

Politics and the Supremacy of God

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Catholic Insight, Oct. 2005



At the end of the school year (2005), a student of mine presented me with an unusual gift, a large scroll of *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, signed by Mr. Paul Martin. At first I wasn't sure if it was a joke, or a subtle slap in the face, or whether he was just absent on the days I spoke out against the Individualism that seems to underpin the *Charter*. I know now that neither were the case. It was just a matter of thoughtfulness with a twist of irony.

But every time I look at the *Charter*, I continue to wonder at the line: "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." What in the world does this line mean for Canadians? What does it mean given that seven in ten Canadians, according to the *Ottawa Citizen*, believe that religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions?

It would seem to me that the *Charter* should be read and perhaps was intended to be read in light of that opening line. But it is not. Rather, the *Charter* is consistently interpreted within the framework of post-modernism. To quickly summarize, the first principle of post-modernism is that the universe has no intrinsic meaning; rather, it is man who projects meaning onto it (Nietzsche). Consequently, there is no such thing as an absolute and universal truth. Hence, there is no natural moral law and thus no permanent and universal standards in light of which certain lifestyle choices are deemed morally deficient and thus validly and legally excluded. Everyone, of course, has a right to his own opinion, because every opinion is just as valid as every other opinion, since there is no "truth" by which to measure its validity.

The basic right of the individual is to become his own unique plan, to determine his own nature (Sartre). The individual is only free to the extent that he can realize his plan, that is, design himself, make himself to be what he wills to be. He is free to the degree that he is not bound by duties or obligations imposed upon him by something other than his own will. And so his freedom is linked to his right to realize the plan that he is by his

own choice, and not to a supposed duty to fulfill a human nature that is conceived and brought into being by God.

Tolerance and respect for individual autonomy become the principal social virtues, but within a post-modern mind frame, these terms acquire a radically new meaning than they once had, with less clearly defined boundaries. Since there is no natural moral law, respect for diversity cannot be limited to respect for diverse cultures, but ought to extend to include the acceptance of diverse and conflicting moralities (moral pluralism) and lifestyle choices that at one time might have been regarded as immoral. Inclusivity and tolerance become the new buzzwords that help distinguish those who belong to the new orthodoxy from those who choose to remain behind, that is, who choose to conserve the principles of an "outdated" worldview (conservatives, of course).

Religion is reduced to being nothing more than one "paradigm" alongside others, one particular way of giving meaning to this otherwise meaningless and unintelligible universe that we have unwittingly found ourselves thrown into. The only problem with certain religious paradigms (i.e., Catholicism) is that they mistake the private for the public. They do so because at the roots of their religion is the acknowledgment of truth as a property of what is real, and which is one, and which measures the mind of man.

Consequently, the separation of Church and state acquires a radically different meaning than it had previously. Originally, separation meant that no secular prince can rightly usurp ecclesiastical office. Within the context of post-modernism, however, separation of Church and state has come to mean the "separation of state and religion" and that the state cannot impose the moral conclusions of the Catholic faith, for example, on the citizens at large (i.e., regarding abortion, euthanasia, marriage, etc.).

"Separation" is thus the relegation of religion to the realm of the private. It means that the decisions of the state must not be influenced by the doctrines of a particular religion, for this would amount to a failure to regard all paradigms or perspectives as equally valid, and it would involve the imposition of one perspective upon the rest. It would amount to a violation of the right of the individual to be the plan that he is by virtue of his own will, that is, a violation of the principle of autonomy.

To anyone the least bit familiar with Supreme Court decisions since the *Charter*, it is obvious that it has been interpreted not in view of the supremacy of God, but in the context of post-modern nihilism. How that line will be able or has been able to survive is difficult to understand.

The Supremacy of God

The idea that religion and morals are to be relegated to the private realm and that public decisions are to be free of any kind of contamination resulting from contact with a particular religion might appear to have biblical support. Jesus said to the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians who came to set a trap for him: "...give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar--and to God what belongs to God" (Mt 22: 21). Thus, it would appear that the political and religious realms are separate. And since we have a duty to pay the tribute of our obedience and property to the government, yet no one can rightly be compelled to be religious, it would seem that the political realm constitutes the sphere of the public while religion belongs within the realm of the private.

But this is nothing more than a post-modern interpretation of that text. Indeed, we must give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God, but Jesus knew that everything belongs to God, because God is the author of all that is (Gn 1: 1-31). Everything that Caesar has and is belongs to God, namely his authority, the state he governs, and his very existence. That is why St. Paul can say: "...Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God" (Rm 13: 1). Of course, this does not mean that tyrants are appointed by God to be tyrants. Rather, it means that the authority they were given by God is to be exercised in the service of God. Hence, "the state is there to serve God for your benefit" (Rm 13: 4), and "...all government officials are God's officers" (Rm 13: 6).

According to Scripture, government officials rule rightly as servants of something higher and prior to themselves. The will of monarchs and princes is not the rule and measure of just law--not to mention the will of a majority. Rather, "by me monarchs rule and princes issue just laws; by me rulers govern, and the great impose justice on the world" (Pr 8, 15-16).

"Give back to Caesar" underscores the debt human persons have to the civil community and that they are bound by the demands of general justice. Thus, human persons are more than isolated individual subjects of rights without responsibilities. "Give back to God what belongs to God" reveals that religion is a part of the virtue of justice and that there exists a claim (debt) upon all that to which God's generosity extends. But His generosity embraces everything, both the realm of the public as well as the private. A state that fails to acknowledge the debt it owes to God and refuses to rule by God and issue laws in accordance with divine law, that is, according to the precepts of natural law which is grasped by the natural light of human reason, is an unjust state.

The authority that belongs to Christ does not merely extend to the private souls of individual believers. Rather, as he says: "All authority in heaven, and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28: 18). His authority is fully extensive, unlike any government. That is why he can commission the eleven to "God, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you" (Mt 28, 19-20). No ordinary person or government can conceivably issue such a charge. Unlike any other king, Christ has authority over all nations. Religion cannot get any more public than that.

Christ does not commission the eleven to assume political office and govern as monarchs or princes. Rather, he commissions them to teach and sanctify. Here lies the boundary line separating Church and state. The Church teaches, that is, clarifies and explicates the requirements of the divine law with the authority of Christ (Jn 14: 16; 16: 13), and she provides others, including Caesar, with the internal means by which to fulfill those requirements. And so it is not possible to rule justly unless one allows oneself to be influenced by the precepts of religion. This is a very different picture than that provided by post-modernism, but one far more in accordance with traditional western democracy than the democratic nihilism of contemporary politics.