

Exodus 33:12-23; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22  
*"I am the King's good servant but God's first."*

28 years ago, I remember attending a lecture by a German general in the town of Celle near the East/West border just after the Berlin Wall fell, to mark the end of the Cold War. At one point he turned the map behind him 90 degrees and pointed to another ominous divide which was about to split our world, the clash between the Muslim world and what was once the Christian West. How right he was!

The Islamic world has seen an extraordinary growth in violent fundamentalism. Various splinter groups have imposed or are seeking to impose the Sharia law of the Koran as the law of the state. The United States and several European countries feel threatened, particularly France, with its large Muslim population and close historical ties with Algeria. Muslims demands that their schoolgirls be allowed to wear the veil in French public schools. Since people often adopt the attitudes of their adversaries, Muslim fundamentalism is soon matched by a noticeable "move to the right" in western countries. Now even moderate mainstream parties are calling for tighter immigration laws. The signs for the future are ominous, to say the least.

The clash between religion and the secular state is not new. In the Roman empire, the emergence of a protected Christianity occurred with the conversion of the emperor. State and faith found working accommodation with newly found belief in the Christian God by Emperor Constantine. Historically, the balance of these two loyalties has been rare. The tension played itself out in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the dramatic deaths of Thomas Becket and Thomas More, and in more modern times there have been countless martyr who have fallen fowl of state as they stood by their principles of faith. Thomas More's last words ring out across the centuries in witness to a right understanding of the principle enunciated by Jesus: *"I am the King's good servant, but God's first."* The conflict of faith and state remains highly charged in our times.

With the break-up of Christianity five centuries ago the process began to reverse. The French Revolution marked a key turning point in favour of the state. Napoleon made the point forcefully by taking his imperial crown from the pope's hands and placing it on his own head. Ever since then the

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state has been clawing back the ground once claimed by the church, while the church reluctantly ceded its former influence.

Now, in this pluralistic world we are living with people whose principles and beliefs differ radically from ours. The state must also take cognisance of them. Our only resort is persuasion, which is a gentle art requiring patience and respect. We best persuade by living our Christian lives to the full, remembering always what St James says: *“the anger of man works not the justice of God.”*

Today’s Gospel makes it very clear that we have two responsibilities: to the government of our country or territory and to God. Where both are in harmony there will be no conflict. Wherever there is immoral or unjust behaviour against people’s dignity and rights, then there has to be conflict. Such conflict is not always bad. On the contrary, it is because of creative conflict that our society makes progress. Provided we always act in a positive and creative way, *“speaking the truth in love”* (as St Paul says) then the flawed kingdoms that men build can, in time, become the Kingdom of God.

Look at the story itself. There were many groups of people in the crowd around Jesus that day, all with vested interests: Pharisees, Herodians, farmers, soldiers, tax collectors – every part of society was there hanging on Jesus’ words looking for something to hang their arguments on! And, it was Passover time—the most likely time of the year for a good riot about religion, the emperor, Rome in general, and Roman taxes in particular.

In other words, this was not an abstract debate about either political philosophy in general or the relationship between Church and state. It was a perfect set-up, a very clever trap intended to ensure that Jesus was either arrested for treason by the Romans, discredited as a false teacher, or lynched by the crowd as a traitor.

On one level, Jesus slipped out of the trap on a technicality. He asked for a coin (notice that Jesus doesn’t have one, but the Pharisees do). It’s a special minting of the denarius. On the coin is marked, *“Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of divine Augustus, High Priest”*. Below these words, the image of the

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emperor is pressed into the metal. To any good Jew, *the coin itself* was an abomination. It violated the first commandment by claiming that Caesar had divine pretensions, and it violated the second commandment by containing an image of this false god. A big part of what Jesus said was simply “give the cursed thing back.” It could belong to no-one but Caesar; it could certainly not belong to anyone who worshiped the God of Israel.

Jesus isn’t thinking of God and of the Roman Caesar as two powers that can demand, one from another in their respective spheres, their rights to their subjects. Like any faithful Jew, Jesus knows that to God alone belongs the earth and all that is contains, the world and all its inhabitants (Ps. 24). What could belong to Caesar anyway, that doesn’t come from God? Aren’t all the subjects of the empire also sons and daughters of God?

But, ‘*give to God what belongs to God*’. That’s to say, don’t give to Caesar what belongs only to God: the life of God’s sons and daughters. And, as he has repeated over and over to his followers: the poor are God’s special ones, God’s Reign belongs to them. No one should abuse them.

We must not sacrifice people’s lives, dignity or happiness to any power. And surely today no power sacrifices more lives and causes more suffering, hunger and destruction than the tyranny of a world economy without truly human purpose that the powerful of the earth have succeeded in imposing on us. Is it right to remain passive and indifferent to this, stifling the voice of our consciences even while practicing the rituals of religion.

Our central definitive characteristic, what it is that makes us human beings, is that we are created in the image of God. And what’s more, at our baptism we are further marked, we are stamped, we are inscribed, with the sign of the cross. Our image and likeness, and what is written upon us, is that of God himself. To whom, then, do we belong? To whom are we to render, to surrender, ourselves? This, the question of our ultimate loyalty and our deepest allegiance, is what Jesus is really talking about. He is saying simply that what belongs to God is nothing other than we ourselves.

Alas, all of this does not provide us any easy answers when we face our moral or political dilemmas. It does not automatically tell us who to vote

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for, or what policy to support, or which course of action is best regarding energy, taxes, the economy, or our current and future wars. Problems like these will continue to be difficult and ambiguous. Give to God what is God's—for God owns that which he has made in his image, and he is Lord over that which bears his inscription. It is that image, in ourselves and in others, that leads to concrete imperatives for justice, compassion, and righteousness.

Determining what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God is constantly debated in the halls of executive government, the legislatures, courts, our churches and schools and on the main streets. But religion introduces an authority that challenges the state's designs, and the exercise of this freedom is surely the first of freedoms. It is almost inevitable that governments will move to infringe upon religious freedom whenever it considers a more broadly-based protection of rights.

The Church and its allied organizations and institutions will face opposition and intransigence from powers that want to see a secular morality predominate. Like Thomas Becket or Thomas More or countless other martyrs we can endure strong opposition by insisting on repaying to God what is God's. Do we have the corporate and individual courage to hold steadfast to: *"I am the King's good servant but God's first."*

Jesus left the opposing claims of God and state to be decided by informed, individual conscience. But there remains his warning in the Sermon on the Mount, that *"no one can serve two masters; one cannot be the slave of both God and wealth"*

*Dignitatis Humanae* from the Second Vatican Council states,  
*"In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience"*

Today, in our own complicated ways we all live in compartments. Is it right that we should appease our consciences by separating out our religious practices into one particular box!