³ J. RATZINGER, *The Unity of the Nations. A Vision of the Church Fathers*, CUA 2015, 11. It is also claimed, however, that «(I)n theory, the Roman emperors did not claim to be gods, and the incense burnt in front of their statues was not meant to be a sacrifice offered to Caesar personally, but only to his genius... This distinction, however, was more easily grasped by the sophisticated Romans than by the citizens of the East, who for centuries had been accustomed to the idea of divine kingship», O. SKARSAUNE, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, IVP Academic, 58.

⁴ On the historical circumstances of this privilege, see *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 54-65.

who can in no way bring about the unity of the world on his own, since this division was imposed upon him by God's sovereign will.⁵

It meant that the single cosmos (the one *res publica*) of the empire was immediately relativized; there is now a greater Divine cosmopolis to which everything and everyone was subject. Certainly, there was legitimate civil authority in this world which Christians had an obligation to obey (this is Augustine's doctrine, based on Scripture), but relative always to the higher law of the Lord God. The metaphor to explain this dual and subservient authority was of two swords, the sword of temporal (civil) authority and the accompanying and greater sword of spiritual authority. This doctrine became particularly relevant when, after centuries of persecution, Christianity was at first tolerated and then became the official religion of the Roman Empire.⁶ In the 5th century Pope Gelasius wrote in this way to the Emperor Anastasius:

There are two powers, august Emperor, by which this world is chiefly ruled, namely, the sacred authority of the priests and the royal power. Of these that of the priests is the more weighty, since they have to render an account for even the kings of men in the divine judgment. You are also aware, dear son, that while you are permitted honourably to rule over human kind, yet in things divine you bow your head humbly before the leaders of the clergy and await from their hands the means of your salvation.⁷

I do not need to remind you how Ambrose, the bishop here in Milan, wielded this spiritual sword when the Emperor Theodosius committed political brutalities.⁸

⁵ J. RATZINGER, *The Unity of the Nations*, 12.

⁶ Cf. The principal ordinances transforming Christianity from a persecuted religion to the official religion of the Roman Empire were the Edict of Toleration (Galerius 311 AD), the Edict of Milan (Constantine and Licinius 313 AD) and the Edict of Thessalonica (Valentinian II, Gratian and Theodosius I, 380 AD).

⁷ The famous *Famuli vestrae pietatis* letter, Denzinger 2012, n.347. The letter is also known as the '*Duo sunt*', a reference from the second paragraph to the two powers by which the world is ruled.

⁸ Theodosius, in a fit of rage, had ordered the death of 7,000 people in Thessalonica, in 390 AD. Ambrose, after the event, refused to meet the Emperor (even though he had been his

What is so important about this is that the Kingdom of God, the cosmopolis, becomes the greatest context, *the* universal public space, the greatest *res publica*. This is one reason one is never charged money for entering a Church; it is the Lord God's open, public space, accessible to all, under his authority. This is also the reason Christianity got into immediate trouble with the Roman Empire. Had the Christians claimed to be just another *private religious group*, as many other groups in the Roman Empire, there would not have been a difficulty; they could have become yet another *religio licita*, but Christians claimed that they, and potentially all people, belonged to a greater empire than the Roman one, and the only true one. For this difference Christians were martyred.

For centuries, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman empire, this was the basic context of understanding and it is important to appreciate correctly, at least in theory, the harmonious relation of both powers and, at the same time, how one authority (the temporal) is ordered to the other (the spiritual). This is Augustine's teaching and his famous phrase *Ipse dat regna terrarum* recognised temporal civil political authority as a necessary, if contingent, divine ordinance:

'It is God himself who distributes earthly kingdoms. The political world, with its manifold and opposing states, had no special divinities but rather was subordinate to the one God, whose works were creation and history'.⁹

Let us ignore the fights and controversies down through those centuries between the holders of the two swords. These very arguments show the implicit agreed context of understanding: there were two swords of authority in one kingdom, as incommensurable as that was to one sword-bearer or the other.¹⁰

friend) and wrote a private letter (Letter 51) requiring the Emperor to do public penance, which the emperor finally did.

⁹ J. RATZINGER, *The Unity of the Nations*, 85.

¹⁰ The most significant clash came with Pope Gregory VII's *Dictatus Papae* (1075) and his clash with the Emperor Henry IV.

III

A major change occurs in the time of the so-called Wars of Religion (1524-1648). It has been suggested, I think correctly, that these so-called wars of religion, while ostensibly about religious conflicts, were deep down about something else: the struggle of the lords, kings and emperors of Europe, both Protestant and Catholic, for absolute power, and the necessary war to free themselves from all other authorities, especially the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church.¹¹ The tensions had always been there, but it was in his *Six livres de la republique*, published in 1576, that Jean Bodin uses the word 'sovereign', a word used in theology only in reference to the Lord God, to describe the temporal power of the emerging states. Even today, text-books on International Law begin their first chapters describing the usual subjects of international law as the 'sovereign political states'.¹² The principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, was not really a principal of religious freedom, but of coercion according to the controlling decisions of the political princes.

The fundamental change in the context of understanding is expressed in M. Luther's doctrine, not now of two swords, but of two kingdoms, a temporal kingdom with sovereign power over everything, and a spiritual kingdom that was private and personal, and that did not invade the public realm of the prince. Religion was generally tolerated in this way, as a private concern but with no public relevance. In varying ways, the founding philosophers of the modern state, T. Hobbes, J. Locke, J.J. Rousseau and others, all took this line; religion could be tolerated, but as a private affair that had no place or power in public authority.

Certainly, the distinction of authorities is of fundamental importance and historically the confusion of civil and religious authority led *de facto* to many abuses, by both spiritual and temporal men of power. My point is that the former doctrine of the two swords, with their distinct and complementary authority, is fundamentally different to this new exclusionary principle of civil authority by the modern sovereign

¹¹ For example, W. T. Cavanaugh's chapter 'The City. Beyond Secular Parodies', in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, and G. Ward, Routledge 1999, 182-200.

¹² For example, Brownlie's *Principles of Public International Law*, 124.

state that I have just described. It is the modern exclusionary principle that prevails today.

IV

Down through these last centuries, and independently of specifically political issues, there has also been a developing atheist perspective on the major areas of life. *Grosso modo*, two major areas of endeavour, legitimate in themselves, have been tainted with atheism; science and humanism.¹³ The word ‘science’ used to mean universal knowledge (I left you in the last lecture with a definition of politics as ‘the science of order in society’), the blending of all sources of knowledge in the identification of basic metaphysical principles. Today, science means just physical science, physics, biology, chemistry and their symbolic language, mathematics, and the exclusive reliance on their particular mode of perception of reality; physical observation, measurement and repeatability as a means of verification. That is not wrong but applies only to that part of reality which is physical. What is wrong is to try to subject all of reality to physical laws of perception and verification. J. Ratzinger calls this a pathology of reason, a diminished and distorted perception of reality:

The result is an unhealthy overdevelopment in the realm of technical and pragmatic knowledge, as against a shrinking in that of basic fundamentals, and thus the balance between them is disturbed in a way that may be fatal for man’s humanity.¹⁴

That means that the scope of reason must be enlarged once more. We have come out of the prison we have built for ourselves and recognize other forms of ascertaining things, forms in which the whole man comes into play.¹⁵

¹³ I refer here to W. Kasper’s *The God of Jesus Christ*, Continuum, 2012, chapter II, The Denial of God in Modern Atheism.

¹⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, 2004, 143.

¹⁵ *Truth and Tolerance*, 158-9.

The other root of atheism is humanist. What has happened here is that man has become untethered from reality, freedom has invaded truth and obliterated it, and man has become, by definition, unrestrained freedom. This has happened because, as W. Kasper has pointed out, 'the point of departure for modern thinking is not nature and substance (our grasp of the order and structure of reality), but subject and freedom'.¹⁶ Everything and everyone who encroaches on my possibilities, my options, becomes threatening to my freedom, a threat to me. This is the language of J. P. Sartre: '(There) is no human nature...Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism'.¹⁷

This is why we react so viscerally to authority (seen just as control of my freedom), to law (restriction of my freedom) to truth (a prison for my freedom), and to education (as Pink Floyd sang: 'we don't need no education, we don't need no false control'). With our technical scientific power, we want even to change the structure of our own human nature, to be free of ourselves. It is not difficult to imagine where the ultimate freeing of oneself leads to...

We said that the Wars of Religion brought into force the power principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, whose realm, his religion. We have lived for centuries with this political practice, but it had less effect while a Christian ethos still practically pervaded the people and institutions of political authority. It is incredible to think that it was only in 1974 that there was a public discussion in Britain about playing professional football matches on the Lord's Day of Sunday.¹⁸ But given the doubled-rooted atheism that has taken hold of our culture, our institutions, our universities, and our politics, that default Christian ethos no longer exists. If one is a Christian today, it is by conscious personal choice, not by cultural default.

¹⁶ W. KASPER, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 26.

¹⁷ Quoted in J. PIEPER, *For the Love of Wisdom: Essays on the Nature of Philosophy*, Ignatius Press, 2007, 173.

¹⁸ Bob Wall, general manager of Arsenal, said in 1973: 'Playing football and making profits on a Sunday is wrong. We will not disturb the peace and quiet of the neighbourhood of Highbury on that day.'

V

What to *do*? I think this is always a necessary philosophical question. One cannot just remain with a dangerous diagnosis and then cheerfully wish the patient a good day. Action as a philosophical category has not always been given its importance. A French philosopher who did realise the importance of doing, living in the truth, was M. Blondel; in fact, his most known work, published in 1893, was precisely called: *Action; Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*. He proposed that knowledge, the intentional possession of the being of reality, only comes with the adequate active response to perception and comprehension: ‘...for it is through action that the questions of the relations between man and God are inevitably decided in fact.’¹⁹

Given these public, political circumstances, what are Christians to do today? In the first place, I suggest that we protect and develop our own identity and life as Christians. The present times oblige us to do this, to know who we are as Christians, to know what we believe, what it means and why we believe what we do. This also means finding the support of others to live as Christians in public, in the public space, which is often openly hostile.

I would also be particularly careful to live the true dimension of our Christian Faith – *creation, incarnation, redemption, salvation* – and not just to conform our actions and beliefs to what public society today considers useful or meaningful.

In a real way, we Christians have also to move outwards in mission, not just remain within ourselves. This, I think, can be done on a personal basis, one-to-one contact and conversion, and also on two great public and political issues today; one is human life (it is the slavery issue of our time) and the other is the struggle for the freedom of Christians in our society. I refer not primarily to China, North Korea or Cuba, but to Western society, which is rapidly corroding the freedom of Christians to live, practice and to teach their beliefs in society.

It may have been the British historian Arnold Toynbee who coined the phrase ‘creative minorities’ on which cultures depend for their

¹⁹ M. BLONDEL, *Action; Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (1893), Notre Dame University Press, 1984, 442.

existence and future. The phrase has also been used by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and by Pope Benedict XVI. Their description of these creative and dynamic groups is, I think, what we Christians are called to develop today. In this way we both preserve and deepen what we have and, at the same time, take responsibility for our present and future times. As St. Augustine said:

‘Bad times, hard times, this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: Such as we are, such are the times.’²⁰

²⁰ AUGUSTINE *Sermon 30*, n.8.