



The Return of the Sacral King: The Christian Subversion of the Roman Empire and the Modern State

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In Pagans & Christians in the City, Steven D. Smith argues that in contrast to ancient Rome, ancient Christianity, following Judaism, located the sacred outside the world, desacralizing the cosmos and everything in it—including the political order. It thereby introduced a political dualism and potentially contending allegiances. Although Smith's argument is right so far as it goes, it underplays the role of Christianity's immanent dimension in subverting the Roman empire and the sacral pattern of antiquity. This division of authority not only undermined the Roman empire and antique sacral political order more generally—it also subverts the modern state, which, in the work of Hobbes and Rousseau, sought to remarry what Western Christianity divorced.

*[I]n whatever place they may find themselves, the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of the Messiah.
—Bardaisan of Edessa in The Book of the Laws of Countries.¹*

[In pagan times,] since each state had its own cult as well as its own government, it did not distinguish between its gods and its laws. Political war was also theological. The departments of the gods were, so to speak, fixed by national boundaries. . . .

. . . It was into these circumstances that Jesus came to establish on earth a spiritual kingdom, which, by separating the theological system from the political system, made it so that the state ceased to be unified. . . . Now since this new idea of a kingdom in another world could never have occurred to pagans they always looked upon Christians as genuine rebels who, beneath a hypocritical submission, were only looking for an opportunity to make themselves independent and masters, and adroitly usurp the authority they pretended in their weakness to respect. This was the cause of the persecutions."²

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract

POLYCARP AND THE CONFLICT OF ALLEGIANCES

In *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Nicholas Wolterstorff recounts the martyrdom of Polycarp as told in a letter from “the church of God which sojourns in Smyrna . . . to all the sojournings of the Holy Catholic Church in every place.” In the confrontation of the Bishop of Smyrna with the Roman proconsul Stadius Quadratus, we discover the way in which the Christian conception of social and political order clashed—at the very foundation—with the Roman conception. According to the letter, after the execution of a Christian youth named Germanicus, the Roman crowd demanded that Polycarp “be searched for” and brought to the stadium. Says Wolterstorff, when he appeared at the stadium, the proconsul admonished Polycarp to “revile Christ” and “swear by the genius (*tychê*) of Caesar” and say, “Away with the atheists [i.e., Christians]”—which, as Wolterstorff suggests, was to say, away with those people who deny the gods of the Romans. “[I]nstead of recanting,” however, “Polycarp gestured toward the crowd of ‘lawless heathen’ in the stadium” and said, “Away with the atheists.” “Then, rather than swearing by the genius of Caesar and reviling Christ, he declared, ‘For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King [*basileus*], who has saved me?’”³

At one point during the confrontation, the crowd in the stadium shouted, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many neither to sacrifice nor to worship.” Still, the proconsul pressed Polycarp to renounce Christ and swear by Caesar’s *tychê*, his patron spirit. To which Polycarp replied, “you pretend you are ignorant [of who] I am. . . . I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn the doctrine of Christianity, fix a day and listen.” Stadius Quadratus replied that Polycarp should seek to persuade the gathered crowd rather than him. Polycarp maintained that he did not consider them “worthy that a defense should be made to them.” Christians have, however, “been taught to render honour, as is meet, if it hurts us not, to princes and authorities appointed by God.”⁴

When Roman civil government ordered Polycarp to renounce Christ and swear by Caesar’s patron spirit, Polycarp refused on the basis of an allegiance to another, a higher King. As Wolterstorff suggests, in the confrontation at the stadium, two allegiances were coming into conflict—Polycarp’s allegiance to Christ (both as a follower of Christ and as a bishop of the Church) and his allegiance to Rome.⁵ And in this clash of allegiances, Polycarp held Christ to be a King above Caesar, one to whom he owed obedience over and against Caesar should the commands of the

two conflict. For Polycarp, Jesus of Nazareth is a King to whom allegiance is owed here and now—not merely a King of a Kingdom yet to come or only of some spiritual realm called Heaven or in some spiritual, atemporal sense that cannot come into conflict with the demands of ruling authorities. But Polycarp also averred that “princes and authorities” that administer civil government are “appointed by God” and so deserve respect. In the Church and in civil government, Christianity posited two distinct authority structures that shattered the religio-political unity of the Roman empire and of antique society more generally. In theorists like Hobbes and Rousseau—indeed, in the doctrine of sovereignty itself—modernity has sought to marry again what Christianity sundered.

THE CHRISTIAN SUBVERSION OF PAGAN ORDER

In *Pagans & Christians in the City*, Steven D. Smith, drawing on T. S. Eliot, describes two different orientations toward the world.⁶ The pagan orientation finds ultimate meaning in and sacralizes this world and the social and political order within it. Christianity, following Judaism, locates the sacred and divine outside of the world. In taking its bearings from a transcendent horizon, Christianity desacralizes the cosmos and, consequently, the social and political order. Christian desacralization fragmented the unity of ancient society, dissolving the glue that held the pagan Roman empire together.

Smith begins his treatment of Roman religiosity by noting that religion was not just one aspect of Roman life but, rather, its defining element. He cites J. A. North’s claim that “both the Romans themselves and the Greeks who came to observe them in the later Republican period regarded the Romans as the most religious people in the world.” Says Smith, “Rome and Roman religion were inseparably bound together from the very beginning” (63). As Smith describes it, Rome was a city and an empire filled with gods. The Roman pantheon included the residents of Mount Olympus called by Latin names, “numerous exotic gods imported from foreign lands like Egypt, Syria, and Persia,” various nature gods (including gods of the “rivers, woods, and fields”), and, of course, emperors apotheosized upon their death. There were more—Salus, Fortuna, Fides, Roma, et cetera, et cetera. To this pantheon of deities, “the Romans devoted massive resources” to honor and retain “their favor” (66). Thus, over the course of a three-month period early in his reign, “Caligula sacrificed over 160,000 animals” (66). Concomitantly, Rome was a city “rife with elegant temples dedicated to the various deities” (69). In addition to structures dedicated to the gods, “every house was in a sense a mini-temple containing its own

shrine dedicated to the household gods” (69). Smith concludes, “Rome was, in a sense, a kind of magnificent megachurch” (81).

Roman religion and civil government were indistinct. Civil officials, for instance, used divination “to determine the will of the gods with respect to pending military or political decisions” “The entrails of animals or birds were carefully scrutinized, and the portents or ‘prodigies’ (such as lightning strikes, a deformed child at birth, or a mole with teeth on it) were studied in quest of clues to the divine agenda.” According to Livy, “the importance attached to augury and augural priesthood increased to such an extent that to take the auspices was henceforward an essential preliminary to any serious undertaking in peace or in war” (in Smith, 68). Indeed, when it came to war, “a battle was not fought without consulting the sacred chickens.” Finally, “the ritual sacrifices and auspices were conducted by men who were at once high political officials and members of one or another public priesthood. Thus, the political leaders of the Roman state—the consuls, the prefects, later the emperors simultaneously served as officials within the four major public priesthoods, with the emperor himself filling the role of the head pontiff, or *pontifex maximus*” (69). Roman civil officials were Roman priests.

Smith aptly describes Rome—both republic and empire—as perhaps the preeminent instance of what historian Francis Oakley designates the sacral pattern of antiquity.⁷ According to Oakley, the ancient world was awash in a sea of monarchy. Moreover, ancient kingship was more than just rule by one. It was “anchored in the cosmos.”⁸ The very purpose of the King was to perform services (i.e., rites) for god or the gods in order to maintain cosmic harmony. The King was a god, the son of a god, the special creation of a god, or the unique representative of the god(s) of his people. His person was therefore sacred. The entire purpose of human society, with the king at its summit, was religious. Deep in the recesses of time, before written history, political order and religion were thoroughly intertwined. Political order performed what we would call a religious function.⁹

Bounded both chronologically and geographically by sacral monarchy occurred what some scholars call “the republican parenthesis.” This phrase dominates the period during which non-monarchical regimes emerged among the Greek *poleis* and also with the Roman *res publica*. However, while these regimes were not *kingships*, they were, as Oakley notes, *sacral*. There was no distinction, much less separation, between the performance of sacred rites and civil government. In democratic Athens, civil officials performed sacred rites. Thus, in the *Statesman*, Plato writes, “in many of the Greek cities . . . one finds that the duties of making the chief sacrifice on the state’s behalf is laid upon the chief officers of the

state.” Moreover, Athens provides “a striking example” of this phenomenon, for “the most solemn sacrifices of this nation are the responsibility of the archon whom the lot designates as King-Archon.”¹⁰ In his *Apology of Socrates*, Plato recounts Socrates’ indictment for refusing to acknowledge the city’s gods.¹¹ Prior to the trial—as depicted in *Euthyphro*—Socrates is about to appear in the court of the King Archon for a preliminary hearing concerning this charge of impiety.¹²

During its republican period, writes Oakley, “the Roman commonwealth itself remained in a profound sense what we take to be a ‘religious’ entity. Rather than being totally obliterated, the institution of kingship was instead broken down into its constituent parts and its disparate functions distributed among the ‘republican’ magistrates who succeeded. Thus, the old royal *imperium* or supreme power passed into the hands of two annually elected consuls.” As well, “the most important of the royal priestly functions appear to have passed in time to the ‘supreme pontiff (*pontifex maximus*), a republican office of great importance.” Thus, the relation of the sacred to civil government remained undisturbed during the republican parenthesis. Since Greek *poleis* that were not kingships and the Roman *res publica* were nevertheless *sacral*, I submit the phrase *sacral republicanism* to capture the relation of civil government and sacred affairs within them. We should also note, following Oakley, that the rise of sacral emperors and the acquisition of the title *pontifex maximus* by Julius Caesar and then by Octavian/Augustus (to say nothing of Augustus’s divinization after his death with the formal establishment of a state cult including “a priesthood devoted to his worship”), “marked something of a return to an ancient orthodoxy, the ideological underpinnings of which had never been completely dismantled.”¹³

In sum, the sacral pattern of antiquity—across time, space, and different regime types—included not only the absence of any separation of what we would call church and state but also the absence of any distinction. Civil government existed to perform sacred rites. Says Oakley, “polis, republic, Hellenistic kingdom, Roman empire—all of them still remained something more than ‘states’ in the modern sense.” Thus, “political thinking and practice in the Roman no less than the Greek classical world continued to acknowledge no real distinction between the political and the religious. The loyalty men owed to their commonwealth was equally a loyalty to their civic gods and quasi-divinized rulers.”¹⁴ As Henri Franfort maintains, before Christianity, only the Hebrews constituted any kind of exception to the rule.¹⁵

As Oakley suggests in *Empty Bottles of Gentilism* and as Rousseau suggests in the chapter on civil religion in *The Social Contract*, Christian-

ity shattered the religious and political unity of the *ancien régime*.¹⁶ But why did Christianity do this? According to Smith, “the Jerusalem-centered faiths represented a radically different form of religiosity” that embodied “a fundamentally different orientation to the world”—one “unassimilable into the Romans’ thoroughly worldly civic piety” (102). Roman civil religion “could not absorb or contain Judaism and Christianity” (ibid). Why not? After all, according to Edward Gibbon, in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Romans practiced “the universal toleration of Polytheism” (135). Doubtless Gibbon viewed Rome as tolerant because it accommodated a considerable number of foreign cults. So why did accommodation of Christianity prove impossible? Indeed, some Romans seemed amenable to an accommodation of Christianity so long as accommodation meant accepting Christianity on the same terms as other religions were accepted: Jesus of Nazareth could become part of the pantheon and worshipped as one god among many. Thus, notes Smith, Eusebius claimed that Tiberius proposed adding Jesus to the Roman pantheon and that the Senate declined only because the Senators thought “they were insufficiently informed regarding the new religion” (150). And, says Smith, the Roman philosopher Porphyry regarded Jesus as a sage “who had been elevated to divinity after his death” (151). Rome could accommodate Christianity by including Jesus among the pantheon of divinities acknowledged by Rome *so long as* Christians were willing to acknowledge the other deities of the empire and, says Gibbon, “cast a few grains of incense upon the altar” (151)—which Gibbon considered eminently reasonable.

Christians, like Socrates in ancient democratic Athens, however, refused to acknowledge the empire’s gods. Indeed, Christians did not regard the empire’s gods as gods at all; they were false gods or, said Augustine, demons (144). Given the sacral nature of their political order, the Romans “developed a formal and empirically verifiable way for subjects to manifest their allegiance. . . . [S]ubjects were expected to make formal, visible sacrifices to the gods and to the divine emperors” (139). Pliny, a provincial governor, and, according to Justin Martyr, Urbicus, a prefect, executed people simply for being Christian (Pliny was confirmed in his course by Trajan who added only that Pliny should not seek people out but only follow this course if a charge against someone was brought to him). Pliny tested individuals accused of being Christians by requiring them to offer sacrifices to the gods. He exonerated those that did and had executed those who refused (139). Justin Martyr was ultimately executed by the Roman prefect Rusticus, who followed the same policy as Pliny. Cyprian, an African bishop, met the same sentence in accordance with the same policy a century later. Other Christians were “sent to the Colosseum, or the arenas

in other cities, to be devoured by wild animals.” Or “sentenced to labor” in “imperial mines.” Christian women were sometimes “consigned to work in brothels. Some Christians were “roasted alive in the ‘iron chair.’” Still others were lit up as torches (132).

To be sure, Christian writings and history indicate that Roman officials often did not persecute Christians. But when they did, simply being Christian and refusing to acknowledge the empire’s gods constituted a sufficiently heinous crime to require the severest punishments. Why? Participation in the various civic cults of Rome, says Bruce Winter, “provided the opportunity for everyone to express publicly undivided loyalty” to Rome and the *pax romana* (139–40).

Moreover, the Roman insistence upon undivided loyalty meant that the Romans were less accommodating not only than Gibbon’s but also, arguably, than Smith’s depiction suggests. According to Robert Wilken, “because religion was so much a part of the fabric of their lives, the Romans were suspicious of foreign cults. Nonconformity was an affront to the Roman ways and was thought to threaten the order and peace of the city.” Thus, Roman officials were suspicious of and ultimately took action against the cult of Bacchus because “they were well organized in small cells under the control of effective leaders independent of civic authorities.” As Rome expanded, including new territories with foreign deities, “Roman officials oversaw their worship, in some cases Romanizing their rituals and making them part of the religious calendar.”¹⁷ Even in the case of the oft noted Jewish exemption, the chief priest in Jerusalem was a Roman appointee.¹⁸ This underscores the degree to which Roman accommodation (Gibbon’s so-called polytheistic toleration) was granted entirely on Roman terms. Acknowledge our gods, grant the supervision of our government over your worship, and you can worship your god(s) too.

But why should refusal to participate in the cults of the empire—cults which, to be sure, permeated every aspect of life—threaten the fabric of the empire? After all, according to Christian apologists, Christians were good and loyal subjects of the empire who obeyed the laws, prayed for the emperor, the army, and the protection of Rome, and paid taxes. Their Scripture and their leaders called on them to honor the emperor and to pay appropriate respect to political authority (136–38). Moreover, early Christian writers insisted that faith was a matter of persuasion *rather than* coercion.¹⁹ How did this destroy the gods, as Polycarp’s accusers said he did? How did this subvert civil allegiance, as Roman officials such as Pliny, Urbicus, and Rusticus clearly maintained it did?

The answer, for Smith, ultimately has to do with the immanent frame of ancient paganism and the transcendent frame of ancient Christianity.

Ancient pagans located the sacred and divine—and therefore ultimate meaning—within *this* world thereby sacralizing it (114). Pagan deities were residents of this world—the most powerful things within it but within it nonetheless (111). And that meant that the highest goods—the end of life itself—are found within this world (114). Within the context of a sacred cosmos, sacralization of political order is at least plausible and perhaps natural. Christianity, by way of contrast, locates the divine outside the world (111–12). The highest good is eternal life and *not* something within this world (118–21). Consequently, neither the world nor anything in it is sacred. Christian desacralization of the world necessarily entails that political order is not sacred (126–27). Indeed, for Christianity, civil government is *not* ultimately responsible for the highest good. Consequently, Christianity results in a divided loyalty or dual allegiance. Civil government has its place. But Christians are also citizens of a heavenly city, which commands a higher allegiance. Thus, “paganism sacralized the city, while Christianity did the opposite. And although Christians lived in and felt loyalty to the city, they could not be citizens of it in the same full and exclusive sense that pagans could. . . . Christians were more like ‘pilgrims’ in the world, and in the city” (126). Says Smith, the immanent frame of pagan polytheism resulted in “a sort of *political monism*”; monotheistic Christianity, in contrast, produced “*political dualism*” (128).

To be sure, “the fact that Christians considered themselves residents of two cities, not one, with their primary loyalty to the heavenly city . . . could support a kind of quietism, or resignation.” After all, “our life in this city and this world is only for a brief moment in the span of eternity, so why fret so much about conditions here?” And, says, Smith, over the centuries some Christians have taken the quietist road. On the other hand, “the belief in a heavenly city—and, more generally, in a transcendent reality or truth against which this world might be judged—gave Christians a critical perspective and standard that pagans whose reality was limited to this world did not have.” And “that transcendent standard could be used to criticize—and, in time, to reform—practices that were taken for granted in the pagan world: infanticide, slavery, inequality, the neglect of the poor and diseased.” The greater challenge Christianity presented to the pagan Roman order, however, resulted from the fact that “Christians did not and could not give the same total, undivided allegiance to the earthly city that pagans could offer—and that pagan authorities sometimes demanded.” This division “prove[d] to be a source of serious, sometimes ferocious, conflict and persecution” (128–29).

Smith’s argument accurately captures a central element of the conflict between paganism and Christianity. Still, I think he leaves part of the story

untold. After all, while Romans certainly found deficient the allegiance of individuals who tendered ultimate loyalty to an eternal city and who considered themselves to have no enduring city here on earth, it's not clear how some individuals living toward an eternal rather than imminent horizon could threaten the empire at its foundations. This is why Christianity cannot be fully understood, I think, without considering Christianity's immanent dimension (while keeping sight of the divine transcendence of the world and its desacralizing implications).

CHRISTIAN SEPARATION OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT FROM SACRED AFFAIRS

A major thread of Oakley's scholarship over the last several decades has been the claim that Christianity desacralized the Roman empire and political order in the West more generally by depriving civil officials of any substantial role in the performance of sacred rites. In ancient sacral political order, civil officials were entrusted with sacred rites. Christianity, in sharp contrast, allowed civil officials no role in the performance of sacred rites and, ultimately, in its Western form, bid them stay out of the administration of religion altogether. As Christians saw it, the administration of the sacraments was the distinct province of the Church. Necessarily, then, Christianity entailed telling Rome—the empire and its officials—that there is here and now a jurisdiction off limits to it, a jurisdiction that belongs to the Church and is administered by officials within it *rather* than by Rome. As Wilken notes above, Rome saw itself as the custodian and overseer of all the religions it accommodated. Christianity refused to grant it such oversight and insisted on a jurisdiction Rome could not control, introducing, instead, a contravening authority structure and administrative apparatus. Christianity established a city *within* the city, as it were—a potentially competing association complete with its own officials, officials who did not derive their position or authority from the empire.

The Greek word for church—*ekklesia*—indicated the popular assembly of a Greek *polis*. In particular, *ekklesia* was the proper name of the democratic assembly in ancient Athens. Members of St. Paul's *ekklesia*, however, were said to have their “citizenship in heaven from where they expect a savior” (Philippians 3:20). “Citizenship” comes from the Greek word *politeuma*, which could be translated “constitution or form of government.”²⁰ In the Pauline appropriation of Greco-Roman political terminology, Christians were said to belong to an association that received its constitution or government from heaven. As well, savior, which translates the Greek *soter*, was one of Caesar's titles. To say Christians awaited a savior from heaven meant they awaited one from heaven *rather*

than Rome. Likewise, to say their constitution/government (*politeuma*) was in heaven was to say the constitution/government for their association (*ekklesia*)—not only in the world to come but also *on earth here and now*—originated in heaven rather than Rome.²¹

Early in the third century, Tertullian described the “distinctive marks of [Christian] association” as a “body [*corpus*] knit together by a common confession [*conscientiae*], discipline and hope.”²² Summarizing Tertullian, Wilken writes, “when we meet together, we offer prayers to God for the emperor and all in authority, and for the public good. In our gatherings, we read sacred writings that nourish our faith and exhort one another to live virtuously. . . . We place our gifts in a common chest to help those in need. We celebrate a common meal.” Though Christians “lived side by side with others, shopped at the same butchers . . . ate the same food, wore the same attire . . . shunned neither the forum nor the baths nor the inns” and even “fight alongside you,” they “belong to a fellowship distinct from the society.”²³ Indeed. A fellowship distinct from Roman society, pursuing a different way of life, with its own officials and that oversaw itself, while its members remained members of Roman society as well. A Christian simultaneously belonged to two distinct societies, each with its own jurisdiction and government. Even after the empire was officially Christian, emperors often resisted the Christian revolution’s shattering of a unified pagan political order.

In a confrontation with the Roman emperor Anastasius, who attempted to intervene in matters of doctrine in order to restore unity among the Empire’s Christian churches, Gelasius wrote the following in 494:

Two elements there are indeed, Emperor Augustus, by which this world is principally ruled: the consecrated authority of the priests and the royal power. . . . For you know, most clement son, that *although it is your right to take precedence over the human race in dignity, you bow your head obediently to those in charge of divine affairs, and look to them for the means of your salvation; and in partaking of the heavenly sacraments, when they are properly dispensed, you recognize that you rather must subject yourself in the realm of religion than rule in it, and, in these matters, rely on the judgment of the priests and not wish that they be bent to your will (emphasis added).*²⁴

Gelasius’s separation of civil government from sacred affairs is even more pronounced in the fourth tract of the Bond of Anathema issued against Anastasius in 496. According to Gelasius, civil officials “*have only the power to judge temporal matters and have no competence in divine affairs.*” Accurately depicting and rejecting the sacral pattern of antiquity, Gelasius held,

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It happened before the coming of Christ that certain men, though still engaged in carnal activities, were symbolically both kings and priests, and sacred history tells us that Melchizedek was such a one. . . . The devil also imitated this among his own people, for he always strives in a spirit of tyranny to claim for himself what pertains to divine worship, and so pagan emperors were called supreme pontiffs. But when he came who was true King and true Priest, the emperor no longer assumed the title of priest, nor did the priest claim the royal dignity. . . . For Christ, mindful of human frailty, regulated with an excellent disposition what pertained to the salvation of his people. *Thus he distinguished between the offices of both powers [priestly and kingly] according to their own proper activities and separate dignities*, wanting his people to be saved by healthful humility and not carried away again by human pride, so that Christian emperors would need priests for attaining eternal life, and priests would avail themselves of imperial regulations in the conduct of temporal affairs. In this fashion spiritual activity would be set apart from worldly encroachments and the ‘soldier of God’ . . . would not be involved in secular affairs, while on the other hand he who was involved in secular affairs would not seem to preside over divine matters. Thus the humility of each order would be preserved, neither being exalted by the subservience of the other, and each profession would be especially fitted for its appropriate functions (emphasis added).²⁵

This line of thought—entirely alien to Roman sensibilities—was revolutionary. Only in the Messiah—Israel’s anointed—do kingly and priestly authority unite. For human social order, two separate jurisdictions governed by separate authorities now obtain. And civil officials ought not to have anything to do with sacred rites and spiritual affairs. In that realm, they are not authoritative but under authority. Christianity shattered the ancient unity not only by positing two cities—one eternal, the other civil and temporal—but also by asserting two separate temporal jurisdictions. Oakley calls this division “the Western apostasy.”²⁶ It turns the antique organization of political order on its head.

Gelasius’s separation of the Christian *ekklesia* from civil government did not entail that Christ had authority only over the former but not the latter. At the end of the Gospel according to Matthew (28:18–20), Jesus says these final words to his disciples: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Here Jesus claims *all* authority—not only over heavenly or spiritual things but over earthly, temporal things as well. In his epistles, especially Romans 1:1–7, St. Paul announces the *gospel* (εὐαγγέλιον/*euaggelion*) of God, concerning the

Son of God, whom he identifies with Jesus Christ our *Lord* (κύριος/*kurios*). Through the Messiah “we have received our apostleship to bring about the *obedience of faith* [πίστις/*pistis*] among all the Gentiles.” He concludes his introductory remarks with this greeting: “Grace and *peace* [εἰρήνη/*eiréné*] from God our Father and the *Lord* Jesus Christ.” Paul made this announcement in a world that already had a *gospel* (*evangelium*) of peace (*pax*) announced by—announcing the rule of—its own lord (*kyrie*) (initially Augustus, the savior/*soter* of Rome). The Roman gospel was, as N. T. Wright suggests an announcement of royal rule (initially Augustus’s) that secures peace and is effected through allegiance (*pistis/fides/faith*) tendered to Rome and its ruler. Paul’s contending *gospel* announces the royal rule of Jesus of Nazareth, Israel’s Messiah, over the nations (Rome saw itself as the rightful ruler of the world).²⁷ The nations are now to be taught the obedience of faith (i.e., allegiance) to Christ. Thus, Paul counters the imperial gospel of the *pax romana* with the announcement that the Messiah’s kingdom has begun.

According to Wright, while the Gospels indicate that the Kingdom of God is not *from* this world—its origins are from heaven—it is nevertheless *for* it (not simply in another dimension or for some future age).²⁸ Taking the crucifixion as the coronation and enthronement of the Messiah, Wright holds that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Kingdom of God has begun. It is not consummated. But it has been inaugurated. According to St. Paul, the Son of God, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, created all thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities and now “is the head over all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:9). Put another way, Jesus of Nazareth is King over and above all kings and Lord over and above all lords. And that means that He is Lord over Caesar, his law above Caesar’s law. Caesar’s law and lordship have their place—so long as they do not contradict or conflict with the law and lordship of Christ. And the law of Christ, as embodied in the teaching of the New Testament and the practice of the early Church, entailed removing sacred affairs from those who exercised civil rule and giving them wholly over to officials who received neither their office nor their authority from Rome or its rulers.

SACRAL POLITY’S MODERN RETURN

What Christianity sundered modernity seeks to marry again. Recall that Christianity divided not only allegiance but jurisdiction—it divided authority and rule within one society. According to that lion of modern sovereignty, Thomas Hobbes, “a doctrine plainly and directly against the essence of the commonwealth” is “[t]hat sovereign power may not be divided. For what is it to divide the power of a commonwealth but to dissolve it; for powers divided mutually destroy it.”²⁹ For Hobbes unified sovereign power

means “that the right of judging what doctrines are fit for peace, and to be taught the subjects, is in all commonwealths annexed to the sovereign power civil, whether it be in one man or in one assembly of men. Consequently, “in all commonwealths of the heathen the sovereigns have had the name of pastors of the people, because there was no subject that could lawfully teach the people but by their permission and authority.”³⁰ Moreover, “this right of the heathen kings cannot be thought taken from them by their conversion to the faith of Christ, who never ordained that kings for believing in him, should be deposed (that is, subjected to any but himself) or (which is all one) be deprived of the power necessary for the conservation of peace amongst their subjects and for their defense against foreign enemies. And therefore, *Christian kings are still the supreme pastors of their people, and have power to ordain what pastors they please, to teach the Church.*”³¹ Consequently, “it is from the civil sovereign that all other pastors derive their right of teaching, preaching, and other functions pertaining to that office, and that they are but his ministers (in the same manner as the magistrates of towns, judges in courts of justice, and commanders of armies are all but ministers of him that is the magistrate of the whole commonwealth).”³² Consequently as well, “every Christian sovereign . . . also hath the authority, not only to preach . . . but also to baptize and administer the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and to consecrate both temples and pastors to God’s service.”³³ The sovereign alone “executeth his office by the immediate authority of God (that is to say, in God’s right, or *jure divino*).”³⁴ All other pastors hold office *jure civili*—from the civil sovereign.

For Hobbes, the modern doctrine of sovereignty entails a repristination of sacral political order. Modern sovereignty consequently requires a rejection of the Christian separation—or, as Oakley calls it, of the Western apostasy. Rousseau concurred entirely with Hobbes’s rejection of the Christian separation of sacred affairs and civil government: “Of all Christian authors, the philosopher Hobbes is the only one who has clearly seen the evil and the remedy, who has dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle and returning everything back to political unity, without which neither the state nor the government will be well constituted” (311). In thinking about the relation of Church and state, Hobbes committed only one significant error: “he should have seen that the dominating spirit of Christianity was incompatible with his system and that the interest of the priest would always be stronger than that of state.”³⁵ Rousseau proposed jettisoning Christianity and replacing it with a civil religion better suited to a sacral regime. For as Rousseau presciently saw, the religion that destroyed the ancient gods and the empire devoted to their worship subverts the modern sovereign state—Hobbes’s “mortal god”—as well.

Notes

1. Quoted in Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 3.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Fundamental Political Writings*, ed. Matthew W. Maguire and David Lay Williams, Ian Johnston (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Editions, 2018), Book 4, Chapter 8, 309–10.
3. Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12–13.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 8–15. Further citations of this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
7. Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism: Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).
8. *Ibid.*, 19. He borrows this phrase from Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religions as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 344.
9. Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism*, 22, 23–29, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 32, 35, 38, 31.
11. Plato, *Apology* in *The Trials of Socrates: Six Classic Texts*, Edited and Translated by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), line 24b5, p. 37.
12. *Euthrphro* in *The Trial of Socrates*, line 2a, p. 3.
13. Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism*, 35.
14. *Ibid.*, 38.
15. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 344–47.
16. Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism*, 40, and chap. 6; Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book 4, Chapter 8.
17. Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), 8.
18. See Richard A. Horsley, “Jesus and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 90.
19. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 13–23.
20. Horsley, “Building an Alternative Society: Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 211
21. According to Horsley, “Paul’s *ekklesiai* are . . . local communities of an alternative society to the Roman imperial order,” *ibid.*, 209.
22. Quoted in Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 12.
23. *Ibid.*

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24. In Hugo Rahner, ed., *Church and State in Early Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 174.
25. In Rahner, *Church and State*, 177–78.
26. Oakley, “Kingship and the Gods: The Western Apostasy,” The Smith Lecture at The University of Saint Thomas, Houston, 1968.
27. See N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans,” and “Paul and Empire,” all in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).
28. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 93–94.
29. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994 [1651]), Chapter XIX, Paragraph 12, p. 213–14.
30. *Ibid.*, XLII, 67, 366.
31. *Ibid.*, XLII, 68, 367.
32. *Ibid.*, XLII, 70, 367–68.
33. *Ibid.*, XLII, 72, 368–69.
34. *Ibid.*, XLII, 71, 368.
35. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book 4, Chapter 8, p. 311.