For King and Country: Christians and Politics [1]

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South Africans will soon be heading to the polls again for a national election. With a great deal of uncertainty about the future and the reliability of political parties, perhaps now more than ever before voters are critically thinking about how to exercise their vote.

When an established Christian political party published a comparison of their values compared to those of other competing political parties, they were met with a large degree of scorn and derision. Some complained about the outmoded values which they uphold; others feared that the party wants to institute a theocracy; and others stated that religion should be kept out of politics.

This article will discuss the role (if any) of religion in politics.

The "separation of church and state [2]" (religion and politics) is a value which is held dear by many people in the West. It means that one ideology will not oppress others, and guarantees freedom to everyone to believe and worship as they please. The need for this value came from some truly disastrous precedents: from the power politics of medieval Christian rulers in Europe colluding or opposing the powerful papacy, to brutal religious wars in Europe by rival "Christianties", to "civilised Christians" lording their superiority over "primitive pagan" cultures during colonial times. These examples of corruption, brutality, and unkindness have seared the consciences of people in the West.

Many people were taught growing up that there are three things which should never be discussed (outside of family): money, politics and religion. These three things raise tempers and divide people, so best to avoid them1.

There is, however, a problem with this sentiment: these three things are not mutually exclusive. They are not neat little categories all on their own. Irrespective whether we believe that these topics should be discussed in public or not, we need to acknowledge that this maxim—at least in part—came about because in the minds of people in the West, these topics *can* be compartmentalised.

The premise, in Western culture since the Enlightenment, is that there exists an objective naturalistic way in which things Should Be Done. Human reason and scientific progress is all that is needed to discovery what Should Be Done, and over time we shall collectively create a perfect society. This should therefore form the basis of politics. Religion may be incidental to the natural progression of mankind (although many people will argue the opposite), but the progression of mankind should be pursued on a scientific and naturalistic basis, not on a basis of religion.

There are two problems with this view. The first is that we have no idea in which direction we should be going. In the twentieth century, humanity has tried diverse social experiments: from capitalism, to communism, and just about everything in between, and nothing has proven a definitive way

things Should Be Done. This is because each approach has show deficiencies. Yet, despite a lack of clear direction, society has indeed been advancing: literacy rates increase, rates of extreme poverty decrease, life expectancy increases, diseases and morality rates decrease. But the world remains (or increasingly becomes) deeply and bitterly divided. By one set of criteria, humanity is moving towards a perfect society, but by another set it is heading in the opposite direction.

The second problem (and what really is the crux of this article), is that this view presupposes a specific worldview: naturalism[2]. It is all well and good for people to have whatever belief they have in what is supernatural, but it cannot be proven by naturalistic standards [3], so they must be dismissed as a valid basis for decision making about society as a whole. This may sound like a reasonable position, but if this position is critically examined, it turns out that it no less oppressive, or even valid, than the historical examples of religious abuses from which it claims to protect people. This is because it excludes other worldviews for being the basis of decision-making.

Religion is part of one's *worldview* [4]. A worldview is an understanding of reality: what is really real. A Christian really believes that reality is not limited to the physical world, but that a spiritual realm exists as well. They believe that a triune God exists and that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. A Hindu really believes that all things are united, and that through enlightenment one can can escape the cycle of reincarnation to become part of the collective essence of the universe. A naturalistic atheist believes that only the physical world exists. Beyond religious categories, a communist[3] really believes that all of human history and human motivation can be framed in terms of class struggles. Everyone has a worldview, whether they realise it or can articulate it or not.

And so, while it may seem distasteful to many, people who genuinely believe a particular worldview [5] cannot be denied having their political leaning influenced by that worldview. This is because they view reality through the lens of what they believe to be really real. Proscribing to them that they cannot is an injustice by denying them their fundamental beliefs (if one believes that humans truly have a right to freedom of belief).

This does open up the possibility that oppression can happen again because one group of people, with a particular belief, gains power and begins (or resumes to) oppress others. But it needs to be recognised that this is *not fundamentally different* from oppressing such people by withholding their right to live and rule as they believe is right by imposing a naturalistic and intolerant tolerance (that is, that they should affirm beliefs which they do not have) on them. That could only be done if the naturalistic worldview is objectively true: but this is just as impossible to prove as any other worldview[4].

While this conclusion may not seem appealing, our main concern should be truth. In every election season, as competing political parties vie for votes, opposing and contradictory claims and statements are made. The public becomes acutely aware of the power of lies and deception, and hungers for truth to prevail (even if, for most people, what the truth is may be greatly distorted by cognitive biases). In the pursuit of truth, we need open and honest discussions. We need to listen with understanding, and respond without being ruled by emotions. We need to try and persuade people whom we think are in error, and allow ourselves to be persuaded after careful and thoughtful deliberation. That is how we build an inclusive and tolerant society: not by forcing compliance with one particular worldview.

In closing, it needs to be said that the purpose of this article is not to motivate that churches as incorporated entities should become politically active, and especially not that churches prescribe to congregants for which political party they should vote. Each person needs to make the decision for which political party they are going to vote for themselves, and do so in a thoughtful manner. A Christian also should not automatically vote for an overtly Christian party, but one which most closely aligns with their values. But a person—Christian or otherwise—should vote according to their conscience and belief. And to ridicule, deride or belittle someone for acting on their conscience and sincere beliefs, is a fault of the person doing the deriding and belittling, not the one receiving it.

To dismiss the position of someone else is the easy thing to do. The difficult thing, is to listen, understand, and engage them constructively.

- 1. Someone once observed that instead of teaching children to avoid speaking about these topics, we should instead teach them how to have discussions about them in a kind and constructive manner. Perhaps with this insight we can help the next generation to be more open and friendly about their views and differences.
- 2. One can perhaps also include deism, which is the view that God is distant and aloof, and not involved with human affairs. In this worldview, humans are left to their own devices anyway, and need to determine their own courses for the future.
- 3. A worldview can be influenced by political ideology as well as religious.
- 4. Except Christianity, which can be proven false [6], or should otherwise seriously be considered as the objective truth.

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