

# CHURCH AND STATE IN AN ELECTION YEAR

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Few things in life are more contemptible than intellectual dishonesty. It's one thing to be wrong from time to time (true of all of us), quite another to make a living advancing an ideological position that is wholly without principle. Unfortunately, many discussions on church and state are of this sort. And now that we have a man running for president who calls himself "a practicing and believing Catholic," and who also rejects the Church's teachings on the life issues—all of them—this issue is running at a fever pitch.

Not among the unprincipled is Cal Thomas, the most syndicated columnist in the U.S. He recently said of the presumed Democratic nominee for the presidency, "Kerry has a choice: either 'resign' as a Catholic, or withdraw from the presidential race." Now that's some strong language. "To be president and not even attempt to make abortion 'rare' by changing the law that has permitted so many, even for convenience," Thomas contends, "ignores the powers of the presidency and trivializes his faith." Thomas, a Protestant, concludes that this makes Kerry either a hypocrite or a heretic.

Kerry, of course, has his supporters. I debated one of them on a Minneapolis radio show recently: Frances Kissling, director of Catholics for a Free Choice. When she said Kerry is "morally opposed" to abortion, even though he has the most extreme pro-abortion record of anyone in the Senate, I asked her what Kerry could possibly be opposed to: If abortion isn't the snuffing out of innocent human life, what moral issue is it that he opposes? Within a minute, she hung up.

Another one of Kerry's defenders is Thomas Fox, publisher of the *National Catholic Reporter*. On April 29, in *USA Today*, Fox took to task those bishops who have either threatened to withhold Communion from pro-abortion Catholic politicians, or have suggested that such persons ought not to present themselves for Communion. "In such actions," Fox says, "I see shades of religious zealotry most Americans find unsettling in other, undemocratic nations." In other words, St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke could pass as a member of the fascist Taliban in Afghanistan.

Fox also says that "some Catholic bishops and conservatives now fail to distinguish moral from civil law, the ideal from the real." When exactly this occurred, he does not say, but it's a sure bet that this alleged blurring of the lines wasn't operative in the 1960s when New Orleans Archbishop Joseph Rummel was busy excommunicating prominent local Catholic politicians for their pro-segregation politics.

This is the heart of the unprincipled, hypocritical, intellectually dishonest positions promoted by these people: they want absolutely no sanctions against pro-abortion Catholic politicians (including those who vote in favor of killing a baby who is 80 percent born), but no penalty is too severe for dealing with segregationists.

To give one more example, today's *New York Times* is all aghast over bishops who threaten sanctions against Catholic public officials who are pro-abortion. But when Archbishop Rummel was excommunicating the segregationists, the *New York Times* ran an editorial congratulating him for his "unwavering courage" and for "setting an example founded on religious principle."

So as not to be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that Catholic lawmakers phone the Vatican before they vote. What I am saying is that no public office holder should have to apologize for saying that he has a religiously informed conscience. If, after reflection on what the Catholic Church

teaches to be true, a Catholic legislator votes his conscience—in a way that reflects the conscience of the Church as understood by the Magisterium—then so be it. Just as important, those who condemn such persons are the real threat to liberty.

The Catholic Church is opposed to murder, theft and adultery. Is there a problem, then, if a Catholic lawmaker votes to keep these matters illegal? According to the logic of people like Thomas Fox, it would appear there is. But in reality, they would only find a problem with keeping adultery illegal. That would cross church and state lines, but not murder and theft.

How do I know this to be true? Two years ago, I debated Fox's colleague, Tom Roberts, on the MSNBC TV show "Hardball." Roberts is the editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*. At one point in the debate, I said, "Now, guys like Roberts, the *National Catholic Reporter*, they don't believe in anything the Catholic Church says on sexuality anyhow, so of course he doesn't want to talk about homosexuality." Mike Barnicle, sitting in for Chris Matthews, then interrupted me: "Wait, Bill, please. Tom, take it up. I mean, you just got whacked across the face. Take it up." To which Roberts replied, "I'm not going to take that up." Because he couldn't—he knew everything I said was true. So beware the phonies this election season.