

## **Church and State in the Social and Political Realms Through the Ages**

*Louis Monieri Manyeli, National University of Lesotho*

### **Abstract:**

The thrust of the paper is that man by nature is a political animal. To do politics or take part in politics is part of his very nature as a human being. It is argued that it is wrong and unfair to deprive any human being, including the clerics, of the right to take part in politics. It is therefore wrong and unfair for the government to keep the clerics out of politics. It is worth noting that the author will confine himself to the Catholic Church. Hence, the clerics referred to here are Catholics clerics.

### **Introduction:**

The Middle Ages was an era when Church and State were inseparable. Just as the kings had a say in ecclesiastical affairs so were the popes in worldly affairs. For instance, the kings were consulted in the elections of bishops and popes, and the Supreme Pontiff was allowed even to condemn injustices performed by secular rulers to their subjects. Prior to the Reformation era the inseparability of Church and State posed no serious threat.

The period of intolerance and severe persecutions resumed when prominent figures like Luther, Calvin, Henry and others left the Catholic Church and established their own churches in their respective countries. To cite just few examples, “the disastrous massacre of about 25 000 Protestants in France occurred, prompted by the suspicion that a Huguenot attack upon the throne was being planned” (Pillary, GJ and Hofmeyr, JW, 1991: 149-151). The Catholic Church in France imposed the Inquisition and used the State to persecute Protestants. The Church of England in Britain used the State to persecute Catholics and deprived them of occupying prominent positions in government. Denmark provides us with another example of a period of intolerance. Christaan III of Denmark, for instance, “who was also the ruler of Iceland, confiscated all Roman Catholic properties in Iceland, deposed the bishops and replaced them with Lutheran pastors” (Pillary, GJ and Hofmeyr, JW, 1991:139).

I believe it was precisely this period of intolerance that led to secularism. Secularism is “a belief that religion should not intrude into secular (worldly) affairs, usually reflected in the desire to separate church from state” (Heywood, 2007: 285). The dominant church used the state to suppress minority churches. It was believed that separation of church from state could end persecution of minorities, and the state could be in a better position to enact laws that were impartial.

Liberal secularism has eventually succeeded to separate church from state, leaving public life in the hands of secular authorities while relegating the church to the private arena. The question worth asking with this separation of church and state is whether the church has any role to play in politics. Put more directly: does the separation of church and state imply that clerics have no role to play in politics? This paper is an attempt to answer this question.

### **What is politics?**

The Greek word *politikos*, from *politeia* etymologically derives from *polis*, meaning a city. In its origin, this word is the same as *political*. Webster Dictionary attests that initially *politikos* and *political* were used as synonyms. *Political* refers to civil government and its administration. It comprises all that pertains to the state, and in particular it comprehends rights that belong to citizens of a given polis.

In his *Political Theory*, Heywood defines politics as a social activity, as ‘a process of collective decision making’ (Heywood, 2004: 52). This means that by right politics cannot be confined either to political philosophers, political scientists or politicians since it is a societal activity. Given that the church is comprised of men and women who are full members of society, they too are entitled to politicize, that is, to partake like other citizens in a process of decision-making. But, former governments of Lesotho, including the present government, have repeatedly shown discontent when the clerics indulged in politics, especially when speaking against social injustice. So, the government’s plea at times to relegate the church to the private sphere is inherently wrong.

### **Man as a political animal**

According to Aristotle, “the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity” (Ross, 1955: 287). Two important points are worth clarifying and elaborating on in this famous passage.

First, that as humans, it is not by chance that we are born and live in our respective communities. Human nature is such that under normal circumstances humans are impelled by their humanity to live in communities. Language makes it possible for humans to communicate as communal beings. If the state was not a creation of nature as Aristotle correctly maintains, language would have been a useless tool.

Second, that if by nature we are political animals, it is mandatory that human beings participate actively in politics. For example, some may choose to do so by fighting for freedom, others by speaking out against unjust distribution of natural resources, others by fighting against violation of fundamental human rights, still others by commending a government for good governance. As a matter of fact, it is this political aspect of man, in Aristotle’s definition of man that distinguishes us from other animals, namely, brutes. Therefore, anyone who deprives other human beings the right embedded in their nature to speak against social injustice, for instance, clearly dehumanizes them. Again, I believe it is precisely because of being political animals that humans are the only beings endowed with the gift of language so that they can actively be involved in politics

In agreement with Aristotle, Heywood maintains that “all people are political thinkers. Whether they know it or not, people use political ideas and concepts whenever they express their opinions or speak their mind. Everyday language is littered with terms such as ‘freedom’, ‘fairness’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’, and ‘right’” (Heywood, 2007: 1). In his own way and in his own words, Heywood correctly attests to Aristotle’s claim that our nature is such that consciously or unconsciously we are beings that normally engage in politics.

Now, the government of Lesotho feels not at ease when the clerics become the voice of the voiceless condemning social injustice. The Catholic newspaper “Moeletsi oa Basotho”, a paper that is run by the clerics, is abhorred by the present government since it speaks social injustices. It must be noted that by the church here I do not only refer to the people of God, but in particular I mean the Magisterium. By the Magisterium I mean the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Relegating the Magisterium to the private domain is absurd since it is similar to saying to those men and women leading their respective religious communities: stop being political thinkers or because of the positions entrusted to you by your respective religious communities you must cease to be political animals.

### **Citizenship**

Aristotle maintains the view that he who enjoys the right of sharing in deliberative or judicial office for any period, fixed or unfixed, attains the status of citizen. A serious error committed by Aristotle like Plato his master, is that of regarding slaves as properties. However, the role he ascribes to citizens can still fittingly be applicable even today.

According, to Aristotle, any person qualifying to be called a citizen has a full right to partake in the administration of justice. Of course, being men of virtue, the ruling class administer justice to ensure that the state will be the most happy one characterized by peace, stability and prosperity. This task is undertaken by men who practice virtue and who are just. But in the assemblies other citizens too have the right to have a say in the administration of justice.

For Aristotle, a citizen has a right also to partake in making laws and formulating policies. According to Aristotle, “The difference between the ruler and the ruled is the difference between he who makes and he who executes the decisions” (Barbara, 1966: 209) Given the size of Aristotle’s state, it is possible and imaginable that citizens can make the laws and formulate policies, while the rulers just execute the decisions of this small self-sufficient state.

It may be argued that the role played by Aristotle’s citizens cannot be applicable to today’s large modern states. In Aristotle’s polis citizens knew each other. Given the size of modern states, it is unimaginable that citizens can actively participate in the making of laws and formulation of policies. It is only through the representatives of the people that policies and laws can be made. But citizens can still play an active role if allowed to defend or challenge the laws enacted and policies formulated by their representatives. This commendable practice is actually occurring in some real democratic states, and it functions well. The fear that the government of Lesotho has when the clerics attempt to challenge some of the laws enacted and policies formulated, has no ground. As citizens, they are entitled like any other citizens who are equally capable and willing to do so.

### **Secularism vs fundamentalism**

Heywood defines secularism as “a belief that religion should not intrude into secular (worldly) affairs, usually reflected in the desire to separate church from state” (Heywood, 2007: 285). According to Heywood, liberal secularism does not present

itself as an anti-religious movement. What it purports to do is to establish a clear separation between church and state. In other words, secularism sets out to relegate the church to the private domain and situates the state to the public sphere.

Heywood maintains that secularism simply establishes a proper sphere for religion, namely, the private arena. He claims that secularism is not an anti-religious movement. But, he also holds the view that secularism is “The spread of worldly or rationalist ideas and values in the place of religious or sacred ones” (Heywood, 2007: 282). Now, as a displacement of spiritual values by secular ones secularism clearly becomes anti-religious. In short, by contradicting himself Heywood commits the fallacy of inconsistency. However, in as far as secularism is concerned, it has succeeded to separate church from state and its rationalist ideas have to a great extent weakened spiritual values.

Heywood maintains that “Religious fundamentalism is ... characterized by a rejection of the distinction between religion and politics. Politics, in effect, is religion” (Heywood, 2007: 281). Heywood further explains fundamentalism as a movement that maintains that a distinction cannot be made between religion and politics because politics is religion.

Fundamentalism claims that the laws enacted in a state must be founded on religious principles. Policies and the whole economy must be guided by religious principles. In my view, this mode of thought is highly problematic. First, in a state characterized by a plurality of religions the policies formulated and the laws enacted will be based on the principles of the dominant religion and inevitably minority religions will be suppressed. It is highly likely that the most competent citizens will be denied equal opportunity to meaningful work, if they are not members of the dominant religion. Second, fundamentalism leads to an era of intolerance where a dominant religion will force minority religions to comply with its laws even when they are incompatible with their own religious beliefs. Imposition of Christian laws, for example, to Muslims and non-believers will result in unending conflicts resulting in bloodshed.

A government that relegates the church to the private sphere denies some individuals their right to participate in politics. Likewise, a state that enacts laws and formulates policies that are compatible with only one dominant religion inevitably suppresses minority religions, and violates some individuals’ fundamental right to freedom of religion. Accordingly, laws must be enacted such that they incorporate all sectors of a given society regardless of their political or religious affiliations.

### **The church and social justice**

I have already demonstrated earlier that to participate in active politics is inherent in the nature of human beings as political animals. The church correctly urges all her members to be committed in social justice. For example, on social injustice the Second Vatican Council maintains:

How then will the cry of the poor find an echo in your lives?  
That cry must, first of all, bar you from whatever would be a  
compromise with any form of social injustice [my emphasis].  
It obliges you also to awaken consciences to the drama of

misery and to the demands of social justice made by the Gospel and the Church (Vatican Council II, 1975: 688-689).

Those who are appointed to be servants of the church, entrusted with the ministry of proclaiming the Word of God and to administer the sacraments are mandated by the church to be pioneers in fighting social injustice, to be the voice of the voiceless. It is their task to be on the side of the poor, the most abandoned who are treated unjustly in the distribution of the natural resources. In other words, if they fail to accomplish this mission, they actually fail to live up to their vocation. And if the government of Lesotho becomes a stumbling block that hinders them from carrying out this task, such a government is in actual fact saying they must cease to be the ministers of the Word of God. Besides, such a government is saying they should cease to be political animals, and therefore not to be human.

Some governments regard the church as a threat, especially when it preaches against social injustice in favour of the poor, the most abandoned. I believe it is precisely because of that feared threat that such governments maintain that the church must be relegated to the private domain. But such governments, mostly led by believers, are unaware or simply ignore the fact that the Word of God itself impels the church to preach against social injustice. In the Old Testament, for example, prophets were called to speak against social injustice. For instance, against the corrupt and insensitive rulers Amos was called to prophesy: “they hate the man who teaches justice at the city gate and detest anyone who declares the truth. For trampling on the poor man and for extorting levies on his wheat: although you have built houses of dressed stones, you will not live in them ...” (Amos, 5: 10-13).

Lesotho, for an example, is a democratic country whose constitution does not bar any category of citizens from taking part in politics. But in practice governments elected democratically have shown dissatisfaction when clerics take part in politics. Examples of the rulers’ discontent abound in Lesotho. The first democratically elected government (the Basotho National Party) worked laboriously to discourage clerics from taking part in politics. The Alumni Priests of St. Augustine issued a letter condemning the disappearance and merciless assassinations of some members of the opposition parties in Lesotho on the 23rd November, 1983. They also urged the government and all opposition parties to resolve their differences by negotiations peacefully. This plea was immediately echoed and strongly recommended by the Lesotho Council of Churches on the 6th November, 1983. (Information from “Moeletsi oa Basotho”). Surprisingly, the government that apparently claimed to abide by the constitution issued an announcement over Radio Lesotho stating that the church must not indulge in politics, rather, it must confine itself to the private domain.

### **The church and political parties**

The term ‘justice’ is a political concept. In my view, a person who indulges in matters pertaining to justice does politics or actively takes part in politics. As free citizens in democratic countries the clerics too are allowed by the church to take part actively in politics, provided of course, that they do not publicly affiliate themselves with certain political parties.

I have shown that as ministers of the Word of God, priests are duty-bound to preach against social injustice. But they may not meddle or be actively involved in party politics. The Code of Canon Law correctly stipulates that clerics “are not to play an active role in political parties or in directing trade unions...” (Canon 287: section 1).

I have shown earlier that to take part in politics is part of man’s nature as a political animal. The implication being that it is wrong and unfair to deprive any human being, including the clerics, of the right to take part in politics. Therefore, it is wrong and unfair for any government to keep the clerics of politics. Some may argue that the above cited code of canon law forbids clerics to participate in politics; and if I commend canon law for doing that and condemn governments for doing it, I am being inconsistent.

A clarification of the distinction between party politics and politics as politics will shed light on the correct interpretation on the above cited passage of the canon law and suffice to show that I am not being inconsistent. On the one hand, to participate actively in party politics implies being affiliated to a certain political party. On the other hand, partaking in politics as such implies either to commend, or condemn or to suggest what ought to happen in politics. The former is forbidden by canon law and the latter is commendable as the earlier quotation from the second Vatican council attests. When a clergyman from the United States, for example, condemns the government’s invasion of smaller states, he must not do so because he is affiliated to the Democratic Party, but because he is simply committed to fight social injustice regardless of who is in power. I believe it is now clear that the church encourages her clerics to partake in politics as such, but forbids them to participate actively in political parties.

I have cited the second Vatican council to show that it is imperative for clerics to participate actively in politics. Now, forbidding them to participate actively in political parties is not without reasons. First, if they affiliate themselves with a certain party, they may find it hard to speak against social injustice when such a party becomes a government. Usually members of a party prefer to be silent when such a party oppresses or suppresses members of opposition parties. Their silence is usually caused by the fear that they may be regarded as betraying the party or siding with the opposition. In order to remain the voice of the voiceless, therefore, the code of canon law correctly forbids clerics to be actively involved in political parties.

Second, the audience of the clergymen comprises Christians affiliated to different political parties. If the clergyman is affiliated to a certain political party, he will be tempted to campaign in favour of the party of his own choice on the pulpit and thereby directly or indirectly impel believers to shun the parties of their own choices. In this way he will be depriving them of their freedom of choice, and eventually this will amount to the loss of credibility even regarding how he interprets the Holy Scriptures.

But Khaketla, in his Lesotho 1970 maintains that the Basotho National Party in Lesotho was launched with the encouragement and full support of the Roman Catholic Church in Lesotho. He holds that “there is little room for doubt that the idea of such a party was the brain-child of Roman Catholic authorities, at a high level” (Khaketla, 1971: 20). Khaketla contents that the Basotho National party was sponsored by the

Roman Catholic Church, and in particular he singles out the Right Reverend J. D. Des Rosiers bishop of Maseru as having been in the forefront regarding the formation of the Basotho National Party.

But the same bishop in his letter dated 29th February, 1959 to the Catholics in Lesotho clarifies the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Lesotho regarding politics. Des Rosiers clearly clarifies that the church (referring to the apostles chosen to lead the church of God) cannot be affiliated to any political party (Des Rosiers, 1959: 4). He holds that such men must rise above political parties since their task is to strive for unity in diversity among Christians in politics. Being a clergyman himself Des Rosiers must have included himself when forbidding the clerics from actively participating in party politics.

It is hard, therefore, to reconcile what Khaketla says regarding the Roman Catholic authorities in Lesotho at the high level with what Des Rosiers as an authority at the high level proclaimed publicly. However, whether Khaketla is right or wrong, it is clear from the previous discussions that under normal circumstances the clerics' right to partake in politics does not imply that they are also entitled to participate actively in certain political parties. I have confined myself to the Roman Catholic priests.

### **Conclusion**

Critics of this paper may argue that if the church is justified to participate in politics, justice requires that the state too be permitted to indulge in church affairs. But given the justified and indisputable fact of religious pluralism, the state cannot do so without partiality. The fact of religious pluralism means that diversity is inescapable in religion. Even within a certain dominant religion in a given state, Christianity, for instance, diversity appears for the moment to be an unavoidable phenomenon. Different churches have different codes of canon law that are irreconcilable. If the state is allowed to partake in church affairs, rulers will be inclined to the laws of the churches they are affiliated to. If, for example, the government is dominated by Catholics, they may declare the feast of the assumption of the Virgin Mary as a public holiday. In my view, the role of the state is to enact laws and formulate policies that are inclusive and impartial.

I have attempted to show why the clerics are forbidden to participate actively in political parties. The implication is that they are allowed to participate passively in party politics. The passive role they are permitted to participate in is that of exercising their right to vote. I believe this will not have an impact in their primary mission of proclaiming the Word of God to all since it is done confidentially. In my view, with regard to voting, I believe the clerics are duty-bound to exhort believers to exercise their fundamental right to vote with the aim of choosing a government that will respect their fundamental right to choose the religion of their choice and work for the common good.

As a matter of fact, it is of paramount importance that the clerics be allowed to take part in politics. First, it is imperative that the clerics be the voice of the voiceless. In most African states, in particular, where people are afraid to speak out freely against social injustice for fear of victimization, the clerics must be in the forefront fighting against social injustice. As followers of Christ, if they are Christians, they must

follow in their master's footsteps who confronted rulers of his time and spoke openly against social injustice. Second, given that the clerics ought not to affiliate themselves with any political party, they could be useful instruments to all governments. Their criticisms in matters relating to social injustice could be constructive if taken positively not as an attack by secular rulers. Where secular rulers govern commendably, their positive criticism could motivate these rulers to further improve and work for the common good.

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