

THE AGE OF PARADISE: CHRISTENDOM FROM PENTECOST TO THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

(JOHN STRICKLAND)

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Christian nationalism is in the air. While that obscure term has been weaponized recently to whip up hate against Christians, it is a real thing, with many historical manifestations. For both Christianity and nationalism are excellent and awesome, and like the chocolate and peanut butter in Reese's, they are even better together than alone. Still, the combination of state and religion has not always been well executed. It must be, however, for mankind to flourish, which is why one pillar of Foundationalism is establishing the proper balance in the society of the future. To this end, we can learn a lot from this history of the first thousand years of Christianity.

Political advice is not the intended focus of John Strickland's book. What he offers is cultural history suffused with religion, in the tradition of Christopher Dawson—though pitched to a less-informed audience than Dawson's, because educational standards have declined very far since Dawson wrote. Strickland is an Eastern Orthodox priest and academic, and this book is the first volume of his just-completed four-volume history of Christendom. He writes from an explicitly Orthodox perspective, and so for anyone who knows Christendom only from the Western (read—papal and Germanic) perspective, this book will be eye-opening. But Strickland emphasizes the commonality of Christendom, not the differences. He is not breaking new ground, really—this topic has been well-covered before, by men such as Robert Louis Wilken and Rodney Stark. He does add his own perspectives, however, and his book is quite accessible.

First-millennium Christian culture was not, for the most part, otherworldly, desirous of total separation from temporal concerns, as is sometimes claimed today. Quite the contrary—Strickland identifies the core of Christendom as a “transformational imperative,” “an evangelical mandate to participate in the renewal of the cosmos by bringing it into alignment with the kingdom of heaven.” Action here, action now, to bring the world closer to God. First-millennium Christianity was nonetheless primarily “paradisiacal”—focused on the kingdom of

heaven, both in this life and the life to come. The kingdom of heaven was something towards which men could work in this life, and while true divinization, *theosis*, was only possible in the next, men did not see a sharp separation. Strictly temporal concerns were, however, secondary matters.

In Strickland's telling, this transformational imperative was interpreted with an optimistic view of man and the heights he could reach, with the help of God, and this optimism was a key part of why Christianity spread. Once the Great Schism, between the Eastern and Western churches, occurred, or rather as it came to full flower over several hundred years, in the West the focus turned to a harsher view of this world and a pessimistic view of man. No doubt in his later volumes Strickland continues this theme, but it is mostly only prefigured here.

In its first thousand years, Christianity passed through two distinct phases—one where politics was only tenuously connected to Christians, and one where politics was everywhere among Christians. Strickland relies heavily on the Book of Acts to explicate the first Christian cultural phase, "a history of how the Gospel revealed by Christ and confirmed by the Holy Spirit became assimilated by Christians living in the world." Acts shows how early Christians saw God as immanent, as saturating every element of the world—in the all-encompassing love that Christ insisted was to permeate the community, in the sacraments that involved God's direct participation in this world, and in the collective continual focus on paradise, the kingdom of heaven. (This also means Christians rejected Gnosticism, the heresy that the material world is evil; in fact, the world is filled with God.)

The Book of Acts, along with other sources, serves for Strickland to cover the pre-political phase of Christianity. In this early period politics was for Christians a one-way street, with Christians being on the receiving end of political action by non-Christians. Fear of Christians creating an alternate political culture drove much of the Roman persecutions. While Strickland does not mention it, famously Pliny the Younger, in his correspondence with the Emperor Trajan in A.D. 112, focused on the dangers to the state of *hetaeriae*, associations or political clubs, sometimes secret, organized around a common purpose, which frequently became involved in political disturbances. Christianity was perceived as potentially problematic to the extent believers acted as a *hetaeria*, and

therefore were a possible threat to the social order. We can see now that Christians were not political in the sense the Romans feared, but it is understandable the Romans were suspicious, not helped by the enemies of Christians being happy to spread lies about them, and few outsiders being able to distinguish between actual Christians and Gnostic sects with more extreme practices.

Christians were not separated from the world. They have always realized, and acknowledged, that they must be in the world to reveal Christ to the world. This truth, often expressed today using the metaphor of “salt and light,” cribbed from several New Testament passages, has a bad odor nowadays among Christians who are not infected by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This is because the metaphor is commonly used by flabby Christians to justify submitting to the dictates of Christ’s enemies, while they stay silent, salving their consciences by pretending their weak-tea Christianity will somehow translate to their overlords through osmosis, and that because this possibility exists they have fulfilled their Christian duty. Thus, supposed Christians send their children to be groomed in government schools, because that is an easier choice than home schooling or a private school, and they say nothing as Christianity is attacked in their workplace and everywhere around them. But, properly applied, it is undoubtedly true that the obligation of Christians is to reveal Christ to the world; they just have to, you know, do some revealing.

After several hundred years of such witness by Christians, who often received martyrdom for their efforts, Christianity transitioned to the overtly political phase of Christianity, inaugurated by the Emperor Constantine. In the Orthodox Church, Constantine is a saint (despite his many temporal shortcomings); in fact, in my own church I frequently pass a large icon of him and his mother Saint Helena, who located and retrieved the True Cross. In this process, Christianity became an integral component of the state, something that lasted until the twentieth century in the West. Given that Christians viewed the sanctification of the world, this present world, as a crucial goal, this opened many new opportunities.

But from the first, the can of worms opened by this change was obvious, and debated by Christians. Strickland contrasts two visions as emblematic of contending views. That of Eusebius, where “Christ’s

incarnate presence in the world was manifested by a righteous political order,” and the Christian, Constantinian state was an extension of the kingdom of heaven. And that of Augustine’s *The City of God*, setting a gulf between the two realms, with little confidence in a Christian state and a view of Christians as largely set apart from the world, a separate city. (On a side note, my daughter, who is reading *The City of God* for high school, has half-persuaded me to read that entire book, unabridged. It’s long.) Strickland acknowledges that Augustine was more sophisticated than Eusebius, who was essentially a Constantinian apologist, yet that does not change that these are the two basic poles of Christian political thought.

Today, of course, we have been thoroughly propagandized by the anti-religious that religion should not be any part of the state, and that terrible things inevitably result if it is. This modern conceit is not only obviously false, as a historical matter, but was incomprehensible to men before the modern era. Yet many modern Christians, and Christian theologians, have swallowed this line. For example, Strickland analyzes modern theological attacks on “constantinianism,” a pejorative term used by, among others, Stanley Hauerwas. But as Strickland accurately notes, neither Scripture nor tradition holds guidance for how Christians should govern, or participate in governance, so disagreements are inevitable. No surprise, given human nature, if Christianity becomes intertwined with the state, and therefore tied to power and riches, the gospel will often not be held as central as it should be, and this is the only legitimate argument for keeping Christianity and the state at all separate.

But we will return to this question. In the back half of his book, Strickland spends a considerable amount of time explaining the background and the chain of events that led to the Great Schism, beginning in the eighth century. This includes disputes about the *filioque*, which originated in changes to the Nicene Creed made as part of Roman attempts to resist the Arianization of warlike Germanic tribes, though doctrinal arguments followed (and also existed before the controversy took on great importance). Strickland also covers the rise of Islam and the subsequent, related iconoclast controversy, in which the tangling of church and state played a crucial role, to the detriment of the church. That controversy resulted in the Seventh Ecumenical Council (a matter of

great importance in the Orthodox Church, largely forgotten in the West), and also helped to alienate the Roman church from the East. Beyond iconoclasm, Strickland blames Charlemagne, helped by the papacy, for much of the increasing tension between East and West, manifesting less as direct conflict and more as Charlemagne and his successors simply going their own way. This resulted in a series of incomplete and partially-healed schisms, culminating in the Great Schism.

Strickland does not cover the Great Schism itself; he ends with the millennium, along the way touching on other first-millennium matters, such as monasticism and conversions of the Slavs. As to the millennium, Strickland explains that the popular myth, much in evidence twenty years ago but still embedded in our consciousness, that Christendom regarded the turn of the first millennium in apocalyptic terms, is exactly that. It's a very convenient myth, whose apogee twenty years ago coincided with the rise of the now-fallen New Atheists, in that it portrays Christians as credulous, unlike us sophisticated moderns. But as Strickland points out, the immanence of Christ was a standard belief in Christendom, and the millennium held no special significance. It was just another year in the ongoing transformation of the world in God's image; certainly Christ would return, but not at some magical date. And there Strickland leaves us, to pick up in his next volume.

I have earlier expounded on the role of religion in the Foundationalist state, and called for Christianity to be the religion officially and formally favored by the state, in what I term "pluralism lite." This leaves open, however, precisely how the relationship between church and state will operate. An established church can take many forms, ranging from complete unity of church and state in a theocracy to mere state encouragement of religious institutions which are otherwise kept entirely separate from the state. The problems with intertwining Christianity and the state have been grossly exaggerated by Enlightenment propagandists. But as with any human political structure which tries to keep two different horses tied to the same wagon, they are real. The question is not how we can avoid problems, but how we can minimize problems. So is an order that intertwines the Christian church and state a good idea, and if so, how should it be done?

As to the first question, I have little doubt that it is a good idea. But does this not contradict Christ's mandate, that his kingdom is not of

this earth? Only if one mistakes an earthly Christian kingdom for the kingdom of heaven. My goal is not to achieve a paradisiacal culture. The purpose of having a Christian political order is to assist in good governance and to achieve human flourishing, something to which Christianity (real, robust Christianity) has long proven an asset. I also happen to think that a Christian political order assists, as Strickland also argues, as did Eusebius, in achieving what God wills, but this is a secondary concern to Foundationalism, which does not seek a confessional state, rather one that optimizes, not perfects, the society in which it operates.

The major challenge in executing the combination of religion and state is not, as many would have it, that it depends on virtue in both the secular and spiritual rulers. It is that it also depends on the virtue of the mass of the people. Not total virtue, to be sure, but partial virtue that respects and uplifts those with more virtue, recognizing that as the ideal, even if most fall very far short. What we have now is contempt for virtue at all levels of society, and that makes it impossible to successfully weave religious belief into the state. Thus, the Foundationalist state assumes that the populace, high and low, will have regained significant virtue, which can only be done by a mass return to religion. And it likely must be Christian religion, because only Christian religion has ever been associated with true flourishing of a society that achieves anything of value (and it is also the true religion).

Again, then, how and to what degree should the institutions of Christian religion be integrated with the state? Some among the so-called integralists have an easy answer—let's return to papal supremacy, which for some reason they think worked well, although they can't precisely tell you when or where. Others who are viewed as integralists, such as Andrew Willard Jones in his analysis of the France of King Saint Louis IX, blur the difference between church and state, alleging the separation is an inexact or inapplicable modern conception. That is as may be, but in practice Jones actually is pushing a variation on the Byzantine, or Orthodox view, much in evidence in Strickland's book, that what society should seek is "symphony." Symphony means, in short, that while church and state exist as separate institutions, they overtly seek the same goals, and cooperate toward those goals. One might call it the original Christian nationalism. Strickland summarizes symphony as

“the emperor, as head of state, was expected to rule in harmony with the church’s bishops.” And on the further end of the scale is caesaropapism, where the state dominates the religious establishment, as seen during periods of the iconoclast controversy, for example.

We can learn from history what works and what doesn’t, although historical examples cannot be completely mapped onto the future. From the very first, symphony was at best a seesaw. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, famously forced the emperor Theodosius to submit and repent for a mass slaughter. This happened before claims of papal supremacy, but clearly along the continuum toward it, in terms of who was the ultimate authority. On the other end of the seesaw, strong emperors and weak bishops, along with fraught controversies such as Arianism, often meant the emperor dictated the rules. This was more common than supremacy of the religious establishment. I conclude that it’s not at all evident, looking at history, that symphony works very well in practice for any length of time; it seems to depend on having precisely the right combination of leaders, both secular and religious, and the right external conditions for the nation. This suggests that symphony is more ideal than anything else. Like a bowling ball, it tends to fall into the gutter on either side of the straight path, and this tends to harm the flourishing of the society under consideration. But again, an ideal that is partially achieved is better than no ideal at all.

Symphony, and its relationship to the real-life alternative of papal supremacy, bears a close parallel to the difference in church decision making between West and East. In the West, the Pope decides doctrine; this was touted for many years by Catholics on the Right as a way of preventing the corruption that had spread throughout the West among the Protestants, although most of those Catholics have been mighty quiet lately, as they see what they thought was a feature is in fact a bug, as the Church is turned into a tool of Satan by Jorge Bergoglio. In the East, a council decides, which modulates rapid change. The drawback there is that unless those in authority are willing to gather and hash matters out, in a way that will probably gore somebody’s ox, little can be done, and sclerosis can result—or at a minimum, important questions cannot be resolved, something we see today in Orthodoxy. Whether inside a church or in church and state reaching joint decisions, for symphony to work, there must be harmony.

The only places where a form of symphony exists today, whether Christians like to admit it or not, are Muslim countries. In Islam, secular rulers have almost always been the ultimate authorities, yet typically cooperate closely with religious leaders, and in fact use religion to inspire men to achieve secular goals. You might even say a type of symphony is the default in Muslim countries. This may seem strange, given the difficulties faced by Western societies trying to embody symphony, but the apparent paradox is easily resolved by recognizing that many of the religious goals of Islam, which include the conquest of non-Muslim peoples, the theft of their possessions, and the perpetual dominance of Muslims over all non-Muslims, are also the goals of the state. Christianity does not include any such goals, and many of Christianity's demands are antithetical to actions commonly taken by the state. Thus, the tensions inherent in the relationship between Christianity and the state are almost entirely absent in Islam. Muhammad's kingdom was, and is, very much of this world, and this easy road to cooperation is not available to Christian societies.

The sole Christian country in which today we see at least some intertwining of church and state is Russia. Now, I know little about Russia, though I know more than the average American. And it is incorrect to suggest, as some say, that Russia is some kind of Christian nation, and that the relationship between Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church one of symphony (if anything, it seems to tend more toward caesaropapism). But that does not rule out that Russia may become a Christian nation and return to virtue; much stranger things have happened, and it seems more likely, at this point, than America, as currently constituted, returning to virtue. I wouldn't get too excited by this possibility—Russia has a great many problems, many of which seem very difficult to resolve. But it's something to watch.

Some argue that we do in fact have a combination of church and state, right now, in the West. Namely, that the state religion is the Modernist cult of globohomo. On the surface, this seems to contain some truth, but as I have analyzed at length elsewhere, wokeism, or what I call Late Stage Leftism, is not a religion. Rather, the state cult is closely analogous to late Roman practice, where none of the traditional indicia we associate with religion, such as accepting burdens, are present, but the state will punish you if you do not burn incense at the altars erected

everywhere. (You could argue that the real Roman religion was the *mos maiorum*, but we have no modern equivalent.) Today there is, however, no religious authority aside from the myrmidons of the state itself, and thus neither symphony, nor caesaropapism, just a set of filthy and destructive practices mandated by the weak rulers of a dying society.

So what structure should Foundationalism have? Probably a form of symphony that tends toward caesaropapism. After all, if the rulers are virtuous (the ideal has always been the rule of Justinian), conflicts with the religious authorities will be modest in scope. The primary role here for religious authorities, as it relates to the state, will be to take the role of Saint Ambrose (whose feast day, as it happens, is today)—to guide, and where necessary, to rebuke the secular authorities for straying from the straight path. But Foundationalism is not an ideology and does not guarantee perfection, or promise bad times will be avoided. Maximizing societal flourishing is the goal, and what might be called “tilted symphony” is likely to be the optimal structure for a strongly Christian society that has a state of very limited ends, but unlimited means. For, after all, many of the problems resulting from conflicts between church and state can be alleviated by having a narrowly-purposed state and having much of society run on principles of subsidiarity, leaving less to argue about.

Yes, I am perfectly well aware that this analysis leaves aside a crucial matter, which is what brand of Christianity will be the religion of the state. It cannot be non-denominational Christianity; someone must rule, in religion as in the state. And there is a wide gulf between, say, Orthodoxy and Reformed Christianity, even if both are very open to cooperation with the state in principle. This is a topic for another day, but the short answer is that this question is probably dictated by the religion of the populace. As I say, rebirth of virtue necessarily implies a rebirth of strong religious belief, and this belief will necessarily take on some dominant character, from which the state will organically take its cues. What we will not have is separation of church and state.