Church and Politics – A Catholic Perspective

Andrew Murray

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The Catholic Church interacts regularly with politics or with politicians and governments in three broad areas – in the articulation of its social teaching, in discussions arising from its involvement in schools, hospitals and welfare and in debate over particular moral issues as they arise from time to time. Each of these carries its own special character and so can be considered separately. There are, however, common underlying principles to do with whether or not the church can speak in the public domain and how it best speak if it does. Indeed, when a political issue politically volatile. In these instances, the church can speak in the public domain and how it should proceed by careful and secret negotiation between bishops and politicians or by concerted political action by parents.

Moral debate arises around many issues and a moderate position often put is that the church can teach on moral matters while leaving legislation to the legislators. The last decade, however, has seen the Catholic voice engaged most frequently around issues to do with the beginning and end of life, and a significant disjunction has entered debate. While the Catholic natural law tradition deals easily with many of these issues, they are less easily dealt with by the kind of contract theory more current in the thinking of society at large. Briefly, how can one make a contract with someone dead or not yet born? This raises the possibility of an intellectual and tactical failure by many Catholic spokespersons. (Murray 2003: 34 – 35.)

The volume and variety of interaction between church leaders and politicians ought not be let obscure the inherent difficulties of the relationship. For each of the Abrahamic religions there exists an essential conflict between region and politics. The God of Abraham is not like the gods of the Greek city but is rather a pre-existent God, who chose to create the world though it was not necessary to do so. Whereas, then, the priests of the Greek city were superintendents appointed by the city to care for something precious to it, the priests of Abraham’s God claim not only an independent and higher authority but also access to knowledge that affects the working of the earthly city. Yet, nor for a long time could earthly rulers acknowledge that they might not be in full control of their domain. The conflict is still being played out today.

In Christian terms, this conflict came to the surface with Constantine, and Christendom can be regarded as a great political experiment in the subjection of civil authority to religious authority. It broke down after a thousand years because of both division within Christianity itself and detrimental effects of political power on religious leadership. It was
replaced by the political experiment of modernity in which both the church and the state are confronted with limitations to the extent of their powers. The rule of the state does not encompass every aspect of society. People are free to form their own associations and to practise religion. Morality and custom are separated from law. The church, on the other hand, is denied authority in matters of state and is not able to enforce the practice of religion.

The simplicity of the phrase, ‘separation of church and state’, hides the complexity and variety of settlements that were worked out through conflict and revolution from the seventeenth century on. Underlying them all was a rejection of absolute power, whether civil or religious, so that democracy and secularity went together, but settlements were different. The French revolution attempted to subject the Catholic Church to the nation. The United States effected perhaps the strongest legal separation of powers, yet in a country that remained substantially bound by religion. In Britain, compromise saw a weakened monarch and an established church. (Manent: 97 – 115) Australia’s own [93] settlement was heir to some of these but was marked by reaction to early sectarian conflict. The point at issue here is that although these settlements do change, their roots are centuries deep, so that any attempt to overthrow them is likely to bring disaster.

It is not hard to generate arguments for why the church may engage in public debate on issues of state and is not able to enforce the means of persuasion in the different circumstances in which they find themselves. In Book II, Chapter 1 of The Art of Rhetoric, Aristotle points out that people believe others not only on the basis of the arguments they present, but also on the basis of the kind of character that they display. He draws his argument form the psychology of human experience. What does life teach about who will deceive us and, therefore, lead us into making false moves? The answer is threefold. Those who are stupid or ignorant will mislead us because they have wrong opinions. Those who are perverse or bad will mislead us because of their wickedness. And those who dislike us, or are our enemies, will mislead us in order to harm us. These are the hard lessons of life. Viewed positively, though, they mean that we generally believe someone whom we judge to be knowledgeable, virtuous and of good will. (Murray 2005: 69 – 70)

There are many sensitivities around religion and politics, but the thoughts offered here are a guide to what they are and how they might be handled. For church leaders to engage in public debate on issues understood to be political is difficult but not impossible and certainly not forbidden.

References


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