

Title: Must religion be a threat to liberty?
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Religion is not the opiate of the masses, it is the essence of freedom, argues Robert Sirico.

The 10th Annual Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom, held by the Centre for Independent Studies, was held on 21 July, 2008.

[\[click here\]](#) to read the transcript of the lecture.

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The arguments for the unity of freedom and unbelief are common cultural currency. We are told that faith makes us subservient to authority. It makes us unwilling to think for ourselves, so that we become tribal and collectivistic. We don't demand our rights against the state because we are always thinking of the next life. We turn the other cheek and put up with endless abuse from tyrants, because we are predisposed to suffer. Indeed, we long to be ruled with an iron hand in the same way that we imagine that God rules the universe. What's more, we are told, religion brings about conflict because people argue about tiny points of doctrine and end up killing each other over them. Or as Rousseau put it: "Christianity preaches only servitude and dependence."

These views characterize the position of a good number of educated people, many of whom have erected dogmatic secularism into a religious system of its own. Some – such as Richard Dawkins – seem to regard contempt of religious belief and religious believers as a mark of higher learning.

The core religious claim of the West—I speak of Judaism and Christianity—is that our loyalties are to God first and to earthly authority only secondarily. This might at first not seem to be a controversial claim. But it strikes at the ambition of every secular ruler to enjoy complete sovereignty. It is certainly contradicted by the civic ethos of the ancient world, in which state and religion were one.

This was why the ancient world so distrusted the Jews. They refused to give their first obedience to Caesar. They had their own law and their own standards of justice. These constituted a sphere within the culture that would not and could not be finally submerged by the Roman state. One thinks of the Psalm 76 (vs. 13): "...terribili, et ei qui aufert spiritum principum: terribili apud omnes reges terrae." "Make vows to the awesome God who takes away the life of princes; he is greatly feared by all the kings of the earth."

What can we say about a religion that sings such songs? It is a safe assumption that such a group will not be beloved of the political class. It was precisely the Jewish people's unwillingness to give total obedience to the state that facilitated their cultural marginalization in much of the ancient world.

So too does Christianity refuse to surrender mind and soul to the state. Buried deep in the Christian mind is the memory that rather than submit to Caesar, the Holy Family fled to Egypt. Indeed, some of the most striking words in the accounts of Jesus' life occur when he was handed a Roman coin with the image of

Caesar on it. "To whom does this belong", he asked? His reply draws a distinction between authority and power: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's."

Here is an assertion of two distinct realms: the temporal and the ecclesiastical. In this concept, both the law and the civil magistrate are to be respected, even prayed for. But at our core, at the most fundamental level of our being, within our souls and in our moral convictions as well as within our hearts, we are not owned by the state. If the moment arrives when Christians are forced to choose, we choose allegiance to God over obedience to the civic realm.

This allegiance is achieved, for Christians, by a free act of our wills and is to be proposed (not imposed) to others because it's very essence is freedom.

It is for this reason that Rousseau, somewhat in contradiction to his claim that Christians are natural slaves, regarded Christians as bad citizens and terrible warriors "The Gospel", he says, "sets up no national religion, a holy war is impossible among Christians." On this basis, Rousseau asserted that Rome's decline was brought about by Christian conversion. "When the Cross had driven out the eagle, Roman valor wholly disappeared," he said.

For this reason, Rousseau further argues that anyone who claims that the Church is the source of salvation ought to be driven out of the civic realm.

What is really at issue here is the problem of authority. Is there a single source of state authority or is there another belonging exclusively to God, which claims adherence based on people's internal conviction, and which is a form of restraint, not based on external coercion, but on interior assent? The claims of the state may or may not coincide with the will of God, and what is God's alone may be withheld from the state. This idea might not strike us as especially radical today, at a time when we consider the distinctions between Church and State to be an intellectual and social given. But the ancient world was different. When Christ drew a sharp line between God and the state—suggesting that they are distinct—he was developing and refining Jewish thought and experience. This would initiate first a deep Christian appreciation of freedom and would evolve into the fact of freedom.

This is an excerpt of Rev. Robert Sirico's Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom to be delivered to the Centre for Independent Studies on 21st July. See links above for the full transcript.