

Theology essay: church state relations



Church-State Relations and Secularization

Throughout history there has developed a variety of relationships between Christian churches and governments, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflictual. The major forms of relationships between Christian churches and governments are in large measure grounded in various perspectives in the Christian Bible. The Christian Bible is not a single book, but a collection of books written over more than a millennium and containing very diverse perspectives on religion and government.

One perspective, represented by the Psalms, which were hymns sung in the Temple in Jerusalem, exalts the king to an almost divine position, sitting at the right hand of God (Ps 110: 1) and receiving the nations of the earth for an inheritance (Ps 2: 8). Coronation hymns celebrate the king's special relationship to God. This perspective dominates the self-understanding of the kings of Judah, the southern part of ancient Israel.

In sharp contrast, the prophet Samuel denounces kings as crooks and oppressors who are allowed by God only as a concession to human sinfulness. Samuel warns the tribes of Israel that if they choose to have a king, the king will draft their young men into his army and put the young women to work in his service. In this trajectory, prophets, armed only with the conviction that they have been called by God to proclaim the Word of God, repeatedly stand up to the kings of ancient Israel and denounce their sinfulness. Thus Samuel condemns Saul, Nathan condemns David, and later prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah condemn the kings of their times.

Meanwhile, in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Roman governor Pontius Pilate that his kingdom does not belong to this world (Jn 18: 36). This suggests a separation of responsibilities between civil governance and religious leadership. Repeatedly in the gospels, when people want to make Jesus a king, he slips through their midst and escapes. His mission is to proclaim the reign of God, not to establish a worldly kingdom.

There are also various covenants that set forth the relationship of God and God's people (Gen 9: 8-17; 15: 18-21; Ex 20; Deut 5); a covenant in the ancient Middle East was a solemn agreement that bound both parties to observe certain obligations. The covenant with Noah was made by God with all of creation. The covenant with Abraham initiated a relationship with Abraham and his descendants forever. The covenant made with Moses at Mt. Sinai became the central framework for the relationship of the people of Israel to God. The Book of Deuteronomy renews and reflects upon this covenant a generation later, as Moses is at the end of his life.

These four options would shape, respectively, later Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist views of the proper relation between church and state. The political theologies of the later Christian tradition consist in large measure of a series of conflicting appropriations of these perspectives. One can read the major political options taken by later Christian communions as developing one or more of the biblical trajectories. The Byzantine Orthodox tradition and some aspects of the Roman Catholic tradition continue the tradition of sacred kingship. Later strands of the Roman Catholic tradition view earthly rulers as prone to corruption and in need of repeated rebuke by religious leaders, such as popes. The Lutheran

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tradition focuses on Jesus's statement to Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world and concludes that there are two kingdoms: the kingdom of God, which is ruled by the gospel, and the kingdom of this world, which is ruled by civil governments. The Calvinist tradition focused on covenant in a way that none of the earlier traditions had done, placing covenant at the center of relationships both with God and with other human beings. In this lecture, I will not discuss the original biblical texts themselves, but I would like to explore the way in biblical perspectives have guided later Christian political theologies.

Divine Kingship

The ideology of the Judean monarchy, with its lofty view of the monarch as favored by God and called to mediate divine justice in the world would shape the Byzantine Orthodox tradition's view of the Emperor as a sacred figure with responsibility for the empire and the church together. Psalm 110 proclaims: "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool" (110: 1). That is, God says to the king: be enthroned beside me. This strand of the Bible sees God as entrusting a special responsibility to the king, which included particular care for the rights of widows and orphans, who were usually the most vulnerable persons in the ancient world. In this perspective, kings are divinely chosen beings with both rights and responsibilities of proper rule.

This perspective would influence later Eastern Christian views of church-state relations. For example, after Constantine had unified the Roman Empire in the early fourth century and made Christianity legal, the fourth-century bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine described the Emperor who

was formally only a candidate for reception into the church, as receiving, “as it were, a transcript of divine sovereignty” from God and directing the administration of the entire world, including the church, in imitation of God (*Life of Constantine*). That is, Constantine had a divinely given responsibility to govern not only the Roman Empire but also the Church. This view of a sacred emperor would shape the self-understanding of Byzantine Emperors until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the self-understanding of the Russian Czars until 1917. All of the first seven ecumenical councils—meetings of bishops from throughout the world—acknowledged by the Byzantine Orthodox and Catholics were called by Roman Emperors and were presided over by them or their legates. If the pope did not wish to have a council, pressure would be applied. In the sixth century CE, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian wanted to call a council, but Pope Vigilius disagreed with him. Justinian had Vigilius kidnapped by the Byzantine police while he was saying Mass and held until he agreed to the council. Then the council was held in Constantinople, where Justinian wanted it, not in Sicily, where Pope Vigilius wanted it. At the end of the council Vigilius did not like the idea of condemning men who had died two centuries earlier in communion with the church. Justinian applied further pressure to the Latin clergy, and Vigilius eventually accepted the Condemnation of various bishops from two hundred years earlier.

The model of sacred kingship would also dominate early medieval Western views of kings and emperors from the eighth to the eleventh centuries.

During the first millennium of Christian history, lay rulers, inspired by the ideology of the Judean monarchy, regularly called bishops and popes to

account for their misdeeds and had recognized authority to depose unworthy ecclesiastical leaders and appoint new ones. In one year alone, 1046, Emperor Henry III, imbued with the divinely given mission of sacred kingship, deposed three popes (Sylvester III, Benedict IX, and Gregory VI) and appointed a new pope, Clement II. Before his death in 1056, Henry would appoint three more popes. There is certainly the danger of abuse of power here, but there was also a genuine concern that the papacy not be dominated by corrupt Roman nobility. This tradition leaves a heritage that challenges Christian political leaders to accountability to God for the way they enforce justice in this world and charges them with responsibility for good governance of the Church. During the first millennium popes from Gelasius I onward would insist on a distinction between sacred and secular authority in order to limit the role of Emperors in the church.

Like Samuel and other prophets who challenged the pretensions of biblical monarchs, Augustine rejected Eusebius's exaltation of a Christian Roman Emperor and the entire model of sacred kingship. Like Samuel, Augustine thought earthly rulers were largely thieves and saw monarchy as a tragic necessity because of human sinfulness and not as directly willed by God. Augustine believed that no form of government could assure true justice in this world, and he questioned: "Justice removed, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers? What are bands of robbers but little kingdoms?" Empires in principle are not Christian. This perspective would buttress the Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century, when a series of popes and reformers would reject the model of sacred kingship. Pope Gregory VII, echoing Samuel and Augustine, insisted that kings are largely thugs and

oppressors who need to be called to accountability by religious leaders and who can be deposed by papal authority. The inability of either popes or emperors completely to dominate Europe would lead to new distinctions between secular and sacred in the twelfth century and in later medieval and early modern thought. From about the year 1100 on, emperors and pro-imperial apologists insist on a distinction between the sacred and the secular to limit the power of the papacy in politics. The suspicion of great empires as great robbers that need to be called to account by religious leaders would inform the battles of popes against emperors and kings for centuries and hovers in the background of Pope John Paul II's challenge to the Soviet Empire on his trip to Poland in 1979 and his eloquent defense of human rights against oppressive governments around the world.

The claim of papal authority over kings and nations could manifest itself in dangerous ways as well. In Psalm 2, God promises the king: "I will give you the nations for an inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession. You shall rule them with an iron rod; you shall shatter them like an earthen dish." Even though never fulfilled in ancient times, that promise, buttressed by the conquest narratives of the Hebrew Bible, lived on in Christian memory, and fifteenth-century popes saw themselves as the trustees of this inheritance. In 1452, as the Portuguese were inaugurating their journeys of discovery and conquest, Pope Nicholas V granted to the king of Portugal the right to conquer and enslave the entire non-Christian world: "In the name of our apostolic authority, we grant to you the full and entire faculty of invading, conquering, expelling and reigning over all the kingdoms, the duchies . . . of the Saracens, of pagans and of all infidels, wherever they may

be found; of reducing their inhabitants to perpetual slavery, of appropriating to yourself those kingdoms and all their possessions, for your own use and that of your successors” (Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas* , 1452; quoted in Peter Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation* , 34). In 1493 and again in 1494, shortly after the discovery of the New World, Pope Alexander VI drew a line on the map of the Americas, marking a partition between the areas that Spain and Portugal could dominate. The dream of empire, inspired by biblical promises, would shape centuries of modern colonial history.

Reformation

During the Reformation, the two major Protestant traditions rejected both the Byzantine Orthodox and the Roman Catholic models, but they drew sharply contrasting visions of politics from the Bible. Citing the Gospel of John, where Jesus denies that his kingdom belongs to this world, Martin Luther used the distinction between two kingdoms as a central principle structuring his theology. Luther insisted that God rules God’s own people by the Gospel and God rules those outside the church by the Law (“ Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed,” in Dillenberger, 368). However, Christians remain sinners throughout their lives, and so God also rules Christians by the Law insofar as they are sinners and part of a sinful society. Luther shared Augustine’s and Samuel’s skepticism about earthly rulers, but he interpreted Paul’s Letter to the Romans (chapter 13) as calling the Christian to obey even rulers whose policies offend a Christian conscience. He insisted on freedom to preach the Word of God, but he generally trusted governmental authorities to rule the temporal realm. In the later history of Lutheranism, contrary to Luther’s intention, the Lutheran

church was generally subservient to the state, and the state often supervised ecclesiastical governance.

In contrast to all the earlier models, John Calvin placed the covenant at the center of his political theology, with implications that would echo through much of European and American history. For Calvinists, covenants governed relations not only between God and Christians but also between earthly rulers and their subjects. In various countries the Calvinist tradition developed a forceful critique of monarchy based on the mutual obligations of each party. For Calvin, God alone is truly king, and all humans are radically fallen and subject to constant temptations to idolatry. No figure, whether pope or emperor or king or even a Protestant preacher, can claim infallible, final authority. Since rulers are forever tempted to rebel against God, all earthly power must be limited. Calvin distrusted democracy because a majority can be just as tyrannical as an individual, and he thought democracy could easily lead to sedition. He judged that in a fallen world, no single figure can be trusted, and thus all political powers must be checked by the self-interest of others. He advocated a mixture of aristocracy and democracy, a model that would be very influential on political developments in North America.

Calvinists often suffered attacks and persecutions. After the St. Bartholemew's Day Massacre in France, when Roman Catholics murdered thousands of Protestants, Theodore Beza, Calvin's most faithful disciple, proclaimed the sovereignty of the people, the right of revolution, and the binding nature of a constitution. Presbyterians in Scotland insisted on mutual responsibilities of the covenant as a way of limiting the powers of the Stuart

monarchs. When Mary Stuart accused John Knox of grasping for power, he denied the charge and insisted: “ My one aim is that Prince and people alike shall obey God.” (Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, p. 634). The rebellion against King Charles I began in Scotland with the proclamation of the National Covenant. Precisely because covenants spelled out mutual obligations for both ruler and the ruled, they could become the basis for rebellion and revolution when the terms were judged to have been violated. Through reflection on covenants in the Hebrew Bible and on natural law, Calvinists influenced early modern theories of government based upon a social contract and thus relying upon the consent of the governed.

Calvin saw the Gospel as a transformative social power, and there is a militant utopianism in Calvin’s vision of Christianity that would change the world. Geneva was to be the New Jerusalem. Puritans frustrated by the Stuart monarchs in England brought this energy and vision to New England, determined to build the city on the hill to inspire the world. Puritans understood themselves as the new Israelites fleeing slavery and coming to the Promised Land. As in earlier papal and imperial models, there was a negative side to the appropriation of biblical promises. Remembering that the ancient Israelites were instructed to destroy other tribes lest they tempt them to worship other gods, Puritan settlers viewed Native Americans as temptations to sin and sought to exterminate them or, at least, contain them in separate areas, reservations that were called “ praying towns” (Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860*, 40-42). When the Puritan Revolution in England failed in

1660, Puritans in America gave up hope for Europe and saw themselves as the millennial people, with a divine mission to convert the world after the failures in Europe.

Secularization and Religious Freedom in North America

Thus far we have seen the major models of church-state relations through the 17th century. Every pre-modern government with which I am familiar looked to religion for a source of legitimation. Emperors, kings, sultans, aristocrats all claimed to rule by the will of God. In China emperors ruled through the Confucian notion of the Mandate of Heaven. Buddhist kings cultivated harmonious relationships with Buddhist monasteries to demonstrate their devotion and piety. All this came under suspicion in early modern Europe.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, European Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, fought a series of bitter and bloody wars of religion. Each side claimed to be fighting on behalf of God; each side assumed that an empire, a nation, or a smaller polity should be unified in its religious belief and practice. Only a small minority of Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries believed in religious freedom for each individual according to the person's own conscience. Because religious convictions were so strong, and because religion was embedded in manifold political, social, and economic relations, the conflicts were relentless and merciless. The Thirty Years' War in Germany, which raged from 1618 to 1648, began as a religious conflict among Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists. By the end the war was more political than religious, with Catholic France intervening on the side of the Protestants to weaken the Holy Roman Emperor; but the damage had been

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done. There were atrocities against civilian populations on all sides. This was the bloodiest war on the continent of Europe prior to World War I. Meanwhile, about the same time, England went through an extremely vicious, bloody civil war, which killed a higher percentage of the population of England than did World War I.

In the wake of these wars of religion, thinking people increasingly began to question whether religion could or should be trusted with the task of legitimating any form of government. Enlightenment thinkers began to reflect on the virtue of religious tolerance, of respecting the liberty of conscience of others in matters religious. They also began to reflect on the possibility of separating church from state.

About this same time, in the British colonies in North America, some began to question the wisdom of government regulation of religion. In New England Roger Williams surveyed the bitter history of religious conflicts in Europe since the time of Constantine and concluded that imposing religious loyalties was a violation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Williams interpreted Jesus's parable of the wheat and the weeds as forbidding Christians to attack those with whom they disagreed. Williams daringly judged the Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire, to have been more of a danger than Nero, who had persecuted Christians. Under Nero, Christians had heroically suffered and died; with Constantine, Christians took power, became corrupted, and began to impose Christianity by governmental authority. Williams also argued that it was unjust for the King of England to pretend to have the right to give away lands where Native Americans had lived for centuries. For Williams, the fact that Native

Americans had different religious practices did not deprive them of their right to their homeland.

In 1635 Williams was banished from Massachusetts as a dissenter. The following year he moved south, where he purchased land from Native American Indians and established a new community, Rhode Island, as a “haven for the cause of conscience,” founded on the principle of religious liberty for all. His ideal of religious freedom or, in his phrase, “soul liberty” was fiercely opposed by the Puritans in Massachusetts but would stand as a model for later generations.

About the same time, Lord Baltimore founded Maryland as a refuge for Catholics fleeing persecution in England. Purchasing land from Native American Indians, he intended the colony to be a home for followers of all Christian paths, and the charter founding the colony offered equal rights in religious freedom to all. In 1649 the Maryland Assembly passed a Toleration Act offering freedom of conscience to all Christians. The example of guaranteeing religious freedom spread to other colonies as well, with similar charters of religious liberty in New Jersey in 1664, in Carolina in 1665, and in Pennsylvania in 1682. There was increasing momentum in the colonies to end government interference in religious practice and to accept a variety of forms of faith.

The Americans who fought the Revolutionary war were struggling for religious liberty as well as for political liberty. The quest for religious freedom came from both the tradition of dissenting Protestantism and also Enlightenment ideals of religious toleration. Many of the founders of the

United States of America were strongly influenced by the European Enlightenment, with its suspicion of Christianity, its critique of the wars of religion, its deist faith, and its doubts about any claims for supernatural revelation. Thomas Jefferson thought that the alliance of clergy and political officials inevitably led to tyranny, and he believed that clergymen should not be allowed to any hold political office. On occasion he excoriated them as “the real Anti-Christ.” In return, some New England preachers attacked Jefferson himself as the Anti-Christ and warned that if he were elected president, he would commandeer all Bibles and establish houses of prostitution in the churches. Jefferson and George Washington, like many of their contemporaries, were deists, for whom the natural religion of humankind provided the ultimate answer to the conflicts among particular religions. For both, religious freedom was indispensable for human progress. As military commander, Washington forbade the celebration of the English anti-Catholic feast, Pope’s Day, on November 5, 1775, at a time when he was seeking support from French-speaking Catholics in Canada. Ben Franklin was deeply influenced by Deism and is often considered a deist; but he shaped his own idiosyncratic view of natural religion, with a plurality of deities under the direction of one supreme deity. Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington would quietly attend Christian church services without believing traditional theology; more radical deists such as Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, and Elihu Palmer, rejected Christianity more thoroughly, criticizing the Bible for its multiple contradictions and substituting a religion of nature for Christian practice.

While many of the founding fathers were deists of one form or another, American Protestants also contributed strongly to the revolution and interpreted the establishment of the new nation in religious terms. Indeed, the evangelical revival movement known as the First Great Awakening in the early eighteenth century did much to foster communication among the colonies, to establish awareness of a new shared American identity in contrast to the British, and also to arouse evangelical Protestant hostility to Anglican and Catholic forms of worship, thereby paving the way for revolt against the British king. The Puritan practice of interpreting the settlement in North America as a fulfillment of promises in the Book of Revelation was influential on supporters of the Revolution.

In Virginia the Church of the England was the established Church, and all other forms of worship were forbidden. The young James Madison was deeply shocked by the imprisonment of traveling Baptist preachers who openly expressed their religious beliefs in Virginia; he would later become one of the leaders in the quest for full religious liberty. Madison asserted, “ Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm to extinguish religious discord. . . . Time has at length revealed the true remedy.” The remedy for Madison and his colleagues was full religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

The founders of the new nation resolved that the bitter religious wars of Europe should not be replicated on American soil. George Mason was the chief author of Virginia Declaration of Rights, which declared “ all men should enjoy the fullest Toleration in the Exercise of Religion according to the Dictates of Conscience.” The Bill of Rights for the Commonwealth of Virginia, <https://assignbuster.com/theology-essay-church-state-relations/>

approved on June 12, 1776, was a landmark achievement, the first such list of rights in history.

On July 4, 1788, a parade in Philadelphia celebrated the ratification of the U. S. Constitution. Clergy from various Christian denominations marched together and with them, arm, in arm, a Jewish rabbi. One observer, Dr. Benjamin Rush, commented, “ There could not have been a more happy emblem contrived, of the section of the new constitution, which opens all its powers and offices alike, not only to every sect of Christians, but to worthy men of *every* religion.” Two years later George Washington visited the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, which still stands as the oldest synagogue in the United States. The Jewish community thanked him and the new government for “ generously affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship”; Washington, in reply, affirmed that the U. S. government “ gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” and he went on to distinguish the religious toleration granted by the British and other European governments (often on condition that Jews “ improve”) from the American recognition of religious liberty as an inherent natural right. In principle, followers of all religious traditions were to be fully equal citizens in the United States of America.

Secularization in the United States was not hostile to religion but allowed a free range of religious debate. One can read the history of the United States in terms of four Great Awakenings, each of which was linked to a movement of social or political reform. Alexis de Tocqueville would note the paradox that in Europe churches were established but languishing. In the United States, by contrast, no church was established, and all were flourishing. The

free competition among Protestant churches called forth creativity and vitality.

France and the Papal Reaction

A few years after the American Revolution, another revolution began in France, which became far bloodier both in attacking established religion and also in devouring its own children. Because the Catholic Church was intimately intertwined with the *ancien regime*, the old way of life in France, the French Revolution targeted Catholic bishops, priests, nuns, churches and monasteries. Many Catholic leaders were killed, churches were turned into museums—as is the case with the Pantheon in Paris to the present day—monastery farmlands were confiscated by the French Republic and put up for sale to support the Revolution and its armies. The model of secularization in France was very, very different from that in the United States. Because the Catholic Church had been so powerfully established for centuries, the program of secularization aimed to eliminate the influence of the Catholic Church from the political sphere for the sake of *laïcité*. This heritage lives on to the present day, continuing to shape relations between the French government and religions.

Catholic leaders in Europe saw the French Revolution as a direct attack upon the Catholic Church, and this prompted a profound suspicion of modernity and its newly proclaimed democratic ideals. Napoleon, after all, had humiliated Pope Pius VII, taking him as a virtual prisoner into France in 1808. Napoleon, in the presence of the pope, crowned himself emperor, thereby signaling that the pope had no role whatsoever to play. Many thought that this would be the end of the papacy. After the defeat of Napoleon at

Waterloo, the victorious European powers gathered at the Congress of Vienna to plan the future of Europe. The pope sided with the forces of reaction. It was commented that the victorious European leaders had “ forgotten nothing and learned nothing.” In this context, the papacy returned to a position of prominence and renewed vigor, albeit on the side of the forces of reaction in Europe.

In this atmosphere, a French Catholic priest, Felicité Robert de Lamennais, sought to accept the ideals of democracy, separation of church and state, and freedom of speech, of the press and of religion into Catholicism. He argued against the interference of governments in religious matters and supported revolutions to transform society. Pope Gregory XVI vigorously condemned him and the ideals of modernity. Pope Gregory condemned democracy, freedom of religion, separation of church and state, and freedom of the press. In a wordplay on the French term for railroads, “ *chemins de fer* ” (roads of iron), he even condemned railroads as “ *chemins de l’enfer*”—the roads of hell. His successor, Pope Pius IX, was originally more positively disposed toward the reform movements in Europe, but after the Revolution of 1848 killed his Prime Minister and forced him to flee Rome in disguise, Pope Pius turned vehemently against the ideals of the modern world. In 1864 Pope Pius IX issued the Syllabus of Errors, which repeated earlier papal condemnations of modern ideals, and concluding by a famous condemnation of the notion that “ the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and comes to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.”

During this time the Italian movement known as the Risorgimento was fighting to unify Italy into a modern nation. The pope had ruled the central

portion of Italy, known as the Papal States, for centuries. By the time of the pontificate of Pius IX, this territory was reduced to the city of Rome, which was effectively defended by French troops. When in 1870 Prussia invaded France, the French troops were called home and the Italian General Garibaldi was able to capture Rome for the new Italian nation.

In protest, the pope declared himself a “prisoner of the Vatican” and refused to leave its precincts for the rest of his life. This precedent was followed for decades. The loss of temporal power profoundly transformed the papacy. For centuries popes had been not only spiritual leaders but also the temporal governors of Rome and central Italy. As such, they were involved in constant political squabbles and frequently papal armies fought in battles for land and power. Popes intervened on the side of their own families and were perceived as partisan political leaders. The papal states were long thought to be necessary to preserve the independence of the pope from domination by a temporal ruler.

In 1870 the worst nightmare of the popes came to pass. Pope Pius IX lost all the temporal possessions except for the Vatican itself. Pius refused any negotiations with the new Italian nation. Finally, in 1929 Pope Pius XI would sign a Concordat with Benito Mussolini, officially establishing the relationship between the Holy See and the nation of Italy.

Paradoxically, however, the loss of the Papal States was one of the greatest possible blessings for the papacy. Once freed from the responsibilities of ruling the central portion of Italy, popes were eventually able to become respected moral and spiritual leaders on an unprecedented global level. This

came to fruition in the middle and late 20th c. Pope John XXIII, who served as pope from 1958 to 1963, was beloved by many, many people beyond the borders of the Catholic Church. He was, in a sense, the grandfather to the world, a kindly, spiritual man who spoke vigorously for peace and the welfare of the poor. During the Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962, when the United States and the Soviet Union came the closest they ever did to nuclear war, Pope John XXIII served as an intermediary, passing messages between them. Pope J