

The Church: Relations with the State

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Today we begin our lecture with a new topic, “The Relationship between Church and State in the Ancient Church.” This is a fascinating study, which is very helpful for us in twentieth-century America as we consider the relationship between church and state today. Looking back upon the past, we can see how the church dealt with this thorny and yet important issue. As you remember, the church, prior to the time of Constantine, was under periods ranging from severe persecution to mild tolerance. Throughout this period, we may generalize by saying that Christianity was an illegal religion until that time.

We’ve talked about this early period in the history of persecution, beginning at AD 98 with Trajan first instituting legal sanction against the Christian church; and finally in 312 to 313, with the ascendancy of the emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor, we have a unique period of Christian history. So that earliest period, in terms of the relationship between church and state, is one of persecutor and persecuted, where Christianity is a persecuted religious minority.

In today’s lecture, we’re going to investigate that relationship in the post-Constantinian era. In this new era of post-Constantinian Christianity, two different lines can be traced. Those would be the positive effects of church-state relationships and the negative effects—the positive effects of the promotion of Christianity to a state religion and the negative effects. Christianity is going to go, as I’ve mentioned in prior lectures, from the catacombs to the cathedrals. Now that’s not exactly right—cathedrals take a long time to be built, but Christianity is going to go immediately from a persecuted religious minority, to the state-sanctioned religion, to the only religion permitted in the entire Roman Empire. This is a radical change, a quick change.

As we’ve been looking at the history of the ancient church prior to this time, we’ve seen a slow movement, especially of

theological doctrine and development; but here in the political realm, the change is rapid. As we've talked about the time period between 325 and 381—the Council of Nicea and the Council of Constantinople—we've seen radical changes and shifts depending upon who is the emperor at any one time. Now we're focusing on the same time period but looking at it from a new vantage point, that vantage point being what are the positive effects and what are the negative effects.

Some of the advantages, or positive effects, upon the church from the acceptance of Christianity as *the* state religion are these: The clergy were exempt from many public responsibilities. For example, people who were ordained in the clergy did not have to perform military service, and they had a limited payment of taxes. Interestingly, since this privilege became quickly abused, there was a time around the year 320 when wealthy men were forbidden to become ministers because of the negative tax effects upon the government.

A second positive effect is that church buildings were constructed and then even richly endowed. We remember that there were house churches in the time before Constantine; that is, many of the buildings were houses that were reconstructed or changed to accommodate a congregation. Now we have the building of edifices specifically for the Christian community.

The third positive effect is that ministers began to receive fixed incomes from church and state treasuries. In other words, ministers of the gospel could be guaranteed a salary paid by the state and by the church.

Fourth, and this is a point that is not often pointed out, but it is of extreme importance, women received more rights. The fourth point is that women in Roman society received more rights. Why is that? In pagan society in the Greco-Roman culture, prior to the time of Constantine, women did not receive the very best of treatment; but in light of the Bible's teaching on the equality of men and women in the eyes of God, we see this biblical teaching bearing political fruit. In the year 321, Constantine gave women the right to control their own property. Once again, for twentieth-century Americans, especially younger Americans, that seems rather self-evident; but that was not the case in the Greco-Roman culture.

These changes, especially of giving rights to women, did not come as quickly as the change from persecuted minority to the state religion. The movement of granting rights to women continues, and tracing that theme a little bit further ahead chronologically, in the year 390 Theodosius I, emperor until 395, his death, gave women certain rights of guardianship of their own children, which had previously been the privilege of men exclusively. Also during this time period, the rape of widows was made punishable by death; and some attempts were even made, although unsuccessfully, to stop prostitution and the horrible life that was the woman's, in light of a life of prostitution.

The church, then, also had a positive effect upon the state with this marriage of church-state relations, in that it did procure the abolition of the gladiatorial shows, which had been so popular prior to this time. Those are some of the positive effects of the union of church and state in the ancient church, that is, that Christianity is not just united with the state but rather becomes the state religion. Once again, for twentieth-century Americans, the idea of a state-supported clergy, especially in terms of their salary, is a little bit strange to us. But I would remind you that this is still the case in Europe: ministers of the state churches are paid with state funds. In Europe there are what we call free churches that are not associated with the state; but until this day, there are still major churches in Europe that have ministers paid with state funds, but this is particularly strange to American ears.

Those are some of the positive effects. How about the second point, the negative effects on Christianity especially as it becomes the state religion? In general, I would call this theme the secularization of Christianity, and that's a theme which you should have down in your notes. This Christianity of the catacombs and the persecutions became the Christianity of palaces and prelates.

As one book points out, there was a rich aristocrat in the city of Rome at the time of Damasus—we've mentioned his name before—that's around 366. This rich aristocrat had the name of Praetextatus, and although Christianity was the only accepted religion, this rich prelate was not a Christian. However, we have in one of his letters the statement which says that he would gladly become a Christian as long as he could become the bishop of Rome. In other words, the opulence already, by the end of this fourth century, of the prelates in these major cities, especially Rome, was tremendous. Apparently testimony accounts from that time period indicates—now we have the degeneration of

the Roman Empire concomitant with these activities, and the information which we have is that the opulence of the prelate of Rome, later what we'll call the pope of Rome—was more lavish than the emperor's. In general, then, one large negative effect is the secularization of Christianity.

Let's try to understand this secularization. It would seem that those apologists, whom we've studied so long ago, would want nothing better than what the Christian church had in 313. The apologists argued that they could at least become a tolerated minority. Now, not only are they a tolerated minority, they're the only accepted religion. This would be heaven for the apologists, and in many ways Christianity was becoming acceptable to the masses of the people.

You remember as we outlined the history of persecution, especially in the first few centuries. Persecution was sporadic but was prompted by the masses. It was the people who hated the Christians. The Christians were repulsive in the common man's eye. We see that by the fourth century, and especially the end of the fourth century, Christianity was becoming acceptable, as it was no longer something that was scary, no longer a threat to the government, that the way of life of Christianity was seen to be above reproach. The overall leavening effects of Christianity were apparent and therefore acceptable to the people.

Also, because God in His providence gave some great minds to the Christian church, Christianity was becoming acceptable to the intellectuals as well. Christianity began to develop its own intellectual literature, as we think about figures like Origen or Tertullian, who were great men of learning, whether judged by the Christian world or the non-Christian world. Yet, as Christianity became more acceptable to the Greek-Roman culture, so there was an increasing mixture of those two cultures. There was a meshing, and that makes sense as one culture becomes more acceptable to another. The reason for that acceptability is oftentimes the similarity between the two cultures.

And so, once again, we have from the accounts of everyday life from letters—and there were no newspapers during this time period—there apparently are accounts that indicate that women, as they went to church, dressed the same way to go to church as they did to go to the theatre, and this was especially looked down upon by men. Once again, that's an interesting comment for twentieth-century Americans, as we reflect upon these issues

of dress for church. But, in general, the indication was that with the acceptance of Christianity as the state religion, so there was an immediate decline in the moral purity of the church.

Let me say once again, as we've noted in the earlier lectures, most of the developments within Christianity are slow. Here we have in contrast to slow theological developments a rapid political event, vastly changing the face of Christianity. We go from the catacombs to the cathedrals; and so, as people whose hearts have not been converted are now attending church because it is socially acceptable, that leaven of unconverted lives begins to rather quickly move into the bread of Christianity. That's what we call the secularization of Christianity.

Besides this general decline, there are other important implications for church-state relations, and a most important other implication is the intrusion of politics into religion. Especially we have seen the time period before this, when politics did in some ways affect the church, remember the outline of events from 325 to 381 and the tremendous interplay of politics and religion.

As we think about this precise point more carefully, we see in the secularization of Christianity that from this time on, to understand the history of Western civilization, to understand the history of Europe itself, you can no longer now take away the history of Christianity. In other words, the history of Christianity and the history of Western civilization itself go hand in hand. One cannot be abstracted or taken away from the other in attempting to understand the one without seeing the complete interplay between the two. Church history is incomprehensible without understanding political history, and vice versa. They are interwoven into a bond which cannot be broken. Again, historically speaking, there was normally within earlier history the union of church and state. Here we are not talking about Christianity, we're talking about pagan religion prior to Christianity. Emperors always played what we would call a priestly role in the cultus, in the worship of the religious community of which that person was an emperor. One would expect this historical precedent to continue within what we would call the Christian state, and this did, in fact, occur.

Beginning with Constantine, who preached sermons, who instituted and deposed bishops, and, in the words of an account of his own day, who acted as "the patron and universal temporal bishop of the church," we see this usurpation, in my opinion,

of church functions by a politician. We see this beginning in Constantine, developing even more fully in his son, Constantius, who was called bishop of the bishops, without ever having any theological training. Without having any right to that title, from the church perspective, but rather obtains the right of that title because of his tremendous political power.

I mention all these things and underline these things, which seem, at least at first, to be shocking to us; and I hold off until now to tell you that Constantine was preaching, deposing bishops, even before he was baptized. And so we see from this time period that the world is divided into two different kingdoms—the priesthood and the secular kingdom.

The church controls the things of doctrinal concern, and from this time on, from 312 to 313 on, the government takes the role of disciplining and generally ruling the people within the church. And so within the church itself, you have these men who will later become what we call priests, these teachers, these sacramental functionaries in the church who have, as their sole purpose, education and performing a rite within the religious community. We have these people who are set apart for that function; and, within the church, the state beginning to take the function of discipline and rising and lowering of bishops and men who then serve in the cultus, in the worship of the church.

I emphasize this so strongly and point this out so boldly, in that this is one part of history which is once again radically different from our own experience in America. The president of the United States can appoint judges, but he cannot appoint the pastor of your church. However, this is radically different in the ancient church period. The emperor not only can appoint judges, he too can appoint your pastor. He has that right, and that right was given him by the people. The people understood this on the basis of centuries of tradition as being a prerogative of the secular government.

I mention, as well, that if you were found to be out of accord with the church, then the right of discipline, once again, falls to the government. And so if I were pastor of a church, and you were excommunicated from my church, not only would I announce to the congregation that you were excommunicated, I would have to call the local police and have them mete out judgment upon you as well—an interesting situation that many pastors would like, probably, to have in twentieth-century America, but it's good that

we don't.

So this is the radical difference between twentieth-century America and the ancient church. The government takes the job of discipline and general rule.

You can imagine that, as the people assume that it is the emperor's or the governor's right to discipline the people, that there would be encroachment and movement between these two kingdoms—that of the priesthood and that of the general ruling of the church. Once again, we are reminded of the title of Constantius, called bishop of bishops. That means that he not only has the power to exercise discipline, but he has the power to proclaim the gospel, to administer sacraments even.

So how does this new change relate to Christian government? We have to speak of a Christian government at this point. The emperor is a professing Christian. The religion of his empire is Christianity. And not only is he emperor, he is also a bishop—all before being baptized in the church. How does this come together?

We begin a new era in church-state relations, again, immediately in the fourth century. And this is an era of the persecution of heretics. After the time of Constantine, departures from the reigning church-state faith were no longer treated solely with excommunication and moral argumentation, but now civil penalties will be inflicted upon the excommunicate. At first the punishment was not very severe. Remember Athanasius: "Athanasius against the world, and the world against Athanasius." What happened to him? Can you remember from your notes? He spends twenty years in exile out of the Roman Empire, in the period between the rise of Constantine and the Council of Constantinople. And this was the general punishment first done, that is, banishment. With that banishment went the confiscation of all property, so that as you became excommunicated from the church, you were thrown out of your hometown as a complete pauper. Only that which you could carry with you was yours to take.

Later, after the time of Theodosius, the death penalty will be inflicted upon those who are excommunicated. Listen to me well now—from this time period until the eighteenth century, it was considered normal for heretics to be what we would say persecuted by the state. Let me say it again: From the fourth century until the eighteenth century, it was considered normal for those who were

excommunicated to receive not only censure from the church but civil penalties as well—oftentimes civil penalty resulting even in death.

We will have some time to reflect upon this historical fact, but we need to understand that fact very well.

The historical development of this theory is very easy to trace. At first, persecution was pointed at, was directed against, heathens—heathens being those who held to the gods of the Greek religion. Interestingly, heathenism very quickly died out in the empire. There was no bloody persecution of heathens after Constantine, like there was of Christians prior to that time. So that's good, that's a positive point of church history. When Christianity became the state religion, heathenism was prohibited and was persecuted, but there was no mass murder of the heathens who would not convert.

Even from the time of Constantine limitations were placed upon those who did not profess orthodoxy of belief. In fact, there was an edict in the year 326 that began the state-run limitations on those who were non-orthodox. As you can remember from our earlier lectures, Constantius, a son of Constantine, was a tremendous persecutor of the orthodox Athanasian party in his attempts to establish Arianism throughout the empire. But under the emperor Julian the Apostate—and we've mentioned him before—religious freedom once again came more into view, only so that the fighting factions of Christianity could kill each other off, if that were possible. Yet it is the emperor Theodosius the Great—I've mentioned his name before, but we should get some dates down just so we can understand the succession of names---379 until his death in 395. It is the emperor Theodosius the Great, who was raised in the orthodox faith, who finally proclaimed the authority of the Nicene Creed and made pagan idolatry an offense punishable by death, as well as all Christian heresy. Theodosius the Great, who ushers in orthodoxy, ushers in as well the death penalty for those who don't profess to be Christians and the possibility for the death penalty for those who are not orthodox Christians.

Around the year 380 Theodosius gives his first edict against heretics, forbidding their coming together in church assemblies. As time went on, he issued no fewer than fifteen further edicts against heretics, culminating in the death penalty to the people called the Manichaeans and even to Quartodecimans. What is a

Quartodeciman? Do you remember that term? We'll be talking before the end of the course some more about Quartodecimans, but these were people who celebrated Easter in proximity to the 14th of Nissan. Quarto and deciman is fourteen, so a people were considered worthy of death for choosing the wrong day to celebrate Easter! In twentieth-century America, once again, this sounds like an extremely radical position, and we'll be talking, as we conclude the course, as we reflect upon the importance of religion in the state, to help make these things more understandable. The point to remember now is that in the time period of the ancient church especially, orthodoxy of belief was taken much more seriously than it is in twentieth-century America.

In the time after what we call the Enlightenment, in modern history, when religion itself has received in the minds of many people a death blow, so even among the religious community of America, orthodoxy of belief is something that is hardly worth fighting about, let alone the death penalty. In this time period—in the ancient church period—prior to this Enlightenment of modern times, orthodoxy of belief was considered to be as important as loyalty to a state.

Historians, therefore, want to date the birth of church-state persecution of heretics from the time of Theodosius. One positive thing needs to be said here in his defense. His purpose was apparently to convert and terrify to submission, rather than punish, the heretics. The first, as far as I know, shedding of blood of heretics comes from those within the orthodox church in the year 385, when the followers of a Manichaean sect, whose name happens to be Priscillianists in the city of Trier in modern-day France. Some followers of that sect who refused to accept orthodox Christianity were beheaded. So in 385, as far as I know, we have the first beheading of people professing to be Christians from the Christian state.

What might appear to us as a barbaric idea was advocated by nearly all the church fathers. Let's run through the history of their thought in this matter. Chrysostom did not think it wise to execute heretics for their beliefs, but he did maintain that it was proper for their assemblies to be banned and for their property to be confiscated. Jerome, on the other hand, thought that it was proper to dish out the death penalty to heretics, and the passage of Scripture he relied upon comes from Deuteronomy 13. He believed that on the basis of these passages in Deuteronomy, it is correct for heretics to be punished by death.

Augustine, who as you remember was, in fact, a member of the Manichaean sect for about nine years, had at one point prior to the year 400 maintained that it was improper for Christians to violently persecute the heretics. However, there is a change in his thought as he begins to argue and debate with a group of heretics known as Donatists, since no amount of persuasion or reasoning with them could cause them to convert to Christianity. And therefore, apparently, he changes his mind in light of this Donatist controversy; and so he does believe, existentially, as he comes in conflict personally with these Donatists, that in fact there should be some physical punishment for these heretics.

Augustine, in his brilliance and his tremendous abilities, argues this way concerning the persecution of heretics; and it's Augustine's argumentation that is going to hold sway for over a thousand years. Augustine argues that as the state has the right to punish certain crimes, like murder, so it should have the right to punish religious error as well. Why is this? In Galatians 5:19, Paul maintains that both adultery and religious faction stem from the same roots in the flesh. That Galatians passage is a very famous one, that fifth chapter. We have the theme of Paul mentioning the warring of the fruit of the Spirit versus the works or activity of the flesh. He gives a list of those activities of the flesh: adultery, factions, and he gives a long list of envies. And all of these types of offenses, like adultery which was always punishable by the state, comes from the same unregenerate human nature; so because Paul maintains that these different activities, adulteries and religious strife and murders, have the same root, therefore it makes sense that as the state has the right to punish some of the fruit of sin and works of the flesh, so it should by implication have the right to punish all the works or fruit of the flesh. It makes sense to Augustine, and it's a fascinating argument. Not too long after Augustine, in the time of Leo the Great (440–461), a strong argument is made by Leo for the death penalty to be meted out to heretics.

This is a difficult time, as we reflect upon this persecution of Christians by a Christian state; and we could spend quite a long time reflecting upon this. I would ask you to spend a few minutes when the lecture is over to reflect upon church-state relations, to think about those fourteen centuries of state persecution of religious heresy, to remind yourself that there's a much longer history of this relationship than the relationship which we have in America for the last two hundred years, of a separation of church and state. You should be reminded that even in twentieth-century

culture, the American situation is rather unique in contrast with the European relationship of church and state. So please put these events in your memory banks, and take some time to reflect upon those events and to do some analysis of this. It might prove helpful for a further exam question, as well.

The last aspect of church-state relations that we should investigate is the explicit relationship of the emperor to the church. We don't need to go into a detailed account of all the various emperors in this matter. We've already investigated Constantine and his son Constantius, and from a very superficial investigation, certain important principles are apparent. First, the emperors took an active part in most of the affairs of the church. They took part in theological disputes, they played a role in punishing heretics, they nominated or confirmed influential bishops, and even to a limited extent issued ecclesiastical edicts without calling general councils of the church.

In general, the second principle was that the new state was regarded as a restoration of the Mosaic and Davidic theocracy. Let me say that again: The coming to life of this new state, this Christian state, was seen as a biblical movement of restoration of the Davidic or Mosaic theocracy. As we have in the time of ancient Israel, the nation having a king who is under God, who is a follower of the laws of God, who is ruling in the name of God, so to speak, so we have a continuation of that covenantal community, now in Europe under a new emperor, a new king, a new person who bows his head, as had David, to the laws of God. That was the general conception. Once again, it's very foreign to us as Americans, but that was how things were seen—a restoration of the Mosaic and Davidic theocracy.

This restoration is made upon the foundation and soil of Christianity. The emperors were to protect the church, they were to support the church, and—just like a father protects and supports his children—so they had a right, as well, to oversee the external affairs of the church, as a father has a right to oversee the external affairs of his children.

To create a balance of power, however, a third general principle developed, that as the emperor was seen as one of the heads, so to speak, of the church, so also the hierarchy of the church begins to develop as a corollary of this. Let me say that again. There is a hierarchy of power in the Roman society, with the head being the emperor and other subordinates, governors, proconsuls

underneath that emperor. The emperor is called bishop of bishops. To create a true balance of power between church, on one hand, and state, on the other hand—although this is a Christian state; obviously the church is now not obliterated—so as there is this taking of the church and the state into a union, so the church adapts to that union and begins to quickly develop a hierarchy itself, so that in parallel power to the proconsul is a church dignitary. In parallel power to a governor is a church dignitary. And ultimately in parallel power to an emperor will be a pope.

So this third movement of church history begins immediately with the development of the Christian state. The emperor and his magistrates, on the one hand, are balanced by the pope and his bishops, on the other. The strong hierarchy that began to develop kept the church from becoming the playground of tyrannical rulers, and this is an important historical development that must be understood as well as a part of church-state relations. We're going to find that it takes a powerful pope to, in a sense, stand in contrast to a powerful emperor, to clip his wings, to keep him from becoming not only a tyrant—in terms of the political life of the church—but also a tyrant in terms of the doctrinal life of the church.

And so the development of church-state relations in the time period of the ancient church is quite different from our own experience, but it is normative for fourteen centuries of Christianity, and it's essential that we understand this important point.