



The Separation of Church and State

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by Sir Fred Catherwood

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, shortly after the introduction of direct rule in Northern Ireland, a colleague of mine found himself Permanent Secretary of the new Northern Ireland Office. He was very English, travelling from Great Missenden every day with his bowler hat and umbrella. I could not imagine him in Northern Ireland, and when he came back I took him out to lunch to find out how he had got on. "I hope you realised that it is a political conflict, not a religious one," I said. "I learnt that straight away," he replied. He told me that while having dinner in the Culloden Hotel with a government minister, the manager came in great agitation. "There's a crowd of women outside, who call themselves 'The Protestant Women of the Shankill Road'. They've got their wee lads with them and the wee lads have half bricks, and they want to see the Minister." When they arrived, minus the wee lads and the half-bricks, my friend Bill Neild said, "I'm not much of a Christian myself, but I always understood that Christ taught that we should love our neighbours, and you want to shoot them up." "We're not Christians," they said, "we're Protestants!"

So I'd like to take a few minutes to unpick the knot which has tied Christian churches into a violent partisan political quarrel. How is it that two groups of people - who have lived together since before the Pilgrim Fathers landed in America, faced the same landlords, the same famine, the same English government that refused civic rights to both Catholic and Presbyterian and who, for one brief spell fought alongside each other - how was it that they came to distrust and then fear each other, to the point of civil war? Why did they set a match to ancient differences when there was so much in common?

That we had much in common is not merely my imagination. Every farmer suffered British government neglect in the great potato famine. My Presbyterian great-grandfather had to emigrate to America in the 1840s, leaving his wife and a newly-born son behind. Had he not died of fever shortly after he arrived there, they would have followed him. He and his Catholic neighbours would probably have voted for the same political party. The lighted match in the 1880s was neither religious nor economic. It was a political creed echoing a new spirit of nationalism which swept across Europe in the late nineteenth century, and created the new nations first of Italy and then of Germany.

The arrival of ethnic nationalism in Ireland made the Plantation Scots aliens in the country where they had lived for nearly 300 years. Gladstone's Home Rule proposal in 1886 was a political issue, not a religious one, but the split it created coincided with the old religious divide, and that coincidence put pressure on the churches to take political sides. The Easter rising, and the fighting which led up to the settlement of 1921, made the divide sharper. But even that might have been healed had not Lloyd-George made one of the quick political fixes for which he was famous. Refusing to wait for a border commission, he drew the border along the crude county lines which were ready to hand, leaving half a million resentful nationalists on the wrong side of the border, impotent and fearful of a provincial government with considerable powers and a built-in Unionist majority.

IF THE UNIONIST MAJORITY had been secure in its position and, based on that security, generous in its treatment of the minority, winning them over instead of seeing them as traitors in the camp, all might have been well. But the Irish Free State entrenched in its constitution a claim on the territory of the new province, creating an embattled Unionist minority in the island of Ireland fighting to stay in the multi-national United Kingdom. The surprise is not that with two embattled and threatened minorities in this small province there was eventually trouble, but that it took so long in coming to the boil.

I grew up in that long period of peaceful if unequal co-existence. I lived as a boy north of the border and as a teenager on the south side. Like a lot of other people, I learnt not to take the division too seriously or to see it mainly as a matter of religion. The ethnic nationalism of the many other new states set up after the First World War had nothing to do with religion. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria and Hungary wanted independence from the larger states of which they had been a part, and those who created them believed like the Lloyd-George government that an ethnically coherent state would be more governable. Within twenty years almost all were overrun by more powerful neighbours. They were too small to defend themselves viably, or to be viable economically. And the more serious problem was that ethnic boundaries everywhere were untidy – leaving too many on the wrong side. Not only in Ireland had ethnic nationalism left dissident minorities on the wrong side of the border. The most lethal were the strident Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia, and their problem led to the German occupation of the whole country and within six months to World War II.

So after a war in which most of the nation states of Europe were defeated and occupied by enemy forces, leaving two distinct super-powers facing each along an iron curtain across the centre of Europe, European political opinion swung the other way. The European Community was created as a way of offsetting the weakness not just of the remaining small states, but also of the largest states, Italy, France and Germany and the new common market meant that the border no longer loomed so large. Given this context the conflict between the ideas of Nationalism and Unionism was quite enough reason for a political dispute without bringing religion into it at all. But, sadly, it paid the politicians in this religious island to try to rally the churches to their respective causes. If congregations feel strongly about a political issue, it is not always easy for church leaders to remain neutral. So, driven by politicians who told them that their faith was at risk, the Catholic church rallied to Nationalism and the Protestant churches rallied to Unionism. But the Christian faith is for every tribe, nation, people and language and is never at risk from politics. Empires have risen and fallen over two millennia, but the Christian faith has survived them all. The early church survived the persecutions of the Roman Empire because Christians were good people and

helpful neighbours, and after three hundred years even the Emperor became a Christian. When, a hundred years later, the Empire fell, the church converted the pagan invaders, Goths, Franks, Angles and Saxons and then Danes, all by the same method. They were loving and helpful and their gospel of a God of love, shown in their own love, was much more attractive than the awful bloodthirsty gods of the pagans. Patrick converted pagan Ireland, Columba converted pagan Scotland and Augustine converted pagan Kent. The power of the Christian faith was infinitely greater than any temporary political power.

It's the same in our own time. Across the former fiercely anti-Christian Soviet Union Christian churches are springing up again after 70 years of anti-Christian propaganda and persecution. I met a girl from Albania, where all religions were absolutely forbidden for two generations. She had become a Christian because she had read what she called 'a little book', the New Testament, and was deeply impressed by 'that wonderful man' and by the reciprocal duties of wives to husbands, husbands to wives, parents to children and children to parents, laid down by St Paul. "That's exactly how it ought to be," she said to herself. In the open market of ideas, the Christian faith is still consistently successful. And the most extraordinary proof of the ability of the Christian faith to rise above all political power is Communist China, where it is estimated that there are over fifty million Christians, an explosive growth which took off at the height of Chairman Mao's tyranny.

The God who made us does not depend on politicians to protect his church, but has insisted that church and state should be kept separate. Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The Jewish leaders denounced Jesus to Pilate as a Jewish nationalist and had he been one, there can be no doubt that Pilate would have found him guilty. But Jesus denied it, saying, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were then would my servants fight. But my kingdom is not from hence." Pilate believed him and his verdict was, "I find no fault in this man." Pilate's sin was that he gave Jesus over to the Jews, not because he was guilty but because the Jews threatened to denounce him to Caesar as being soft on nationalism.

But politics has its place. There is a positive Christian doctrine of the state and its relation to the church. We Christians believe that God has ordained three human institutions to keep people in a sinful and quarrelsome society from doing each other harm. The first is the family and the other two are the state and the church. The state and church have different functions and different laws. One is moral, one is civil. They have different sanctions and officers to enforce these laws, so they must be kept separate. The pulpit is reserved for God's absolute truth. And a government that takes over the function of the church and lays down what is right and what is wrong must be totalitarian.

THE PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY of the State is laid down by the Apostle Paul in Romans 13 and by the Apostle Peter in I Peter 2. It is to make and enforce laws to protect the citizen and, even in the Roman Empire and Maoist China, it is the duty of the Christian to obey the laws so long as they do not infringe the authority of the divine laws. Only when civil laws infringe divine laws, should we reply as Peter replied to the Sanhedrin when they told him not to preach the Gospel, that he must put God's law first. This separation of church and state follows the separation in the Old Testament where Moses was the lawgiver and Aaron was the priest. Jesus gave the reason for the distinction when he was asked why, if Moses allowed divorce, he, Jesus, forbade it. He replied, "Moses, for the hardness of your heart allowed divorce, but from the beginning it was not so." God in the beginning had made man and woman as one flesh when they married and Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder." He made only one exception, 'save in the case of adultery'.

So, in laying down the civil law, politicians today also have to do as Moses did to allow for sinful human nature. Laws cannot be enforced unless they have widespread support. Politics is, as has been said, 'the art of the possible'. That is why the pragmatic politician who has to adjust the law to what people will support, must not be confused with the man in the pulpit, who preaches eternal and unchanging truth, the same today as it was two thousand years ago. Political opinion changes, but God's law does not change. The political platform has to adapt, the pulpit has to stick to eternal truth, because God's promises are eternal and he does not change his mind.

So long as this distinction is kept clear, so long as the church does not interfere in party politics and the state does not try to lay down the moral law by which rulers as well as common people are to be judged, the state and church can and should support each other in their separate functions. The church should teach citizens to be law-abiding and should also help to create a strong and stable moral order which allows people to get on with each other without going to law. And when the states are tempted to engage in the social experiments of the secular humanists which are destroying the first divinely-ordained institution, the family, they should listen to the long experience of the church, which slowly but surely brought Europe out of barbarism.

The function of the church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world and each generation has its own moral battles to fight. The big moral battles today are not between Catholics and Protestants, but between those who believe in a Christian moral order as the basis of a healthy society and those who are making every effort to remove all the moral structures, so that society today is slipping rapidly into moral melt-down. This should not be an issue

between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, north or south. In all the morally based political issues which came before the European Parliament, the Irish members were our most solid support, far more so than the majority of nominal Protestants who were mere echoes of secular humanism. The big issues facing our society are not between Protestant and Catholic. They are between those who believe in a Christian moral order and those who want to impose their own untried moral order, together with the church leaders who go along with them and who are far more common in Protestant churches than in Catholic. Those Protestants and Catholics who still appeal to the same source, the word of God contained in both Old and New Testaments, have far more in common than with those whose final source is their own opinion, heavily influenced by the ephemeral spirit of the age.

When it comes to the main issue in this part of the world, forgiveness, we need a church which does not play politics, but which argues, with all the authority of the word of the God who made us, that we must forgive. Prayer is central to the Christian faith. The pattern for prayer was given to the disciples by Jesus himself in the Lord's Prayer. At the centre of the prayer and at the centre of the Christian gospel is the issue of forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive others their sins against us." We cannot ask God for forgiveness if we have not ourselves forgiven those who have harmed us. There are those who argue that we should only forgive those who have asked us for forgiveness. But that is to put ourselves above God, as the Apostle Paul tells us that when we were still sinners Christ died for us. His disciples asked Jesus how often a person should trespass against them before they stopped forgiving, say seven times? He told them not seven times but seventy times seven. Of course forgiveness is hard. We all know those who have friends and relations who have been killed and injured. But the alternative is the self-perpetuating pagan feud, carried down from generation to generation, until the original injury is lost in the mists of time. The only way to stop that terrible culture of everlasting retaliation is to forgive.

The French and the Germans are no worse off for forgiving each other for injuries far more terrible than this province has ever suffered. I met an old Protestant paramilitary last year. He said, "We just went at it hammer and tongs, day after day, week after week. They took out one of ours and we took out one of theirs. Heads down, we never had time to think. Then suddenly you find yourself in the Maze and you say to yourself, 'I'm not meant to be here. It's the 'Shinners' who are meant to be here. And then you have all the time in the world to think.'" Now, after years, he is out, and spends his whole energy in youth clubs, trying to keep teenagers out of the paramilitaries. As I listened to him, I began to see why it is the former paramilitaries in the front line in Belfast and Derry who are solidly in favour of a peaceful settlement.

SOMETIMES THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SUFFERED feel least obligation to forgive and forget and ask cynically, "What has changed?" They do not see so clearly how destructive is the pagan culture of feud and revenge. In the parable of the prodigal son the father ran to forgive the returning son who had spent all his inheritance. It was the older brother, who had stayed on the farm, who was not prepared to forgive. And the moral of this parable of forgiveness is addressed to the respectable older brother then and now. The culture of the feud says, "They have killed before and they can kill again; nothing has changed." But that culture shows lack of imagination. Think what it would feel like to try to bring a killing machine to a halt. Think of all the arguments used against you. Have we lost all those lives for nothing? Is all we have fought for over thirty years to be put in the rubbish bin? What guarantees do we have for the future if we give up the weapons? Think of the risks of failure to bring a settlement by peaceful negotiation; the accusation of being a traitor to the cause, the short way the paramilitaries have of dealing with traitors. Former paramilitaries who have tried to bring their followers round to cease-fires and peace are taking their lives in their hands. Forgiveness reaches out to help them and tries to bring them on to the solid ground of a lasting settlement. Forgiveness breeds forgiveness, trust breeds trust.

And what is the alternative for our province? We have the eyes of the world on us. If this most Christian part of Europe cannot show the forgiveness which the world is entitled to expect from Christians, it will do the Christian church enormous damage. Every effort to put a Christian point of view will be met with, "Don't talk to me about a Christian gospel of a forgiving God. Just look at unforgiving Northern

Ireland." And what are we frightened of? That we might lose our identity? That is what fuels English nationalism today. New English nationalism comes from a loss of self-confidence which blames all the England's problems on foreigners. A self-confident people do not worry about loss of identity. If you know why you believe what you believe, nothing can shake you. The Republic of Ireland is doing well today and does not lack in self-confidence, and nor should the Ulster Scot. Speaking as an Ulster Scot, our culture is rooted in the Calvinistic ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency which made us pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, not just in this part of the world, but in Scotland, Holland, Switzerland and New England. The Dutch have a saying, "The good Lord gave us nothing but sea and sand and wind, but he gave us John Calvin and that was enough." A young Scot, coming home from his first visit to London, was asked what he thought of the English. "I didn't meet any English. I met only the heads of department," he said. It wasn't politics that built the linen industry, shipbuilding, engineering and prosperous farms in this province.

There is no need for any Ulster Scot who sticks to his faith to lack self-confidence. If we do not forgive our enemies, God will not forgive us, but if we do what is right and forgive our enemies, God will bless us. We have a Christian heritage and we must stand by that heritage, and the Church which believes in forgiveness, must come to the aid of the state at a time when the state needs to translate that forgiveness into political life. If we do what is right, if we forgive our enemies, God will bless us. And if we do not believe that, we may call ourselves Protestants, but we cannot call ourselves Christians.

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