

Applying the “Holy Nation” in Church History, (part 2)

Joe Fuiten, Bible Teacher, July 14, 2024

Some years ago Providence RI Bishop Thomas Tobin was interviewed by Chris Matthews. The Bishop had banned Congressman Patrick Kennedy from Communion for his views on abortion. The interview on that topic was more than a clash of two personalities. **It was a clash of two worldviews.** Each expressed their viewpoint with clarity and force. Particularly, Chris Matthews articulated the new value that has risen in America with regard to the moral teaching of Christianity being incorporated into the law. Matthew's accusation was that Christianity had failed in its mission to teach its values by preaching. Consequently the Church now tries to compensate for that failure by coercing the public into obedience to God through the force of law. He charges that what the preacher failed to do, the policeman must now accomplish.

Here is a key sampling of Chris Matthew's comments in that interview: Matthews: *"And I would contest that your problem is you haven't gotten people to obey your moral code through teaching, and you have resorted now to use the law to do your enforcement for you. And the problem with that is you are hesitant, even here, your Excellency, to state for me now what the punishment should be under the law for having an abortion, because you know, deep down, if you said one minute in prison, you would be laughed at, because the American people, catholic and non-catholic, do not think it's a criminal act to have an abortion.*

They may not like it. They may think it's immoral. But they don't think it's criminal. And yet you are here bringing the force of the law, the authority of the police, and the bench, the law, the judiciary. You want to bring it all to bear, including the Constitution, to enforce your moral beliefs, which are very valid, and I happen to share them. But how do you do it under the law, your Excellency?"

We have apparently come to the place in American history where a majority feels the church should not impose its values through law.

If this is true, it is not only a huge change but one that requires a change of strategy in the church. If true, we have gone from a governing church to a minority church. With that, all rules change. I want to explore that reality and consider what God wants from us as Americans going forward.

The world which Christianity entered was pagan in its religion and practices.

The world did not know God and had incorporated a religious system based upon paganism and opposed to Christianity in many elements. Indeed, both the Jews and the Romans used the power they possessed to oppress Christianity at various times in the first few centuries after Christ. Christianity had to incorporate its values in contrast to that culture. We were a decided minority without political power or the ability to shape law. Yet very early on, in the years after the New Testament, Christian leaders such as Irenaeus formulated a theology of government.

Irenaeus is important because he is such a close link to the Apostle John. John disciplined Polycarp, who in turn disciplined Irenaeus. Irenaeus was born in 120 AD, just two decades after John died. Irenaeus lived a long life, dying in 202 AD.

Some would say that Revelation represents the Apostle John's commentary on government, that he wrote it all about the Roman Empire. There is probably some truth to that but we see it more as prophetic about the future. If John is not describing Roman government, then Irenaeus would be the first Christian theologian to assemble many of the biblical texts to form an organized theology of the state.

In *Against Heresies*, he laid out his five principles for relating to government particularly in Book V, Chapter XXIV.-Of the Constant Falsehood of the Devil, and of the Powers and Governments of the World, Which We Ought to Obey, Inasmuch as They are Appointed of God, Not of the Devil.

1) Government Belongs to God: As therefore the devil lied at the beginning, so did he also in the end, when he said, "All these are delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give them. For it is not he who has appointed the kingdoms of this world, but God; for "the heart of the king is in the hand of God." And the Word also says by Solomon, "By me kings do reign, and princes administer justice. By me chiefs are raised up, and by me kings rule the earth." Paul the apostle also says upon this same subject: "Be ye subject to all the higher powers; for there is no power but of God: now those which are have been ordained of God."

2) Governmental Power is of God: And again, in reference to them he says, "For he bears not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath to him who does evil." Now, that he spoke these words, not in regard to angelical powers, nor of invisible rulers-as some venture to expound the passage-but of those of actual human authorities, [he shows when] he says, "For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, doing service for this very thing." This also the Lord confirmed, when He did not do what He was tempted to by the devil; but He gave directions that tribute should be paid to the tax-gatherers for Himself and Peter; because "they are the ministers of God, serving for this very thing."

3) Government Imposes the Fear of Man toward Justice: For since man, by departing from God, reached such a pitch of fury as even to look upon his brother as his enemy, and engaged without fear in every kind of restless conduct, and murder, and avarice; God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, as they did not acknowledge the fear of God, in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their laws, they might attain to some degree of justice, and exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword suspended full in their view, as the apostle says: "For he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath upon him who does evil." And for this reason too, magistrates themselves, having laws as a clothing of righteousness whenever they act in a just and legitimate manner, shall not be called in question for their conduct, nor be liable to punishment.

4) God is the Judge of Government: But whatsoever they do to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and illegally, and tyrannically, in these things shall they also perish; for the just judgment of God comes equally upon all, and in no case is defective. Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations, and not by the devil, who is never at rest at all, nay, who does not love to see even nations conducting themselves after a quiet manner, so that under the fear of human rule, men may not eat each other up like fishes; but that, by means of the establishment of laws, they may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations. And considered from this point of view, those who exact tribute from us are "God's ministers, serving for this very purpose."

5) God allows certain types of government as correction or blessing for the People: For by the law of the same Being as calls men into existence are kings also appointed, adapted for those men who are at the time placed under their government. Some of these [rulers] are given for the correction and the benefit of their subjects, and for the preservation of justice; but others, for the purposes of fear and punishment and rebuke: others, as [the subjects] deserve it, are for deception, disgrace, and pride; while the just judgment of God, as I have observed already, passes equally upon all. The devil, however, as he is the apostate angel, can only go to this length, as he did at the beginning, [namely] to deceive and lead astray the mind of man into disobeying the commandments of God, and gradually to darken the hearts of those who would endeavor to serve him, to the forgetting of the true God, but to the adoration of himself as God.

Here is Dr. Jeffrey Bingham's summary of what Irenaeus taught:

First, human government exists through the ordination of God. Second, Christians are obligated to pay taxes to the government ordained by God. Third, human government exists as a concession to humanity's refusal to fear God. Human authorities exist to confront people with the fear of humanity's sword in substitution for humanity's fear of God. Fourth, human government exists as a means to benefit humanity through the structuring of justice. Fifth, the aims of human government to structure peace and justice are consistent with God's own benevolent, just nature and identity as Creator. Sixth, human government conducts itself in diverse ways, both just and unjust. Seventh, although human government exists by God's design as a concession to human rejection of God, in order beneficially to structure justice, it does not supplant God's own sovereign dispensing of universal justice. Whether through the just conduct of the magistrates or God's condemnation of their injustice, God still dispenses just judgment on all. [1]

Christianity, even though it had a vision of government, remained in a minority position until the fourth century.

During that time they felt the duty to obey so long as it did not go counter to their faith. Tertullian, writing around 200 summarized this using the examples of the three Hebrew children and Daniel. First he emphasizes obedience:

Therefore, as to what relates to the honors due to kings or emperors, we have a prescript sufficient, that it behooves us to be in all obedience, according to the apostle's precept,

"subject to magistrates, and princes, and powers;" but within the limits of discipline, so long as we keep ourselves separate from idolatry. For it is for this reason, too, that that example of the three brethren has forerun us, who, in other respects obedient toward king Nebuchadnezzar, rejected with all constancy the honor to his image, proving that whatever is extolled beyond the measure of human honor, unto the resemblance of divine sublimity, is idolatry. So too, Daniel, in all other points submissive to Darius, remained in his duty so long as it was free from danger to his religion; for, to avoid undergoing that danger, he feared the royal lions no more than they the royal fires. [2]

In another place Tertullian identifies much more completely with the Roman Empire and prays for its success even in persecution:

Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man of Cæsar, an emperor would wish. [3]

As time progressed, Christianity gained in numbers, building from the ground up. Whole legions of the Roman army were Christian but the ruling class remained decidedly pagan. The conversion of Constantine, and his rise to Emperor, would prove to be a turning point. Under Constantine, Christianity became legal and then favored. He returned Church property that had been confiscated in earlier persecutions. He chaired the Council of Nicaea where Christian unity on the nature of Jesus was established.

Even with its new position, Christianity did not immediately incorporate all its values in law. The last of Constantine's house was Julian the Apostate who governed to 363 and tried to return paganism to its place of supremacy. Apart from his dramatic attempt to return to paganism, the process of Christianizing the law took place over a period of three hundred years culminating in the revisions to Roman law under Justinian the Great.

What I am considering is the role of the Church in fashioning a Christian legal structure. For that I want to go back to Gregory Nazianzen who was born the year of the Council of Nicaea presided over by Constantine.

The church was newly legal but still did not control a great part of the ruling class. However, more and more Christians were rising to the upper levels of government. Gregory came into his own during the years of Julian the Apostate and beyond, dying in 389 AD.

Gregory wanted Christian leaders to come to the aid of the Word by legislation. **For Gregory, this involved punishing what is wrong, and promoting what is right:**

"I enact this for Laymen too, and I enjoin it also upon all Priests, and upon those commissioned to rule. Come to the aid of the Word, all of you to whom God has given power to aid. It is a great thing to check murder, to punish adultery, to chastise theft; much more to establish piety by law, and to bestow sound doctrine. My word will not be able to do as much

in fighting for the Holy trinity as your Edict, if you will bridle the ill disposed, if you will help the persecuted, if you will check the slayers, and prevent people from being slain. I am speaking not merely of bodily but of spiritual slaughter. For all sin is the death of the soul Here let my discourse end." [4]

We could question the degree to which one can actually establish piety by law but it was the goal that he had. There were those who took the teachings of Gregory, and Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan [5], and gave them legal force. Foremost among these was Emperor Flavius Theodosius (347 -395), also called Theodosius I and Theodosius the Great, the last Emperor to rule both East and West. He was the one who made Nicaean Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and acted to shut down the pagans.

In the beginning, he showed support for the preservation of temples or pagan statues as useful public buildings and was fairly tolerant of the pagans mainly because he needed the support of the influential pagan ruling class. His first effort against paganism was in 381 when he reiterated Constantine's ban on sacrifice. In 384 he prohibited the reading of sheep intestines and other forms of fortune telling. Unlike earlier anti-pagan prohibitions, he made non-enforcement of the law by Magistrates into a crime itself.

In his "Theodosian decrees" he declared that those Pagan feasts that had not yet been rendered Christian ones were now to be workdays (in 389). In 391 he decreed that "no one is to go to the sanctuaries, walk through the temples, or raise his eyes to statues created by the labor of man". These closed pagan temples were declared "abandoned" which made it permissible to demolish them. By permission, a Christian church could be built over those sites. Also in 391 he ended the subsidies that had gone to some remnants of Greco-Roman civic Paganism too. The eternal fire in the Temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum was extinguished, and the Vestal Virgins were disbanded.

In spite of these stout efforts, Christian values were slow to come into Roman law. That would await the great efforts of Justinian the Great who reorganized Roman law. When he was finished, a great many Christian values were in Roman law

Truthfully, many Christian values were already expressed in Roman culture, particularly during the Republican period. When the public and private Roman virtues are compared to Christian values there is almost a 100% correspondence between the two. There were obvious points of divergence which were addressed over time in such areas as sexuality, abortion, and the rights of women, but the general Roman outlook was very similar to the values that God wanted in society.

I debate with myself as to whether or not America is Christian. In many ways we are but in other ways we are systematically removing Christian values from law.

On those areas where we agree, Americans are happy to have Christian values applied in law. **Where we do not agree and have deep divisions, then we do not want those Christian values applied in law.**

[1] D. Jeffrey Bingham, *Irenaeus and the Kingdoms of the World, God and Caesar*, Michael Bauman and David W. Hall, eds. (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1994), p 33.

[2] Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., "On Idolatry," *Ante-Nicene Fathers; Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*; vol 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 71.

[3] Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., "Apology," *Ante-Nicene Fathers; Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*; vol 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 42-43.

[4] Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "Gregory Nazianzen, On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; vol. 7 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995) 344. (325 AD to 389 AD)

[5] In 390 Ambrose excommunicated Theodosius, who had recently given orders which resulted in the massacre of 7,000 inhabitants of Thessalonica in response to the assassination of his military governor stationed in the city, and that Theodosius performed several months of public penance. Right after that period you have Theodosius acting very strongly in behalf of Christianity.