

## RENDER UNTO CAESAR

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Scripture: Psalm 99  
Matthew 22: 15-22

Today's gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> is often cited as the biblical authority for the separation of church and state: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."<sup>ii</sup> Jesus is asked whether Mosaic law, which binds Jews together as a covenanting people, allows paying taxes to a hated foreign occupying power in Judaea. Jesus in effect says "yes," – separate church and state -- but not without devastating his opponents who'd been plotting to entrap him with their question.

The Pharisees, with Herodians by their side, were challenging Jesus within the sacred walls of the temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were a Jewish intellectual elite, distinguished by their learning, strongly attached to studying and explicating the Mosaic law.<sup>iii</sup> The Herodians were overt supporters of the Roman regime, which had placed the local Jewish King Herod in charge of territory in Judaea.<sup>iv</sup> The Pharisees resented the Roman tax, but they wouldn't go as far as the radical nationalists, the Zealots, and publicly resist its payment. The Herodians supported paying the tax.<sup>v</sup> So these two groups put Jesus on the spot. Would he support tax payment, and look like an apologist for Rome in the eyes of the Jewish nationalists, or would he counsel against paying the taxes, making himself subject to arrest for violation of Roman law?

Jesus responds in a very clever way. It turns out that Roman taxes can only be paid with Roman coins, and most of them had an image and an inscription considered sacrilegious by many Jews: Translated, it read in part, “Tiberius Caesar...son of the divine Augustus...” So Jesus asks them for the kind of coin used for the tax. They bring him a Roman denarius, a small silver coin.<sup>vi</sup> Note that this means that these Jewish biblical teachers, the Pharisees, are being forced to produce, within the most sacred context of the temple, a Roman coin with its idolatrous image and inscription, proclaiming Caesar divine. Jesus then asks his opponents to identify whose likeness and inscription is on the coin, and they, of course, respond “Caesar’s.” Now Jesus can defuse the incendiary issue of paying tribute to an occupying power -- by making it merely a matter of property:<sup>vii</sup> “[Oh], render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” But then, he adds a zinger: “And render unto God the things that are God’s.”<sup>viii</sup> By those words, Jesus makes it crystal clear that Caesar is not God, and that what’s really important are those things that are God’s, not some coins of foreign oppressors. Later in the same chapter of Matthew, in answer to another question by the Pharisees, Jesus answers explicitly what belongs to God: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind [That’s a lot!] ... And ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>ix</sup>

It turns out that paying taxes to an occupying force nowhere violates Mosaic law, so the Pharisees, with all their learning, could not actually have trapped Jesus theologically.<sup>x</sup> But their aim and intent was solely pragmatic and political anyway. As stated earlier in chapter 12 of Matthew: “The Pharisees conspired against him [Jesus],

how to kill him.”<sup>xi</sup> By their challenge on taxes, they hoped terminally to alienate him either from the masses of oppressed Jewish people or from the Roman authorities. They asked him a political question, really, not a theological one. He responded with an unexpected answer that had both political and theological implications.

Another way of putting it is that Jesus was operating religiously in a highly charged political environment. And he never shrank from doing quite publicly what he felt was religiously correct in that political environment, even unto his own death, ultimately at the hands of both Jewish and Roman authorities.

So, it’s a misreading of this passage to see it as a proof text for the separation of church and state. Jesus was regarded as a prophet,<sup>xii</sup> and prophets of Israel were always deeply involved in challenging kings, principalities and powers, and the political order, in the name of the higher authority of God. Jesus began his ministry by identifying himself with the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free.”<sup>xiii</sup> If you’ll remember, he said these words in the synagogue in his hometown in Nazareth, and fellow congregants were so dubious of his authority that he retorted, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”<sup>xiv</sup> Jesus’ very last lesson to his disciples before he died was also prophetic, insisting that his followers be worldly activists: Directing themselves to the very least of those around them, they were to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoners.<sup>xv</sup>

So what does this all mean to us in America, in an age when many think there’s much too cozy a relationship between church and state – or at least between the Christian

right and many governmental bodies, starting with the Office of the President of the United States? As the Rev. Jerry Falwell said last year before the election, “It is the responsibility of every...evangelical Christian, every pro-life Catholic...to get serious about re-electing President Bush.”<sup>xvi</sup> And the Rev. Pat Robertson added, “The Lord has just blessed him [President Bush]...It doesn’t make any difference what he does, good or bad.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Well, let me begin answering with my experience with the opposite case, from several months I spent traveling through five totalitarian communist countries a quarter century ago. The Romanian Constitution at the time guaranteed freedom of religion so long as its exercise did not harm public morals and order. In practical effect, though, that outlawed all commentary from church pulpits which related religious principles to political life in any critical or prophetic way. Not only was any suggestion of social change emanating from the churches prohibited, so was much of what we would call charity. As a pamphlet on religion I picked up in a neighboring Warsaw pact country, the Soviet Union, explained, “Charitable activity is not directly related to the performance of religious rites...[and therefore it is] prohibited. Neither is there any practical need for such activity. Poverty, famine and unemployment have long been done away with in the Soviet Union. The socialist state undertakes responsibility for social security.” So much for the religious duty of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick, as Jesus called his followers to do.

James Luther Adams, for many years professor of Christian Ethics at the Harvard Divinity School, insisted that churches must take a hefty share of the blame for Hitler’s rise to totalitarian power in Nazi Germany, because they were so lacking in political

concern and prophetic consciousness that they created a moral vacuum in their society into which a powerful charismatic leader could march with his Brown Shirts. When Hitler did come to power, he reduced the life of the church to that comparable to totalitarian communist countries: personal piety, permitted worship only in registered churches which have sworn loyalty to the state, and no challenges allowed to the existing social order.<sup>xviii</sup>

I breathed a big sigh of relief when I returned, after my time abroad, to American religion – active historically in politics on both the left and the right...major contributor to civil rights and anti-war movements that made a real difference, just as surely as to pro-life campaigns and opposition to same-sex marriage. As U.S. constitutional scholar Larry Tribe has put it, “The attempt to silence the clergy on matters political or...to silence politicians on matters religious is fundamentally and deeply inimical to the First Amendment and to its underlying spirit.”<sup>xix</sup> Yet, how should we respond when a Yale Law School graduate, clergy person, and politician named the Rev. Pat Robertson claims that “The Constitution of the United States is a marvelous document for self-government by Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian and atheist people, they can use it to destroy the very foundation of our society, and that’s what’s been happening.”<sup>xx</sup> Or when the Rev. Jerry Falwell asserts that “We must have men and women elected to office at every level who believe...in the right of little children to pray in their schools... Biblically-sound textbooks must be written for every school child in every course of study.”<sup>xxi</sup> This is where the other side of Professor Tribe’s perspective is helpful. No, we should never silence clergy on matters political, nor politicians on matters religious, but the U.S. constitution is equally clear that “neither

religion nor politics may become an arm of the other,” for “when those arms embrace, the result may be the suffocation of freedom.”<sup>xxii</sup>

The most hopeful document I’ve ever seen for addressing the proper extent of church-state separation was published in 1988 as the Williamsburg Charter.<sup>xxiii</sup> It was the result of a summit meeting convened of both conservative and liberal Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Jews, along with members of Congress, academics, media people, business leaders, and various other representatives. Signatories included the likes of Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, Billy Graham and Coretta Scott King, Bob Dole and Michael Dukakis, William Rehnquist and Warren Burger, Norman Lear and Phyllis Schlafly, Robert Bellah and Peter Berger, Bill Bennett and Lane Kirkland. The charter noted that “Justifiable fears are raised by those who advocate theocracy or the coercive power of law to establish a ‘Christian America’ ...At the same time...interpretations of the ‘wall of separation’ [between church and state] that would exclude religious expression and argument from public life also contradict freedom of conscience and the genius of the [first amendment].” It went on to identify “a growing philosophical and cultural awareness that all people live by commitments and ideals, [and] that value-neutrality is impossible in the ordering of society...Politics is indeed an extension of ethics and therefore engages religious principles.”

So, concretely-speaking, how do we decide what to render unto Caesar and what to render unto God, according to the Williamsburg Charter? First of all, public policy should be developed through vigorous religious and non-religious contention, but within an atmosphere of political civility. That means that “Arguments for public policy should be more than private convictions shouted out loud. For persuasion to be principled,

private convictions should be translated into publicly accessible claims... [This should be done] for two reasons: first, because they must engage those who do not share the same private convictions, and second, because they should be directed toward the public good.” I take it that the Williamsburg Charter is calling for us to be well grounded in our own religious and philosophical perspectives, but in the public sphere to make arguments from those perspectives that have been translated into a language of civil discourse that can be rationally articulated and readily understood across traditions.

Secondly, the Williamsburg Charter implores us not to allow the needed dynamic tension between church and state to deteriorate into ideological warfare in which individuals, motives and reputations are impugned. “Too often,” the Charter tells us, “religious believers have been uncharitable, liberals have been illiberal, conservatives have been insensitive to tradition, champions of tolerance have been intolerant, defenders of free speech have been censorious, and citizens of a republic based on democratic accommodation have succumbed to a habit of relentless confrontation.” Instead, what we should be working toward is “neither a naked public square where all religion is excluded, nor a sacred public square with any religion established or semi-established.” The ideal is “a civil public square in which citizens of all religious faiths, or none, engage one another in the continuing democratic discourse.”

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus was forced to deal with religious and political enemies who were plotting to entrap him in what he said in about church-state conundrums, and ultimately to have him killed. We seem to be living in a difficult age now too, with high stakes religiously and politically, if not all-out struggles unto death. What does Jesus teach us to show us the way through? First of all, the Pharisees are

actually right in their disingenuous comment that Jesus is sincere and teaches God's ways without either partiality or deference to anyone. May we be careful as we engage religiously in public life to be sincere, impartial, and non-deferential ourselves.

Secondly, may we continue to be diligent in trying to discern God's way, rather than insisting on our own. May we not make idols out of worldly pursuits like material wealth and personal power, remembering to render only unto God those things that are God's: like ultimacy (that is, what's really and finally important, beyond having to make the next tax payments)...like gratitude for our very lives on this glorious earth of which we are stewards...like devotion to others in return for the unconditional love which is the enduring law of the universe, even after all has seemingly gone wrong. For then we will understand, in the poetic words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, that it is not in vain that the distance beacons and that we sweep ahead to heights sublime. Then, we will understand not only how ancient founts of inspiration point to one increasing purpose, but also how human beings might finally see their battle flags furled in a federation of the world.<sup>xxiv</sup>



## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Matthew 22: 15-22.
- <sup>ii</sup> Matthew 22: 21.
- <sup>iii</sup> Peter Calvocoressi, Who's Who in the Bible (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 149.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
- <sup>v</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 420.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1997), p. 308.
- <sup>vii</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 674.
- <sup>viii</sup> Matthew 22: 21
- <sup>ix</sup> Matthew 22: 37-40.
- <sup>x</sup> *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 873.
- <sup>xi</sup> Matthew 12: 14.
- <sup>xii</sup> See, for example, Matthew 14:5; 21:11; 21:46.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Luke 4: 18.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Luke 4: 24.
- <sup>xv</sup> Matthew 25: 35-36, 40.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Jerry Falwell, *The New York Times*, July 16, 2004, as cited in *Sojourners Magazine* (October 2004), p. 35.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Pat Robertson, *AP/Fox News*, January 2, 2004, as cited in *Sojourners Magazine* (October 2004), p. 35.
- <sup>xviii</sup> See, for example, James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 255-256.
- <sup>xix</sup> Lawrence Tribe, as quoted at a New York conference in 1984 (cited in an October 14, 1984, sermon by Scotty McLennan, entitled "Why the Church Should be in Politics").
- <sup>xx</sup> Pat Robertson, comments made on the NBC "Today" show, October 30, 1988.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Jerry Falwell, comments made on the NBC "Today" show, October 30, 1988.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Tribe, N.Y. conference, 1984.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Text of the Williamsburg Charter may be found at [www.religioustolerance.org/wil\\_burg.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/wil_burg.htm)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Not in Vain the Distance Beacons" (lyrics to a hymn set to Ludwig van Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy"), *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #143,