

What is Caesar's¹

Charles De Koninck

1963

According to Catholic doctrine, as clarified (*explicitée*) in recent times (for we must admit a progress in understanding the principles of Christian teaching, a progress fostered by a long and greatly varied experience), the distinction between State and Church is radical. The ends that define these societies are different; and these societies can be called perfect to the extent that they are sufficient unto themselves. The saying of Christ is very categorical: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." To Caesar belongs civil society; God, on the other hand, is the principle and end of an order which, while transcendent with regard to political society, leaves it sovereign in its order, autonomous, complete. Catholics at least must be in agreement on this point of doctrine. Moreover, this is what is meant today rather commonly by the secularism (*laïcité*) of the State.

Historically, the problem of this secularism has been put in terms of the relation between Church and State, especially between the Catholic Church and political society. As I have suggested elsewhere, it could be put differently, on a more general level, because other religions in fact exist, as well as ignorance or denial of religion. In short, we could study this question by comparing the good that characterizes political society to the goods which are transcendent and beyond this good. But I don't believe that this is the place to discuss the problem in this sense. Let us note, however, that from the Catholic point of view, the separation of these two complete societies does not prevent the Church from having a social doctrine of its own. This separation is such, in reality, that the political society does not have the right to make its own this doctrine as doctrine of the Church, supernatural faith not being able to be a condition of citizenship.

In the heart of the Christian, at once citizen and religious man, there exists, without any doubt, an order of subordination between the respective ends of the two societies of which he forms at the same time a part. But that is far from entailing that the visible authority of the Church can dictate to Caesar in matters for which Caesar must answer; just as well, Caesar can no more mix himself in the things of the Church. When such interference is produced, it must be attributed to the ignorance of men, and not to the doctrine that the Christian as such professes. This error has, however, been committed in the course of history and is yet maintained in a number of countries, Catholic and non Catholic.

It is remarkable and significant that in the synoptic Gospels, which all three relate the saying of Christ, Caesar is named first. The fact is that if the distinction that this saying states is not first observed in the temporal order, the transcendent good of religion will be compromised in it. For it belongs precisely to the State to ensure that liberty of consciences be respected by all citizens. The secularism of the State is what guarantees my religious liberty in the State and among its citizens.

*

*

*

¹ Translated by David Quackenbush

Given the human condition, both for natural truths more fundamental in themselves, and the supernatural, liberty of consciences will eventually involve a pluralism that is humanly inescapable. We may well say that this pluralism is not the ideal; the ideal society is no more real than the ideal gas of physics. Indeed, the ideal that we conceive, compared to reality, to the realizable, can be very false. The ideal Church, defining itself by the holiness of all its members, would be one to which we would not have access and which will not exist at the end of time. "It is as well good that there be schisms among you -- *oportet haereses esse*" (I Co 11 19). Which is not to say that we should create them deliberately, but rather, on the contrary, that what depends on us is only to learn from them in order to understand with more discernment and to act with more wisdom. From the point of view of action, the ideal is that which can be realized in the given circumstances, which are always contingent. What is ideal today would have been disastrous in the past, and inversely.

I do not believe that it is henceforth permitted to maintain that the State can again consent to be the secular arm of a religious society. Even when in certain countries the national common good is invoked, we cannot forget that this good remains subordinated to the good of the international community, which is founded on the law of nations (*le droit des gens*). We must avoid scandal, even the *scandalum infirmorum*. To be the secular arm of the Church appears to me to be contrary to the nature of the State as complete society, sovereign and autonomous. To say *arm* is to say *organ, tool, instrument*. Christ did not say "Render to God what is God's by the intermediary of Caesar." Why deny that such a vassalage is in truth contrary as well to the very independence of the Church in regard of temporal powers? When the State refuses to be the secular arm of the Church, it does not refuse the Church, but the men who tend to overstep and not respect what is Caesar's. It does not seem to me that my Church permits me to be unjust toward my neighbor, whoever he may be. The religious majority to which I belong is not a body of persons confirmed in the good; it remains a majority that always risks imposing its numerical weight even where it ought not weigh. As a Catholic, I see in the secularism of the State a salutary power dedicated to suppressing the injustices of whoever it may be. If we respect our Church, we will respect as well those who are not in it. Would it not be normal that a Christian be capable of seeing the Church as those who are not of its flock can glimpse it? If we, Catholics, Christians, are not capable of regarding ourselves from without, with the eye of the other, of the neighbor, our conception of the Church is at least truncated.

Who other than civil society could protect the liberty of consciences? To whom does it fall, for example, to publicly and practically accord the priority of paternal right in the matter of education? The pluralism in question, and which is a ransom of liberty, is intimately tied to the priority of this right. Civil society can disregard neither this right nor its priority without destroying the family, without doing violence to the liberty of consciences from which follows, in practice, the diversity of beliefs. Let us even say that respect for this liberty, and consequently for confessional and non confessional diversity, is the sign of a legitimate and healthy secularism which, for Christians, is a principle of doctrine. It falls, indeed, to the State to see to it that those who are opposed in matters of religion should be so not within political life but at the level of religion.

It is understood that the Church teaches the liberty of consciences, the priority of paternal right in the matter of education, to such an extent that the refusal of this teaching and of its application would bring spiritual sanctions on those of its members who committed it. The Church tells me that it is a question of precepts of natural right and I firmly believe it; but quite as firmly I believe that no one can be *forced* to submit himself to the authority of the Church as such, the dignity of a faith freely accepted being compromised. In other words, when the

pluralist State recognizes the precepts in question, it is not because on the faith of the Church they fall within natural right, but for the reason that without these precepts the political life would not be one.

Does this secularism mean to say that the State is neutral in the matter of religion? If by *neutral* we mean that the State cannot impose a religion upon its citizens, in this sense the State must be neutral. However, where the expression signifies that the State places itself on the whole above religious diversities or returns to the pure relativity of philosophical liberalism -- a dogmatic position in its own way and a tributary of a totalitarianism in which the part absorbs the whole -- I would find it inadmissible; it would result in a manner of forcing me to adopt such a philosophy. Let us note in this connection that the secularism of the State is in no way tied to the doctrine of philosophical liberalism, even though, historically, this philosophy has furnished the occasion of posing the question of secularism more precisely.

If, now, we juxtapose the texts of the ecclesiastical Magisterium on this question, nothing is easier than finding it in flagrant contradiction with itself. And it is very true that, supposing that we abstract from the historical, contingent circumstances in which the Church has pronounced, and that we take no account of the diverse signification of words according to the time and the context, the Magisterium contradicts itself. But the times have changed, and the meaning of words has changed. Why would we set ourselves to disregarding it?

Some will perhaps protest that the secularism of the State implies a negative attitude toward religion. How can this be asserted when the State is obliged to it in view of the common good, of peace, and in order to safeguard the free practice of religion? Respect for the freedom of consciences -- true or false ones -- is not a leveling of all consciences; it is simply the respect due even to the person whose conscience is erroneous in our eyes.

It is appropriate to cite here a passage from the talk recently given by Cardinal Bea at the *Pro Deo* University in Rome, on liberty of consciences, and which appeared on February 25 in *Le Devoir*: "Another aberration of a misunderstood love of the truth is found in the painful wars of religion, when, in the name of the truth, it was attempted to impose with force certain convictions on other men, denying a not less fundamental fact of the love of the truth, namely, the liberty of man.

"This liberty means the right of man to decide his own destiny freely, according to his own conscience. From this liberty is born the duty and the right of man to follow his own conscience, a right, and a duty to which correspond the duty of the individual and of the society to respect this liberty and this personal decision . . .

"To one who would object here that error does not have the right to exist, it suffices to reply that error is something abstract, and from this fact it is not the object of a right, but man, yes, even if he mislead himself invincibly, that is to say without power of correcting himself! He has therefore the duty and the right to follow his conscience and thus likewise the right that this independence be respected by all."²

*
* *

² (Documentation in appendix of original)

To return to the ideal society. We are often reminded that in the opinion of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the monarchical regime was the better so long as the monarch governed with the assent of his people. But they found it equally the most dangerous, because of the concentration of power and the possibility of maintaining this power against the will of the people: the passage to tyranny is easy, which destroys political society as such. We can ask ourselves if Christian civil society under the form realized in certain epochs of history did not involve similar dangers. The most recent centuries incontestably indicate so. A too tight connection between the State and religion is apt to present at the same time the greatest menace for religion. This was the case with ancient Rome in which Caesar, at once emperor and sovereign pontiff, became therefore a persecutor of Christians. It goes pretty much the same way when the Church mingles or allies itself intimately with the civil power. The Middle Ages knew regrettable persecutions, at the moment when Christian society appeared to be ideal.

We find ourselves before a fact clearly established by experience, that if a religion becomes a religion of State, there will follow the confusion of allegiances of which history offers us so many cruel consequences as examples. Further, try as one may, it hardly follows from the saying of Christ quoted above that a religion should be transformed into a religion of the State. Let us not forget that Christ answered thus to people who, just as the Caesars, fashioned for themselves a theocratic conception of the civil community.

Is it not possible for the State -- and worthy of it -- to acknowledge a public status for every metapolitical position which is in practice compatible with the public peace? This would not imply in every case the slightest approbation of such or such opinion or position, except the simple positive recognition of a right to the respect of consciences, whatever be their reputed truth. It is in this that the attitude of the State toward pluralism is positive. It would be negative if in these matters the State accorded privileges to one group to the exclusion of others. Thus it would fail to be a legitimate and healthy secularism. In acting in accord with this secularism, the State reveals itself in fact to be in accord, without having to proclaim it publicly, with the teaching of Our Lord.

Instead of embittering ourselves over pontifical texts, or being troubled by the equivocal appearance they acquire from reading them as if they were written in contemporary language, there is on the contrary every reason to rejoice; for finally it is given to us, for us, simple Christians and citizens, from the fact of the vicissitudes and the lessons of history, without doubt, and perhaps for yet other grounds, to know the plain meaning and the practical scope of the saying of Christ that we must repeat: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's; render to God what is God's."