

# Religion and Politics: The Case for their Divorce

Gerard Casey  
School of Philosophy  
University College Dublin

4 March 2009

## Introduction

Since the heyday of the Enlightenment, there have been concerted efforts in many parts of the West to get religion out of politics, presumably on the grounds that religion is bad for politics. Whatever the merits of these efforts, and to whatever extent they may be justifiable, what has not, perhaps, been so widely considered is whether or not it might also be a good idea to separate religion from politics because politics is bad for religion! I argue that politics, understood as the institution and operation of the state, is a deeply flawed project and hence that religion's association with it is necessarily damaging to religion. The time for divorce has finally arrived.

## Introductory Remarks

In liberal circles, using the term 'liberal' in its modern and not in its classical sense, one would find very little disagreement that the detachment of politics from religion has been a Good Thing. But one thing that never appears to be considered is whether or not it would be a good thing to detach religion from the influence of politics!

For the first three hundred years of its institutional life, Christianity was a non-establishment, oftentimes persecuted, religion. One of the reasons for its persecution was that it was believed that its adherents were atheists, that is to say, they did not worship the gods of the State and therefore were considered to be politically subversive. The Constantinian settlement, when it came in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was undertaken as much with a view to seeing what support Christianity could bring to the Roman State as with seeing what support the Imperial state could bring to Christianity. Caesaro-Papism immediately became the new norm of Church governance, a norm that continued in the Eastern Empire until its fall in 1453. In the post-Roman West, the story was somewhat different. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the rulers of the various barbarian tribes retained their original sacral functions even when Christianised—a kind of Caesaro-Papism in miniature. With the Papal Revolution inaugurated by Gregory VII in 1075 all this changed. Over the next 400 years, the Church tried, and to a large extent succeeded, in establishing its independence of the various political orders, whether local, regional or imperial. This welcome development came to a shuddering halt with the onset of the Reformation, so-called.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983.) See also, his later volume: *Law and Revolution II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformation on the Western Legal Tradition* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). See also Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Leaving to one side the purely religious dimensions of the Reformation and its complicated and convoluted theological debates, one of its most significant and deleterious consequences was the re-emergence of local forms of Caesaro-Papism in the newly emerging autonomous and, more often than not, absolutist states. This regional Caesaro-Papism occurred primarily in the areas under the sway of the Reformed traditions, Lutheran or Calvinist, but was also witnessed even in areas that remained Catholic. To an extent that had not been seen since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Church, or rather Churches, now came under pressure to become departments in the various sovereign and independent states, a pressure to which they largely yielded. The modern state, in the form in which we have come to know it—the sole sovereign power in a defined territory, exercising a monopoly on (allegedly) legitimate violence, with the power to commandeer the resources, including the persons, of its citizen—had come into existence.

### **Politics and the Myth of the State**

Politics can be understood as the art of living in community, either benignly, as the organisation of a voluntary and consensual system of government, or not-so-benignly as the organisation of an involuntary and non-consensual state. Government in some form or other is absolutely necessary for human flourishing. It comes into existence either naturally, as a matter of status, for example, within the family, or artificially, as a matter of contract, in voluntary associations. The modern State is entirely another matter being neither a matter of status nor of voluntary association.<sup>2</sup> In the remarks which follow, I shall concentrate almost entirely on the politics of the state.

Modern political theory is dominated by a myth, the myth of the necessity of the state. The state is considered necessary for the provision of many things but primarily for the provision of peace and security. Where a state is that group of people which wields a territorial monopoly of alleged legitimate force financed by a compulsory levy on the inhabitants of that territory, the myth holds that without such an entity there would be widespread disorder, violence and chaos; in a word, anarchy (as that term is commonly employed). So dominant is the myth of the state that the claim that the state as we know it today is historically contingent, morally indefensible and functionally unnecessary is typically met with a mixture of bewilderment, incredulity, derision and hostility.

### **Some Preliminary Reflections**

Firstly, a little reflection will demonstrate that most of our relations with other people come into being outside the ambit of positive law and the state and would, for reasons of mutual benefit, if for no more elevated reasons, continue in existence and operation even if there were no state to enforce its laws.

Secondly, the state does not in fact prevent or punish most internal violence. Even with the state there is a measure, often a considerable measure, of disorder and criminality, thus the state, to that extent, fails in respect of one of its fundamental functions.

Thirdly, in the history of mankind, most killing has been done by one state or another, or by some armed group seeking to control the coercive apparatus of the state. The number of

---

<sup>2</sup> The brief account that follows is an abbreviated version of one of my papers: Meddling in other men's affairs: the case for anarchy" *Economic Affairs*, December 2007.

people killed in the twentieth century in state-sponsored conflicts is, at a conservative estimate, about 175,000,000; although it is impossible to say for definite, it can reasonably be judged that the number of people killed in the twentieth century by non-state sponsored criminal homicide is nowhere near that number.

Fourthly, finding its role as the preserver of civil order unrewarding, expensive and time-consuming the state intrudes coercively upon other areas into which it has no business going and in which, we may be thankful, its renowned inefficiency is manifest. In a classic strategy of distraction and displacement, the state, bored with and indifferent to those things for which, allegedly, it primarily exists, becomes ever more interested in curtailing and interfering with the lives, liberty and property of its citizens in ways that are more systematically devastating and irresistible than any danger posed by the ordinary criminal. Lovers of the grotesque must surely cherish the irony that the dubiously moral organisation known as the state, in addition to purporting to provide services that are genuinely required (albeit doing so inefficiently and expensively) should also set itself up officiously as the guardian of public morals when it itself is, more often than not, a principal offender against morals.

### **The Moral Status of State Action**

It is important, in considering political matters, not to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. We talk of the 'state' as if it were a real entity of a different and higher order of reality from the mundane things we encounter in daily life. But the state is simply a name for a particular group of people acting in particular ways at particular times and places. Such being the case, the (rebuttable) presumption will have to be that such people are bound by the normal rules of conduct that apply to us all. What is good for one is good for all; what is bad for one must be bad for all. If it is presumptively wrong for me to initiate aggression against you, it must be presumptively wrong for those people calling themselves the state to do so. If someone wants to make the contrary case then the burden of proof resides with him. If someone claims that being a hitman for the Mafia and taking money for killing to order is wrong, then he is going to have to work hard to show why being a soldier and doing what appears to be the same thing (somewhat more efficiently but for considerably less money) is right. Without in any obvious way possessing a different moral status from ordinary mortals, the state does things that, if done by anyone else, would be illegal, immoral and criminal – for example, in making war, it kills; in taxing, it steals; in conscripting troops for war, it kidnaps. The task of the defenders of the state is not easy. They have to explain that it is wrong to forcibly expropriate another's property – except when the one doing the expropriating is the state. They have to explain that it is wrong to take the life of another – except when it is the agents of the state who do the taking. Slavery and kidnapping, they will tell you, are wrong – unless it is the state that enslaves you or kidnaps you by means of conscription.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> It is said that voting in elections signifies one's assent to the state and its government. It is far from clear that this is so. Even if most people approved of what a state government is doing at any particular time this would still make it at best a matter of majority tyranny. In any event, the morality of an act is not determined by polling the general public. Acts of murder or theft don't cease to be what they are just because most of us agree that they may be performed. Secondly, my voting in an existing political system may just be a matter of self-defence rather than an act signifying my assent to that system.

It is said that we have representatives whom we have elected and that this justifies our being coerced by the government of the state. There are some immediately obvious problems with the notion of political

## Freedom

Man is free: metaphysically, inasmuch as his actions, though conditioned by factors such as heredity, environment, training, education, associations, and so on, are nevertheless not determined; practically, inasmuch as his actions are not constrained by factors outside himself. As Christians, we believe that man is created in the image and likeness of God. This likeness is most obviously manifest in our possession of intellect and will. Our capacity to grasp reality by means of our intellect is a dim reflection of God's creative knowledge, limited intrinsically by our finite nature. Our freedom too, mirrors the Divine freedom.<sup>4</sup> Milton has God speak of man thus:

*I form'd them free, and free they must remain,  
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change  
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree  
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd  
Thir freedom. ...*  
(John Milton *Paradise Lost*, III. 124–128)

God has made us to know, love and serve Him in this life. We believe that God loves us with a love that is utterly disproportionate to our merits and that He wishes us to love Him in return. But that love must be a free response to his overtures. Even in the sphere of human actions love, to be love, must be free and unconstrained. However much we may want someone to love us, that love, if it is to be worth anything, must be freely given and not coerced. The burden of many fairy-tales, operas and films is that the pseudo-love produced by a magic potion (or its latter-day technological equivalent) is no love at all. The desired end, the love of the beloved, has been attained only by means of the destruction of the beloved. God, who loves us in a measure that passes all understanding, will not force us to love Him. In the end, he respects our choice, even if that choice is, mysteriously, to reject Him. If God, who manifestly has the right to do with His creation what He wills, will not coerce us, what creature can presume to take it upon himself so to do.

---

representation. Suppose I don't vote, or vote for someone who is not elected; how then is the person elected my representative? However, there is a much more fundamental question over the very notion of representation. In what way are our public representatives *representative*? Under normal circumstances, those who represent me do so at my bidding and cease to do so at my bidding. They act on my instructions within the boundaries of a certain remit and I am responsible for what they do as my representatives. Is this the situation with my so-called political representatives? Furthermore, the central characteristic of representation by agency is that the agent is responsible to his principal and is bound to act in the principal's interest. Can a political representative be the agent of a multitude? This seems unlikely. What if the principals have interests that diverge from each other? A political representative must then of necessity cease to represent one or more of his principals. The best that can be done in these circumstances is for the politician to serve the many and betray the few. Some additional items may serve to distinguish the very special sense of representation embodied in the notion of political representation: in contrast to the day-to-day notion of representative agency, political representatives are not (usually) legally answerable to those whom they allegedly represent. In fact, in modern democratic states, the mass of a representative's putative principals are in fact unknown to him.

<sup>4</sup> You may recall the theological controversies concerning the relationship of grace to freedom. There are five (possibly more) schools of thought: Thomism, Augustinianism, Molinism, Congruism and Syncretism. All of these various systems, however, must respect the basic data, founded upon Scripture and Tradition, that God is omnipotent and that "the human will remains free under the influence of efficacious grace, which is not irresistible." Freedom, then, is a constitutive element of man, both metaphysically in the indetermination of his will, and practically in the nonlimitation of his actions.

The State, then, is an organisation of persons which, whatever good it may incidentally do, it nevertheless does by means that are fundamentally flawed, means that involve violence against the human person (homicide, slavery, assault) and against property (theft). No organisation could survive for any length of time unless it did some good and most states will, even if only intermittently and inefficiently, protect the person and property of some of its citizens but this fact cannot be used to deny that the state is essentially a violent and coercive institution.

### **Christianity and the State**

For Christians, the words of Scripture are normative. It is therefore a matter of some importance to us to discover if we can find some Scriptural justification for the State. I know full well how hazardous an enterprise it is to venture on the sea of Scriptural interpretation. My few comments are not meant to be the final word on any matter; however, following the tradition of *sic et non* inaugurated by Peter Abelard, I venture to suggest that we can find two kinds of passage in Scripture; one kind broadly dismissive of the concept of a state (to risk being anachronistic in using such a term in the context of Scripture) and the other (much smaller) kind being, it would appear, supportive. I shall take one example of each kind and subject it to some elementary analysis.

I think it fair to say that most relevant Old Testament passages (and many passages in the New Testament) are sceptical of the value of secular political rule. The Book of Judges concludes with these words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." (*Judges*: 25) and there is no suggestion in the context of that book that such a state of affairs was considered to be in any way problematic. The passage I have chosen to examine in some detail, however, the one I find (as have others before me) most instructive, is a passage from the Book of Samuel (1 *Samuel* 8:4-22).

### ***Samuel***

The elders of Israel asked Samuel to give them a king, saying to him "<sup>5</sup>... "Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways. Now make us a king to judge us, like all the nations." Samuel wasn't happy about this demand and consulted God. God told Samuel that this request indicated that the people of Israel had rejected God's reign over them. Nevertheless, He instructed Samuel to listen to what the people said, first pointing out to them what their request involved.<sup>5</sup> So, Samuel told the people what to expect if they got themselves a king:

<sup>11</sup>And he said, "This will be the manner of the king who shall reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for himself, for his chariots and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. <sup>12</sup>And he will appoint him captains over thousands and captains over fifties, and will set them to till his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war and instruments of his chariots. <sup>13</sup>And he

---

<sup>5</sup> "<sup>7</sup>And the LORD said unto Samuel, "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee; for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. <sup>8</sup>According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken Me and served other gods, so do they also unto thee. <sup>9</sup>Now therefore hearken unto their voice. However, yet protest solemnly unto them and show them the ways of the king that shall reign over them."

will take your daughters to be confectioners and to be cooks and to be bakers. <sup>14</sup>And he will take your fields and your vineyards and your olive yards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. <sup>15</sup>And he will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards, and give to his officers and to his servants. <sup>16</sup>And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup>He will take a tenth of your sheep; and ye shall be his servants. <sup>18</sup>And ye shall cry out on that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day.”

However, Samuel’s good advice got the reception generally accorded to good advice, which is to say it was ignored.

<sup>19</sup>Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel, and they said, “Nay; but we will have a king over us, <sup>20</sup>that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” <sup>21</sup>And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he recounted them in the ears of the LORD. <sup>22</sup>And the LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king.”<sup>6</sup>

The significance of this passage is worth reflecting upon. First, God clearly sees the demand of the men of Israel for a king to be a rejection of His kingship. Second, he has Samuel tell them clearly what to expect from their king when they get him—he will take their sons and daughters, confiscate their property and make them his servants. Nevertheless, if they persist in their desire for a king, God will not interfere with their freedom to choose, even if that choice is foolish and unwise. The subsequent history of the kings of Israel, from Saul, through David, Solomon and Rehoboam, followed by the division of the kingdom is very far from edifying and can be seen as the fulfilment of Samuel’s warning.

### ***Romans***

So much for a passage illustrative of the dangers and limitations of secular state rule. On the other hand, it is often claimed that Scripture explicitly endorses secular rule and enjoins obedience to such rule upon the Christian.

<sup>1</sup>Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup>Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. <sup>3</sup>For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup>for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup>For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup>Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. [*Romans*: 13 1-7]

---

<sup>6</sup> A little later, Samuel severely reprimands the men of Israel, saying: “...see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king.” [1 *Samuel* 12: 17]

This is one of a few passages that appears to run against the general current, as exemplified by *Samuel*.<sup>7</sup> Let us look more closely at this passage.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the standard English interpretation uses the word ‘governing’ in verse 1, the Greek text does not. It reads: ‘Let every soul be subject to the superior powers.’ Who or what are these superior powers? It is assumed by many commentators that in this passage St Paul was referring to the secular authorities. But why should we make this assumption? Let us place this passage in context. In the previous chapter of *Romans*, St Paul had just written “Do not be conformed to the world...” (*Romans* 12: 2); why should we think that he would almost immediately contradict himself and counsel conformity to the world? The bulk of chapter 12, and the verses of chapter 13 that occur immediately after the passage just cited, concern themselves with what is required of the Christian in living a Christian life, of the mutual duties and responsibilities among Christians. There is nothing explicit in these two chapters to support the claim that St Paul has switched his focus in the early verses of chapter 13 to discuss the Christian's relationship to *civil* government. In fact, the context seems to support the contrary: St Paul is dealing with spiritual authority within the Body of Christ and the individual members' relationship to that authority. The apostle tells us to submit to the higher powers, then he quotes the law of the higher powers, the love of neighbour of which the particular commandments are only particular exemplifications. What St Paul is talking about here is the Law of God—what has this got to do with the dictates of the secular authorities? We might wonder why should St Paul suddenly switch to a completely different topic, and then back again to what he was speaking of in chapter 12? It would seem much less interpretatively arbitrary to take it that St Paul is exhorting those to whom he wrote this letter to be obedient to *their* authorities. Why would St Paul encourage the Roman Christians to obey the secular authority that was persecuting the Church!

There is another passage in the writings of St Paul where he exhorts his readers to “obey them that have the rule over you”. It is perfectly clear, however, in this passage, that those that have the rule over you are the leaders in the Church, not the secular authorities. “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.” (*Hebrews* 13:17)

Of course, if the enemies of the saints in Rome to whom the letter is *not* addressed were to come across this letter and read this passage as exhorting Christians to obey the secular authorities, and if, deceiving themselves by such a reading, this self-inflicted deception resulted in a lessening of the persecution of Christians, then so much to the good. The technique of deliberate indirection is not foreign to the writers of the New Testament and, if we accept the words attributed to Jesus Christ himself in Scripture to be His, not foreign to our Lord Himself either.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> The only other passages are 1 *Peter* 2: 13-17 and *Titus* 3: 1.

<sup>8</sup> I have been helped in understanding this passage by material gleaned from that most ubiquitous of resource, the Internet. Unfortunately, I have mislaid the references and so cannot at this moment give credit to the actual sources.

<sup>9</sup> There are five principal passages in Scripture in which Jesus' words or actions bear on matters political. These are: *Mark* 12:13; *Matthew* 20: 20-25; *Matthew* 17: 24; *Matthew* 26: 52 and the accounts of Jesus' trial in the various Gospels. I think it fair to characterise these passages as exhibiting “irony, scorn, noncooperation, indifference and sometimes accusation.” [Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), p. 71.]

Let us recall some of the things done by the secular authorities that some interpreters believe *Romans* 1-7 would have us obey: the killing of all the male children in Bethlehem under two (Matthew 2: 16); the judicial murder of John the Baptist (Matthew 14: 10); the slaughter of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices (Luke 13: 1); the arrest and scourging of the apostles for preaching the gospel (Acts 4: 3 and 5:40); the execution of James and arrest of Peter by Herod (Acts 12:2-3); the beating of Paul and Silas with rods and their imprisonment (Acts 16:19-24). In *2 Corinthians*, St Paul speaks of "...far more imprisonments with countless beatings and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned" (23-25), and recounts how he fled from the governor at Damascus (32). Tradition holds that SS Peter and Paul were judicially executed and there is no reason to doubt that the tradition is valid. And last, and very much by no means least, we have the arraignment of Jesus by the Jewish authorities, and his judicial torture and execution by the Roman Procurator, despite Pilate's not being able to find any case against him.

After all this, are we seriously to believe that St Paul in *Romans* is demanding that we obey the secular authorities in any matter in which they care to command us? Surely not! Are we to suppose that these secular rulers were "God's servant for your good"? St Paul says of the authorities of which he speaks in *Romans* that they "are not a terror to good conduct but to bad." So, then, are we to conclude that the conduct for which the apostles and other early Christians were punished was bad? We know from our own experience that the demands of our secular rulers often conflict with the law of the Gospel. The authorities who flogged, imprisoned and killed the apostles yesterday are today corrupting the minds of the young in state schools and countenancing the death of millions of innocents in abortion clinics.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

What, then, are we to do? Religion—in this case Christianity (strict Calvinism apart)—is predicated upon the compatibility of divine omnipotence and human freedom. Despite having done so on occasion in the past, it seems reasonably obvious that Christians should not attempt forcibly to restrict the free activities of others (except, obviously, in resisting trespass against life and property), nor should they formally cooperate with any person or

---

<sup>10</sup> *Arkhones*, the word that is translated as 'rulers' in v. 3 of the passage cited, which is generally taken to refer to the secular authorities, is everywhere else in the New Testament used to refer to the Jewish religious leaders.

In v. 4, are we to suppose that the secular rulers are servants (*diakonoi*) of the Church? Where in the New Testament is any secular ruler described as a servant of the Church? Once again, *diakonoi* is a term used to describe Church leaders (see *1 Timothy* 3:8)

In v. 4 occurs the word *machaira*, the Greek word for 'sword'. This is taken to be more or less conclusive proof that the rulers here are secular for surely the leaders in the Church do not use weapons in following God's will? Once again, however, a comparison of this passage with other Pauline texts dilutes the obviousness of the secular connotation of this word. In *Ephesians* 6:17, we find St Paul saying: "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." This is especially significant because St Paul has just said that "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness..."

And if more support for the secular interpretation of *Romans* 1-7 were needed, what could be more convincing than the reference to taxes or tribute (*foroi*) in vv. 6 & 7. But the obvious is not necessarily the true. The letter is addressed to Romans who, presumably, were familiar with the concept of taxes or tribute. What more natural than to use this familiar word to stress the necessity for Christians to support their own leaders in the Church, to supply, in effect, what would later come to be called 'tithes'.



body that systematically restricts human freedom. To the extent that the state or any other group of human beings is engaged in such restriction, then religious believers should consider in conscience whether or not, and if so, to what extent, they may be formally cooperating with wrongdoing.

Where an evil already exists and cannot immediately be eliminated, it is both prudent and morally defensible to act to reduce the extent of that evil; so, for example, while I might reject the entire political system, I nonetheless can choose to vote in an election if by so doing I judge that I reduce the amount of unjustified interference with human freedom that otherwise might result, just as I may, in a legal environment in which abortion is permitted, support the reduction of the time period after which abortion is not permitted without thereby lending my support or countenance to the culture of abortion. Positively, one might be considered to have an obligation to support and foster status relationships and voluntary modes of government.

Let me finish by once more quoting Scripture: “They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not.” *Hosea* 8:4, and “Put not your trust in princes...in whom there is no help” *Psalms* 146:3