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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART V

Questions About Theology and Metaphysics

61. THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Dear Dr. Adler,

I understand that our Constitution requires the separation of church and state. Yet there seems to be a continual controversy as to just what this “separation” means. What are the main views on church-state relations among the great writers of the past? What are the main views on separation of church and state today?

C. P.

Dear C. P.,

In the Western world there have been three principal views of the relation between church and state: (1) the church should be supreme, (2) the state should be supreme, and (3) church and state should be independent of one another.

The classical expression of church supremacy is found in Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine of “the two swords.” Aquinas holds that church and state are the institutions appointed by God to achieve the ends of human life. The church aids man to attain eternal salvation, and the state aids him to secure his temporal happiness. But since eternal salvation is the ultimate end, to which all other aspects of human life are ordered, the temporal authority of the state is subject to the spiritual power of the church. Hence God entrusts both “swords” to the church, the spiritual to be wielded directly by the church, the temporal to be handed over to the political authorities. Both temporal and spiritual power belong to the church, but the temporal power is entrusted to political rulers as stewards for the church.

Thomas Hobbes, the sixteenth-century English political philosopher, affirms the doctrine of state supremacy with great cogency and consistency. For Hobbes, there can be only one sovereign authority in a state, and it rules over all spheres of human life. The head of the state is the head of the church. He holds both “swords.” State and church are one. In a universal state, the world sovereign

would be the world pontiff. This type of church-state relation has been fittingly called “caesaropapism.”

As opposed to both Aquinas and Hobbes, Dante, the fourteenth-century Italian poet, calls for a clear separation of the two powers or “swords.” Church and state, said Dante, are both given directly by God to man for his spiritual and secular welfare. They are equal and separate powers, subordinate to God alone and not to each other. Both of them do God’s work in the world, and neither should interfere with the other.

The modern doctrine of separation has come down to us through John Locke, the seventeenth-century English philosopher. According to this view, religion is a purely spiritual matter, the church should have no secular power, and the state should not interfere in religious matters. The state is set up to deal solely with man’s earthly affairs and is maintained by law and force. In contrast, churches or religious associations serve man’s eternal salvation and are held together only by the sincere and uncoerced beliefs of the members.

Locke’s principle of separation and of the rights of individual conscience has become the governing rule for church-state relations in this country. It is expressed in the basic American documents on religious freedom, written by Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. It is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids Congress to “establish” any religion as a state church, on the one hand, and to prohibit religious worship, on the other.

It is generally agreed that the First Amendment bars the national government from interfering in religious matters, promoting or punishing religious beliefs and practices, or favoring one religious denomination over another. There is a conflict of opinion, however, as to whether it intends strict and complete separation between government and religion, or permits cooperation between the two spheres in matters of mutual concern.

The “separationists” contend that it is the intention of the First Amendment to keep government and religion absolutely separate, each strictly confined to its own sphere. They hold that such separation is necessary and essential for religious freedom and serves the best interest of both state and church. The “cooperationists” contend that church and state have mutual concerns in education, social welfare, and family life. They hold that cooperation in such matters does not violate the spirit and intention of the First

Amendment, or impair the proper independence of either church or state.

62. THE GREEK GODS

Dear Dr. Adler,

I recently read Homer's Iliad and was quite scandalized by the tales he has to tell about the Greek gods. Can the Greeks have looked up to such petty, immoral, grasping, and ridiculous beings? Or did Homer mean to attack the religion of his time? If it had such gods, it certainly deserved to be attacked.

H. H.

Dear H. H.,

Your letter raises, first, an historical question about the relation of Homer to the development of Greek religion; and, second, a philosophical question about the ethical content of religious beliefs.

In answer to the first question, modern historical knowledge tells us that the Homeric stories belong to a later stage of Greek religion. The earlier religion centered in natural forces, the daemons of places, magical rites, and the cult of the dead. By Homer's time the natural forces had assumed a personal form. Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon are not only Sky, Sun, and Sea; they also have definite characters. Homer carries this process further, makes the characterizations more concrete and organizes the chaotic horde of local deities into a single Pantheon. From their GHQ on Olympus they ruled over the affairs of men, and men tried to propitiate them with sacrifices and prayers.

The great value in the Homeric stories, according to certain interpreters, is the unification it wrought in Greek culture. But the ethical import of these stories raises a serious question with ordinary people nowadays, as it did with ancient philosophers. Plato is as much disturbed as you are by the portrait of the gods in Homer's poems.

Part of the *Republic* is devoted to a diatribe against the corrupting effect of such works on the young. Plato is particularly irate about the story of Cronus binding and mutilating his father, Uranus, and the various adulteries, deceits, and other shenanigans of the Homeric gods:

They are stories not to be repeated in our State. The young man should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that . . . he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods.

Feeling against these stories in ancient Greece was not confined to philosophers. They also aroused the indignation of later poets. Pindar says: "Hateful is this poet's lore that speaks slander against the gods." And Euripides says: "If gods do anything base, they are no gods."

How, then, are we to accept the view that Homer was the educator of Greece, preparing the way for the flowering of Greek culture? How can we accept the writings of Homer and Hesiod (who also told tales about the immoral acts of the gods) as the Greek equivalent of our Bible? Can this be religion?

We do not face quite the same kind of question in our own religious tradition. The Bible does not ascribe sexual functions to the divinity. There is but one slight reference to the "sons of God" mating with "the daughters of men." The *Song of Songs* has been interpreted as an allegory of the man-God relation, but it is more often enjoyed simply as a delightful and quite human love song.

However, God is depicted in some Biblical passages as cruel, vindictive, and bloodthirsty, and figures in what seem to us to be quite unedifying episodes. The command to Abraham to slay Isaac, to the Jews to steal the jewels of the Egyptians, to Hosea to marry a loose woman—how can these be ascribed to a righteous God? "Shall not the Lord of all the earth do right?"

Just as certain Greek thinkers and poets objected to the portrayal of the gods in Homer's works, so do some people nowadays object to certain incidents in the Old Testament (such as that of Lot and his daughters, and of the men of Sodom and the angels). The objectors include those born in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, who think that the Bible should be presented to children in a carefully selected version, because reading such stories might have morally or psychologically unwholesome effects. They also include people outside our religious tradition, who expect a sacred scripture to deal only with spiritual and edifying matters, and profess to be shocked at some of the material in our Bible.

I leave it to you whether people are being high-minded or naïve in objecting to Homer or the Bible on these grounds.

63. THE MEANING OF TRAGEDY

Dear Dr. Adler,

Why are we so gripped by the great tragedies we see on the stage and by accounts of tragic figures and events from real life? It would seem that we would be repelled by them and instinctively avoid contact with such unpleasantness. Why are tragedy and the tragic so compelling? What is tragedy?

O. R. M.

Dear O. R. M.,

The term “tragedy” has a narrow and a broad meaning. Tragedy in the narrow sense refers to events that take place on the stage—or in movies or novels. Tragedy in the broad sense is a quality of human existence. The term here refers to what happens in actual life.

The classical example of tragedy in the narrow sense is the type of drama which originated in ancient Greece. According to Aristotle, tragedy is distinguished from comedy by having an unhappy ending. The tragic hero, a man above the average in station and character, suffers a change of fortune. His fall is caused by a combination of fate and fault, not merely by viciousness or stupidity on his part. The spectator sympathizes with the tragic hero and feels pity and terror at his fate.

Oedipus, Hamlet, and King Lear are good examples of the tragic hero. They come to unhappy endings. But they do not merely suffer, dumbly like brute animals or passively like weak whiners. They struggle against their fate, and they recognize it. They find meaning in their misery.

Dramatic tragedy, then, implies a certain view of the nature and meaning of human existence—tragedy in the wider sense. It is this tragic vision of life that has been proclaimed by such modern philosophers as Nietzsche, Unamuno, Berdyaev, and Jaspers. According to these thinkers, human life is a deadly serious and dangerous thing, involving aspirations that go far beyond the common level. Hence it often leads to frustration, contradiction, and suffering.

Tragedy, for these thinkers, is not merely darkness and doom. They point to the exultation that the hero experiences in confronting his fate. Indeed, Karl Jaspers thinks that this will to struggle, to

confront and transcend one's fate, is symbolic of the Western spirit. He distinguishes this restless tension and intransigence from the serene acceptance or indifference characteristic of the Eastern spirit.

In this view, man is great in his failure. As against the shallow "success" story, dramatic tragedy shows the true greatness and dignity of man in the midst of failure and "shipwreck." Dramatic tragedy conveys the tragic sense of life and the tragic knowledge about man's potential grandeur. The spectator, through his emotions and imagination, shares in the struggle and awareness of the tragic hero. We stand with Oedipus and Hamlet and Lear and confront the truth and the meaning of life.

If we seek in modern literature for works that convey the tragic vision, we seldom find anything that fits the Aristotelian definition of tragedy in detail. Modern heroes are usually ordinary men, though a bit more aware and articulate about their fate. They do not have the certainty about what is good for man and about ultimate truths, which we find in the ancient dramas.

Nevertheless, tragedy is still to be found in modern literature. Often the author and the spectator are more aware of the meaning of a tragic situation than the leading characters are, but the meaning is there. Tragic heroes in contemporary literature include Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Blanche Duval in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, and Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

Contrary to a certain vogue in modern thought, however, tragedy is not the final word on life. The religions founded on the Bible admit the dark realities of human existence but see them in the light of divine purpose and redemption. That is why Dante called his great work, which starts in Hell and ends in Heaven, *The Divine Comedy*. It has a happy ending—salvation.

64. EXISTENTIALISM

Dear Dr. Adler,

The term "existentialism" throws me. I don't quite understand how existentialist writers use the word "existence." It seems to have a special meaning for them. And all kinds of people seem to be called "existentialists," from the most venerable and holy then to hangers-on at sidewalk cafes and coffeehouses. Just what is exis-

tentialism, anyway? Who are the leading existentialist philosophers? How far back does this kind of thought go?

J. P. H.

Dear J. P. H.,

The first thing to note about the existentialist philosophers is that when they use the term “existence” they mean *human* existence. They have no interest in the existence of tables and chairs, stars and atoms, or other things. We should also note that by human existence they mean the existence of the particular individual, not the human race. Man’s problem, in their view, is to become fully conscious of his authentic self in the particular situation in which he finds himself.

This basic problem cannot be solved by rational thought and abstract ideas about human nature. Universal laws and general concepts cannot come to grips with the problem of the utterly unique, concrete, particular person. There can be no precedents or guidebooks to direct him on his painful and anxious mission of becoming himself.

Existential thinkers believe that through this “project,” with its dread and anxiety, a man may gain a deeper and surer insight into reality—what the traditional philosophers call “being”—than any abstract, detached rational analysis can afford. Truth is attained only by the existing thinker in his particular personal situation, not by objective thought detached from the thinker’s existence.

The mission of becoming one’s self involves decision, commitment, “engagement.” It is through decision that man attains self-conscious existence, not merely through high ideals or good intentions. Indecision is a state of nothingness.

Modern existentialism has some ancient precursors. Religious leaders have long emphasized the transformation of personal existence as the major human concern. Philosophers such as Socrates and the Stoics look upon philosophy as primarily a way of life rather than a purely speculative pursuit. Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Pascal have an anguished awareness of the human condition and stress the saving role of personal transformation and commitment.

Sören Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish religious philosopher, is the originator of modern existentialism. His major concern is twofold: how to become one’s real self, and how to become a

Christian. He holds that God is known only through personal faith and commitment. Rational demonstration of God's existence is absurd and irrelevant. The criterion of truth is the intense passion of "inwardness" of the person who attains it. There is no objective, abstract truth apart from personal "appropriation."

Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, is another founder of modern existentialism. He sees modern man as a degenerate, spiritless, and devitalized creature who tries to escape from the horrible reality of his condition by a shallow philosophy and a soothing religion. He holds that it is man's mission to create his own transformation through a resolute will, personal suffering, and an experience of the depths and heights of human existence. He rejects traditional philosophy as an illusory satisfaction of psychological needs, and Christianity as a denial of the value of earthly existence.

These two types of existentialism—religious and atheistic—are represented by present-day thinkers. Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Karl Jaspers are proponents of a God-centered existentialism. Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus are atheistic or agnostic existentialists. The two schools are held together by their common concern with personal existence as the realm of basic truth.

PART V: *Questions About Theology and Metaphysics*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In Great Books of the Western World

- Plato: *Euthyphro*; *Phaedo*; *Republic*, Books II—IV, VIII—X;
Laws
- Aristotle: *On the Soul*; *Metaphysics*, Book XII; *Physics*, Book VIII; *On Poetics*, Chs. 6—22
- Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*
- Epictetus: *The Discourses*
- Marcus Aurelius: *The Meditations*
- Plotinus: *The Six Enneads*, Enneads III—IV
- Augustine: *The Confessions*; *The City of God*; *On Christian Doctrine*
- Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Part I complete, Part II—II, QQ. 1—46, 183—189, Part III, QQ. 1—16, 60—65, 69—99
- Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. 12, Part II, Ch. 31, Parts III—IV
- Montaigne: *Essays*, "That to Study Philosophy Is to Learn to Die,"
"That a Man Is Soberly to Judge of the Divine Ordinances,"

“Of Prayers,” “Apology for Raimond de Sébonde,” “Of Liberty of Conscience,” “Of Repentance”

Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Spinoza: *Ethics*, Part I

Pascal: *The Provincial Letters; Pensees*

Locke: *A Letter Concerning Toleration; An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, Chs. X, XVIII—XIX Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sections X—XI

Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws*, Books XXIV—XXV

Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, Book IV, Ch. 8

Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*, Book V, Ch. 1, Part 3, Article III

Gibbon: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chs. XV—XVI, XX—XXI, XXIII, XXVIII, XXXVII, XLVII, XLIX—L, LIV, LVII—LX, LXVI—LXVII, LXIX—LXX

Kant: *The Critique of Pure Reason*, “Transcendental Dialectic,” Ch. III, “The Ideal of Pure Reason”; *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Part I, Book II, “Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason”; *The Critique of Judgment*, Part II, Second Division, “Dialectic of Teleological Judgment”

Hegel: *The Philosophy of History*

Freud: *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, Section V; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sections I—II; *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Lecture 35

Other Works

Acton, John E. E. D.: *Essays on Church and State* Adam, Karl: *The Spirit of Catholicism*

Anselm of Canterbury: *Proslogium; Monologium*

Aquinas, Thomas: *Summa Contra Gentiles*

Baeck, Leo: *The Essence of Judaism*

Barth, Karl: *Dogmatics in Outline; The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*

Brunner, Emil H.: *The Christian Doctrine of God*

Buber, Martin: *I and Thou; Israel and the World; The Eclipse of God*

Burckhardt, Jacob: *Force and Freedom*, Sections II—III

Calvin, John: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Forsyth, Thomas M.: *God and the World*

Freud, Sigmund: *The Future of an Illusion*

Hegel, G. W. F.: *Early Theological Writings*

Heidegger, Martin: *Existence and Being*

Heiler, Friedrich: *Prayer*

Hume, David: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

James, William: *Essays on Faith and Morals*, V. “The Dilemma of Determinism”; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Jaspers, Karl: *Tragedy Is Not Enough*
 Jung, Carl G.: *Psychology and Religion*
 Kant, Immanuel: *Religion Within the Limits of Pure Reason Alone*
 Kierkegaard, Sören: *The Concept of Dread; The Sickness Unto Death; Fear and Trembling*
 Luther, Martin: *Three Treatises; Table Talk*
 Marcel, Gabriel: *Being and Having; The Mystery of Being; The Philosophy of Existence*
 Maritain, Jacques: *Science and Wisdom; Freedom in the Modern World*
 Niebuhr, H. Richard: *Christ and Culture*
 Niebuhr, Reinhold: *The Nature and Destiny of Man; Beyond Tragedy*
 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Antichrist; The Birth of Tragedy; Thus Spake Zarathustra; The Will to Power*
 Nilsson, Martin P.: *A History of Greek Religion*
 Otto, Rudolph: *The Idea of the Holy*
 Pfeffer, Leo: *Church, State, and Freedom*
 Sartre, Jean Paul: *Existentialism and Humanism; Being and Nothingness*
 Schechter, Solomon: *Studies in Judaism*
 Schelling, Friedrich W. von: *Of Human Freedom*
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich: *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*
 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Freedom of the Will*
 Spinoza, Benedict de: *Theologico-Political Treatise*
 Temple, William: *Nature, Man and God*
 Tillich, Paul: *Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be*
 Underhill, Evelyn: *Worship; Mysticism*
 Weiss, Paul: *Man's Freedom*
 Whitehead, Alfred N.: *Religion in the Making*

[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)

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