



SLAYING LEVIATHAN

GROUP DISCUSSION STUDY GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY:

Unlimited government, Leviathan, has opposed the Church many times before, and it is doing so again in our day. We can look to the past for a better understanding of what the proper place of government is and how we can resist it.

HIGHLIGHTS:

“This is what happens in crisis situations when the government claims the right to control all areas of life. You end up with a totalitarian nightmare, a monster that reaches into everything we do, everything we say, everything we think, that claims authority over everything we own and lets us live only in line with its values and interests. What you get is Leviathan.” (p. 2)

“The government we have now would have been unrecognizable to the Founders, and our acquiescence to its

systematic encroachments on liberty would have infuriated them. But here is the point: it would not surprise them. They were well acquainted with the tendency of governments to turn tyrannical. A popular quote in the nineteenth century frequently attributed to Jefferson says, “Eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty.” If we are to maintain our liberty, we must constantly be on guard against the rise of Leviathan. We must play Whac-A-Mole with it whenever it rears its head.” (pp. 4-5).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What did Thomas Hobbes argue in his *Leviathan*? How has government overreach always been a problem?
2. What did the American founders do to limit Leviathan? What has happened in our day? How can familiarizing ourselves with the Christian political tradition help us?



CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY CHURCH

SUMMARY:

The Christian confession that Jesus is Lord for the first time asserted that the state was limited in what it could command. When the Roman Empire converted to Christianity, it did not mean that the state now had power over religion, but rather there was a sphere of influence, the Church, which it could not completely control.

HIGHLIGHTS:

“Emperors may have gotten involved in issues in the church, but church leaders also called emperors and government officials to task for the conduct of political affairs.” (p. 14).

“Although each of these spheres should govern its own affairs, sometimes on a wide scale they do not: family structure

collapses, schools fail to teach effectively, businesses act unethically, labor organizations become corrupt. When this happens, the temptation is for another sphere, almost inevitably the government, to step in to fix the problem rather than to work to revitalize the failing sphere(s). Unfortunately, government is ill-equipped to solve these problems—its tools and its competence lie in its areas of responsibility, not in those of other spheres.... It is not alarmist to say, more ominously, that whenever a government oversteps its sphere in this way, it usurps power that properly belongs to another institution. This petty tyranny is, of course, the first sign of Leviathan rising.” (p. 16)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why did Romans persecute Christians? How did the Christian confession “Jesus is Lord” conflict with the Roman claim that “Caesar is Lord”?
2. Did Constantine impose the Christian religion on the empire? What group of heretics did Constantine persecute?
3. How did the distinction between Church and state make space for other spheres independent from state? What is civil society? Why is it important that the government not step into other spheres?



CHAPTER 2

AUGUSTINE

SUMMARY:

The Church Father St. Augustine recognized the way sin poisons the city of man, and he introduced a healthy suspicion of government into medieval political theory. However, he was not sufficiently suspicious of the ability of the government to root out heresy, and he defended the persecution of heresy, which led to state inquisitions in the middle ages.

HIGHLIGHTS:

“The Augustinian answer to how a Christian should view the government, then, is quite simple: we should be wary of it, constantly aware of the danger of corruption, and constantly evaluating whether our rulers are people of integrity and virtue. If they are not, we can count on them working to accumulate more power to themselves and sooner or later demanding allegiance to themselves over allegiance to God.” (p. 28)

“We cannot rely on government to deal with our Sin, because government itself is subject to Sin and is ill-equipped to solve social problems outside its proper purview. Instead, we need to use the tools of the City of God—love, compassion, mercy, self-sacrifice, confession, penitence, and the like—to identify Sin in ourselves and in our institutions and to work toward renewing them and restoring them to their proper functions under God.” (p. 33)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are the city of God and the city of man? What did Augustine think the city of man was based upon?
2. How can the city of God and city of man benefit each other? How did Augustine’s thought promote the participation of Christians in government?
3. Why did the Donatists separate from the Church? How did Augustine lay the groundwork for the state testing people’s orthodoxy?
4. What is the two swords theory? How was this a reversal of previous Church teachings?



CHAPTER 3

CHURCH, STATE, AND THE LIMITS OF POWER

SUMMARY:

The Middle Ages was not a time of absolute monarchy, but a time when the Church and state vied for political power. It was also a time when the rediscovery of Aristotle's writings made many political thinkers realize how government could have a valuable role in shaping society.

HIGHLIGHTS:

"We are conditioned to think of democracy as a good thing. But Aristotle, who had lived through Athenian democracy, knew its pitfalls. He recognized what we today describe as mob psychology, that people in crowds act more out of passion than reason. The danger is that a demagogue (literally