“Two There Are”

Religion and Politics in a Polarized Society

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Himes presents some important insights and perspectives concerning the issue of Catholics in public office, examines recent magisterial teaching on the subject, and shares his reflections on the current undesirable situation.

During the past presidential election a considerable amount of acrimony arose over the question of refusing the Eucharist to those Catholic politicians who were judged to be opposed to restrictive abortion legislation. The debate took place not only between bishops and public officials, but also between the bishops themselves. More than three decades after Roe v. Wade, the polarizing impact of abortion politics continues to divide Americans.

Regardless of partisan preferences, the brouhaha that arose over Catholic officeholders and their worthiness to receive the Eucharist is regrettable. Regrettable because the centerpiece of the Church’s liturgical life became a political football that was kicked around by ill-informed commentators on the left and right. Regrettable, too, because the church’s role in the political realm was not clarified but confused by the debate. Finally, regrettable because, once again, the advisability of Catholics running for political office was called into question.

In what follows I present some distant and more proximate perspective on the issue of Catholics in public office, examine recent teaching on the subject, and conclude with some comments about our present undesirable situation.

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Jesus and Politics

In a story found in all three synoptic gospels (Mark 12:13-17; Matt 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26), Jesus is confronted by Jewish leaders on the question of paying taxes. He asks them whose head and inscription is on the coin? When they replied, Caesar, Jesus stated: “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s” (Matt 22:21).

In his still valuable volume, The State in the New Testament, the late Oscar Cullman made several points worth remembering about this famous exchange. By his answer Jesus distanced himself from the zealots and their avowed aim of the violent overthrow of Roman occupation. The zealots of ancient Palestine sought to usher in the Messianic age by dint of creating a Jewish kingdom, a state that would be theocratic and absolutist. In effect, the zealots would establish a state that was identified with the reign of God. Jesus was having none of it; for him God’s reign will not be brought about by human action, and especially not by violence.

Instead, Jesus expressed a provisional tolerance of the Roman state. By no means was it the reign of God, but it did have a measure of legitimacy for the time. That time was passing and Rome along with it. But for the moment, the believer should render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

This sentiment was further expressed in Romans 13 where Paul urged his readers to honor the civil authorities, pay their taxes, and obey their laws. For Paul, the spread of the gospel was the true imperative; all else was secondary to that duty. Civil authority was to be acknowledged for, ultimately, all authority is from God. In Paul’s mind no particular form of governance or any individual ruler was divinely ordained, but the institution of the state was in accord with God’s purposes. Its leaders, therefore, were not to be simply dismissed; they, too, had a place in God’s plan.

In his encounter with the Jewish leaders, Jesus also stated that one had to render to God what was God’s. And by that comment he proposed there were some things that were not the state’s. The efforts of the imperial regime to promote emperor worship placed the overreaching claims of the state at odds with Christian belief. While the state had a legitimate place in God’s plan, there was no possibility of making the state the central player in history’s drama. The state may deserve respect, but it cannot command ultimate loyalty. To make obedience to the state the highest duty was to lose sight of Jesus’ preaching about the primacy of the reign of God. This rejection of an overbearing state making false claims explains
the view of the empire found in Revelation 13 where the writer describes the Roman Empire in terms akin to Daniel's apocalyptic vision.

The Patristic Era

As historians have been quick to explain, the question of Caesar's coin shifted once the emperor became Christian. In the fourth century the two institutions had to discover how to relate to one another. Neither indifference nor opposition was adequate to the new situation; mutual cooperation became the watchword. However, the risk was that cooperation might lead to unhealthy interference. Therefore, it was important that boundaries be drawn that highlighted areas of collaboration and shared interest, but that also established realms of independence.

The issue, of course, developed differently in the West than in the East. Looking at the differences, it is possible to distinguish two trajectories embodied by Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) and Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 340). The latter expressed a viewpoint that came to be known, somewhat derisively, as Caeseropapism, seeing in the emperor a figure whose leadership extended into ecclesial affairs.

By contrast, Ambrose was a strong proponent of the church's autonomy. While appreciative of the emperor's interest in ecclesial matters, he warned of imperial actions that undercut the right of church leaders to govern their own affairs. At the same time, Ambrose defended the place of clerics in upholding church teaching in moral matters, even if that meant challenging government leaders. In a famous incident, Ambrose refused to celebrate the Eucharist in the presence of the emperor Theodosius because Ambrose faulted him for a massacre at Thessalonica.

Even as it defended its autonomy, the church also acknowledged the independence of the state. For example, Gregory I (d. 604), the most powerful pope up to his time and a figure of great influence in Western Europe, was measured about his claims for the church's authority in temporal matters. With Gregory the papacy had clearly stepped into the spotlight of temporal affairs; nonetheless, he was clear in his acknowledgement of the rightful autonomy of the state and its important role in society.

The conviction about the separate but related powers of state and church had already been proclaimed in what was called the doctrine of the two swords. In the famous words of Gelasius I (d. 496), "Two there are, august Emperor, by which this world is ruled" (179). The context was that Gelasius had inherited a formal schism between the eastern and western churches. With the pope and patriarch of Constantinople no longer in communion, the new emperor Anastasius seemed to lean toward Monophysitism. There was grave risk in the situation, and Gelasius relied upon the developing western tradition from Ambrose on to articulate an understanding of spiritual and temporal power that delineated what is proper to

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church and state. He wanted to make sure that the emperor’s misguided theological leanings would not endanger church doctrine.

Two powers exist, temporal and spiritual, which cooperate and overlap, but remain separate. Clerics may teach those rulers who are believers for, after all, such rulers are also members of the church. And rulers may govern clerics who are citizens of earthly kingdoms. The principle embedded in the doctrine of the two swords became firmly established, but it is a principle that has occasioned much debate as to its application to individual cases. Subsequent centuries have seen numerous changes that confused the terms of the debate, for example, popes with vast territorial holdings to govern and monarchs with theories of divine right to legitimate their actions, as well as concordats with the Vatican that gave rulers a role in the selection of bishops. Still, the fundamental principle has endured.

In sum, the interplay of church and state is an old problem that will not go away, however transformed it may be, by the appearance of modern secular governments with limited constitutional powers and a postconciliar church’s support for the human right of religious liberty.

**Vatican II**

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World certainly encouraged church members to take an active role in shaping the temporal order. Indeed, the bishops noted that the “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 43).

The conciliar teaching underscored that the realms of religion and politics cannot be divorced since both “under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same people. The more that both foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 76).

In carrying out this cooperative effort, the church serves as a leaven in the society. “By preaching the truths of the Gospel, and bringing to bear on all fields of human endeavor the light of her doctrine and of a Christian witness, she respects and fosters the political freedom and responsibility of citizens.” This means that “the Church should have true freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social doctrine, to exercise her role freely among people, and also to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it” (no. 76).

Thus, any modern rendition of the Gelasian principle cannot mean the divorce of religion from politics. At the same time the bishops explicitly affirmed the legitimate autonomy of the state in secular affairs. “The Church and the political
community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 76).

While the church must be free to teach, preach, and witness, it is not for the church or its officials to develop specific solutions to political issues. “Laypeople should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the layperson not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 43).

The teaching of the pastoral constitution finds an echo in the Declaration on Religious Liberty. In that document the bishops disavow any role for the state in regulating or governing internal church affairs. “Provided the just demands of public order are observed, religious communities rightfully claim freedom in order that they may govern themselves according to their own norms, honor the Supreme Being in public worship, assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them by instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles” (*Dignitatis humanae*, no. 4).

In keeping with the balance of the Gelasian principle, however, the bishops also oppose any employment by the church of state power in the realm of faith. “The religious acts whereby people, in private and in public and out of a sense of personal conviction, direct their lives to God transcend by their very nature the order of terrestrial and temporal affairs. . . . [I]t would clearly transgress the limits set to its [the state’s] power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious (*Dignitatis humanae*, no. 3).

The result of the conciliar teaching is that within the modern setting—a constitutionally limited state in a pluralistic society—the church-state issue “was resolved in favor of religious liberty” (Hollenbach, 10). By this is meant attention must always be given to the primacy of conscience; all efforts at shaping the political culture of a people, which *Gaudium et spes* calls for, must accept that individuals can only come to truth on the basis of free consent. Churches should

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refrain from resorting to the coercive power of the state instead of persuading others through preaching and witness.

**Benedict XVI and the U.S. Bishops**

Here in the United States there have been some tense moments between Catholic leaders and civic officials on a variety of topics, but nothing in recent decades has been more provocative than the issue of abortion. Ever since the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, politics has been polarized in this nation. It has been the rare electoral campaign since 1972 in which abortion has not played a role.

What heightened tensions after *Roe v. Wade* was that Catholic politicians sought national office and failed to espouse a view of abortion policy that reflected the church’s teaching. Recall the criticism of Geraldine Ferraro, the New York congresswoman who ran as the vice-presidential nominee in 1984. Cardinal John O’Connor, not her bishop, was public in his complaints. Ferraro never was successful in articulating her understanding of the connection between morality and policy, and her failure evoked episcopal criticism and cost her support among Catholics.

During that same electoral season, New York’s governor, Mario Cuomo, took up the challenge of O’Connor and other bishops to explain how he could reconcile his Catholic beliefs on abortion with his policy position. In a speech at the University of Notre Dame that garnered much attention, he laid out his case for how someone personally opposed to abortion could support a pro-choice policy regime (Cuomo). While subtler and more nuanced than Ferraro in his views, Cuomo also failed to convince church leaders that his position was coherent.

Episcopal displeasure with Catholic politicians continued to grow throughout the decades of the eighties and nineties. The pontificate of John Paul II regularly voiced strong opposition to abortion and the U.S. bishops consistently followed the papal lead. In 2002 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) under the leadership of then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger issued a doctrinal note, “The Participation of Catholics in Political Life.”
With heavy reliance on the teaching of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (13 of the 31 footnotes cite Gaudium et spes), the document laid out the position “that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals” (no. 4). The CDF statement went on to deny that “appeal to the principle of pluralism or to the autonomy of lay involvement in political life” may permit compromise of essential moral norms (no. 5). The distinction was made between “the rightful autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church—but not from that of morality . . .” (no. 6).

The CDF document emboldened a small number of American bishops to raise the stakes in their ongoing dispute with certain Catholic public officials. Not content to uphold the October 2003 document, “Faithful Citizenship: a Catholic Call to Political Responsibility,” these bishops went public with their assessments of the worthiness of certain candidates to receive the Eucharist. The most prominent public official who was threatened with this sanction was John Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts and presidential candidate.

The media attention given to these bishops’ statements caused consternation among their fellow bishops as well as Catholic public officials. A Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians was created to address the issues that were emerging as a result of the long-standing dispute. Led by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C., the group sought further clarification from the CDF on the issue of imposing a eucharistic ban on public officials judged to be inadequate in their defense of human life.

To see how far things had developed, a particularly ill-advised statement came from Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs in May 2004. In a pastoral letter he stated that “any Catholics who vote for candidates who stand for abortion, illicit stem-cell research or euthanasia” ought not receive the Eucharist and put their salvation at risk (1). Apparently, oblivious to any sense of the Catholic moral tradition and the helpful distinctions between formal and material cooperation, as well as proximate and remote cooperation, Sheridan staked out for himself the most extreme position in the discussion.

**Concluding Observations**

History is replete with examples of Catholic hierarchs who have made foolish claims about the secular political order. At the same time, history also demonstrates that the temporal realm cannot be divorced from the concerns of morality or religion. Life is simply more complex and interconnected than our theories of church and state can comprehend. Prophets, martyrs, reformers, lawyers, diplomats, and pastors as well as political and ecclesiastical rulers have all played
their part in the history of church and state. The enduring truth is that “two there are,” two authorities of spiritual and temporal power, and the persistent problem is how they relate to one another.

There has been considerable growth in appreciation for the positive value of the state and the political vocation since New Testament times. Christians understand public service as a noble and worthy vocation. Precisely for that reason, the church cannot be indifferent to the moral dimension of politics. The legacy of Ambrose of Milan includes the challenge that religious leaders must be willing to call government officials to adherence to moral norms, not only in their personal lives but also in their public roles.

Vatican II remains a watershed for understanding the church’s role in public life. The call to be a leaven within the dough of society means the church must not abandon politics to the expedient and popular. Moral values must be maintained in the life of a political community and this entails public policies that will inevitably enshrine some goods in preference over others. The challenge according to the council’s teaching is that people must be persuaded, not coerced, to accept the morally good.

Within the American Catholic hierarchy the conviction remains firm that direct abortion is morally evil without exception. At this juncture the American electorate, including Catholics, remains unpersuaded. This is reflected in the statements of Catholic public officials. Though not exclusively so, this reticence to support restrictions on abortion is notable among Catholic members of the Democratic party. Thus, the stance of the U.S. bishops appears to many as partisan, particularly when abortion is given preeminence among all other moral issues.

Tension between ecclesial and government figures has a long history. Abortion is the present hot-button issue, but another will emerge in another era. Whether any of these tensions actually affect significant numbers of votes within the electorate is uncertain. Certainly, we no longer live in the age of a “Catholic vote” that can be delivered by the bishops acting like ward bosses.

Given the exceptional role of the Eucharist in Catholic life, it is difficult to imagine a more powerful exercise of spiritual authority than for a bishop to deny a person reception of the sacrament. To single out a small array of issues, usually involving fetal or embryonic life, as the crucial divide in determining which public official is worthy of the Eucharist is dangerously myopic. Life is at stake in any number of issues today—capital punishment, AIDS prevention, war, foreign aid, environmental degradation, to name a few items—and a reductionist approach to the promotion of human life undercuts the claim of prophetic judgment by those who challenge politicians on abortion.

The tensions of the past election campaign are likely to simmer and be stirred anew the next time a Catholic runs for national office. History teaches that the line between religion and politics is not easily drawn even though the distinction is acknowledged. Avoiding any escalation in language or behavior is difficult when
feelings run deep on a moral issue. What is needed at this point in the life of the American Catholic community, however, is not prophetic denunciations but space for serious and searching moral reflection by church leaders and public officials on how one translates sincerely held moral convictions into public policy when society lacks moral consensus on a topic.

References


