

They say that religion and politics should never mix. But this is impossible because both religion and politics take place in the public realm. It's a bit like saying that china teacups and cucumber sandwiches should never be seen together in the same garden. Of course politicians abuse religion for their own purposes and religious people abuse politics for theirs. If this were the BBC and not the pulpit at St Michael's, there would now follow a twenty minutes diatribe against American Protestants and President Bush. But we try to avoid clichés here – so let's stick to our own country.

I know plenty of conservatives who are atheists. They support the church though, in their fashion, because they see it as an instrument for social control. It's not particularly edifying, is it, so to use instrumentally a thing you don't believe in? On the other hand, the church hierarchy, bishops, synods and the like are nearly all socialists and they don't believe the Christian faith either. I mean, they don't believe the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and the gospel miracles. They see the faith as a metaphor for their social policies.

I've lost count the number of sermons I've heard saying that the feeding of the five thousand wasn't a miracle at all but a parable about sharing. I really don't follow this: if Jesus had wanted to tell people to be nice to one another and share things out, then he would have said so directly. But of course Jesus didn't waste his time on such banalities.

What I've been saying overlooks the fact that you really don't find any socialists or conservatives in influential positions today. New Labour practises not the teachings of Marx or even of Kier Hardy, but a debauched form of state capitalism, corporatism, centralised bureaucracy, dictatorship-lite. I'd be surprised – no matter how many sods you turned over with your exploratory spade – if you could find half a dozen conservatives in the whole country. Those calling themselves conservatives are usually free-market economic liberals.

There are others of the Dave tendency who believe – if *believe* is not too strong a word – in a sort of Etonian sub-paternalistic condescension peppered with as many fads and modernising slogans as possible. Then there are the widespread small groups of nasties, the devotees of fringe meetings who call themselves conservatives but really they just hate blacks, Jews and foreigners.

Charles Sisson said: “The word ‘Tory’ is as shop-soiled as any in the dictionary and has long been the property of a political party which has no conception at all of its meaning.”

For the true meaning of what it is to be a Tory, we have to go to Dr Johnson: “A Tory: one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state and the apostolic hierarchy of the Church of England.” Show me one person in the modern Conservative party who even understands that, let alone believes it.

Since Christ became incarnate in the world of men, there has to be a Christian politics. What would such a Christian politics look like? Sisson says:

“Any political unity worth maintaining must contain a principle of foresight and continuity which goes beyond the next series of trade figures; and it will be the foresight of care rather than calculation.”

Sisson was echoing Samuel Coleridge who said we need:

“The true historical feeling, the mortal life of an historical nation, generation linked to generation by faith, freedom, heraldry and ancestral fame.”

But instead, Coleridge wrote in the 1820s:

“This has given place to the superstitions of wealth and newspaper reputation...talents without genius; a swarm of clever, well-informed men; an anarchy of minds, a despotism of maxims; despotism of finance in government and legislation; guess-work of general consequences substituted for moral and political philosophy...”

My word, Sam, you should see us now! The politics which Johnson, Coleridge and Sisson were talking about was not the politics of party interest but the politics of a Christian nation under God. And if that sounds a bit fanciful, we'd better put some flesh and blood on it – since we are all children of the Incarnation. Beyond party politics are national institutions: the monarchy, the church, the law, the university and the army. These institutions were all forged out of historical crises and they are all in their way historical compromises and creations which allow men who differ in their opinions to live together in peace. You might say that we have institutions so that we do not die of party politics.

Roger Scruton, in his fine book *Modern Philosophy*, reminds us that when the Nazi and Communist parties wanted to destroy every notion of corporate personality outside the party, they abolished institutions. Scruton says:

“Institutions have moral rights and duties. They invite our respect and consideration not as a means only, but as ends in themselves. Institutions are rational agents...they can be loved as persons.”

Our institutions are the many faces of the body politic, the public realm, the whole community. And the quality of any community may be defined in terms of the objects of its desires. Show me what you value and I'll tell you what you're worth. We make the mistake of imagining our politics to be something novel and unique, when really it has all happened before – the same struggles, the same striving to achieve civic virtue and the good life in community. Listen to St Augustine and you could think you were reading today's newspaper. But this is from his great book *City of God*, written towards the end of the Roman Empire:

“The maladies which afflict the mere exercise of economic competition are the reduction of life to the status of simply providing more opportunities for making and spending money.”

Augustine preaches against what he calls: “The vice of merely economic and utilitarian justice.” And he warns us:

“This can become a bad habit dressed up as a virtue: like the Athenian woman, you can by a series of small doses accustom yourself to poison.”

But Augustine was not one of those of the monkish disposition who thought it his duty to escape from the business of the naughty world. The state and its politics have a purpose and he tells us what this is:

“It is the instrument for intimidating evil and enabling goodness to live more quietly among us.”

Our institutions ought to help us improve our lives together. Augustine knew this and he denounced as rank paganism the idea that God helps only those who help themselves. He says: “God also helps those who do not help themselves – in order that they may learn to help themselves.”

We are never left entirely in the dark, without grace. We are not totally depraved. Even the smallest inkling of the possibility of becoming better is to begin our improvement. All politics depends for its reality and practice on the possibility of freedom. This is not a slogan – for the freedom meant here is freedom of the individual will and this is guaranteed only by God’s grace. We are not free by nature. So politics can never be the final purpose of mankind.

Caesar must abandon his pretensions and submit to Christ. In Original Sin Adam is Everyman. And it follows that Everyman is my neighbour. This is the political gospel.

The ultimate values are truth, beauty and goodness and these values are real and essential, inherent in the very constitution of the universe. In the beginning was the Word. Wholesome politics means to live in the Christian tradition. This politics cannot be separated from religious truth because it requires religious faith to provide the metaphysical link between the past, present and future.

This is what the New Testament means when it speaks of the Communion of Saints