

The Christian Attitude to Politics

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A Way of Posing the Problem

The very presence of Christianity in the world poses the problem of the Christian attitude to human activity. In this respect one of the most burning questions in our time and in the context of a shift from totalitarianism to democracy in postcommunist countries is that of the Christian attitude to politics.

At first sight it is difficult to discern any essential relation between religion and politics, as their tasks are entirely different. Besides, Christianity believes the commandment of love to be the main guiding principle in the life of both individual and society, whereas politics often suggests that the principle is something utterly different, such as the 'law of the jungle', characterised by a bitter and unscrupulous power struggle motivated not by ethical criteria, but by effectiveness. Even when the atmosphere of political struggle is relatively pure, the contrast between religion and politics still persists.

Whereas religion makes reference to moral principles which are unshakeable and relevant at all times, and which it invokes to solve global problems in the interests of human salvation, politics normally proceeds from specific situations and exploits actual opportunities. Those practising politics therefore adopt short-term policies which correspond to a particular current state of affairs. It would be incorrect, however, to say that religion has never taken into account specific human situations or that politics has never dealt with global tasks. The primary task of the Second Vatican Council was the so-called *accommodatio renovata* – the adjustment of religious life to the challenges and signs of the times. Secular states, meanwhile, have at times worked with a global vision – of a united Europe, of peace without conflicts, of population growth and development, for example. There is a relationship between religion and politics, then, however difficult it may be to bring them into harmony.

The term 'politics' is derived from the Greek *polis*, 'the state'. Politics is the art of ruling. Appropriate conditions need to be created for human fulfilment, for all-round human development – physical, intellectual and ethical. For this purpose political associations, understood as states or international communities, are indispensable. If the state exists for the sake of the people who live in it, the more so does religion, whose task is to bring them to God so that they may be saved. The relationship between religion and politics, then, lies in their shared concern for man and his welfare. In our reflections on the relationship between religion and politics we will recognise their distinctiveness. 'In their field, the political community and the church are autonomous and independent of each other' teaches *Gaudium et spes* from the

Second Vatican Council. The autonomy of religion and politics does not, however, exclude common ground, since both serve man. It was not by accident that Pope John XXIII liked to repeat, 'Though the church is not of this world, it is in this world.'

The Autonomy of Religion and Politics

The autonomy of religion and politics is widely accepted in most countries today; but this was not always the case. The history of the Chosen People clearly indicates that their time was a time of theocracy. Politics was subjected to religion. The political leader was at the same time the representative of God Himself. This double function was performed by, for example, Moses, who as the leader of the Israelites was for them the representative of God. He spoke with God and conveyed His instructions to the people, and the people accepted them (Exodus 19:3–9). This explains why the Israelites were at first opposed to a monarchy: they viewed it as a violation of Divine rule.

The theocratic system ultimately fell into oblivion. It was rejected by Christianity too, but its heritage is to be found in the insight that every human activity is subject to Divine law, even political power, for 'there is no authority except that which God has established' (Romans 13:1). Subjection does not mean identification, however.

The principle of autonomy between religion and politics was affirmed by our Saviour Himself. In His time in Palestine, the most disputed question was that of paying tax. The Pharisees once asked Jesus whether it was permissible to pay tax to Caesar (Matthew 22:17). Our Saviour's words were to become the basis of church teaching on the autonomy of religion and politics: 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's' (Matthew 22:21). Christ the Jew recognised the political power that was represented at that time by the Romans. In doing so he was clearly departing from the Old Testament understanding of theocracy, in which political power was identified with religious power. Christ recognised the autonomy of politics and religion. While recognising the Roman Caesar, Christ rejected the idolatry whereby Caesar was held to be god and secular power was thereby defined as well. That the political and religious spheres of activity were envisaged as separate by Christ is evident from His attitude towards the Sanhedrin, which exercised the highest religious and political power (though subject to the Roman governor). Many members of the Sanhedrin – and even some of Christ's disciples – were looking primarily for a political leader in the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Christ did not come up to their expectations. He repeatedly declined to perform a political function (Luke 22:66–71; Luke 24:21; John 3:1–21). Christ's mission was wholly moral and religious, not political and secular.

The separation of politics from religion was recognised by Christians throughout the first three centuries of Christianity. At the beginning of the third century, however, after the Edict of Milan (313) which brought freedom for the Christian religion, the situation began to change. The Emperor helped the church but did not interfere in its affairs. This symbiosis of political and religious power produced absolutism as well as the development of a 'political Christology'. This was a clear deviation from the New Testament vision and a shift towards the Old Testament idea of theocracy. Some theologians such as Eusebius of Caesaria (340) taught that the power of the Emperor was mandated by God. History provides numerous examples of the church's involvement in politics – the interpenetration of religion and politics – in both East and West. The medieval West developed a theory of the temporal and spiritual powers as two swords, with the latter having primacy. Political power was

interpreted as the 'secular arm', *bracchium saeculare*, of the church. This model of the relationship between religion and politics persisted in the West until the nineteenth century, and it was only the French Revolution (1789–99) that helped to realise the pressing need for a separation of the religious and political spheres of activity.

The church's involvement in politics very often turned out to mean that the church was serving particular political and economic interests. State religions proved to be most prone to this: the concept *cuius regio, eius religio* – the religion of the ruler is the religion of the country – meant that the confessional affiliation of the ruling monarch ensured political advantages for his religion. In other situations the political authorities might grant special privileges or make promises to the church in return for being allowed to use the church's authority for their own purposes. Church involvement in politics is manifested in some cases, then, through union between the altar and the political throne, and in other cases through subjugation to the state's purposes of a church which is theoretically separated from that state. A classic example of this latter situation was that of the churches in communist countries, where despite declared separation of church and state the latter unashamedly interfered in the work of the churches and tried to use them for its own purely political advantages.

Similar involvement of the churches in political life can also be seen in their support for Christian parties, trade unions or individual political leaders – often non-believers. Meanwhile, in a desire to improve their political image, persons indifferent to religion, nonbelievers or even atheists will attend or even organise divine services. The French king Henri IV declared that Paris was well worth a mass; many contemporary politicians might say the same thing.

The new political situation today is challenging traditional church–state relations. In the Middle Ages states were as a rule uniconfessional, while today various religions and world views coexist within the same state. Economic, political and religious pluralism has challenged the model of a state with one dominant religion. The French thinker Jacques Maritain advocates the concept of a secular state, which is not, however, an atheist state, but one which distinguishes between the political and religious spheres, recognising them as autonomous. In such a state, Christians are to engage themselves in the socio-political structure, bringing into it the spirit of the Gospel. In this way a secular state can be enriched by Christian ideals. This will happen, however, only if the citizens who are believers are active. Justice, equality, freedom, prosperity, culture and other values can be realised in a secular state but should be actively fostered by the Christians in that state. The role of Christians is thus to inspire the socio-political activity of the state with the spirit of the Gospel.

These ideas were reflected and developed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. As we have seen, *Gaudium et spes* reaffirmed the autonomy of religion and politics. This was an explicit depoliticisation of Christianity. As the document goes on to explain: 'The church, which by virtue of her service and calling is by no means confused with the political community or associated with any political system, is at the same time a sign and guardian of the transcendence of human personality.'

Autonomy of both church and state does not imply their mutual isolation. The Council affirmed (again in *Gaudium et spes*) that both the church and the state 'serve, though in different forms, the personal and social calling of the same people. The better they develop sensible cooperation with each other, taking into account the place and the time, the more successful they will be in this service for the benefit of all.' The goal of this cooperation cannot lie in the welfare of the state and the church understood separately. The goal should be rather the good of the people whom both

the state and the church serve. Members of the church, individual people are at the same time members of the community. It is the people's common good that provides a common platform for cooperation between the church and the state. The church does not demand privileges, but merely recognition of those rights necessary for its continuing presence and activity in the community.

The Council recognised the autonomy of the state while reserving for the church the right to assess the activity of that state not only politically but also morally, as required by consideration for the salvation of souls. In doing this the church applies the Gospel to the common good in ways appropriate to the times and circumstances (*Gaudium et spes* 76). It is in this activity that the prophetic role of the church is revealed.

Other Christian confessions today show a similar understanding of their role to that of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. In 1993 Patriarch Aleksii of the Russian Orthodox Church said

it is our profound conviction today that the church should be separated from the state; she should be free from its interference in her internal affairs and, in her turn, should not interfere in the political affairs of the state. This does not, however, mean separation of the church from the community or her indifference to the processes taking place in it. If necessary, the church should express her attitude to developments. Her principal task, however, is to promote the spiritual and moral health of society.¹

We should also recall a comment made by the patriarch in 1991: 'Orthodoxy is a search for God in life, while the public and national ordering of life is a secondary matter for us.'²

It is appropriate to mention at this point that public opinion in Russia is opposed to the idea of a state or national church and to participation by the church in political life. In a recent public opinion poll people were asked which of two statements they supported. The first was: 'In this country there are national religions (Orthodoxy and Islam). They should be given more rights than the religions which are new to this country (Catholicism, the Baptist Church etc.)'. (Please note that I am quoting the question literally: neither Catholicism nor the Baptist faith is a new religion in Russia.) The second was: 'All religions should have absolutely equal rights.' The first statement was supported by only 9 per cent of those polled, and the second by 75 per cent. A published report on the poll observes that the percentage of those who favoured the involvement of the church in political life declined from 74 per cent in 1990 to 48 per cent in 1991.³

As citizens of their state, which is a political community, Christians can and must be engaged in political activity, but not as representatives of the church, though they are its members. Christian participation in political and social life should consist in Christian witness and the manifestation of Christian ethical values. The social teaching of the church, which defines the place of a Christian in politics, thus opens the way for the activity of official representatives of the church, who speak in the church's name, should be of a different kind. They are acting as spiritual leaders, guiding people to salvation. Priests, monks and bishops – those responsible for the church's spiritual mission – should therefore avoid any political affiliation, in order to be able to preach the truth independently, credibly and fully. 'For all those who have committed themselves to the service of God the Word should use resources and means corresponding to the Gospel, different in many ways from the ways of the earthly city,' teaches *Gaudium et spes* (76). History offers vivid examples of

individuals rendering this kind of service to the People of God in complex political situations: St Sergi of Radonezh, St Thomas More, Patriarch Tikhon, Metropolitan Veniamin, Archbishop Romero and others.

The Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church forbids clergy to engage in political activity. Canon 287 paragraph 2 says that clergy 'cannot take an active part in political parties, nor can they lead trade unions, except in those cases where, according to the competent church authority, this is necessary in order to protect the rights of the church or the common good'. During his visit to Lithuania in September 1993, Pope John Paul II said in his address to the priests:

Let there be neither winners nor losers, but only men and women who need help to overcome their mistakes... With the return of democracy, it is hoped that relations between the church and the state will be built on the basis of mutual respect, without deviation either to secularism or to clericalism. The state should not interfere in the area that the Constitution and international agreements have reserved for religion, just as priests, in fulfilling their evangelical duty, should not interfere in the policies of parties and the affairs of the state.⁴

On 8 October 1994 the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted a resolution along the same lines, ruling that 'clergymen should abstain from participation in elections as nominees to the representative bodies working on a regular basis, above all at the federal level'.⁵

The Concrete Christian Attitude to Politics

The history of church–state relations includes periods of cooperation and understanding between church and state as well as periods of friction and conflict. The reason for so ambiguous a history lies in the difference between the nature of the institutional presence of the church in state structures on the one hand and of the state in church structures on the other. The position of the Catholic Church on this subject as articulated at the Second Vatican Council and further developed in its social teaching coincides in many respects with that of other Christian confessions today.

Firstly, in its religious mission the church is not associated with any particular economic, social and political system or form of culture (*Gaudium et spes*). There can therefore be no particular 'Christian' economic, social and political systems. The church recognises the relative autonomy of the economic and political realms with their own specific laws; but 'relative' autonomy means that these laws are ultimately governed by the moral law established by the Creator Himself.

Secondly, 'relative autonomy' does not in any way imply that the church and the Christian are separated from 'secular civilisation'. On the contrary, it defines their place and role in the life of the community. In the light of Christian social teaching it is possible to formulate three principal tasks for the church in relation to the community and state.

- 1 To make an assessment of the principles and political practices of a particular state in order to establish whether they are consistent with human rights and the Gospel.
- 2 To acquaint statesmen responsible for ordering public life with the basic requirements for social order seen as essential by the church, such as human dignity, social justice and solidarity, and the common good, both national and international. In its social teaching the church seeks to relate these principles specifi-

cally to various fields of public life.

3 To perform the Christian duty of helping to build a community founded on justice.

Thirdly, it is clear that the last task concerns lay Christians first of all, since 'the task of educating the thinking, morality, law and order of the community in which everyone lives in a Christian spirit is so inherent in lay people that it is impossible to realise it without them'.⁶ However, if Christians are properly to fulfil their task of building a community on justice, they have to be adequately trained in Christian social teaching. In addition, the church should provide them with adequate spiritual support for them to fulfil their social and political obligations. It should be stressed here that these obligations are not to be limited to 'politics' in the narrow sense of the word, but are to be realised also in their commitments to the family, to work, to the education of the younger generation and so on, as the community should be healthy in all its manifestations.

Fourthly, while giving special attention to Christian lay people educated in accordance with the principles of Christian social teaching, the church is aware that as they act and reflect people will arrive at different conclusions about how these principles are to be applied to social reality. In principle, then, there can be a certain pluralism of opinions. No particular group, however, has the right to invoke the authority of the church in support of a particular position, since everyone speaks for himself as a citizen motivated by Christian conscience (*Gaudium et spes* 76).

Fifthly, there is another important consideration that determines Christian commitment in politics. Society today more often than not comprises a 'pluralistic' or 'open' community. This means that there is no longer one spiritual force or one value system uniting it. Society consists of various economic, social, political and cultural forces of various different origins. In such a situation tolerance and cooperation between all the positive forces is essential (*Gaudium et spes* 75–6). In his social encyclicals *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus annus* (1990) Pope John Paul II speaks in concrete terms about the need for this kind of cooperation between people of good will and of major world religions, and especially amongst Christian organisations of all kinds. In this contest, the Prayer for Peace initiated by the pope in Assisi and elsewhere, as well as the proposal for a meeting of Orthodox patriarchs, the pope of Rome and Islamic leaders made by Patriarch Aleksii when he met Patriarch Pavle of Serbia and Cardinal Kuharić of Zagreb on 17 May 1994 at Sarajevo airport, deserve special attention. On that occasion the patriarch said that

world religious leaders should meet and testify that territorial conflicts in lands inhabited by Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims have nothing to do with religion either in Yugoslavia or other hotbeds in the world. By shaking hands in friendship and condemning the practice of religious wars and destruction of churches, mosques and holy places the world's religious leaders will set an example of accord for politicians.⁷

Sixthly, this cooperation is especially important in postcommunist countries where society finds itself without any spiritual foundation after decades of atheism. Christians and Christian values were excluded from the public sphere, and this has resulted in the ideological distortion of political life. In this situation, there is an acute need for Christians to receive new guidelines from the church relevant to the specific challenges of the times, and new inspiration for fulfilling their new obligations in the realm of politics. Every Christian confession of course has its own specific traditional methods for introducing the faithful to public life. These heritages

need to be respected. On the other hand, however, it is a matter of urgency that methods should be adjusted to present-day needs. To this end, the various confessions must carry out historical, theological, ethical and other studies. A renewal of this nature will also benefit from a dialogue with other Christian confessions, especially with those which, through good fortune, have had an opportunity to develop their social teachings freely. Naturally, such a dialogue should be held in a spirit of mutual respect for different traditions. It would be very helpful if meetings of this kind could be organised as frequently as possible at the level of both clergy and laity in eastern and western countries.

Seventhly, the Christian religion today is facing two unprecedentedly urgent tasks. The first is to proclaim the Kingdom of God that is not of this world. This is the primary task that cannot be replaced by any other temporal political commitment. The second task is to put the principles of this Kingdom of God into practice, applying them to the human community and its requirements, with the aim not of domination, but of service. As mentioned above, responsibility for the fulfilment of the second task lies mainly with the laity, both as individuals and as organisations united by social apostolicity. In this second task, ecumenical and interconfessional cooperation becomes increasingly urgent in a world which transcends national and continental boundaries and in which the task of building peace and an economic, social and political order worthy of man is increasingly a task of global dimensions.

Notes and References

- ¹ Patriarch Aleksii, speaking at a press conference in Volgograd, 18 June 1993, *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, no. 2, 1994, p. 8.
- ² Patriarch Aleksii, speaking in the Patriarchal Cathedral, Moscow, 24 February 1991, *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, no. 2, 1994, p. 58.
- ³ *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 7, 1992, p. 23.
- ⁴ Pope John Paul II, speaking in Vilnius Cathedral, Lithuania, 4 September 1993, *Ekho Litvy*, no. 173 (15059), 7 September 1993.
- ⁵ *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, no. 2, 1994, p. 2.
- ⁶ The decree of the Second Vatican Council *The Apostolicity of the Laity*.
- ⁷ Press release, Department of External Church Relations, Moscow Patriarchate, 18 May 1994.