Caesar's Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government
Michael Cromartie, ed.
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Caesar's Coin Revisited is an edited collection of four conference papers which address the Christian view of the role and limits of government. Each paper is followed by one formal response, and by brief comments made by conference participants. The collection opens with Luis E. Lugo's "Caesar's Coin and the Politics of the Kingdom: A Pluralist Perspective," and is followed by "A Catholic Response" from James V. Schall, S. J. Lugo begins with a discussion of the passage from the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus says "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Jesus' words are intended to negate both the absolutist claims of Caesar to authority and divinity, and the Zealots' argument that "the claims of human government are illegitimate" (p. 4). Lugo notes that Jesus' death on the cross resulted from His claim to Messianic sovereignty, a claim which has practical consequences. One of the consequences is that Christians must reject all forms of totalitarian ideology, including the ideology of nationalism, because they "arrogantly intrude upon the sovereign prerogative that is God's alone" (p. 6).

Christian opposition to Caesar's efforts to fuse and confuse civil and religious power places Christians among the best citizens of a country: "Their very confession serves as a bulwark that keeps the state within its proper limits, limits it must scrupulously respect if it wishes to free itself to carry out its legitimate task" (pp. 7–8).

In his discussion of "the things that are Caesar's" Lugo identifies God's covenant with Noah rather than the Old Testament theocracy as the scriptural basis for a political community which protects both confessional and institutional pluralism. Jewish thought, the Reformed tradition, natural law, and the Second Vatican Council provide principled support for confessional and institutional pluralism, and religious freedom as defining characteristics of a political community which conforms to Biblical norms (pp. 9–13). In the pluralist tradition expressed both in Abraham Kuyper's "sphere sovereignty" and the Catholic concept of subsidiarity, our obligations to God include rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's while rendering to the many non-political authorities such as marriages, families, churches,
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schools, and businesses what is theirs. We follow the example of Jesus by acknowledging that there are things which rightfully belong to Caesar even as all things remain subject to the sovereignty of God (pp. 14-22). James Schall's response suggests that we should not rest easy with the aspects of diversity or pluralism which represent the political affirmation of things which are simply wrong. Here, says Schall, we are challenged "to resolve diversity in truth" (p. 27).

Jean Bethke Elshtain's essay on "Caesar, Sovereignty, and Bonhoeffer" discusses the development of the concept of sovereignty which lies at the heart of the codification of the nation-state in the mid-seventeenth century. Elshtain concludes, "The Sovereign God gets displaced in the early modern theory of sovereignty, taking up residence at a much greater remove than he had for medieval Europeans, where God's sovereignty was incessantly enjoined as a brake on the king's designs" (p. 49). The centuries which follow lead to a concept of sovereignty which is not only indivisible and inalienable, but also "preoccupied with the notion of a unified will...one final will" (p. 50). This concept of sovereignty is rationalized by a misinterpretation of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms suggesting that the divine and the worldly kingdoms are completely severed, and that the secular world is emancipated from the heavenly kingdom. In a terrible irony, the Enlightenment's deification of man's sovereignty over himself converges with such notions of sovereignty to create totalitarian societies in which "human beings begin to devour themselves" (pp. 51-52). It is this concept of sovereignty, of what is to be rendered to Caesar, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer resists with his very life.

Bonhoeffer's own view of sovereignty includes the recognition of a "duty of obedience" on the part of each person which is not vitiated by the fact that government has its origin in the Fall. This duty is binding "until government directly compels him to offend against the divine commandment, that is to say, until govern-

ment openly denies its divine commission and thereby forfeits its claims" (pp. 54-55). The balance which is struck in Bonhoeffer's reflections on "rendering unto Caesar" leads Elshtain to conclude that regimes which promote rabid nationalism, prevent the free exercise of human responsibility, collude in evil deeds, or worship power and accept no limits on their "sovereign designs" are at odds with Bonhoeffer's understanding of legitimate authority (p. 56).

Wilfred McClay's response complements Elshtain's essay with a lengthy quote taken from Bonhoeffer's The Cost of Discipleship. There Bonhoeffer emphasizes the Christian's duty to "live under authority as a doer of good, let him live in the world as a member of the Body of Christ, the New Humanity... Let the Christian suffer only for being a member of the Body of Christ" (pp. 62-63). The comments of conference participants weave back and forth through applications of Bonhoeffer's understanding of sovereignty to American social order. Most useful here are the comments of Kenneth Grasso, contributor of the next essay, who notes Tocqueville's warning about a society of sovereign individuals being fertile ground for an omniscient state. Grasso concludes:

"what I kept thinking of was the famous Nazi propaganda film Triumph of the Will. That is exactly the phenomenon [Elshtain] is talking about... [W]e've seen the emergence of an intellectual universe in which only will exists. In this universe, the question then becomes simply, Whose will do you absolutize?" (pp. 76-77).

Grasso's "Man, Society, and the State: A Catholic Perspective" and Max Stackhouse's "A Protestant Response" provide an especially fruitful exchange of ideas for ACE readers. Grasso's essay is a primer on Catholic social thought. It is too lengthy to summarize adequately here, but some key points can be identified. Grasso enumerates the four principles which undergird the transformation of Catholic
social thought in the twentieth century: communitarianism, perfectionism, pluralism, and personalism. The first two principles enable the Council to “speak of the common good in terms of the furtherance of human perfection—understood as the achievement by man of his ‘true and full humanity’” (p. 82). It is the latter two principles, however, which undergo an extraordinary renewal at the Council. The fundamental dignity of the human person and its meaning for social and political order have been made “more adequately known” through the quiet ferment of the Gospel. It is clear that man’s personhood carries inherent moral responsibilities which “create rights vis-a-vis government, and demand that limits be placed on the scope of government” (p. 87). The Council also concludes that the essential duties of government include protecting and promoting these rights and the pluralist structure of society embodied in the principle of subsidiarity. Finally, the Council recognizes freedom as “the political method par excellence” (p. 88).

The concept of the common good remains intact in Catholic social teaching because while the government has to limit its intrusiveness in people’s lives, it also bears a moral responsibility to promote conditions which are conducive to the development of the human person. This is largely a subsidiary responsibility to promote conditions in which people can do this for themselves. According to Grasso,

“what the Council does is wed a perfectionist theory of politics to a theory of limited government. The result is...a state which is sharply limited in its power, yet dedicated to the promotion of human excellence. There is no inconsistency between these two commitments, because it is the moral order itself, and the pluralist nature of the society whose common good it exists to serve, that demand a limiting of the state’s scope and power” (p. 94).

After contrasting the Council’s position with various forms of liberalism, Grasso examines Pope John Paul II’s contributions to Catholic social teaching. Here Grasso plows familiar ground regarding the Pope’s embrace of a “free economy” rooted in respect for the dignity of the human person. Grasso concludes with a discussion of American culture’s growing moral nihilism and the erosion of the intermediary institutions of civil society, especially the family. The decline of the covenant tradition, the constitutional-legal tradition, and classical republicanism as sources of self-understanding has left a void which cannot be filled by either branch of liberalism, one celebrating economic freedom and the other the necessity of state intervention in markets. Both branches are rooted in the absolutized sovereign will of the individual and result either in nihilism or in the “solution” of an absolutized sovereign state. Catholic social thought can fill the void in this “individual-state-market grid” which, in John Paul II’s words, suffocates the individual “between the two poles represented by the state and the marketplace.” Catholic social thought “integrates its doctrine of human rights and human freedom into a theory of politics broad enough to encompass a recognition of the social dimensions of human existence, the demands of the objective moral order, and the conditions of human flourishing” (p. 110).

Max Stackhouse’s “Protestant Response” is broadly supportive of Grasso but takes issue with his treatment of liberalism. Stackhouse describes a Protestant non-teleological metaphysics of the human person which is rooted in the “advocacy of a basic freedom of the individual soul” (p. 117). It is deeply enmeshed in the institutions of American liberal democracy, is a part of the inheritance of the Reformation tradition, and according to Stackhouse shares several key features with Catholic social teaching. These include holy living as the purpose of freedom, the striving “toward the unattainable goal of perfection in living the Christian life,” and an appreciation of the importance of voluntary associations and
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their theological foundation in the model of the covenant. While arguing that Protestantism typically makes a stronger case for civil society and questions the view that "authority is needed to guide the energies of all toward the common good," Stackhouse does find important common ground between Protestants and Catholics on the question of what we should "render unto Caesar." Stackhouse explains,

The Answer is: whatever it properly requires to maintain those forms of law and order that (a) preserve the dignity of each as a potentially free and reasonable person able to be converted, (b) preserve the multiple and differentiated institutions of society in which people may freely found various associations, and (c) accomplish both without trying to control the purposes of every person or group to make them all converge with the state's own ends (pp. 122–23).

In "The Necessity of Limited Government" Doug Bandow presents the libertarian view of the scriptural admonition to "render unto Caesar," and draws strong but qualified praise from Glen Tinder and a spirited exchange among conference participants. Bandow argues that Scripture assigns government the task of protecting citizens "from the sinful depredations of other sinful human beings, particularly by combating violence, theft, and fraud, and by promoting an impartial standard of justice" (pp. 144). The role of "the state as neutral arbiter and protector" appears throughout Scripture but does not include the promotion of the modern notion of "social justice." It focuses on process rather than outcome. "[B]iblical justice," according to Bandow "guarantees a fair civil government in a culture in which the wealthy and powerful recognize their obligation—ultimately to God—to help those in need" (p. 146). The state is to prevent predatory behavior, but attempts "to enforce moral, social, and economic norms like those of the Old Testament" are beyond the government's abilities, and invite the corruption of civil authority and the creation of the "idol state" (pp. 147–150).

Tinder's response admits the validity of "Bandow's excellent generalizations" and seeks to protect them from oversimplification (p. 167). According to Tinder, Bandow's failure to emphasize constitutionalism as the heart of the idea of limited government leads to at least three "false inferences:" that the welfare state represents an egregious evil "rather than imprudence," that the principle of limited government makes us either anarchists or libertarians, and that it justifies an "idealization of free markets" (pp. 163–66). Tinder characterizes as "conspicuously untrue" the claim that examples from Scripture support the view that unfairness in market transactions usually results from coercion facilitated by state intervention (p. 166). In fairness to Bandow, some of the examples cited may be construed to imply the use of authority to negate the intended effects of a contract, e.g. Ezekiel 18:12 and James 5:4-6 (see also Deuteronomy 24:14–15), but Tinder's point is well taken. The search for common ground among conference participants is poignant but respectful.

Caesar's Coin Revisited provides a challenging and instructive reflection on the meaning of Christ's teaching that we are to "render unto Caesar...." Especially revealing for economists are the consequences of abandoning the "individual-state-market grid" as a framework for addressing questions about political-economic order which arise in Scripture. It requires us to address the meaning and relevance for our own inquiries of such concepts as personhood, sovereignty, and the common good. Caesar's Coin Revisited points us in that direction.