

Political Rule: Still in Thrall of Gods and Masters?

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Abstract

One of the enduring aspirations to emerge during the French revolution was that of ‘*ni dieu, ni maître*’, loosely meaning neither God nor master. The idea that political order derives from neither gods nor masters but from self-actualising citizens can be regarded as the *sine qua non* of modern political rule. Even so, political theory has not yet managed to cut off the king’s head, as Foucault once remarked. Yet this only states half the problem. Not only has political theory not managed to remove the king’s head, it has also been unable to dispense with king’s soul, the religious foundations of political rule. Rather, political rule remains beholden to the hierarchies of gods and masters. To demonstrate this is the burden of this paper.

One of the enduring aspirations to emerge during the French revolution was that of ‘*ni dieu, ni maître*’, loosely translated as neither God nor master. The sentiment was clear; the hierarchical order of the estates of pre-revolutionary France was to be dismantled. In its place, a new social and political order predicated on liberty, equality and fraternity, the verities of the declaration of the Rights of Man, would see each individual man (and for the briefest of moments, individual women) as masters of their own fates, citizens beholden neither to a god nor a master. The idea that the political and social order derived neither from gods nor masters but from self-actualising and self-constituting citizens became the *sine qua non* of modern political rule.

Foucault (1986: 121) once remarked that political theory has not yet managed to cut off the king’s head. That is, the sovereign authority of the State may have been rendered subordinate to the citizens, but the hierarchy of authority that it symbolises remains embedded within our theories of political rule. Even so, Foucault only identified half the problem. The other hierarchical authority, symbolised by the Church, also remains intact. Despite the advent of a misnamed secular age, political rule remains tied to its religious moorings. In this paper I am principally concerned with demonstrating that political rule remains beholden to the hierarchies of gods and masters. Despite the alleged unimportance of religion for the constitution and exercise of political rule, the hierarchies of gods and masters, not self-actualising citizens, remain the *sine qua non* of political rule.

In the Christian West the tensions between religion and politics date back to before the birth of organised Christianity to the idea that believers should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's, as reported in the Gospels by Matthew (22: 21), Mark (12: 17) and Luke (20: 25). While this was attributed to Jesus it is likely that the source is St Paul who also made a number of pronouncements on this issue about the obligations of subjects and rulers. (*The Holy Bible*: Romans 13). Saint Paul's views provided the basis for solving the problem of divided loyalties. The monarch and his or her subjects were all God's subjects and hence all owed allegiance to God, and by extension God's chief representative on Earth, the Pope. And the subjects owed allegiance to the monarch who ruled on God's behalf. Thus those who challenged the right of monarchs to rule challenged God. Over the course of the first five hundred years or so of the development of the Christian Church, the practical relations between monarchs and clergy came to be hammered out along lines similar to those just described.

However, the domain of the clergy was seen as separate from the domain of everyone else. In principle each power, the State and the Church, was understood to be autonomous, each in their own sphere, but to the extent that the religious sphere authorised that of the State, the Church had the upper hand. For even though men and women supposedly were the subjects of monarchs ordained by God (and hence owing a duty of obedience to them) it was also the case that men and women owed a duty to God. If the two duties came into conflict then the obedience to God was to take precedence – at least in principle. In this regard, the spiritual sovereignty of the Church entailed a serious degree of spiritual autonomy in the sense that it enabled spiritual authority to claim independence from that of the monarch and which, as Sabine and Thorson (1973: 190) perceptively noted “left a residuum without which modern ideas of individual privacy and liberty would have been unintelligible”.

What needs to be emphasised here are two points. First, the notion of the secular had always been tied to the domain overseen by the sovereign political authority, the State, in contradistinction to the spiritual domain overseen by the Church. And second, precisely because this latter domain was spiritual, an idea of spiritual freedom was built into this separation of sovereignties such that the Church could never be considered

entirely subordinate to the State, if at all. However, all this was to change when the sovereign authority of the State was itself redefined in ways that allegedly removed the Church from the equation. The idea that spiritual freedom entailed direct loyalty to God, mediated by the Church as it might have been, provided the political space for all sorts of manoeuvres with respect to struggles between monarchs and Popes, and monarchs and their subjects. And once the various monarchies rendered the Church subordinate to their authority (in the wake of the various wars of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the principle of non-interference proclaimed within the various treaties following the Thirty Years War) the residuum idea of spiritual freedom provided an opening for challenging the arbitrariness of the State's sovereignty.

This redefinition of sovereign authority, was played out in political tracts and treatises, on the battlefields of revolution, and in the histories of those revolutions. At issue was the redefinition of the source of, or basis for, legitimate sovereign authority. The longstanding idea that sovereign political authority derived from some divine source in the sense that it was authorised by the Christian God was displaced in favour of grounding that authority on some form of covenant (eg Hobbes 1651a; 1651b) or contract (Locke 1690; Rousseau 1762). The ascendant principle hypothesised was that the governed gave their consent to authorise the founding of the authority that was to govern them and hence there was a covenant or contract between the governed and their governors. This was a direct repudiation of the previously dominant patriarchally informed justifications for government and, by extension, a repudiation of arguments about the religious bases for sovereign political authority.

The three great revolutionary moments of early modernity – the revolution of 1688 in England, the revolutionary war of independence in the Americas in 1776, and the French revolution of 1789 – put paid to arguments about the State's authority being divinely authorised. It also set in train the possibilities for challenging and possibly denying the newly reconfigured States the right to impose a particular religious viewpoint on the citizens. But it was only a possibility within the English revolution because the reconfiguration of the English state subordinating the monarchy to the parliament's sovereignty left the supremacy of the Church of England more or less intact. The Church of England remained the established church and the reigning monarch, however much subordinated to the will of parliament, remained its head. In effect the Church retained a

privileged position in relation to sovereign political authority. In this respect the so-called separation remained consistent with the practice of preceding centuries in which the Church provided the spiritual sustenance for the secular ruler.

The American revolution of 1776 ushered in a reconfigured state, a republican state purportedly under the sovereign sway of “we the people” (USC 2010), a polity approximating a self-constituting citizenry. The clauses of the Constitution and the series of amendments now understood as the Bill of Rights, in particular the First Amendment, were aimed at specifying the basis and scope of sovereign authority. In effect this amendment was aimed precisely at preventing the newly formed sovereign authority from setting up a state religion or establishing a state church, and hence from imposing a particular religious belief on the rest of the population. There was not to be a State-sanctioned establishment church in the new republic, and freedom of religion and religious worship was to be guaranteed. Yet this did not guarantee freedom from religion, since the foundation of the new state was predicated, as in post-1688 England, on rendering religion a merely private matter. Although the legitimacy of the new republic’s sovereign authority rested on its citizens, a transformation of hierarchy and privilege was barely effected since the vast majority of the citizens were in effect fenced off from meaningful democratic participation (Wood 1996). Nonetheless, symbolically at least, the US revolution provided significant inspiration for those seeking to challenge the old order of dynastic rule.

Certainly the revolutionaries in France in 1789 looked almost as much to the lessons emanating from the newly emerging United States as they did to the Enlightenment philosophers of Europe, particularly the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his radically democratic view of popular sovereignty. The new form of political legitimacy ushered in by the revolution was based on the consent of the governed and an “articulation of popular sovereignty [that] took on a holistic, messianic, and universalist rather than a more liberal, constitutional, and constrained form” (Bukovansky 1999, 198). For a brief period from 1789 to 1802 the idea of ‘*ni dieu, ni maître*’ held sway until Napoleon’s coup restored the Church’s privileges (Weber 1976), even if the Church had to suffer the ignominy of being placed under direct state control. In 1905 the enactment of the policy of *laïcité* redefined the relationship between Church and State as one of strict neutrality. Religion, as a matter of state policy, was deemed an entirely private matter:

“financial aid to churches officially ended ... and freedom of public worship was guaranteed” (Ewing 2000, 38). This was consistent with the revolutionary sentiments of the 1790s in which that newly reconstituted political power aimed to guarantee “a public space that is neutral with respect to religion” (Bowen 2007, 14). Thus it would seem that for most of the twentieth century the French state returned to the principle of ‘*ni dieu, ni maître*’, except that political authority remains hierarchically organised in ways that minimise the democratic pulse of Rousseau’s imagined republic.

Similarly in Australia, a post-colonial settler society, the sovereign authority remains the Crown. The citizens perform the rituals of representative democratic processes but the constitutional reality is that a polity in which the self-constituting citizens are sovereign remains to be achieved. Like the USA and France there is a constitutional recognition of the separation of political and religious authorities with the former understood as sovereign. Constitutionally, the Australian State may not legislate to impose a particular religion, may not enforce particular religious observances, may not prohibit the “free exercise of any religion”, nor impose a religious test “as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth” (*The Constitution*, §116). The intent would appear to be one of guaranteeing that citizens would have freedom from a state imposed religion, though as Frame (2006, 8) has noted, “[t]his separation does not, however, preclude interactions between church and state.” Whether it is appropriate to describe this constitutional arrangement as a separation remains debatable, but Frame’s point still stands because the Australian state and its rituals remain very much inflected with officially sanctioned religious observances and practices (Maddox 2005).

Each of the above instances of reconstituted political sovereignty, post-1688 England and the republics of the USA and France, provide salutary instances of transformed political and social orders in which the legitimacy of the newly constituted sovereign political authority appeared to be beholden to neither gods nor masters. In all three cases the Church came to be subordinated to the sovereignty of the State. However, this was not the triumph of secularist philosophy, but merely the end of the divided sovereignties problem – at least in principle. In practice, however, the power of the Church still exerts a considerable presence, even in the US and France where the separation between Church and State is supposed to be well defined. Despite the fact

that self-actualising and self-constituting citizens are supposed to be the *sine qua non* of modern political rule, all of these states are marked by hierarchical systems of political rule. Moreover, the very fact that religion is supposed to be a private matter results in these private issues permeating the political identities of those who aspire to rule in the name of these self-constituting citizens.

It is hard to find any democratically elected leader within Western countries who eschew the religious mantle when pressed about their affiliations. Only a few have expressed an avowedly atheist position such as former British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband (Zakaria 2009). Of the forty-four US presidents only five (Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes) had no stated religious affiliation during their term of office, though there is considerable controversy over the particulars of their beliefs. With the exception of Gordon Brown, all previous British PMs professed to be Anglicans in accordance with the place of the Church of England as the established Church. In New Zealand, former Prime Minister Helen Clark was an agnostic (Graham 2009, 160). Similarly in Australia, former Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke (and possibly Ben Chifley) were agnostic, as is current Prime Minister Julia Gillard, but all other Australian PMs have professed to belong to one or other of the Christian faiths. Indeed, since the late 1990s within Australian politics the religious affiliation of political leaders has generated considerably more scholarly comment than was the case in decades past (eg Crabb 2009; Warhurst 2007; Frame 2006; Kelly 2006; Maddox 2005).

What is of interest here is the way in which the Church is continually invoked to legitimise political authority, and by extension to legitimise the exercise of that authority. For example, most recently in Australia PM Rudd built his political credibility in the lead-up to the 2007 elections, in part, by establishing his religious credentials. This was also similar to the electoral strategies pursued by Blair in the UK and Obama in the US in that each used their personal faith commitments to articulate a new “moral compass” that could appeal to their respective electorates as means of cultural, social and political renewal (Graham 2009). Where invoking religious beliefs in some way or another is expected of presidential candidates (Raban 2008), its appearance within the political discourses of New Labour in the UK and the electoral strategies of Rudd in Australia was less usual.

For some commentators this means that there is occurring an intensification of the presence of religion in politics in the early twenty-first century (Maddox 2005; Kelly 2006; Warhurst 2007). It is also interpreted as an indication that the so-called secularisation of society has reached its limit and politicians ignore this at their peril (Kelly 2006). Yet both of these interpretations share an assumption, also common to the Blair and Rudd political strategies, that religion is the *sine qua non* for possessing values, or at least demonstrates that one has (the right) values. The paucity of that view needs no refutation here. What is far more interesting is that it reminds us that religion is indeed the *sine qua non* of something – not of holding moral values and ethics, but of the moorings that tie politicians (and by extension the wider polity) to a particular understanding of the constitution and exercise of political rule. In effect, the hierarchies of gods and masters, not self-actualising citizens, remain the *sine qua non* of political rule.

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