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978-0-521-08169-6 - The State and the Church in a Free Society

A. Victor Murray

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BY

A. VICTOR MURRAY

*President of Cheshunt College
Cambridge*

THE HIBBERT LECTURES, 1957



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TO
THE MEMORY OF
CLEMENT C. J. WEBB
GUIDE, PHILOSOPHER AND FRIEND

*Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos
gigantium humeris insidentes, ut possimus plura eis et
remotiora videre, non utique proprii visus acumine aut
eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvehimur et
extollimur magnitudine gigantea.*

JOHANNIS SARESBERIENSIS METALOGICON
(ed. C. C. J. W.) III, iv.

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PREFACE

This book represents an attempt to elucidate the present position of a very ancient problem which is not even confined to Christianity, although it is the Christian aspect which the book has in view.

In present-day practice in the West the relation of Church and State has gradually been changing its character since 'Church' has come to mean much more than a particular institution however powerful, and 'State' has come to mean not so much the Government (which was formerly its sole reference) as the community at large working through its appointed officers. In these circumstances the pattern of the free society which all progressive communities have or ought to have before them is that of the Christian family, a society in which tensions are neither avoided nor exploited but resolved. This seems to me to be the plain reading of Christ's teaching on the fatherhood of God, the implications of which are still far from being accepted by the modern world. The political problem involved is therefore not that of the limits of political obedience, which so much exercised our forefathers in the seventeenth century, as that of the conditions necessary to enable all sorts and conditions of men to live together in unity and peace. It is here that politics merges into religion and that religion expresses itself in political terms.

Of course the old connotations have not passed away all at once nor is their disappearance likely to be very rapid. The Roman Church in this matter stands where it has always stood. It will never willingly agree to share its power with any other, and it continues to discuss 'Church' and 'State' in terms of institutions. It was only as a matter of expediency that the Roman theory came to admit that the State as well as the Church is a *societas perfecta*, a term which in these days has about it a curiously antiquarian flavour. Communism, our latest revival of ancient

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ways of thought, must of necessity for its own self-justification continue to postulate the old idea of the State as the Government. In this case, as the State is by definition tyrannical and as tyranny must have an object, there is associated with the seventeenth-century theory the myth of a depressed 'proletariat' whose only road to freedom lies in sabotage and revolution.

Nevertheless it is at least arguable that the future rests with neither type of authoritarianism, Catholic or Communist. Ideologies which are passionately attached to logical completeness must in the long run be defeated by human nature. It is a characteristic of the problems of human life and destiny that we cannot know all the answers, and any institution which claims otherwise is very rightly suspect. In a time of disturbance like the present, however, it is a very great comfort for some types of mind to have at hand an institution or a party which is not ashamed to make such claims. Hence there is a drift of the frustrated towards Rome or Moscow.

In such circumstances Protestantism and democracy find themselves to be natural allies, but the effectiveness of that alliance in building up a Christian society depends on certain conditions, the chief of which is a recognition of the real witness of Protestantism today. I doubt if it is to be found in the Reformation period, and to call Luther and Calvin out of their graves to prophesy to this generation is not only to ignore the vast changes in Church and State in the intervening four centuries but also to deny the work of the Spirit in leading men into new truth. The real evil alike of Roman Catholicism and of Communism is that each is judge in its own cause. The position could not be better put than in a little handbook written for Communists which, with rather limping logic and grammar, states: 'It is essential for the student to realise from the outset that Marxism does not claim recognition because it is based on abstract moral principles but because it is true.'¹ Communism is evidently a closed circle, recognizing no authority and no obligations outside itself. And *mutatis mutandis* the same can be said of the Roman Church, for, although it would admit

¹ Emile Burns, *What is Marxism?* (1948), p. 8.

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the existence of a higher authority than itself, it is itself the sole interpreter of that higher authority. It is of the essence of Protestantism that it takes an entirely different line. Not only is Christ the head of the Church (which is also the belief of the Roman Church) but the Church itself is conceived as an ideal by which the Church as an institution is continually judged. The difference between the two positions is clearly seen if we examine any of the *causes célèbres* of Roman Catholic modernism, say that of George Tyrrell, or even the different case of the worker priests in France. It was quite clear in these cases that what was at stake was the overruling authority of the Church. Sooner or later it was this that the would-be reformers had to meet, and on this rock they fell to pieces. In cases of a similar kind in Protestantism, say the Robertson Smith case or even the Colenso decision, the reformer was supported by a large section of his fellows within the Church who, as the years passed, were able to turn themselves into a majority.

The weakness of Protestantism—which is also the weakness of democracy—lies in the place wherein also lies its strength. Depending as it does on persuasion and not force, it is characterized by suspense of judgement, not because of lack of conviction but in order to be sure that it can count on the convictions of a sufficient number of people. This induces a certain spirit of agnosticism which cuts the nerve of effort, and while Protestants are making up their mind the Roman Catholics have entered in at once with complete assurance. Similarly with democracy. The totalitarian states can act and strike at once while the democratic states are seeking to be sure of the suffrage of the majority.

There is no way out of this dilemma, and it is indeed part of the cross which lies heavy on such progressive movements. The reason for it lies in its very refusal to be judge in its own cause.

This feature of Protestantism has emerged only in recent years. It was acknowledged in theory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was almost totally dishonoured in practice. Not the spirit of God, waited for patiently and with complete commitment,

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but the Bible became an external rule of faith and was made use of as arbitrarily as any papal bull. The priesthood of all believers as it was first propounded is not far removed in spirit from the Marxian view of the proletariat and was as quietly ignored when it became inconvenient. Justification by faith led straight to the antinomianism of the less balanced sectaries and was the cause of numberless divisions and subdivisions. Natural law, although it was much more in line with the Protestant view of things than the Catholic, was entirely thrown overboard and was salvaged by the Roman Church itself. New presbyter became old priest writ large. Democracy has in our time exhibited a similarly wide variation between theory and practice. There will be enough illustrations in this book to indicate that the corruption of the best is the worst.

Yet it is the best, and these corruptions are defects of a quality. We cannot accept Aquinas's position that monarchy is the best defence against tyranny. The real spirit of Protestantism is very much needed in our time, for it supplies the only genuine alternative to authoritarianism whether Roman or Communist and gives the necessary sanction and challenge to democracy. Both are in eclipse for the time being, but eclipses do not last for ever and even totalitarian states have their day and cease to be.

The Hibbert Lectures for 1957 were delivered in the Universities of Sheffield, Southampton and Hull. I have first of all to thank the Trustees for the great honour that they have conferred upon me in appointing me to this lectureship. Particularly would I thank the Rev. H. Stewart Carter, Professor F. J. M. Stratton, and the then Secretary, Dr J. C. Flower. I am also grateful to my kind hosts and hostesses at the three Universities concerned for their gracious hospitality—Professors Jessop and Castle in Hull, Mr Bramley, Dr F. Masina and Mr Ronald Wilson in Sheffield, and the Vice-Chancellor (Dr D. G. James) in Southampton. My thanks are due and gladly paid to my former colleague, the Rev. R. J. Hall, who stood in when I was absent from Cambridge during so much of the month of February.

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For the table on page 122 I am grateful to Mr W. Hagenbuch of Queens' College, Cambridge, University Lecturer in Economics. For the general preparation of the book I am once more indebted to my secretary, Mrs Amy Richardson, and to my wife for checking the proofs.

A. V. M.

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*See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the
pattern shewed to thee in the mount*

HEBREWS viii. 5.

*In heaven, methinks, there is laid up a pattern of the
good city which he who desires may behold, and be-
holding, may set his own house in order. But whether
it exists or ever will exist on earth is no matter, for the
wise man will live after the manner of it, having
nothing to do with any other.*

PLATO, *Republic* IX, 592.

Injustice is impiety.

MARCUS AURELIUS