

A Free Church in a Free State

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“A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal.”¹ So says the *Baptist Faith and Message*, and demonstrably so it is the case. Concerning this basic statement of religious liberty, the *BF&M* speaks of the separation of church and state, the ordination of civil government, the use of spiritual means alone to advance the gospel, and of God’s unique role as “Lord of the conscience.”

In support of this position, the *BF&M* cites a range of texts: the creation of man (Gen 1:27; 2:7); private prayer (Matt 6:6-7); a conflict of masters (Matt 6:24); gaining the world at the loss of one’s soul (Matt 16:26); God’s and Caesar’s prerogatives (Matt 22:21); soul liberty in Christ (John 8:36); Peter and John’s “civil disobedience” in preaching (Acts 4:19-20); death to sinning (Rom 6:1-2); submission to the government (Rom 13:1-7); responsible freedom in Christ (Gal 5:1, 13); citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20); prayer for rulers and civil concord (1 Tim 2:1-2); a single universal Lawgiver and Judge (Jas 4:12); exemplary submission to authorities (1 Pet 2:12-17); the right thing, whatever the cost (1 Pet 3:11-17); suffering for Christ (1 Pet 4:12-19).

The following article is meant to complement the *BF&M*’s statement on religious liberty, noting other verses and non-scriptural rationales for appreciating a “free church in a free state.” We begin by underscoring the distinction between church and state, and then we look more closely at reasons for granting each its own room to work.

Ekklesia, not Panklesia

The *ekklesia* is not a *panklesia*. One is called out of society into the church. The body of Christ in a nation is not co-extensive with the populace, a fact that has escaped, oddly enough and from time to time, Greek authorities. Though *ekklesia* is their word, their practice has often been to require baptism for citizenship, to stamp “Orthodox” on the passports of infants, and to require those not wishing this designation to declare and argue their dissent at a government office before they are granted separate status.²

No Church Prisons, No State Ordinations

Though the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows Americans to bear arms, it does not allow them to carry just any arms they please. Private citizens, including parishioners, may not own anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, and crew-served weapons. Neither may they tax or imprison their fellow Americans, even those preaching false doctrine.

Military operations, penitentiaries, and tariffs are matters of state. As 2 Cor 10:4-5 teaches (and the *BF&M* might well have noted), the church advances through persuasion, not coercion.

On the other hand, the notion of state ordination of ministers and state administration of the ordinances (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) is bizarre, even oxymoronic (“state baptism” making as much sense as “2% tithe”).

Limits of State Competency

Facing massive unemployment and rising inflation, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was besieged by many in the church, demanding that the government correct things. In a speech entitled, "The Spirit of a Nation," she insisted that the government could not do everything:

The state cannot create wealth. That depends on the exertions of countless people motivated not only by the wholesome desire to provide for themselves and their families, but also by a passion for excellence and a genuine spirit of public service. The state cannot generate compassion; it can and must provide a "safety net" for those who, through no fault of their own, are unable to cope on their own. There is need for far more generosity in our national life, but generosity is born in the hearts of men and women; it cannot be manufactured by politicians, and assuredly it will not flourish if politicians foster the illusion that the exercise of compassion can be left to officials. And so, I repeat, it is on the individual that the health of both church and state depends.³

In America, the special abilities of the church have also been recognized, at least in the early days of the Republic, when the government partnered with churches to improve the lot of Indians.

In his February 8, 1822, report to the House of Representatives on "Condition of the Several Indian Tribes," President James Monroe listed the government's agents for helping the Indians, including the Missionary Society of New York (to the Seneca); the Hamilton Baptist Missionary Society of New York (to the Oneida); the Moravians (to the Cherokee); the Cumberland Missionary Society (to the Chickasaw); the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions (to the Miami); the United Foreign Missionary Society of New York (to the Osages). Regarding the Chickasaw, the report said

"that the children have been orderly and attentive to their studies, and particularly so to moral and religious instruction."⁴

Of course, one could count such close government cooperation with missionary agencies unwise, and those saturated in the rhetoric of absolute church-state separation might find such language in a "state of the union address" unthinkable. Many would object to the nation's paternalistic treatment of Indian people. But we must not lose sight of Monroe's and Congress's deeper wisdom, that faith in the living God is the deepest wellspring of civilization.

Now, having rehearsed some distinctions between church and state, let us turn to reasons for bolstering the vitality of each of these two God-ordained institutions. They are neither equal in weight nor exhaustive of the case that can be made, but they do suggest the rich wisdom in the Baptist, biblical, stance.

A Free Church

A Free Church is Typically a More Vital Church

In the 1930s, German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent the better part of a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. When he returned to Germany (where he was martyred by Hitler), he wrote an essay on the American church, observing,

Nowhere has the principle of the separation of church and state become a matter of such general, almost dogmatic significance as in American Christianity, and nowhere, on the other hand, is the participation of the churches in the political, social, economic, and cultural events of public life so active and so influential as in the country where there is no state church.⁵

In contrast to the free American church, the European state church has been languishing. Recently *The Economist* spoke of this malaise in marketing terms, and then turned its eyes on the budding charismatic and Pentecostal churches, which operate without state subsidy or control:

Grace Davie of the University of Exeter argues that there are really two religious economies in Europe. In the old one, religion is “a public utility”: there is one state-backed supplier, and most Christians follow their religion vicariously (in the sense that somebody else does your church going for you). For instance, around 75% of Swedes are baptised as Lutherans, but only 5% regularly go to church. The church pockets a staggering \$1.6 billion in membership fees, collected by the state through the tax system. It has been rare for Swedes to opt out, though that seems to be changing.

Alongside this old religious economy, a smaller one, based on person choice, is growing. Together evangelicals, charismatics and Pentecostals accounted for 8.2% of Europe’s population in 2000, nearly double the rate in 1970, according to the World Christian Encyclopedia.⁶

Derek Davis, dean of humanities at Mary Hardin-Baylor, finds this disparity perfectly understandable:

Many Europeans today unfortunately look upon religion as just another government program. Attendance in most European churches is abysmal. The people have lost, to a very large degree, the will to support their own religious institutions because government does it for them.⁷

The Iron of State Needs the Iron of the Church to Sharpen It

As Margaret Thatcher explained above, the church stirs, directs, and fortifies the souls of its members, making them better

citizens. They are more reliable employees, more thoughtful managers, and less selfish colleagues and neighbors. The regenerate are good people, and goodness is essential to the welfare of society. In his farewell address, George Washington underscored this truth:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connection with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles. ‘Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.⁸

Reading this, one might get the impression that the essential gift the church gives the state is the personal morality of its members, their respect for the rule of law, their fellow man, and their familial duties. Thus, winsome public policy would spring from the hearts of wholesomely domesticated men. But, consistent with Washington’s statement, the church also has an edgier role to play, that of tireless critic.

When the state suppresses the prophetic role of the church, allowing its

members to meet only for mutual edification, then the nation is robbed of a corrective—a form of discipline if you will. America’s second president, John Adams, said as much on the eve of the American Revolution:

It is the duty of the clergy to accommodate their discourses to the times, to preach against such sins as are most prevalent, and recommend such virtues as are most wanted. For example,—if exorbitant ambition and venality are predominant, ought they not to warn their hearers against those vices? If public spirit is much wanted, should they not inculcate this great virtue? If the rights and duties of Christian magistrates and subjects are disputed, should they not explain them, show their nature, ends, limitations, and restrictions, how much soever it may move the gall of Massachusetts?⁹

In this connection, the *BF&M* could well have cited the examples of Amos, Jonah, and Jeremiah to support their liberty section. A nation needs its prophets.

This goes down badly in many minds today, and not only with the targets of rebuke. Secularists and other radical separationists insist that the church remain silent and insular, a place for devotional life and deeds of charity. When it presumes to bring its perspectives to bear in the public square, the state is compromised, or so think men like University of South Alabama political science professor, Ethan Fishman, who writes this in *The American Scholar*:

[Roger] Williams and [Thomas] Jefferson sought to prohibit government from directly translating church doctrine into law and policy. The Bush administration, on the other hand, has fought embryonic stem cell research, abortion, contraception, sex education, and the teaching of evolution, all apparently in deference to evangelical Protestant theology.¹⁰

Never mind that Orthodox Jews, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and even atheists often agree on these things and that President Bush has selected a Jew, Leon Kass, to head his Council on Bioethics. Never mind that a state position has to rest on *something*, and it is not at all clear why that something must always be scrubbed clean of theological conviction? For Fishman the slightest hint of such conviction at play in the halls of government is toxic. And thus he and his fellow alarmists would insulate or pad the state from the sharpening perspective of religious conviction, binding the church in irrelevance.

Of course, even believers can be reluctant to bring the iron of biblical teaching to bear on the iron of public policy. As Darryl Hart argues in *A Secular Faith*, “[T]he basic teachings of Christianity are virtually useless for resolving America’s political disputes.”¹¹ That is why he dedicated his book to “the memory and legacy of J. Gresham Machen,” who, in Hart’s estimation, was

a twentieth-century Presbyterian who opposed any church pronouncements on the social or political questions of the day because in so doing, he believed, churches were turning aside from their proper mission: “to bring to bear upon human hearts the solemn and imperious, yet also sweet and gracious, appeal of the gospel of Christ.”¹²

(So much the worse, then, for the great Christian tradition of effectively opposing the gladiatorial games, infanticide, child labor, cruelty to animals, slavery, racial segregation, etc.)

Hart assures the reader,

[T]he problem I raise goes deeper than the tendency to reduce Christianity to bumper-sticker propositions on the campaign trail. The more profound issue is that Christianity

is essentially a spiritual and eternal faith, one occupied with a world to come rather than the passing and temporal affairs of this world.¹³

Of course, no one is trying to “reduce Christianity to bumper sticker propositions.” Clearly, it is more than this. But what would have been the problem with bumper stickers (had they had cars) in Wilberforce’s day, one reading, “Blacks and Whites are Equals” or “God Hates Slavery”?

And it is difficult to gainsay all Christian activism, such as that stirring up of 19th-century British opposition to Turkish atrocities in the Balkans:

In certain circumstances the combined moral indignation of external pressure groups and parliamentarians could create a political explosion of extraordinary power. Such was the case in 1876 following the Turkish suppression of an attempted insurrection by Bulgarian nationalists. The news that 15,000 men, women, and children had been massacred by the Turks produced repugnance and fury against both the Islamic power and Disraeli’s Eastern policy. In less than six weeks some 500 public demonstrations had provided a forum for all who felt moral revulsion at the Turks or guilt at British policy. The agitation drew on the moral energy of those touched by the mid-century religious revivals and the Oxford Movement, including those who otherwise lacked political power, and who had learned lessons from earlier quasi-religious campaigns for anti-slavery, suffragette reform, and the repeal of the Corn Laws. Nonconformists and Anglo-Catholics, especially ministers and clergy, were prominent at every level. They included that loyal son of the Congregational manse, the crusading young Darlington editor W. T. Stead; Bishop Fraser of Manchester; Canon Liddon of St. Paul’s; and Samuel Smith, Liverpool Presbyterian cotton merchant, one of those who

had invited Moody and Sankey to Liverpool in the previous year, and now politically active for the first time in his career. By early September more than half of the towns in England had held protest meetings. It was then that Gladstone, excited by this mass display of moral passion, lent his weight to the agitation, publishing his *Bulgarian Horrors* and addressing the great “atrocities” meeting at Blackheath on September 9. Richard Shannon characterized that gathering as “a great revivalist rally”; certainly Stead continued to regard it as one of the most memorable scenes of his life. But there is little sign of the manipulation of public sentiment by politicians; rather, their role was reactive, one of response more than initiation. In the view of George Kitson Clark, the agitation was “by far the greatest . . . revelation of the moral susceptibility of the High Victorian public conscience.”¹⁴

A silent, lapdog church is the dream of many, but it is a sub-Christian notion. Alas, two politicians, Thomas Jefferson and Lyndon Johnson,¹⁵ both stinging from the rebuke of clergy, have succeeded in diminishing the voice of the American church. In a letter to Danbury pastors after a narrow victory over John Adams in the presidential race of 1800, Jefferson introduced the extra-constitutional, “wall of separation” language so favored by the Supreme Court, ACLU, and Americans United in recent decades. And as a U.S. senator, Johnson introduced pulpit strictures into the tax code in 1954, whereby, after 150 years of national practice to the contrary, it became illegal for preachers to take sides in political races. (Of course, it may be impious and imprudent to address such contests in the course of a sermon, but it is quite another thing to declare it illegal.)

Where the Church Is Quashed, the State Is Eager to Fill the Vacuum

Nature hates a vacuum, and state idolatry is ready to fill the one left by erasure or suppression of the church. Reporting on his visit to the international Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932, G. K. Chesterton wrote,

[I]t is only by believing in God that we can ever criticise the Government. Once abolish God, and the Government becomes God. . . . Wherever the people do not believe in something beyond the world, they will worship the world. But, above all, they will worship the strongest thing in the world.¹⁶

Certainly, the twentieth century supplied two stunning examples of the secular state becoming the heart of a new religion. Having driven the church into submission, Adolph Hitler founded a cult of his own, centered around Nuremberg. There, annually, he gathered a hundred thousand Nazi soldiers, bearing thirty thousand banners, as a hundred thousand spectators watched in awe. As Hitler entered through a spotlighted gate, a line of 150 searchlights popped on, casting a wall of light 25,000 feet straight up into the night air. A British ambassador said it was “solemn and beautiful . . . like being inside a cathedral of ice.”¹⁷ William Shirer, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, observed that one meeting at Nuremberg “had something of the mysticism and religious fervour of an Easter or Christmas Mass in a great Gothic cathedral.”¹⁸

Besides a “cathedral,” Hitler’s religion had a prophet (himself), a sermon (captured in Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary, *The Triumph of the Will*), a pilgrimage (a 1,000-mile youth march to the rally), a relic (a blood-stained flag), a ritual (homage to the dead), a litany (chants and responses),

a confession (50,000 voices shouting fealty to the Fuhrer), hymns, an altar (a martyrs’ memorial modeled on the ancient pagan altar at Pergamum), and a congregation (assembled in Nuremberg by 500 special trains).¹⁹

Mao Tse-Tung provides another dramatic example. The “Cultural Revolution” of the 1980s ushered in “the exaltation of Mao and his ideas to the exclusion of everything else. He was no longer venerated; he was worshipped.”²⁰ The result was a reverse of the Ten Commandments, including the employment of image veneration (“At workplaces each morning, people stood in formation and bowed three times before Mao’s portrait. . . . They repeated the same ritual each evening.”)²¹ and the leader’s unbridled practice of adultery,²² theft,²³ and slander.²⁴ Before this mass murderer was done, seventy million lives were sacrificed on the altar of his false, state religion.²⁵

Religious Oppression

Means Economic Peril

Through common grace, God has equipped “pagans” of every stripe with gifts, and the flowering of their talents means economic gain. Quash religious liberty, including the liberty to be irreligious, and you drive away business. As Russell Shorto argues effectively in his book, *The Island at the Center of the World*,²⁶ New York City’s (and America’s) prosperity is indebted to the Dutch tradition of religious freedom (largely a reaction to years of Spanish tyranny),²⁷ not the oppressive atmosphere of Massachusetts Bay Colony, from which Roger Williams fled for the sake of liberty of conscience.

Though “New York” is an English name, the city is replete with signs of her Dutch past: Brooklyn (*Brueckelen*),

Bronx, Staten Island, Flatbush (*Vlackebos*), Flushing (*Vlissingen*), Stuyvesant Street, Coney Island, and the Bowery. Dutch built Wall Street's wall, and Vanderbilts and Roosevelts were pillars of New York culture.²⁸ And, by the time the British took over, New Amsterdam was a Dutch religious "zoo." As the first English governor observed, the place was rife with "Singing Quakers; Ranting Quakers, Sabbatarians; Antisabbatarians; Some Anabaptists some Independants; some Jews."²⁹ It was reminiscent of Amsterdam, where Swiss Anabaptists had fled murderous magisterial Reformers, where English Separatist refugees became re-baptizers themselves, where the Pilgrims sojourned before heading out for Plymouth Rock, and where Jews, such as the ancestors of philosopher Baruch Spinoza, had found refuge from the Spanish Inquisition.

Of course, freedom of religion—including freedom from religion—can be very messy. In the early days, New York, "was little more than a place of chaos and slop, of barroom knife fights, soldiers fornicating with Indian women while on guard duty, and a steady stream of wayward newcomers . . . ready to smuggle, drink, trade, whore, and be gone."³⁰ But there was trade aplenty, and both regenerate and unregenerate genius flooded the city.

When the Dutch drafted the Union of Utrecht in 1579, they gained a "de facto constitution." Written in response to long-standing Spanish tyranny, it specified that "each person shall remain free, especially in his religion."³¹ Little did they know that this document would set the tone for their colonial efforts in the New World and pave the way for unsurpassed financial vitality on "the island at the center of the world."

Indeed, the striking Dutch example did

not escape observers of that day:

Pundits wrestled with the problem, especially in the 1660s and 1670, and reached a consensus that religious liberty was responsible for their little neighbor's [Holland's] surprising ascendancy. In his widely read *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands* (1673), Sir William Temple concluded that the "vast growth of their trade and riches, and consequently the strength and greatness of their state" could be attributed to the wisdom of the Dutch in granting "impartial protection" to all religions in their country. William Penn was among those who agreed. Why, he asked, was the Netherlands, "that bog of the world, neither sea nor dry land, now the rival of the tallest monarchs." Because, Penn answered, the Dutch "cherish [their] people, whatsoever were their opinions, as the reasonable stock of the country, the heads and hands of her trade and wealth; and making them easy in the main point, their conscience, she became great by them; this made her fill with people, and they filled her with riches and strength."³²

The Arab world today provides a starkly contrasting example. By suppressing religious dissent, they have strangled research and development, alienated investors and entrepreneurs, censored stimulating ideas, and primitivized the populace. In an interview with *Congress Monthly*, former CIA director, James Woolsey, summed up the situation:

Twenty-one Arab nations, plus Iran, have about the same population as the United States and Canada. Other than fossil fuels—mainly oil, of course—they export to the world less than Finland, a country of only 5 million people. If the world moves away from oil, these countries will have to learn from countries like Finland that have no oil but that produce decent lives for their people by educating their women, teaching engineering, math, and science in the schools and colleges—not

just rote memorization of religious texts—and otherwise move out of the 7th century. Indeed there is a fine role model quite near them, a nation that operates in this fashion, practices freedom of speech, press, and religion, and has a GDP per capita of over \$18,000 per year (as contrasted to Saudi Arabia's of some \$13,000 per year). This country—Israel—has virtually no natural resources except for farmland it has reclaimed from the desert. Tours should perhaps be organized for those who want to learn how to start with little more than sand and resolve, and from those create a prosperous democracy in the Middle East.³³

Of course, economic health is not the touchstone of spiritual vitality, but it seems to be a by-product of religious freedom. And though one would not want to build an apologetic for the faith on the basis of GNPs and GDPs, one would be foolish to ignore the correlation between liberty and prosperity.

A Free State

The Fall and Babel Teach the Necessity of Checks and Balances

The *Baptist Faith and Message* might well have listed the Fall (Genesis 3) and the confusion of languages at Babel (Genesis 11) among its scriptural citations in support of religious liberty. For the grasp of these phenomena is foundational to sane government, including matters of church and state. Because humankind is corrupt, its creatures cannot be trusted. Working both from scripture and evidences of the Fall in recent European history, the American Fathers wrote limits and reversals into the Constitution: all public servants may be impeached; it takes two houses to approve a bill, and even then the president may veto it; Congress may override his veto; the Supreme Court justices may declare bills unconstitutional; subsequent

presidents and congresses may replace them with new justices. And so it goes. No one can really be trusted.

It is simply the case that mankind cannot handle overarching power. The state must curb the church; indeed, the church must curb the church. While multi-ethnic congregations are admirable, it is probably good that there are distinctively-ethnic, unamalgamated (though cooperating) churches as well, for homogenized worship can rob the church universal of strong gospel music, meticulous theology, ethical zeal, and prophetic utterance. That is to say, some division keeps the church honest and vital.

The separation of church and state is essentially a conservative, even a pessimistic, position. Unlike the utopian, who dreams of a worldwide Muslim caliphate, a United Nations authority to which all nations must bow, or a post-millennial Reconstruction, the conservative sets his sights lower. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine* back in 1973, Andrew Hacker connected the theological and political dots:

Conservatism has always had a straightforward theory of human nature. "History," wrote Edmund Burke, "consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy and all the trains of disorderly appetites which shake the public." A short way to say this asserts that man is infected by the virus of Original Sin, a position that James Burnham and other conservative scholars are prepared to argue. Burnham, a one-time Trotskyite and a philosophy professor at New York University until the mid-nineteen-fifties, holds to "the traditional belief, expressed in the theological doctrine of Original Sin . . . that man is partly corrupt as well as limited in his potential."

Adam's fall, whether an article of faith or a figurative metaphor, underlies every conservative conclusion. It implies that man is prone to perversity; that the best-intentioned plans will have self-defeating consequences; that no society can ever attain consensus. The conservative case for capitalism, capital punishment, for believing that people prefer loafing on welfare to working for a living, all arise from this view of human nature.

One problem in that the left is unwilling to come to grips with this conception. In earlier centuries the debate among radicals, liberals and conservatives was clearly delineated: those on the left were prepared to assert that man was essentially good (Rousseau), inherently rational (John Stuart Mill) and capable of ordering his own and society's destiny (Thomas Jefferson). In fact, the left still hold to this outlook – why else do they continually come forward with plans and proposals to remedy the maladies of our time? – but its adherents have become too sophisticated for so simple an affirmation. Nevertheless the assumption of altruism slips through. Hence the surprise in liberal quarters when account books of ghetto programs fail to balance. (They would be on safer ground, intellectually as well as financially, in providing beforehand for a little pilferage.)³⁴

Now it may seem that this is a forlorn position, robbing mankind of its best achievements and highest spiritual exhilaration, but Sir Karl Popper argues quite to the contrary. In his *Open Society and its Enemies*, he demonstrates that there is nothing so lethal as a utopian, whether Plato or Marx. Once a party or people become convinced that earthly paradise is within reach, tyranny and ruin are just around the corner. Of course, the ideologue's plans will fail, and many innocent people will be crushed in the process. Unfortunately, even the church can be the culprit.

Left to Itself, the Church Can Turn Tyrannical, Even Lethal

Though history is full of examples of religious violence and tyranny, the stunning cases at hand today are Muslim. Where Sharia law reigns, no non-Muslim (or dissident Muslim) is safe. A quick trip around the world provides a sampler, all these from 2006: the new democratic government in Afghanistan threatened Christian convert, Abdul Rahman, with the death penalty; Saudi police arrested four African Christians meeting for home prayer; a Malaysian authority forbade Catholics to build a new church with steeple and cross, claiming it would be too provocative; Pakistani Christian Mobeen Boota was imprisoned for his faith and otherwise persecuted in an attempt to drive him to Islam; in Dubai, a Filipino pastor was convicted of "abusing Islam" and deported, all for giving Christian literature to an Egyptian man. Earlier, in 2005, police, looking for Christian material, raided the home of Iranian Pastor Ghorban Tori just hours after he was kidnapped and stabbed to death. And currently, in Egypt, churches, unlike mosques, must clear with provincial governors if they are to repair their buildings.³⁵

Of course, this sort of thing has been going on for years in Muslim quarters. For example, in 1989, Iran hanged Assemblies of God pastor and evangelist Hossein Soodman for his faith.³⁶ And though the U.S. State Department has noted no executions for "apostasy" (specifically, conversion to Christianity) since the late 1990s, the legal structure for such state-sponsored murder is still in place in some countries: "Freedom of religion does not exist. Islam is the official religion, and all citizens must be Muslims. . . . Conver-

sion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy. Public apostasy is a crime under Sharia and punishable by death."³⁷ This was the policy by which Saudi Arabia, in 1992, beheaded Sadiq 'Abd al-Karim Mal Allah for Bible smuggling.³⁸

One does not need Muslims to teach us the lethality of religion. The Supreme Court of Georgia intervened when Jessie Mae Jefferson refused a Caesarian section to save the life of her unborn child. A devout Jehovah's Witness, Mrs. Jefferson was fundamentally opposed to blood transfusions, an essential part of the Caesarian. (For them, it is tantamount to eating blood, forbidden by the Old Testament.) While the justices sympathized with her religious scruples, they could not let her deny the baby a life-saving operation.³⁹ In the words of the court,

[T]he state has an interest in the life of this unborn, living human being. . . . [T]he intrusion involved into the life of Jessie Mae Jefferson and her husband, John W. Jefferson, is outweighed by the duty of the State to protect a living, unborn human being from meeting his or her death before being given the opportunity to live.⁴⁰

Of course, the problem is not limited to false religions. Even the Christian Church can turn on the Christian Church. Consider, for instance, the family of Balthasaar Hubmaier, the Anabaptist whose chief sin was declaring infant baptism a nullity. "Along with his wife, Elizabeth, who was thrown in the Danube River with a rock around her neck, Hubmaier was condemned to death and burned at the stake in Vienna by the Catholic King Ferdinand in March 1528."⁴¹ Ferdinand was suffering from what Southeastern Baptist Seminary professor Daniel Heimbach calls "religious idealism," which he

describes as "an approach associated with pre-Vatican II Catholicism, various parts of the Orthodox Church, Saudi Arabia, Islamic terrorist groups linked to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, Japan prior to WWII, and ideological communism." It "is characterized by a single overarching principle, that only truth has rights, and error has no rights."⁴²

Of course, abuse in the name of God does not require acts of state, as in Hubmaier's case. Indeed, so widespread is vigilantism in church history that it has spawned the special study of the "religious riot," which Princeton's Natalie Davis defined as "any violent action, with words or weapons, undertaken against religious targets by people who were not acting *officially and formally* as agents of political ecclesiastical authority" (the targets could be objects, such as icons, as well as people).⁴³ So either through channels or outside them, self-proclaimed Christians can be quite thuggish.

Left to Itself, the Church Can Render the State Excessively Tender

While tyranny can result from overreaching church power, the opposite is also possible. A feminized church can rob the state of its proper role. In this therapeutic age when the church is obsessed with victimhood, feelings, and such, clergy are often heard to counsel weakness in government. One could easily argue that if the National Council of Churches or the Episcopal Church (USA) took over the reins of power, they would cast aside the state's prerogative to execute murderers, wage war, and draw natural distinctions, such as that between real marriage and "gay" unions.

Of course, there will always be a constituency for such tenderizing, as Darryl

Hart notes, citing a movie scene:

Even run of the mill ex-cons, like Ulysses Everett McGill, the scheming ringleader of the three escaped prisoners in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, could see that his colleagues' conversion would have no effect on their legal predicament as fugitives. When Pete and Delmar both appealed to their recent baptism in a muddy river as the basis for a general absolution of forgiveness for past and present violations of the law, Everett responded, "That's not the issue. . . . Even if it did put you square with the Lord, the State of Mississippi is more hardnosed."⁴⁴

Actually, Mississippi is not more hardnosed than God, who ordains the tough work of state justice in Romans 13. But it is quite possible that if clerics ran the state of Mississippi, all sorts of pastorally-minded compromise would be in the footing.

Even so stalwart an institution as the Roman Catholic Church has urged that the state pull its punches. Reversing centuries of commitment to retributive justice, Cardinal Bernardin and even Pope John Paul II pressed for the abolition of the death penalty—and commended now-jailed Illinois governor George Ryan for emptying death row. Appealing to a "consistent life ethic," whereby the killing of an unborn baby is curiously equated with the execution of an adult murderer, the Vatican and the United States Council of Catholic Bishops were heartened as Governor Ryan gave reprieves to all of the state's 156 death row inmates (to the consternation of the victim's relatives). Abandoning the moral teaching of Augustine and Aquinas on this matter, Catholics now claim that the state is incompetent to administer the death penalty even if capital punishment is, in principle, just. But the outcome is just the same, as if the death penalty were immoral *per se*.⁴⁵

Of course, the state can use some use some tender council from time to time, just as it can benefit from the stern word of prophets. Indeed, such was the basis for the English office of Chancellor, with its modern application to chancery courts and courts of equity. This "court of conscience" originated in the practice of sending clerical intermediaries from the king to the plaintiffs gathered *ad cancellos*, at the lattice which held them at a distance. The office evolved under Charlemagne, came to England under Edward the Confessor, and was occupied by such luminaries as Cardinal Woolsey and Thomas More. Theirs was the task of assuring that widows, orphans, the poor, and the insane were not abused in their dealings with the powerful.⁴⁶

This is a wonderful tradition, but the Chancellor is not the king. Otherwise, the rule of law could give way to the rule of feelings. Unfortunately, there are many in the church who would be inclined to cheer this development.

The Church Cannot Even Manage Its Own Affairs, Much Less Those of State

To theocrats of every stamp, one might ask, "How can you presume to run the nation when you cannot even manage your own affairs?" For, at every turn, the writers of the epistles expressed alarm at a wayward church: Paul rebuked Peter for his Judaizing (Gal 2:11-21), fought the divisive example of Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 2:5-11; 4:2-3), scolded the Corinthians for harboring a sexually immoral member (1 Cor 5:1-2) and for bringing lawsuits against one another (1 Cor 6:1-8), and bemoaned party spirit in the congregation (1 Cor 10:1-17). James expressed dismay at quarrels and slanders (James 4:1-12) and

the tendency to favor the rich and powerful (Jas 2:1-13). Peter alerted the saints to false teachers in their midst (2 Pet 2). Jude reported that godless, heretical men had slipped in to the church (Jude 3-4). John attacked a wickedly powerful church member named Diotrephes (3 John 9-10) and recited a litany of disappointments in Asian churches (Rev 2-3).

The list goes on and on, and provides scriptural base for the church to be checked-and-balanced itself. But one needs only look to the contemporary church for examples of moral weakness, misdirection, and perfidy—priestly pedophiles, fraudulent ministries, hedonistic televangelists, pastoral prima donnas, treacherous laymen, pharisaical watchdogs, and antinomian bishops. Thank God the church is not in charge.

State Support Breeds Pointless Resentment

When the Southern Baptist Convention took a stand against homosexuality back in 1993, some sensitive souls called it a “public relations disaster,” much as they had when the conservative resurgence reinstated respect for biblical inerrancy in the seminaries. They were appalled that we would appear so negative and combative, and they feared that the denomination would “turn off” the watching world and undermine evangelism. What they missed was the fact that the gospel itself is a public relations disaster, alternatively “foolishness” and “a stumbling block” to various sectors of society.

Yes, there is room for biblical public relations, if only to set the record straight. The early church had to correct a variety of misconstruals, including the claims that the believers practiced cannibalism (“eating” the blood and body of Christ) and

incest (whereby *Brother* Aquila went home to bed with *Sister* Priscilla). The believers simply needed to be sure that they were despised for the right reasons.

When the state adopts the church, providing it sustenance, then critics of the church can question this support—and rightfully so. The situation is reminiscent of the furor over “welfare queens” and “welfare Cadillacs,” of which politicians spoke and lyricists wrote back in the 1970s. When others are pulling their own weight, how is it that able-bodied characters were sent checks to keep them afloat and to even luxuriate a bit?

Today, one hears the same sort of complaint regarding the National Endowment for the Arts. Society resents the fact that insufficiently popular artists must turn to the public coffers to keep themselves going—and often going in the wrong direction. And while morally acute people may express disgust at some of what the private artists do, at least they do not have to pay for it. When, though, they are drafted to fund perversity, the complaints are loud and justified.

The fact of the matter is that in the aggregate, church members have a sorry record of giving. Simple mathematics reveals that if the membership even tithed, most churches could double, triple, or even quadruple their budgets. This would provide plenty of support for the maintenance of vital congregations, the multiplication of mission works, and the support of charities of every sort. Indeed, it is an embarrassment that charities bearing Christian names would feel free to approach the taxpayers for help. There is scandal enough in the cross. Why add the scandal of panhandling to the church’s record?

The Church Needs State Iron to Keep It Sharp

One has only to look to the Middle East for examples of an unsharpened “church,” where irrationality reigns because it has not been exposed to the full range of challenges. Canada’s *Globe and Mail* reports the following:

It’s been 375 years since Galileo published his earth-shaking *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, 336 since John Milton wrote *Paradise Regained* and nearly 40 since James D. Watson had an apparent international bestseller with *The Double Helix*, about the discovery of the structure of DNA. Amazingly, however, none of these books, and thousands of classics like them, has ever been translated into Arabic, the first tongue of more than 300 hundred million persons worldwide. Indeed, according to a 2003 United Nations report into human development in the Arab world, more books are translated into Spanish each year—10,000—than have been translated into Arabic in the previous 10 centuries.

Now this situation is being rectified by the sheikhdom of Abu Dhabi, one of the seven Muslim United Arab Emirates, which last month officially revealed its plans to translate 100 epochal foreign-language texts into Arabic by the end of next year.⁴⁷

Yes, this is Islam, with its own peculiar pathologies, but Christians are not immune to damaging insularity. While it is true that the public schools often cheat their students by failing to mention such nation-transforming phenomena as the First and Second Great Awakenings and the Prayer Revival of 1857-1858, Christian schools, left to themselves, might fail to do justice to the (albeit specious) charms of evolution, communism, and existentialism. And a home-schooled child might, after a few short lessons, become convinced that J. S. Bach and Isaac Watts

said it all in music and that seventeenth century Dutch painting was the only thing worth collecting. Of course, one can arrive at sweeping judgments on such matters, but it is better if the journey traverses the land of alternatives. And here, the state can help. Take postage stamps for instance.

There are many spiritually-defective people who make a contribution to a nation’s institutions, and there is a place to acknowledge their genius and industry. Consider, for instance, U.S. commemorative stamps for such non-Christian luminaries as atheist philosopher Ayn Rand (1999),⁴⁸ racist baseball star Ty Cobb (2000),⁴⁹ actor-singer and Communist sympathizer Paul Robeson (2004),⁵⁰ and drug-plagued singer Judy Garland (2006).⁵¹ Were the Church to run the national stamp program, it is highly unlikely that such people would be mentioned, much less honored, but there is a place for the achievements of the lost to be celebrated, if only for the standards of excellence they attained in their fields of endeavor, the courage they showed as pioneers, and the way in which they advanced the national conversation. Common grace has its due. (Now if the secularists and separationists would give Christian giants their due. Witness Yale’s continuing campaign for a Jonathan Edwards stamp.)⁵²

Two Wings

The ideal of a free church in a free state tracks well with Michael Novak’s account of the genius of American statecraft: “The United States took flight on two wings, and could not have taken flight on one of them alone. The two wings were (and are) humble faith and common sense.”⁵³ In saying this, he intends to honor Tocqueville, who wrote,

Anglo-American civilization . . . is the product of two perfectly distinct elements which elsewhere have often been at war with one another but which in America it was somehow possible to incorporate into each other, forming a marvelous combination. I mean the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom . . . Far from harming each other, these two apparently opposed tendencies work in harmony and seem to lend to each other mutual support.

Both men speak not only of cooperation but also of healthy tension,

reminding religious people of the importance of the wing of reason and common sense, and secular people of the importance of the wing of biblical religion, the primary origin and nourishing mother even of such "Enlightenment ideals" as fraternity, liberty of conscience, and equality. Missing either of these wings, the American eagle cannot fly.

One might say that God uses a free church in a free state to keep everybody honest—and in so doing, he stimulates prosperity, produces magnet cultures, and glorifies himself. Religious liberty and governmental liberty are matters of principle and duty, but also engines of well-being.

It is said that the "blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," and there are outstanding, historical illustrations of this claim. But facilitating the martyrdom or victimization of others, whether for their religion or irreligion, is both iniquity and folly. And against such ruin, both a free church and a free state stand watch.

ENDNOTES

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