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Church and State: Revelation as an Example of the Ethic of Resistance

Biblical studies on how the New Testament perceives church-state relationships identify three distinct stances that are commended in different New Testament writings:

1. the ethic of subordination (found in the letters of Paul and in 1 Peter)
2. the ethic of resistance (found in Johannine writings and, especially, Revelation)
3. the ethic of critical distancing (found in the Synoptic Gospels)

Here we look at the ethic of resistance. For the other two views, see 1.19 and 1.20.

Summary Description of the Ethic of Resistance

In the Gospel of John,

We hear that Jesus's coming is a judgment on the world (9:39; 12:31), which is inhabited by sons of darkness (12:35–36); for the world is incompatible with Jesus (16:20; 17:14, 16; 18:36) and with his Spirit (14:17; 16:8–11). In short, the world hates Jesus and his followers (7:7; 15:18–19; 16:20). Jesus refuses to pray for the world (17:9); rather, he overcomes the world (16:33) and drives out the Satanic Prince of this world (12:31; 14:30).¹

In the book of Revelation, the political implications of such a view are drawn out, as political structures are understood to be instruments of demonic injustice and of profound misuse of wealth and power. In response, the church is encouraged to withdraw from society in every possible way, to avoid any compromise with worldly powers, and to strive to implement what is godly in direct opposition to that which an ungodly society seeks to produce.²

Key Texts Expressive of This Ethic

John 15:18–19:

(Jesus says) “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.”

1 John 2:15–17:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

Revelation chapters 13, 17, 18:

In Revelation 13 the seer paints his apocalyptic portrait of the state with the image of two beasts. . . . The first beast arises out

of the sea (13:1), the symbol of chaos, the abyss of demonic forces. Its claim to authority is derived from the dragon (Satan), from whom the beast has received absolute power and domination. This is the great Antichrist, the empire itself and the individual emperors who rule. . . . The second beast arises out of the earth (13:11) and acts wholly under the authority of and in the service of the first beast (13:12). John is describing the local and regional representatives of Rome in Asia Minor who promote the imperial cult and who otherwise serve as puppets of the imperial regime. . . . A second image of the imperial state is the great whore. The image first appears in Revelation 17. This is Rome, the eternal city, the invincible conqueror of the world. But in John's vivid imagination, the imperial whore is the great seducer and corrupter of the earth—and she is “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (17:6). . . . The third image of the state in Revelation is Babylon. All of Revelation 18 revolves around the fall of Babylon, and 18:9–20 presents three laments by those who had gained most from Babylon's wealth and power: The first lament comes from the kings of the earth, condemned for living in luxury. . . . The second lament comes from the merchants, who benefitted from an international commerce that created abundant wealth for a relatively small minority while the masses of the empire's population lived in dire poverty. . . . The third lament comes from the shipbuilders and those who prospered from their trade.”³

Some Common Observations Regarding This Ethic

- The apparent antipathy to the world in the Gospel of John must be balanced by John's assertion that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" and by the insistence that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17).
- The counsel to avoid the world in the Johannine Gospel and epistles is not articulated with specific reference to politics or to governmental affairs. The main concern seems to be moral: Christians are not to live in the same way that those who "belong to the world" are apt to live.
- The book of Revelation is usually understood as depicting church and state relations during a time of crisis, when the church is experiencing persecution from the state. The question is asked whether the response of the church presented there would be appropriate "for all seasons."

Walter Pilgrim observes,

Revelation does not teach an escapist ethic of irresponsibility toward history. Instead, it intends to motivate and encourage action toward greater justice on behalf of suffering believers and all humanity. And though it advocates resistance, it is nonviolent resistance patterned after the suffering of the Lamb.⁴

1. Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 63.

2. Walter Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 151–61.

3. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, 152.

4. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, 178.