Must Religion Be a Threat to Liberty?

Does Christianity destroy or defend freedom?

Answering this question, Fr Robert A. Sirico turns to the foundations of Christianity. Beginning with Jesus' instruction to 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's,' Sirico maintains that Christian doctrine and practice formed the essential basis for modern ideas and institutions of freedom, not least by establishing that there are areas of human life in which the state has no authority.

In more recent times, Christianity is often accused of having insufficient regard for individual liberty. Sirico argues that this is a serious misconception, and illustrates that Christianity's insistence upon the ability to apprehend truth provides an indispensible grounding for human liberty, and was central to Christianity's sustained opposition to twentieth-century totalitarianism.

By insisting upon the autonomy of church and state and teaching that liberty is an indispensible prerequisite for moral flourishing, Sirico holds that authentic Christian faith serves not as a violator of liberty, but rather as one of its strongest guarantors.

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is the president and a cofounder of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, which works to promote a free, virtuous, and humane society by demonstrating the compatibility of faith, liberty, and the free economy.

The Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom was inaugurated by the Centre for Independent Studies in 1999, under the auspices of its Religion and the Free Society Program. Named after the eminent nineteenth-century religious thinker and historian Lord Acton, the lecture provides a public platform for prominent individuals from all faiths and churches to offer their reflections on religion and freedom in the modern world, to inspire public discussion of the role of religion in free societies.

CIS Occasional Paper 112
ISBN 978-1-86432-153-1
ISSN 0155 7386
www.cis.org.au

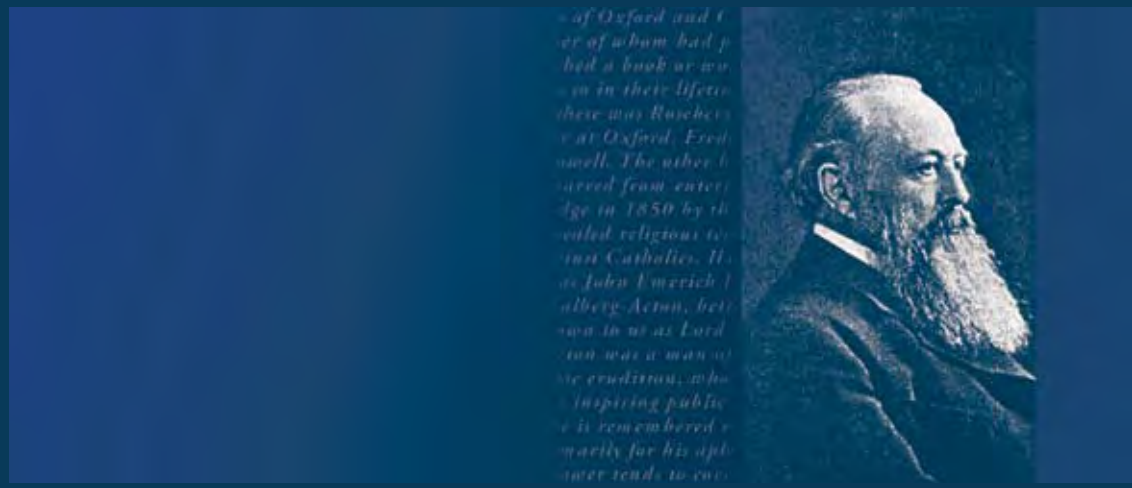
THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

ISBN 978-1-86432-153-1
9 781864 321531

The 10th Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom

Must Religion Be a Threat to Liberty?

Rev. Robert A. Sirico



Must Religion Be a Threat to Liberty?

Must Religion Be a Threat to Liberty?

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

The 10th Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom
Delivered on 21 July 2008 at the
Commonwealth Bank Theatrette, Sydney

CIS Occasional Paper 112

2008

Published October 2008
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW, 1590
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

Typeset in Adobe Garamond and Frugal Sans

Sirico, Robert A., 1952–

Must Religion Be a Threat To Liberty? / Robert A. Sirico.

1st ed.

ISBN: 9781864321531 (pbk.)

Series: CIS occasional papers; 112.

1. Christian biography.
2. Liberty–Religious aspects–Christianity.

270.092

The 10th Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom was made possible by support from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

Introduction

Greg Lindsay
Executive Director
The Centre for Independent Studies

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you to this the Centre for Independent Studies' 2008 Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom. It is the tenth in the series. Let me also thank, at this point, the Commonwealth Bank, for the use again of this auditorium and for providing the refreshments we have just all enjoyed. It is also my pleasure to welcome our speaker tonight, Father Robert Sirico. He's a good friend, and this is his third visit to Australia. As you may guess, his main purpose in coming here this time was to participate in the World Youth Day activities, and we are pleased that he agreed to speak for us this evening.

The format for tonight is that following my remarks, Father Sirico will speak for about thirty-five minutes, and there will be a brief question period followed by a vote of thanks to be delivered by the Right Reverend Robert Forsyth, Anglican Bishop of South Sydney and our 2003 Acton Lecturer. I am more than delighted, too, that our first Acton Lecturer, His Eminence Cardinal Pell, is also here tonight, despite having had perhaps the busiest week or so of his life with the visit of the Pope for World Youth Day and everything that entailed. It has been an extraordinary week and the fact that it rained only last night when everything was over was almost a miracle, I guess.

For a number of years, the Centre had a program of studies entitled Religion and the Free Society, of which the Acton Lecture was a component. For a secular organisation, as the Centre is, this was considered to be an interesting development. However, a core feature of the Centre's work has been to examine the role of voluntary institutions in a free and open civil society, and it seemed to us that the churches, and religions more generally, were an important component of this and

worthy of some attention. The program ended a few years ago when its director, Sam Gregg, moved to the US—in fact, to work for the organisation that Father Sirico heads—but we decided to continue the Acton Lecture as a feature on the CIS calendar.

The purpose of this lecture is not, I must stress, to discuss internal matters of discipline, dogma, or organisation, with which all faiths and churches wrestle from time to time. Instead, it offers a platform for prominent individuals to offer their own reflections on issues affecting aspects of their faith in the modern world and to inform the public about various aspects of their faith and how it interacts with the free society.

Reverend Robert A. Sirico received his Master of Divinity degree from the Catholic University of America, following undergraduate study at the University of Southern California and the University of London. During his studies and early ministry, he experienced a growing concern over the lack of training religious studies students receive in fundamental economic principles, leaving them poorly equipped to understand and address today's social problems. As a result of these concerns, Father Sirico cofounded the Acton Institute with Kris Mauren in 1990.

As president of the Acton Institute, Father Sirico lectures at colleges, universities, and business organisations throughout the US and abroad. His writings on religious, political, economic, and social matters are published in a variety of journals, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, the *London Financial Times*, the *Washington Times*, the *Detroit News*, and *National Review*. Father Sirico is often called upon by members of the broadcast media for statements regarding economics, civil rights, and issues of religious concern, and has provided commentary for CNN, ABC, the BBC, NPR, and CBS's *60 Minutes* among others.

In April of 1999, Father Sirico was awarded an honorary doctorate in Christian ethics from the Franciscan University of Steubenville, and in May of 2001 Universidad Francisco Marroquin in Guatemala awarded him an honorary doctorate in social sciences. He is a member of the prestigious Mont Pelerin Society, the American Academy of Religion, and the Philadelphia Society, and is on the board of advisors of the Civic Institute in Prague. Father Sirico also served on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission from 1994 to 1998. He is also currently pastor of St Mary Catholic Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Father Sirico's pastoral ministry has included a chaplaincy to AIDS patients at the National Institutes of Health, and the recent founding of a new community, St Philip Neri House, in Kalamazoo.

It is my pleasure to invite Father Sirico to deliver the 10th Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom.

Must Religion Be a Threat to Liberty?

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

May I begin by thanking Greg Lindsay and the Centre for Independent Studies for the kind invitation to deliver this year's Acton Lecture. It is a tribute to the CIS—a secular organisation and Australia's leading think-tank—and a sign of its breadth of thinking that it instituted this lecture almost ten years ago, in recognition of the importance of thinking about the place of religion in free societies.

I am, of course, a guest in your country and I do not claim to know the religious history of Australia especially well. I am aware that Australia is a country—like America—where the majority of the population identifies itself as Christian. I also know that, like the United States, Australia has a remarkable history of religious tolerance—and, in some respects, perhaps even a better record. Australia did, after all, elect a Catholic prime minister—James Scullin—thirty years before John F. Kennedy became president of the United States. You have also had two Jewish Governors-General: Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir Zelman Cowen. I am told that Melbourne has the largest concentration of Greek Orthodox believers outside Athens, and that many Catholics of Italian descent (like myself) discovered Australia as a land of opportunity and freedom after the Second World War. I also know that many Christians from the Middle East—the birthplace of Christianity—have found refuge in the land of the Southern Cross. Like all Middle Eastern Christians, they have demonstrated a flair for business and have created wealth and employment for themselves, their families, and many other Australians of all creeds and none. You also have a significant Muslim population that, like most Muslims around the world, wants to live peacefully with its neighbors. Here, it is also worth mentioning that you have the world's largest Muslim nation—Indonesia—on your doorstep.

Many Australian religious leaders have also made an impact on the world stage. It is hard to deny that the late Daniel Mannix, the long-serving Archbishop of Melbourne, had a significance that went beyond Australia's shores. Your own Cardinal Pell, I can assure you, especially after this past week's incredibly successful World Youth Day events, is well known outside Australia and greatly admired by many American and European Catholics. Nor is it a secret that the Anglican Archdiocese of Sydney plays a major role in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Of course, just as many Americans are not religious, so too are a good number of Australians. I am told that convinced believers and nonbelievers are found on both sides of politics in Australia.

Regardless, however, of where we live, it is also true that many question whether liberty is compatible with religion in general and, more specifically, with Christianity. We know the arguments to the contrary. They have been advanced since at least the French Enlightenment, and the belief persists to this day that an attachment to religious dogma represents a kind of threat to others and preconditions the culture to accept a measure of despotic control in place of freedom. We see this bias even in the language we choose: an atheist is said to be a 'free thinker,' whereas a believer is thought to be bound or shackled by tradition and dogma.

The arguments for the unity of freedom and unbelief are common cultural currency. We are told that faith makes us subservient to authority. It makes us unwilling to think for ourselves, so that we become tribal and collectivistic. We don't demand our rights against the state, because we are always thinking of the next life. We turn the other cheek and put up with endless abuse from tyrants, because we are predisposed to suffer. Indeed, we long to be ruled with an iron hand, in the same way that we imagine that God rules the universe. What's more, we are told that religion brings about conflict because people argue about tiny points of doctrine and end up killing each other over them, or, as Rousseau put it, that 'Christianity preaches only servitude and dependence.'

These views characterise the position of a good number of educated people, many of whom have erected dogmatic secularism as an ideological system of its own. Some—such as Richard Dawkins—seem to regard contempt of religious belief and religious believers as a

mark of higher learning. My thesis is exactly the opposite, and it is this theme that I wish to address this evening.

Let me first address the issue of authority. The core religious claim of the West—I speak of Judaism and Christianity—is that our loyalties are to God first and to earthly authority only secondarily. This might at first not seem to be a controversial claim, but it strikes at the heart of the ambition of every secular ruler to enjoy complete sovereignty. It certainly contradicted the civic ethos of the ancient world, in which state and faith were one.

And this was precisely why the ancient world so distrusted the Jews. They refused to give their first obedience to Caesar. They had their own law, courts, and standards of justice. These constituted a sphere within the culture that would not and could not be finally submerged within the collectivist civic project. One thinks of Psalm 76, verse 13: '*terribili, et ei qui aufert spiritum principum: terribili apud omnes reges terrae*' [Make vows to the awesome God who takes away the life of princes; he is greatly feared by all the kings of the earth].

What can we say about a religion that sings such songs? It is a safe assumption that such a group will not be beloved of the aspiring political class. It was precisely the unwillingness of the Jewish people to obey their worldly masters without question that led to their social and cultural marginalisation. It was their desire to be free of tyrannical control that led to the decisive events in Jewish history.

So, too, was Christianity born in the refusal to surrender mind, heart, and soul to the state. Buried deep in the Christian mind is the memory that rather than submit to Caesar, the Holy Family fled to Egypt. Indeed, some of the most striking words in the accounts of Jesus' life occur when he was asked if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. His reply—'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's'—drew a mighty distinction between authority and power.

Here is an assertion of two distinct realms: the temporal and the ecclesiastical. In this concept, both the law and the civil magistrate are to be respected, even prayed for. But at our core, at the most fundamental level of our being, within our souls and in our moral convictions as well as within our hearts, we are not owned by the state. If the moment arrives when we are forced to choose, we choose allegiance to God over obedience to the civic realm.

This allegiance is achieved, for ourselves, by a free act of our wills, and is to be proposed to others, not imposed on them, because its very essence is freedom.

It is precisely for this reason that Rousseau, somewhat in contradiction to his claim that Christians are natural slaves, regarded Christians as bad citizens and terrible warriors. He said that 'since the Gospel does not establish a national Religion, a holy war among Christians is impossible.' From this insight, Rousseau suggests that the decline of Rome was brought about by Christian conversion. 'Once the Cross had driven out the eagle,' he wrote, 'all Roman valor ceased.'[1]

For this reason, Rousseau further argues that anyone who claims that the Church is the source of salvation ought to be driven out of the civic realm.

What is really at issue here is the problem of authority. Is there a single source of state authority, or is there another belonging exclusively to God, which claims adherence based on people's interior conviction, and which is a form of restraint, not based on external coercion, but on interior assent? The claims of the state may or may not coincide with the will of God, and what is God's alone may be withheld from the state. This idea, too, might not strike us as especially radical today, at a time when we consider the distinctions between church and state to be an intellectual and social given. But the ancient world was different. When Jesus drew a sharp line between God and the state—suggesting that they are not unified and that their interests do not always coincide—he was developing and refining Jewish thought and experience. This would initiate a deep Christian appreciation of freedom that would evolve into the fact of freedom.

We see the idea again in the title of a foundational work in the history of the West: Saint Augustine's *City of God*. This is a book that should be studied by every student of the social sciences, because it is here we find a core idea that would lead to the emergence of a new form of civilisation, one in which the state would not reign supreme on earth. Saint Augustine saw that civil authority is not the final authority. It is not infallible. Indeed, the civil authority, characterised by its possession of the means of coercion, is not populated by impeccable people, but by sinners who will be judged by God just as everyone else.

This, drawn from the Christian doctrine of the need of all people for redemption, was actually the beginning of a new form of egalitarianism: all men were to be judged by the same standard of morality and justice. That included even the most exalted of rulers. After death, they would not continue their earthly status and become rulers and gods themselves. No matter how much ermine they wore or how many jewels they owned, every monarch would face their maker not as a judge and king, but as a human like everyone else.

This raises another striking aspect of the Gospel narrative: its individualism or, better put, its personalism (which is a more cohesive and complete consideration of human individuality). The parables are addressed to individuals and presume that they enjoy the free choice over their lives, their beliefs, their morals, and their earthly and eternal fate. As a religious leader, this was Jesus' primary pedagogical method, perhaps even more so than his miracles. He appealed to reason. He counselled not war but peace, not swords but persuasion. He did not seek earthly power. Indeed, his own followers were confused on this point, as we know from the Gospel account of his return from the desert into Jerusalem. He was greeted as a would-be king and urged to take his rightful place as ruler. But he refused, saying, 'My Kingdom is not of this world.'

The power of Christ was of a different sort. But this power was an especially threatening one to the omnipotent state, precisely because of his refusal and that of his most intimate followers to succumb to Caesar. He was killed by the Roman state, a fact that became a central symbol and driving reality for the band of followers he left behind.

The nascent Church followed Jewish tradition by creating its own structures to manage its own affairs, eschewing institutions of the state. It developed its own law and courts, with the hierarchy serving as a governing structure over its belief systems. The state would come to be seen not as part of the structure of that authority, but worthy of obedience insofar as its dictates accorded with a higher moral sense. Christianity did not, however, see the origin of authority as lying in the state, and it did not see the state as the source of law, much less of morality.

Nor was Christianity satisfied with an insular social status. Its social vision sought to change the whole world. Because it was inherently evangelistic, it was a religion open to all, inviting all people into its fold.

It was the Church's very universalism, its catholicity, that led to the concept of social and economic mobility and eventually to a concept of universal human rights. This view of humanity went contrary to the idea that people are somehow stuck in the condition and class or tribe of their birth. Instead, it upheld the revolutionary concept that through their own free will, people can discover and adopt a new vocation and become a new creation, both in their hearts and in their relation to the world. Whereas the pagan state tended to favour strict hierarchies of command and rigid structures of social and economic status—so that it could better control its citizens—Christianity imagined a society in which people leave old professions and adopt new ones, take on vocations as priests or nuns, become educated and advance within the culture, become merchants and capitalists who produce wealth. The poor and suffering do not have to remain so, and the rich are not secure forever. Progress and change are ideas integral to the Christian faith.

Another trait of Christianity that made it unique was its emphasis on reason. Whereas religions of the Far East saw God as formless and incomprehensible, Tertullian, Augustine, and many other Church fathers were defenders of reason, as Rodney Stark writes in his book on Christianity.[2] Clement of Alexandria, for example, wrote that 'it is not safe to commit these things to bare faith without reason, since assuredly truth cannot be without reason.' It was the dialogue between faith and reason that enabled Christianity to look to transcendent sources of moral authority yet still be concerned with concrete social realities.

Christianity's universalism, its emphasis on independent thinking, its evangelical strain, and its insistence that people can know the truth through faith and reason are precisely what have led totalitarian governments, from the time of Herod to the present-day leaders in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and China, to use every means available to suppress it. Communism was atheistic partly because it was essential to the ideology but also because it was required of its practice. If the state was to own all and rule all, an authentic and independent Christianity had to be crushed.

Popular history has it that Constantine changed all this by establishing Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. This is not the occasion to enter into the entire history of this period, but let me just say this: in this period, Christians were being horribly

persecuted, and the most notable aspect of Constantine's rule was a new toleration for Christianity.

He and his successors certainly went too far in making the Christian faith the official religion and using public resources for the construction of churches. But when we look at this history, we need to carefully distinguish between unjust practices of the present day and the roots of what would eventually lead to what we now know as modern-day freedom. It was Christianity itself, and not atheism, secularism or materialism, that first advanced the idea that the state and the Church were distinct and separate entities. The concept that institutions could flourish in the absence of civic approval is what led to the creation of the university, the monastery, the hospital, the rule of law in courts, and the flourishing of science and institutional and international charity.

What about the claim that the Age of Faith was really the Dark Ages, and that it took Enlightenment deism to bring light? Historians today are discovering that this line of thought is little more than an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century relic of wishful thinking. The so-called Dark Ages saw the origins of the water mill and the windmill, used for capitalistic production. Monastic estates were used for the domestication and production of fish, and for cloth-making. Monasteries were the first modern institutions of complex capitalistic production. It was during this period that we saw the development of clocks, eyeglasses, chimneys, and many forms of indoor temperature control. Transportation advanced dramatically.[3]

It was the same in the world of art and literature. Music, painting, architecture, and writing flourished under Christendom as they never did under the Roman Empire. It was the case with science as well. Copernicus's heliocentric model was not the beginning but the culmination of scientific advances that stretched back centuries to the followers of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Fourteenth-century thinkers such as Jean Buridan and Nicole Oresme are not household names, but it was their scientific investigations that led to the explosion of progress two centuries later.

I've written previously on the subject of the discovery of market economics in Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The late scholastics gave us the first coherent theories of the origin of value and price. They theorised about inflation and the business cycle. In a

complete break from ancient-world bigotry, they saw the merchant as someone who lived out a high calling and benefited society at large. They advanced the modern idea of human rights and were notable contributors to Christianity's intellectual assault on the institution of slavery.

Indeed, it is Christianity that lies at the root of the body of ideas we know today as classical liberalism, which can be summed up in four essential claims: all people have rights that cannot be abrogated; society flourishes most when the state is a resource of last resort; economic advance is desirable and made possible through free exchange; and the social peace is best maintained when religion and the state are separated.

Any informed observer will note that the old liberal tradition was not always friendly to Christianity. Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson were Deists. Many of America's Founding Fathers did not embrace the Creed. This is true enough. But let us consider that they were reacting to the several centuries of history in which church and state became too bound up with each other. The governmental system of monarchism led them to believe that liberty is threatened as much by the king as by the religion the king professes. But they had made a mistake in their analysis. That the tyrant professed Christianity was an incidental fact: he was merely using the culturally dominant religion as a cover for his true ambition.

Atheistic classical liberals will freely cite the religious scepticism of the old liberal school, but they overlook contrary facts. American ministers were the leading champions of the American Revolution.[4] They cited Locke (it's very questionable whether Locke was really a Christian) from their pulpits and spoke of human rights, religious liberty, and need for progress. As for Paine, it was not his religious scepticism that made him popular—it was his fiery rhetoric on behalf of what was already being preached in churches all over the colonies. Indeed, we might even argue that his religious scepticism led him astray, so that he, unlike his contemporaries, was not able to distinguish between the genuine freedom sought by the American Revolution and the phony freedom that led to actual tyranny of the French Revolution. It was monotheism in the Judeo-Christian tradition that gave us liberty, theism that protected and nurtured it, and theism that will guide the development of our liberty in the future.

And yet there remains the issue of the institutional Church: to what extent is this institution a bulwark in defence of liberty or a source of the curbing of human liberty? Without the Church, the overarching weight of cultural authority falls on only two sources: the state and the individual. The individual is not often in a position to exercise the influence necessary to fight bad policies or defend liberty. The organised Church, on the other hand, is better suited. This is why, for example, the Church played an important role in the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe, and continues to play a critical role in Latin America, fighting attempts by would-be despots to grab social and economic power.

We can see this role, and confusions regarding it, more clearly by examining the pontificate of Benedict XVI. At its very outset, I wrote an article that attempted to shift the gravity of the debate concerning what we might expect from his leadership over the Catholic Church.[5] Though he was widely described in the English-speaking media as 'conservative,' 'archconservative,' or even 'ultraconservative,'[6] a person who would impinge on the liberty of Catholics and certainly not contribute to liberty in the world, this impression was gained mainly from his time as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (during which he was known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger). For having orchestrated a few high-profile censures of dissenting theologians, he was seen as someone who was willing to use forceful methods to impose the truth—the very caricature of the Inquisitor.

Few observers were willing to recognise that his actions in this period did not amount to coercion of any sort. Theologians who purport to teach the Catholic faith but who instead publish and teach in profound dissent from or undermine that faith are themselves engaged in a form of deception. Censuring them does not deny them their rights to teach and publish. It only revokes the privilege of teaching in the name of the Catholic faith. They are still free to write and publish, and even free to write and publish as Catholics, in any venue they can find.

The act of revoking a certain teaching mandate at Catholic universities, then, is not an illiberal action, any more than it would be for an automobile company to dismiss a salesman who sold his customers cars that were a different make and model than advertised. This denies no one's fundamental rights. It merely clarifies the terms of

a contractual arrangement, so to speak, making it more honest, more aboveboard. Consider that those disciplined by Cardinal Ratzinger were teaching things like liberation theology and moral concepts completely opposed to the Catholic tradition, were open about it, and had long publishing records. The cardinal's actions were wholly justifiable.

So on these grounds, then, there is no basis for describing Benedict XVI as an 'ultraconservative.' Permit me to carry my argument further. Having read his writings over many years, I had observed a consistent theme, namely a firm and unyielding attachment to the idea of religious liberty and the power of Christ to convert hearts in absence of coercion. Unlike many in the traditionalist camp, Cardinal Ratzinger showed no sympathy for the notion of the temporal power, which amounts to the claim that the Church should exercise state-like powers. Instead, he had written in favour of the Church as a cultural force whose truth-claims wield influence only over hearts and minds. In this regard, Cardinal Ratzinger is very much in the line of the Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II), in which he played an important role, which speaks of the desire of the Church to 'propose' rather than 'impose' its teaching on the human heart. Cardinal Ratzinger has published several extensive and passionate arguments for religious liberty.

What this attachment to religious liberty signifies is hugely important in the history of modern Catholicism. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, at a time when democracy was rising, the Papal States were under serious strain, and radical political movements were on the move, two general camps emerged within the Catholic Church. On one side, there were the ultramontanists, who favoured the temporal power and regarded the idea of religious liberty as a fateful surrender to secularism and modernism. On the other side were the liberals, who embraced religious liberty and argued that papal infallibility should be embraced only in the strictly defined terms related to its own competency of faith and morals, but not to politics or economics. Liberals and ultramontanists were found in every country on the Continent and in England, and the debate and split between the two persisted for decades.[7]

These issues were debated in great detail at the First Vatican Council. Though Pius IX tended to favour the ultramontanist side, the final result of that council was compatible with a certain version of the Catholic liberal position, as is seen in the acquiescence to the definition of papal

infallibility by a number of prominent persons who initially sought to modify or deflect it, such as Isaac Hecker, John Henry Newman, and Lord Acton. As eventually defined, the Pope's infallibility would extend on to faith and morals, but not to politics and other matters, as some ultramontanists had hoped, and then only under strict conditions. Even Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* could be read as compatible with an embrace of liberty if we recognise that while it condemned the view that the Church must be universally separated from the state (understood as the state confining religion to the purely private sphere—the goal of today's radical secularists), it tolerated the view that the Church can be made prudently and advantageously distinct from the state. And yet this debate persisted well into the twentieth century, and was decisively settled at the Second Vatican Council with its defense of religious liberty. The following text from the Vatican II documents is representative of the fullest expression of the old Catholic liberal perspective, now developed into authoritative teaching:

> This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.
>
> The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognised in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.
>
> It is in accordance with their dignity as persons—that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility—that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it

> is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.[8]

After the Second Vatican Council, a new kind of 'liberalism' emerged within Catholicism that asserted a patrimony in the old Catholic liberal's worldview, but was actually a departure from this authentic old liberalism, which never doubted the core truths of Catholicism. The old Catholic liberalism was the complement to the old political liberalism that embraced freedom and truth, and in fact saw freedom as the best means to seek and advance truth. This was the same with Catholicism in the style of Antonio Rosmini, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Lord Acton, and their generation.[9] The new liberalism, in contrast, wanted to argue not about religious liberty but about the moral liberty of belief itself. It embraced not freedom as such, but a relativism that resented any truth claim. It thus brought into question core truth claims about doctrine and faith. It still does, as we see from the dissenters in the Church today.

Benedict, I want to be clear and as is manifestly obvious, is decidedly not this sort of new liberal. In fact, we have a good reason to reclaim the word on behalf of its authentic meaning: religious truth united with political and economic liberty. I believe that insofar as the modern papacy has implications for economics and politics, it is in the direction of a humane and unifying liberalism that places its hopes in society, faith, and freedom.

Consider even the name *Benedict*. When it was announced that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would take the name of Benedict XVI, this question immediately presented itself: who was Benedict XV, and what did he stand for? What does it imply for the future of this papacy that it

would consider itself to be, in some sense, a successor papacy to that one?

Benedict XV was Pope from 1914 to 1922, and witnessed the age of peace and prosperity and hope turn to one of bloodshed, violence, and the total state. He is remembered mostly for his anguished encyclical '*Ad beatissimi apostolorum*,' which sought to end the conflicts and battles that became what we now call World War I, which so violently dashed the hopes of many generations of nineteenth-century classical liberals.

The temporal power of the papacy had come to an end, and at the urging of those from the liberal wing of the faith. They had placed their hope in the capacity of Christian faith to flourish in the absence of coercion, and in the capacity of the world to continue its progress toward peace and prosperity. It was to be a world of free trade, free minds, and religious orthodoxy. But that was not to be. The vision of liberalism in which they had placed their hopes was dashed utterly and completely by the carnage of war. In '*Ad beatissimi apostolorum*,' we read that

> In 1914 Pope Benedict XV warned of the great dangers ahead in an illiberal world. He observed that 'the dread phantom of war holds sway' over the minds of men. The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the earth; what wonder, then, if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society?[10]

Benedict XV drew particular attention to the human and economic costs of an illiberal world. 'Day by day the mighty number of widows and orphans increases, and with the interruption of communications, trade is at a standstill; agriculture is abandoned; the arts are reduced to inactivity; the wealthy are in difficulties; the poor are reduced to abject misery; all are in distress,' he wrote.

Obviously, these sad words foreshadowed what would follow: the crimes and terrors of communism and Nazism, the end of European unity, the advent of weapons of mass destruction, and the takeover of the West by ideologies of social management, secularism, consumerism, and every kind of horror. These were the worldly concerns of Popes that followed Benedict XV, all the way to John Paul the Great (John Paul II), who was singularly instrumental in overthrowing some of the great tyrannies of the last century. It was a debilitating time for anyone who believed in the spirit of Lord Acton and his contemporaries.

And what became of Christian hope? We find it in documents of the Second Vatican Council, the most important event to shape the lives of both Papa Wojtyła and the German theologian Joseph Ratzinger. This was the Council that did not turn its back on religious freedom, but rather embraced it more fully, with a confidence that the setbacks that followed the end of the temporal power would be temporary. This Council looked forward to a world of renewed spiritual and material progress in which a global order of freedom—along with technological advance—would serve all peoples in all places. The Council placed renewed emphasis not only on the Church's ultimate salvific mission, but also on its proximate temporal mission of promoting human solidarity and well-being.

At the time the Council closed, many traditionalist Catholics had great doubts about the optimism at the heart of Vatican II—not without some reason—and particularly that which motivated the Church to embrace the modern world and more clearly define the need for religious freedom and human rights. But today, the Council's wisdom is clearer. Communism and Nazism came and went. The other ideologies that dominated the twentieth century seem also to be abating. We again live in times of new hope—with conspicuous exceptions emerging from parts of the Islamic world and radical secularism—similar to the ones that gave birth to the liberal vision of the nineteenth century.

This is a vision that was warmly embraced by John Paul II, and one can see this continue and even develop with Benedict XVI, who speaks in favour of religious liberty in nearly every meeting with secular leaders. Indeed, the writings of Benedict XVI on matters of politics and theology burn with a passion for the idea of authentic liberty, for which he credits the Christian tradition and which he traces to Jesus' startling

declaration that there is no identity between what belongs to the state and what belongs to God. Hence, Christianity is not a politicised faith. It does not find its fulfilment in the power of kings, presidents, central plans, or sweeping revolutions for control by new regimes. Its capitol is the human heart. Further, Benedict XVI's writings on the inviolability of conscience are at least as passionate and politically unyielding as anything written by Lord Acton.

The economic implications of this stance have been understood for many centuries. A state that protects private property and resists interference with the freedom of association or the individual conscience must tolerate the emergence of the complex matrix of human action and exchange known as the market economy. To be sure, some Catholic thinkers in the twentieth century have been slow to fully understand this. After decades of development in Catholic social teaching, John Paul II found pastoral reasons after the fall of socialism to clear up confusions. His 1991 encyclical, '*Centisimus annus*,' makes the moral and practical case for the business economy as an application of Catholic concerns.

There is clear continuity between Benedict XVI and John Paul II as regards economics. Indeed, it was Benedict (as Cardinal Ratzinger) who guided the Catholic Church through a period of challenge when 'liberation theology'—essentially a baptised form of Marxism—had made serious inroads. This challenge led to writings on the history and development of the idea of freedom and limitations on the state. Thus, we can look forward to further elaboration on the 'right of economic initiative' so often emphasised by his predecessor. Particularly exciting is how the Pope's writings on conscience as understood by the late scholastics might be integrated in a more complete moral defence of economic liberty.

Consider, for example, Cardinal Ratzinger's wonderful tribute to Bartolomé de las Casas, who was instrumental in the ending of the colonial occupation of Latin America, along with its brutalities, and very influential in the teaching of the Catholic Church against all forms of human slavery. In a 1987 book, Ratzinger wrote that the power of the cross 'lies in its powerlessness, and in this world it must remain powerless in order to be itself.' He draws attention to the main political orientation of the New Testament, which is not about gaining or overthrowing power but rather a kind of 'apolitical inwardness,' of 'subordination, patience,

obedience.' He points out that the New Testament 'was written out of the minority situation of the slowly growing Christian Church and is thus ordered towards safeguarding what is specifically Christian in the midst of Christians' political impotence, not towards the ordering of a Christian power.'[11]

When Jesus says that we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, he 'breaks up the fundamental constitution of the ancient world and indeed of the pre-Christian world as a whole. By separating the *ius sacrum* [sacred law] from the emperor's *ius publicum* [public law], he created the space of freedom of conscience where every power ends, even that of the Roman God-emperor.' The state becomes 'a purely human emperor and changes into the beast of the Apocalypse when he nevertheless wants to remain God and denies the inviolable space of the conscience. To this extent this saying sets limits to every earthly power, and proclaims the freedom of the person that transcends all political systems.'[12]

Now, here we have a very powerful defence of the old liberal view that the state is not God, that the state that purports to be God is the beast or the anti-God, and that the truth must be embedded in conscience and in a juridical framework of liberty to emerge in a culturally sustainable way. This is not only a strategic truth, it is a doctrinal truth. Thus, we can say that Ratzinger might have gone even further than John Courtney Murray, the most influential theologian writing on these topics prior to the Second Vatican Council. He argues that to deny the informed conscience is to violate human rights—an extraordinary and wonderful claim from which I think we can all learn—and one at the core of the Christian worldview now and forever.

Further, by way of reinforcing my point, consider this excerpt from 'Theology and the Church's Political Stance' in the same work:

> [I]t is precisely this separation of the authority of the state and sacral authority, the new dualism that this contains, that represents the origin and the permanent foundation of the western idea of freedom. From now on there were two societies related to each other but not identical with each other, neither of which had this character of totality.[13]

The state no longer bears the burden of being a surrogate religious authority that reaches into the depths of conscience. Its moral basis must refer to something outside and beyond the state, namely the Church. And the Church, for its part, has authority that 'depends on voluntary adherence and is entitled only to spiritual but not to civil penalties, precisely because it does not have the status the state has of being accepted by all as something given in advance.'

Ratzinger has been openly critical of historical periods when Church and state blended. He has written, 'this balance has often enough been disturbed, that in the middle ages and in the early modern period things often reached the point of Church and state in fact blending into one another in a way that falsified the faith's claim to truth and turned it into a compulsion so that it became a caricature of what was really intended.' But even during the darkest periods, the idea of the conscience could appeal to an authority which was never finally and completely blended into civic society: 'The modern idea of freedom is thus a legitimate product of the Christian environment; it could not have developed anywhere else.'

Christianity was and is unique in this respect. It was not Benedict, the Pope, but Ratzinger, the theologian, who first drew the contrast with certain forms of Islam:

> The construction of society in Islam is theocratic, and therefore monist and not dualist; dualism, which is the precondition for freedom, presupposes for its part the logic of the Christian thing. In practice this means that it is only where the duality of Church and state, of the sacral and the political authority, remains maintained in some form or another that the fundamental pre-condition exists for freedom.[14]

He writes, decisively,

> Where the Church itself becomes the state freedom becomes lost. But also when the Church is done away with as a public and publicly relevant authority, then too freedom is extinguished, because there the state once again

> claims completely for itself the justification of morality; in the profane post-Christian world it does not admittedly do this in the form of a sacral authority but as an ideological authority—that means that the state becomes the party, and since there can no longer be any other authority of the same rank it once again becomes total itself. The ideological state is totalitarian; it must become ideological if it is not balanced by a free but publicly recognized authority of conscience. When this kind of duality does not exist the totalitarian system is unavoidable.[15]

The duality of the sacred and secular—the core of the Christian liberal ideal—must be maintained:

> The Church must make claims and demands on public law and cannot simply retreat into the private sphere. Hence it must also take care on the other hand that Church and state remain separated and that belonging to the Church clearly retains its voluntary character.[16]

This separation defines the Church's political stance. It must not be 'directed simply at the Church's power,' for this would be a 'direct contradiction of the Church's true nature and would consequently go directly against the moral content of the Church's political stance. It is guided rather by theological perception and not simply by the idea of increasing influence and power.'

To those well versed in his writings, the Pope's statement from '*Deus caritas est*' would not have come as a surprise: 'Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. *Mt* 22:21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the autonomy of the temporal sphere.' Catholic social teaching 'has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.'[17]

The teaching has implications not only for the Church, but also for the strict limits placed on the state in the management of society: 'The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern.' So it is that 'we do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need.'[18]

The Pope's writings represent the culmination of many centuries of thinking on this subject, and his thoughts are best understood in light of the authentic Christian liberalism of the nineteenth century, which in turn connects backwards in time to the Middle Ages, to Augustine, to the Church Fathers, and finally to the words of Jesus. Freedom, not force, is the means by which the Church will convert the world. The main impetus of Christianity is to insist on the liberty of the human person to choose faith, on the limits of the civic order to provide anything resembling salvation, on the non-deified status of the civic ruler, and on the impossibility of salvation through the state. Liberty, then, is an essential precondition for the proper fulfilment of the mission of the gospel. By insisting on the separation of realms, on the infinite value of every person, on the inviolability of the human conscience, and on the need to make progress in the world toward material improvement and the protection of human rights, religious faith of the particularly Christian variety serves as a guarantor and not a violator of liberty.

In conclusion, religion, rightly understood and defined, is the friend of authentic liberty, not a threat to it.

Endnotes

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract,' in *Rousseau: 'The Social Contract' and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), book IV, chapter 8, 149.
2 Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).
3 Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003).
4 Harry Stout, 'How Preachers Incited Revolution,' *Christianity Today* (Spring 1996).
5 Robert A. Sirico, 'True Liberalism,' *Acton Commentary* (22 April 2005), www.acton.org/commentary/commentary_263.php?view=print.
6 For a typical example, marking him an 'archconservative,' see *Information Please*, 'Benedict XVI,' (Pearson Education, 2007), www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0931189.html.
7 The debate and the place of liberalism is covered extensively in Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). See also William L. Portier, *Isaac Hecker and the First Vatican Council* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).
8 Pope Paul VI, 'Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*)' (7 December 1965), section 2, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.
9 Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, *The Constitution Under Social Justice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).
10 Pope Benedict XV, '*Ad beatissimi apostolorum*' (1 November 1914), section 3, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xv/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_01111914_ad-beatissimi-apostolorum_en.html.
11 Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 165–179.
12 As above.
13 As above, 152–164.
14 As above, 165–179.
15 As above.
16 As above.
17 Pope Benedict XVI, '*Deus caritas est*' (25 December 2005), section 28a.
18 As above, section 28b.

Vote of Thanks

The Rt. Rev. Robert Forsyth

Bishop of South Sydney
Anglican Church of Australia

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to be invited to move the vote of thanks to Robert Sirico for his work. The topic he has dealt with, can I say, is a very serious one, and the answer is not obvious. The reason is that religion is not a 'thing' that comes in various versions, all of which are basically good, the way with cars you have your Toyota, or your Lexus, or your Mercedes. Religion has been associated with some of the worst things in human history and, I believe, some of the best. And that's why Robert had to answer his question in a specific tradition—the Catholic tradition—and I don't apologise for drawing attention to that.

I have no idea whether Jesus realised what he was starting when he was asked the question about whether it was right to pay tax to Caesar. He gave the most fruitful answer to a taxation question in history. I know that's not a high claim, but the trick was this: if he said that it was right, then he was endorsing Caesar's claims to quasi-divinity, as the son of deified Augustus, ruler of the sacred state. Yet Jesus was a Jew, and Jews were asking the question. If he said no, then he was guilty of sedition, and they had a reason to pick him out and punish him.

Jesus's answer, which remains tantalising, is not a simple one. It wasn't 'let me give you a doctrine,' it was 'give to God what is God's, and to Caesar what is Caesar's.' It was a very fruitful answer for this country, for this world. It wasn't an off-the-cuff answer, because later on, if you read the Gospel of John, you'll find that when faced with Pilate, Jesus told this Roman governor, who'd received his authority from Tiberius, 'your authority is not your own, but comes from above.' He wasn't speaking of this authority coming from the Roman emperor living in Capri.

There is, within the Christian faith, secularisation in a good sense of the word—a distinction between earthly power and its ultimate legitimisation. I want to thank you very much, Robert, for drawing our attention to this very fruitful tradition. Sadly, I've got to tell you that Christian teaching has not always been interpreted this way. I don't want to give you the impression that in practice we Christians have resisted the temptation to use state power to persecute and oppress. Sadly, there have been times in the history of my own church—I'm an Anglican—where state power and the church's power have been united, where there's been a tragic collapse of that duality. It's happened in a number of places, but thank God Establishment has not survived, because at its heart the claims of the Christian faith relativise the claims of the state without destroying the state.

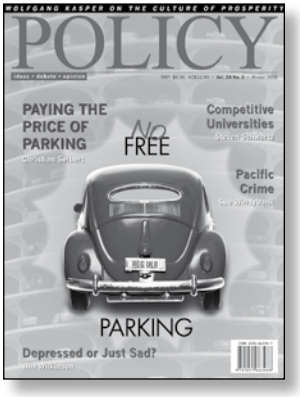
So, I want to thank you for your address. It does seem to me that today we no longer face the claims of semi-divine emperors, or even of the terrible magic of thinking 'if only we slaughter all the enemies of the people today, then we'll have peace and harmony and no more conflict tomorrow.' Those horrors are past. But we still live with a temptation to think there can be a plan, whether it be the will of the people or some economic system, that if universally enforced will bring peace and harmony.

Against all those claims, I think we need a religion like the Christian faith to keep whispering in our ears, 'There is more. There is more, and therefore what you have must be qualified by that other.'

I am delighted that the CIS is brave enough to allow people like Father Sirico and myself to have a place amongst you in what is, in the best senses of these words, a reasonable and secular organisation. So, Robert, thank you very much.

POLICY

ideas • debate • opinion



LATEST ISSUE AVAILABLE AT NEWSAGENCIES

Become a POLICY subscriber now!

New subscriber offer—$35* for four issues

POLICY is the quarterly magazine of the Centre for Independent Studies. It covers foreign and domestic policy issues relating to Australia and New Zealand. POLICY is considered a must-read by leading politicians, businesspeople, and academics, and is available at newsagencies and online.

www.policymagazine.com
For more information contact CIS on +61 2 9438 4377
or email policy@cis.org.au

*This offer is in Australian dollars (incl. GST) and is only available to new Australian subscribers. This offer is not available to institutions.