

I am reading two highly dissimilar books, one a theological work on the Revelation to John, the other a work on European political theology. I was struck by the similarity of thought of the two authors describing Rome and the modern State. The emergence of the modern “heavy” State and its various theories of sovereignty was a process of centuries that came to fruition in the French Revolution, and it has since become the way the world is organized politically. Without developing further the thought here, over the last several years I have come to the view that the Church and the State are irreconcilably on a collision course. These excerpts from Bauckham and Lottieri illustrate why I have come to think that.

On the theological claims of Rome and the State:

“The Roman Empire, like most political powers in the ancient world, represented and propagated its power in religious terms. Its state religion, featuring the worship both of the deified emperors and of the traditional gods of Rome, expressed political loyalty through religious worship. In this way it absolutized its power, claiming for itself the ultimate, divine sovereignty over the world. And so in effect it contested on earth the divine sovereignty which John sees acknowledged in heaven in chapter 4. The coming of God’s kingdom on earth must therefore be the replacement of Rome’s pretended divine sovereignty by the true divine sovereignty of the One who sits on the heavenly throne” (Bauckham, 34.)

“In this sense, recalling how in modernity the relationship has changed between ethics and institutions, and between thought and force, requires that one focus attention on the relationship of Western humanity to faith. According to an authoritative line of thought from Carl Schmitt to Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the consolidation of the modern State in Europe is directly traceable to a theologico-political turn, among the basic outcomes of which, it seems to me, has been the hollowing out of Christianity and the strengthening of secular institutions. On the symbolic as well as the institutional level, the administration of man by man is defined by altering principles of religious origin and taking upon itself a whole series of attributes - from unity to perpetuity - that are characteristic of the biblical God. This is not surprising to one who has understood that, according to Jacques Ellul’s instruction, “secularization is always relative to the specific form of sacredness of a given society;” one never fully leaves the religious dimension, rather, one abandons one sacred form for another” (Lottieri, 21-22.)

Lottieri cited Jules Michelet, a late 19th century French historian who wrote an enormous history of the French Revolution:

“It is said that the revolution was wrong. Against the fanaticism of the Vendée and the Catholic reaction it should have adopted a creed of one of the Christian sects, claiming Luther or Calvin for itself. I respond: it would have been wrong. It adopted

no creed. Why? The fact is that it was itself a church” (Lottieri, 25.)

On the characterization of Rome and the State as peacemakers:

“Rome’s subjects were persuaded to accept and to welcome her rule by the ideology of the Empire, which John effectively portrays in two different aspects corresponding to the beast and the harlot. To take the latter first, although the harlot lives at her clients’ expense, she also offers them something (17:4) – the supposed benefits of Roman rule. This is no doubt the ideology of the *pax Romana*, vigorously promoted throughout the first century AD, according to which Rome’s gift to the world was the peace and security Rome provided within the borders of her empire and thereby the conditions of the Empire’s prosperity. Rome, the self-proclaimed eternal city, offered security to her subjects, and her own dazzling wealth seemed a prosperity in which her subjects could share. But Revelation portrays this ideology as a deceitful illusion. It is the wine with which the harlot intoxicates the nations, offered in the cup whose exterior is golden, but inside are abominations (17:2,4)” (Bauckham, 36.)

“As Schmitt emphasized, one must always remember that the State imposed itself as a neutral space with regard to different cultures and in particular, to different faiths. And even though it began to emerge prior to the breakup of Christian unity on the Old Continent and prior to the wars of religion unleashed by the Reformation, there is no doubt that the political organization of society asserted in modernity is largely indebted to the wholly worldly vision of associational life that identifies sovereignty as the condition for peace and to the end of all tensions. Religion must be expelled from the public arena, which by now coincides with coercive principles: education, assistance, culture, health, and every other space of life must be freed from all confessional presence. As Gianfranco Miglio recalled, an important interpreter of Schmitt, the modern State’s self-imposition is fulfilled when the Christian religion “is declassified from the central orientation of all of human life to a private matter, to a corpus of subjective beliefs that can no longer produce political behavior” (Lottieri, 26-27.)

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Lottieri, Carlo. *Credere nello Stato? Teologia politica e dissimulazione da Filippo il Bello a Wikileaks* [Believe in the State? Political Theology and Dissimulation from Philippe the Fair to Wikileaks]. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2011, translations mine.

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