

God and Caesar: Selected Essays on Religion, Politics, and Society

Cardinal George Pell, with M. A. Casey (Editor)

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The vocation of Catholic bishops in the modern secular West is not easy. Their day-to-day responsibilities are vast, akin to being the CEO of a major corporation. It is, however, the case that the role of the bishop is not that of a manager or mediator, let alone fundraiser-in-chief. The role is as it has always been since the time of the Apostles. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, it is to “take the place of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act as his representative (*in Eius persona agant*)” (CCC, no. 1558).

In *God and Caesar*, Cardinal George Pell provides his readers with an example of how a Catholic bishop can engage the modernity in which most of the Church now lives but in a manner faithful to right reason and Catholic orthodoxy as well as being conscious that the post-Enlightenment world has bequeathed us much good along with new expressions of old forms of evil. It is not an exaggeration to state that many Catholic bishops, especially in the developed world, have not shown themselves especially adept at arriving at this equilibrium. Often there is a retreat into a managerial-clericalism-careerism and/or an embarrassing tendency to become slaves of the contemporary, indiscriminately embracing anything perceived as modern or relevant, no matter how muddle-headed or anthropologically suspect its origins.

In this respect, *God and Caesar* is a teaching exercise—not only for its readers but also in how an orthodox Christian can speak respectfully but unambiguously and without the slightest trace of fear to the modern secular mind. In doing so, Pell demonstrates comfortable familiarity with a range of ancient and modern sources, grounds his arguments upon basic principles of logic, and avoids excessively academic language.

On one level, this book of essays is about the perennially difficult relationship between the spiritual and temporal realms that has existed ever since Jesus Christ desacralized the state by his famous words in Luke’s gospel (Luke 20:20–26). At another level, however, this book addresses the relationship between Christianity and the various Enlightenments that began to emerge in the seventeenth century. Each chapter is derived from a lecture or speech made by Pell in a variety of settings between 1997 and 2004. Significantly, most of these addresses were originally presented in secular rather than religious settings.

The first half of this book, *Catholicism and Democracy*, addresses the relationship between law and morality, the church and politics, the nature of freedom, and the character of democracy itself. In each instance, Pell’s target is the contemporary tendency to associate liberty with relativism and to detach freedom from the truth known through faith and reason. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume is identified as one of the sources of the separation, as are Hegel, Huxley, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. To diagnose the nature of the separation and its consequences in modern democracies—most notably the secularization of the Western mind—Pell draws upon figures ranging from

Blaise Pascal, John Henry Newman, and Alexis de Tocqueville, to John Finnis, John Haldane, and Pierre Manent.

By *secularization*, Pell does not mean the healthy distinction between the spiritual and the temporal realms. Rather, he has in mind the abandonment of metaphysics and the adoption of practical atheism (understood as living and acting as if God does not exist) by many Westerners—including many self-identified Christians and Jews. Pell's observation is that once a society goes down this path, then many of the things that modernity is fond of claiming for itself (such as the concept of human rights) no longer make sense, and indeed can become profound threats to human liberty and dignity.

At no point, however, does Pell suggest that we ought to dispense with the modern project. Indeed, he welcomes its many fruits. Pell also voices careful criticism of particular Catholic thinkers who he thinks seem to regard any conversation with modernity as intrinsically problematic. "The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment worlds," Pell writes, "are not such strangers to our own tradition that we have nothing to say to them and everything to fear. The Enlightenment itself is in many ways a child of Christianity.... Indeed, Enlightenment modernity fails to understand itself fully unless it acknowledges its Christian roots and context: How can we understand Hume without the background of Calvinist faith and ethics to which he is responding? The French Enlightenment without Jansenism?" (61).

God and Caesar's second half is more directly concerned with theological and metaphysical questions, and with demonstrating the immediate relevance of such matters for social and political life. These include the faith-science relationship, why it is reasonable to believe God exists, the role of the Catholic bishop, the place of theology in the university, and the full meaning of human dignity. Throughout these essays, Pell demonstrates how orthodox Christian belief actually facilitates rather than hinders good theology and provides plenty of examples to make his case. In the process of doing so, Pell politely but clearly underlines (much as Cardinal Francis George of Chicago did a number of years ago) the moribund character of those theologies and now-withering movements—often labeled as well as self-identified as liberal—that embraced the path of dissent after Vatican II and now do little more than ape secular left-liberal culture.

Much of Pell's critique of such trends involves the careful intellectual demolition of the "primacy of conscience" argument promoted by dissenting Catholic intellectuals. Here Pell demonstrates that such arguments have little to do with the Catholic understanding of conscience that insists that conscience derives its dignity not from an *a priori* commitment to individual subjective judgment but by being grounded upon theological and moral truth revealed by right reason and faith in what the Catholic Church has always taught to be true.

A possible weakness of *God and Caesar's* second half is one section in the essay, "The Case for God." Most of this essay is a carefully written, easy-to-follow philosophical argument about why it is more reasonable to believe in God than to disbelieve in his existence. It ends, however, with a section in which Pell underlines religion's social utility. This shift from metaphysics to sociology is unnecessary. Given that today's professional

atheists invariably base most of their arguments upon religion's alleged social dysfunction, perhaps Pell considered it necessary to demonstrate that such approaches generally ignore most of the empirical evidence on this subject. In the end, however, it is not clear where this gets us. After all, if a religion is untrue in its fundamental claims, then no amount of social utility can make up for the fact that the adherents of that religion are living an untruth. Interestingly, Pell acknowledges that his reflections on religion's positive social impact could be perceived as an instance of special pleading. Nevertheless, he believes that it is good for people to be reminded of religion's social benefits—a point much stressed by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* 170 years ago.

In his introduction to *God and Caesar*, Pell identifies individuals who have influenced his thinking about how religious believers should act in the public square. One name not mentioned, however, that may come to some readers' minds after reading these essays is another cardinal-bishop.

Martyred in 1535, Saint John Fisher (for whom Pell is surely the perfect potential biographer) is famous for being the lone English Catholic bishop who refused to submit to Henry VIII's subordination of the Church to the state. Unfortunately Fisher's erudition, formidable pastoral skills, intellectual abilities, humility, and enthusiastic engagement with the new ideas springing forth from the Renaissance are mostly unknown to Catholics today. This is unfortunate because rarely have such models been more needed by Catholic bishops than the present time. *God and Caesar*, however, illustrates that bishops of Fisher's caliber are alive and well in the Church today. *Deo Gratias*.

—Samuel Gregg
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