



Blessing Peace This Easter: The Mission Still Unaccomplished

Does the individual belong to the state or does the state belong to the people? The question is a tricky one in the way I have worded it. Note that “the individual” (singular) in the first clause is supplanted by “the people” in the second. Whereas we may rightly maintain that no individual belongs to the state, it is equally true that no state belongs to an individual — nay, not even King Louis XIV of France or Obama the First of the United States.



The sovereignty of the individual extends to his own life and is a matter to be settled between the individual and God, leaving the state out of it altogether. The sovereignty of the people over the state is, in our land, an understanding of the people who did “ordain and establish the Constitution of the United States” for themselves and their posterity. On that we invoke the blessing of God who has left political arrangements, for the most part, up to the genius of man.

So far, so good. But the classical liberal understanding of the proper relationship between the individual and the state eventually gave way in America to the Prussian model, fashioned largely by Otto von Bismark. Recall that the Framers did not even like the idea of a standing army, with Jefferson in particular likening it to the menace of a national bank. They favored a defense of the nation by state militias, each made up of citizens keeping and bearing their own arms for the defense of a free people. While many of us grew up in an age when conscription into a national army was taken for granted, nothing could have been further from the ideals of the Founders of our Republic.

The militias have received mixed reviews, generally regarded as having performed well during our War for Independence and not well at all during the war of 1812. Even in that latter war, however, the mighty British empire was not able to recapture its former colonies, any more than the United States was able to subdue and capture any part of Canada. The militias proved more effective in defending the homeland than in waging an offensive war of conquest and annexation. That fit the plan of the architects of the new Republic, who did not envision soldiers of a United States of the World, leaving their native land to go off into combat in faraway places with strange-sounding names.

“That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The colonists’ [Declaration](#) to the world of the reasons for our separation from the British empire made clear the relationship between the people and the state. The state is an artificial contrivance, made by man for the service of man. Men come from the hand of God; government from the hands of men. Tyranny is the perennial heresy of reversing that relationship, which is why Jefferson regarded tyranny as a form of [idolatry](#) and was jealously on guard against the extension of federal power beyond that which was authorized by the Constitution.

The modern nation-state was unknown in the time of Christ. Yet we can find in the Savior’s words a refutation of heresy expressed by an American admirer of Bismark that “The individual exists for the



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 30, 2013

state, not the state for the individual.” It was, after all, Jesus who shocked the authoritarians of his day by [saying](#) “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

One thing we might bear in mind this Easter season is that Jesus went to the cross, died and rose again for no state, nation, political party, or ideology. He died for people and rose to destroy death over the human race, to whom he offered and still offers eternal life, a priceless commodity that, incredibly, men are often willing to exchange for political power: “For [what shall it profit](#) a man if he gains the whole world in exchange for his immortal soul?”

In the material world, we have Walmart and its competitors for the sale of manufactured goods. But at the intersection politics and spiritual life, we have a virtual “soulmart” in Washington, D.C. and in state capitals where men show their pettiness by trading their votes for the smallest of special favors. The human race may be nothing to write home about and sin does not appear to have lost its grip on the world. But Jesus came to redeem the human race from the tyranny of sin and death and that means redemption for each and every individual willing to claim it.

So man is not the property of the state, cannot be, never will be. The state was made for man and not vice versa. Ironically, Jefferson, who held to no orthodox religion, came to define for a new nation the philosophy diametrically opposed to that which animated Bismark’s Prussian empire.

In our confusion we have always sought the blessings of peace, even when waging wars of aggression. When the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph sought a papal blessing for his troops at the start of World War I, he was rebuffed by Pope Pius X. [“I bless peace, not war.”](#) said the pontiff. Blessed will be the nation and people who realize that that blessing remains among the missions yet unaccomplished.



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