

Theology and the law of the land

Basic considerations and definitions

A society is a group of dependent and interdependent individuals, such that the decisions of one member have consequences for other members, whether immediately or through intermediary decisions. Each individual pursues his **particular good**, which can otherwise be termed as their “quest for happiness”.¹

The relationships within a society are termed **altruistic, cooperative or exploitative**. Cooperative relationships are so named because they involve two or more people who work together for their mutual benefit. Exploitative relationships are those where one person or group extracts benefit from the other without the other receiving just compensation. Altruistic relationships are those where a person or group freely gives of his/its resources to another group without expectation of reward or compensation. For a relationship to be truly altruistic, it requires both interior and exterior freedom on the part of the giver – if either is lacking, the relationship risks being exploitative.

Justice, which is a virtue, is classically defined as rendering to others according to their due. It is the virtue which is directly opposed to exploitation. Its proper establishment depends on a proper understanding of human rights and social duties.

In order to promote individual happiness, a society must promote the **common good** of the members of the society, so that their common action creates social conditions which support the individuals in the pursuit of their particular good. The first component of the common good is the establishment of public justice, so that relationships are (at a minimum) cooperative rather than exploitative.² As a next level, it is necessary to coordinate human activity for the purpose of maximizing the common good. Finally, the common good also contains institutions that encourage altruistic behaviour (which, by definition, cannot be imposed absolutely).³

The specific components of the common good, and the balance between those components, can change with time (for example, as technologies advance, as populations migrate, as climate changes, etc.) Discerning the existence and nature of these changes, as well as how best to react, is a rational exercise. As such, societies look to particularly gifted individuals to act as **leaders**. A leader is someone who is invested with the public trust, thanks to his or her integrity and capacity of discernment and communication regarding what is required for the common good.

Over time, a process of individual and collective experimentation establishes that particular courses of action are proven solutions to particular problems. Gradually, these **customs** become commonly accepted patterns of behaviour that are trusted as being wise. While

¹ The destructive power of vengeance, the requirement to love ones enemies.

² This includes both relationships within the society, as well as those without (i.e. a right of self-defense).

³ It can be imposed relatively, in that a person may freely choose to give another an authority of command over his or her life. This general grant of authority does provide some right to command altruistic behaviours, although the true altruism does depend on an ongoing grant of said authority (i.e. it must be possible for the individual to “take it back”).

they possess great social legitimacy, however, customs emerge slowly. When the pace of the emergence of social questions begins to outstrip the pace of the establishment of new customs, societies begin to vest their leaders with **authority**. Authority is here understood as a right to command obedience without those being commanded having to necessarily immediately assent to the justice of the command.

Why might social change accelerate, thereby requiring the establishment of authority? There are many possible reasons, one of the most common being an external threat of some kind. In the event of unanticipated natural disasters, for example, populations crave authority and are willing to assent to it quite readily. Another common sort of external threat, unfortunately, comes from social groups who seek to exploit a given society. Authority is therefore often vested in those able to coordinate a collective self-defense against external threats, or to root out and punish internal threats.

It is also possible that social change in some instances is not actually accelerating, but that the society in question has become so large and complex that the process of custom development slows down to a pace below that required to meet the challenges of social change. In such cases a society begins to establish **laws**, which are positive rational precepts established by a legitimate authority. Laws, by definition, are general rules meant to cover a multitude of particular (but similar) situations. At its best, a law is an attempt to more rapidly codify and communicate the wisdom needed to meet a particular social challenge, and because a law is established by an authority, it benefits from the general assent given by the members of society to that authority without needing to be specifically “proven” first. Of course, the relative wisdom of particular laws may continue to be debated, and the pace of social change will always continue. Laws therefore are always subject to a process of revision, being replaced by other subsequent laws. Of course, some laws establish precepts of proven long-term social value, and as such they may gradually achieve the level of legitimacy of a custom.⁴

Laws, on their own, are not enough: they must be a social mechanism to establish them, as well as a means to interpret and enforce them. The term **government** refers to that set of institutions which accomplishes these functions in a given society. At its core, a government consists of those leaders who possess proper authority to establish, interpret, and execute laws; in theory, this proper authority may even be vested in a single individual. Such authority, however, can (and typically must be) delegated to others in some fashion. It is all these individuals, taken together, who constitute a government. A government is said to be **sovereign** when it does not recognize any other superior level of government whose laws must be obeyed (true sovereignty, of course, being something that must be effectively defended). Social units whose governments are not sovereign are termed **intermediate bodies**, in that they group together individuals for some set of common objectives, but which are in turn subject to a higher level of social order.

The term **corruption** refers to a situation in which those who possess authority do not exercise that authority for the building of the common good, but rather use that authority for exploitative purposes.

⁴ A good example of this principle is the form of government of Great Britain. Great Britain does not actually have a written constitution: its form of government depends on particular customs that are well-established in the social consciousness of the British people.

The general position of Christianity regarding these basic considerations

Christianity, as a religion, has a particular vision of social morality and structure that depends on its vision of the dignity and nature of the human person. These religious ideas form the basis of all social critique brought by Christianity regarding law and government.

The social nature of human beings

Christianity, in general, sees human beings as being intrinsically social in nature, rooted in the concepts of mutual need and mutual gift. One of the earliest chapters in the Bible teaches this lesson, as it describes the creation of man and woman:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2: 18-25)

The fact that "it is not good for the man to be alone" reflects a deep need within human nature for social contact, in order that a person might achieve his greatest possible personal good. However, the fact that human nature was created by God with this profound need cannot be seen as a justification for exploitation. The nakedness of the man and the woman is a symbol of the total gift of self for each other: nothing is "hidden" within their relationship.

Christianity believes that this intrinsic social nature within man is more than a biological accident: it reflects something of the Divine Nature itself. Christianity believes that God is a Trinity of divine Persons, i.e. the one God is at the same time an eternal "society". It is both as individuals and as a society that human beings reflect this divine nature:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1: 26-27)

This Biblical passage refers to not just the individuals, but indeed the original couple, *as a couple*, as being patterned after the divine image. Human society, therefore, *as a society*, is called to live in such a way that it reflects the nature of God.

A key element to add to this discussion is that God is not understood as being apart from human society. Human beings, if they truly are stamped with the divine nature, are called to relationship not only with each other but with God. God, therefore, is part of human society, as a full and active member. Indeed, the term "human society" is somewhat of a misnomer: there is only "person society", with 3 divine members and countless angelic and human members. God-

as-Trinity is at the centre, and all other humans are grafted into the life of that Trinitarian “society”.

This understanding of human society in general informs the understanding of Christians regarding the nature of the Church. The term “Church” does not refer principally to buildings or governing institutions, but rather to a particular form of human society. Christians believe that God has come in person, through Jesus Christ, to establish a new society (the “Kingdom of God”) which will live according to the ideal pattern envisaged in the original plan of creation. Faith in Jesus, therefore, is not merely a person choice to be lived personally, but one which necessarily opens one up to living in this new society (which is also known as the “Body of Christ”). It is also not merely an assent to live according to a way of life brought by Jesus, or else he would merely be another form of prophet. To acknowledge Jesus as Son of God is to acknowledge that Jesus is actually the very principle of social communion itself, as he therefore becomes the gateway for all rational creatures (particularly humans, but also angels) to enter into communion with the Trinity.

Dependence and independence

While Christianity does see the development of our natural human powers as a genuine good, Christianity does not believe that the lack of such powers represents a flaw that diminishes the degree of human dignity. Within the Christian spiritual vision, all human beings must recognize their profound interdependence which can never be overcome. The quest for total independence, which is typically accompanied by a horror of being dependent on others, is actually a subtle perversion of this good desire to develop our natural powers. At its worst, this illusion of independence is actually a form of idolatry:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3: 1-5)

The man and woman eat of the fruit because they wish to develop a natural power (knowledge), but without reference to the other member of their primitive society (i.e. without reference to God). By becoming “like God” they hope to be emancipated from their dependence upon him, despite the fact that they are living in a natural paradise free from danger or need.

Christianity therefore sees personal development as something that is intrinsically tied to social development. The reason we should pursue personal development is to better pursue our relationships with others and with God. In other words, it is meant to develop and expand our capacity to love. Given this reality, dependence can even be seen as a social good. Certainly, any form of human weakness that diminishes our capacity to love others in a concrete way is something that should be overcome if possible. At the same time, however, such weaknesses are meant as occasions for others to love us and to put that love into practice through concrete action. The compassion that arises from witnessing the weakness of others is not a defect of human nature, but rather a gift to help humans live the love necessary for full self-actualization.

The weakness present in some members of society is a constant challenge for us to overcome the subtle idolatry of independence.

Particular good, common good and the natural law

Christianity believes that there is a fundamental orientation towards the future present in human nature. The memories of the past are to be treasured as sources of wisdom and (hopefully) joy, but living exclusively in the past is ultimately unhealthy. This is not simply because times change and human beings must change with them, but because human beings have an infinite capacity for self-development. Living in the past negates the possibilities this self-development offers; stagnation is typically not offered as a model for human life! Human life is therefore fundamentally oriented towards a particular good, which is pursued *ad infinitum*, for the possibilities of human existence are endless.

The term “particular good”, however, must be understood in a balanced way. Christianity believes, as already shown, in a fundamental unity of human nature, such that there are certain elements of the particular good of individuals which will be the same for all human beings. All humans need to sleep, for example, so receiving proper rest is a particular good which is universal. At the same time, however, there may be particular goods which are not distributed uniformly across all members of the human race. For example, some individuals may be particularly gifted artists, and so therefore they feel a particular drive to create works of beauty – while other individuals may instead have a gift at organization, or a gift of teaching, or a gift of athleticism and sports. The fact that human beings both share a common nature and are interdependent prevents these elements from being in contradiction.

The term “common good” is a somewhat more subtle concept. It does not refer to “universal elements of individuals’ particular good” but rather to a set of social conditions (wealth, social equity, access to opportunity, peace, social institutions, etc.) which are necessary for individuals to be able to best pursue their individual particular good. A good example is a university. Universities exist, in part, to offer educational opportunities for others to better “pursue their dreams”. A university does not define what the particular dream of a student should be, but rather offers a collective resource to help all students, whatever their dreams, to be able to better pursue them.

The expression “natural law” refers to certain behaviours or interdictions which arise naturally and logically from the requirements of the particular and common good. In some cases, knowledge of the natural law seems almost instinctual (such as the profound sense within children that sexual abuse against them is wrong) while in other cases it must be deduced through the use of reason. Indeed, it is even possible to get the two confused: for example, people sometimes claim that they possess some sort of intrinsic drive which justifies particular behaviours (pedophiles, for example, often engage in such rationalizations), when in fact the use of reason can demonstrate that the actions that would result from such drives would harm the particular and/or common good. The reverse can also be true. In either case, the consequences of failing to live up to the requirements of the natural law are serious, in that it eventually stunts the possibility to live some element of the particular good. Individuals who stunt their capacity to live their individual particular good is bad enough, but when the case involves a failure to live up to the natural law that flows from the common good the consequences are typically more severe. Such societies tend to experience social divisions, as groups of people seek to defend

their natural rights in the face of being “shut out” of the common good in some way. At its worst, such divisions lead one side to dehumanize the other, so that, through the denial of the full human nature of the other, the cutting off of one group from the common good can be justified.

With regards to the laws established by God, such as in the form of the Ten Commandments, Christianity believes that such divine laws never contradict the natural law that arises from the requirements of human nature. Because human reason can get easily side-tracked in its attempt to deduce the content of the natural law, however, Christians believe that God has graciously gifted human beings with the elements of a moral code to help make explicit which is merely implicit in human nature.⁵

Forms of relationship and theories of social structure

The preceding major section mentioned three forms of social relationships: altruistic, cooperative, and exploitative. Every person has experienced some form of such relationships, but the question often arises: which form of relationship is the most “natural” for man?

Thomas Hobbes, the famous English social philosopher, argued that a group of humans reduced to what he called the “state of nature”, without a supporting social structure, would become barbaric.⁶ In his work *Leviathan*, he put forward the idea that society would be in a constant state of internal war, with everybody against everybody else. In his words, life would be “solitary, nasty, brutish, and short”. Hobbes clearly believed that the fundamental form of human relationship was exploitative, and that other forms of relationship existed only because they were imposed by some authority that had sufficient power to “force” others to be good. Order, in such a view, arises because those with power see the possibility of imposing a social structure that benefits themselves. In the process, however, the whole of society tends to benefit, giving rise to what amounts to a justification for tyranny as a state of affairs preferable to the state of nature. This situation is nevertheless fundamentally unstable, mind you, given the constant competition that arises out of this negative state of nature. Individual tyrants compete with each other, employing every form of violence and deceit, while groups within societies try and organize to overthrow the tyrants for the sake of their own gain. All this is justified as a kind of Darwinian “survival of the fittest” in which might, quite literally, makes right.

John Locke and Jean Jaques Rousseau, on the other hand, saw the State as something which arose from a free agreement among rational men. In their view, people are capable of moderate, practical behaviour even without a dominating authority over them. Such persons can then band together to form a “social contract” which lasts as long as it is truly mutually beneficial. Such a model sees government as arising from a set of natural cooperative relationships, rather than as being required due to the omnipresence of exploitative relationships.

Christianity, with its emphasis on the virtue of love as the highest possible virtue, accepts neither of these premises. To be sure, Christianity does accept that there is a weakness in human nature, called *concupiscence*, which does cause people to tend towards selfish behaviour.

⁵ Observers of Christianity are sometimes puzzled to note that Christians seem somewhat selective in the choice of which laws of the Old Testament to follow. The division exists because Christians believe that some of the laws were explicitation of requirements present in all human nature, while other laws were specific to the Jewish people as a people in a particular time and place. Obviously, the first kind of laws bind everyone everywhere in all times, while the latter only bind relatively depending on time, place, circumstance and purpose.

⁶ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*.

Christianity also accepts that humans are capable, through the light of the natural powers of intelligence and will, to moderate behaviour and work in genuine cooperation. From a Christian point of view, however, the form of behaviour that is most truly “natural”, that is to say in accord with human nature itself, is altruistic behaviour. Jesus affirmed this himself when he was asked about the greatest commandment of God’s law:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Matthew 22: 35-39)

Altruistic behaviour, however, cannot be forced. This illustrates an important dimension of the Christian view of law: its pedagogical purpose. In this viewpoint, the law exists not merely to regulate behaviour, but also to direct people towards virtue by outlining its fundamental principles. Certainly, there must be laws to protect people against exploitation and to better coordinate human activity, but in the Christian point of view these forms of law will never be sufficient, in part because they depend too much on a self-protective reflex that prevents people from aiding others. A new kind of culture is required, which recent Christian thought has termed the “civilization of love”, in which a genuinely altruistic attitude, lived in an atmosphere of mutual trust, is a centrally accepted element of the quest for happiness within society. (cf. Acts 20: 35)

Justice and mercy

Flowing from the Christian understanding of altruistic relationships comes a particular understanding of the concepts of justice and mercy, and with them a particular view regarding vengeance.

Christian moral teaching tends to following the classical definition of justice, which defines it first and foremost as a virtue, that is to say a stable disposition within a person which enables him to spontaneously render to others according to their due. Christian moral teaching therefore also defends the idea of being treated justly, i.e. the right to demand that others render to us according to what is due. Justice, therefore, is the virtue and basic precondition that prevents relationships from falling from cooperation to exploitation.

Because Christian moral teaching values altruism, however, Christianity values mercy above justice. One does not sin in asking to be treated justly, but one does even better if one acts mercifully towards those who owe us. According to the Bible, God is just but is also merciful, full of compassion and forgiveness. Jesus himself taught that a moral duty exists to forgive, and that even the forgiveness we might hope for from God depends, in part, on our own willingness to forgive:

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay

what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18: 23-35)

Throughout history there have been those who believe that such an attitude of mercy is actually a form of weakness, and is in fact destructive to society. In such a view, others must be held accountable for their actions, to “pay in full” as it were, or else it will merely encourage additional bad behaviour. In such a view, even vengeance can be seen as part of the virtue of justice, as the one seeking revenge is (supposedly) merely “rendering to the other what is owed”. Christianity, however, does not things in this manner. Christians believe that the “right” to exact vengeance has been reserved by God to himself for the day of the final judgement (Hebrews 10: 30), who therefore possesses the right to show clemency on behalf of others as well. Christians, instead, are called to surrender any desire for vengeance to God as a form of spiritual sacrifice, as exemplified by Jesus himself, when from the cross he declared, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23: 34)

As a final point regarding authority, it should be mentioned that Christianity believes that God is also an object of justice, in that human beings have a duty to render to him what he is due. At the core of this obligation lies *worship*, which at its root means “respecting and declaring the worth of another”. While specific forms of worship vary from one Christian denomination to another, today worship is commonly understood as a form of prayer by which God is praised for his holiness and goodness, and thanked for all his blessings. This worship has not merely a private, but also a public character, in that one should never have to fear exposing one’s love relationship with God to others. This public nature of worship necessarily carries with it a right to worship God, both individually and as a group, and also requires of Christians that they live lives of proper justice. After all, it does no good to praise God for his goodness but then live badly – it takes God for granted and drives others away from the fulfillment of their human nature. The Bible itself specifically connects moral behaviour and true worship together (cf. Proverbs 21: 3; Psalm 4: 6).

Leadership and authority

Christianity sees leadership and authority as rooted in the will of God for human society. St. Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, presents leadership as a personal charism given by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12: 28).⁷ Numerous other passages indicate that authority exists through the will of God:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Romans 13: 1-2)

⁷ The exact word used to describe a leader is actually derived from the Greek term for the rudder of a ship. It involves a skill at being able to “steer” the correct course.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. (1 Peter 2: 13-14)

While Christianity recognizes the necessity of the establishment of authorities, however, it also recognizes that authorities can overstep their legitimate boundaries. This leads to the on-going debate of the relationship between “Church and State”. Jesus himself first established the principle of separation of Church and State in response to a question regarding taxation:

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesars." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are Gods." (Matthew 22: 15-21)

The key question, therefore, has to do with identifying what elements “belong to Caesar” versus what elements “belong to God”. In general, this reduces to a set of positive rights that permit the community of believers to worship according to their religion (freedom of religion) as well as the right to refuse to perform a certain action because it would conflict with the duty of moral rectitude tied to the worship of God (freedom of conscience). We see these rights being affirmed in a scene in the Acts of the Apostles where some of the apostles have been called before the court:

So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4: 18-20)

Establishing a practical *modus vivendi* between religious and secular authorities has never been easy. Throughout the history of Christianity there has been a temptation for one side to simply absorb the other. In cases where the Church acts in the place of the State, however, difficulties and scandals quickly arise, simply because the laws present in the Bible are typically only sufficient to establish general legal principals arising from the natural law. The Church is much more likely to stay true to its nature when it limits itself to a prophetic role as a social critic, than placing itself in a governing role. Of course, there are always those who believe that any voice of social criticism coming from a church authority itself violates the separation of Church and State, but this is to misunderstand the terms of this separation, which has to do with the specific exercise of authority rather than the general principles which govern that exercise.

One of the most sensitive issues today with regards to the separation of Church and State has to do with the duty of elected officials, and others who act in the public trust. To what extent can their personal faith be allowed to influence their decisions as public officials? Christian faith generally teaches, as stated earlier, that the moral law is actually not “imposed from above”, but rather emerges from rational reflection on the natural law. As such, any person of good will who seeks the truth should be able to govern just as well as any other person, regardless of religious background. This being said, however, there are those who reject this principle of the connection between the natural and moral law, and this tends to form the real basis of most major arguments today regarding Church and State relations. In addition, Christianity generally teaches that

nothing can justify a person acting against their conscience. In other words, just because a person has been given an elected mandate does not exempt that person from acting and deciding in accordance with his deeper beliefs – he or she is not permitted to set them aside in order to act in a particular way so as to please others. “I was just following orders” is not an acceptable excuse!

As a final point, the separation between Church and State can just as often be violated by the State, which seeks to set itself up as a sort of secular religious authority. Just as kings and emperors in the past have demanded to be worshipped as gods, ideologies today can seek to supplant religions as the ultimate source of meaning for human existence. The Christian tradition terms such movements as belonging to the “Beast” of the book of Revelation:

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bears, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" (Revelation 13: 1-4)

Later in the book (chapter 17) the Beast is explained to represent an empire, with the various diadems representing individual rulers. This final empire sets itself against the authority of God, and commands worship of itself in place of worship of God. It makes war on all those who refuse to accept its mark. God’s final intervention in history is provoked by this Beast, in a sense, as God comes to finally seek to restore the correct order of things by sending his Messiah.

The manner of government

A brief survey of the various nations of the world, along with their various social institutions (religious, corporate, community, etc.) quickly demonstrates that many different forms of government exist, and even coexist within the same society. Western civil governments, for example, are often based on a democratic model, but the governing structure of its corporations is far more autocratic – working for a family business can sometimes feel like living in small-but-absolute monarchy! The Christian tradition is generally quite open with regards to the various *forms of government* that exist (e.g. democracy, autocracy, monarchy, etc.), in that it does not generally recommend one form over another as long as that government is staying within its limits. That being said, experience demonstrates that a certain distinction of the powers of governance, at least within civil governments, is useful:

It is impossible to determine, in all cases, what is the most equitable form of government, or how civil authorities can most effectively fulfill their respective functions, i.e., the legislative, judicial and executive functions of the State. In determining the structure and operation of government which a State is to have, great weight has to be given to the circumstances of a given people, circumstances which will vary at different times and in different places. We consider, however, that it is in keeping with the innate demands of human nature that the State should take a form which embodies the three-fold division of powers corresponding to the three principal functions of public authority.⁸

⁸ *Pacem in terris*, nos. 67-68.

In addition, it should be noted that the various branches of Christian tradition have certain predispositions regarding forms of government. The Catholic and Orthodox churches have a long tradition of working within imperial or monarchical societies, and are themselves hierarchical in nature; as such, they are quite willing to operate within such contexts, and even sometimes have trouble operating within a more democratic form of society. The Protestant tradition, on the other hand, arose within a context of rejection of the Catholic model of governance, and has tended to develop more democratic structures within itself. The very model of salvation itself found within Protestantism is more individual and less corporate than that of the Catholic/Orthodox tradition of government, and so Protestants tend to a more suspicious view of human authority (while at the same time seeking to promote the dignity of the individual).

While Christianity tends to be more open regarding forms of government, it definitely has a lot to say regarding the style of government. The key notion within Christianity is that a governing official must act as a servant, not a master, to those who are being governed. Jesus emphasized this very point himself:

Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20: 25-28)

At his Last Supper, Jesus even expressed this doctrine in gestures, by washing the feet of his disciples – a task reserved for servants and slaves. The common Western idea that a public official is also a “public servant” is therefore directly rooted in the Christian tradition. It is also the basis of the widespread opposition to corruption. **Corruption** is defined as the use of the power of governance for reasons other than the good of the governed (i.e. for one’s own benefit, the benefit of one’s family, etc.). Corruption is often accepted as a simple fact of life, or even as a fringe benefit of government, in many societies, but in the Christian point of view it violates the principle of servant leadership taught by Jesus.

With regards to the relationship between the various levels of government within a society, the Christian tradition generally promotes a concept known as *subsidiarity*. A society is generally considered to be properly living subsidiarity when a higher-level authority does not assume functions that can be properly executed by a lower-level authority, i.e. there is a natural bias in favour of lower-level authorities and intermediate organizations. An example of subsidiarity would be the question of the education of children. In the Christian tradition, the education of children is a natural right and duty of the parents. The State has an interest in ensuring that children are properly educated, but the actual task of educating (whether at home, at school, etc.) should flow naturally from the rights and duties of parents, rather than be imposed by the State. Many Christian parents homeschool their children, for example, and the Christian tradition generally supports their right to do so. Such parents may, at some point, choose to pool their resources and found a school, and then a school board, and so on, with each layer acting as a service body to the other, more immediate, layers.

Just as the Christian tradition tends to respect the principle of government closest to the governed, it also believes that the universal common good requires the eventual establishment of some sort of universal authority. This issue has become more pressing in recent years. In the

past, the internal relationships within societies were far more important than the external relationships outside of them, but the development of communications technology, coupled with increased human mobility, has meant that the borders on maps no longer define the borders of societies. The interdependence of nations now means that they must find ways for joint action in the pursuit of the common good, and hence there has been a rapid proliferation of international organizations devoted to this purpose in a variety of different domains. One of the most advanced examples of this is the European Union, in which nations have actually transferred some elements of their sovereignty to a higher authority. It would not be unreasonable to expect that the emerging “global village” will one day endow itself with a “global government” of some kind, but with regards to this issue there is a deep ambiguity within the Christian tradition. On the Catholic and Orthodox side, there is no real objection in principle to the emergence of a world government, but many on the Protestant side believe that certain prophecies within the Bible identify a future world government with the forces of evil. On the surface, the issue is one of Biblical interpretation, but below the surface are different views of the nature and role of authority and law.

Freedom, the law, and the Holy Spirit

In conclusion, while Christianity has much to say regarding authority and government as it arises from the natural law, Christianity also believes that God has offered to human beings a supernatural principle which, in theory, should transform and elevate the way in which authority and government is lived. This principle is nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

According to Christian teaching, God invites human beings into a relationship with him through his Son, Jesus Christ, who has been named the King of the universe. Jesus most definitely possesses authority, that is to say, the right to command, but generally does not exercise this authority directly with regards to those who are capable of choosing to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, primarily because he wishes that our ‘yes’ be always a free choice (and therefore done out of love). Christian spirituality generally sees the “authority of Christ” as something wielded against the evil spirits, who are beyond redemption, as well as against the damned at the final judgement. For those still capable of making the choice, however, Jesus offers his rule but does not impose it – it is up to us to choose to accept and follow him as King.

While Jesus does not presently rule in a direct manner, however, Christian teaching does hold that he governs his people through the Holy Spirit. Those who accept to follow him as King and Lord are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, a gift which can increase as they grow in their spiritual lives, and which they retain as long as they do not renounce Jesus through serious sin. Thanks to this presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus does not need to issue new general ordinances from heaven for the sake of the governance of his people, because the Holy Spirit himself acts as a mechanism of social coordination. We must recall that the reason people establish laws and customs is to coordinate human activity – but what if the King of kings himself was present, coordinating that activity directly with perfect wisdom? No laws would therefore be needed, and indeed they would represent a step backward, as no body of laws can account for every single situation. In effect, the Holy Spirit is the “law” for Christians, sometimes referred to as the “law of grace”.

Christianity therefore sees the Church as more than just another club or organization. The Church, according to this definition, is the emerging presence of the Reign of God in the world. The word “emerging” is used not simply because the Church is growing numerically, but also because Christians do not always respond appropriately to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, distorted as they can be by sin. The Church is therefore still in a state of journeying towards the Kingdom of God, learning as it goes how to live as the People of God. Christians, whether individually or as a Church, have essentially made a declaration of independence with regards to every human authority in favour of the authority of Jesus Christ – but in turn, Christians believe that Jesus Christ then commands them to generally obey those authorities. For Catholics and Orthodox especially, this includes the governing authorities within the Church itself, who are necessary to help bridge the gap between the freedom promised in the Holy Spirit and the sad reality of the obscuring of his promptings. Ecclesial governing authorities therefore have a special duty not simply to govern with wisdom, but to seek holiness of life and union with the Holy Spirit to better help individuals and groups discern the call of the Holy Spirit.

STUFF TO KNOW FOR THE FINAL

1. Be able to define and/or briefly explain each of the bold-type words found in the first section of this course chapter.
2. Be able to briefly explain the concept of natural law.
3. In what way is God said to be an object of justice, according to the Christian tradition?