



The "Beast" and Its "Mark"

By David R. Larson

- She: Did you see the religion section of the paper?
 He: Guess I missed it.
 She: It reports that your church teaches that my church is the "Mark of the Beast."
 He: Are you sure?
 She: I read the story three times!
 He: Sorry!
 She: Well?
 He: Well, what?
 She: Is it true?
 He: Is what true?
 She: Does your church teach that my church is the "Mark of the Beast?"
 He: Isn't there a difference between the "Beast" and its "Mark?"
 She: There is?
 He: Did you see the sports section of the paper?
 She: What's the difference between the "Beast" and its "Mark?"
 He: It is like the difference between a nation and its flag: the first is the reality, the second is the symbol.
 She: What, then, is the "Beast?"
 He: Are you sure you want to get into all this?
 She: I want to know what your church says about my church!
 He: That depends.

She: Really?
 He: Upon whom you ask.
 She: Don't the members of your church agree on such things?
 He: Does everyone in your church agree about abortion?
 She: No.
 He: What about vasectomies, tubal ligations, and other forms of sterilization?
 She: Not really.
 He: What about contraception?
 She: We are getting off the subject!
 He: That's fine with me.
 She: What does the majority in your church believe about the "Beast" and its "Mark?"
 He: Twenty percent of the members of any church provide eighty percent of its money.
 She: What does that have to do with anything?
 He: A minority of the members of any church also do the majority of its thinking.
 She: Have you thought about these matters?
 He: Yes.
 She: What do you believe?
 He: I believe I am getting a headache!
 She: Do you know what you believe?
 He: I do.
 She: Are you ashamed of your beliefs?
 He: Not that I know of.
 She: Are you afraid to tell me?
 He: You must be kidding!
 She: Well, then, what is your answer?
 He: My answer is that it depends.
 She: I might have guessed!
 He: Are we talking about what the "Beast" and its "Mark" meant to others in the past or what these words mean to me now?
 She: I thought you based your beliefs on the Bible!
 He: To do so is not merely a matter of believing now what those in Bible times believed then.
 She: How convenient!
 He: But neither is it a matter of disregarding what they believed.
 She: How can you have it both ways?
 He: There is a link—a true and telling connection—between what the text meant to others in the past and what it means to me now.
 She: They don't have to be identical?
 He: They can't be, too much has happened between then and now. But neither should the two be wholly unrelated.
 She: It's hard to picture.
 He: Why not think of what the text once meant to others as one circle, and what it means now to me as another.
 She: These circles aren't one and the same?
 He: They are distinct; however, they do overlap.
 She: The area they cover in common is what matters most?
 He: So it seems to me.
 She: So when it was first used, to what did the term "Beast" apply?
 He: The Roman Empire.
 She: Why?
 He: Because it used its great power to compel people to worship its leaders.
 She: What happened to those who refused?
 He: They were punished and sometimes killed.
 She: Did this happen to many?
 He: Not at first, but to more and more as time went by.
 She: Just because they wouldn't worship as they were instructed?
 He: Precisely.
 She: I'm glad those days are over.
 He: They aren't.
 She: On second thought, I guess they aren't!
 He: Religious movements often use political power to force others to think and act as they command.

She: Political powers often use religious movements to give them legitimacy and authority.
 He: That's what the Roman Empire did in the ancient world.
 She: That's what made it the "Beast?"
 He: The Roman Empire was the "Beast" because it used coercive power to compel others to accept its views and values.
 She: Coercion!
 He: Frequent coercion. Intense coercion. Widespread coercion.
 She: That's what made the Roman Empire the "Beast."
 He: That's what makes any empire the "Beast!"
 She: So there can be more than one "Beast?"
 He: There can be as many as there are political and religious powers that join forces to compel people to think and act as they dictate.
 She: My church has sometimes done that.
 He: And sometimes it hasn't.
 She: Others churches have sometimes done this too.
 He: And sometimes they haven't.
 She: Which of these is the "Beast?"
 He: To the degree that they combine religious and political power to coerce others, they all are. To the extent that they don't, none are.
 She: "Beast" is as "Beast" does: Is that what you are saying?
 He: Indeed!
 She: Why didn't you say that way back when?
 He: I thought you wanted a more simple "yes" or "no."
 She: I can handle more than that.
 He: I apologize.
 She: So maybe you believe my church is the "Beast" after all!
 He: I thought we were trying to be more precise than that.
 She: Now it's my turn to apologize.
 He: It goes both ways.
 She: We have both apologized?
 He: Religion uses political power. Political power uses religion.
 She: It goes both ways at once!
 He: That's when people get hurt, killed.
 She: It is wrong, no matter who does it, to force people to think and act in any one way.
 He: Why is this option, though evil, so attractive to so many?
 She: Maybe humans are prompted more by power than sex!
 He: Maybe its difficult to draw a line between the two.
 She: Between power and sex?
 He: That too!
 She: What else?
 He: Between legitimate and illegitimate uses of coercive power.
 She: Governments can hardly relinquish it entirely.
 He: But when should they use it?
 She: Governments should not use their powers to enforce religious matters.
 He: Everything is religious.
 She: That depends!
 He: On what?
 She: On what we mean by "religion."
 He: I suppose so.
 She: "Religion" can refer to the link between any "object" that is valued, on the one hand, and any "subject" that values it, on the other.
 He: Or it can mean the more specific beliefs and practices of particular communities of faith.
 She: Governments should not enforce religion in the narrower sense.
 He: Fair enough.
 She: You seem less than satisfied.
 He: We still have to draw a line, this time between the wide and narrow meanings of religion.
 She: Do we have to become obsessive and compulsive about it?
 He: We do need some general guidelines.
 She: With respect to the use of coercive power, when in doubt do without!
 He: Yes!

She: With respect to the use of coercive power, what's right for one religion is right for all religions.

He: You're on a roll!

She: With respect to the use of coercive power, less is usually more!

He: Continue!

She: With respect to the use of coercive power, it's usually safer to enforce the last six rather than the first four of the Ten Commandments.

He: Agreed!

She: With respect to the use of coercive power, the tangible benefits in this life for all must outweigh the costs for all.

He: Anything else?

She: Perhaps, but not now.

He: Shall we discuss sports?

She: The newspaper also said that your church teaches that my church's day of worship is the "Mark" of the "Beast."

He: Nobody alive today knows for certain what the "Mark" was in Roman times.

She: What does your church say it is today?

He: Again, that depends on whom you ask!

She: I'm asking you what you believe.

He: I believe the "Mark" is any symbol that communicates, both to those who use it and to those who refuse, allegiance to any coercive combination of religious and political power.

She: How about a swastika?

He: Excellent example!

She: It was used for thousands of years in many parts of the world with a variety of meanings before the Nazis adopted it.

He: But in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s it had a special significance to all who displayed it and to all who didn't!

She: This interpretation of the "Mark" does not necessarily exclude my church's day of worship.

He: Neither does it necessarily include it.

She: Whether my church's day of worship is the "Mark" of the "Beast" depends upon whether in some setting it collaborates with political power to coerce others?

He: And upon whether those who participate in these worship services and those who don't both perceive doing so as a public vote of confidence in the coercive religious and political regime.

She: That's two big "whethers."

He: Toward the end of the Roman Empire, during the rule of Constantine to be more exact, the observance of one day of worship was explicitly linked with the emperor's conversion to Christianity and his attempt to force all others to convert as well.

She: Didn't the Puritans in New England attempt to enforce their day of worship on everyone?

He: It was no more defensible.

She: What about some Orthodox Jews in Israel today?

He: Different day, same problem.

She: I once read something by a North American theologian in which he recalled the very day in his youth when the ways of Constantine died in his home town.

He: When was that?

She: When the theaters were allowed to show movies on the day of worship the civic leaders preferred!

He: He knew what he was talking about!

She: So do you.

He: How do you know?

She: I like to read Christian history and theology.

He: You knew the answers to your questions before you asked them!

She: Of course!

He: Why did you question me so closely?

She: I wanted to know if you know what I know!

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