



Sacred Cow, White Elephant and Soaring Eagle: Romans 13:1-7 and Christian Political Responsibility

By Dr Tan Kim Huat

The problems with interpreting Romans 13:1-7 are well-known. Even so, the Christian has to decide how this Scriptural passage may be applied in a complex world, where a wide range of political realities exists. Is every government in our world appointed by God? What about inhumane or despotic regimes? Are we to obey them regardless of what they are? To make a complicated topic manageable, the Pauline scholar Victor Furnish suggests we think of the issue in relation to two animals: the sacred cow and the white elephant.

The sacred cow metaphor speaks of veneration and in this respect, it urges that Romans 13:1-7 is to be taken literally as God's express commands that remain eternally and universally binding, regardless of change in time, culture or context. The white elephant metaphor is used to speak of anything that was once erected with great care and effort, but is currently outmoded or irrelevant. In relation to our topic, this metaphor suggests that even if Romans 13:1-7 contains God's express commands, they were for Paul's time but may now be set aside. To apply them in today's world is futile and, what is worse, as dangerous as using a 19th century medical textbook for our surgeries.

Is Romans 13:1-7 to be treated as a sacred cow or a white elephant? What divides the two approaches concerns whether and how an ancient text can be authoritative through the changes of time and place.

Are we to venerate it, and thereby evoking some calls for slaughtering sacred cows, or are we to deposit it in a museum of curiosities?

We want to suggest another approach and we can use an animal metaphor for it: the soaring eagle. In Isaiah 40:31, this powerful and comforting metaphor was given to a people who were grappling with great changes in life and culture. The metaphor therefore resonates with our concerns. Moreover, an eagle is renowned for its sharp vision. When it is soaring, it also sees far and wide. Romans 13:1-7 may then be understood along these lines. It provides readers of all time with the proper or heavenly perspective on their political realities, and not commands to be obeyed literally or woodenly. With an eagle-eyed perspective, Christians won't be locked into an option that is myopic or narrow. He will be able to rise above the boiling brew of politics and agitations, and see matters for what they really are. Proper actions will then follow.

How does Romans 13:1-7 provide an eagle-eyed perspective on the thorny matter of the Christian political responsibility? We should note that in verse 1, Paul uses the Greek word *hupotassō*, and not *hupakouō*, to speak of the posture Christians are to adopt in relation to governing authorities. The former word speaks of submission to an order, while the latter speaks of obedience. This fine distinction is important for it clarifies that when Christians do what the State asks of them, it is for the larger

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purpose of order, and not because they are obeying an imperial master.

Two interesting aspects linked to submission must now be fleshed out. First, Christians submit to institutions or people even when these are imperfect. Paul certainly did not view the Roman Empire with rose-tinted glasses. The immediately preceding text (Romans 12:14-21) indicates this, for it speaks of leaving vengeance to God and treating the enemy benevolently. What is Paul referring to exactly? This is clarified by the text that follows (Romans 13:1-7), which speaks of governing authorities. The early Christians were sometimes ill-treated by such authorities and it would not be surprising if some of them contemplated vengeance or sabotaging state operations. Paul counsels otherwise. In this regard, we may say that Romans 13:1-7 provides a realistic picture of life on earth. There will be authorities and they are imperfect, but it does not mean the alternative should be anarchy.

The second is that submission does not always mean obedience. The early Christians were no rabble-rousers, but when the apostles were ordered to cease preaching the gospel by the governing authority in Jerusalem, they replied that they should obey God rather than men (Acts 4:18-20). Similarly, the book of Revelation portrays the people of God as refusing to obey the Beast (Rev 13). The word Paul uses in Romans 13:1 (*hupotassō*) fits into this larger New Testament picture. Christian submission to governing authorities is not fully synonymous with obedience. Full obedience is given only to God.

So the first element in the perspective-building of Romans 13:1-7 shows us what is at stake: maintenance of order. However, as significant as the word 'order' is, we have to remember that it is a neutral word. Whose order and what order are we talking about? In this respect, Romans 13:1-7 also provides a way forward. Verses 1-2 may be repugnant to some interpreters, because they take them to mean all governments, evil or good, are legitimated. In actuality, the verses serve to relativise all human power and authority, and subject it to a theocentric evaluation. This second element in the perspective-building of Romans 13:1-7 may be summarised in one word: God. There is therefore a higher reality that stands behind governing authorities, and to which they are called to account for their service.

How exactly are governing authorities to serve? We come now to a third element of the perspective-building and this may be found in verses 3-4. We may sum this up as 'people'. By mentioning the positives of governing authorities in the passage, Paul does not mean to flatter the Roman Empire, to which he is subject, but indicates instead the primary functions of governments: maintenance of law and order for the sake of the flourishing of life. Good is to be promoted, while evil is to be suppressed. There is to be no privileged group, where the principle does not apply.

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Understood rightly, Romans 13:1-7 is neither a sacred cow nor a white elephant. Instead, it offers a powerful perspective on the Christians' political responsibility. In the complex matter of politics, whatever actions we take are to be informed by a vision that is clear and sharp, wide-ranging and far-sighted, like that of an eagle. Romans 13:1-7 helps us therefore to understand the true ontology and proper function of governments, despite the different forms these may take. We can then discern how we may contribute towards constructing a better world, or respond to one that has many blemishes. We will know how we ought to exercise our right to vote, and if this option is not open to us, to know how to pray, live and act in a way that retards society's descent into chaos or desolation. The concrete actions to take will vary across time and space. But the perspective guiding such actions cannot be ignored.

Allan Boesak, a prominent activist and critic of apartheid, was once confronted with the following. A senior police officer called at his home to dissuade him from fighting the State. The officer revealed that he was a Christian, and an elder of a church at that. To this officer Romans 13 meant that Boesak must toe the line. It took a while for Boesak fully to come to terms with the passage, and when he did, his answer was, 'We do this [resisting apartheid], not in spite of Romans 13, but because of Romans 13.' ❖



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