

## 6.08 Jesus, Religion, and the State

This chapter asserts that church and state should be kept separate. Nearly all modern people live in a state and practice religion in a state. Like it or not, we have to think about how to live in a state. We have to think about how to live our religion in a state. For example, nearly all people depend on the state for religious security. We have to think about how to follow Jesus within a state. Too many people use the state as the tool of their self-interest, religion, and morality. In so doing, they corrupt the state and corrupt all religion including their own. We have to learn how to follow our religion within the state without making the state our tool. This chapter omits questions of international relations.

**Synopsis.** Even though some major religion played a role in the foundation of all major states (including Communist states and political correctness), modern states should aim to be secular. The domestic duties of a modern state are to maintain order, maintain a basic level of common decency, and enforce some morals that all people agree on such as “do not murder” and “do not have sex with minors”. For example, the state may ban smoking in public places because smoke is a threat to health. Often the morals that everybody agrees on are also needed for basic order and common decency, such as “do not murder”. The state may carry out projects that lead to general benefit, without creating greater cost than benefit, and without leading the citizens into dependency, such as a system of national roads or regulated banking. The state may address a systemic problem, especially if the problem touches general moral sense. For example, because capitalism has unavoidable minimum unemployment even among willing workers, the state may help people that are inevitably unemployed or poorly employed, such as by providing welfare and health insurance – as long as the state does not encourage too much dependency. This chapter does not enter debate about the general role of the state.

The state should not enforce all morals, not even morals that everybody agrees on such as, “do not lie”. The state is one agent of general morality but the state is not the primary moral agent of life. Some morals do not need to be enforced by the state because people enforce them on their own (do not commit adultery), some are too hard to enforce (do not get drunk), some do not contribute much to general order or to common decency (sexual acts), and some represent particular groups (Sabbath laws for Jews, Christians, and Muslims). The state should not enforce any morals that are not needed for general order, not needed for common decency, are hard to enforce, not generally agreed upon, or generate other hard problems. When the state enforces any morals, it intrudes into life. When the state enforces some morals unnecessarily, it intrudes into life too much. The state should never serve as the moral agent of any one group, such as religious fundamentalists or strident PC people. When the state serves as the agent of one group, it necessarily oppresses other groups and intrudes too much into life. Trying to enforce morals inevitably leads the state to extend its power too far. Once extended, the state rarely withdraws power.

Jesus' teachings fostered the active participation that is needed by citizens in a modern democracy. That attitude toward citizenship and good government is now a part of the political culture of the West and the structure of Western nations. Having been exposed to this role, non-Western states, and religions other than Christianity, adapted the role to their needs and ideas. They made it theirs. While it is useful to know the roots of modern citizenship in Jesus' teachings, it is not useful to stress the roots if to do so annoys people, makes them lesser citizens, or turns them against Jesus and Christians.

If you feel the laws of the modern secular state are too lax for your group, then you should live by stricter laws yourself. Do not try to push your laws on others through the state. Do not expect your children to feel as you do. If you feel that secular-based laws, as they are now, do not support general order, general morality, or common decency, then you can try to change the laws as long as you remain within the scope of secular. If you feel that secular-based laws can never be good enough, and must be lifted to the standards of some religion, then you should consider moving. If you think that secular-based laws are never good enough, and that the moral code of your particular religion would make the laws good enough, then you should think about moving. If you think that secular-based laws are never good enough, some religion has to uplift the laws, and religions have to compete to see which takes control, then you should think about moving. If you try to impose the laws of your religion beyond what is needed for general order, morality, and decency, then you should expect to be thwarted.

**Jesus and Christianity.** The classical Jewish idea of church and state was theocracy. God, state, and the people were one. The priests and the aristocrats administered the state in God's place. Whether they administered the state for the good of the people was irrelevant as long as they did what God said. Fortunately, God did insist on social justice. Because God collectively rewarded obedience and punished disobedience, if the rulers did as God bid, the state as a whole should do well. If the state did well, the people should do well. There was no idea of modern citizenship except as the people participated in the theocracy of the Temple, all people adhered to God's Law, and all people were rewarded or punished.

This is not the idea of a group that was current in the original human hunting-gathering way of life. There was no state in the original human way of life, so there were no ideas about the state and about the relation of people, religion, morality, and the state. Jewish ideas of the state, God, and the people are typical of agricultural states in general. They also differed in important ways. How Jewish ideas are typical and distinct is important but I cannot go into it here. Although modern states are not agricultural, they inherited their ideas from their agricultural precursors, including that the state is collectively punished or rewarded for behavior and the state should implement the morality of a particular religion. Only within the last 300 years have states changed that old basic attitude to the modern secular attitude. Exactly how modern non-agricultural states differ from agricultural states and from Israel is another large topic.

Jewish ideas of God, state, rulers, people, and Law did bring significant advances, such as modern ideas of morality, law, persons, and history. This is an important topic. Please refer to the Bibliography.

You cannot argue out of the conclusion that Israel was an aristocratic theocracy. It is a fact. You cannot argue around it by saying the Jewish version was the true version, was the best version, or was necessary for modern ideas of the state. Traditional Jewish ideas of the state cannot serve as the model for modern states although they can contribute key ideas, and have. Modern states changed from the basic model of Israel. Instead of trying to “get back to Israel” in various devious ways, we should think about how to run the modern state.

Jesus accepted the Jewish ideas current in his time. In some ways, he was right. But in some ways, he was just wrong, at least as the ideas apply to our times. I think it is better to face what he was right and wrong about. Christians cannot accept that he was wrong about anything so they try to avoid this dilemma. To do so, you have to redefine Jesus in ways that I do not believe Jesus would recognize or approve.

Jesus was right that God had used the Israelites to develop ideas of God and to develop a simple and useful morality. Jesus was right in seeing a shift away from collective reward and punishment to a focus on individual responsibility. I hope Jesus was right in seeing Israel as a great moral leader that would inspire other nations to follow the best in religion and morality.

If Jesus felt that Israel would dominate the world politically and militarily, then he was wrong. If Jesus felt there would be a dramatic series of events which would lead to the dominance of Israel and the rule of God then so far Jesus has been wrong.

Jesus was wrong about the close relation between religion and the state. It is possible to have a good state without necessarily having a single religion, especially without necessarily having Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. It might be that most of the people in the state are good religious people, and most of them might even be Jews, Christians, or Muslims, but that does not mean the state should be a religious state based on one of those religions or should be a theocracy. In fact, the state works best, and religions work best, when the state does not try to be the agent of God and when no religion tries to make the state its tool.

I think history has directions, and I think God foresaw the course that life would take on a planet such as ours, but I do not think God has been rewarding and punishing people in general to make them carry history in particular directions. If God did that in the past with Israel, he is not doing that now with any particular nation and he is not doing that now with humanity as a whole. There is now no longer any particular chosen nation leading humanity toward a certain historical point. Now, we have many nations trying to do better and trying to lead their people toward understood goals of freedom, responsibility, and economic security. At any particular time, some particular nation might take a brief leadership role but no particular nation has that role now as Israel might have had it in the past.

God probably does not intervene much in our lives to teach us proper behavior. He probably does not reward and punish us. He set up the world so that it would do so for him, and then let the world do its job.

The fact that Jesus was wrong about the relation of state and religion, and wrong about a big change in the world, does not mean that Jesus was wrong about what is good and bad. Jesus was still a great leader and great prophet. His message is still valid.

**Christian Citizen.** Jesus had an unusual idea of the relation of a follower to his-her group, of the relation of a follower to the movement that Jesus himself began. The roots of Jesus' ideas are not clear, and I do not speculate here. Jesus had more in mind than the usual relation between an Israelite and the state of Israel. Jesus had more in mind than the usual resident-citizen in an Eastern nation such as in Egypt or Babylon. To Jesus, as with the Pharisees, each person in the movement was almost like a citizen-ruler-priest, almost like a priest of the Temple. Each person was equal because each was holy, and vice versa. As long as we do not think this automatically entitles us to run a state along the lines of our own morality, as if we are an instrument of God, this is not such a bad way to think of ourselves and our relation to other people.

When the Church began to organize after Jesus died, it took over his idea of a strong relation between members and the Church as a whole. Every member of the Church was like a priest of the Jewish Temple. I am not arguing that the Church should not have a clergy or that every Christian is a bishop. I am stressing that the relation of Christians to the Church was stronger than the relation of most members to their religious organization or state at the time. (A similar relation might have prevailed between members of "cults" and their "churches" of the time but I cannot go into that here.) Jesus' idea was a relatively new idea. Because it was new, the exact terms of the strong relation, and the exact status of the individual, were not clear, and had to be hammered out over the next two thousand years.

One way in which the ideas became clearer was to mix them with the idea of a citizen in a Greek city state. All members of the Christian Church were like the ruling members of the aristocracy in a Greek city state. All members participated in the Church rites, all had a voice in governing, and none was too superior to others. The Church was not absolutely egalitarian, not even at the start, and so Church members did not expect that. But the ruling aristocratic citizens of a Greek city state were not absolutely equal either, and so it was easy to see parallels. The office of Bishop was powerful but it was not hereditary, like the temporary ruler of Greek city states.

Ideas of membership in the Church merged with ideas of being a citizen in a Greek city state. There the ideas slept until they were revived from time to time, as whenever the West fumbled toward democracy. When the West did fumble toward democracy, it could look toward semi-egalitarian relations in the Church as models. As long as we understand that this Christian model does not commit us toward identity between church and state, then this is a pretty good model of citizenship. It is another legacy of Jesus' good teachings.

**Modern Bad Versions of Ancient Israel.** The developing Church did not rest with Jesus' ideas of a close relation among members of the earliest Church but naturally also took over ideas of Israel and its close relation with God. The developing early Church thought of itself as the New Israel. The biggest difference was that the Church, at first, could not hint at any military-political takeover of the world, and could not stress a close relation between church and state. It had to be very careful of those points in the Roman Empire. Later as Rome diminished and Christianity

took over the West, the Church could claim a close relation between church and state, and it could claim that one day the Church and its states would take over the world. It then transferred Jewish ideas about God, the priests, the Temple, and the state to the Christian Church and its political states. That is about where we stand now.

I am not clear about the official doctrines of major churches now such as the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches. If they still see themselves as the new Israel, then they have to see a close relation between church and state, and have to look forward to the Church and its partner states taking over the world. The churches have to look forward to God collectively punishing any nation that does not vigorously try to follow morality as the particular church defines morality.

If you listen to Right Wing religious leaders in the media such as Pat Robertson, and listen to Right Wing not-so-religious leaders in the media, such as Rush Limbau and Glenn Beck, this ideology of the new Israel, including politics and the military, seems alive and well, even if it is not stated outright in so many words. I still half-laugh and half-cry when I think of Pat Robertson expecting God to send storms and earthquakes against any city in America that supports the teaching of evolution in its schools and/or supports the "gay agenda". I can only cry when I think of churches picketing the funerals of dead American soldiers because they think America is going against God's Laws against homosexuality, and are trying to forestall the collective punishment that they are sure must follow.

America and Christianity are not the only culprits. Almost every European nation has thought of itself in these terms. Many Muslim nations, or Islam collectively, thinks of itself in these terms now. America, Europeans, and Muslims, have done, continue to do, and will do, bad things as a result. This is what makes atheists condemn religion.

Early Christians would not participate in the civic religions of the particular city states or the Roman Empire or the general civic religion of the Empire. Yet the United States now has the equivalent of a civic religion, the Christian churches here enthusiastically embrace it, and they demand of Christians that they participate. The United States does not require that citizens offer a sacrifice to a god but we, the people of the United States, do everything in civic religion short of that demand. Our civic religion consists of Mom, children, business, labor, apple pie, the flag, cars, electronic devices, celebrity, pledges of allegiance, wearing flag pins, extolling the military, and holding elaborate ceremonies on civic holy days such as the Fourth of July. We sacrifice to our civic gods on those days through our parades and gifts and taxes. As long as we carefully make sure people understand the state is not holy, all this civic religion need not be so bad. But people do not understand the state is not holy, and the active participation of the churches in civic religion does not make the distinction clear. I think early Christians would have seen what Americans do as civic religion and would be very wary of it. Christians now embrace what early Christians feared and shunned.

**Sacred Secular States.** The material in this section appears to contradict my desire to keep the state and religion distinct but it does not. It faces some points of reality about human nature that we have to go through to keep our balance.

Much as we might like to found the modern state on a purely rational basis, we cannot. Much as we might like to found morality on a purely rational basis and then use rational morality to found the state, we cannot. All states ultimately rest on a core set of ideas that are sacred and are not up for discussion. These ideas might make some rational sense but that is not why we accept them. We accept them because they make sacred and moral sense. For a modern state, the ideas include democracy, rule of law, individual rights, individual responsibility, privacy, freedom of speech, etc. Even when we can find some rational basis for one of these sacred ideas, as we find a rational basis for the Golden Rule in equality under the law, usually we did not get the ideas through rationality but through a religious teacher. We do not accept ideas such as the Golden Rule because it is so rational but because Jesus taught it to us. We do not accept equality under the law because it is self-evident but because it is an extension of a deeper moral idea that some great teacher taught us, in this case the prophets of Israel who were concerned with social justice and individual responsibility.

This fact does not mean that every state is a hidden theocracy or every state should become an open theocracy. Once we have the deep underlying moral idea we do not have to accept all the tenets of the religion that gave it to us. We can accept the Golden Rule without also accepting that Jesus will return from Heaven to lead a never-ending Jewish state. We can accept the Silver Rule as a basis for good government without also accepting circumcision. We can accept that God leaves signs for us through his creation without also making a pilgrimage to Mecca. We can accept democracy without also having to give offerings to Athena.

We have to do just what political philosophers have been telling us to do since Classical Greece: look at our values, try to harmonize the values, be sensitive to the contradictions, and do the best we can. It helps to be honest that they are values and to acknowledge the source of our values in history and religion.

I believe the values of the modern secular state largely coincide with the large general points of moral logic that evolved as part of human sentient-moral nature: applies equally, the Golden Rule, empathy, and respect similarities and differences. Modern states do not ideally embody those values but they do best represent those values in our times. Future times might see other situations. I doubt that any particular religion, religiously based morality, or church, shows these values better than a successful modern secular state. I am not saying that evolution aimed to produce the modern state in some kind of metaphysical plot, or that the modern state is the physical embodiment of evolution as Jesus is supposed to be the physical embodiment of God. I do not praise the modern state in this chapter because it goes along with my ideas of the inherent tendencies of evolution but because I have used my evolved mind to figure out what seems best to me in the conditions under which I live. I do not think I surreptitiously projected my ideals of the modern secular state backward into evolution so that I could find them again and use them to praise the modern secular state. I cannot go further into this topic here.

**Ideal Moral Groups.** The state is not a giant band of hunter-gatherers. The state is not a giant small community. The state is not the family or household writ gigantic. The state is not a giant

church. The state is something else. We need to be careful using images of ideal communities to guide our thought about the state.

In the original human condition, human communities approached, but did not achieve, groups of self-selected good guys. Even now the human ideal of community is much like a group of self-selected good guys. It is only natural to think of the state as a giant community of self-selected good guys. We can use that image as one ideal to think about the state but the state is not a giant community of self-selected good guys, and we should keep in mind how they differ.

Religious-moral-political-economic small subgroups within states think of themselves as self-selected good guys, as better than the state in general, and as better than nearly all other small groups within the state. "We are good; we are the best; everybody should try to be like us; and the state should be us writ large." Their tendency to think that way, and some of the tactics they use to get that way, were probably inherited from original human groups but have been intensified by life as a subgroup within a larger modern state. The way of life of a subgroup within the state is not the same as the original human life as self-selected groups of good guys and is not the same as the state as a whole. We should not follow them as models of the state. We should not think of the state as a labor union, church, business firm, business organization, political party, PAC, or any other group writ large.

People in original human groups of self-selected good guys liked to think they shared enough of morality, religion, and ideas so that they could always understand each other and could always get along. They were not as diverse as a modern secular state but they were not all alike in ideas, ideals, morality, or religion. I guess that nearly all original human groups were more diverse than most small churches in the United States, and might have been more diverse than the official doctrine of any large church too. Original humans wanted people to think alike enough to be get along but they just did not care about making people think uniformly in the same way that modern groups do. The modest tendency toward uniformity in original human groups might give power to the tendency toward uniformity in subgroups in a modern state but we should not let our natural tendency toward uniformity in small groups drive our image of uniformity in the modern state.

Original groups had, and small groups now have, enforcers of behavior. The enforcers took an active role, likely more active than we would like modern people to play. Probably they did not enforce much through physical force but mostly through gossip, suggestion, behavior, inclusion, and exclusion, much as we have among small groups today. Modern people inherited the role of enforcers, and we intensify the role in subgroups in the state. Modern states also need agents to look after general order, decency, and morality; but we do not need moral police or the thought police. The modern state should be more lax than small groups.

**Fighting Bad Invaders.** Recall that self-selected groups of good guys are vulnerable to bad people within them and bad people without. It is easy to take advantage of people who always play by the rules and who give everybody the benefit of the doubt many times. Taking advantage is what people do who wish to use a successful secular state as the tool of their religion. Using

morality itself as their tool, they invade the state from within, like bad people invading a group of self-selected good guys.

When the state already is primarily secular and already reasonably successful, then the advice given above to be open-minded still stands. But that is not the case as much as we need. Too often, the state already has been invaded by self-interest groups that use morality and religion. Too often, the subgroups already wield enough power so they cannot be controlled by rational decency. Since the early 1960s, and especially since the 1980s, this has been so in America. What then? I can't give much good advice.

Unfortunately, craziness often works against other craziness. Commitment works, and craziness is a kind of commitment. When we face crazy people with some power, we become crazy too. We push our religion and morality to the exclusion of other ideas and without compromise. We use the state as the tool of our way of life. We see all compromise as betrayal. We redefine common good, common decency, and general morality to coincide with our view of morality and to exclude other views. We say we are only promoting the general good when really we promote our ideas in the fight against others. Probably, the other groups, the invaders, have already done this. We see them as immoral invaders, and that is how they see us. Even if people point out our fault, we still feel justified because other groups already did it first. As I wrote in late 2011 and early 2012, several times the Tea Party had brought the United States to a halt based on this mentality.

Jesus advised us not to resort to forceful craziness. He advised using kindness even in the face of craziness and power, even if kindness got you killed and even if it temporarily set you're your group and your cause. He relied on God to set things right in the end if kindness did not work now. You have to decide if you can follow Jesus here, and, if not, what you and your cause will become.

**State as Kingdom of God.** Throughout this book, I have urged people to be good citizens, and I sometimes implied that being a good citizen was one way to act properly in the Kingdom of God. That is true, but it tends to foster some mistakes, and I need to make sure nobody makes them.

First, the state is not the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is not the state. That is what I have argued throughout this chapter. A good citizen of the Kingdom of God does not aim to make the state a theocracy. We cannot turn the state into the Kingdom of God. We cannot turn the Kingdom of God into a political state. All that thinking is idolatry. We should not think that the Kingdom of God has a right to use the state. The Kingdom of God is something apart from the state. A good state would have many of the same goals as the Kingdom of God and would tend to breed the same kind of people as would want to live in the Kingdom of God, but, even so, the state and the Kingdom are not the same. The state would do well to learn from good people in the Kingdom of God, Christians and from other religions too, but the state cannot pattern itself after those people only. Get clear about the Kingdom first and then you can more easily get clear about its relations to the state.

Second, we should not think that being a good citizen of the state is always enough to make us a good citizen of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes it is, but often it isn't. This is another version of identifying the state and the Kingdom of God. Just because we are an informed rational voter does not mean we are automatically a good citizen of the Kingdom of God and that we don't have to do anything else. Just because we have spent a lifetime in service to the state does not have to mean we have also been a good citizen of the Kingdom of God, although I am inclined to think God would be favorably disposed to seeing it that way. You have to assess your situation, and the situation of the state, to decide what is best.

Third, we should not think that being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God automatically makes us a good citizen of the state. Plenty of people with good natures make lousy citizens of the state. It is two different skill sets. Find out what you are good at, work at what you need to make better, and make up your mind.

**Morality Tales.** About the time of Jesus, the Roman Emperor Augustus (Octavian) Caesar declared that people had to live in stereotypically standard Roman families and had to behave according to unrealistic idealized Roman family values, much like idealized stereotyped modern family values. Urban Roman citizens were not marrying and producing children as they had in the past, and Augustus Caesar was worried that the noble Roman way of life would die out under the wave of modernization and new radical religions. People had to get married, have children, and live in the right kind of family households. They had to understand the Roman legacy and worship traditional gods. Augustus Caesar was highly revered, genuinely popular, and quite powerful. People agreed with his policy in theory. Yet Augustus Caesar failed miserably in his attempt to legislate family values. People just would not do as he ordered but instead lived the kind of lives that worked for them in the new urbanized empire.

Before Constantine de facto made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire after 340 CE (AD), Christians had already done well in the supposedly decadent secular Empire. Before Constantine, the Roman Empire had seen some bad times, but was on the rise again. Both Christians and the Empire had done well while Christians were not in power. After Christians came to power, the Empire slid into the "Dark Ages", and remained dark for a thousand years. Everybody was worse off when the Christians gained power, even the Christians. In fairness, the slide did not begin right away, and Christians did not alone cause the slide. But the fact that the slide happened after Christians got power makes an important point: when a religious group gains power over the state, things do not always get better, not even for the religious group that gains power. Power is not always a gift from God. God does not always give political power to his religious group. Having political power does not mean you are on the right side of God. Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.

Christians have not always wanted the state to enforce their morality and religion. Sometimes they are content to live within the state as long as the state does not persecute them, living by a stricter moral code than the state in general, serving as an example for other groups, recruiting through their example, and recruiting through their ability to offer financial aid and social security. Christians in the Empire lived with prostitution, abortion, infanticide, animal sacrifice, drug use, slavery, racism, sexism, homosexuality, gambling, drinking, promiscuity, debauchery, military

service, big differences in wealth and power, diverse religions, and many other behaviors that Christians considered sins and still do. Other than Augustus' brief failed interlude, most Roman laws were not concerned with what we think of as moral life and family values but with property and social order. Under those conditions, Christians thrived as much as any other group. Until Constantine, Christians did not try to change the Roman laws or the Roman state. Christians first followed Roman laws, and then followed their own laws on top of Roman laws. Some Christian groups live in the United States this way now, such as the Amish. It is a simple idea, yet people often are not satisfied but still wish to impose their life on everybody else too.

If you want to be politically active in a modern state, do so primarily as a citizen of the state who is concerned with the general welfare and general order of the state. Do not act primarily as a religious person using the state as an instrument of your own religious ideas and morality. If you can limit yourself, in the long run you will serve both the state and your religion best.

American core principles require the state to take some action for general order and decency but do not require the state to become involved in many aspects of daily life. Our core principles require the state to keep out of most aspects of life. The state is primarily an instrument of order, basic general good, and common simple moral decency; it is not primarily an instrument of any greater morality; it is not an instrument for the morality of any particular religion; and it is not even an instrument for the full morality of the people in general.

As with the early Christians in Rome, our morality does not have to coincide with the general morality enforced by the state. We have to think about which of our morals have to be enforced by the state. If any of our morals is not necessary for public order, then we are better off not using the state to enforce it. Instead, we can live more strictly according to our morals within the state and let other people live as they wish. I lived in Alabama in 2008. Alabama does not have a lottery because a small but powerful minority considers it immoral. Most Alabamans seem to like to gamble, are happy to go to Mississippi for casinos, to dog tracks, to casinos run by Native Americans, and to places where bingo machines operate. To any objective observer, the bingo machines are like slot machines. The government was fighting with a casino about whether the casino was breaking the law with its bingo machines. In the long run, it might be easier to accept some gambling than to spend resources enforcing the morals of a minority. If some people do not wish to gamble, they need not. We only have to think how much gambling, and what kinds of gambling, are a real threat to public order.

Some moral issues do demand action, and sometimes action can only happen through the state, as when America ended slavery. Even in these cases, we have to be careful. Some people think homosexuality is so bad it has to be stopped, and the state has to be the agent to stop it. In contrast, some people think repression of gays is so bad it has to be stopped, and the state has to be the agent to stop it. That we can have two opposed points of view on the same topic, with both groups calling on the state as their agent, should make us stop to think really hard before we conclude that any behavior is so morally bad that it must be controlled for everybody and that the state has to be the agent of our morality. I am not saying there are no such serious moral issues – there are – I am only saying we need to be careful. We should consider other modes of action

besides the state. If the state does have to intervene, we should consider alternatives other than enforcing a particular morality. I discuss gay marriage later in the book.

In the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, Agent Smith was the Devil. Agent Smith could not stand the Matrix world. He needed everybody to be like him. Only when everybody was just like him could Agent Smith feel comfortable in the Matrix. He found a way to make everybody like him after he merged with Neo. Citizens in a modern state too often act like Agent Smith. It is natural to want other people to serve our interests and natural to want to control them. One way to control them is to make them like us. We do not feel fully comfortable unless other people are under control or unless other people are exactly like us. Like Agent Smith, modern people found a way too: use the state as a tool of control by invoking moral indignation. When people do not act according to our morals, use the state to make them act that way. When enough people act as we want them to act, then we are in control and successful. When enough people are moral clones of us, we are safe. We ought not to act like Agent Smith.

When the first group has control of the state, it uses moral indignation to control others, and this first group feels good. It praises the state as the natural agent of all morality, meaning its own particular morality. Later, when a second group takes over the state, it uses moral indignation to persecute the first group. Then the second group feels good and praises the state as the natural agent of all morality, meaning its particular morality. When any particular group comes to power, it uses supposed differences in morality as excuses to oppress rivals and to exert general control. It uses morality as a tool of its power. After the first group lost power, too late, it knew the danger of using the state as a moral tool, of anybody’s morality. Then it appealed to the second group for sanity and moderation but the second group would not listen. This is not a made-up story. It happened scores after the Reformation when Protestants took over from Roman Catholics and when Roman Catholics took over again from Protestants. It happened when one Protestant group took over from another Protestant group or one Catholic group took over from another. This theme dominated the French Revolution. It happened after World War I with the Treaty of Versailles when the imposed penalty on Germany paved the way for Nazis. It happens now in America every time the President and Senate have to fill a Supreme Court seat. It happens when we fight over abortion or gay rights. It happens when we fight over whether to legalize marijuana. It happens daily in Africa when one ethnic group seizes power and terrorizes other ethnic groups. It will happen to PC people if Fundamentalist Christians take over the United States and will happen to Fundamentalist Christians if strident PC people take over. If we accept that we want to use the state as the instrument of our power and morality, then maybe we can overcome our desire. We would all be better off.