

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

April 17, 2011

Randy David

### **To God what is God's**

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” This is Jesus' reply to a tricky question that an audience of Pharisees and Herodians threw at him. It is quite possibly the first ever statement on the separation of church and state. The religious and political leaders of his time had been trying to entrap him as he went about preaching. They waited for him to say something subversive, blasphemous, or shallow, that they could use against him.

The entire context of this elegant formulation is fascinating. The Jews hated paying taxes to Caesar. That is why tax collectors were mentioned in the same breath as prostitutes and sinners. Israel's children were a subjugated people. They knew that the tax they paid to Rome was only used to further oppress them. And yet, they were not prepared to openly oppose Rome. They were hoping for the restoration of the client kingship of Herod that would replace Rome's direct rule. Accordingly, they saw Jesus as a spoiler to their long-term designs. The things this man was saying were new and liberating, and he was gaining followers wherever he went. He was a threat to their leadership. They had to get rid of him using Rome's own laws.

A double-bind question is one whose answer is likely to compromise a person no matter how he responds to it. This is the kind of question that was posed to Jesus: “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?”

A yes would alienate the Jews because it would indicate that he was

supporting Rome. A no would be taken as a defiance of Rome's rule, which could put him in trouble. As the gospel of Mark (12:17) tells the encounter, Jesus' response was unexpected.

“Why are you trying to trap me? he asked. Bring me a denarius, and let me look at it.’ They brought the coin, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ And they were amazed at him.”

Note that Jesus did not provide a religious reason to justify paying taxes to Caesar. Caesar alone must account for this imposition. He would take no responsibility for Caesar's rule, but while he would not be prompted to defy it either, he sought to restrict its scope. We give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. What Jesus preached was our responsibility to one another as God's children -- how to love, how to forgive, how to bear our sufferings, and how to live and die as human beings created in his image.

But all these, of course, make sense only within the context of a system of beliefs. In simple societies, these beliefs are completely rooted in religion. The religious experience is the only way of experiencing reality. As societies evolve in complexity, other belief systems emerge that offer alternative meanings and ways of processing information about the world. There is science, there is law, there is politics, there is the economy. Religion survives only when its explanations and accounts of reality reach such a level of generality and abstraction that they cannot be substituted by other systems. As Niklas Luhmann nicely put it: “Thus religion cannot give ‘money’ a try if ‘God’ doesn’t seem to be working anymore.”

Religion conceives the whole world in its own way. It does not confine itself to a limited number of themes the way law or science does. Every event in the world is interpretable from a religious perspective. In this all-embracing reach, it avoids being compared to or replaced by other systems of meanings. And so the religious experience persists even in

the most modern differentiated societies, defying predictions about the full secularization of the future or the final retreat of religion from the public square.

But, this is not to say that religion's dominance has gone unchallenged. On the contrary, modern societies have sought to restrict religion to a narrow sphere of human activity. The modern attitude frowns upon imperious religions that seek to control all decision-making in society. This becomes a big problem for politics, for law, and for the economy in transitional societies, but, alas, the Church in general does not see this as its own problem. Not content with simply expressing and promoting the religious interpretation of the world, it tries to annex the other institutions of society by overt acts of intervention in their operations. It is then left to these other institutions to defend their autonomy by sticking to their own codes and criteria.

A religion that succeeds in colonizing politics, the law, or the economy soon finds itself functionally overloaded and engulfed in complexity. The choices it makes or the causes it champions in a variety of fields spawn their own paradoxes. When the clergy, for instance, begin to directly assume key roles in various worldly function systems (like politics), they risk undermining their authority as moral shepherds. Their own flock starts to question their wisdom.

Still, there is a role for religion that modernity will never be able to erase. And that is to hold the ideal of perfection as an antidote to the worldly preoccupation with development. The image of the God who became man in order to teach the rest of humanity how to be human remains one of the most powerful symbols of any religion. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," Jesus said. What is God's but perfection?

[public.lives@gmail.com](mailto:public.lives@gmail.com)