

Chapter 6.05 Contradictions

Religion has always given advice on how to deal with life problems. If it did not, most people would ignore it. Modern life has its problems but modern religion offers few suggestions for how to deal with them. The lack of guidance leads people away from religion. Problems in modern life appear as contradictions in our institutions and our lives. This chapter describes some of the contradictions. Later chapters describe how people respond to them. We get confused if we do not face up to contradictions. We cannot work toward Jesus' message if we do not feel how we can get twisted up in the modern world. All social situations, all nations, and all types of government have contradictions and hypocrisy. This chapter is not about contradictions in general but only about contradictions in modern democratic states. Children have a hard time dealing with contradictions but adults have to. When we refuse to recognize contradictions we treat ourselves as children. Children cannot self-govern.

(1) People really are mixed in their moral talents. We really cannot fully live up to moral ideals. We do pretty well but not really well. People vary in their moral abilities. Some people are moral bricks while some people are moral mud. Neither our religious or political leaders will come to grips with this fact and tell us what to do.

(2) Religion played a role in the founding and running of nearly all nations that are still around today, including not just classic states such as Egypt and China but modern states such as the United States, France, England, and Thailand. All nations need a core set of ideas that are not negotiable and on which the state is founded. These ideas are sacred in all senses of the word except the ideas might not be overtly tied to a particular religion. Modern ideas include respect for individuals and the rule of law. In the United States, some of the core ideas are expressed in our founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution while some are widely and tacitly understood such as the right to privacy. Originally, basic ideas were intimately tied up with the religion-and-morals of the nation even among modern states that do not express a tie to any particular religion. Modern states require respect for each other and the law, and require good institutions to carry out good laws. Christianity was a key in the making of the modern state, its core ideas, its basic institutions, and the underlying attitudes, even among nations that are not Christian. Other religions now provide additional important ideas such as the role of the Buddhist Middle Path in Thailand. These ideas might play an increasing role on the world stage in the future. Yet the modern state cannot privilege Christianity or any other religion, and cannot rest its core ideas on any particular religion. States need sacred ideas at their core; religions provided the original core ideas for most states; one religion, Christianity, was a key to the birth of the modern state; other religions provide other key ideas; yet no state can privilege any religion.

(3) The problem of the secular state founded on a religious tradition is acute for states arising in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. In Jewish tradition, to which Christians and Muslims owe their ideas, the state is holy. The state is from God, and it exists to express God on this Earth. (This relation of "heaven" and the state is true in other traditions too in slightly different ways, as for example in China and India). Rulers rule only as instruments of God. Subjects are not under the authority of officials as mere people but under the authority of God; rulers are only instruments to carry out the will of God. Laws come

directly from God's word. A breach of the Law is not only a breach of the civil order or of agreements among people but is a breach of the will of God. Offices are held in trust from God. A breach of God's Law or God's obvious intent, as God's obvious intent is shown through morality or through the prophets, is enough to remove a ruler from office. Every citizen is not just a resident of the state but is an actor of God's will and is like a small official of God's holy state. The constitution of Israel came directly from the scriptures. Christianity took over this tradition.

Yet the modern state cannot be like this, not even states founded directly in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. So we have a contradiction at the core of our political life. This is not necessarily fatal any more than the contradiction between free will and determinism. When you have to accept a contradiction, it is better to face up to it and come to a livable resolution than to hide it. We have to accept a core set of basic principles that came out of one religion but then we have to put those principles into practice in a secular state with many beliefs. My personal resolution of this contradiction is that God put us in this situation and wants us to succeed in self-government and social justice in a secular state.

(4) An intrinsic part of the state (and of any relation with God) is social justice. The state has failed if any honest hard working people cannot get by. The state has failed even if people other than hard-working honest people do well and even if the state is a world power. Because of the Jewish stress on social justice and Jesus' emphasis on social justice, followers of Jesus have a special responsibility to strive for social justice.

To get true social justice in the modern state, we might have to work through the state. Unfortunately, at the same time, it is only human nature to abuse state help. People are lazy, dependent, and lose personal integrity when the state helps. Business firms, including the officers of business firms, are much the same when they get state help. The Golden Rule says we should not help people if by doing something for them we actually hurt them. We have to balance state action for social justice against the normal human tendency to abuse state help. The state does not owe anybody prosperity or a family. The state does not owe any business support. Not all business firms are "job creators" and we cannot fool ourselves into supporting business in general on that basis. We cannot use the state to right all wrongs or to promote all growth. We have to develop a sense for what issues we can use the state, and for what issues we should use private action.

(5) Despite serving us well in many ways, capitalism really does have intrinsic failings that call out for social justice; contrary to Christian apologists for capitalism, it is not Christianity on Earth until Jesus returns. Capitalism is not just as good as Jesus; it is not the modern equivalent of the Church. Capitalism has inevitable minimum unemployment so that even qualified willing people cannot find jobs. In the United States, the inevitable minimal rate used to be about four percent but now is closer to eight percent. Capitalism also has inevitable minimum poor employment so that even adept willing people can find jobs with only poor pay and no benefits. In the United States now, about twenty percent of people have poor jobs. Of course, some unemployment and poor employment results from laziness, stupidity, and ignorance, but the problems would still exist even without those contributing causes. The problems arise from the intrinsic nature of the system. The flaws in capitalism reinforce racism, sexism, ageism, and socio-economic classes. They reinforce the other contradictions of modern life. They give the need for justification a tool by which to bore into modern brains. They make rebelliousness inevitable but also silly. All nations now are necessarily part of world capitalism even though some nations are not developed or

do not thrive. We are all part of one world system. People in power deny the failings of capitalism because they do not know what to do, are not willing to do what it takes, or benefit from the failings. All major political parties participate in the denial. When ordinary people see that their leaders will not face up to reality, they know their leaders are not decent people following the core set of principles, and then ordinary people do not feel bound either.

(6) A democracy assumes that the large majority of people are competent to self-govern. Not only are most people of mixed moral competence, most people are not competent to be citizens in a democracy either. Yet we have to try anyway. Some people are too stupid, ignorant, lazy, or morally inept. Many people are maimed by ideology and religion. Even many professional people and business people are too busy to be informed and therefore too ignorant to be good citizens. Even if all the people who could be prepared were prepared, still a large minority of residents would be too stupid, morally inept, bad, or ruined by ideology; and their incompetence severely distorts politics. Pretending that everybody is automatically competent to be a good citizen only gives scoundrels opportunity and undermines democracy for the people that are competent. But to deny a large group of people participation because of widespread human failings would re-institute tyranny. If modern states did not have other deep problems such as with capitalism, we could probably overlook this contradiction by letting a select group of officials run the state, but we do have deep problems, the problems stir the people, and the people do not always solve the problems well. We have never found how to limit citizenship to qualified people so as to preserve democracy without also undermining democracy at the same time. We have never found how to run a real-world democracy so as not to undermine itself. Even the people that are not qualified to be good citizens can sense this trap and sense they are their own victims. Even bad citizens have been burned by other bad citizens and so know. Qualified good citizens resent the damage that the herd does in the service of bad leaders.

(7) In telling us that we are the depraved heirs of Original Sin, standard Christianity also says that we are not competent for self-government. The same is true for any religion that finds deep failing at the core of humanity such as Buddhism or Islam. Christian churches supported kings when kings claimed only they were competent to rule. Yet now churches support democracy. We cannot believe both that we are so depraved that we must be ruled by kings and that we are now suddenly competent for self-government. One or the other belief must give way. If we believe some people are competent for self-government but others are not, we do not thereby automatically also believe in Original Sin; in fact, the idea that some people are competent for self-government even while many other people are not competent is a strong argument against Original Sin because it denies that Original Sin could be universal. People gave up the idea of Original Sin when they wanted democracy. When people gave up the idea of Original Sin, they also had to give up many of the ideas of standard Christianity that had been merged with the idea of Original Sin, such as the divinity of Jesus.

(8) Jesus has not come back for 2000 years. He will not come back tomorrow. The promised messiah has not appeared for Christians, Jews, or Muslims. I have never met a bodhisattva, at least as they are described in Mahayana sutras. The major Christian churches refuse to accept the obvious fact of Jesus' absence. One implication of his obvious non-return is that we need to act on Jesus' teachings without worrying about whether or not he will return. We need to get on with realistic democracy rather than wait for an alien visitor to save us.

(9) John the Baptist stressed honesty in life, occupation, and in carrying out an office. This we can take directly from religion into modern citizenship. Unfortunately, people only really do it in a few nations, mostly those in Western Europe or descended from them such as Canada.

(10) For Jesus, membership in the Kingdom of God was perhaps the most important goal of this life. With the rise of modern states, and especially democracy, we mix the idea of membership in the Kingdom of God with citizenship in the state. We make the state holy, partly as a way to make our own normal lives holy and partly to use the state to control other people. This is part of the legacy of the old holy Jewish state but we have to be careful because the modern state is not the same. To the extent that being a member of the Kingdom of God first then leads us to be good citizens later, the mixture can be good. When we put the state first, and then see the Kingdom in terms of citizenship in the state, we err. When we substitute citizenship in the state for membership in the Kingdom, we cross the line. When we substitute the state for the Kingdom and we make the state holy, we cross the line. Rather than make the community like the Kingdom, we make the state holy. Conservatives in particular do all this, often without realizing it. PC people have their own version. Being a good citizen and being a member of the Kingdom of God can support each other but the two roles are not the same and cannot be made the same. Being a good citizen is something we do apart from being a member of the Kingdom of God. Many good citizens are not religious. Many religious people are not adept citizens. In particular, we cannot use the state as the primary instrument of our religion or our morality.

(11) Being a good citizen is hard work and takes a lot of time. We hope that being a good citizen also automatically satisfies whatever strenuous effort toward building a better world that Jesus expects of us. We do not want to have to be a saint on top of being a good citizen. In some cases, such as people who devote themselves to public service, being a good citizen is likely enough. For many of us, it is not enough. We have to be a good citizen and we have to do more in accord with what Jesus wanted.

(12) Where do good citizens come from? Schools are important but schools alone are not enough. We need a culture of good citizenship. We need good citizens as role models and to mold more good citizens. Religion was the original source for producing good citizens, and religion can still play a part, but, in the modern world, religion alone cannot produce the culture of good citizenship. Good citizens who are also religious can use their religion to promote good citizenship but they cannot use their religion as a filter to limit good citizenship only to fellow believers.

Despite the value of good citizens to the state, and the value of religion in creating good citizens, the state should not use religion to produce good citizens. The need for good citizens should not call forth any alliance between religion and the state. If the state can create citizens only by calling on a particular religion then it has failed.

Good citizenship does not preclude disagreeing with the state and does not preclude even rebelliousness. In fact, it can require disagreeing sometimes. A good citizen is not a mindless robot of a holy state. A good religious person, such as a follower of Jesus, is not a mindless robot of the state even when the state calls itself Conservative and says it is devoted to minimal government or even when the state says it is the guardian of social justice. Mindless robots of the state are neither good citizens nor good followers of Jesus.

(13) Because democracy is of the people, democracy has fostered the false hope that the state can and should do everything for us. If we cannot solve problems through our own state, then how can we solve them? Who else is there? Government can serve us better in some ways than it has recently in America, such as with realistic limited universal health care and with oversight of economic institutions. The state is the natural agent for big systems such as roads. But the state cannot solve all problems and it cannot do everything for us. Sometimes the state causes problems when it attempts to solve problems. The state should quit interfering in some ways in which it already does too much, such as with drugs and sex. Many problems have to be handled through private action, through charity, and through living privately to a higher moral standard than what is enforced by the state. We need guidance about where to draw the lines.

(14) When faced with deep endemic problems such as with capitalism, we naturally turn to the state, and the tendency is stronger in a democracy. Such problems seem beyond the power of private action, even dedicated organized private action based on a religious commitment for social justice. The state likely has to be the primary agent to take care of the problems caused by unemployment and under employment. But even then we should not expect the state to take care of every aspect of every problem. The state can give unemployed people food and health care but it cannot give them the means to raise families. We have to balance our zeal for social justice with caution about working through the state. Again we need guidance about where to draw lines.

(15) The quest for social justice lends itself to problems of justification and zealous crusading, especially because many problems are deep and do not have obvious solutions. Problems of justification and zealous crusading lend themselves to abuse of religion, social relations, the state, and the balance between state and church. The situation leads people to join groups to serve their own needs for justification rather than because the groups do real good. Because the problems are deep and have no easy solutions, groups do not agree, and oppose each other. Because the zealots often take their cues from religious ideologies, we get intrusion of religious groups into the state, and we break down the separation of church and state. Groups try to capture the state to use as their weapon in fights with other groups. People feel they must join a group, especially when other people join a group or when other groups gain control of the state. We get gangs of zealots focused on one issue rather than clusters of informed citizens doing what is generally best. We have to strive for social justice and at the same time not lapse into self-serving, hurtful, self-righteousness, crusading, and religious power groups. This is not easy. We need guidance in the issues and in how to address the issues.

(16) Religion is not only about giving to charity; it is also about the right kinds of institutions and the right kinds of leaders - even if no religion may determine the institutions and leadership of a democracy. We need guidance about our institutions and leaders. Even in a tyranny, we would need guidance. In a democracy, we need more guidance because ultimately we are the leaders and institutions. Religion has to guide us without taking over the state. Even with religions that are concerned profoundly with personal issues rather than social issues, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, religious leaders have to give the people guidance. Unfortunately, our religious leaders have given us little good guidance. Usually they avoid questions. Sometimes they urge us on a crusade while at other times they effectively urge us to seize the state as a theocracy.

If the state ran well all the time and had no contradictions, this issue probably would not matter much. But the state does have to deal with deep problems. So we need guidance even more, as long as the guidance does not urge zealotry or theocracy. When we don't get good guidance, we mistrust religion in general. We think that religion is not good for anything.

(17) Christian leaders have a special duty to be clear about social justice and the contradictions of modern life because of the Jewish tradition of social justice and Jesus' emphasis on social justice. Most people feel that modern religious leaders have failed in that duty except to support an occasional crusade or to support the state. Their failure amounts to complicity in making the problems worse. We need more than just projects for crusades; we need more than advice to support the state; we need education, clarity, good advice, and good models.

(18) Christian leaders fail more profoundly than neglecting to give us good advice. Much too often, churches support civil authority even when civil authority does not serve the people and even when it is wrong or corrupt. Official Christianity too often ignores the endemic problems of the modern state and of democracy, and the chain of problems that arise such as racism and sexism. Official Christianity chooses which issues to address and which to ignore not on the basis of merit but on the basis of alliance with power or with interest groups. Churches too often need the backing of the state, if not actively through money and power then indirectly through tax exemptions. When religious leaders owe civil leaders then religious leaders are complicit. In that case, all religion is undermined. When the churches and the state collude to mis-serve the people, the people feel lost and abandoned.

(19) In the character of its ideology, its fervor, its tendency to crusade for Justification, and its abuse of the search for social justice, PC is essentially a religion. To the extent PC does not understand endemic problems of the modern state and capitalism, or selects which problems to address and which to ignore on the basis of alliance to power, then it acts like any other church. PC people act much the same as Conservative Christians in many respects.

Before this train of thought becomes a blanket condemnation of institutional Christianity, I want to repeat that standard Christianity does much good and I do not want to debunk it. Some churches advise their members on what the issues are and on how to get informed about the issues without dictating to their members how to think. Many churches devote considerable effort to helping the poor, handicapped, and victims of tragedy. The least of their service is much more than I have done by writing this book. I hope church members carry on without worrying about the issues here. That is one way to be a good member of the Kingdom of God. But these issues need to be raised and faced so that we can avoid problems.