

# A Debatable Proposition

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Of the numerous questions raised by the pastoral letters of the Puerto Rican bishops, three seem to be of particular significance.

1. The Catholic Church being not a local but a universal church, is it conceivable that an action can be declared a sin locally but not universally? If it is a sin to vote for the Popular Democratic Party because of a phrasing in its program which, according to the governor's own testimony, was misinterpreted as being anti-catholic, would it not be an all the greater sin for Italians or Austrians to vote for their respective Social Democratic parties whose programs are not only socialist but Marxist and thus based on a consciously materialistic philosophy that considers religion as little more than opiate for the people? Yet, there is no record of any bishop having declared a vote for these parties as sinful, or of any priest having refused communion on that ground.

In Austria, the Marxist Social Democratic Party even forms part of a Coalition Government with the Catholic People's Party which corresponds to PAC in Puerto Rico. From a Catholic point of view, the idea of a local sin that is not at the same time a universal sin is logical nonsense. There is only one Church, and that is Catholic, not Catholic Puerto Rican.

2. Have the Puerto Rican bishops violated the constitutional provision of separation of Church and State? If they have, they may be prosecuted. If they have, they must be prosecuted. If the violation of ordinary laws is punishable, how much more must an action be punished that violates the supreme law of the land. If no proceedings are initiated, then not only the bishops are guilty of unconstitutional behavior but also the government which fails to defend the constitution. However, the very concept of separation of Church and State indicates that the Puerto Rican bishops are not guilty of unconstitutional behavior.

On the contrary, because both State and Church are separate principalities, each can within its province do as it pleases. The Church cannot govern the country and the state cannot administer the sacraments. But if the Church condemns the State, this is exactly what separation permits it to do.

And if the State does not care a hoot about the Church's condemnation, separation sanctifies also this. In their relation with each other, they are like the Kremlin and the White House, each being a full sovereign.

3. However, since the idea of Church-State separation renders each of the two parties helpless when the other abuses its sovereign power, would it not be wise to reexamine the whole relationship? After all, the sacramental character bestowed on anything that is written in the constitution should not on that ground alone induce catatonia, which Ursula von Eckardt has defined in one of her many stimulating columns as "a state of mental automatism in which the voluntary muscle systems retain any position in which they are placed."

There are many who would consider the separation of religious and political activities an impossible proposition. William Blake thought: "Are not Religion and Politics the same Thing? Brotherhood is Religion." Charles Peguy, an eminent Catholic author, wrote: "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics... The Church is nothing of what she was... unless she too pays the price of an economic revolution—a social revolution, an industrial revolution, in short a temporal revolution for eternal salvation... Unfortunately, it is not enough to be a Catholic. One must still work in the temporal if one wishes to tear the future temporal tyrannies."

Albert Schweitzer, the great Protestant philosopher and humanist, complains that "in recent times a tendency has appeared in dogmatic religion which declares that religion has nothing to do with the world and civilization," and that its representatives should think that "it is not its business to realize the kingdom of God on earth." Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz warns that "whoever says that

the words of the Torah are one thing and the words of the world another, must be regarded as a man who denies God." According to the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, "the Hebrew form of thought rebels against the very idea of a distinction between the secular and the religious aspects of life." And he indicates that Jesus Christ could hardly have been a signer of the American Constitution when he says of him that "he is not an idealist—for the same reason that he is not a materialist—because the distinction between the ideal and the material does not arise for him."

This does not mean that separation of Church and State is actually a vice. It means that it is a debatable proposition, and that other forms of relationship should be considered. One is a kind of Church-State fusion such as the agnostic Athenian philosopher Protagoras would have suggested on the ground that religion, like language, customs, or Olympic games, is a state concern. The other would be a Church autonomy not separate from, but within, the State, analogous to the institution of university autonomy which through the ages has proved such an eminent safeguard against interference and abuse. In England, in the not so distant past, there was a considerable fervor in support of the idea of separation of State and Medicine (particularly amongst doctors), State and the Law (particularly amongst lawyers), State and Business (particularly amongst businessmen), State and Education (particularly amongst privileged private schools). Yet those defending these various separations as arising from our holiest political principles are now called the reactionaries, while those who uprooted them by changing, rather than catatonically submitting to, the constitution are called the progressives.