## The Relationship of the Church and the World

### А. The Biblical Concept of “World”

Before we discuss the relationship of the Church and the world, we must define what the Bible means by “world.” The Greek term κόσμος (*kosmos*)has many meanings and connotations in the New Testament, including: (1) the planet Earth (2) the human race, and (3) the system of thought, attitudes, and behaviors practiced by the people of the world that contradicts God’s ways.

In other words, the term κόσμος (*kosmos*) indicates: (1) where people live, (2) people themselves, and (3) how people live. It is interesting to compare these three meanings of κόσμος (*kosmos*) with the events recorded in the first three chapters of Genesis. In chapter 1, God creates the material world and all it contains. Genesis 2 focuses on the creation of people. In Genesis chapter 3, we learn of humanity’s fall into sin. We will keep these three applications of κόσμος (*kosmos*) in mind as we investigate how believers in Christ should relate to the world.

The apostle John devotes much attention to this question. For example, in John 1:9, he speaks of the “world” as the planet on which we live: “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” In John 3:16, the “world” is all people who live on the planet: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Finally, in John 15:18, the term “world” refers to a perspective and lifestyle in opposition to God: “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before {it hated} you.” John expands his definition of this third meaning of “world” in 1 Jn 2:15-16:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

In John 17:15-18, we find all three applications of κόσμος (*kosmos*) in one context: “I do not ask You to take them out of the world (1st meaning), but to keep them from the evil {one}. They are not of the world (3rd meaning), even as I am not of the world (3rd meaning). Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world (2nd meaning), I also have sent them into the world (2nd meaning).”

### B. Separation from the World

In light of the above considerations, how should the Church understand and apply the biblical principle of being separate from the world? The following passages exhort us, “’Come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord” (2 Cor 6:17), and, “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jam 4:4).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Old Testament, God required Israel to separate itself from the surrounding nations (Lev 18:3, 24-30; 20:23). Similarly, the psalmist warns of the danger of close association with unbelievers: “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers” (Ps 1:1).

In what sense do God’s people need to separate themselves from the world? It is mistaken to think that believers should refrain from enjoying the material blessings that the Lord provides in creation. An ascetic approach to life does not come from the Bible, but finds it roots in ancient Greek philosophy.

Paul words to Timothy here are instructive: “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:4-5). In this same context, Paul calls the ascetic ideal a “doctrine of demons” (1 Tim 4:1-2). Therefore, separation from the world does not mean asceticism.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that although God in no way forbids our participation in the blessings of creation, one must be cautious of over-attachment to earthly things, which can distract one from spiritual things. Peter calls believers in Jesus “aliens and strangers” on the earth (1 Pet 2:11), and speaks of the Church as the διασπορά (*diaspora*), i.е., the “diaspora” (1 Pet 1:1).

It is also misguided to understand separation from the world as avoidance of the people of this world. The life of Jesus gives us the ultimate example of a proper attitude toward outsiders to the Faith. He was often criticized for spending time with sinners. Yet, He responded, “{It is} not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:12-13). Paul gives further instruction in this regard: “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I {did} not at all {mean} with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world (1 Cor 5:9-10).

Moreover, Jesus encourages us not to judge others (Matt 7:1-5; see Jam 4:11-12), to love our enemies (Matt 5:38-47), seek peace with others (Matt 5:9, 23-24, also see Heb 12:14) and their good (Matt 7:12), and to forgive all offenses (Matt 5:7; 6:12-15; 18:21-35). The apostles teach the same. Both Peter and Paul instruct us to show love and respect to all people (1 Pet 2:17; 1 Thes 3:12; Tit 3:2) and not seek revenge (1 Pet 3:9; 1 Thes 5:15, Rom 12:17ff; also see Prov 20:22; 24:28-29; 25:21-22).

In a word, God calls us to walk in love toward all people. Love is the fulfillment of the Law (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jam 2:8), the thrust of Jesus’ Great Commandment (Mk 12:29-34), the goal of New Testament teaching (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Pet 1:5-7), and the greatest of the Christian virtues (1 Cor 13:13). Therefore, separation from the world does not involve withdrawal from people of this world.

Believers must be separate from the world in the sense of abstaining from non-Christian lifestyles, practices, and perspectives. We are allowed to enjoy the creation God has made for us. We are free to interact with unbelievers in order to show them Christ. Yet, we refrain from walking in the ways of unbelievers. We maintain our distinctive lifestyle and values.

Jesus reminds us that the values of this world differ from what God values (Lk 16:15; 9:23-25). Paul charges us in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” He gives the same charge to the Ephesians: “So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk” (Eph 4:17). Peter also speaks of separation from the world in this sense: “For the time already past is sufficient {for} {you} to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles” (1 Pet 4:3).

In the Old Testament, the psalmist often decries the behavior of unbelievers (Ps 119:53, 136; 120:1-7; Ps 139:19-22; also see 2 Pet 2:7-8). Israel was forbidden to associate with Gentiles to prevent them from imitating their practices and turning from Yahweh their God (Deut 29:16-18; Judg 2:2-3). They were not to marry outside the commonwealth of Israel (Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12-13). Israel’s failure to observe these restrictions led to their apostasy and subsequent punishment (Num 25:1-6; 31:12-18; Judg 3:3-6; Hos 7:8-9; 12:1; Ezek 11:12).

### C. Christ and Culture

Concerning the question of how the Church should relate to secular culture, one must consider the well-known publication *Christ and Culture*, by H. R. Niebuhr.[[2]](#footnote-2) He lists five different approaches to defining this relationship: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. To simplify this scheme, we will focus on three options: rejection of culture, endorsement of culture, and sanctification of culture.

The first position asserts that believers should reject culture and separate themselves from people of this world. It is believed that human cultures are totally given over to sin. Therefore, Christians should have nothing to do with distorted secular culture and must refrain from participation in secular affairs.

Exponents of this view cite in support the biblical injunction to be separate from the world. Friendship with the world is forbidden (2 Cor 6:14; Jam 4:4). The world lies under the power of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19; 2 Cor 4:4). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). We are only strangers and aliens on this planet (1 Pet 2:11). Some early Fathers adopted this view, Tertullian in particular. Monasticism arose as a means to escape this sinful world and devote oneself to the Lord.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On the other hand, the Church is nonetheless part of the culture and called to exert a positive influence on it. There is a close relationship and interdependence between Church and society.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, God calls us to love not only one another, but also the people of this world. In addition, Jesus is not only Redeemer, but also Creator of all. Believers are called not only to evangelize, but also aid in fulfilling God’s commission to humanity in general to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it” (Gen 1:28).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second approach is to reconcile Christ with human cultures and unify them. Adherents of this view emphasize the features that Church and society have in common. The advantage to this approach is greater opportunity to exert a positive influence on the world and draw from secular society its positive aspects. On the other hand, it is clear that all human cultures embrace certain values and practices that depart from the biblical norm. In fact, Paul summons all peoples of all cultures to repent (Acts 17:26-30). Peter calls the secular world of his day a “perverse generation” (Acts 2:40).[[6]](#footnote-6)

We feel the best approach is sanctification of culture. Every culture has both positive and negative elements in it. The Church can endorse the positive elements and thereby encourage interaction with outsiders and participation in cultural events. On the other hand, the Church can speak against negative elements in a culture and introduce reform. Gardner critiques the two more extreme approaches: “Whereas the separationist church (i.e., rejection of culture) leaves culture unaffected by religion, the folk church (i.e., endorsement of culture) gives religious sanctions to the goals and values of culture” and thereby loses its prophetic voice.[[7]](#footnote-7)

### D. Other Aspects

The Church’s relationship with the world also involves evangelization. Followers of Jesus seek to bring others in God’s kingdom. Evangelization is the theme of the next chapter. The Church also seeks to support societal structures and institutes, as discusses in chapter 2 of volume 4. Moreover, believers in Christ perform their jobs with diligence and integrity, as prescribed in many biblical passages (Eph 6:5-9; 1 Thes 3:10; 1 Pet 2:18-20; Col 3:22-24; Dan 6:4). It is important for believers to have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim 3:7; Ecc 7:1; 2 Cor 8:21).

The Church’s presence has a sanctifying effect on the world at large. Speaking of His disciples, Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:13-14). God even delays His judgments for the sake of believers living in the world. For example, He was willing to spare Sodom for the sake of righteous persons living there (Gen 18:26).

### E. Resolving Societal Problems

Concerning the Church’s involvement in resolving societal problems, several arguments support this. The so-called “existential argument” states that God’s love motivates us to help those in need. The ethical argument reminds us that the Church is still a part of human society and should participate with other members of society to resolve its problems. A practical reason for seeking improvement in society is for the sake of our children, who could inherit our unresolved issues. Aiding those in need in society also has spiritual value to serve as a visible testimony of God’s love and to attract people to the gospel.

We cite several writers who support the Church’s involvement in society. McConnell, for example, comments on the value of all individuals as created in God’s image. One must consider not only a person’s need for redemption, but also a one’s dignity as a person.[[8]](#footnote-8) The famous evangelist, Billy Graham, stated, “We must be concerned with human suffering wherever it is found because God is concerned about it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) He points out that the missionary activity of the Church often included humanitarian works, such as hospitals, schools, orphanages, etc. Jesus Himself healed the sick. Roman Emperor Julian wrote that Christianity:

…has specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Nevertheless, Graham feels that evangelization should accompany humanitarian aid.[[11]](#footnote-11) McGavran adds that the best way to improve the moral condition of society is to improve the moral quality of each individual in it through the gospel.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At the same time, some go to the extreme of saying that the main task of the Church is to introduce reform in society. Among adherents of this view is S. M. Hauerwas, who writes, “To be a disciple of Jesus means that our lives must literally be taken up into the drama of God’s redemption of his creation,” and, “This means that peacekeepers, rather than withdraw from politics, must be the most political of animals,” and, “To be such a community is not to withdraw from ‘society’ but rather to stand within our society making present what would otherwise be absent.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Hall reasons likewise. He believers that the Church is “a community of witness that participates consciously, actively, in the divine transformation of groaning creation.”[[14]](#footnote-14) It disappoints him that:

Christianity in most of its prevailing expressions has been so centered in God, the transcendent Christ, and the afterlife, and so persuaded of the inherent evil and inferiority of the material world, that it has presented its gospel more consistently as redemption *from* the world than as redemption *of* the world.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Gardner also affirms that the Church should play an essential role in addressing society’s problems. He feels that the Church must have an “existential involvement… in the secular life of contemporary man – in his pursuit of economic, educational and political goals.”[[16]](#footnote-16) For him, “Neither the church nor secular culture is the Kingdom of God, but both are instruments of the Kingdom.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, “The church, therefore, is not the exclusive – or even the primary – channel through which the divine will is disclosed.”[[18]](#footnote-18) At the same time, he correctly states that the Church should point people to God, who is “the true center of their existence and the ultimate ground of meaning and value.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Remarkably, we learn that the famous Christian witness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, held to such a view. He felt that the Church exists to serve society and enable its development. In his opinion, the Church’s goal should be “the transformation and renewal of man for life in the midst of this present humanity.”[[20]](#footnote-20) He also reproved the Church of his time that it imposed its values on others.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Another similar view is voiced by P. Clayton, who claimed, “Our work’s not done until we’re having a transformative effect on the society around us.”[[22]](#footnote-22) He even proposed adapting Christian theology so that it better corresponds to a program of social action. In other words, we must “develop Christian theologies that support social transformation,” and focus on the “crisis of the planet, the crisis of poverty, the crisis of peace.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Another position diverging from biblical revelation by R. Ruether claims that God seems either indifferent to society’s problems, or unable to resolve them. Hall approximates this view: “The power and dominion of God will have to restrict itself to the kinds of alterations that honor existing realities, good, bad and indifferent!”[[24]](#footnote-24) Ruether advises cooperation between religions to address society’s issues. He also posits the existence of a “world soul,” which unites all living things on the planet, in which all people should participate.[[25]](#footnote-25) Moreover, he “sees animals, plants, rivers and hills as fellow creatures, having their own unmediated relation to God.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Contrary to these opinions, Moffett along with others rightly stresses that our “vertical” relationship with God takes priority over “horizontal” connections with other people. Love for one’s neighbor is not the first, but the second commandment. Therefore, Christian theology should focus not on people, but on God. Additionally, meeting people’s spiritual needs is more important than satisfying their physical ones.[[27]](#footnote-27)

It is true that the Bible often addresses the issues of poverty and injustice. Nearly all of these passages, though, are taken from the Old Testament. The question arises whether the Old Testament is speaking of poverty and injustice in society in general or among God’s people. Examples exist where Scripture urges God’s people to look out for the welfare of the nation in which they dwell (see Jer 29:7 and the examples of Daniel, Joseph, and Mordecai). Adherents of the “social gospel” conclude that these Old Testament texts refer to society in general and therefore urge the Church to social action.

This question is complicated, though, by the fact that these two entities, i.e., “Church and society,” were at that time one and the same. To resolve the question, one must appeal to the New Testament, where secular society and the people of God were two different overlapping entities. Remarkably, the New Testament addresses poverty and injustice almost exclusively in the context of the Church (see Acts 11:29; Gal 2:10; 2 Cor 8-9; Jam 2; 1 Jn 3:17). Consequently, the corresponding Old Testament texts likely had God’s people primarily in view as well. Nonetheless, the New Testament does not forbid involvement in social action. One can cite the example of the Good Samaritan. The Old Testament has a clear example as well in Jonah’s preaching to the Gentiles of Nineveh.

Gardner, however, offers a different explanation for these observations. He asserts that the apostles directed more attention to the Church because the Church had just begun to exist and was struggling for its survival. Furthermore, the Church did not engage in societal affairs because it expected the soon return of the Lord. Finally, the Church of that time had little political clout and so could not exert much influence in society.[[28]](#footnote-28) Although there is validity to these claims, the New Testament gives no hint of any change in the Church’s attitude toward the world and its problems. Gardner’s hypothesis is pure conjecture.

The guiding principle for believers in this regard is found in Galatians 6:10: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” In 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, Paul also wrote, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within {the church}? But those who are outside, God judges.” It is also significant that Jesus prayed to the Father: “I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me” (Jn 17:9).

In light of the above, we conclude that God does not forbid involvement in social action, even encourages it. Yet, His first priority is the Church, which is God’s new society that will someday replace the secular order and endure forever. In Icenogle’s words, the first disciples of the Lord Jesus established “a beginning order of a new human community that God would make to last forever. The new community would eventually put to death or transform all other inadequate human made structures and systems.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Nevertheless, the Old Testament advances many valuable principles for relating to others, such as the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21). Job’s life is a fine example of righteousness and justice (Job 31:13-40). These are topics also addressed by the prophets (Jer 7:5-6; Ezek 18:7-17; Micah 6:8-12; Zech 8:16- 19), in the poetic books (Ps 14:2-5; Prov 20:14; 24:23-25; 11:1; 16:11), and in the Torah (Lev 19). John the Baptist echoes this call in his day (Lk 3:10-14). Jesus repeats an injunction from the Law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; сf. Mk 12:31).

The Proverbs lay special stress about care for the poor (Prov 31:8-9; 19:17; 28:8, 27; 29:14; also see Ps 41:1-3; Zech 7:8-10) and condemns their oppression (Prov 28:3, 27; 22:16; 17:15; also see Amos 2:4ff; 8:4-6). Moreover, generosity is encouraged and rewarded (Prov 11:17, 26; 22:9; 14:21, 31; also see Ps 37:21, 26; 112:5). On the other hand, Scripture reveals that the poor are sometimes the cause of their own poverty (Prov 14:23; 28:19; 13:8).

### F. Rejection by the World

Although we have already highlighted many positive aspects of the relationship between the Church and the world, we must also keep in mind that the world, by nature, hates God and, consequently, has enmity toward God’s people as well. Jesus warned His disciples, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before {it hated} you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you” (Jn 15:18-19). Paul repeats Jesus’ teaching here, stating that suffering for Christ is an unavoidable consequence of following Him: “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). Prominent teachers of the Church also predicted opposition for God’s people from the world. Martin Luther even claimed that suffering was the mark of the true Church.

Colossians 1:24 provides even more insight into this question. Paul writes, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.” Paul is working off the principle of union with Christ and claiming that the Church receives a certain “quota” of suffering, which it is appointed to endure. In his sufferings, Paul is “filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions” in the sense of filling up a certain measure of this “quota” of suffering.

Peter explains why the world reacts to the Church in this way: “They are surprised that you do not run with {them} into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign {you}” (1 Pet 4:4). When we refuse to take part in sinful deeds, we send a message of rebuke to the world. Jesus said, “The world… hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil” (Jn 7:7). When we encounter persecution, the Lord counsels us to “rejoice” (Matt 5:10-12). Rejection by the world is an indicator that we belong to another Kingdom. A more detailed treatment of Christian suffering is presented in chapter 13 of volume 4.

### G. Church and State

**1. Relationship of the Church with the State**

The basic attitude of the Church to government authorities is submission. Romans 13 calls them God’s servants (Rom 13:4; see Job 36:7). Interestingly, Paul was referring to Roman authorities here, which were, in general, evil and oppressive. Nevertheless, God uses government authorities to preserve order in society. The Bible calls us to pray for leaders (1 Tim 2:1-3; Ezra 6:10), honor them (Prov 24:21; 1 Pet 2:17), and not curse them (Ecc 10:20; Ex 22:28). Paying taxes is necessary (Mk 12:15- 17).

On the other hand, when submission to government authorities contradicts God’s will, believers obey God as their first priority. Peter said to the Jewish leaders of his time, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge” (Acts 4:19, also see Ecc 8:2-5; Prov 23:1-7). There were times in the Old Testament when God’s people refused to obey their leaders when they acted foolishly or improperly, for example in the case of Saul (1 Sam 14:28-46; 19:1-17; 20; 22:17), Jezebel (1 Kin 18), and even David (1 Chr 21:3-6).

We know that some leaders are evil (see Ecc 10:5-7, 16). We also know that God will not allow wicked leaders to stay in power indefinitely. Daniel 4:32 reveals that God has the final word about the right to govern, “The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.”

**2. Relationship of the State with the Church**

After considering the relationship of the Church toward government, the question remains about how government should relate to the Church. We will examine the history of this question, comparing and evaluating the different approaches already employed. The main approaches are: a state church, religious tolerance, and separation of Church and State.

A state church is when the State supports one faith and suppresses the rest. This method prevailed for many centuries in Europe. Christianity became the legal religion by a decree issued by Emperor Constantine called the Edict of Milan. At the start, however, this system better approximated religious tolerance than a state church.

We have given free and absolute power to these Christians of exercising their own religion. And as this indulgence has been granted to them, so you understand that a similarly free and unrestricted power is, with a view to the peace of our time, conceded to all others as to their own religion or observance, that each may have the free liberty of the worship which he prefers; for we desire that no religion may have its honor diminished by us.

At the same time, Constantine granted special privileges to Christians: exemption for priests from military or civil service, emancipation of Christian slaves, financial support for the Church and its clergy, and others.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In 380 AD, Theodosius the Great made Christianity the state religion:

Those who follow this doctrine we authorize to assume the name of Catholic Christians; and all others, judging themselves to be senseless and insane, we ordain to bear the infamy of holding heretical dogma… they must expect to be visited, first by the divine vengeance, and then by that also of the authority which we have received from the will of heaven.[[31]](#footnote-31)

From that time until the seventeenth century, the European states recognized no other religion. At times, unbelievers were forced to accept Christianity, and those considered heretics were persecuted.

In the East, the head of the Church was the Emperor. Justinian, for example, considered the Church to be one of his governmental departments. Russian Tsar Peter the Great so regarded the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Byzantine emperor was considered the “anointed,” the “first servant of the Church,” and the “bishop of bishops.”[[32]](#footnote-32) He had the authority to call church councils and enforce their decisions: “All offenses against the Church were henceforth regarded as crimes against the State.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Bulgakov comments on the position of the emperor:

The Orthodox Emperor – was considered one of the Church’s essential attributes. The Emperor was the sign of the conquest of the world by the Cross; he was the ‘architect’ of the Kingdom of God on earth.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Kik makes the following insightful observation: “Whereas in previous centuries the Caesars had regarded themselves as the high priest of the heathen State religion, now the Caesars regarded themselves as the high priests of the Christian religion.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Parker makes mention of several factors that advanced the development of the emperor’s exalted position in the Church.[[36]](#footnote-36) First, in the East, the idea of a State religion system was more developed and accepted than in the West. Second, the Eastern Church was influenced by the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, who ascribed to the State ultimate value. Third, before the dawn of Christianity in the East, divine qualities were attributed to the tsar. Parker comments, “The conception of a free church in a free state could never arise either in the Constantinian polity or in the Byzantine system which succeeded it.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

The Eastern Church saw their role as a support to the emperor and his rule, and as a sanctifying influence on him and the people. We again cite Bulgakov: “The Orthodox Church always wished to influence the power of the state as much as possible, but from within and not from without,”[[38]](#footnote-38) and, “The Church exercises its influence on souls by the way of liberty, which alone corresponds to Christian dignity, not by that of constraint.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

In addition, although the Church submitted to the emperor or tsar and considered him God’s servant, it uncompromisingly opposes him if he unlawfully interferes with Church affairs. For example, the Church rejected the Henotikon proposed by Zeno, Monothelitism, championed by Heraclius, and the iconoclastic movement of Leo III and his son Constantine V. In general, the decisions of the emperor were considered valid only if they agreed with Church Tradition.[[40]](#footnote-40) Parker comments here,

One cannot point to any instance in Byzantine history in which emperors, however autocratic, succeeded fully in turning the current of belief in a direction opposed to Church tradition and to the convictions of the majority of churchmen, clerical or lay.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In the West, the Roman Pontiff held sway over civil authorities. Pope Leo I (5th c.) considered himself the successor of the Apostle Peter and the representative of Christ on the earth. In the Middle Ages, the pope appointed the kings of the Holy Roman Empire, beginning with Charlemagne in 800 AD. Struggles for power were common between pontiff and king. Hildebrand (11th c.) wrote about the pope, “His feet only shall be kissed by all princes; he may dispose the emperors.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

The popes not only claimed, but also exercised civil authority.[[43]](#footnote-43) In one case, Pope Gregory VII (11th c.) excommunicated King Henry IV for disobeying him, and Henry came to Gregory barefoot in the snow to plead for forgiveness. Pope Innocent III (13th c.) punished kings with the interdict, which liberated citizens from allegiance to their king and suspended nearly all church activities in his realm. Pope Boniface VIII (13th-14th c.) proclaimed himself tsar and emperor. He wrote, “The spiritual and material sword are both in the power of the Church, but the former is to be used by the Church, the latter only for it.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Until this day, the pope wears the papal crown, which symbolizes his dominion over both the spiritual and political life of individuals and nations.[[45]](#footnote-45) Kik summarizes the Roman Catholic position:

The Roman Catholic Church for centuries has been possessed with the vision of one Christian society under direct authority of political and ecclesiastical power. In regard to the relationship between these two powers, Roman Catholicism has maintained consistently the position that the Church is supreme over the State.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Remarkably, the state church system persisted in Europe even after the Reformation. Calvin and Zwingli had civil powers in their respective cities. Every Protestant county in Europe sponsored a specific faith – whether Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican.

The state church system does boast some advantages.[[47]](#footnote-47) The close ties between Church and State can promote greater involvement by the Church in secular society. Additionally, less confusion is caused by a multiplicity of Christian denominations. There is more visible unity. National leaders benefit by having a unified faith to enhance solidarity in their land.

However, we can note the following weaknesses. First, this system benefits only those who belong to the state church. Others suffer discrimination. Second, the question arises whether it is appropriate to use force to suppress heresy. Third, as we have mentioned above, we also encounter the difficulty of who actually rules the nation – the State or the Church. Tensions will certainly exist between them. Finally, state officials will likely have input into Church affairs, whether or not they are sincere Christians.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The next system we will examine is religious tolerance. In this approach, there is one officially sanctioned faith, yet other faith groups are free to congregate and serve God in accordance with their convictions. In the seventeenth century, this idea became popular in Europe for several reasons, one of which was that religious persecution proved ineffective to suppress rival faiths. In addition, this practice in the Netherlands apparently resulted in great prosperity for that country. Moreover, two English authors, John Milton and John Lock, wrote convincingly in favor of religious tolerance. In 1689, England passed a landmark legislation called the “Act of Tolerance.”

Nevertheless, this approach encounters problems as well. The state church enjoys privileges that other faiths do not. Members of other faiths must pay taxes, some of which will go to advance the agenda of the state church. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, American colonists complained about paying taxes for the benefit of the Anglican Church.

The final system for our investigation, which is the most widely accepted one in the modern West, is the separation of Church and State.[[49]](#footnote-49) In this approach, all religions are equal and enjoy freedom in their religious convictions and practices. The State is not allowed to interfere in Church matters. The State regulates matters between individual parties, while the Church addresses one’s relationship with God.

This system forms the basis for the Constitution of the United States, which reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Two authors effectively propagated this system – Isaac Backus and Robert Williams. They declared it inappropriate for the State to pass laws concerning the first part of the Decalogue, that is, in relation to faith in God. The State is limited to legislation regarding the second part of the Decalogue, that is, concerning relationships between people.

Bennett comments on the advantages of this approach.[[50]](#footnote-50) First, the Church enjoys many freedoms – the freedom to assemble, to own property, to choose its leaders, to evangelize, and to speak out in favor or opposition of social programs. Yet, Bennett prefers that the Church should introduce social change though teaching and example, rather than by political means. A second advantage is that the Church must be self-financing, which is beneficial for its development. Church members must actively support the work of the Church, which increases their attachment to their congregation.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov also defends this approach. He feels that the Church needs no representation in government: “There is no dogmatic connection between Orthodoxy and a predetermined political system. Orthodoxy is free and must not serve any political regime.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

However, separation of Church and State is also not without difficulties. First, the State cannot maintain neutrality in religious questions. All legislation is based on some kind of worldview or moral code. Therefore, whenever a law is passed, it gives preference to that worldview or moral code that underlies that legislation. Pannenberg confirms that independence of the State from religious influence is an “illusion.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Additionally, although Bennett is an advocate of separation of Church and State, he admits, “It is impossible to separate that which is purely secular in the field of education from that which has religious implications.”[[54]](#footnote-54) He also states that the Church “cannot be separated from society or keep out of many activities which touch the life of the state… The Church by its very nature is involved in most phases of life in which the state also is involved.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Moreover, if the State intends not to show preference for one religion by forbidding all public displays of religious faith, then it creates the impression that God is not important in the life of the nation and basically established atheism as the state religion. Bennett comments, “When all specific forms of religion are omitted from the world of the school, this is itself a negative form of religious teaching.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Gardner agrees that the danger of separating Church from States is that “It creates a moral and spiritual vacuum into which doctrinaire forms of secularism inevitably move.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

The only final solution to the dilemma of interaction between Church and State is to combine civil and religious authority in one individual, who must be perfect, just, faithful, and eternal. Therefore, successful interrelations between Church and State await the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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