
EVOLUTIONS AND INVOLUTIONS IN THE CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIP[†]

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Abstract

Since its beginning, the Church shaped itself as a community of Christian believers which fully coincides with that of citizens of states, nations or geographical regions in which they spend their worldly life, but with their soul always attentive to God's eternal kingdom.

From the day of the Pentecost to the present, the relation Church-State has seen success, having as spiritual foundation the communion life of the Holy Trinity, but also failure. This study aims to historically rank certain aspects of this dynamic, evolutionary or not, starting from the setting of some terms, such as: theocracy, democracy etc. belonging to the two major Christian families: Eastern and Western.

Keywords: theocracy, democracy, Byzantine symphony, Papacy, Orthodoxy

1. Introduction

In order to understand somehow the relation between the Church and secular power represented by what we call nowadays the state, it is necessary to make a short incursion through the pages of the Holy Bible and foray in the history of Christianity to be able to settle the meaning, the role and the position of the state in the evolution of a people and thus, the relation that the state as a political power should have in connection with the religious power, that is the Church the Christ set up and that exists within the state. In other words, we have to make the distinction with respect to the significance of the theocratic state, the secular state and the confessional state, the relation between state and Church. Therefore, we have to bear in mind the words of our Lord, Jesus Christ: "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22.21).

In this context we may say that *theocracy* is that form of government in which the political power is subsequent to religious power or it is exerted on its behalf. During history, theocracy had two different forms: the government of a class representing the voices of a divine will, made up of prophets and priests

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(the typical examples are the Old Testament wide range of prophets that guided Israel and the lamas that conduct Tibet) or the government of a sovereign chosen by God, the kings being empowered by the prophets according to a precise divine message.

Terminologically, *theocracy* has its etymology in the Greek word *Theokratia*, from *Theos* (θεός) - God and *kratos* (κράτος) - power meaning *the rule of God* or *governed by God*. The Greek meaning was, therefore, *to rule through God(s)* or human representatives of God(s).

For the religious man in the ancient world or nowadays world theocracy represents a form of government in which the sacred or divine power is manifested within the political act of governance of a nation or even of the world, using either the direct divine presence among people or their representatives as part of a sacred institution as it is the Church of Christ that has the mission to govern the civil society on behalf of God. The theocratic state is rule according to theonomic laws and guides its people through divine care enforced by its representatives directly enlightened and endowed by God.

The most genuine form of the theocratic state is obviously that of Moses but as well that of Joshua or Samuel the prophet. Symbol of the Mosaic religion, Moses was chosen as the sole go-between of God in relation with His people, and he became, thus, the embodiment of the entire legislative, executive and religious power. Moses enforced the Law received on Mount Sinai (see the Tables of Law as a primary institutionalised form of theonomy of a theocratic state) and he organised the people. Nevertheless, we have to mention that although theocracy was settled during Moses it became legitimate and independent during the Maccaees when the theocratic state started to be conducted by a supreme assembly called *sanhedrin* made up of 70 members and a president [1]. Later on, theocracy acquired a pejorative aspect that ended up with the power of the popes which, under the pretext of the divine governance imposed its own way of ruling in both religion and politics giving birth to the so-called theocratic state of Vatican. Besides Vatican, there are also other states that claim to be theocratic states such as Andorra, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These are not in fact theocracies as the former ancient Israel but they have their structure similar to a theocracy being governed by representatives having more or less religious interests.

2. The word theocracy

The word theocracy, with the same meaning we use nowadays, is recorded for the first time by the famous Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who brought arguments for supporting this type of government of the Jewish people in contrast with other forms of government of the world at that time the monarchy, the aristocracy and the democracy. The great Jewish historian saw in theocracy the fourth form of government that seemed in itself a paradox as long as God is the only sovereign of the human society and His law is the sole instrument that regulates the co-existence of its members at a social level,

leaving aside the religious aspect, that was prevalent for the Jews. Although easily accepted in the beginning, the concept of theocratic state faced a deep resistance during Humanism and Enlightenment emphasized by Hegel's negativism.

Famous representatives of theocratic theory were Aurelian Augustine and Thomas d'Aquino who grounded their concepts on Plato's *Republic*, but the most significant attempt to impose theocracy took place between 11th and 14th centuries through Pope Gregory VII, nicknamed the founder of the papal theocracy, Pope Innocentius III and then Bonifacius VIII who provided the theory of the papal power superiority over the imperial power claiming the right to govern spiritually and politically.

Until the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the political power was considered a legitimate form of the sacredness in all world religions and thus, the state was the bearer of holiness and ensured the observance of laws not only as an expression of human will but of the divine will, as well, in an unconditioned way [2]. Jesus Christ is the One that draws a clear borderline between the state and the Church. He was to settle it on the very motivating words of giving "*the Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's*". Subsequently, those who owned political power began to organize themselves in monarchies and dynasties that need not the religious rulers' approval in order to diminish their supremacy over the state; this practice was obviously applied in the Roman Empire through the persecutions against the church as a symbol of theocracy. Until Constantine the Great the Church endured a lot of pressure on behalf of the Roman State, mainly due to the fact that the Redeemer Himself made a clear distinction between His Church and the political power, a distinction that does not eliminate the Church from the life of the city that is, the Church preserves its spiritual mission on earth but does not go beyond the barrier or political implications which, most of the times imply relations based on alluring diplomacy.

The Church, as a mystic body of the Redeemer, that *ekklesia tou Theou* (ἐκκλησία του Θεού) or the gathering of those called and joined in the same faith, hope and love of Christ, its head, has the mission of transferring and transfiguring the human order towards another existence, the Kingdom of Heaven where each Christian is called to become its honorary citizen. This very aspect implies in a certain way a counter position with the exercise of political power [3, 4], structured according to humans' earthly mentality. This conflict of interests, if we are to use a modern terminology, led to what we know from history as the dark period for the Christianity that is the prosecutions initiated by the Roman emperors against the Christians over the entire territory of the Empire which went on aggressively till the emperor Galerius and further until Constantine the Great.

Those vexations imposed by the polytheist Roman Empire focused systematically on elimination of the Christians, but, to the disgrace of the prosecutors, the effect was paradoxically as Christianity augmented and spread all over the world. In such a context the Apostolic and Patristic Church had to

find a way of co-existence inside the Roman Empire coping with both the religious polytheism and its political structures and Judaism.

As Christianity penetrated all strata of the society new problems occurred and had to be dealt with as long as inside Christianity there was not only an apologetic defensive orientation but a permissive open orientation counting on the values of ancient philosophical culture. It is about the contingency of Christianity with the intellectuality of the Latin and Greek-Roman world, mainly with philosophy, astrology, mathematics, natural sciences which conducted to heresies due to metaphysical and epistemological errors because Christianity was grounded on revelation while the pagan world counted on scholastic logic.

It is true that against the background of intensifying the persecutions as well as the emergence of heresies, the Church was compelled to assimilate critically concepts of the philosophical language (platonian, neoplatonian, aristotelian) but only after the metaphysical bases of the ancient philosophical systems were reconfigured the teachings of the Church Fathers could become the light to facilitate the theological thinking and thoroughness of revelation.

Although having to cope with horrifying persecutions put into act by the emperors Domitian (81-96), Trajan (98-117), Decius (250-251), Valerian (257-260), and Diocletian (284-305) who prosecuted Christianity under the name of *pontifex maximus*, the Church managed to stand still mainly through her religious politics which was to make of the Roman Empire that *corpus christianorum* or the instrument of promoting the new Christian religion. The persecutions slowed down and even ceased during the emperor Galerius as if preparing the soaring Christianity period initiated by Constantine the Great through the Edict of Milan in 313.

There was a beneficial period for the Church labelled by the historians as the period of complementarity, harmony and symphony [5], considering that the civil state completed the status of the Church and its canons which in their turn, used the favourable laws enforced by the Roman emperors to regulate the civil life of the society. This period is known as the period of diarchy, a theory promoted by the emperor Justinian (527-565) grounded on the recognition of both the authority of the emperor and the Patriarch of the Church. On the one side, the emperor received as in former times of theocracy, the investment on behalf of the Church in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople where he uttered the Creed of the Church and on the other hand, the emperor invested by the Church ruled over the civil society and gave his agreement for the election of the Patriarch of the Church.

3. The Church and the state

The Church and the state, that is, *sacerdotium* (religious power) and *imperium* (imperial power) were meant to form a sole body based on agreed reciprocity in which none intends to take over the other's role but on the contrary, both redefine their content and purpose in a complementary way. This reciprocity which during the Byzantine period of the Roman Empire generated

the concept of Christian Empire can be traced afterwards especially in Orthodox countries even at present.

Although it seems a perfect or ideal alliance, the symbiosis between the two poles of the society has never been salutary for the Church, but on the contrary, with timespan it generated the impairment of its authority. The controversies related to the great heresies of the primary Christianity, some favoured by the Roman emperors (monophysitism or iconoclasm) are well known. On the other hand, even during the emperor Constantine the Great, ranked as ‘the one with the Apostles’, the balance began to bias the state issuing a new concept *caesaropapism* emphasized by theologians such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Saint Augustine, Thomas d’Áquino, Alexander Schmemmann, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and the radical reformers: “In the same way that the fight between the empire and Christianity was, as we have already seen, intended and inevitable in the same way, but reverse, the peace between them was the problem that implied first of all, a person, a will, an initiative. Nobody denies the fact that Constantine played this role.” [6] At the same time the emperor Constantine did not give up his pagan title of Pontifex Maximus, being claimed as Augustus which generates doubts about the quality of saint according to Schmemmann and Meyendorff.

Although there were tensions and different opinions between the state and the Church, Orthodox Christianity through its dynamic popularity and a discipline oscillating between stoicism and crusades [7] succeeded to preserve a stable peace with the political power both during Constantine’s reign and afterwards, because the Church, irrespective the political organisation of the society, is a divine-human institution whose mission is temporal and a-temporal, permanently oriented towards the people it conducts.

This aspect is confirmed by a fragment from the Epistle to Diognetus, chapter V: “For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.

They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.” [*The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>, accessed on April 24, 2013]

Not the same thing can be said about the West where *papacy* became itself a power not only a religious power but also a political one, capable to set against the political structures of different states through the power of guns. But considering in general the relation between the state and the Church in the Christian world we have to emphasize that once the Roman Empire dissolved, the new small empires or kingdoms overtook as a pattern of internal organisation the well-structured model of the Church. Moreover, there were cases when the crowned sovereigns of various newly emerged empires or kingdoms asked for help and recognition from the Church. Subsequently, starting with the 15th century [8], the political power intervened in the Church to ensure the election of the rulers, being aware that having the Church besides it could easily provide social cohesion necessary to political governance without major problems.

The most noticeable danger that could destabilize the Church was the paradoxical and axiological line of teachings and essence, that is the Church proclaims itself a divine-human institution that guides itself according to laws of the afterlife which means that the Church does not live for a temporal reality but for a reality postulated for times beyond present, being permanently oriented eschatologically during its entire history.

Nowadays against the background of a free religious expression the relation between the state and the Church developed differently in the Catholic, Protestant or Neo-Protestant West and the Orthodox East. If in the East there has always been a symphony between the state and the Church, in some countries the Church having the status of National Church (the majority of the population being Orthodox up to 90%) in the West the permanent lack of a Christian monarch and the opposition against the papal primacy made that the Catholic Church organize itself as a centralized state of law compared to Orthodoxy which uses the model of sacramental communion [9].

This fact provides within the European Union the following patterns of relation between the state and the Church [A.C. Tomescu, *Rolul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în integrarea Europeană a României. Exigențe, probleme și perspective*, online at http://www.episcopiacaransebesului.ro/pagini/scriptorium.php?articol_id=34, accessed on February 23, 2013]:

- The French pattern of total separation - the secular state;
- The English pattern or total identification - the monarchy being represented as legitimate authority of sacredness in both religious and political plan, in a

certain way very similar to the old theocracies with the difference that not God conducts through chosen people but people of different states consider themselves chosen by God to lead the master the world;

- The German pattern (confessional) or of distinctive co-operation - in which the state recognizes the Church and cooperates with the representatives of this institution but does not accept the interference of religion in political life.

We should also consider the Norway case *'Folgero against Norway'* and the Greek model where the Church is a national institution (in a way similar to the English pattern) taking into account that the Church of Greece is an autonomous institution with a synod acknowledged by the state. From the 46 countries of Europe, only three do not teach religion in public schools: France, Albania and Macedonia while the course of religion is compulsory in 25 states, in others being facultative or optional, according to ECHR resolution of 29 June 2007, in the case *'Folgero against Norway'*. Its content settles that the states have the right to spread through education information or knowledge having religious or philosophical content and according to which the European Convention for Human Rights does not authorize the parents to oppose to the integration of such education in the curricula; as per case of 9 October 2007, for the cause *'Hasan şî Eylem Zengin against Turkey'*.

4. The nowadays postmodern society

The nowadays postmodern society brought along new alterations regarding the relation between the state of law and the Church which influences the entire society in a negative way. If Jesus Christ points out and requires listening to God more than to the people and to give Caesar's what is Caesar's, then the humans should observe God's words. Humans are dichotomist creatures and their main purpose is becoming similar to angels in material bodies, therefore the preparation for the heavenly citizenship is of first importance. Their role in material life is secondary and complementary as humans should focus on the main aspect of receiving eternal life and heavenly citizenship.

On the other hand, the state is an institution made up of humans under the command of the living God. In this regard, the state must guide itself after the indication of the Church to become the son of the Bride of Christ, the Emperor of those seen and unseen. Thus, a sort of Trinitarian dialog is settled between Christ, the Church and the State. The Church being submitted to Christ the groom who gave himself on the cross for her, is the ship and the Christian guide of the state of law in a secular and globalizing world in which the objective realities are undervalued and obsolete in the context of subjective over evaluation of non-values.

Establishing a relation between the state and the Church in a postmodern world is an approach that should be set up under the guidance of Christian revelation and afterwards by own experience. Thus, we avoid the confinement that the state practises fervently, by encasing the right of majority to normality

and allowing the manifestations against nature of the human society sometimes through brutality and armed struggle. The state tends to be part of deviant behaviour of human society and encourages it against the Church, instead of using the counselling activity of the Church. This attitude can be regarded as demonic and the warning that the Redeemer launches against the deviant behaviour is clear and unambiguous: *“He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad”* (Matthew 12.30).

It is true that in nowadays world the state is an essential component of the human society as long as it completes its rational purpose but the human being having a dichotomic structure cannot find personal fulfilment under its guidance but in a material, worldly, limited environment. The state is not and will never be the sum of all things, and the best example is that of the Roman anti-Christian empire which was not able to fulfil the human ideal in the wholeness of his or her aspirations. That is why the Church through its status and character is designed to guide and fulfil the social need of the state, demolishing through its teachings the political myths so unhealthy for the modern man and protecting him from the alluring temptations that adulterate him totally.

On the other hand, living in nowadays secular and global society, although regarded reluctantly by the political authority and power, the Christians through their Church proved to be the only and the true factor of stability inside the human society, still preserving the basic rule of their faith. We have samples of verses in the Holy Scriptures that Christians all over the world cherish and honour with great love: *“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”* (I Timothy 2.1-2).

The modern Christian is thus, presented as the most faithful supporter of the state to which he guarantees the cohesion and moral security of the society, in the way that through his moral conduct he strengthens and supports the fight of good against the evil. This is the only way in which the society can defend itself against all crimes, robberies, corruption or immorality and their bad consequences. Nevertheless, if the State becomes a persecutor of the Christians and thus, of the Church, taking part to the above crimes, the Church should stand against and oppose through sacrifice and not through violence.

Obedience to the Church does not represent a theocracy in itself or a nostalgic feeling for lost paradise, but the realism of the religious man who is able of self-governance under the guidance of God’s laws. Thus, the Church receives the entire support of the state with regard to worldly matters and the state accepts the guidance of the Church in order to get the guarantee of the holly lasting goods through the sacred fulfilment of anthropology, for the human society [10].

5. Conclusion

I consider proper to conclude using the wonderful words of Pope John Paul II who synthesizes the divine role of the Church in the postmodern world: “The Churches have the task of being peace makers, of providing solidarity and fraternity so that they should not present themselves as antagonists but collaborators for the common good, leaving aside everything that could exacerbate the oppositions, the passions and ideologies which during the past decades tried to prevail the persons, local human communities and principles of freedom and truth. Observing their temporal autonomy, their spiritual mission calls for them to watch the world in order to remind the values that are the basis of the social life, for identifying under human and spiritual aspects any lack of respect due to each person, to his/her dignity and fundamental rights, especially religious freedom and the freedom of consciousness.” [11]

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