

Render unto Caesar

In the gospel according to Matthew (22:21) it is reported that hostile questioners tried to trap Jesus into taking an explicit (and dangerous) stand on whether Jews should or should not pay taxes to the Roman occupiers. The question was a trap for there was no answer that would be satisfactory to both the questioners and the Roman authorities. Answering “yes” would have placed Jesus on the side of the Romans and against Jewish resistance to the occupation. Answering “no” would have brought him into trouble with the Roman rulers.

Jesus, after calling his questioners hypocrites, asked them to produce a Roman coin that could be used to pay the tax. When it was produced, he asked the questioners whose name and inscription was on the coin and they answered “Caesar’.” The gospel reports that Jesus’ reply was “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and onto God the things that are God’s.”

My intent this morning is to explain how I think this story relates to us today. This sermon concerns the words of Jesus as understood by Mike Kobran and I will tell you how I am using those words. I will also warn you that, as Shakespeare wrote in the *Merchant of Venice*, “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

I use “render” as the act of giving unto another, honoring the wishes of another or perhaps complying with another. It is an act of conformance.

We have to do a little thinking about what I mean by “Caesar” and what I mean by “God.” For purposes of thinking about this, I am using “Caesar” in the sense of a community, a community that sets the laws, rules, mores, taboos, etc. by which the individual is supposed to operate. The community may be as small as a family or as large as a nation or a group of nations. It is the other, in contrast to the individual.

I also use “God” to stand for the thoughts, aspirations, desires, morality, and so forth, of the individual. Whether the individual claims to be acting in the name of religious belief, a personal desire, or a deity of some kind, the act itself is brought into being by an individual mind deciding to do so. This conception goes back as far as Socrates.

Columbia University philosopher Philip Kitcher restates Socrates: “If you believe that God ordains morality you will still have to decide where God gets morality from and if you decide that God is goodness, you deprive yourself of any capacity to judge that morality.” What I take from this is that it is within the power of the individual to accept, deny, or ponder any morality that he or she comes upon or is given.

So, if my metaphor is apt, we give unto our community what it requires and we honor ourselves by holding what we personally believe. A neat dichotomy but there is something wrong with it. There are not really two discrete elements to this picture, Caesar and God, the self and the other; there is also the relationship between the two elements that affect one another. No one doubts that the young child, the self, as it matures, is shaped by the culture, religion, language, etc. of its environment. There is no such thing as a self-made human. The mature self is to a great extent a product of his or her life experiences. No one should doubt, either, that individuals help to shape the changes that inevitably happen to cultures, mores, taboos, language, etc. that we associate with the other, be it as small as tribe or as large as a nation. There are no self-made social environments either; they are the product of individual choices that coalesce when the moment is right, when the number reaches a critical mass.

Proverbs (29:18) says “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The vision to which this refers is the common vision, the vision of Caesar. Without some overlap of general values among its members, a community can not long endure. That lack of agreement on slavery, which dated back to before our Constitution was written, is what precipitated the Civil War in this nation.

The late UU minister from New York City, Forrest Church, described the Great Religious Awakenings help to understand this last point:

The First Great Awakening, during the middle of the 18th century was when many people discovered that the patriarchal church establishment, the parliament and the king didn't have the people's best interests at heart. George Whitfield, an English Methodist minister, introduced a benevolent God who was ready to save anyone who turned her eyes heavenward. This God replaced God the judge and Christ the King. Whitfield was

telling people you don't need the good offices of the established church or even Whitfield himself to be saved, you can do that yourself. Indeed, Forrest Church said the First Great Awakening paved the way to the Revolutionary War.

The Second Great Awakening was during the early decades of the nineteenth century that swept through the American Frontier in the presence of Baptist, Methodist and Scotch Presbyterian ministers who told the people they could be liberated by the gospel of freedom in Christ from all earthly authorities including the established church. Church says:

The politicized religious establishment, **including the Unitarians**, in states like Connecticut and Massachusetts, who leaned on the government for direct financial support and were campaigning to reestablish the United States as a Christian state, looked down their nose at these wandering vagabond preachers as they advanced ... [who would] "undermine the settled and ordained pastor and break up and destroy" the authority ... of church and state alike.

Indeed in the early years of our Republic, the Christian sect that stood for the separation of Church and State, of God and Caesar, was the Baptists. Congregationalists and Unitarians on the other hand lined up on the religious right to demand a stabilizing seat for God in government.

The European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries may turn out to be a pivotal event in the history of the West or even of human beings on the Earth. It was a shift from a morality enforced by nightmares of the afterlife to one based on the importance of the individual's own senses and the evidence of the material world. However, its widespread acceptance over the years in the western world has led some of us to take its ideas a little bit for granted. We believed that if we let people think freely and rationally about science they would eventually draw the conclusion that the earth is not flat and it moves! In the same way we believed that if people thought freely and rationally about the best way to organize human society — with a view toward diminishing turmoil and augmenting the realization of individual potential — eventually they'd separate church and state.

In contrast, as pointed out by Mark Lilla, an historian at Columbia University, in his book *The Stillborn God*, “when looking to explain the conditions of political life and political judgment, the unconstrained mind seems compelled to travel up and out: up toward those things that transcend human existence, and outward to encompass the whole of that existence.” That is, political theology comes naturally to most of us and only highly unusual circumstances can compel us to give it up. Christianity’s fundamental ambiguities — torn between a picture of God as both present and absent from the temporal realm, as powerfully represented by the paradoxes of the Trinity — made it uniquely unstable and subject to a variety of interpretations. These became institutionalized in sectarian division and caused several centuries of devastating upheaval in Europe.

The question arises: how do the beliefs strongly held by a given community change? David Deutsch, a physicist at Oxford, writing in his new book, *The Beginning of Infinity*, talks about the evolution of culture: “(N)eo-Darwinian accounts of the evolution of culture ... treat cultural items — languages, religions, values, ideas, traditions — in much the way that Darwinian theories of biological evolution treat genes. They are called ‘memes’ and are treated as evolving, just as genes do, by mutation and selection with the most successful memes being those that are most faithfully replicated.” (David Alpert in his review of Deutsch’s new book).

Deutsch thinks there are two different strategies for meme replication, one “rational” and the other “anti-rational.” Rational memes are simply good ideas: they will survive extensive scientific scrutiny and will make life easier or safer or more rewarding because they tell us something useful about how the world actually works. Irrational memes reproduce themselves by disabling the capacities of their hosts to evaluate or invent new ideas. This can happen through fear or by the need to conform, or by appearing natural and inevitable. Think of the controversy in the stem cell research field and you get the idea.

The problem then is how do we reconcile the needs of the community and the needs of the self, when, like Jesus, we face a dilemma? We can’t just come up with a clever statement that avoids the issue entirely, uttering to ourselves a tautology when action of

one kind or another is called for. An individual entertaining anti-rational ideas about the other is not a danger to the community except when those ideas gain momentum and mass. This can happen quickly in an age of instant communication and a critical mass of individuals subscribing to the same ideas can become a vocal minority which finds the levers of power through obstructionism. They can also become a majority. We then have the danger of populism, which is majority rule without regard to the rights of individuals and leads to what has been called the “tyranny of the majority.” Such a group could change the memes of a culture even though what they propose is anti-rational.

This is something that has been done and will continue to be tried. The historian John Lukacs has noted in speaking about the accumulation of opinions:

“...the accumulation of opinions can be manufactured and even falsified through the machinery of publicity, at times even against contrary appearances. That opinions can be molded, formed, falsified, inflated has always been true. But it is the accumulation of opinions that governs the history of states and of nations and democracies as well as dictatorships in the age of popular sovereignty. It is the main ingredient of nationalisms, the cause of wars, and of the majority support of fanatical speakers like Hitler, or of the less enthusiastic but majoritarian support of less than mediocre presidents.”

With the advent of the Arab spring this year it is clear that the role that popular opinion plays in challenging the legitimacy of powerful authoritarian leaders is significant if not predominant. What has to be remembered is that such opinion can also destroy the legitimacy of democratic leaders. That was what the nasty episode of concern about our President’s place of birth has been about. It did not reach majority levels but the level of acceptance among the general populace in a democracy such as the United States gives me, for one, cause for concern.

There are also dangers in the opposite direction, the egoistic tendency of individuals. Some have given the community short shrift when it comes to deciding what the individual owes to it. I think of Ayn Rand and her followers who consider themselves self-made people who by doing what is best for themselves supposedly will lead to the greatest good for all. These are the people who look only to their rights and not their social responsibilities. These are the people who want to subjugate the needs of the community to the needs of the individual.

There are also those who want to subjugate the individual to their perceived community of believers and the government to their beliefs as well. As De Touqueville noted in *Democracy in America*: “For the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other.” There is a danger in this as there is again more and more pressure to recognize the US as a Christian nation. Author Kevin Phillips in his book *American Theocracy* identifies radical Christianity and its growing intrusion into government and politics as one of the three significant forces shaping contemporary American life. Phillips identifies a rapidly growing group of “Christian Reconstructionists” who believe in, among other things, the reversal of women’s rights, who describe the separation of church and state as a “myth” and call for a government shaped by Christian doctrine. A recent news article states that most of the people running for the nomination to the presidency would eliminate federal funding for stem cell research. This position is not based on science, it is based on religious belief and does not meet Jefferson’s dictum of neither picking our pocket nor breaking our leg: it is pandering to anti-rational memes.

This fundamentalist Christian impetus is not only dangerous to all of us; it is demonstrably dangerous to religion itself. Ian Buruma, Professor of Democracy, Human Rights and Journalism at Bard College, notes in *Taming the Gods* it is “...especially important in democracies not only to have strong faith but also to keep it well away from worldly power, because political theories, not to mention political leaders, come and go. ...Americans felt that they could believe freely, not just because religious freedom was protected by the Constitution but because [religious] authority was not in the hands of worldly politicians.”

The evidence of this can be found in Western Europe where centuries of church participation in politics and the establishment of the church by the government led to secular societies where most of the citizenry no longer meaningfully participate in religion even though taxes support churches and church schools. Concurrent with the visit of the Pope to Spain last month, a *New York Times* headline read: “Protests Greet Visiting Pope as Austerity Grips Spain.” The article described Spain as “... an overwhelmingly Catholic country where church attendance has declined and many citizens are worried about severe economic austerity, indebtedness and unemployment.”

The protestors were furious over the cost to Spain of the Pope's visit which was thought excessive in times when many Spaniards are scraping by. They also condemned the blurring of the line between a Catholic celebration and the secularism of the Spanish Constitution. (8/19/11, A6) And yet, on August 21st, it was estimated that a "...million young pilgrims braved the searing heat followed by blustery rains to take part in a prayer vigil with Pope Benedict XVI at a dusty airport field ..." near Madrid.

Let us consider an example of the dangers of individual beliefs as moral imperatives that coalesce into a mass movement that impinges on everyone's individual freedoms regardless of the consequences. Since the *Roe v. Wade* decision was handed down by the US Supreme Court in 1973 the Anti-Abortion movement has assumed increasingly important dimensions in terms of affecting the nation's laws; that is, "God" has impinged on "Caesar's" domain.

An August 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center found that the percent of people who cited religion as the top influence on views of Abortion and Same Sex Marriage among all registered voters was 37% for Same Sex Marriage and 28% for Abortion while the percent for one of the major political parties was 52% and 40% respectively. Among those surveyed who described themselves as Tea Party supporters the percentages were 53% and 46% respectively.

The desire to have an individual moral decision remake the law of the land so that it becomes a universal moral decision has metastasized regardless of the explicit consequences that include taking up valuable political space and energy, fostering division, violence, and public harassment, and threatening a return to days when only the wealthy could get safe abortions and those who could not afford the cost would have to fend for themselves, mainly by taking unsafe chances.

The opposition to existing laws by Anti-Abortion advocates is often expressed as the desire not to have their taxes used for some action they consider morally wrong. On its face that is an unexceptional ethical belief that I could agree to if I were willing to forget what the consequences might be. One of those consequences, not mentioned above, is that it will open the door to other such impositions of individual moral choices into the public sphere. So I will agree to stop any use of federal taxes that allows the taking of a

human life (accepting that the fetus is in that category, a dubious assumption) but I want it expanded to my moral imperative that war takes human lives (born and unborn) and I don't want my taxes used for wars. Isn't that fair enough?

Again not being mindful of consequences, the Anti-Abortion movement would, one might think, be interested in the political goal, as I am, of minimizing the number of abortions taking place in this country. They then might espouse the same policies of the most recent President during whose term of office the number of abortions actually decreased, William Clinton. Instead the same people work politically to end federal funding for family planning the sole policy mechanism that proved it can accomplish the goal of decreasing abortions without coercion. That is why they are not Pro-Life and are only Anti-Abortion.

That, then, is the danger inherent in individuals with strong moral opinions joining together with others of like feelings wanting to make their beliefs a dictate for all of us through the force of law without thinking the matter through, without considering alternatives, without understanding that there may be many other people they will affect who have beliefs contrary to theirs. They have rendered to God what is hers but have failed to pay the necessary homage to Caesar and have instead attempted to usurp Caesar. History has at times has gone the other way. We as a nation have rendered unto Caesar prohibition of slavery, the vote for women, the freedom to marry the individual we want to regardless of race and, more recently, sexual orientation, the right to practice contraception, and many more progressive freedoms. But history has also shown us that the drive by some to dictate to the rest of us does not die, it only subsides for a time.

Confucius, who lived some 500 years before Christ, when asked by his disciples how to serve the spirits and gods, reportedly said: "Let us leave the spirits aside, until we know how best to serve men." It is this attitude which all citizens should aspire: leave theology to the believers and concentrate on the rules of the democratic game. Moral choices are for the individual not for the species. I end with a poem by Phillip Larkin that encourages hesitation, doubt and ambiguity:

*Since the majority of me
Rejects the majority of you,*

*Debating ends forthwith, and we
Divide. /And sure of what to do*

*We disinfect new blocks of days
For our majorities to rent
With unshared friends and unwalked ways,
But silence too is eloquent:!*

*A silence of minorities
That, unopposed at last, return
Each night with canceled promises
They want renewed./ They never learn.*