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obedience of faith*

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# Editorial

We live in an increasingly dysfunctional world of disintegrating marriages and family life, sexual abuse and perversion, drug addictions and suicide, escalating violence and corruption. The failure of the marxist socialist experiment is no comfort to the poor, the unemployed and the marginalized. Political ideologies give vision and coherence to democracy, but political systems are ultimately powerless to stop the moral decline in society and destruction of the environment.

Is there hope for the future? 'Yes', says the Christian, for God is the sovereign creator of planet Earth and in keeping with his promise, 'we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness'. This salvific process of recreation has its source in the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead and who will come again to complete his kingdom on earth. He has commissioned the church, as the people of God, to be his agent of redemption, transforming lives and, families, restraining evil in society and enabling governments to exercise rightly the authority given to them by God to govern for the good of the people. As the authors in this volume make abundantly clear, there can be no absolute dichotomy between the secular and the sacred; both are subject to God's sovereignty however much their spheres of responsibility differ.

The church is the chosen servant of the Lord, imbued with the Spirit's power and is appointed to bring justice to the nations. It is the church as redeemed people not as hierarchical institution that God uses, though the institutionalized church and her agencies have an intermediate function in God's purposes. While the church is not coterminous with the kingdom, wherever Christ reigns there his kingdom is made visible. Christ has called us to be his servants in this process as our writers emphasize.

The church, then, is to be a *sign* to the nations that the kingdom is in our midst. Individuals, families, local churches, mission agencies are to live out the life of the kingdom before a watching world. We are called to be communities that model the kingdom, drawing people to righteousness—just as a street lamp on a dark night attracts insects. We do this as worshipping communities that glorify God in all things, that live in harmony with one another, give unconditional compassionate care to our neighbours and the wider community in times of need and distress, are ethically just in all our dealings with others and show restraint and good stewardship of all of God's creation. In our dysfunctional world, local churches must be signs that the new and transforming society wherein is found 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' has already come. From this perspective there is a place for Christian institutions—schools, hospitals, retirement homes, city missions, centres for rehabilitation etc. While this has always been the concern of missions in the undeveloped world, the same need is becoming increasingly evident in the western so-called 'developed' world where government services are increasingly inadequate and powerless to meet the mounting social needs of our time. The inner city problems of New York, London or Paris are little different from those of Sao Paulo, Nairobi or Bombay. The need of the hour everywhere is for the church to make visible Christ's reign in society.

However, the church has another ministry, to be a *signpost* to the nations, pointing the way to God's kingdom of righteousness where love, peace and justice reign. Sign and signpost are different functions of reality, distinct but inseparable. As a signpost the church is called to be 'salt and light' to the world, penetrating every aspect of national life— political, economic, social and religious—rebuking and restraining the putrefying evils of society and at the same time bringing out the best in human endeavour and harmony in relationships between ethnic and tribal communities, different classes and religious communities. God's people have a God-given important role to play in the

governing of the nation, from local to national politics, to see that the law of God, common and known through God’s universal revelation to all people is adhered to—for example, seeing that the command ‘Thou shalt not steal’ is enforced against shop-lifting, car theft and deception, tax evasion and other forms of dishonest dealing.

We are also to be light to the world, reflecting the light of him who said, ‘I am the light of the world’. This means exposing the hidden dirt of society, but also showing the way to a new society based on transcendent moral values and unconditional love. In a democracy, politics means compromise. This is a costly sacrifice that not every Christian is prepared to make but we must support our Christians in politics who are willing to carry this heavy burden. The church has no mandate on any particular political ideology. Ideology is necessary, but all ideologies are tainted by sin; therefore the church has an important role in transforming these ideologies to become consistent with the revealed laws of God. In his political and ethical manifesto ([Lk. 4:18-19](#)) Jesus made clear the Christian’s responsibility in the church and to the nation. His mandate for us today has not changed. As Valson Thampu points out, ‘the main vocation of the [Indian] Church is to be “a house of prayer for our nation” ‘.

## The New Testament and the ‘State’<sup>1</sup>

N.T. (Tom) Wright

This refreshing, incisive and scholarly article cuts to pieces evangelical shibboleths on the New Testament teaching on the nature and function of the state and Christian attitudes to involvement in the political process. It comes as a surprise, if not shock, to realize that Jesus’ message was inescapably political and Paul’s concern in [Romans 13](#) is very different from the popular understanding of unquestioning obedience to the state held by many conservative Christians.

Editor

### INTRODUCTION

In September 1974, Archbishop Michael Ramsey visited Chile under its new right-wing régime. While he preached in church, an armed guard waited outside, and asked the *Observer’s* correspondent as he left: ‘Was there any politics in it? He must stay with things of the soul, because politics is for us’—the last remark accompanied by a pat on the gun under his arm.<sup>2</sup> Ramsey was not afraid to speak out on political issues but among the disturbing features of the soldier’s remark is the fact that a large number of practising Christians (including the Anglican Bishop in Chile) agreed with him then, and probably still do. The western church in general has bought heavily into the Enlightenment belief that ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ are divided by a great and more or less unbridgeable gulf. And

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<sup>1</sup> This article, hastily written though it alas is, would have even more flaws were it not for the kindness of Professor Walter Wink and the Revd Michael Lloyd, who both read the first draft and offered careful criticism. The many remaining faults are entirely my own.

<sup>2</sup> Owen Chadwick, *Michael Ramsey: A Life*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 229

when we try to read the New Testament (NT) we are already doing battle with such presuppositions. The working title of this article was ‘The New Testament doctrine of the state’, but on reflection I have decided that this simply will not do. Explaining why will serve as an introduction to the subject as a whole.

What is the set of questions that such a working title presents? Traditionally, it suggests that the NT contains ‘doctrines’, clear statements about things that Christians should believe. The central doctrines concern God, human nature, sin, salvation in Christ, the Holy Spirit; then come church, sacraments, worship; somewhere near the bottom of the list comes ethics, and perhaps in a sub-category of ethics we find the question of the state. The question will be variously put. What political responsibility has the Christian individual? Should he or she bear arms if asked to by the government? Are legitimate rulers agents of God, and if so to what extent? And somewhere in the midst of all of this one may expect to find, in a biblical theology at least, an exegesis of certain passages: ‘Render unto Caesar’ ([Mk. 12:13-17](#) and parallels), the notorious [Romans 13:1-7](#), [1 Peter 2:13-17](#), and (if we are lucky) some of the Revelation of St John. The ‘doctrine’ is then treated as these passages are usually treated: as a footnote to more important things, an aside, almost an irrelevance in a modern democracy where Christians are quite happy with things as they are and are free to preach the gospel and save souls.

The problem should be clear to anyone who knows the world of the first century—or for that matter any century until the eighteenth, and any country outside so-called western civilization. It is simply this: the implicit split between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ is a rank anachronism, and we read it into the NT only if we wish not to hear anything the NT is saying, not only about what we call ‘the state’ but about a great many other things as well. No first-century Jew (and no twentieth-century Arab, or Pole, or Sri Lankan) could imagine that the worship of their god and the organization of human society were matters that related only at a tangent. If we are to hear what the NT has to say on what we call ‘the state’, we must be prepared to put our categories back into the melting-pot and have them stirred around a little. We cannot read a few ‘timeless truths’ about the ‘state’ off the surface of the NT and hope to escape with our world view unscathed. Hence the revision of the title of this article, and the inverted commas around the suspect word, which belongs precisely in the eighteenth century. What would a first-century Jew or Christian have made of the modern notion of ‘state’? Not a lot, I suspect.<sup>3</sup>

We are therefore committed to a more complex task than bringing our comfortably isolated category to the NT and asking what this book has to say about it. We are bound to re-enter the rough-and-tumble world of the Middle East (that phrase is loaded, too, but one cannot guard all flanks at once) in the first century and try to see, in the writings of the early Christians, what categories emerge to handle what we think of as the relation between Christian belief and practice and political allegiance and obligation. And since this involves unthinking a great many of our normal ideas on the subject, we must then engage in the complex hermeneutical task: how to get from the first century back into the twentieth. We are not first-century Jews, living under the *pax Romana*. We live in a world where a great deal has already been done for good and ill in the name of Christ, the world of crusades and inquisitions as well as the world of William Wilberforce, Mother Teresa and St Francis. We cannot naïvely pretend that we are innocent of all that, and go back to a ‘pure’ Christian faith unsullied by social involvement, under the impression that following the NT means living as though the last 2,000 years has not happened. History,

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<sup>3</sup> See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia Fortress, 1984) p. 46, quoting Günther Dehn: ‘no modern or “secular” view of the state was possible for Paul’.

then, and hermeneutics: these are the tasks; exegesis must be the tool they use, and theology the air they breathe.

## JEW, GREEKS AND ROMANS

We must begin with a brief look at the world views within which Christianity was born and nurtured. They, after all, set the agendas even if the church claimed the responsibility to write up the minutes.

The Romans had inherited the role of superpower (at least as far as Palestine was concerned) from a long line of nations: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Egypt again, Syria. Arguably, Roman government was better for the Jews than many of its predecessors. Taxation was a problem, but things had been worse. Foreign and idolatrous symbols (the two epithets sometimes approached synonymity) were a continual offence, but the Romans were not the first to introduce such things, Greek culture had been a fact of life in Palestine for a couple of centuries at least by the time of Jesus, and many had learnt to live with it, while others, though still resenting it, were nevertheless influenced by it in a variety of ways. There was no invisible checkpoint at the borders of the Holy Land confiscating 'Hellenistic' ideas or exchanging them for 'Palestinian' ones.<sup>4</sup> The Romans at least, after a puzzled early period, allowed the Jews, uniquely among their subject peoples, to practise their own religion. From an outsider's point of view, then, the Jews were quite well off. They, of course, saw it differently. Their forefathers had been exiled to Babylon because of their own idolatry and wickedness; now that they, the descendants, had sharpened up their observation of the covenant documents, why were they still being ruled by foreign idolaters? From some points of view, the exile was still continuing as long as the Herods and the Pilates ruled Palestine, the great prophecies of Isaiah or Ezekiel were still awaiting fulfilment. The period which historians call 'post-exilic' was seen at the time as semi-exilic. Not until Israel's God, the God of all the earth, demonstrated that he was both of those things by liberating Israel from this internal exile would Jews be satisfied that the covenant had been kept.

Israel's theological aspirations thus had an inescapably historical and political referent. If someone had offered a first-century Palestinian Jew the consolation of pie in the sky, it would have been refused, no matter how kosher the pie. One of the great myths of twentieth-century scholarship is that most first-century Jews expected the space-time universe to end immediately. They did not: they expected their God to act dramatically *within* history, with effects that they could only describe with metaphorical end-of-the-world language.<sup>5</sup> We might well describe the fall of the Berlin Wall as an 'earth-shattering event'; 2,000 years hence, no doubt some pedantic literalist will argue, in the *Martian Journal of Early European Studies*, that the wall fell because of a large earthquake, and we will all turn in our graves at the misreading of our everyday metaphors.

The cultural symbols of Greece, then, and the political and military might of Rome both superimposed themselves on the daily world of the Palestinian Jew, as well as on his or her cousin in Alexandria, Tarsus, or Philippi. And the bulk of the Jewish literature of the period, whether it be the Wisdom writings, the Maccabean historical hagiographies, the

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<sup>4</sup> See, on this point, the work of Martin Hengel in particular (e.g. *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the early Hellenistic Period*, 1974), over against the whole drift of scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> There is no space to argue this in the detail it deserves. A good statement of the position may be found in George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, (London: Duckworth, 1980), ch. 14. Compare too Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: a Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, (1982).

Qumran scrolls, the fierce and Pharisaic Psalms of Solomon, or the apocalyptic visions of the Sibylline Oracles, Jubilees, 1 Enoch or 4 Ezra, proclaims that a time will come when the God of all the earth, who is in covenant with Israel, will call a halt to the present order of the world, reward idolaters as they deserve, and rescue Israel, or at least those who have remained faithful.

The exceptions to this rule are instructive. Philo carves out a mystical compromise between the God of Moses and the god of the philosophers that allows him to articulate his Jewishness in a way less threatening to his Alexandrian culture. The Sadducees hold a precarious but advantageous political position under the Romans and are not interested in a change that might leave them exposed to the anger of the lower orders; that, arguably, and not a proto-liberalism, was why they rejected that most revolutionary of doctrines, the resurrection. Josephus, by the time he is writing, has decided, for an interestingly mixed set of reasons, that Israel's God is now on the side of the Romans. The first-century proto-Rabbis whose words we reconstruct with some difficulty from much later written documents, were arguably as fanatical about Israel's sociopolitical fate as those Pharisees who incited the young hotheads to pull down Herod's blasphemous eagle from the temple gate.<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Akiba, no less, hailed Simeon Ben-Kosiba as Messiah as late as the early second century, and those who disagreed with him did so on the grounds of chronology, not because they had exchanged politics for piety.<sup>7</sup> It is the later documents that reflect the filtering out of dangerous ideas in the light of the events of AD 70 and AD 135. As the focus of Jewish identity moved, inevitably, away from the Holy Land and more towards the Holy Book, so, in a kind of ironic displacement, the idea of the ghetto was born: a safe place where one could worship Israel's God in private while the world went on its own way.

Exceptions apart, then, Jews of the first century looked for their God to act within history to liberate his people. It was into this world that there came Jesus the Galilean teacher, and Paul the fanatical Pharisee. Did they ignore the hope of the people, radically alter it, or reaffirm it—or what?

## JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Writing about Jesus without a long methodological introduction is risky, even in these days of the 'third quest'.<sup>8</sup> What I have to say can, I think, be justified by rigorous historical argument, though there is no space for it here, and I shall therefore be open to objection from all quarters. It is a situation one learns to live with in NT studies.<sup>9</sup>

First-century Jews had a slogan which encapsulated their aspiration for a new order in which Israel would be liberated. Their God, already sovereign of the world *de jure*, would become so *de facto*. The rightful King would become King indeed. There would be, in their phrase, 'no King but God'. God's kingship was a key idea in the Zealot philosophy,

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<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.149–163.

<sup>7</sup> See Emil Schürer, *The history of the Jewish people in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC—AD 135)*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–87), pp. 543f., and Roger T. Beckwith, 'Daniel 9 and the Date of Messiah's Coming to Essene, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Zealot and Early Christian Computation', RQ 40 (1981), pp. 536–539.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, (Oxford: OUP, 1980), pp. 379–403.

<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I am drawing on my own work on Jesus, in dialogue with such scholars as Sanders, Borg, Harvey, Meyer, Thiessen, Freyne and Horsley; but there is no space to show the detailed workings of the necessary discussions.

and Josephus, when less guarded, indicates that the Pharisees' ideology was not far away.<sup>10</sup> When, therefore, a prophetic figure down by the Jordan declared that God's kingdom was at hand ([Mt. 3:2](#)), and when this cry was taken up by a contemporary who travelled the villages and lanes of Galilee, the immediate reaction could not have been that an apolitical religious revival was taking place. If that was the impression John and Jesus wanted to make, they chose a disastrous way of going about it. The proclamation and invitation of Jesus must have looked uncommonly like the founding of a political movement. When large crowds followed Jesus up a hillside or to the seashore, they did not leave their homes and jobs for the day in order to be told about pie in the sky, or to be instructed in how to be nice to each other. They went because they sensed that Jesus was inaugurating the new day for which, with double taxation and political turmoil, they had longed. When Jesus called some followers up into the hills, and arranged them into a group of twelve, the analogues pointed, not to a primitive ordination ceremony for a church with minimal ties to socio-political reality but to the groups of desperate men who went off into the wilderness to prepare for God's action in restoring Israel. The Galilean hills were a favourite haunt of *lestai*—not 'robbers' in the sense of early highwaymen, but holy brigands, living a life of desperate obedience to God as the only King and frantic hope in the coming kingdom as the only way out of the present awful situation.<sup>11</sup> When Jesus took the twelve up north to Caesarea Philippi, the source of the (politically symbolic) Jordan, elicited from them the acknowledgement (however ambiguous) that he was Messiah, and told them that they were going to march on Jerusalem, where the Son of Man would suffer and be vindicated, they are almost bound to have heard him invite them to come with him on a desperate mission, which might involve some of them being hurt or killed but in which they would be victorious. Peter objected, naturally, to the idea that Jesus himself would die in the process, the disciples as a whole never, before the resurrection, worked out the double meaning, but continued blithely to regard Jesus' words as indicating what as ordinary Palestinian Jews they were conditioned to expect and want: a socio-political revolution, leading to a new world order.

What then was the double meaning? For some interpreters, it is precisely here that Jesus differed radically from the Jewish expectations of the time. They argue that we must do with this political language what Bultmann wanted to do with Jesus' eschatological language, and say that while Jesus accommodated himself to the language of his day, what he *meant* by it was something quite different. In both cases—the Bultmannian demythologisation of apocalyptic, and the normal ecclesiastical domestication of Jesus' revolutionary call—the scholar who wants to make such a move has to say that Jesus sailed close to the wind; but that is a small price to pay for the twentieth-century luxury of knowing that he 'really' preached a message about individual 'decision', not about the end of the world, or that he 'really' summoned individuals into a spiritual kingdom, in which politics become irrelevant and the hope of an other-worldly heaven all-important.<sup>12</sup> (As an aside, I think that one of the reasons the latter route has been so easy to take in the modern western world is because of the astonishing but regular misreading of 'kingdom of heaven' in Matthew as 'a place, called heaven, which is God's special

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<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.23; contrast the earlier account of the Zealots in *War* 2.118, 433, where they are sharply distinguished from the Pharisees described in 2.162f. In the earlier work Josephus is desperately concerned to blame the Zealots and exonerate the Pharisees; in the later one the mask slips, and we see how close the two sects may in fact have been.

<sup>11</sup> See Josephus' account (*Antiquities* 14:420–430) of Herod's getting rid of the cave-dwelling Galilean *lestai*.

<sup>12</sup> On the whole debate, see particularly Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, (New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), ch. 1.



country, to which his people go after death'; this view because of the place of Matthew at the start of the NT canon, is then read into 'kingdom of God' in Mark and Luke.)

The double meaning, I think, was far more subtle than such reductionisms have allowed. Jesus' message was after all inescapably political. He denounced rulers, real and self-appointed. He spoke of good news for the poor. He led large groups of people off into the wilderness, a sure sign of revolutionary intent. He announced the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem temple. At the start of a festival celebrating Israel's liberation, he organized around himself what could only have looked like a royal procession. And he deliberately and dramatically acted out a parable of the temple's destruction, thus drawing on to himself the anger of the authorities in a way which he could never have done by healing lepers and forgiving prostitutes (though we should not miss the revolutionary note in his offer of forgiveness, whose real offence lay in its bypassing of the temple cult). The temple was, after all, the centre of Judaism in every sense. It was not like a church, even a cathedral, which housed the religious business while politics and economics went on elsewhere. For the first-century Jew, the temple was the equivalent, for twentieth-century Britain, of the Houses of Parliament, the City, the Butcher's Guild, Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey, all rolled into one. And it was against this central and vital institution that Jesus spoke and acted. He died the death of the *lestai*, the political insurrectionists (Barabbas, and the two crucified with Jesus, were *lestai*). How could he not have been 'political'?

This is not to say, of course, that he was actually advocating military violence. The equation 'non-violent = apolitical' is of course absurd, as we who know about Gandhi must realize, but it is frequently made none the less. To a nation bent on violence, anyone who claims to be speaking for God's kingdom and who advocates non-violent means as the way to it is making a very deep and dangerous political statement. He is likely to be caught in crossfire. That, in a sense, is what happened: on the level of historical explanation that deals with the intentions of Herod, Pilate, the chief priests and those who advised them, Jesus' death was a mixture of convenience and political necessity. But what about the level that deals with Jesus' intentionality?

Jesus, I have argued elsewhere, believed two things which gave him an interpretative grid for understanding his own vocation as leading to a violent and untimely death.<sup>13</sup> First, he believed himself called to announce to Israel that her present way of life, whose focal point was resistance against Rome and whose greatest symbol was the temple, was heading in exactly the wrong direction. Down that road lay ruin—the wrath of Rome, the wrath of God. Second, he believed himself called to take Israel's destiny upon himself, to *be* Israel-in-God's-plan. What happens as the story reaches its climax, and Jesus sits on the Mount of Olives looking across at the temple and beyond it to an ugly hill just outside the city wall to the west, is that the two beliefs fuse into one. He will be Israel—by taking Israel's destiny, her ruin, her destruction, the devastation of the temple, on to himself. He will be the point where the exile reaches its climax, as the pagan authorities execute Israel's rightful King. Only so can the kingdom come on earth (in socio-political reality) as it is in heaven (in the perfect will and plan of the Father). From this perspective, to say that Jesus' death itself was a 'political' act cannot be to divorce it (against the grain of all first-century Judaism) from its 'theological' implications. On the cross politics and religion, as well as love and justice and a host of other abstractions, meet and merge. Only from the perspective of the cross, shattering as it was to Jesus' followers then as it should be now, can any view of politics, and hence of the 'state', claim to be Christian.

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<sup>13</sup> See N. T. Wright, 'Jesus, Israel and the cross,' SBL 1985 *Seminar Papers*, ed. K. H. Richards (Chico: California Scholars Press, 1985), and ' "Constraints" and the Jesus of history', S/T 39 (1986), pp. 189–210.

What then might Jesus have meant by those words, ‘my kingdom is not of this world’ ([In. 18:36](#))? And what was the distinction he drew between what belonged to Caesar and what belonged to God? Leaving aside the critical questions once again, both of these passages in their contexts resonate well with the scenario I have sketched. The claim before Pilate is that the kingdom Jesus is inaugurating is not worldly in its methods: ‘if my kingdom were of this world, my followers would fight to prevent me being handed over’. Kingdoms of the world fight; physical power, strategic, revolutionary or military power is the rule of the game. Jesus’ kingdom has a different *modus operandi*. The sentence should not be read as referring to an other-worldly, Platonic, nonphysical kingdom. It designates Jesus’ kingdom as the breaking into the worldly order of a rule which comes from elsewhere, from Israel’s God, the creator God. It does not mean the abandonment of the created order and the escape into a private or ‘spiritual’ sphere. On to the scene of worldly power—precisely there, or it is meaningless!—has come a new order of sovereignty, which wins its victories by a new method.

So too with the saying about Caesar ([Mk. 12; 13-17](#) and parallels). Within the sharp polemical context, and underneath the shrewd epigram that turns the challenge and threat back on its proposers, there lies a fundamental perception of the socio-political reality of the day. Israel has bought into Roman rule; she has accepted her own secularization. And this is how God now intends to keep it. Israel has become a nation like all the others: she has ‘no king but Caesar’ ([In. 19:15](#)). The kingdom is therefore taken away from her and given to others ([Mk. 12:9](#), coming just before our passage). From now on, as even Josephus saw, Israel has forfeited her right to be a theocracy, and must take her place among the nations of the world, giving allegiance to Caesar and to God. We cannot press this passage further, as though this were Jesus’ considered systematic statement for the benefit of future generations in a church as yet unborn, for details about ‘church and state’. What we can suggest is that any analysis of such matters must include this epigram as a fixed point in its hermeneutical line. And with that we are pointed towards Paul.

## PAUL AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD

### (i) God’s covenant faithfulness

The starting-point of Paul’s Christian theological reflection was the realization, on the road to Damascus, that the crucified Jesus was indeed the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> Central to this was the recognition that *God had done for Jesus what Paul had expected him to do for Israel on the last day*. Jesus, as an individual, had been executed by the pagans and raised from the dead; but that was what God was supposed to do for Israel at the end of time; therefore Jesus had indeed enacted Israel’s destiny, and his claim to be Israel’s Messiah, her anointed representative, was thereby vindicated.

Paul, as a direct result, believed that all God’s promises had now come true in Jesus as Messiah ([2 Cor. 1:20](#)). In particular, as he sets out at length in Romans, God’s covenant faithfulness, his ‘righteousness’, has been revealed at last. And, in fulfilling his covenant promises to Abraham, God has thus acted as the righteous, ‘just’, judge: he has dealt with evil, he has been true to the law, he has acted impartially, and he has rescued the helpless from their plight.<sup>15</sup> But the revelation of God’s covenant faithfulness, his justice, cannot be simply a matter of the private experience of Christians. The whole Jewish background out

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<sup>14</sup> I have argued for this point, and much else in this section, in forthcoming works on Pauline theology.

<sup>15</sup> All this, arguably, is contained within [Rom. 1-4](#), particularly [3:21-26](#).

of which Paul writes militates against this, and nothing he says detracts from this thrust: the God of Israel is precisely the creator, the God of the whole world, and when he acts to redeem his people this will be the means of blessing for the whole world.<sup>16</sup> Though I do not agree with Käsemann in his assertion that ‘the righteousness of God’ means his ‘victory over the world’, Käsemann, has, I think, erred in the right direction:<sup>17</sup> because of what the phrase *does* mean, which I take to be ‘God’s covenant faithfulness’. Paul cannot but see the realization of that idea as involving the new world order predicted in the prophets (here is the line that leads to [Romans 8](#)). The Jewish particularism is not abandoned in the revelation in Christ; rather, the specificity of the covenant is the means of the creator’s intended blessing for the whole world.

But how can the blessing come to a world where idolatry still rules? That question is at the heart of the missionary theology by which Paul articulates his motivation and method in announcing to the world that the crucified Jesus is Lord of the world; and it is in his answers to that question that we may locate properly (and not as a footnote or appendix) his reflections on what we have come to call the ‘state’. We may begin away from Romans, in order to work our way back to it, not least to chapter [13](#), with some hope of exegetical success.

## (ii) Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord

Let us first go to Philippi, a proud Roman colony. It is to the young church in precisely that city that Paul emphasizes the call of his Christological monotheism: at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Kyrios, to the glory of God the Father ([2:10f.](#)). Though modern exegetes may sometimes be more interested in the question of whether this implies universalism, for the original recipients there would be a far more pressing concern. Jesus is ‘Lord’, therefore Caesar is not. Not surprising, then, that Acts records (against what some think is the ‘grain’ of the book) that Paul and Silas are charged in nearby Thessalonica with proclaiming Jesus as an alternative King, a rival to Caesar ([Acts 17:7](#)). This suggests a new way into that puzzling text [Philippians 1:15–18](#). There Paul speaks of those who ‘proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry’, who do it ‘not sincerely, but with the intention of stirring up trouble for me in my bonds’. It has been thought often enough that these were Christians with whom Paul disagreed. I suggest that this is a misreading of the phrase *Christon katangelein*, to ‘preach Christ’. The verb is much wider than the English verb ‘preach’, something done by Christians in a church or at most in an open-air rally. It denotes a royal proclamation, something done by a herald. In the light of [2:11](#) and [Acts 17:7](#), I suggest that Paul’s idea of ‘proclaiming Christ’ had little to do with offering people a new religious option, a new private experience of the love of God, and far more to do with the announcement to the world at large that the crucified and risen Jesus was its Lord and King, the one before whom every knee must bow. This is fighting talk, the sort of thing that gets you in trouble with the authorities and that is exactly what we find in Acts and the letters. Who, then, are these strange announcers of Christ? They are, I suggest, people in the local pagan (and quite possibly Jewish) communities who are telling people about this ridiculous fellow, Paul, and his wild claims: he is saying that Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean preacher, is the Lord of the world! Paul’s response is simple: as long as people hear the news that Jesus is Lord of the world, I am content to stay in jail. This is the message which is invested with the power of God whether, by implication, the announcers know it or not.

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<sup>16</sup> Such is the argument of [Gal. 3:10–14](#).

<sup>17</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (ET. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), *passim*.

### (iii) Confronting the powers

This idea of the proclamation of Jesus as Lord sends us on therefore, to the confrontation with the powers (it is scarcely surprising that the prison epistles show a particular awareness of this dimension of the gospel). The powers have long been marginalized within studies of Paul, despite heroic efforts in some quarters, but it is high time that they were put back where they belong, well within the main lines of his world view.<sup>18</sup> Paul's theology is not simply about human sin and how people get saved by Christ. It is about God, the creator, about his covenant and how he has been faithful to it, *thereby* delivering the world from the grip of sin and corruption. Salvation falls within Paul's theology at this point, and his teaching about it can be fully understood only there. He is thus a fully Jewish theologian, focusing attention on the doctrines of monotheism and election and working out, in practice as well as theory, the radical revision of those doctrines necessitated by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, and the gift of the Spirit. And from this Jewish basis we can understand his language about the powers.

Paul is a robust monotheist, and there is no suggestion that the powers are really alternative gods. They are only 'so-called' gods and lords ([1 Cor. 8:5](#)). They are, rather (and perhaps initially surprisingly), part of the good creation made by the Father through his agent, the pre-existent one who became human and was known as Jesus ([Col. 1:15-17](#)). The powers have nevertheless, rebelled, and have wreaked much havoc in the world by shutting up humans under their own power; it is at this point, perhaps, that we realize what Paul is talking about. The *stoicheia*, which are dealt with in [Galatians 4:1-11](#) and [Colossians 2:8-15](#), include at least the national and/or territorial gods, which insist upon racial, ethnic or geographical loyalty. They include the idols by whose worship humans are reinforced in prejudice about race, gender, class. They include the 'forces', as we would call them, which operate through the Herods and Pilates of this world, so that sometimes it is impossible to tell whether Paul is actually referring to the human agents of power or the powers that work through human agents, or more likely, both ([1 Cor. 2:8](#)). They thus include the 'forces' that put Jesus to death, and that were thereby duped, shown to have overreached themselves, defeated and led away in the divine triumphal procession ([Col. 2:14f.](#)).

The result of this débâcle is not, as one might have imagined, the abolition of the 'powers', so that they would have no place in the renewed world order. On the contrary, they are thereby 'reconciled' to the creator, again through Jesus the Messiah ([Col. 1:18-20](#)). Apparently, with the reaffirmation of creation in the resurrection of Jesus there goes the reaffirmation of the essential created goodness even of the 'powers' that had rebelled. Only so is dualism avoided. The powers became demons only when they (falsely) became gods; and they became godsonly when humans gave them the worship which they did not deserve.<sup>19</sup>

Paul is therefore living, and knows himself to be living, in a situation whose multiple ambiguities would be intellectually fascinating were they not so politically and personally pressing and uncomfortable. The ambiguity is reflected in the contrast of two passages, [Ephesians 6:10-20](#) and [Romans 13:1-7](#).

On the one hand, the battle continues: as humans are still worshipping the principalities and powers, they are still powerful *de facto* even though *de jure* defeated on the cross; the old illustration of the time-lag between D-day and V-day comes again to

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<sup>18</sup> See recently the work of Walter Wink, and his trilogy on the Powers (1984).

<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that demons did not exist, or do not exist, until humans call them into existence; merely that the powers of which Paul speaks are to be thought of in this way.

mind. The power still wielded by the 'powers' is undeniable: Ephesians is written from prison, where the powers seem to have won temporary victory over the ambassador of the new king, and battle must be maintained unrelentingly by those who, like David's supporters in the reign of Saul, are backing the anointed one against the present establishment. The gospel Paul announced is always going to confront those who have a vested interest in the worship of Athene, Roma, Diana, Aphrodite, Mars, Mammon or any other of the defeated rabble who are dethroned by the cross. And such confrontations, which are bound to be 'political' in that they meet such rebel powers with the news that their time is up, that they must bow before one whose kingdom inaugurates a different order, will inevitably produce trouble for the announcer.

#### (iv) [Romans 13](#)

On the other hand, there is [Romans 13](#).<sup>20</sup> We may shake off from the start the voices that tell us that the relevant section (vv. 1–7) is an interpolation.<sup>21</sup> It is far more important to look at the background to such ideas in the Judaism of the period, and to see the flow of thought whereby Paul has reached this point in the letter. History of religions and exegesis together will contribute to theology, and, I hope, to hermeneutics.

For a start, we may note that already in this period there had been voices among Diaspora Jews advocating a quiescent attitude towards the ruling authorities. Since the exile, and the resultant dispersion of Jews in much of the then known world, Jewish communities had had to come to terms with living in countries where the writ of Israel's God did not run even in theory. Though they might still look for the liberation of Palestine as their real homeland, when it came to living in Alexandria or Tarsus, Rome or Athens, Jews would be content if they were allowed to study their ancestral Torah and practise their ancestral taboos. The Wisdom of Solomon declares that the kings and rulers of the earth have their dominion given them by the Lord, and that they are his servants ([6:1–4](#))—even though it then continues at once to declare that the Lord will therefore judge them for abusing their trust, something that Paul does not mention in this passage (however much late interpreters may wish that he had).<sup>22</sup> There is always the old Jewish idea that the nations were assigned tutelary guardians, while Israel was the creator's special preserve,<sup>23</sup> and there is the emerging Diaspora viewpoint, according to which the study of Torah can substitute for the temple as the locus of the divine presence (a convenient Diaspora doctrine, this, which did not undercut allegiance to the temple but made the practice of the presence of God more readily possible).<sup>24</sup> All of these combine to

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<sup>20</sup> See the very full bibliographies in James D. G. Dunn, [Romans 9–16](#), (Waco, Texas: Word, 1988), pp. 757f., C. E. B. Cranfield, C. E. B., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975 & 79), pp. 651–673. It is impossible here even to list the relevant items, let alone to interact with them.

<sup>21</sup> See John C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 207–214, and others noted by him and Dunn, *Romans*, p. 758.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, pp. 759, 761f. His first reference somewhat misleadingly cites this passage in Wisdom as supporting 'quietism'; it could actually be construed (as Dunn sees on p. 762) as fighting talk, conceding a divine right in order to assert a divine judgement.

<sup>23</sup> So [Dt. 32:8](#), [Sirach 17:14](#), etc.: see the discussion in Strack-Billerbeck 3.48ff.

<sup>24</sup> So *Pirke Aboth* 3.2: 'if two sit together and words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Divine Presence rests between them' (Danby, Mishnah, p. 450). The saying is attributed to R. Mananiah ben Teradion, a sage killed in the Bar kochbah revolt. Interestingly, the same Mishnah passage begins with a different rabbi exhorting: 'pray for the peace of the ruling power, since but for fear of it men would have

give the Pharisee that Paul had been a sense of a range of possible attitudes *vis-à-vis* ruling authorities. Whereas the Sadducees believed in free will i.e. (translating Josephus' euphemistic categories into their more likely political meanings) in God helping those who helped themselves, and the Essenes in determinism, i.e. waiting for God to act without human effort involved, the Pharisees, who believed in a mixture of the two, seem to have been ready for action and also, ready for God to act independently of human action.<sup>25</sup> This gave them the leeway which they exploited in various ways: sometime for revolution, as in the case of Akiba, sometimes for quiescence, as in the Diaspora. The Pharisaic attitude to the ruling authorities therefore—a new position, granted the new situation of a Jew living away from the Holy Land—was on a par with the idea of 'spiritual sacrifices', developed precisely when Jews could not get to the temple on a regular basis. Paul picks up both ideas: the latter in [Romans 12:1–2](#), the former in our present passage.

In a sense, then, the question had already been faced and decided to some extent. What should the people of God do when they find themselves off their own turf? Obey the rulers of the place where they happen to be, because the creator has given them for the benefit of all. But, in another sense, the situation that faced Paul in the early church had both sharpened up the need for such advice and given a new edge to the advice itself.

On the one hand, the church believed itself from very early on to be a distinct community, different from Jews on the one hand and Gentiles on the other. It did not even *look* like an ordinary first-century religious movement, which one would have expected to be either racially-based or a private religious club for the benefit of the 'enlightenment' of its members. It claimed less, and more, than these: an open society, claiming to be the human race in embryo.<sup>26</sup> They were neither Jews nor Greeks, but 'the church of God' ([1 Cor. 10:32](#)). In particular, it came to believe very early that the promises about sacred turf had been widened to include the whole world as the inheritance of the people of God: Paul in [Romans 4:13](#) makes this move as if it were already commonplace. No one nation racially or geographically, is 'special' in that sense any more. The whole world is claimed for the risen Lord. What more natural, then, than that the church should regard itself as above obedience to mere earthly rulers? Already worshipping the one to whom Caesar would bow, why should it bow to Caesar as well? This prospect of holy anarchy, which in its Jewish form was brewing up towards a terrible war as Paul was writing Romans, would not commend itself as serving the gospel. More natural was the line which would occur readily, we may suppose, to a Pharisee now rethinking his world view in the light of Jesus and the Spirit. The major section of Romans (chapters [1–11](#)) is given over to an exposition of the covenant faithfulness of the creator God, as a result of which the motley rabble that made up the church were to be assured that they, no matter what their moral or racial background, were the true covenant people, heirs to the promises made to the patriarchs. They were, in other words, a different version of what Diaspora Pharisaism had held itself to be—the people of God, spread abroad in the world. Learning to live with the 'powers that be' was therefore the appropriate mode of existence for this Israel redivivus.

We should note carefully what is being said, and what is not being said. What is here ruled out is an attitude which would flout magistrates and police; which would speak and act as though it were above or outside all law and social restraint. What is enjoined is not a meek submission to whatever an authority wishes, but a recognition that, by being

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swallowed up each other alive'. The belief in the providential ordering of governments goes deep within the thinking of Judaism, despite pogroms and persecutions: see Dunn 3.761 for more references.

<sup>25</sup> Cf Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:171–173. Josephus gives these as the views of the schools *periton anthropinon pragmaton*, i.e. concerning human affairs; this would scarcely exclude political actions.

<sup>26</sup> I owe this point, and much more besides, to Professor Rowan Williams.

Christian, one has not thereby ceased to be human, and that, being human, one remains bound in ties of obligation to one's fellow-humans, and beyond that to the God who, as creator, has called his human creatures to live in harmony with each other—and such obligations are, to a lesser or greater extent, enshrined in the laws which governments make from time to time. Paul's point is not the maximalist one that whatever governments do must be right and that whatever they enact must be obeyed, but the solid if minimalist one that God wants human society to be ordered; that being Christian does not release one from the complex obligations of this order; and that one must therefore submit, at least in general, to those entrusted with enforcing this order.

This implies, I think, neither quiescence before, nor acquiescence in, totalitarianism. The history-of-religions background to Paul's thinking is instructive: Jews holding views broadly analogous to his were quite capable of political activity in the Empire, and of reminding governments of their business. What Paul says is clearly anathema to the totalitarian: the point about totalitarianism is that the ruling power has taken the place of God; that is why it is always *de facto*, and frequently *de jure*, atheist. For Paul, the 'state' is not God. God is God, and the state is thus relativized, as are the powers precisely in [Colossians 1:15–20](#), where they are created and reconciled but not divine.

I have indicated hereby the position I currently take, with a fair degree of caution, on the two major issues that face the interpreter of [Romans 13:1](#) (a) are the 'powers' here the double-referent 'powers' that we find elsewhere in Paul, or are they merely the earthly rulers, without their 'spiritual' counterparts? and (b) what sort of 'submission' is required to those 'powers'? By following those who understand 'submission' as considerably less than 'unquestioning obedience', and who see it rather as a matter of humbly understanding one's place within the divinely ordered human world, it becomes easier, I think, to follow also the minority who still hold to the double, or perhaps better bipolar, referent behind the the 'powers'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is odd to see the consensus on the matter shifting towards a single, this-worldly, reference at the same time as we are being made aware, by writers like Ellul and Wink in their different ways, of the 'forces' which as we so readily acknowledge in everyday speech, stand behind, and are greater than the sum total of, the humans involved in the political and economic processes. It is of course true that the advice which follows in [Romans 13](#) refers to one's behaviour *vis-a-vis* the actual office-holders. But Paul's other references to the powers, and the ubiquitous double reference in the ancient world, make it (I think) far more likely that he would not have excluded from his mind the extra or spiritual dimension of the powers, however we may like to refer to it. But this raises the final and perhaps the most important question: what difference does the death and resurrection of Jesus make to the powers to whom one must (in this sense) submit?

### **(v) The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ**

At one level, the answer is 'nothing at all'. In Cranfield's image (which may not be altogether to the point, but serves this limited purpose), a warrant can be served for someone's arrest, and until it is acted on the criminal can pursue his course unhindered. Calvary and Easter serve the warrant on the powers, but they still need to be brought into

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<sup>27</sup> With Cranfield 2.660f. on 'submission', against him, and Dunn 2.760, on the double referent. Instead, I follow Wink pp. 45–47 (Wink is more cautious than one would realize from Dunn's summary of the issue), and, with modifications, Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956) and *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970): other references in Dunn, *ad loc.*

line, and (as Paul knew only too well) can still wreak evil in the world.<sup>28</sup> At another level, all the difference in the world: by the same image, the situation of the powers has radically changed *de jure*, and those who know of this change—i.e. Christians—know that the submission they offer to earthly institutions is neither absolute nor final, neither dehumanizing nor constricting to those called to announce the absolute Lordship of the crucified and risen Messiah. Underneath the call for submission in [Romans 13](#) we should, I think, place the astonishing words attributed to Jesus in [John 19:11](#): faced with a false charge, a skewed trial, an ineffective judge, Jesus says, ‘You could have no power over me if it were not given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin’. If Jesus and/or John can affirm the God-giveness even of Pilate’s power, and even at that precise moment, it is perhaps right to go on looking for the solution to [Romans 13](#) within the multiple ambiguities of reading ‘powers’ in its full Pauline sense, rather than cutting the knot and making Paul superficially easier.

What, then, has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and how has it brought a new state of affairs into being? From Paul’s perspective, Calvary and Easter were the occasions when the whole cosmos died and was reborn ([Gal. 6:14–16](#)). This dying and rising needed, of course, to be worked out as individuals and groups went through it ([Gal. 2:16–21](#); [4:19](#)); we have here, not unusually in Paul, the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. What we do have ‘already’, though, is a community of people called and equipped to live by the worship of the crucified and risen Jesus, instead of by the worship of this or that idol, and so to discover, and to announce to the world, a new way of being human and a kingdom ‘not of this world’ in the sense that it cannot be reduced to the power plays and power struggles of ordinary human society. The narrative of Acts shows Paul quite clearly reminding authorities, both Roman, Hellenistic and Jewish, of just what their God-given responsibilities consist in. What we have, supplementing as always the death of Jesus in Paul’s theology, is the gift of the Spirit—the Spirit given to the renewed people of God to enable them to *be* the renewed people of God, and so to bring to human affairs the transcendent and transcending vision and message of the true God. This does not absolve men and women from social and political responsibilities, any more than it renders unnecessary the acts of eating and drinking (it is interesting that in [Romans 14](#) Paul is concerned with precisely those things, and once again rejects any dualism that would assign part of the created order to a sphere in which the creator’s writ does not run). It gives them a new reason for engaging with the world, for announcing in all ways open to them that Jesus is Lord.

## CONCLUSION

I have had no space to discuss the rest of the NT, and I think that to add Luke/Acts and Revelation, at least, would have been illuminating, would have filled out the picture more than a little. But I have said enough, perhaps, to indicate the ways in which I think the historical end of the picture ought to be appreciated. What about the hermeneutical question?

We in the twentieth-century church are neither Galilean villagers nor citizens of the Roman and Mediterranean world of the first century. The specific concerns which Jesus addressed are not ours; the agenda which Paul believed himself called to address is not ours either. We do well to respect our distance from the NT and its world, and should not, in our eagerness to make it relevant and so demonstrate our Protestant orthodoxy, flatten out the territory that separates it from us. We need it to be where it is, at the beginning of

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<sup>28</sup> Cranfield 2.655.



that historical movement which we confess in the creed to be under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, and which is known rather flatly as Church History. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> I believe that the means by which the Bible, and particularly the NT, can today carry the authority which is so often glibly claimed for it is by the resolute working out of the essential *story* or drama of God's dealings with humankind which we find written up, prophetically, in Scripture. In the Bible we find a drama in several acts. The life and death of Jesus are the penultimate act, the moment when the drama reaches its height. The resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, and the birth of the church are the beginning of the final act, in which the climactic moment of the previous act is worked out. But the drama is not over. The way the NT is written is precisely open-ended—with clues as to how the final scene will look ([Rom. 8](#); [1 Cor. 15](#); [Rev. 21–22](#)), no doubt, but with a large blank to be filled in by those who, as the heirs of the first scene in the fifth act, are seeking to advocate the drama, by means of Spirit-led improvisation, towards its appropriate conclusion. The authority of the NT, then, consists not least in this: that it calls us back to this story, this story of Jesus and Paul, as our story, as the non-negotiable point through which our pre-history runs, and which gives our present history its shape and direction.

In particular, the story of Jesus compels us to work out, better than we normally do, the hermeneutical principle by which we get from the penultimate act—his life and death—to the final one, in which we find ourselves still. The whole world view of Israel provides the clue: when Israel's hopes are fulfilled, then the world will be blessed, or at least ruled properly at last. If Jesus is bringing to its climax the destiny of the people of God, then this is bound to have earth-shattering implications for the whole world. The hermeneutical rule of thumb, then, is that Jesus' mission to Israel becomes the basis, and the model, for the church's mission to the world. His call to Israel to repent, his summons to her to join him in a new way of being Israel, is to be translated into the church's call to the world to a new way of being human.

Within that responsibility, there emerge different levels of interaction between the church, *qua* church, and the official rulers. [Romans 13](#) enunciates the minimal position: being a Christian does not mean being an anarchist. The Creator intends his human creatures to live in social relations, which need order, stability and structure; Christians are not exempt from these. But, just as no one would think that [Romans 14](#) had said the last Christian word about what one was allowed to eat or drink, or that [Romans 12](#) had said the last word about behaviour in general, so [Romans 13](#) must not be taken as the sum total of all that Paul might have thought, or could or should have thought, about what we call 'the state'. The minimalist position is basic, corresponding to the equally generalized [Romans 12:9](#) ('hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good'). Beyond that, one is free to develop and explore the implications of Christian theology and ethics, responsibility and vocation, in all sorts of ways.

Among these ways will be, I think, a full outworking of the implications of [Philippians 2:10–11](#). If it is true that the church is called to announce to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord, then there will be times when the world will find this distinctly uncomfortable. The powers that be will need reminding of their responsibility more often perhaps as the western world moves more and more into its post-Christian phase, where, even when churchgoing remains strong, it is mixed with a variety of idolatries too large to be noticed by those who hold them, and where human rulers are more likely to acknowledge the rule of this or that 'force' than the rule of the creator. And if the church attempts this task of reminding, of calling the powers to account for their stewardship, it will face the same charges, and perhaps the same fate, as its Lord. It is at that point that decisions have to be

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<sup>29</sup> See my article, 'How can the Bible be authoritative?' *Vox Evangelica XXI* (1991), pp. 7–32.

made in all earnestness, at that point that idolatry exacts its price. But it is here, I think, that the NT's picture of the gospel and the world of political life finds one at least of its contemporary echoes.

I cannot, in short, support from the NT the separation of the gospel and politics which is still so popular, not least in certain shrill branches of contemporary evangelicalism. We cannot abandon politics to those who carry guns, or for that matter to those who carry pocket calculators. When I pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, I cannot simply be thinking of a condition which will begin to exist for the first time after all human beings have either died or been transformed *a la* [1 Corinthians 15:51](#). If I am to be true to the giver of the prayer, and to those in the first Christian generation who prayed it and lived it, I must be envisaging, and working and praying for, a state of affairs in which the world of the 'state', of society and politics, no less than the world of my private 'religious' or 'spiritual' life, is brought under the Lordship of the King.

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## **The Church and the Nation**

**Valson Thampu**

On August 15th 1997 India celebrated the 50th anniversary of its political freedom and independence from British colonial rule. On that day more than 20,000 Christians met in New Delhi for a service of Thanksgiving and Prayer sponsored by the churches of the capital city. The Church's influence in the development of the nation is far greater than its numerical strength. Christians were active in the framing of the constitution; missions and churches have pioneered in education, medical care and social welfare and their thousands of institutions are noted for high standards, integrity and compassion. The important place of the tribal states in the Union is the fruit of Christian missions. Christian members of parliament meet regularly for prayer. The democratic spirit within the Christian community, which now numbers approximately 30 million is an important factor in the life of the nation which continues to be the largest democracy in the world. In this statement of Christian realism Valson Thampu speaks with commitment to the unfinished agenda of the Church's role in nation building and the primacy of the Church's call to prayer.

Editor

Fifty years ago an ancient civilization was reborn as an infant nation. We succeeded in creating a free India. But we haven't had great success in creating a united people who are free to feel and think as Indians. The agenda to achieve inner freedom remains unfinished. So also does the mandate to 'set the captives free' from their social, economic and cultural prisons.

Development was understood narrowly to mean only improvement in the material conditions of life. The State endeavoured to help people survive; and that was important. It still is. But it was forgotten that the State is required to be also a standard-bearer of

values. The leaders pursued their vision of a secular, socialistic and democratic nation. In retrospect we realize that the people did not understand their rhetoric. And now the rhetoric too has changed, if not vanished!

The foundation for an independent India was laid. We gave ourselves a splendid Constitution. But the people have not been nurtured in the passion for unity or the commitment to justice. Instead, attempts are being made to soil the social fabric of India in the pursuit of power and short-term profit. Massive efforts to balkanise the national psyche are still going on. Our society today abounds in alienation.

Yet we remain, thank God, the largest democracy in the world. But we have a long way to go to build the democratic mental infrastructure. In the telling words of Nani Palkhivala, we are a people 'who gave unto ourselves the Constitution, but not the ability to keep it, who inherited a resplendent heritage but not the wisdom to cherish it, who suffer and endure in patience, without the perception of their potential'.

### **THE CHURCH IS LEAVEN IN SOCIETY**

Though a tiny minority, we have stretched ourselves to the limits to serve the cause of nation-building. We have worked like the 'leaven in the lump', without wanting to draw attention to ourselves. It was right that we did so. But there has been a problem. In as much as we focused exclusively on a few chosen areas, increasingly we lost touch with the totality of the national scene. We did not have the confidence or courage, except on occasions, to discern the general trends in the society as a whole. Even when we became somewhat uneasy about certain developments, we were not sure if we could make any difference. We continued to pursue our vocation, blissfully unaware of the tragic degeneration in our national character. Values and ideals continued to decline and die in public life. We chose to ignore the fact that slowly we were becoming irrelevant to the larger context. By now our alienation from the national mainstream has reached an all-time high. And there is demoralization everywhere.

This is good neither for the Church nor for the nation. The loss for the nation is not just in terms of the decline in the standards of our institutions of service. The loss, more fundamentally, is that the springs of renewal that our society so desperately needs, are all drying up. Our present state of marginalization is not the result of our numerical insignificance. It is the outcome, rather, of a crippling misunderstanding concerning the role of the Church in the given society. It is not in terms of the quantity of services rendered, nor of the prestigious quality they maintain, that the mettle of the Church's relevance is to be assessed.

Our radical calling is to imbue our society with an adequate vision of what constitutes the foundation for human dignity and fulfilment. If we are the 'salt of the earth and the light of the world' we cannot stop short of ministering to the wholeness of the nation as a whole, believing that 'with God everything is possible'. It is in this regard that we have suffered maximum demoralization. We may not break out of this state of disability as long as we continue to be obsessed with quantity and scales of operation. It is time we realized that we shall serve India best only in terms of our own unique strengths and resources, in the light of which we need to re-think our Christian vocation in the present Indian scenario. Being the 'leaven in the lump', we are called to relate to the total context and work towards its continual renewal. The health of the nation, not less than the well-being of individuals and groups, is our goal.

Part of our problem originates in the exclusive focus on sin and salvation at the individual level. While this is an important part of the Christian proclamation and vocation, it is by no means our total mission. The essence of biblical spirituality is the

effort to integrate seemingly exclusive areas of commitment and responsibility. We cannot pursue, for example, the ultimate to the neglect of the intimate. God does not want us to focus on the world to come to the neglect of the world around us. Likewise, we are not to focus on the individual at the expense of the nation.

## **ACCOUNTABLE TO CAESAR AND TO GOD**

As a community guided by the light of the Word ([Ps. 119:105](#)), we have yet to come to terms with the larger implications of our incarnate spirituality. Though in a somewhat enigmatic fashion, Jesus himself pointed to a necessary relationship between the State and the Church, between Caesar and God. We are to give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is his. The underlying truth is that we cannot honour our commitment to either without also remaining faithful to the other. The followers of Jesus cannot afford to be politically naive, indifferent or irresponsible.

Reflecting from within the context of India at the threshold of another century, we need to ask: What is it that we owe to Caesar or to the State? Is it only dutiful payment of taxes? Competence and commitment at work? Do not our dues to Caesar also include our duty to remind him continually that he too owes something to God? That he must render unto God what is God's and that he is entitled to his share only on the basis of his accountability to God? As we quote [Romans 13:1-7](#), we are to affirm not only that Christians must uphold civic authority but also that every form of authority is accountable to God. This is the bottom-line of our prophetic presence in a society fast sinking into corruption and moral anarchy. Surely, India can do a lot better with a little more of accountability in public life!

Biblically, it is self-evident that a definite role is envisaged for the Church in the given society. It is also clear that the totality of that relevance is not adequately claimed or practised by us today. The followers of the Lord Jesus Christ have added duties, while not being exempt from what is routine in their society. We shall here limit ourselves to considering only one of them.

After cleansing the Temple of Jerusalem Jesus affirmed: 'My house shall be known as a house of prayer for all nations' ([Mk. 11:17](#)). This is a seminal statement on the source of the Church's relevance to society. The Church is not merely an army of professional and skilled workers engaged in the pursuit of a materialistic and secular agenda. We betray our biblical heritage if we believe that nations and societies can be built with human and material resources alone. The Book of Proverbs says that where there is no vision the people perish ([29:18](#)). The Psalmist avers that our efforts to build the city will be futile if God has no place within our endeavours ([Ps. 127:1](#)). He has, probably, the story of the Tower of Babel at the back of his mind in this instance ([Gen. 11:1-9](#)).

## **THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL RESOURCES FOR NATION BUILDING**

We tend to under-estimate the importance of spiritual resources simply because we are too deeply influenced by the presuppositions of a materialistic culture. Only that which is tangible, visible and ponderous has any value and the invisible things of the spirit tend to be devalued. But not every resource even in a secular and scientific sense is visible or tangible. What about the force of gravity, for example, without which life would come to a stand-still? The wind, for example, which, like the power of the Spirit, can only be felt and seen in terms of its impact on other objects? The importance of oxygen for life cannot be belittled because we cannot touch or see it. A mindset that discounts the invisible will

end up discarding values and the subtle things of the spirit. The foundation of a building is invisible, but is not unimportant for that reason.

In the midst of the mounting evidence all around us, we cannot resist the truth that the basic contribution we as a faith community can make to the shaping and renewal of the Indian Republic is our fervent intercession before the throne of Grace. The main vocation of the Indian Church is to be 'a house of prayer' for our nation.

Prayer played an important role in our freedom movement. To Gandhiji, prayer was at least as important as the political parleys. The people of India followed his saintly leadership with fervour and zeal. Prayer, thus, constitutes the very foundation of our nationhood. It should remain the source of the health and wholeness of our society. It is in this sphere that the Church and individual Christians can make a decisive contribution. The Great Commission embraces individuals and nations alike. We need to enter fully into this enlarged paradigm of understanding the significance and vocation of the Church to regain the lost grounds of our relevance to the national main-stream.

Prayer, to be sure, should not be seen as an escape route from reality. Prayer is not an alternative to action. Prayer is, in fact, the most relevant resource to cope with and master reality. Prayer needs to be incarnated through corresponding action. True prayer is, in a real sense, the 'word become flesh'. It is only through prayer of this kind that anything of lasting value can be achieved.

It is very gratifying to learn that Christians, crossing all denominational barriers, have come together to pray for the nation and experience our solidarity as a Christ-centred and patriotic people, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of our independence. We need to be encouraged by the truth that the gospel played a significant role in awakening the passion for freedom in the minds of the Indian people. The Christian faith has had a liberating influence wherever it spread. The influence of the Bible on Gandhiji is too obvious to be debated. As I wrote recently in one of our national newspapers: 'It is a matter of pride for Indian Christians that the Father of the nation is indeed the most outstanding example of appropriation of the biblical idea of freedom in modern history.' It is our sacred duty to continue to mediate the power of the gospel into our society and public life as part of our commitment to work towards the health and wholeness of India and her teeming millions.

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## **A Message of Solidarity from The National Council of Churches India on the Occasion of the Golden Jubilee of India's Independence**

The National Council of Churches in India representing over 20 million Christians greets all people of our nation on the eve of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Independence with the following message.

We remember with gratitude and thanksgiving

- the life and sacrifice of the freedom fighters and martyrs of yesteryears.
- the great national leaders, religious leaders and Christian missionaries who gave their life and guided our nation.
- those unsung men and women who laboured and continue to labour for bringing Justice and Peace.
- the Jawans (soldiers) who sacrifice their lives in safeguarding the security of our country in eternal vigilance and the Kisans (farmers) who sustain the life of our nation.
- the salient provisions of our Constitution, the Democratic values on which the life of our nation is founded, and those who are involved in the governance of our country.

### **WE REPENT**

- the negligence of duties related to our communities and our nation.
- the mistakes of the past and seek God's forgiveness to fulfill the mission of Christ in the world which he loved and be a sign of hope for our motherland.

### **WE COMMIT OURSELVES**

- to the development of our nation through elimination of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.
- to fight against corruption in the churches, society and governments.
- to support and express our solidarity to all the efforts of the government in upholding human rights, communal harmony, and the vision of a welfare State.
- to build up communities of Peace and Justice through propagating and practising the message of love and peace.
- to the practice of participatory democracy, secularism and freedom with responsibility.

### **WE DEDICATE OURSELVES**

- to fully participate in nation building so that our country will continue to develop as a land which will be the model of the Kingdom of God. To that end may God help us!

# **The Lordship of Christ and Political Ideologies**

# Valdir R Steuernagel

The author argues that the Church's confession of the Lordship of Christ in history and in the Church is not an ideological statement, but neither is it ideologically neutral. However, the public confession of Christ demands ideological mediation if it is going to be coherent and relevant in each and every historical context. The Lordship of Christ relativizes lordship to Caesar and all other gods and demands that affirmations of faith are consistent with life in community and justice and love in the world. The author discusses the failure of socialist ideology in Latin America and in Eastern Europe and warns against the alternative of oppressive capitalist ideologies. The Church's strength lies in its vulnerability.

Editor

But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard' ([Acts 4:19-20](#)).

## THE BREAKDOWN OF THE WALLS OF IDEOLOGY

In the seventies and eighties, especially in Latin America, 'ideology' became a kind of catchword in many theological circles. If there was a theological conversation it had to be brought in. In a superficial statement, the word became a tool to denounce western theology and western capitalism and to feed the utopia of a socialist society.

During the nineties, there were signs that people were becoming tired of this subject. But, more than this, there were major historical developments, especially in Eastern Europe but also in China and Nicaragua. It became impossible to continue to denounce the conservative ideologies from the North and to dream of revolution within a socialist framework. Almost all of the self-entitled 'socialist regimes' had broken down and no longer entered into the dreams of any utopia.

Hence, a remaining and very important question is, how to interpret the recent historical developments and how to relate them to the discussion about ideology? However, let me be very clear by saying that I do not share Francis Fukuyama's 'illusion' when he speaks about 'the end of history'.<sup>1</sup> Neither do I think that theologians or Christians in general can conclude that it is time to retire from the discussion about ideology and to concentrate completely on in-house issues. Nor would it be possible for me to join in chorus with those who triumphantly proclaim the victory of capitalism, proclaiming Adam Smith as a king and 'the free market myth' as the royal sceptre.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the danger of radicalization, perceived in the seventies and eighties, where everything at all times and in any place became ideological—an argument for every occasion—there was a richness to the discussion that should not be put aside.

Let us step back and ask two basic questions: (1) What were the basic motives that led so many theologians and church practitioners to incorporate the ideological dimension into their theological discourse and Christian practice? (2) What were the main contributions that this discussion brought to that discourse and practice?

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<sup>1</sup> See Strobe Talbott, 'Terminator 2: Gloom on the Right', in *Time*, January 27, 1992, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf's paper, 'When the Unclean Spirit Leaves', describes 'the recent Eastern European revolution' as a 'revolution of return': 'The only option was to shift into reverse. So the revolution acquired the character of a restoration. Smith, the realist, was proven right; Marx, the adventurist, had failed. The socialist prodigal son returned in rags, as his older capitalist brother had predicted all along' (p. 3).

## Searching for Motives—Why Talk About Ideology?

In a very simple way it could be said that, in Latin America, the discussion about ideology was related to the conclusion, reached by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church, that they could no longer maintain their traditional alliances with the conservative forces in power, while increasing numbers of the population were becoming not only poor but miserable and many young people and organized workers' associations were embracing revolutionary options of socio-political and economic changes.

The economic and political alternatives officially at hand in the continent were not working but instead produced deep scars of injustice. In spite of the 'Alliance for Progress' slogan, the development model was being recognized as a social failure and the military dictatorships, which were spread all over the continent, had their dirty hands full of blood.

By analyzing this situation, the traditional way of understanding the Christian faith and of doing theology was put under suspicion. A new way of reading the Bible and relating to the struggles of everyday life was asked for, as well as a new way of doing theology. The traditional mediation of philosophy, in the process of doing theology, was recognized as being inadequate. It did not help to uncover and change reality and to establish the necessary bridge between faith and life. Social Sciences, and their tool of analysis, would be much more helpful to the church in understanding its task in the context of the specific reality of poverty, injustice and oppression in Latin America.

Furthermore, by using those tools of interpretation, it was concluded that much of local poverty and many of the patterns of injustice in the Third World had transnational roots. Those roots had not only to be denounced but also eradicated. It is within this context that the Dependency theory was brought into the theological discourse. In David Bosch's words:

*Since the 1950s, however, the mood had been changing in Third World countries themselves, particularly in Latin America. Socio-politically, development was replaced by revolution; ecclesiastically and theologically by liberation theology ... Soon 'liberation' was cropping up everywhere in the ecclesiastical landscape. The opposites we were dealing with were not development and underdevelopment, but domination and dependence, rich and poor, Capitalism and Socialism, oppression and oppressed.<sup>3</sup>*

## Looking for Contributions—Was the Discussion About 'Ideology' Helpful?

To bring the discussion about ideology into the theological field was helpful and not only presented the theologians with new challenges but also enriched the understanding of Christian faith and practice. Let us look into some aspects of such contributions:

a. We are all part of what Guillermo Cook calls 'the ideological game'.<sup>4</sup> While the Christian faith, as an affirmation of the 'Lordship of Christ', is not an ideological statement, the public witness of that faith, in word and deed, does have an ideological flavour. 'To be sure,' says Costas, 'the confession of the lordship of Christ is not an ideological affirmation ... it is acceptance of God's free gift of forgiveness, obedience to Christ's will through the help of the Holy Spirit, and hope in the future revelation of God's kingdom.' However, Costas continues, 'just as it is impossible to talk about our God experiences without

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<sup>3</sup> David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books: New York, 1991), p. 434.

<sup>4</sup> Guillermo Cook, 'Ideología y Comunicación Cristiana: Imágenes Bíblicas', p. 14.



religious language, so there cannot be a public confession of Christ without an ideological mediation.<sup>5</sup>

This ideological mediation occurs not only because the Christian faith is embraced and witnessed about by people and communities with their roots in history, carrying their historical baggage, but also because the Christian commitment to ethical imperatives such as justice, peace and love, demand an ideological mediation in order to be coherent and to become concrete in each and every historical context.<sup>6</sup>

b. To become aware of the impossibility of absolute ideological neutrality is necessary and important. All of us are, consciously or unconsciously, exposed to ideological influence. If we recognize this fact we should, as Cook says, 'critically revise our own ideological presuppositions', practising, on a personal and collective level, what has been called the 'sospecha ideologica'.<sup>7</sup>

c. By applying the criteria of the 'sospecha ideologica' to the life and historical activity of the Church, many Christians in the Third World have become aware of the ideological background and influence which has been determining the public witness of the Christian faith; Latin America being an example, as expressed and articulated by the modern missionary movement. Costas says:

*For one thing, third world Christians have become much too aware of the ideological ties between the modern missionary movement and the colonization and exploitation of their countries. For another, they have uncovered the historic economic and ideological ties between Western missionary expansion and the economic interests and military aggression of the United States and its European allies. This has led to a growing suspicion not only of the hidden motives behind a lot of present-day foreign missionary activity and development projects, but especially of the ideological presuppositions in Western theological thought.*<sup>8</sup>

## FROM IDEOLOGICAL ABSOLUTISM TO VULNERABILITY

There are different ways of defining ideology. Referring to political ideologies, Orlando Costas says that 'a political ideology involves a vision of the future, a coherent interpretation of reality, and a programmatic line of action conducive to the organization of society'.<sup>9</sup> By involving a vision of the future and proceeding towards an interpretation of reality every and each ideological proposition has the virus of relativism and myopia which is inherent to any human production. In other words, the criteria of 'sospecha ideologica' must be applied to any and every ideology.

François Chatelet even says that ideology is a cultural production which expresses the viewpoint of a social class or caste. According to this definition, as Cook concludes, ideologies do not have the primordial function of communicating the truth. Ideologies interpret and sustain specific perceptions of reality.<sup>10</sup> As such, they are very important but their importance is relative.

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<sup>5</sup> Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate. Mission Beyond Christendom* (Orbis Books: New York, 1982), p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> See Costas, p. 121, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> See Cook, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Costas, p. 122, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Costas, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Cook, p. 15.

Only a few days ago, the anchorman of a Brazilian nationwide television network said that Fidel Castro is reinstating in Cuba the practice of the death penalty—the *pared-ao*—which characterized the revolution in its early years. A desperate political act to keep together an old revolution. Furthermore, in this month of February, a group of Brazilian artists, politicians, writers and intellectuals spent a week in Cuba on a solidarity trip. They wanted to make their support of the Cuban revolution very clear—quite a difficult task. The shadow of the *pared-ao* made this act of solidarity very difficult. And there was more. As an act of solidarity each one of the voyagers had to take along thirty-five kilos of medicine. A public mirror of the state of despair of an aging revolution.

Does this short concentration on Cuba mean that the long-standing North American boycott of the small Caribbean island should be supported? Not at all. I'm against the boycott. What I'm trying to say is that the vulnerability of the old revolution can no longer be hidden ... and this is very hard to recognize. The old Christian principle of human relativity and sinfulness is again on the agenda. There is a human tendency to elaborate and implement plans and projects and then be unable to recognize mistakes, exercise the practice of a healthy self-criticism and be open to changes. Ideological options and historical projects do get old and tired and carry with them the virus of death.

The reference to Cuba is just one example of a worldwide ideological crisis. More than an ideological crisis, we face a crisis of hope. The dreams of our youth do not go beyond their effort to get some money, buy a new shirt and go dancing on Saturday night, after having a sandwich at a new local shopping centre. The intelligentsia of our societies are lost and while some of them decide to make money others still travel to Cuba with thirty-five kilograms of medicine.

While this ideological crisis indicates that the emerging generations are frustrated with the proposals of their parents, it also demonstrates a crisis of the modern state. In this sense it must almost be questioned if what we are facing is not both a crisis of utopia and a financial crisis where the state is unable to finance not only the dreams of changes but also the most elementary necessities of human life such as health and housing, transportation and work.

Where are we heading to? Is there such a thing as a post-ideological society? While this question is too complex to be answered, the emergence of a new, global and enchanting ideological articulation cannot be detected on the horizon. What can be detected is a kind of culture of survival, determined by increasing levels of poverty, on the one hand, and a struggle for room to be free and to be yourself, on the other hand.

The culture of survival could also be identified as the revolution of the empty stomachs, which expresses itself in an anarchical adventure of crossing the frontiers between rich and poor; between those who have, and those who do not have and do not even have the perspective to have. Yesterday, thousands of poor Brazilians migrated from the Northeast to São Paulo searching for a better life. Today, the quality and perspectives of life in São Paulo might not be, to those people, much better than in their former homeland. Furthermore, many Brazilians are looking for some other place in order to 'make some money'. One of the key challenges of the nineties will be named MIGRATIONS. Voluntary, desperate, uncontrollable waves of migrants will invade Europe and North America in search of work and in order to survive. The mobilization of those waves of migrants does not respond to any ideological proposal. Their utopia goes as far as their stomachs and the network of their families.

Motivated, among others, by economic problems the struggle for room to be free and to be yourself can be seen in a frightening dimension in the increasing numbers of nations which are emerging in Eastern Europe. The re-emergence of ethnic, racial and religious identities and the upheaval of minority groups will put its mark especially on the future

of Europe and will become even more explosive as it faces the waves of migrants invading that old continent.

Looking at the blank screen created by the absence of collective and motivating dreams, I also perceive, in the context of my country and culture, decline in values, on the one hand, and a desire to participate, mainly on a micro level, on the other hand. The decline in values can best be seen on the national political scene where corruption, involvement with drugs traffic, family breakdown and sexual involvements are part of everyday life ... without constraint. The desire to participate, on the other hand, occurs mostly at the grassroots level, establishing a political culture that stresses micro organization and participation on decision-making processes.

The second major question of this paper is, How to address the uniqueness of Christ within the context of this hour without talking only to yourself, or within the walls of 'closed' church buildings?

## **JESUS CHRIST IS LORD OF HISTORY**

That Jesus Christ is Lord is one of the oldest confessions of the Christian faith. And from its beginning it was a confrontationally exclusive, universal but contextual affirmation. In answer to the demand for silence from the established religious system in Jerusalem, Peter declared his absolute dependency on God and the impossibility of keeping silent. His calling to tell the story of Jesus was so intense and radical and his experience with Jesus so life-changing that there was no other way than to keep telling the story further and further. Over against the petulant confession that Caesar is Lord, the Christian family declared, from its early hour and for the whole Roman Empire to hear, that Jesus Christ was Lord ... Lord of the whole Empire, Lord of history, Lord of the universe.

The affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord of history is a life-changing, a contextual and a universal statement. If those different but integrated dimensions of the confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ do not keep together, the confession runs the risk of becoming either parochial or abstract. There are examples of both to be told. It may be an inhouse confession of the Lordship of Jesus that is unable or unwilling to relate such confession to the surrounding reality, or it may be an abstract construction of the uniqueness of Jesus that is unable to dialogue with the real challenges of life, either at a personal or a global level.

To affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord is always an invitation to life, a denunciation of death and a relativization of the powers and systems of the day. By inviting people to surrender their lives to Jesus and to belong to a worshipping, witnessing and serving community, the Christian faith is promoting life: 'When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there dressed and in his right mind ...' ([Mk. 5:15](#)). And, as the passage continues, this experience of life has a contagious nature: 'As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ' ([Mk. 5:18-19](#)).

To affirm the Lordship of Jesus implies a denunciation of forces of death, be it the demons who possessed and violated the humanity, dignity and identity of the Gerasene man; be it all and every 'Caesar's system' that believes itself to be absolute, behaves as if exclusive, oppresses those who do not agree with it and exploits those who are unable or unwilling to react against it. Not least, it relativizes powers and systems that are unable and unwilling to perceive that they are only powers and systems of the day, waiting to be replaced tomorrow. But we have not yet addressed the question of how to relate the

uniqueness of Christ to the challenges of this hour or, how to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord today. I would start by suggesting what we should not do.

### **Lessons from 500 years of Christian History in Latin America**

In this hour of ideological crisis and the absence of any utopia we should avoid, at any price, singing a naive chorus of victory, by arrogantly and simply saying that we knew it all along and were only waiting for the whole ideological apparatus and revolutionary proposals of the last decades to fall down.

Why should we avoid singing such a chorus? First, because this would only show our ideological bias. Second, because we should remember that we live under a glass roof. Third, because the ideological crisis is ours too.

*First.* One of the side effects of the breakdown of the Berlin Wall is the danger of romantically raising up a monument of victory to the capitalist ideology, celebrating the belief that some day the whole world will submit to the law of privatization and the free-market economy. From the perspective of the Third World it could be said that such a monument does already exist, except that it has been erected in the world's backyard and it does not look nice at all. We, in Latin America, have been exposed to the capitalist ideology for a long time and it has not worked well. Hence, when Miraslov Volf says that 'Eastern European countries are more and more facing problems similar to those that plague the countries of the Two-Thirds World',<sup>11</sup> many of us from the Third World have to say that we are already moving on to the Fourth World. There are no illusions, and we know that while capitalism has been able to provide an opulent table to many in the First World and to a few in the Third World, there is an increasing number of empty tables in our villages and communities, while unjust structures and exploitative working relations continue to provide delicacies, mostly to those tables that are already opulent.

As Walter Altmann has shown, one of the consequences of the easing of the tension in the East-West relations is that the North-South conflict will emerge much more strongly as the world's open wound. Since the economies of the North are becoming more self-sufficient and no longer need the South in the same proportion, the weakness and abandonment of the South will be seen as never before. As Altmann says:

*The masses of the Third World, transformed into Fourth World, are becoming superfluous. We have to count more and more with the 'lumpen' reality: poor masses thrown to the margin without any perspective of a dignifying life, deprived from everything that is essential and even from the ability of taking initiatives and from hoping.*<sup>13</sup>

And, not last, there is the danger of celebrating the defeat of the materialistic socialist dream, while proclaiming, in the name of a free Christian world, the victory of the capitalist ideology.<sup>14</sup> We should view the capitalist world (which is also essentially and programmatically materialistic), with the same suspicion with which many of us viewed the state-socialist experiment. By so doing we would become less bound by ideology and render a better service to the Kingdom of God.

*Second.* What about our 'glass roof'?

It is somehow easy to proclaim the ideological captivity of others and to condemn the ideological options of those who are far away. In 1992, in Latin America, we are searching

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<sup>11</sup> Costas refers to this absolutist tendency as follows: 'Ideologies, however, can be potentially explosive for Christians, since they tend toward absolutism when they demand complete loyalty from their adherents to a coherent (and inflexible) system of political thought and action. Insofar as Christians are motivated by vision of God's eschatological kingdom, they will always find themselves uneasy with any ideology, even with those that come close to their ethical concerns' (p. 122).

for a language that better expresses the meaning of the 500 years of Christian presence in the Continent. And as we move from 'celebration' to 'invasion' and vice versa we are impelled to conclude that the gospel has been captive to and impoverished by different ideological expressions, responding to the political apparatus and economic needs of those who, in power, had their tables well set. While we rejoice in the fact that God has been with us and speaking to us, throughout all this time, we also have to recognize that much harm has been done to the gospel and many lives have been cut down—literally and figuratively speaking—in the name of that faith that should bring life ... abundant life.

However, from an evangelical perspective, it might be tempting to denounce the negative effects of the presence and ministry of the Roman Catholic Church in the Continent for so long, without recognizing that we built on the basis established by them. And, in many cases, we are not aware—or do not want to be aware—of our own ideological captivity. After all, the historical presence of evangelicalism in Latin America also responds to ideological presuppositions which are foreign to the gospel. Furthermore, there is the temptation to say naively that we will do everything right and that Latin America will be changing its social picture as it becomes evangelical. The hour has come to say 'NO' to this temptation. While the Church is growing, and evangelicals are entering their first major experience of national politics in this continent, there are many signs that we are not only being blind but also captive to dreams of change that resist a solid biblical hermeneutic, that do not have a good economic and socio-political basis, and to which history has already said 'NO'. The challenge to exercise the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in the political arena, vis-à-vis the discussion of political ideologies, is very much needed in Latin America today, even if the desire to face such a challenge is evaporating.

*Third.* Are Evangelicals facing an ideological crisis too?

It is usually very difficult for us, as evangelicals, to recognize that we are in crisis. We work with the assumption that we have answers while others have questions. Alongside this way of perceiving the crisis of others and our own sense of security there is even a tendency to hold a party around the empty table of utopias, a characteristic of the end of this century and of today's younger generations. I would suggest that there is no longer room for this kind of apologetic posture that always waits for the worse scenario to emerge in order to proclaim the rescuing message of Jesus Christ.

While we cannot and do not want to give up the privilege of experiencing hope in Christ Jesus as well as of sharing this hope with others, we should be humble in order to experience the agony of emptiness and hopelessness that characterize this hour. If our Christian witness is not marked by a humble attitude of openness which is willing to suffer the pain of the world we will not be able to understand the lack of commitment of our youth, the despair of mothers concerning their children, the abandonment of the elderly, the increasing levels of drugs consumption, the proliferation of AIDS, the acceptance of corrupt practice as a normal procedure and the complete breakdown of the morality which gave some sense of coherence to former generations.

We should recognize that the crisis of utopia of our days is our crisis too. We are not only a part of this historical moment but are much more contaminated by the virus of hopelessness than we think. I myself have been experiencing the pastoral challenge to share about hope in Christ in a context where the axe of unemployment is over almost everyone's head from Sunday to Sunday, and where the younger generation seems to be suffering from an unshakable commitment to a hedonist lifestyle that produces a scaring sense of immunity in the midst of a world in flames. Yes, the ideological crisis is our crisis too.

## **JESUS CHRIST IS LORD OF THE CHURCH**

As Christians we experience the hopelessness of this hour by identifying with the weeping of Jesus over Jerusalem, by committing ourselves to the witnessing community of Christ, and by rooting our faith in the promise that 'we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness' ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)).

Are we able to weep over 'Jerusalem'? In the last decades the contextual theology that has been erupting from the Third World has said that INCARNATION is a key missiological concept in the search of understanding the missionary task of the Church today.

Applying this emphasis to the discussion about the uniqueness of Christ it must be said that there is not much room for a kind of theoretical discourse which, using philosophical categories, wants to 'prove' how unique Christ is over against other philosophical statements, political proposals or religious alternatives. While the Christian faith has a discursive dimension—proclamation, dialogue—attached to it, it must be able to relate to people within the context of their everyday life experience. The Christian faith becomes contextually unique when the Church follows the steps of the Lord. To put it in another way: there is little room for systematic discourses about the uniqueness of Christ when and if the Lordship of Jesus does not become a touchable reality within the context of the living Christian community ... down there at the village. There is no place for victorious discourses about the superiority of the Christian faith if the streets of 'Galilee' are empty of acts of love in the name of Jesus. The universality of the statement about the uniqueness of Christ is best seen and becomes authoritative when the Lordship of Jesus becomes reality at the contextual level of individual and contextual life.

We are not talking of a local context only. We need the ability to relate to reality and to interpret historical developments and challenges. In this sense we as Christians not only experience the pain of this hour but also engage in dialogue which we perceive as being in favour of life. Hence, while old and new political ideologies are put under the scrutiny of a Christian analysis they should also come under Christian influence while in the process of articulation and/or implementation.

*A Unique Community.* While the Christian faith is essentially a communal faith, the community of faith is essentially missiological. Hence, the commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the assertion concerning the uniqueness of Jesus is, by its very nature, missiological. The way in which the Lordship of Jesus becomes reality in the everyday life of the Church and the means through which the Church relates to and engages in favour of life, with other living forces in society, sets the tone about the acceptance and experience of Christ as being unique.

In the Latin American context this points to the fact that both Church and poverty are growing and ideological discourses and options are out of fashion. But how do Church, poverty and ideologies relate to each other? According to the gospel, the Church cannot ignore the poor and the levels of poverty will not diminish without a political action that responds somehow to an ideological option. Without ideologizing the Christian faith, the Church in Latin America today has the responsibility of participating in the different national dialogues which search for an economic and socio-political option for today. This is a consequence both of the demand of the gospel and of the growth of the Church. There is no way for the Church to say that saving souls is its business without betraying the gospel and the poor. And there is no room for strategies on world evangelization toward the year 2000 without asking the question about the contextuality of those same strategies.

*An Expectant Community.* In times of crisis there is always the tendency to embrace a kind of escapist eschatology. While the hope of the ultimate return of Christ and the installation of the kingdom of God is a very important source of endurance and witness in our days, any eschatology that diverts the Christian community from its healthy and

necessary involvement in present history is harmful to the Christian community as well as to the human communities that need to know the Lord.

While waiting for the kingdom of God to erupt in plenitude the Christian community is committed to signalize this kingdom by preaching the gospel, healing the sick and reproving the evil spirits. By doing so, the church will not and cannot abandon present history to the devil. Furthermore, it cannot avoid taking ecological co-responsibility for the earth, being consistent to the proclamation of faith that claims that ‘the earth is the Lord’s’ ([Psalm 24:1](#)). A healthy eschatology waits eagerly for the Lord to come; but while waiting it plants a tree. This we should have learned from Martin Luther.

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# **The State from an Evangelical Perspective**

Pietro Bognesi

In this important article the author strives for an authentic evangelical conscience on our Christian commitment to nation building in the context of a nation where the Roman Catholic church and culture pervades all of life—political, economic, social and religious. He gives a broad survey of the main schools on the origin and functioning of the state; the unfolding of the perspective of biblical revelation on church and state; a survey of perspectives through history from the first centuries to the present; and a number of theological reflections on the nature and function of the state for the promotion of a good society. This extended article is worthy of careful study. Editor

## **INTRODUCTION**

The state<sup>1</sup> tends all the time to absorb more and more space in man’s social life. It is not only one of the many dimensions of human life; it is also that which, at the present time, appears perhaps to be the most intrusive. Despite the pluralism it claims for itself, the state puts considerable pressure on the individual, society and the church. The term itself sounds somewhat abstract, but sooner or later everyone becomes aware of its weighty concreteness.

Believers are involved in the progress of the kingdom of God in the family, in the church, in education, and in all spheres of life, including that of the state. It is right, therefore, for them to ask themselves what their responsibilities are regarding the state. It is important for them to consider what the state should be according to God’s plan. What is the nature of the state? Is it possible to outline a theology of the state? In everyone’s

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘state’ is used in the present article without a capital letter, except in those cases in which a quotation is used. This emphasizes the intention of attributing to it a perfectly ordinary role, in contrast with the widespread tendencies of state-worship.

mind there are models that are difficult to modify, but if one imagined starting from scratch to redefine the functions which the state carries out at present, how would we move in order to outline a role that honours God's revelation?

It is embarrassing to note how evangelical churches have given so little consideration to this matter, and how their presence and action have often had no effect whatsoever on society. Most Christians have passed very casually from reaction to integration, and continue to do so, without trying to develop a vision that is radically biblical and consistent. Their convictions are often comparable with those of people outside the church, and this poses a serious question regarding the specific attitude one would expect from Christians in the socio-political field.

From the theological point of view, the doctrine of the state is one of the most complex doctrines to deal with, and there are several reasons for this. First, there are the various ramifications and connections to be considered; second, there is the competence that such a study requires; and third, there are the differences that are evident between Christians in this field. The limitations of a theological way of thinking must not, however, lead to paralysis. Other disciplines too impose considerable limitations when the role of the state is in question. Herman Dooyeweerd states that: "There is no other community that has aroused such a difference of opinions in modern social philosophy and in the social sciences as the State."<sup>2</sup>

Because of the variety of assumptions, many Christians have ended up developing political convictions that are widely differing. In the economic field virtually all the different positions can be found: from capitalism to socialism, with many intermediate stages.<sup>3</sup> In the social field the whole range is covered, from the individualist concept to the collectivist concept. At the present moment, one cannot say there is a univocal vision among Christians regarding the role of the state and the function of politics. Everyone has poured into his personal conviction his own philosophy and assumptions. And for the most part, there has been a decided lack of any encouragement to verify how far the assumptions are consistent with the faith that has been declared.

The purpose of this study is not to present something free from such risks, but rather to provoke thought in this field. It seemed worthwhile, all things considered, to try not to be silent. For the Christian, modesty must not hinder commitment.

The study is divided into four basic sections. The first deals with the emergent tendencies, that is, those that can be considered the great schools of thought. The second attempts to call to mind the most important biblical texts and themes for the research. The third section presents a brief outline of the subject from a historical point of view. The fourth section focuses on the theological orientation.

## **I. EMERGENT TENDENCIES**

In the Christian tradition, four main schools can be recognized regarding the origin and the function of the state. Each school branches off into different positions regarding what the function of the state should be in today's world.

### **The Eschatological or Spiritual Tendency**

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<sup>2</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: H. J. Paris—Presb. and Ref. 1969, vol. III), p. 380.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).



The first concept is the *eschatological* one. This links the state with the *idea of judgement*. It is, therefore, a *radical* concept, which sees the state as tainted by sin and condemned to perdition. The institution of the state, like all political, social and economic institutions, must be left to itself because it is not particularly important for the kingdom of God. The world is destined to disappear; therefore all there is left to do is to offer people first of all salvation for the soul, so that the largest possible number of them can be saved.

However, it is a great distortion of the Christian faith to think that the Bible has to do only with spiritual salvation, or to consider its teaching as something that concerns only the life of people that are now far removed from the present world in terms of their characteristics, situations and problems. Life is religion in its very essence, since it involves a reaction to the Word of God, whether this is a right or wrong reaction. Religion is not something from which one can choose or refuse to benefit; it is a matter of existence. That means there is nothing in life that is detached from God and his law. To ask oneself questions regarding the relationship between Christians and the state in the light of Scripture is, therefore, not only legitimate, but also morally imperative.

The eschatological concept brings other problems with it, since no-one can really be consistent in taking up such a stand. All of us work in the world and try to improve our situation. The very preaching of the gospel cannot be carried out without structures typical of the world. Life is not just 'spiritual', it contains many other dimensions that cannot be separated one from the other. This means that it is a vision that cannot be treated without rigour, and that is ultimately utopian.

### **The Amartological or Defensive Tendency**

The second concept may be defined as *amartological*. It links the beginning of the state to the entry of sin into the world, and therefore to the *order of preservation*. Civil authority was ordered by God in order to curb the effects of sin on the human race. The function of the state was, therefore, basically negative and consisted of preserving order and decency in a real world that was already marred. Political life would be dominated by sin and Christians should not be involved in it. The state lives on power and the church lives on love.

This concept finds wide acceptance in Christian circles, but can be traced back to the Lutheran tradition, with its understanding of the relationship between law and gospel. While the state would depend on the law of justice, the Christian community would depend on the gospel of grace.

This opinion is not without its problems. The separation implicitly suggested by it poses considerable problems. Under its banner, abuse and discrimination have been perpetrated, and it does not appear to be at all easy to continue defending such a cause.

### **The Christological or Redemptive Tendency**

The third concept can be considered the *Christological* one. According to this, the origin of the state is set in the *order of redemption*. The grace of God for the world is shown in Jesus Christ. God's purpose in Christ, therefore, has its focal point in the church. He is interested in the Christian community, and not in the state. The state, for its part, must not follow its own vision of reality, but is exposed to the light which shines out from the Christian community. The life of the state should reflect that of the church. In the church there should be such a fulness of light that it illuminates the world also. The state would then shine with a light that is reflected. Thus, the authority of God in the world would take on the characteristics of a Christocracy. It is as if the creation absorbed redemption.

But the order of redemption cannot precede that of creation without upsetting the structure of revelation itself: creation-fall-redemption. Among those who support this concept are Karl Barth and Jacques Ellul.

### **The Theological or Creational Tendency**

The fourth concept can be considered *theological*. The origin of the state is seen as originating in the *order of creation* itself. God created reality and ordered it through his own word. What he created was not chaos, but the cosmos—that is, order ([Is. 45:18–19](#)). God entrusted to man a mandate that includes all the spheres of human existence, not least of all the state.

Without doubt, sin has radically ruined all the relationships that exist, and therefore all that is involved in politics. Nevertheless, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, man can work to restore the original reality for God's glory. The power of sin must not be minimized at all, but neither must the power of redemption which Christ brought.

The theological tendency fits in well in a reformed situation where it inspired not only Calvin but also people like Abram Kuyper. Thomas of Aquinas tried to 'baptize' this concept, giving it a modified version. He considers the natural law as valid for the state in harmony with the canonical law which is valid for the church, with a view to synthesizing the two. This concept however, remains essentially dualistic, foreign to the biblical vision, and providing a contrast to the reformed viewpoint.

It is obvious that the tendencies described above give an idea not only of the variety of perspectives, but also of the risks that attend the reading of biblical and historical data. Bearing this in mind, it is now necessary to deal with this data.

## **II. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The Bible talks to humanity as a whole, and therefore concerns all human relationships. To live out one's faith in a real world involves the necessity of making room for God's perspective concerning the state as well. The *Sola Scriptura* of the reformers draws attention to the importance of biblical revelation for life as a whole. In order to be authentic Evangelicals, therefore, it is necessary to start with the Scriptures.

That does not mean that the Scriptures give all the solutions to the issues that Christians have to face every day, but it definitely means that they can give direction in all the various areas of human life. Christians know that their identity is at stake. Either they identify themselves with God, on the basis of Scripture, or they identify themselves with a divinity of a general nature, on a basis that is divorced from Scripture. That is why it is necessary to start from the Word of God even when it is a question of a doctrine of the state.

In order to set about such a study, we will aim to follow a twofold path. First we will try to collect material that appears to offer elements readily usable for reflection, and then we will try to gather some of the basic themes. Without expecting to understand all the material immediately, we will try to listen to it in order to glean the most important statements. At this point we will try to avoid drawing conclusions that are too hard and fast.

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **The Law**

The review of material must, of course, start with *Genesis*. In the kingdom which God established in creation, man and woman appeared as beings with their own *specific identity* whose existence is protected by God ([Gen. 9:6](#)). They are called to have dominion over the created world, thus imitating the One in whose image they were made. Through their *work* they must exercise a power that is closely knit to their identity and their own fulfilment. In their work, man and woman must also respect the *order* and the *balance* of creation, according to the will of God. God also establishes different countries or *nations* ([Gen. 2:11-14](#)) characterized by resources that are well distributed.

But the entry of sin into the world brings out human selfishness and causes desolation, divisions and oppression. From [Genesis 3](#) onwards the whole world is the victim of a *systemic disorder*. It suffers because of the imbalance and yearns for freedom. The climax of this disorder is expressed in the project of Babel ([Gen. 11](#)). Humankind, their alliance with God broken, try to accomplish a lofty project and separate themselves from God. But in a world that is divided right to the core, because of the effects of sin, such a project cannot be successful.

In *Genesis* we find also the story of Joseph, who carries out his *office* in a pagan context. He is not afraid to proclaim God's lordship to Pharaoh, and then to suggest solutions for the famine that is about to strike the land. God honours him and Pharaoh acknowledges God's greatness by adopting a similar attitude before God. ([Gen. 41:38](#)). In the end Joseph holds a position of great responsibility in a pagan state.

Another episode that immediately comes to mind when thinking of the state and of one's relationship with the people of God is [Exodus 1:17](#). Here is an example of *disobedience*. Faced with the conditions that the state wishes to impose on Israel, a whole category of people offers resistance, running great risks. The midwives disobey the state because they fear God, and he favours them. After resisting for a time, the people rebel against those in power, and God's lordship is proclaimed with joy ([Ex. 15:18](#)).

In the law we also find a *legislation* that is not limited to the sacred realm, but which touches on all the dimensions of human life in order to give it a real *quality*. The law, therefore, concerns various different areas.

*The safety of the person and his health.* Every person must be respected as such ([Lev. 19:14](#); [Deut. 27:18](#)). Even buildings must meet certain conditions in order not to endanger human life ([Deut. 22:8](#)), which is a gift of God.

*Fairness in business* ([Lev. 19:35](#); [Deut. 25:13-15](#)). *Work* must be done with respect for the rights of everyone concerned, and must be rewarded fairly ([Lev. 19:13](#); [Deut. 24:14-15](#)). The activity of work must go hand in hand with regular *rest*, because human life does not consist only of work.

*Juridical guarantees* ([Deut. 16:18-20](#); [17:8](#); [1:17](#); [Ex. 23:6](#)). The law has its sure foundation in God himself ([Deut. 10:17](#)) and not even the king is exempt from observing the law ([Deut. 10:17-20](#)). The authorities must not be cursed ([Ex. 22:28](#)). The *punishment* determined for the various crimes must not, however, be excessive ([Deut. 25:1-3](#)). The Law calls for the lawbreakers to make expiation and restoration<sup>4</sup>.

*Social solidarity.* The introduction of *tithing* and the *sabbatical year* ([Lev. 25:1-7](#)) imply giving attention to the poor. Social structures can absorb a certain degree of tension, but the main thing to be emphasized is that the foreigner, the orphan and the widow have certain things by *right*. They can benefit from what is left over from the harvest ([Deut. 24:17-22](#)). It is to be understood that this does not correspond to modern charity (a word

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the essay written by E. L. Hebden Taylor 'The Christian and Penal Law', *Pro Rege* IV (1975/2), pp. 16-28 and R. D. Vaux, *Le Istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento*, (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1964), pp. 165ff. (orig. 1957).

that has no equivalent in Hebrew), but to justice. It is, therefore, a duty towards someone who has the same dignity before God. The recipient receives what is his by right. The poor can also have advantages regarding credit ([Lev. 25:35–38](#)). It is in this context that the institution of the *jubilee* appears. This regards the distribution of possessions. Every fiftieth year the land must be given back to its original owner to avoid the capitalization of land, and therefore the risk of accumulating riches. The right to *possession* is at the same time affirmed and made relative, because the land is the Lord's.

The *family*. Everyone must respect his or her role ([Lev. 19:3](#); [Deut. 27:16](#)) and not offend others ([Ex. 21:15](#)). The elderly person must be treated with respect ([Lev. 19:32](#)). The family plays a crucial role in maintaining social balance. The fiancé must provide the dowry and not the fiancée, as happens in the European tradition ([Ex. 22:16](#); [Gen. 34:12](#)). The dowry (*mohar*) provided by the fiancé is a demonstration of his maturity at the personal and social level, but also provides economic protection for his wife and children. In the event of divorce, if the husband is the guilty party, the wife is covered, whereas if the wife is guilty, the children are covered. The family, therefore, provides the social assistance necessary for the people without the state needing to intervene.

*Accuracy of information*. Slander is prohibited and severely punished ([Ex. 23:1–3](#); [Lev. 19:16](#)).

The fact that legislation concerns every aspect of life does not imply, however, that the state is the supreme regulator. The responsibility of the state comes into play only when offences cannot be handled privately. If, for example, a thief repents and gives back what he stole, the state plays no part in the matter ([Lev. 6:1–7](#))<sup>5</sup>.

Here we have a whole system of balances that deserves fuller treatment. Nevertheless, it encourages a considerable degree of fairness and offers real counterweights.

### Other Writings

The book of *Joshua* dedicates several chapters to the *division of the country* ([13–19](#)). Moses had already outlined the need for respecting boundaries, when he asked the king of Edom if he could cross his country ([Num. 20:17](#)). Here we see once again how the importance of limits is underlined for the development of business. The twelve tribes of Israel, grouped together into a *federation*, sign an agreement at Shechem ([Jos. 24](#)).

During the time of the *monarchy*, it is clear that while Israel acknowledges that kings have a certain degree of authority, that authority is not absolute. The king is there to serve the people, and like them, he is subject to the law and judgement of God. Power ultimately belongs to God, who judges on the basis of obedience to the law and faithfulness to the agreement.

For a man of God like *Samuel*, the important matter is not the kind of regime (the neofederalism of the judges or the monarchy), but the reasons that determine it. The people ask for a king, but not the one promised by the law. They want a king who is like the pagan power ([I Sam. 8:5, 20](#)). Samuel points out the negative characteristics that can appear even in a monarchic regime, and reminds the people that between the king and the people there is a law that everyone has to abide by ([I Sam. 8:11ff](#)). Such a law allows one to be *submissive* or *critical* according to the current situation, and puts the relationships between the people and the government into *structures*.

[I Kings 18](#) shows that there is a time for waiting patiently and a time for reacting. There would be the tendency to think that the prophets have always reacted forcefully to certain abuses, but these episodes show that there is also the possibility of being patient and waiting for the right moment. At one point Elijah attacks his enemies directly, then he

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<sup>5</sup> Vern Poytress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, Tn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

makes a strategic retreat. The schools of the prophets themselves are centres of religious and political reflection.

The invitation to *practise justice* is present everywhere ([Psa. 58:1](#); [72:1-2](#), [12-14](#); [82:1-4](#)). This determines an attitude of obedience and criticism at the same time. God's values are valid for everyone and the psalmist states that he would not be put to shame even before pagan kings ([Psa. 119:46](#); cf. [Deut. 4:6-8](#)).

*Ecclesiastes* praises the *social nature* of power that makes it possible to listen and speak, rather than the selfishness of power that isolates and makes people unreasonable despots ([Eccl. 4](#)). For this reason many counsellors are necessary ([Prov. 11:14](#); [15:24](#)). Because of human limitations, those who come after the reign of a king will not rejoice in him ([Eccl. 4:16](#)). No-one must be surprised to see certain values become outdated and be trodden underfoot. Power however, must not be demonized, because it is God who causes kings to reign and issue just decrees ([Prov. 8:15-16](#)).

### Prophets

In many of the statements made by the prophets, political power is seen as an instrument for oppression, abuse and slavery, all of which deserve severe judgement from God ([Isa. 3:14](#), [15](#); [10:1-2](#); [14:5-6:20](#)). For *justice* to spread throughout the country, they look to the coming Messiah and to his action ([Isa. 16:5](#); [Jer. 23:5](#)). Protests are never made in the name of human power, but in God's name. The precarious nature of the reality in which they live is not an excuse for inactivity, because there is a constant appeal for people to work towards renewal.

Because human life is a unity, if the nation is indifferent to social justice ([Isa. 1](#)), then worship becomes unacceptable. The *structures* within which one carries out one's worship are important to God. He promises to judge his people, not only for the personal sins into which they have fallen, but also for their social sins ([Mal. 3:5](#)). Their indifference to the abuse of others is unacceptable ([Isa. 5:8](#); [Jer. 22:13](#)). There is a very close link between personal and social values, between salvation and justice. 'We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away ... So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter' ([Isa. 59:11](#), [14](#)).

In the book of *Jeremiah* we find that the Jewish exiles in Babylon are invited to *participate actively* in working for the good of the city to which they were deported, despite its pagan nature. ([Jer. 29:4](#) ff). Jeremiah himself speaks to the king ([Jer. 13:18](#); [5:30](#)).

*Amos* does not mince his words when he condemns the powerful who, instead of guaranteeing justice and fairness, become a scandal because of the licentious and morally degenerate lives they live. There is no awareness of the social mandate and the people are oppressed ([Amos 4:1-4](#); [6:1](#), [7](#)). *Judicial power* treads fairness underfoot for venal motives and does not work justice for the weak ([5: 7](#), [10-12](#); [6:12](#)). The same is true of *economic power* ([2:6-8](#); [3:9-10](#); [8:4-8](#)) and *military power* ([4:4-5](#); [5:4-6](#), [14-15](#); [8:13-14](#)). Amos condemns the sins that other peoples committed with the approval of the people of God ([2:1-15](#)) and stresses the need for establishing firmly what is *law* ([5:15](#)).

*Ezekiel* condemns the ineffectiveness of power in order to emphasize a wider reaching prospect, God's kingdom. He wants the people to open themselves up to the eschatological future, in the light of which it is necessary to judge the present ([Eze. 34:23-31](#)).

*Daniel* and his friends are not opposed to the state on principle, but are ready to set limits when it seeks to invade areas which are not within its competence. Here again one could talk of a kind of *disobedience* to the state in the name of obedience towards God. The state issues orders that are unacceptable for believers, and they oppose it.

The Lord is acknowledged as the Most High, who reigns over men's kingdoms ([Dan. 4:32](#))<sup>6</sup>, and his lordship extends to the pagan state which oppresses God's people exiled there. This is in accordance with the conviction that foreign rulers, too, are instruments of God's will ([Isa. 10:5-6](#); [Jer. 27:4-8](#); [28:14](#); [43:10](#)).

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Gospels and Acts

Jesus' words have a connotation 'which is at the same time social and ethical and religious'<sup>7</sup>. Jesus brings the pagan peoples into the orbit of his lordship. He brings out into the open the false antitheses and announces that those who are last will be first in his reign ([Lk. 13:22-30](#); [Mat. 8:10-12](#)). One can understand, therefore, how the theme of the state and justice can be seen in the NT, too<sup>8</sup>. It is made even clearer how the origin of the state must be traced back to God himself, since man was given a social instinct right from the moment he was created. There is, therefore, a *divine basis for authority* ([John 19:11](#)). The state is made neither demonic nor divine, it is simply connected to the God who is the true holder of power.

'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God ...' is a very simple formula, but it can make us reflect on how far Caesar's demands can be legitimately extended. The Christian is a citizen of the state, and not only of God's kingdom. Money belongs to Caesar, and taxes are to be paid to him, whereas to God belongs not only one sphere of man's existence, but the whole of man. Caesar will pass away and his demands with him, but God will not pass away. The state must not, therefore, make totalitarian demands<sup>9</sup>, but must be a simple administrator because the earth and all that it contains belongs to the Lord ([Psa. 24:1](#)).

[Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#) is not directly concerned with the theme of the state, but it can help us to clarify the possibility of the *coexistence* of different realities in the world. It teaches us that we can tolerate discord and that there can be a certain *plurality* which does not exclude divine justice. If the Lord can accept such a plurality, there is all the more reason for the state to accept it, too. Within the state there can be conflicting world visions.

In [Acts 4:12, 19](#) it is intimated that God himself is ready to intervene *against* the state, and further on, that the requirements of the preaching of the gospel are to be put above those of the state ([Acts 5:29](#)). The accusation made against Christians that 'they all go against Caesar's statutes saying that there is another king, Jesus' ([Acts 17:7](#)) emphasizes which authority they really submit to. The confrontation between Christ and Caesar concerns the question of authority. At the moment of their baptism, Christians confess that they belong to the one and only Lord, and, in so doing, state their concept of

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<sup>6</sup> Nearly all the commentaries of this book emphasize this dimension.

<sup>7</sup> H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Phillipsburg: Presb. and Ref, 1969), pp. 188ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. on the subject in general, O. Cullmann, *Dio e Cesare, The problem of the state in the primitive church* (Milan: Comunità, 1957); Id., *Studi di teologia biblica* (Rome: AVE, 1968), pp. 87-166; L. Goppelt, *Teologia del NT* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1983), II, pp. 541-583; H. Schlier 'Lo stato nel NT' in *Il tempo della chiesa* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1965), pp. 3-26; Id., *Riflessioni sul NT* (Brescia: Paideia, 1969), pp. 251-274; for a presentation of the environment: AA. VV., *Cristianesimo e potere* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1986), G. Theissen, *Sociologia del cristianesimo primitivo* (Genoa: Marietti, 1987), A. W. Meeks, *I cristiani dei primi secoli. The social world of Paul the Apostle* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1992), B. W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> H. D. Wendland, *Ethik des Neuen Testament. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen, 1970) (It. Trans. Brescia, Paideia 1975, pp. 50, 120ff.).

sovereignty. At Philippi, Paul and Silas show that they are ready to suffer for the Lord. They also show that a Christian resists the temptation to flee from his responsibilities, even if he has the opportunity to do so, and lastly, they show that it is acceptable to challenge authority if that authority does not reflect justice ([Acts 16:19–40](#)). *Suffering* does not exclude *confrontation*, nor an appeal to the *law*.

### The Epistles

*Romans 2:15* shows that even those who are not Christians have a certain perception of God's moral law. Although this cannot lead them to salvation, nor to the building of a perfect society, the moral law is legitimized irrespective of education or lack of it.

In *Romans 13* Scripture offers one of the most comprehensive presentations of the *role of the state*<sup>10</sup>. It must be a ministry of justice. There is no relationship whatsoever between men that has not been vindicated by God<sup>11</sup>. The question that Paul attempts to answer is important, because it helps one to understand whether the Christian must submit to two masters or not. His reply is quite clear. Caesar, the state and the magistrate are nothing more than deacons, and therefore they must serve.

This text is not a blank cheque for the state, but an appeal for it to assume its responsibility towards the one and only Lord. It is not 'ethics typical of people who are subjects of a monarch'<sup>12</sup>, but ethics for people with real dignity. The state is in a position to punish crimes, within the limits established by God. Although the participation of Christians in the life of the state was considerably limited, Christianity was nevertheless allowed to state its point of view in the various situations in which it found itself.

In the epistles it is also emphasized that Christ is the one who reconciles the world to God. Sin separated the temporary from the eternal, the earthly from the heavenly, the creation from the Creator, but God in Christ reconciles all reality to himself ([2 Cor. 5:19](#); [Col. 1:20](#)). Christ's work of *reconciliation* put an end to the separation between the temporary and the eternal. The work of the adversary, in turn, aims at repositing a unitary synthesis similar to that of Babel. Scripture heartily opposes such a mixed grouping ([2 Thes. 2:3–4](#)). Every unitary project that is independent of Christ is destined to fail.

The *Pastoral Epistles* invite the Christian to *intercede* for the authorities ([1 Tim. 2:1–2](#)) and to *submit* to the magistrates ([Tit. 3:1](#)).

*1 Peter 2:13–14* teaches submission to the authorities for the Lord's honour, and also the necessity for them to practise authentic justice. When it speaks of 'every institution', however, it indicates a *weighing up*. No one authority must sum up the whole range of human activities.

### Revelation

The book of Revelation reflects the great change that has taken place in the relationship between the church and the empire since Paul's time. The imperial order has been transformed into a persecuting order.

An anticonventional vision of the state emerges from [Revelation 8](#). The state has become an instrument of injustice and corruption, because it requests for itself something

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<sup>10</sup> The bibliography on this subject is endless, apart from my 'La situazione del cristiano davanti all'autorità secondo Romani 13' *RicBiblRel XVII* (1982) pp. 9–23; cfr. J. V. Pica, *Romanos 13, 1–7* (Rome: Las, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> P. Wells 'Dieu Créateur et la politique', *La Revue Réformée XXVII* (1976) pp. 30ff.

<sup>12</sup> H. V. Campenhausen 'Die Christen und das bürgerliche Leben nach den Aussagen des NT' in *Tradition und Leben, Kräfte der Kirchengeschichte* (1960), pp. 180–202, op cit. p. 198.

that belongs to God alone. Rome will be judged by God because of its immoral practices ([Rev. 14:8, 15–20](#); [17:1–2](#); [18:2–3, 9–10](#)). Christians begin to *resist* because they realize that they are dealing with a state that worships idols and that is trying out a diabolical parody of the reign of God, using divine titles and usurping the right which belongs to the only Lord of the world.

Scripture presents, therefore, a vision that is in line with God's plan, and one which opposes it. Christians, as they take part in the current political process through their approval or disapproval of the various proposals, decide whether or not to obey. Their reference point continues to be the sovereignty of God.

### **Themes for Today's Church**

It is clear how the texts we have collected are interwoven with the various different underlying themes and how they are rooted in an overall vision that is typical of biblical revelation. Moreover, it proves to be impossible to make a simple transposition of biblical data. Biblical data refers, at least as far as the OT is concerned, to a situation in which theocracy is dominant. Even if there are elements, therefore, that should be evaluated and maybe translated into the present reality because of the wisdom that they transmit, it is necessary to cover more ground and decide on certain guidelines of the revelation. These will contribute to an understanding that takes into account the many different indications of the Word of God<sup>13</sup>.

### **The Divine Mandate**

Right from the first page of the Bible up to the last, it is clear how God holds humanity responsible in all spheres of its existence, and how man and woman have been called to make the earth submit to them in the name of God. They were put in the garden of beginnings to dominate as viceroys, and at the end of time a holy city is mentioned. God's plan is always successful and this makes it possible to underline the importance of the divine mandate.

This divine mandate evidently presupposes God's lordship over all reality. God's mandate: 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it ...' ([Gen. 1:28](#)) bestows on humanity a dignity that is unparalleled in the realm of creation. The alliance that underlies this invitation makes one think of a kind of collaboration between God and human beings.

God's reign is not to be identified exclusively with the church, but embraces every area of human life. Christians must glorify God not only through church life (adoration, prayer, mediation) but also in every other dimension of life (family, work, pleasure, education, society, politics). The Lord died on the cross not only to reconcile individuals, but also to restore all creation to a right relationship with God. Redemption does not concern simply the souls of Christians, but the world as a whole, with all its structures, practices and relationships. Christians are left in the world so that the desert may be transformed into a garden to God's glory.

The fact that man has broken the allegiance does not prevent God from carrying on with his plan. Christians are invited once again to respond to God's mandate: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...' ([Matt. 28:19](#)). The risen Jesus sends his children into the world again to serve him and honour him. It is not a matter of giving a new mandate, but of applying the first one in the situation man finds himself in after the entry of sin into the world. Man governs the world badly without God's direction. He overworks it and

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald B. Mayers 'The New Testament Doctrine of the State' *JETS* XII (1969), pp. 199–214.



manipulates it for his own gain, but the return to a right relationship with God allows man to redirect his commitment in the world.

It is not a question of a spiritual domain set in contrast to, or above, a material domain. It is always God who gives man responsibility, both for earthly matters and for heavenly ones. The supremacy of Christ, therefore, has a meaning that is both rich and concrete. The language used in [Colossians 2:15](#) is not symbolic. Satan has been conquered, and Christians can believe that their Lord really is King of all reality, even if there are many things that would appear to deny it. Christian frankness in preaching the gospel derives from the fact that Jesus is already the One who reigns in accordance with what he himself said in [John 12:31](#): The judgement of this world is coming, and the prince of this world will be cast out.

The victory was already won two thousand years ago and Christians have the great privilege of declaring this victory. It matters very little that many deny it and that much evidence appears not to confirm it. For those who live by faith and not by sight, what matters is what God says in his Word, rather than what they think they perceive through their experience.

### **Christ's Supremacy**

The Lord Jesus is presented as the one who has the supremacy in creation and in redemption ([Col. 1:15-20](#)). Creation and redemption are linked inseparably to his lordship.

Human *freedom* cannot be separated from it. It cannot be perceived in abstract terms, but it can be exercised in a responsible manner only within the framework of the revelation and of submission to Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

#### **(a) In Creation**

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' ([Col. 1:15-17](#)).

#### **(b) In Redemption**

'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things in earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' ([Col. 1:18-20](#)).

A similar text underlies how redemption brings about a new Genesis and how the church now represents the new humanity (cf. [Col. 3:10-11](#)). The Lord Jesus is completely sufficient both for the created world and the redeemed world.

The Lord Jesus arose in order to have preeminence over all reality ([Col. 1:13-18](#)). Every thought must, therefore, be brought to obedience to Christ ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). In whom *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden ([Col. 2:3](#)).

Jesus is presented as the 'prince of the kings of the earth' ([Rev. 1:5](#)) and one can therefore understand how he can declare that he has all authority in heaven and on earth ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)).

Because Christ is Lord in the field of creation, just as he is in that of redemption, Christians can make their Christian identity count at the civil level without it being

distorted by such a commitment. One must, therefore, recognize the legitimacy of communication between the realm of redemption and that of creation. The supremacy of Christ implies his full sufficiency for the needs of the created world.

### **The Universality of God's Law**

Another theme that is readily seen in Scripture is that of the universality of God's law. Because the world is God's world, there is nothing that can be considered foreign to him or that can be considered independent of him. There are not other lords alongside God, and that applies both to the heavenly spheres and the earthly spheres. Each reality has an existence that is dependent.

The distinction between the church and the state taught by the OT and the NT never implies that the state is outside God's law. Life is basically one, and one alone, and it has only one centre, which is outside of it.

This perspective represents the preliminary considerations necessary for the understanding of what is real. The created reality does not have different criteria of authority; it has only one. Since reason proceeds by analogy, it is not possible to have criteria that are different or opposed to one another, because if that were the case, the reality could not be understood. Rather, precisely because God is the only Lord, man can observe the created reality and understand it, since it can be brought into a unitary field.

This has important consequences as far as the law and the judgement of God are concerned. God presents himself as the 'judge of the nations' ([Isa. 2:4](#)). If kings can reign and emit decrees that are just, they owe this to God, whether they like it or not ([Pro. 8:15-16](#)). No nation has the right, therefore, to consider itself outside the realm of God's will. There is no state in the world that can legitimately consider itself outside God's dominion and exempt from his law and judgement ([Psa. 22](#); [Pro. 8:15-16](#); [Philp. 2](#)).

The nations are called to acknowledge God and abide by his principles of justice ([Lev. 18:24-30](#); [Pro. 14:34](#); [16:12](#); [Psa. 110:5](#)). The prophets exhort the nations not to stray from God's law. In this way, a pagan king like Artaxerxes is urged to carry out God's law ([Ezra 7:11-28](#)). All this allows Paul to state that everything will be judged by divine law ([Rom. 1-3](#)).

His law and his justice can be carried out, because God's world cannot be divided and withdrawn from God's jurisdiction. If one imagines a different basis for knowledge, one must also derive a different criterion for judging, but Scripture does not allow for any interpretation of this kind.

At this point it can be useful to distinguish between crime and sin. Crime is something that offends one's neighbour, sin is what offends God. In God's eyes, all crime is sin, but not every sin is a crime. This means that there must not be a levelling of the two things. The non observance of the sabbatical year during Moses' time was a sin, but not a punishable crime ([Num. 25:1-7](#)). In several cases God intervened directly to punish sins ([Lev. 10:2](#)). The state can punish crimes because they concern relationships between men, whilst God can also punish the sin committed. Sins against God can be punished only by him<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Distinction of the Institutions**

Biblical revelation leads to a limiting of the authority and competence of the various institutions. Each must keep its actions within certain limits and must not go beyond the boundaries. If that were not the case, one could not understand the radical judgement that

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<sup>14</sup> V. Poythress, *op. cit.*, pp. 294ff.

hit people like Saul and Uzziah, to name but two examples. When Saul invaded Samuel's field of jurisdiction, he committed an act of unprecedented gravity. Kings are neither judges nor priests, and each must be careful not to invade the territory of others.

At the *structural* level, one must recognize the order with which God created the world. No institution must take the place that rightly belongs to another. The school, society, the state, the church, the family, etc., must not overlap one another. God created such structures so that they could stand independently one of the other. Society is like a garden with different plants in it, and none of these must be a parasite drawing on the life of another. Each must have its own territory.

All men live in the context of relationships ordered by God, and every human activity has its own sphere to allow man to fulfil himself in that context. The church, for example, must not define itself on the basis of the state's recognition of it, but only on the strength of its statement of faith. As such, it must run on a basis that is independent of the state in which it exists. The state has an aim that is specific and limited. It must not expect to find its own authority within itself, because in that case it would present itself as an absolute reality. At the beginning we find neither the church nor the state, but God.

Magistrates are 'God's ministers' ([Rom. 13:4](#)) and as such are not answerable only to men for what they do, but also to God himself. The magistrate has no intrinsic authority, because authority comes from God alone, and only he can delegate it. Jesus says to Pilate: 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above' ([John 19:11](#)). That means that no-one can stake claims upon others on the basis of his own convictions. When this happens, when the state considers itself autonomous, it becomes something that is animal-like ([Rev. 13](#)). The state must simply encourage the coordination of the different realities that exist within it, and must not dominate them.

There is a realm in which a sovereign has jurisdiction, and another realm in which he has no jurisdiction. Caesar deals with money and taxes, but he must not go beyond these limits. The Lord Jesus did not give the keys of the kingdom to Caesar, nor did he give the sword to Peter. He acted on the basis of a distinction. One must not, therefore, acknowledge the authority of the state in matters that do not concern it, and every illicit claim of power should be condemned.

On the other hand it is evident that one cannot limit the Christian message to one sphere alone, as it must necessarily affect all the other structures as well. God's order to dominate over the earth is still valid, and redemption has not brought in a utopia. Man, through sin, lost the right and the ability to dominate reality, but in Christ he has the duty to obey God's order. He cannot leave the various institutions to themselves without disobeying God's commandment. He must, therefore, work to transform them. He must not shun institutions in order to reach God, but rather he must work to see them changed and consecrated to God.

### **The Operative Criteria**

To prevent the statements made above from becoming something abstract and fleeting, another step must be taken. It is necessary to outline those operative criteria which appear in Scripture to represent general guardrails.

God's law must first of all be tied to *truth*. God's commandments are true not only because they coincide with reality, but also because it is well worth while to live according to them<sup>15</sup>. Truth is not simply a concept, but something that must be done, a path which one must follow ([Psa. 26:3](#); [86:11](#)). In order to be true, one must be completely reliable. A

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. K. Haacker 'Il concetto biblico di verità', *Sdt II* (1979) N 3, pp. 4-36.

communication made to obtain results that are contrary to the truth is unacceptable, just as slander and the distortion of facts are unacceptable.

Closely linked to the criterion of truth is that of *solidarity*. The downcast and the orphan, the afflicted and the poor are objects of divine interest. In this context, one must understand what God chooses for the weak and the downtrodden. It is not a question of making more of the poor because they are better or holier than the rich. Poverty is not a vehicle for grace, nor a preferential road to it. God does not defend the weak from a spiritual standpoint, but from the viewpoint of service. The state is called on to do a similar service in the name of public justice and solidarity. God's interest concerns the fairness and solidarity that must characterize human relationships.

It must be noted, however, that since what counts is *God's* justice, it is not a question of giving preference to the poor over the rich. [Leviticus 19:15](#) teaches that one must not commit sin in judging: 'Do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.' Authority is a means for stating the divine order of justice in social relationships. When it remains faithful to that role, this affords protection against the forces of evil.

The third criterion that can be evoked is that of *justice*. God wants justice. Scripture resounds with the message of law and justice. There are two parallel imperatives ([Amos 5:24](#)). They express the heart of the good news and must not be separated as if they belonged to two different worlds. Scripture teaches that 'righteousness and justice are the foundation' of God's throne ([Psa. 89:14](#)).

Scripture insists that God is deeply involved in seeing that justice is carried out between men ([Psa. 82:1-4](#)). Symbolically, judges and magistrates are actually defined as 'gods'! And this gives us an idea of the responsibility and of the close link with the Judge of all the earth.

Truth, solidarity (humility) and justice are associated with the triumphal riding forth of God. 'In your majesty ride forth victoriously in behalf of truth, humility and righteousness' ([Psa. 45:4](#)). The association of the three themes makes us think of the necessity of a right balance between them. Truth, solidarity and justice make up a trinomial and they must be linked together. It is well-known how ideals of truth can keep justice at a distance, and how justice can nullify solidarity. Because of him who rides forth in majesty, these three things can be bound together.

### III. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this case too we must settle for just a few notes, and leave to one side many of the deeper discussions.

#### **From the First Centuries up to the end of the Middle Ages**

In the *first centuries* of Christianity, religion and society were seen as two realities that were inextricably mixed. Political stability required religious uniformity. The state had its religion, and the rejection of religion was considered not only blasphemy, but also treason and a cause of political instability.

This helps us to understand the persecutions that Christians met with in the context of the Roman empire. Their message had effects that were clearly revolutionary. Christianity introduced a new dimension into a world that attached little if any value at all to human life, practised human sacrifices, and ascribed to their sovereigns divine characteristics and all manner of rights over their subjects. It offered man concepts of truth, freedom, justice and solidarity which went beyond the usual ones. No authority could really define truth, freedom, justice and solidarity without making reference to God.

New life in Christ produced interest in social action, which developed above other institutions in the field of assistance. A church like the one at Antioch helped thousands of needy people.

The Christian faith offended traditional habits and the world view that characterized them. It put a great deal of emphasis on the quality of the Christian life. To be redeemed meant to obey 'Christ's law'.<sup>16</sup> The Christian faith had its own world view and was not ashamed to express it. To put the one and triune God above every other authority meant undermining the authority of the state, which could not claim, therefore, to be the ultimate authority.

When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, the ideas that had existed before continued to dominate the way of thinking. Religious uniformity continued to be seen as a condition of political stability. The Fathers on the whole accepted this way of doing things, and they went along with it in an uncritical fashion.

*Donatism* represented an exception. It showed considerable disdain for institutions. The idea that the end was imminent led to a shunning of responsibility. Rather than an involvement in politics, it was believed that separation from it would guarantee justice.

*Augustine* [354–430] opposed Donatism. He took as a model for reflection the contrast between two cities. On the one side there was the heavenly city, and on the other side there was the earthly city. Between the two there was a fundamental opposition. 'We have divided humanity into two groups: the group of those who live according to man, and the group of those who live according to God. In an allegorical sense we can call them "two cities", that is, the two societies of men, one of which is destined to reign for ever with God, and the other of which will suffer eternal torment with the Devil.' Everything that belongs to the 'earthly city' is of inferior quality compared with that of the heavenly city.<sup>17</sup>

Even if in the *Middle Ages* the Pope and the emperor did not agree over certain details, they did agree that the church and the state should work towards promoting and defending the cause of true religion. The medieval world saw reality according to a hierarchical structure, in which everyone could fully participate to a different degree. According to the level each person was at, he or she played a different role in the social order: God in heaven, the bishop in the cathedral, the lord in his castle, the farmer in his field. Such a structure had been established by God himself and was not to be modified. At each level, however, one could partake in the dignity of the level above by serving it. By submitting to the church, the state became its so-called secular arm.

Alongside this concept there was another, which placed the goal of man's existence outside the material world. The everyday and earthly world was considered unworthy of man, who was therefore to aim at things that were incorruptible and eternal. This led to the conviction that contemplation was the most noble of all activities.

*Thomas Aquinas* [1225–1274] tried to 'christianize' the theories of the natural law. His synthesis embraced the natural law for the state and the canonical one for the church. In his attempt, Thomas tried to make a synthesis between the sacred and the profane. At the base there was, however, a dichotomy between nature and grace. The assumption was that the church belonged to the supernatural realm of grace, while the state belonged to the inferior realm of nature. The church was to deal with spiritual and eternal matters; the state on the other hand was to deal with material and temporal matters. The church was to influence the world.

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<sup>16</sup> This is a dominant theme in the writings of Clemente, Barnabas, Policarp, cf. H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 115–124.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Augustine, *La città Dio*, XV, 1; cf. also XI,1; XIV, 28.

*Marsilius of Padua* [1290?–1343] took one step further in radicalizing the dualism. In his work *Defensor Pacis* [1322]<sup>18</sup> he attacked the temporal power of the church, by insisting that its power should be exclusively spiritual. For Marsilius the law of the state (a) is based exclusively on reason; (b) cannot be exercised forcefully apart from any corrective element; (c) expresses and represents the will of the people. Thus, in practice, the church was given no say in the material, political, economical, artistic and scientific world. Furthermore, it had no right to make any opposition to this world, as such action would have simply been attributed to irrationality. Civil life was sufficient on its own, and did not need to depend on any other source of power outside that of the *populus* and/or the *universitas civium*. Marsilius's school of thought had considerable influence on Wyclif, Hus and Luther, and it was to open the way for the theories of Hobbes and Rousseau on sovereignty.

The dualist concept that dominated Catholicism in the Middle Ages branched into two parallel schools of thought. One school viewed politics as something degrading and profane, of which one should be very wary. The other school saw involvement in politics as a useful way of protecting the interests of the Catholic church.

Many religions teach that day to day secular existence is something inferior and transitory, to be avoided if one wants to live a better life. This idea is based on dualistic reasoning and it is accompanied by lacerating divisions. It is, however, a long way off from the biblical vision, which does not divide reality, but works to transform it to God's glory.

### **From the Reformation Onwards**

The Reformers accepted, for the most part, the medieval idea that the state should promote the good of the church. Their interest was primarily that of spreading the gospel in concrete contexts, and that did not allow them to express precisely every detail of a vision that was truly reformed by the Word of God.

It would be quite pointless to look for ready answers in the writings of the Reformers. They were concerned with answering questions that were asked at the time, and things were not necessarily the same then as they are now.

The key to the school of thought of *Luther* [1484–1546] for the founding of civil government is the doctrine of *two kingdoms*. It can be linked with the Augustinian formulation of the two cities, but Luther develops his own thoughts. On the one hand he reacts to the hierarchical vision and the relative confusion between church and state that derived from it in the Middle Ages. On the other hand he reacts to the Anabaptists' rejection of the idea that Christians should become involved in civil government.

All humanity is divided into two classes, Christians and non-Christians. True Christians belong to God's kingdom and others belong to the kingdom of the world. The two kingdoms are under God's lordship, but their government is different. For each, therefore, there are different types of law. Christians are governed only by the Word of God, while there are others are governed by man's laws. Spiritual government has only an interior authority, while temporary government has authority only at an exterior level 'The gospel, on the contrary, is not at all concerned about earthly things'.<sup>19</sup>

Luther also discusses the question of *heresy*, because he emphasizes the relationship between the interior and the exterior aspects of government. Heresy belongs to the kingdom of this world, but it is also of a spiritual nature. Temporal authority cannot therefore be successful in fighting heresy; this remains the bishop's duty. Luther even

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<sup>18</sup> Marsilius of Padua, *Il difensore della pace*, edited by C. Vasoli, (Turin: Utet, 1960), spec.

<sup>19</sup> M. Luther, *Ouvres choisies*, vol iv (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1958), p. 164.

goes as far as to reject a plurality of confessions in the same territory and to recommend that part of the population move away.<sup>20</sup>

Luther invites believers to be involved in the life of the state, but not to believe in the possibility of a Christian state. Men can become *cooperator dei*<sup>21</sup> and offer 'divine service'.<sup>22</sup> In this way he resists the temptation of political millenarism, which tries to establish God's kingdom on earth. Because there is, at the heart of society, a disorder caused by sin, the state belongs to those 'orders for conservation' that are necessary until redemption arrives.

To Luther's way of thinking, the spiritual kingdom and the temporal kingdom exist on the same level, but the contrast between the two worlds is not completely erased. Very strong tension can be felt between the total freedom of the Christian and his submission to the injustices of the temporal order.<sup>23</sup>

The Lutheran attitude towards social structures was for the most part the same as that which typified the Middle Ages, and later allowed the tragic events of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> From the German experience one can understand the danger inherent in the clear-cut separation of the sacred from the secular, and in separating the primary commitment from the secondary.

When Calvin [1509–1564] wrote his introductory *Letter* of the *Institutions* of 1536 to Francis I, the king of France, the outlines of his school of thought were already present. Later on, however, these outlines are developed in the sections regarding the value of Christian freedom<sup>25</sup> and in that concerning civil government.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'It is not good for any city to have divisions within its population on account of people who stir up such things or on account of preachers. When that does occur, part of the population must leave, whether they are Evangelicals or Papist' [1527], WA 23, 16, 14. A similar concept is in clear contrast with the statement by Luther on the freedom of believing

<sup>21</sup> *Comm ad Gal.*, WA 40, 1, 292, 6.

<sup>22</sup> WA 11, 260, 34: Gottesdienst.

<sup>23</sup> M. Lienhard, *Martin Luther* (Paris: Centurion, 1983), c. 10.

<sup>24</sup> For other elements, cf. M. Luther, *Sull'autorità secolare* [1523]; Valdo Vinary, *I due regni nella teologia di Lutero* (Rome: CEC, 1950); Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (Philadelphia, 1996); D. Sinnema, 'Luther and Calvin on Christianity and Politics' *Tydschrift christlike wetenskap* (1980) pp. 1–23; A. Bondolfi, 'Etica e politica nella dottrina luterana dei due regni' *Theologos* I (1983/3), pp. 491–504; Alberto Bellini, 'Chiesa e mondo in Lutero: la dottrina dei due regni' in AA.VV., *Martin Lutero*: (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1984), pp. 48–160; R. V. Pierard, 'The Lutheran two-Kingdoms doctrine and subservience to the state in modern Germany' *JETS XXIX* (1986), pp. 193–204.

<sup>25</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* [1559].

<sup>26</sup> Inst. IV, 20. On this subject cf. Brandt B. Boeke, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Civil Government' *Studia biblica et theologica* XI (1981) pp. 57–59; John T. McNeill, 'Calvin and Civil Government' and W. Fred Graham, 'Church and Society. The Difficulty of Sheathing the Sword' in *Reading in Calvin's Theology*, Donald McKim (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 260–274; 275–290; Gordon J. Keddie, 'Calvin on civil government' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* III (1985/1), pp. 23–35; L. M. du Plessis, 'Calvin on state and politics according to the Institute' in *John Calvin's Institutes. His Opus Magnum*, B. J. van der Walt (ed.), (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for CHE, 1986), pp. 174–183; 353–374; W. R. Godfrey, 'Calvin and Theonomy' in *Theonomy. A reformed Critique*, ed. W. S. Barker and W. R. Godfrey, (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990), pp. 299–312; Anna Case-Winters, 'Theological affirmations and Political Arrangements: two way traffic' in *Calvin and the State*, P. De Klerk (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1993), pp. 65–76.

There are many caricatures of his ideas, but without doubt, 'it is against the truth to talk of theocracy when referring to the ruling of Geneva'.<sup>27</sup> Calvin never stated that government must be based on the OT laws. For him the *lex naturae* to which the magistrates must refer is based on the *lex Dei*. Therefore it can be said that he rejected the Constantine and medieval structure of society, and the relative dualistic assumption, which had dominated, the world for at least twelve centuries.

What was peculiar to Calvin's world view is that it was dominated by the *sovereign authority of God* in Jesus Christ over every aspect of life. Next to this we can place the doctrine of *sin* and that of *common grace*.

Since God holds authority, the *state* is divinely ordered by him. The same is true for the church, but it is a question of 'two completely different things'.<sup>28</sup> Since they are God-ordered, they are legitimate areas of Christian service, and in each of them Christians carry out their function according to their vocation. 'God has given us such strong obligations towards others, that no-one must consider himself exempt from submission.'<sup>29</sup>

Calvin did not draw very clear-cut lines between the various spheres of society, but he did make it his business to outline indications for a just society in the specific context in which he lived. In that way he tried to ward off danger both from the left, represented by 'overthrowing all authority', and from the right, represented by the 'flatterers of princes'.<sup>30</sup> He showed himself, however, to be an heir of the world that had preceded him.

Civil government has *specific duties*. It must 'guarantee and maintain service towards God in its exterior form, pure doctrine, and religion; keep the church in its condition of integrity; teach all sentiments of uprightness required by human living together ... establish and keep peace and general peacefulness.'<sup>31</sup> The state, therefore, must work as an integrator of public justice to promote the social status of humanity. 'It is not enough for a man to say "I work and do my duty", or "This is my work". It simply is not enough. One must examine whether it is right, whether it is beneficial and for the common good and whether one's neighbour is enriched by it.'<sup>32</sup> The activity of work must, therefore, be put into the context of the 'mutual communications' between men.

Then he goes on: 'I have no doubts whatsoever that the Apostle wished to indicate the order which God wanted to govern the human race. That is because the verb from which the Greek word is taken means to build or to "set out a building". The term "order" is suitable, therefore, because Peter shows that God, the Maker of the earth, did not leave the human race in confusion and disorderliness to live like wild beasts. Rather, he wanted every part of it to be in its own place, as in a well-built construction. Such an order was called *human* not because men invented it, but because well-ordered and well-structured living is characteristic of men.'<sup>33</sup> It is easy to understand from this that to Calvin's way of

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<sup>27</sup> A Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Genève: Georg, 1961), p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> *Inst.* IV, 20, 1.

<sup>29</sup> J. Calvin, *Comm. aux Ephésiens* 5:21.

<sup>30</sup> *Inst.* IV, 20, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Inst.* IV, 20, 2.

<sup>32</sup> J. Calvin, *Sermons sur l'Épître aux Ephésiens* [[Eph. 4](#), 26–218], OC 51, col 639.

<sup>33</sup> J. Calvin, *Comm. 1 Épître de Pierre* 2:13.



thinking, order is better than chaos, and therefore it is right to obey. Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly wonders whether Calvinism hasn't the tendency to overstate order.<sup>34</sup>

In order to carry out its functions, the *government* must have some kind of reference point. Calvin claimed that the Word of God is normative for the church and the state, even if it is a question of two distinct institutions. That does not mean, though, that the law of Moses must be applied *in toto* to society. The mosaic law 'was a political ordinance given only temporarily to the ancient people'<sup>35</sup> and therefore does not have indiscriminate validity. That distinguishes Calvin from the school of theonomy.<sup>36</sup>

According to Calvin there are in man two worlds that can be traced back to different kings and laws.<sup>37</sup> In order to prevent this distinction from becoming separation, the Reformer underlines the fact that obedience to the civil government means obedience to God.

Every *service* has a dignity of its own and so, even service of the state is not inferior to other types of service.

'Kings and magistrates have their authority on earth not because of human perversity, but because this is the provident and holy decision of God, who is pleased to govern men in this way ... Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the condition of civilian superiority not only represents a holy and legitimate calling before God, but is also a vocation that is sacred and honourable among all vocations.'<sup>38</sup>

'I am not talking about people, as if we should cover over with a character of dignity all foolishness, folly, cruelty or evil temperament, and thus confer on vice the praise that is due to virtue. All I wish to say is that the condition of superiority is in itself worthy of honour and reverence, so that we will hold in high esteem those who direct us, and respect them because of the power that they have received.'<sup>39</sup>

The dignity of the *magistrates* is not, however, an absolute factor. In commenting on [Daniel 6:22](#), Calvin notes how the authorities are not above the law, but under its authority. On the one hand he was opposed to violent resistance to persecution, while on the other he did not hesitate to express his uneasiness and criticism when authority deviated from the order of nature. Obedience to an authority that exercises power correctly justifies a conservative viewpoint, whereas disobedience to God's authority on the part of a magistrate could justify a radical viewpoint.

To Calvin's way of thinking, certain tensions continue in this way. It is not easy, for example, to understand how independence of religious and secular authorities can then develop into mutual dependence between them. Nor is it easy to eliminate the tensions between spiritual freedom and civil freedom. The fact that he continued to think in terms of *corpus christianum* resulted, without doubt, in tension between his desire to honour Scripture and the actual working out of it.

With *John Knox* [1514–1572] the submission of believers to God as a true sovereign is made more explicit. The dialogue between Mary Tudor, Queen of Scots [1553–1558], an intolerant and convinced Catholic, and the Reformer John Knox is well-known.

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<sup>34</sup> *The French Revolution and After*, Westminster Conference Papers 1975, p. 106, Inst. IV, 20, 29; IV, 20, 32.

<sup>35</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), Vol. 2, p. 399.

<sup>36</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, G. Bahnsen, cf. W. Godfrey, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> *Inst.* III, 19, 15.

<sup>38</sup> J. Calvin, *Inst.* IV, 20, 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Inst.* IV, 20, 22.

*Mary Tudor*: 'You have taught people the practice of a religion that is different from that of the sovereign, how can it please God, who, on the contrary, orders you to obey the sovereign?'

*John Knox*: 'Milady, true religion takes its strength and authority from God alone and not from princes, so men are not held to believe according to the appetites of princes.'

*Mary Tudor*: 'Do you think that the people can stand up against their own prince?'

*John Knox*: 'If princes abuse their power, it is permissible to stand up against them even forcefully.'<sup>40</sup>

*Anabaptism* distinguishes sharply between the role of the state and that of Christians (*Confession of Schleithem*, 1527).<sup>41</sup> The world of the church and that of the state are antithetical and incompatible. The Anabaptists hold no hope for civil government and therefore declare that there must be a radical separation between the state and the church.<sup>42</sup>

They seem to suggest that the church must consider itself in the right place in God's plan only when it is suffering and persecuted ('die liedende Gemeinde'). Their commitment is, however, concerned with the building up of an alternate community to the worldly one. Instead of working inside society like salt and yeast, they aim at attracting it through their example. In this perspective, Anabaptism appears to be a recuperation of some of the OT themes. The world ends up being left alone. It is not only something different from the church, but also something to avoid, so that a sort of dualism is created.

After the peace of Westfalia [1648], which practically marked the end of the religious wars in Europe, the fact was accepted that in the same territory different religious groups can exist.

### After the Reformation

Samuel *Rutherford* [1600–1661] makes one of the most significant contributions on this matter. In his *Lex Rex* [1644], he affirms that while the government is God-ordered, its form depends on man. The king reigns because of a divine order, even if he receives his mandate from the people, who can revoke it and dethrone the king. This work is important also because it allows one to explain the Christian idea of opposition to the state. He belonged to the Scottish delegation of Westminster

'An ethical, political or moral power that oppresses does not come from God and is not a power, but an unchecked deviation of it. It no longer comes from God, but from sinful nature and from the ancient serpent.' He then goes on to mention three different levels of resistance. (a) By protest. There are different ways of trying to make sure that certain values are respected. (b) Through exile. When people do not agree with the decisions of the government of a country those who do not agree can leave that country. (c) By force.

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<sup>40</sup> E. Funchs—C. Grappe, *Le droit de résister* (Genève, 1980), pp.48–49.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. U. Gastaldi—L. Santini—E. Campi, *Il dibattito su anabattismo e riforma*, (Chiesa e Potere, Turin: Claudiana, 1973).

<sup>42</sup> Addressing the Magistrate of Strasbourg in June 1535, the Anabaptist Scharnschlager makes this statement: 'Secular power is a special kind of power, it has a special function, and a manner, ruling and quality that are all special; it belongs to a special kind of people. Christian power is a special kind of power, it has a special function, and a manner, ruling and quality that are all special; it belongs to a special kind of people—and it is valid for eternity'. *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*, t. VII Elsass II, Stadt Strassbourg 1533–1535 (Gütersloh, 1960), Fr. tr. *Conscience et liberté* (1983), p. 107. Another Anabaptist makes this statement: 'Just as there is a difference between night and day, between light and darkness, there is a difference between the world and Christians' *Acta des Gesprächs zwischen predicanten und Touffbrudernn ergangen inn der Statt Bern* (1538).

'A similar possibility can be examined when one's own life or that of others is endangered.'<sup>43</sup>

The fact that civil disobedience is a possibility does not mean that the change in is itself necessarily for the best. A king who does not obey the law is no longer a king and the laws that he passes are illegal.

*Pietism* has accentuated the difference between the two realms, which is typical of the Lutheran vision, and has mainly cultivated works of a philanthropic nature.<sup>44</sup> Generally speaking, it has not worked out at a systemic level a viewpoint on the roles of the authorities, but has settled rather for easing the difficulties of some, on the grounds that as individuals change, so will society.

Another extremely important school of thought is represented by *puritanism* [about 1620]. The Puritans developed their concept in the slipstream of Calvin's heritage.<sup>45</sup> God is the Most High and Jesus Christ reigns. The nations exist to glorify God, and with all their strength they must work towards this great goal. The communities they founded reflected their priorities. They were not against culture, as some might think, but they tried to transform it in the light of their priorities. 'Their enthusiastic and resolute action was an integral part of their religion and not something distinct and separate.'<sup>46</sup> In drawing up their code, they took their inspiration from the Word of God, modifying or omitting what was not applicable to their context.

The Reform must be universal—states the pastor Thomas Case, preaching to the House of Commons in 1641—'a reform of all places, people and functions, a reform of justice and lawcourts, a reform of the university, the city, the countryside, the primary school ...'<sup>47</sup> The vision was extraordinarily wide and concerned not only people but also institutions and social structures.

The 'saints' have the responsibility of changing structures. Compared with the medieval vision, a radical change is being wrought here. Citizens are no longer dependent on those who are above them in the social hierarchy, but they themselves are responsible for what they do. Macchiavelli, but also Luther, still relied on the prince for changes to come about, whereas it is the 'saints' that must bring about change. Passive attitudes which surrendered are suddenly repudiated. Everyone is responsible before God for his own actions.

William Penn [1644–1718], an English thinker, who was also a Quaker, moved to America in 1682. He founded a colony in Pennsylvania and outlined a project for peace in Europe in his *An Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe*. In it he proposed the constitution of a worldwide Federation to which all men should belong, and which should have common institutions to ensure 'perpetual and universal' peace. He was one of those thinkers that made federative (from the Latin *foedus-foederis* = (agreement, alliance) proposals and he was recognized as one of the leading figures in the establishment of the United States of America (4th July 1766).

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<sup>43</sup> Quotation from John Whitehead's 'Christian Resistance in Face of State Interference' in Gary North (ed.), *Christianity and Civilisation*. (Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983), p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> U. Gastaldi, L. Santini, E. Campi, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Samuel T. Logan, 'New England Puritans and the State' in *Theonomy. A Reformed Critique*, *op. cit.*, pp. 352–385.

<sup>46</sup> M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Quotation from M. Walzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

Closely associated with the supreme value of a situation of universal peace were the ideals of cooperation as opposed to subordination, reciprocity and solidarity rather than individualism.<sup>48</sup>

With the *Renaissance* and *Illuminism*, social systems emerged that were based explicitly on individualistic introductory statements. But individualism lost the social dimension. The various institutions ended up as artificial creations which depended on the will of individuals. In politics, individualism tended to move inexorably towards a collectivist society (as was evident in Hobbes [1588–1679],<sup>49</sup> Locke [1632–1704] a ‘social contract’, Rousseau [1712–1778] a ‘general will’).

The theory of a social contract as a basis for society is a concept that is typical of the western world. It can be traced back to John Locke and other illuminist thinkers. The idea is related to popular sovereignty. The government depends on the people and is for the people. The authority of the government depends on the approval of those who are governed. The will of the majority represents the supreme court of appeal and is carried out through elections. God’s norms are removed. The law no longer has any basis of a transcendental nature, and is implicitly opposed to Christianity. The modern state, influenced as it is by Rousseau’s concept of the infallibility of the general will, leans towards totalitarianism.

The *French Revolution* [1789] goes on to declare war on God and on those who wish to honour him, and celebrates the ideal of progress separate from God, even in social life.<sup>50</sup> ‘Ni Dieu, ni maître!’ Pagan ideals, which were thought to be a thing of the past, are becoming more accepted all the time. Owning money is treated as the worst of all evils and is held responsible for disagreement between people. The fight for survival is transformed into a fight for money, with all the relative consequences for the social order. The rich have caused the state around to bow to their ideals and the poor have rebelled.

The idea of state autonomy can be associated with the idea of the city-state of ancient Greece, but also with Hegel’s concept of the state as the supreme incarnation of the spirit of the people of a nation. It can also be associated with Naziism or with the concept of the socialist state. The state has a life of its own and is independent of any requirements, since it is sovereign.

### From Modern Times

In the nineteenth century, with *romantic theology*, one can witness an even further widening of spirituality. The spiritual life is set in opposition to the material life, while the religious life is set in opposition to the profane life. The main interest is in an inner life that is separate, as it were, from the outer life. Public, social and political life, becomes increasingly a thing on its own.

With *Methodism*, and the evangelical *revivals*, a new interest is developed in politics. It depends for the most part on the moral conscience of the believers. The conversion of people becomes an instrument of considerable pressure on the social structures, even if the churches as such do not play a specific role. With the industrial revolution in full

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. M. Albertini et al., *Storia del federalismo europeo* (Turin: ERI, 1973). A. Danese writes: ‘At the base of federalism is the pluralist concept, its direction is harmony and its regulating principle is solidarity.’ ‘Federalism’ in E. Berti—G. Campanini (ed.), *Dizionario delle idee politiche* (Rome: AVE, 1993), p. 318.

<sup>49</sup> Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651].

<sup>50</sup> Otto Scott, ‘The Challenge to Christianity’ *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction XIII* (1994), pp. 23–37; AA. VV., *Revolution et christianisme* (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1992).

swing, Lord Shaftesbury [1801–1855] and William Wilberforce [1759–1833] fight for justice for the poor.

In the sphere of *Dutch Calvinism*, and from Guillaume Groen Van Prinsterer [1801–1876] onwards, the idea of a greater independence of the church from the state developed. It opposed repressive measures used by the government against dissenters and considered illegal the ordinances that the church took for itself in 1816, because they were ‘in conflict with history, justice and the very essence of the Church’.<sup>51</sup> According to him, the church can never submit to the state, nor the state to the church.

He did not manage to express clearly how various religious viewpoints could live together in the same Christian state, but he started off serious reflection on the subject, breaking with the Calvinist tradition expressed by the *Belgian Confession*.

His heritage was received by Abraham Kuyper [1837–1921], who advocated the idea that the church should be independent in a society guided by Christian ideals. ‘The Church and the State must, each in its own sphere, obey God and serve His honour.’<sup>52</sup> According to Kuyper, the church should teach magistrates that they are God’s ministers. As for the state, it should consider the churches not so much as private associations, but rather as public associations which should be consulted officially on moral and religious matters. His programme for the Antirevolutionary Party recommends the setting up of a board (*Collegie van correspondentie*), in which there would be one representative for every hundred thousand members of each Christian denomination.<sup>53</sup>

One of the thinkers who tried to follow on from Kuyper’s intuitions was undoubtedly the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. ‘In this sinful life, when things like culture, teaching, art, the family, and political life are made possible by common grace, the Christian is inevitably called to make Christ the King of this temporary life ...’<sup>54</sup> This concept remains the product of a national history that is quite unique. In their attempt to deal with the complex matter of the church-state relationships, the Dutch Calvinists have shown the tragic failure both of theocracy and of the neutrality of the state. In the first instance, the interests of the church were favoured, while in the second instance the secular state’s interests were favoured.

Abraham Kuyper emphasized how Calvinism has contributed to underlining the way in which the human element must not be considered the main thing ... but God, in his majesty.<sup>55</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd considered the principal function of the state to be the power of the sword.<sup>56</sup>

In the *evangelical* world of the twentieth century, through the influence of men like Schaeffer, a new sensitivity is developing regarding social commitment, and the moral obligation of offering resistance when the authorities do not practise justice.<sup>57</sup> Now that

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<sup>51</sup> Guillaume Groen Van Prinsterer, *The Anti-Revolutionary Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), p. 104

<sup>53</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Ons program* (Hilversum: Vijde druk, 1907), pp. 386–7.

<sup>54</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State* (Nutley: Presb. & Ref., 1968), p.33.

<sup>55</sup> A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, op. cit., p. 414. Cf. W. R. Godfrey, ‘Church and State in Dutch Calvinism’ in *Through Christ’s World*, ed. W. R. Godfrey and J. L. Boyd III (Phillipsburg: Presb. and Ref., 1985), pp. 223–243.

<sup>57</sup> F. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, (Crossway Books, 1981), pp. 97, 101, 130, which refers back to Reformers like Knox and Rutherford.

the state powers are tending to expand beyond measure, Evangelicals are taking on a new awareness of their responsibility towards the state.

A worldwide congress, like that of Lausanne [1974] on evangelism, allows the evangelical world to confess its vision of social commitment. Article five is set forth very clearly even if it does not express clearly the relationship between social commitment and evangelism.<sup>58</sup> The Manifesto of Manila [1989],<sup>59</sup> another important document of worldwide evangelism, likewise sheds no light on the structural issues of the social problem.

Social responsibility on the part of Evangelicals is characterized, generally speaking, by three factors.

*Firstly*, there is a clear distinction between social commitment and preaching. The latter is considered primary and has priority over the first. Moreover, according to an outstanding exponent of this opinion, ministers are required to refrain from taking part in programmes for social reform, 'because those who listen to him could confuse the eternal and unchangeable truths of the Christian faith with the uncertain and changeable matters relating to temporary affairs'.<sup>60</sup>

*Secondly*, there is a distinction between the church and social action carried out by individuals. The aim is to avoid a wrong identification of the church with the kingdom of God. According to Carl F.H. Henry, 'by calling a specific political programme Christian, and by giving it the authority of the church, or by assuming that its political achievements are to be considered adjacent to the Kingdom of God, one loses all certain Scriptural authenticity'.<sup>61</sup>

*Thirdly*, the Christian contribution concerns the ethical aspects, and not the economical and financial ones, because Christians would not have specific policies concerning these aspects.

These elements of social responsibility can be better understood if one bears in mind the risks represented by the social gospel of the Liberals. On the one hand they appear to be defensive measures aimed at protecting the evangelical world from the decline that is typical of the liberal vision, and on the other hand it is clear that there is the legacy of pietism.<sup>62</sup> They are certainly not true of all Evangelicals. Social action does not direct one's

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<sup>58</sup> "Il patto di Losanna" *Sdt I* (1989) pp. 72–3. For other elements cf. K. Bockmuehl, *Evangelical and Social Ethics*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979); P. Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom*, (London: Marshalls, 1984); AA. VV. in EQ LXII (1990/1).

<sup>59</sup> "Il Manifesto di Manila" *Sdt II* (1990) pp. 97–98.

<sup>60</sup> H. F. R. Catherwood, *The Christian Citizen*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Carl. F. H. Henry, "The basis of Christian action" *International Reformed Bulletin* (1967), N 28.

<sup>62</sup> One of the first signs of Evangelical revival in the social field can be associated with Carl F. H. Henry, *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). The greatest interest in the political field has resulted from the commitment of: the Mennonites: H. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), who maintains a rigorously pacifist vision; Ron Sider, *Rich Christian in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1977), who promotes a political economy that is Anabaptist; the Reformed: Richard Mouw, *Political Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), Id., *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (1976); R. McCarthy, J. W. Skillen, W. A. Harper, *Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); the Theonomists: Rousas Rushdoony, *The Institute of Biblical Law*, 2 vol. (Nutley: Craig, 1973), (Vallecito 1983); Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy and Christian Ethics*. (Phillipsburg: Presb. and Ref., 1977), (2) 1984.

attention away from evangelization; it is not a result, nor an outward expression of it, nor a partner nor anything else; it is simply an *aspect* of the church's very mission.<sup>63</sup>

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Some people believe it is impossible to develop a theological vision of the state. They are happy to take note of biblical and even historical information, but they do not think they have to work out a set of criteria that can stimulate reflection and behaviour in a complex world like ours. Not only do they think that the problems of the past are something remote and not very relevant to the present reality; they also think that it is impossible to formulate such a synthesis at all. Although it is easy to see the difficulties involved, it is not right to refrain from such an attempt altogether.

There follow some more systematic suggestions regarding the doctrine of the state.<sup>64</sup> Although they inevitably have limits, their aim is to try and outline a few points that are important in order to continue our considerations.

##### The Practice of Social Justice

According to Scripture, the state must carry out a specific role in relation to justice ([Romans 13](#)), and this represents a central issue for the associated life that the state must organize. The state must ensure that the rights of all are respected. The laws, therefore, must express a series of norms that are not discriminatory, and society must be organized in such a way that everyone can live a quiet and completely honest life.

The idea of public justice makes it necessary not to give to any particular community privileges that others do not have. On the legislative level, the state must not have a religious preference, and must not, therefore, favour any confession in particular. All groups must have the same possibilities of expressing themselves.<sup>65</sup> This is true not only for churches, but also for schools, Trade Unions, political parties, humanitarian organizations. Everyone must have the freedom to express their own world view, even the humanistic movements that are not expressly religious.

This does not mean that the state must dictate laws on all issues. It does mean, however, that within certain limits it must make sure that the various options that may exist within it can be put into practice. Conditions of legality and equality must be ensured for everyone.

Christians must have the right to a specific identity. A system of justice that does not recognize the specific nature of its various interlocutors would not be worthy of the name. The independence of the various spheres cannot be translated into indifference without damaging the specific nature of each reality, since each is defined also in relation to that which is outside itself. Is it possible, though, to say something more about the idea of justice that must govern state legislation?

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<sup>63</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Perspectives' in *In World and Deed. Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (WEF/LCWE) (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985), pp. 41–61.

<sup>64</sup> Hebdon E. L. Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley: Craig Press, 1967), p. 653; A. Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (Leicester: IVP, 1979); Haddon Willmer 'Towards a theology of the State' in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, David F. Wright (ed.) (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), pp. 85–104; Ray A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Nôtre Dame: University of Nôtre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 263–286.

<sup>65</sup> This elementary principle does not appear to govern a citizen's rights in a country like Italy, where the dominating church continues to enjoy rich preferential treatment both on the formal and on the material level, and where discriminations between confessions are evident everywhere.

The *notion of justice* is far from being clear-cut. Although the same definition may be used, different people have ideas, according to the vision that inspire them. a) For some, it means giving everyone what they deserve. This could be called the classical concept, and was the practice in ancient Greece. b) For others, justice is giving every man what he deserves according to his abilities. This is the individualist-capitalist concept, which bases justice on personal merit. c) Then there is justice based on human needs. It can be summed up in these terms: 'Each must give according to his abilities, and receive according to his necessities.' This is the socialist concept.

It is evident that similar concepts hark back to an immanentist and humanist vision, which is not based on anything absolute. But a set of norms that does not appeal to any authority higher than mere human wisdom and experience inevitably turns out to be an arbitrary concept. The idea of legality itself runs the risk of becoming more and more hazy. The result is a proliferation of laws and impressive structures for ordering everything in minute details. In the meantime, however, a sense of insufficiency persists, characterized by search for 'guarantors'. This, too, bears out the fact that no matter how many laws there are, they are not sufficient.

When dealing with a concept that does not make appeal to a reality outside the juridical field, and that is not happy merely with translating the results of statistics into laws, one ends up asking how legitimate the use of the word justice is. Similarly, one cannot accept the self-determination of the individual or of the majority as the clinching factor. If that were the case, force would become the criterion of the law.

Justice based on humanist and relativist principles, like that which make of justice 'a principle of coordination between subjective beings' (Giorgio Del Vecchio) is unsuitable for the exercise of authentic justice. A better definition of justice appears in the Declaration of Oxford [1990]. 'Biblical justice means giving to everyone, impartially, that which he deserves according to the rules of the moral law of God.'

Justice cannot be defined without reference to what God says. A notion of justice of natural origin certainly does exist, since God has impressed it on the hearts of his creatures, but this same notion turns out to be distorted and suffocated by sin. That is why it is necessary to appeal to the ideal of justice that comes from Scripture. That does not imply in any case that the justice of the state must necessarily coincide with that of the church. The world is not the church, nor is the church the Kingdom of God in its fullness. Something more will be said about this further on, but for the time being it seems to be important to bear in mind such a necessity, if one wishes to avoid separating the idea of justice from an authentic absolute.

### **The Promotion of the Good of Society**

The psalmist talks of the Lord as he who 'has founded the law' ([Ps. 99:4](#)). It would then be truly paradoxical to think of the good of society without considering God. To distinguish does not mean to separate, nor to confuse. From a Christian point of view one must consider God the judge of the universe in its entirety. This means that politicians are servants and not masters, and that they exist for the growth of their fellow men and not to dominate them.

The state, then, must hand over to the church the responsibility of proclaiming the law of God to everyone, without limiting God's authority over creation. It is not a question of subordinating the state to the church or vice-versa, but of making communication possible on bases that are truly equal. If it is true (and it is) that the state has access to general revelation, while the church has access to special revelation, and if it is true (and it is) that God is the author of both, then communication is possible.



God's law, which establishes and leaves its mark on every human choice, appears in all its clarity and straightforwardness in Scripture, although it also exists outside of it. Since one lives in a state that constantly tends to overstep its limits, it is good for Christians to stand at a distance and be critical of it. A certain degree of pessimism on their part can serve to limit that decline of the state which can so easily come about in the various fields of human activity.

Believers must not, therefore, abdicate their responsibility for *persuading*. They must keep watch, and at the same time vindicate, with conviction, their freedom to proclaim the Good News. They know that only the Lord can bring about obedience to his law at a deep level, and they also realize that the world will never coincide completely with the kingdom. Nevertheless, Christians must participate fully in the social and political process of the country in which they happen to live. The persuasive power of the Word of God is truly extraordinary, and it would be tragic to forget it. Since the Lord is King, believers can claim back for him all spheres of life, and strive to point the state in that direction, even though they are fully aware that the state cannot identify itself with any faith in particular.

Even if the church possesses no jurisdiction at all over the other institutions, it must be their conscience. Through the preaching of the whole Word of God, every reality is declared to the whole society. Every sphere must come under the authority of the King. If the Christian is to be a Christian in church, at home, in school, in the state—in other words, as he goes about his business—then he must listen to the Word of God, which instructs and directs.

One of the modern idols to be removed is the concept of the sovereignty of the state. Hidden behind the idea of the sovereign state is one of the worst lies, falsehoods and idolatries in the world. God is the only sovereign. Christian preaching must challenge the claim of a sovereign state and declare that only the Lord is sovereign.

That is why the church will make sure that its voice is heard clearly. It will also take care not to enter into details of policy, thereby setting itself up as a primary political subject. It will settle for the statements made in Scripture, leaving to others the responsibility of translating the principles themselves into practice in the different contexts.

### **Conscience of Structural Aspects**

The analysis of the present situation leads us to consider the structural aspects of reality as well. What has been said on the concept of justice and common good, for example, will turn out to be incomprehensible if it is separated from more general matters. Justice and common good refer to a system of relationships that is very complex.

The state is not the only reality that regulates civil life. There are also great international companies, the mass media, various ideologies that influence people's way of thinking and judging. It is well-known, for example, how markets operate increasingly on a worldwide scale, which often pushes national economic policies out on the fringe. In the same way, international aid programmes for developing countries are often responsible for putting these countries in a situation of permanent dependence. How is it possible for this to happen?

World economy has to do with power and ideologies, and makes up a huge mechanism from which it is impossible to move away. The intention of limiting the effects of injustice by intervention from charity organizations is important and it is also the right thing to do. Nevertheless, it does not, on any account, mean that one resolves the root problems. To do that, it is necessary to work on changing the structures that have caused such injustices. If one does not work at such a level, one does not obey God's call to practise *true* religion ([Jam. 1:26-27](#)) in the present context.

The general economical system of today has given birth to injustice and poverty, and it perpetuates them. This is in accord with the biblical viewpoint of the structural sin of the world. Sin is, in fact, a mechanism not only of an individual nature, but also of a social nature. The systemic element of sin (thrones, lordships, authority, power) constitutes a filter between the individual and freedom. Many have underlined the importance of faith and personal responsibility, and rightly so, but the Bible also contemplates corporate responsibility. The only way of acting responsibly on the local level is to take into account considerations on a worldwide level.

At present there is a worldwide economy that conditions social, political, intellectual and religious processes to an enormous degree. Precisely because it has not been transformed into a world empire, it is much stronger than previous systems. Compared with the great systems produced by history, this peculiarity paradoxically strengthens the present system, which it is not easy either to identify or to outline. In this sense it is practically impregnable.<sup>67</sup> Although there can be different economic systems, in today's world there is only one reality which feeds on the dogma of the neutrality of the laws of the market and of the almost metaphysical primacy of profit, and which heavily affects national and personal responsibilities.

Structures tend to hinder the complete fulfilment of the individual, and in this sense they need to be reformed. That requires a full awareness, a desire to change and true creativity. In the first place one must be aware of this structural dimension of the problem, and believe that the supreme good of society does not lie in its economical, scientific and technological growth. In the secularized eschatology of many people, every innovation seems to have an absolute value. As a result, the idea of economic, scientific and technological progress represents true discrimination to the point that it can be promoted as a supreme norm.<sup>68</sup>

Material progress has become something so important that it seems impossible not to fall in line with it. Even if it involves tyranny of a bureaucratic nature, one is prepared to make sacrifices on its altar quite shamelessly. But the structural aspects of the phenomena should neither be ignored nor underestimated.

It is not a question of launching an attack of a more or less moralistic nature against one aspect or another, because there are contradictions everywhere and by now they are plain to see. It is, rather, a question of recognizing the problem, knowing that the Christian vision requires a rigorous commitment towards revision in this field too. If that does not happen, then the church itself would be very vulnerable. That is because its members are also included in the existing structures, and these are so strong that they cannot be corrected by the ability or by the dedication of the individual elements.

### **The Utilization of Intermediate Organs**

In today's world one can notice a growing convergence between ideologies of an individualistic and a collectivist nature. It is as if these traditional concepts are incapable of answering the everyday needs of reality if taken separately. It seems that there are still too many anomalies and that one must therefore seek to overcome certain traditional barriers in order to meet the needs of modern society. The outlines of the ideologies tend, however, to be more blurred.

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. I. Wallestein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 5–6; N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

<sup>68</sup> B. Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress. A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation—Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 191, 152.

The connection between the individual and the state does involve, however, a certain tension.<sup>69</sup> The state invades fields that should not really come under its jurisdiction, like education and the family, and the individual's rights are therefore threatened and violated. The weight of habit tends therefore to make the search for different solutions more problematic.

The biblical vision excludes both the individualistic concept and the collectivist concept, both that of the right-wing and that of the left-wing. Individualism emphasizes individual freedom and collectivism emphasizes the authority of some established power. Both refute the biblical idea of differentiated responsibility in society. Individualism believes that it is the people who create the state; collectivism sees the state as sovereign. Both are opposed to the sovereignty of God, because they believe in some form of autonomy instead. All this is in sharp contrast with the biblical vision, and cannot satisfy the needs presented by reality.

To help overcome the tension between the individual and society, and in order to encourage the development of a vision that is more akin to the biblical concept, intermediate structures should be utilized. That means intermediate structures like the family, marriage, schools, churches, work, trade unions, etc. Today they are undergoing a certain amount of erosion and their function seems to be greatly reduced. It would therefore be advisable to encourage a reevaluation of them.

In this context even Christian centres for reflection can find their natural place. Without identifying themselves with the church or with the state, such centres can represent intermediate structures that can act as links. They are free associations of people who encourage the reflection and the indirect interaction of different groups. Having recognized the fact that the state as such does not have the right to make specific religious choices, and that the church must not take on direct responsibilities in its relations with the state, it is fitting to give space to intermediate structures.

From this biblical point of view, one can also conceive of a federal system of government. Under such a system, power would be distributed on the basis of the geographical areas that make up the state. Thus there would be a greater possibility of balancing central and decentralized government, and it would be easier to lessen the risks of individualism and collectivism. Actually it is not a question of finding a compromise between individualism and collectivism, but of recognizing how both were built on false bases.

The social structures of the medieval world, like the monastic orders, universities, and feudal orders, with their essentially collectivist structures, had only very limited independence, under the protection of the church and the state. Today it is a question of thinking of something different.

It is true that there are different realities, but it is also true that they often appear to be questionable because they were not born to counterbalance other realities. They emerged from purely incidental situations as empirical solutions, and that explains their fragility and incapability of having a true impact.

Many fear that kind of concept, because it seems to pose serious questions regarding the unity of society. Someone could quite rightly pose the question about what kind of cohesiveness such a social structure would have. A society lacking a common religious basis cannot have a unified vision. It is well known that the fragmentation of society goes hand in hand with the polarization of ideologies, and that often complex historical and political factors intervene, which can exert a great influence in a particular direction. A

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<sup>69</sup> John C. Sharp, 'The individual and the state', *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* III (1985/1), pp. 37-52.

long and dramatic conflict with another country or with the nature or size of a territory, etc. can, for example, make for a strong spirit of nationalism, and therefore a strong sense of cohesiveness. But that is not the case with all countries.

In a Christian perspective, a state of a centralist nature represents a danger not only for the church as such, which can easily lose its freedom, but also for society, which can end up being subject to one of the worst forms of idolatry. That is why it is necessary to work towards a concept of the state with suitable links.

Even more worrying is every project of the *New World Order*. The idea of a system through which the nations unite to fulfil the universal goals of humanity (peace, safety, freedom and order), appears blasphemous. In a world that is divided because of sin, every project of unification that ignores the redemption offered by Jesus Christ appears as an attempt to avoid the shame of the cross.

And here one begins to think of all those all-embracing ideologies, that is, all those concepts which, either implicitly or explicitly, offer an all-inclusive key to reality through an economic, ideological, cultural, or other kind of system. Such ideologies represent an enormous threat to the good of society, whatever the benefits they might appear to bring for a time.

### **Responsibility Towards God**

The expression 'church-state' is very unfortunate. Not only does it appear formalistic, it also gives the impression that on the one hand there is a religious authority and on the other hand there is a secular one. Nothing can be more false than that. What is more, every division which opposes the sacred to the secular is not only incompatible with a correct biblical vision, but it is also unreal. Life is fundamentally one and only one; it has a sole centre, and the centre is not the state, but God and his law.

General revelation, to which the state has access, whether it recognizes it formally or not, represents a criterion for responsibility before God. Even if the communication of general revelation is often ambiguous and hazy, it represents the indispensable space for responsibility. Political life belongs to the order of God's creation, and not to a nature that is set free from every dependence on the Creator.

Today we are better able to admit that politics cannot be separated from ethics. We recognize that all laws rest on moral convictions, which are considered fundamental for our make-up. The state itself then appears to be a religious institution, in the sense that its choices can inevitably be traced back to motivations that underlie a dominating world vision. Although it claims to be neutral, the state modifies and passes laws based on opinions that are widespread to a greater or lesser degree. According to the basic options that direct us, each of us decides to express his or her choices in a different way in the various fields of the family, the school, society and the state. These choices can be traced back to a confessional plurality from which not even the state can escape.

Despite evidence such as this, the modern state thinks it can set aside matters of a religious nature, and is under the illusion that the law must be based on relativist principles. In this way it refutes any kind of transcending authority. By setting aside the Judeo-Christian heritage, political activity ends up following the inspiration of expedients rather than principles.

The state is, by its very nature, a religious reality, in the sense that, in the end, its various choices can be traced back to basic options that were never established in an untarnished manner. Public affairs have a religious character in the same way in which the aspects of private life are religious. The state is never autonomous, but answers to God in that it holds delegated authority and is subject to God as are all existing realities.

Is it then meaningful to talk of a *lay* state? The term 'laicality' is now very widely used to claim the state's absolute independence from any kind of religious or ideological confession.<sup>70</sup> To claim the lay nature of the state means to vindicate the total autonomy of choices with respect to any kind of ideological bond.

The idea of laicality has many positive aspects. First, it involves the abolition of the difference between the sacred and the profane, and thus implies a kind of freedom from ecclesiastical tyranny. What is more, it serves also to discard the weight of suffocating traditions and contributes to the moderation of extremisms. When faced with the fact that others can have convictions that are completely different from one's own, there is no sense of anxiety. Finally, it makes for a certain degree of tolerance and acceptance of differences in cultural and religious fields. In this sense, the lay nature of the state can foster a certain amount of freedom at the religious, cultural and social level, and encourage the independence of various organs.

But the idea of laicality becomes a problem when it does not represent simply a question of 'style', as it were, but rises up to the rank of a principle. In this case, it assumes that Christian values are completely outmoded. Is it possible to believe in a moral and neutral autonomy? What can laicality do with its idea of tolerance when confronted with a personality cult that could arise, or with the explosion of ideological and religious integralisms? Can it truly banish morals and religions to the peripheries of its existence? Can it be really indifferent without becoming an accomplice?

A state that is indifferent to religion to the point that it banishes it to the periphery and embraces other societal values, slips into the kind of laicism that is the ideology of nonreligion. In the face of other ideologies, however, that of nonreligion must settle for a 'plurality of monisms' closed to communication and dialogue, and open only to violence. At this point one tends to make a stand, not so much in absolute terms as in terms of convenience (*ratio utilitatis* rather than *ratio veritatis*), but this leaves the doors wide open to many discriminations. To conquer violence, is it sufficient to appeal to the need to live together? To what degree is it possible to divide the sphere of morality from that of legality? And can legality truly be separated from a unitary base?

The idea of the lay nature of the state is therefore ambiguous. It can have meaning only if the background of Christian ethics is strong enough in society. The removal of Christian faith does not make for a decent lay state. It is necessary at least to have recollections of Judeo-Christian values. Without them the lay state loses its positive meaning. A Christian concept of a lay state would mean that the state would really be God's minister. As such it would prevent the various confessions from being prejudiced against one another and it would take action against those which disturb public order.

Only the laicality that keeps alive the connection between the many-sided and the individual is in a position to satisfy the needs of modern society. A multiplicity separated from the uniqueness of the law of God cannot offer any guarantees for social order. For multiplicity to be really fruitful, there must be space for the single element.<sup>71</sup> Is not such a laicality, however, different from what the average person generally thinks? A laicality that presents itself as a general and sufficient set of beliefs would break up like Babel, because it could not incorporate the multiplicity of existence without violence.

In the end, it turns out to be truly illusive, and at the same time, impossible to separate religion and politics. Nothing can be neutral, least of all the state. This means that its

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<sup>70</sup> For an open discussion on the subject, cf. the Atti del Colloquio di Montpellier 1990, H. Bost (ed.) *Genèse et enjeux de la laïcité* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> For a more indepth study on this subject, I take the liberty of making reference to my article 'Unicità e pluralismo' *Sdt IV* (1992/2) No 8, pp. 115-126.

choices would be of an exclusively technical nature, but that is only a wild fancy in which no-one could believe. The fact that the state plays such a central role in the life of human beings shows how the idea of its neutrality is one of the biggest lies of the world today. Some would like to see Christians participating in political progress only as citizens and not as Christians, but neutrality is a serious falsehood. For their part, Christians are loyal in rejecting it, because in God's world there are no areas without military protection.

It is precisely because Christians know the God of truth, that they should be in the front line in the political field, too. While other concepts have only the vaguest idea of the order that God wants for his world, Christians have the privilege of knowing God and should, therefore, be those who have the right to be active in this field. They have a platform on which to work to find out the ways that are most suitable for honouring the Creator of the world. Moreover, precisely because they know who is the Lord of reality, they know they are working not so much for themselves or their interests, as for him who holds ultimate authority.

## CONCLUSION

At this point, both the temporary nature of order and the possibility of conflicts should be underlined.

The present government system is not the final one of the kingdom of God. It has a *temporary nature*, because it must take into account the reality of sin. Because sin is present in Christians also, they do not have solutions that are infallible, and they must fight for the teachings of Scripture to become clear in themselves and apply them in the concrete situations of the modern world. Despite their efforts to remind people of God's law, they will still be only a sign of God's kingdom, and not a full expression of it.

Such a commitment does not exclude the possibility of a *certain amount of conflict*. The Christian concept of the state that we have tried to outline can easily conflict with the dominating visions of the present. It is to be expected. Christians must be ready to face situations of conflict. Then they will not be afraid to measure themselves, without fear and without presumption either, against the assumptions which are at the base of the choices made by others.

To be citizens of the state and of the kingdom of God may mean that there will be a conflict between the interests of the two. In *this* situation there are no easy solutions already formulated. It will be necessary to find answers from day to day, without expecting it to be easy. The city that Christians must contribute to building is not one of perfection, but of mediation, not of the absolute, but of the relative.

Christians have a prophetic function that is not indifferent in this context. They will not be afraid to criticize incredulity, injustice, materialism, hedonism, selfishness, and all the various forms of discrimination that one can come up against. They will not be obliged to join the left wing or the right wing, but only to side with God's truth, solidarity and justice.

The importance of convinced minority groups is often underestimated, but they have a value that is considerably greater than that which one normally imagines. Prophetic voices must be heard against the state's tendency to group everyone together. It is true that in the past there have been totalitarian states, but a widespread religious sense has opposed this. The tendency today to abolish every religious dimension makes the role of the modern state even more dangerous.

From the Christian point of view, no tribute can be offered to feigned neutrality. In God's world, every attitude that is like Pilate's is condemned. All Christians have a political responsibility. Whereas not everyone is called to be a professional politician, everyone

should analyse the problems, vote for and support those who promote justice. Instead of allowing themselves to be hypnotized by the myths of the mass-media, Christians can affirm their critical sense and work towards the promotion of God's values even in Caesar's world.

Christians will never forget that their citizenship is in heaven, but while they remain watchful and ready to recognize the apostate nature of secular hope, they will also be able to remember that their labour will not be vain in the Lord.

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## **Spiritual Gifts for Community Building in the Urban Slums**

Michael Duncan

In this article the author draws on his personal experience of living and working in an urban slum, conscious that community building does not begin with triumphalistic faith or the exercising of spiritual gifts but with the vulnerability and weakness of our flawed humanity, witnessing to the grace of the transforming power of God. He argues that empowering people through technology is not enough; empowerment calls for dependence on spirit controlled gifting, defeating the Devil and his demonic spirits and living lives that radiate peace and justice in the midst of poverty, oppression and powerlessness.

The Editor

Today God is building communities in the cities, especially in Latin America and Asia. This is a remarkable development. As James Comblin points out in 'The Holy Spirit and Liberation'<sup>1</sup>. 'It is not natural for communities to spring from the midst of a people so alienated by history and geography from any sort of association: it is a miracle from God.'

Living in the urban slums of Manila has brought new insight into why Paul urged the community at Corinth not to allow their common 'immersion' in the Spirit to lead them into a false individualistic spirituality that elevated tongues over people. The goal was to be formed into one body. To be 'spiritual' means to build up the community. One of the tragedies of so-called church growth in the Philippines where the power dimension has featured largely has been an acceptance of 'culture Christianity' unaccompanied by true repentance and marked by triumphalist individualism.

### **EMPOWERING THE POOR**

Experiencing the gifts of the Spirit can transform community life and empower the poor. Doday was told he needed expensive surgery to remove his kidney stones, otherwise he

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<sup>1</sup> James Comblin *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Orbis, 1989)

would be dead in two years. But borrowing the money would saddle his children with an appalling burden. He chose to go without the operation. One night he came to a regular cell meeting and asked us to pray for him. We laid hands on Dodoy and the stones popped out. What amazed him was that God was interested in him. Healing not only empowers the diseased and crippled to continue an active life—the awareness of being noticed, the sense of being touched, loved and healed by God does wonders for the poor person's self-esteem.

When Jesus healed lepers his action had social significance. He was welcoming into Israel people who had previously been marginalized— forbidden to hold any political, civil or religious office. Healings were—and are—acts of justice.

A ministry of healing inevitably involves relocating to live alongside the poor and elderly, the addicts, prostitutes and AIDS victims. Yet even if we go to these places, healing says very little about us and a lot about God. Faith is not something we have. It is simply trusting in the Father's character. It is not about getting all fired up and committed; rather it is becoming aware of how much the Father is committed to us and to the poor and needy. When you *see* this, then like Jesus you will go anywhere and do anything.

## **THE GIFT OF TONGUES**

The poor are often treated as ignorant and so in turn they perceive themselves as ignorant. In this big ugly world no one wants to listen to the poor, to the little people, to the uneducated. It is an immense gain to break the culture of silence which is so crippling in a slum. Today the poor are discovering their voice again. They now believe that their speech can convey something worthwhile. This revolution of speech is being facilitated in part by the gift of tongues. As the Spirit enables them to speak directly to God, so they discover that these words from *their* mouths count for something and are worthy of God. The powerless discover a new power in prayer. This gift then gives confidence to pray in their own language and soon they discover that God accepts them despite their grammatical errors and how they pronounce their words or what language type they use. God hears their words.

And so their views, their contribution, their voices are now important. Realizing this, the poor gain awareness of their own dignity and worth. Then, excitingly, this rediscovered dignity carries over into other areas. One who speaks in prayer soon speaks in public places.

## **THE GIFT OF TEACHING**

It is impossible to separate Christ from the Spirit, in terms of activity. As teacher, awakener, and conscientizer, Jesus helped the little people to see that they were no longer little people. Inevitably the elite perceived his 'critical awareness' programme as a threat. But over and above this Jesus was encouraging what Theissen describes as 'a takeover of upperclass attitudes by the lower class'<sup>2</sup>. He taught them to take no care for tomorrow, to not fear their enemies, to not trust in riches. Finally he sought to cure them of their superstitious mistrust of themselves.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit likewise through his gift of teaching continues Jesus' work of liberating the poor from the attitudes that keep them a dominated people.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerd Theissen *The Shadow of the Galilean* (SCM, 1989), p. 27

<sup>3</sup> Gerd Theissen *The Shadow of the Galilean* (SCM, 1989), p. 23



## THE GIFT OF DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN SPIRITS

We cannot divorce development from spiritual realities. In the cities we see the evil of evil but behind all poverty is a Devil. The immediate causes of poverty include injustice, international sin, population growth, wars, climate and the like. But the ultimate cause of poverty is the Devil himself. Community development is as much about the forces of evil as it is about appropriate technology or whatever. All of us, not only the poor, need to be saved from spiritual powers which are beyond our strength to conquer.

It has been suggested that poor folk who lack the basic defences and support systems of life become the natural prey of demons. Biblically, this may not be so absurd as it initially appears. The devil is a devourer ([1 Pet. 5:8](#)) and a murderer. His only interest is death. The evil of evil is that he seeks to take advantage of those who are already disadvantaged. He lives to impoverish the already impoverished. We see him doing this in the slums.

Rene Padilla quotes Ethelbert Stauffer's reminder that 'in primitive Christianity there is no theology without demonology'. Padilla continues, 'Without demonology the answer to the problem of sin must be found exclusively in man, without giving attention to the fact that man himself is the victim of an order that transcends him and imposes on him a detrimental way of life.'<sup>4</sup>

As the marginalized recognize they lack power they may be driven by despair to seek out powerful spirit mediums in the hope of gaining access to supernatural power. In this way they are drawn into further dependency and enslavement and their poverty is reinforced.

A young man asked me to come and pray with his brother, who was being continually plagued by a demon. With legs of lead I followed him to the house. I was introduced to the brother and asked if I might pray for him. Three times I laid my hands on his head. Each time he hit the floor. I put him in a chair. He fell out of it. He would race around the room, muttering in strange languages. When I asked him who told him to drive in the nails that had scarred his hands he replied, 'Mary'. Not for a moment did I interpret this as the mother of Jesus. At length three devils named themselves and were subsequently commanded to leave in the name of Jesus. According to his brother, he is a different man today.

Evil must not be tolerated. During much of my pilgrimage I have tolerated evil and explained it away as part and parcel of life. But Jesus shows us that evil is to be opposed, not tolerated. The social sciences have much to offer us in our work of development but they cannot give ultimate victory over the evil one. Transformation must confront all evils, structural and supernatural, but to share in this we must reach beyond ourselves and touch God.

This gift is needed also to discern where God is at work in history. In the 1986 Edza revolution in Manila, the masses united to overthrow a tyrant. They came together to lament over their nation and to cry out for justice. Marcos was overthrown and under Cory Aquino the Philippines endured the anguish of realizing the freedom won in 1986. Did God hear their cry? Where was he in the revolution? Was it the Spirit who inspired the cry for justice? Was this revolution, in fact, an act of the Spirit in history?

## PROPHECY, WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE

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<sup>4</sup> C Rene Padilla *Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 7

These gifts are given to counsel and guide us. Unfortunately, we have often allowed the Counsellor to guide us only in matters of evangelism and other 'churchly' things. To guide us through the minefields of justice and development issues we have sought the guidance of the social sciences. Do we defer to the social sciences because we perceive development as a human rather than a theological activity?

Jesus is Lord and by his Spirit demands the right to speak to every aspect of his kingdom mandate. However surprising it may seem, the Holy Spirit has just as much to say on issues of justice and the empowerment of the poor as he does on evangelism and church planting.

## **URBAN SPIRITUALITY**

We need more than gifts. Their effectiveness must be enhanced by an appropriate spirituality. This was realized by the Catholic orders when they instituted disciplines to strengthen those called to carry the gospel to difficult and cruel places. They make the load light not heavy. They can help us to be at peace amidst anxiety and unpredictability.

One important element in this urban spirituality is community. Community is what will birth new communities in the city. No individual is called to go and be Jesus to the people. This concept is a symptom of western individualism. Scripture, by contrast, portrays a community of faith becoming Jesus, the Body of Christ, to others. The city does not need super-servants. The ones who will see 'signs and wonders' are those who are willing to depend on the Spirit in the community of faith. Bruised and bashed by disappointments and hardships, we can come together in community and with laying on of hands invite the Spirit to come and heal, restore, strengthen and equip us anew. This fragile community of the Spirit then scatters again to be community-makers in the wider city.

## **CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION**

Westerners have jittery minds and hyperactive bodies. We charge off joining crusades to change the world, leaving our own selves uncultivated. In the city we become reactionists, whether to noise, crowds, pollution or poverty. 'This is it!' we exclaim as we launch ourselves into a painfully mistaken course of action. The person who has been schooled in contemplation will withdraw from the context and seek to harness the mind and the emotions in order to reflect before action.

## **RESTING IN THE SPIRIT**

In urban ministry it seems as if the city is your enemy. You battle against its chaos, its fragmentation, its sheer size. You feel small and helpless and after a while you begin to doubt your place in the city, trapped in a guilt/ helplessness syndrome whereby you feel powerless to achieve anything, yet guilty for failing.

We need reminding that the Spirit also lives in the city. He was already there when we arrived. As we yield ourselves to him, we recognize that where we are going is his concern. Even though I live in a Third World slum, my primary location is not the slum, nor Manila, nor even the world. Primarily I am in Christ through the Spirit. When I walk the streets of the city I am really walking in the palm of God's hand.

## **FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT**

The city presents many barriers, many aspects. We cannot survive there without being prepared to change. Neither the Scriptures nor the city allows us to get comfortable in our little boxes. Only the Spirit can give us the courage for change and power for renewal. [Luke 11:9-13](#) assures me that if I ask for the Holy Spirit I shall receive. This private communion with the Spirit enables one to walk the many public places in the city.

## THE SPIRIT OF WEAKNESS

The church at Corinth had succumbed to a common disease. They had so elevated tongues and other gifts that they thought of themselves as 'like the angels'. Ironically this over-realized spirituality was a source of weakness. For the city needs people who perceive themselves not as sources but as instruments of grace: fellow travellers, not those who have already arrived. It is tragic that the western selection processes for priests, teachers and so on focus only on the strengths of the applicants.

If the poor and needy are initially drawn to our flawed humanity, our weaknesses and wrinkles, then we must become a people that can accept, admit to and use our weaknesses in mission. In the grace of God our insecurities, foibles and fears can become a witness to others. Vulnerability and fragility are just as important in mission as are faith, healings and victories. 'If I must boast', said Paul, I will boast of the things that show my weaknesses.<sup>5</sup> He recalled Christ's promise. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' and decided. 'I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ... I delight in weaknesses ... for when I am weak then I am strong.'<sup>6</sup>

Collectively our communities may be full of every imaginable fear, weakness and sin. Paul, who described himself as the greatest of all sinners, might not be unduly appalled. He also wrote, 'We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'<sup>7</sup> In the midst of our flawed communities is a gracious God who is healing us by his power.

A psychiatrist friend remembers a retreat where a number of nuns were asked whom they sought out in times of distress. It was not their mother superior, nor their confessor, but a defrocked alcoholic priest. The implication is not, of course, that we should try to debase ourselves further, as if only depressives or addicts were truly human. All that is needed is that we allow the city-dweller to see our flawed humanity, not as a badge of merit but as a sign of solidarity with the poor and needy.

Doing this will be difficult, incredibly so for people from a hyper-faith or triumphalistic tradition. But radical discipleship and community-making demand a twofold process of contextualization. Not only must we contextualize the written word of God into the host city; we must also have the courage to contextualize ourselves so that we become what the city-dweller needs for the process of transformation.

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<sup>5</sup> [2 Corinthians 11:30](#)

<sup>6</sup> [2 Corinthians 12:9, 10](#)

<sup>7</sup> [2 Corinthians 4:7](#)

# Book Reviews

## ALL GOD'S PEOPLE: A THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH—THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL IN HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

by David L. Smith.

(Wheaton, Illinois: Bridge Point Books, 1996 ISBN 1-56476-382-X 487pp)

*Reviewed by Dr Brian Cedgar, Bible College of Victoria, Australia*

There is little point writing a theology of the church which is not related to real situations. This means that there is a tension which any writer on the church has to face, which arises from dealing with an entity which on the one hand is local, historical and cultural and on the other hand is universal, multifaceted and theological. In *All God's People: A Theology of the Church* David L. Smith writes in the midst of that tension and produces an ecclesiology which emerges out of a specific situation—a conservative, evangelical, North American, Baptist context. This book follows previous writings: *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* and *With Willful Intent* (a theology of sin).

Smith examines the church in four parts: Historical (182 pages, examining Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Scientific and Twentieth century understandings); Biblical (112 pages of Old Testament, Gospels and Apostolic interpretations); Systematic (100 pages investigating the Origin, Nature, Mission, Ministry, Membership and Unity of the Church) and Practical (14 pages—really a brief set of conclusions). One reviewer on the dust jacket suggests that it should be used in adult Bible classes which would be appropriate but no doubt it will be used in undergraduate studies as well.

The subject is so extensive that, inevitably, there is a need for any writer to be selective. The book is simply written and provides useful overviews of a wide range of topics. The historical section provides brief summaries of the Fathers which may help those who have not studied history. The Medieval period also receives brief attention as it is only 'systematising and interpreting the Fathers'. With the Reformation Smith is on more comfortable terrain and the treatment is more comprehensive though with a distinct preference for the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions. In the modern period there is a rather uneven selection of theologians and movements. The three representatives of twentieth century evangelical theology and ecclesiology are Millard Erickson, Donald Bloesch and Chuck Colson. Neo-orthodox, Pentecostal, Orthodox and Catholic theologians are examined but there are no representatives of classic liberal or ecumenical ecclesiology.

The Theological and Biblical sections are good resources. The mission of the church is fourfold (koinonia, diakonia, martyria and leitourgia) and the fundamental ministry is the ministry of reconciliation. The unity of the church is to be sought but the present problems appear to be insoluble. The biblical section provides some very helpful analyses of topics such as covenant, kingdom and gifts. However, the scope is a little limited sometimes with dispensational issues playing a significant part with the 'spectrum' of understanding extending from conservative evangelical to dispensational.

*All God's People* is offered from a Baptist perspective. As Smith moves through historical and biblical material he pays particular attention to Baptist themes (baptism, the gathered church, conscience, a reserve towards 'tradition' and church state relations, ordinances etc.). It perhaps expresses a somewhat idealized view of Baptists. Nonetheless, *All God's People* is a well presented, systematic and useful volume that deals with many contemporary issues which will be appreciated by many.

# SPIRITUALITY IN AN AGE OF CHANGE REDISCOVERING THE SPIRIT OF THE REFORMERS

by Alister E. McGrath

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994

ISBN 0-310-42921-8 Pb 206pp)

*Reviewed by Dr David Parker*

This book, by well known Oxford author Alister E. McGrath, does a good job of giving a popular exposition of the way the key theological ideas of the reformers affect the religious life. It is especially successful in giving the back-ground and context of the major reformers and in providing useful quotations from their own works (using a translation made by the author).

McGrath believes that Reformation spirituality is an attractive option which can address the shallowness and impoverishment often seen in contemporary North American evangelicalism. At a time of considerable flux when many people are searching for deeper roots, he argues that the Reformation is a good model because in similar circumstances it succeeded in remaining faithful to Scripture and at the same engaged with the realities of contemporary life. Its views of the Christian life 'were forged and tested in the white heat of the crucibles of the great cities of early modern Europe'. (p.19) Such a context, he believes, is not unlike that of today, and the various forms of Reformation spirituality are worth understanding for their value in helping Christians to develop authentic forms of the faith in the present age.

For McGrath, the spirituality developed by the reformers as they critiqued the mediaeval religious practices they inherited was grounded in and relevant to everyday life, God-oriented, Scripture-based and focused on the priesthood and vocation of all believers. In particular, Luther's theology of the cross, implying the hidden presence of God, was an answer to human reason and the authority of subjective experience in the face of the suffering, humiliation and rejection which are so integral to human life. It is of considerable relevance to a world where personal advantage and satisfaction seem to have become part of faith itself.

Similarly, McGrath argues, the Reformation view of faith as adherence to Christ is a vital element of spirituality in an age of doubt and uncertainty. Faith for the Reformers was not simply understanding, but 'a decision to trust in the person and promises of God' (p. 104) which unites the believer to Christ. Thus it provided a resolution to the tension between faith and experience and, because it rests in the trustworthiness of God, offers an assured basis for everyday life. McGrath also points to its vital importance for the personal life of divine grace, by which God accepts the believer in Christ—it is 'something given, not something earned' (p. 156). He also emphasizes its importance for forgiveness, discipline and freedom.

The Reformation was to a large extent 'an urban phenomenon' and according to McGrath, this gives it special relevance to the present time. Reformation spirituality is so influential in this respect because it was able to avoid the worldliness of the papacy and the world-renouncing views of the monastery through its theology of creation, fall and redemption, undergirded by its understanding of justification. Because it was, thereby able to adopt 'a critical yet affirmative attitude to the world', (p. 141) the reformers could develop a positive approach to the dignity of human work and the value of secular vocation.

*Spirituality in an Age of Change* concentrates on providing a lucid explanation of the important Reformation theology, and therefore it does not always manage to give a detailed application of these doctrines to the modern scene; instead, as the title indicates,

it focuses mostly on the way in which both periods were ages of change. A major emphasis of this volume is the reformation as a prime source of evangelical teaching which can be re-visited today with considerable advantage. This is likely to be a useful historical exercise, and one that will strengthen the self-identity of evangelicals as they look to the reformers of the faith to teach them more about the founders and the Pioneer.

## JESUS UNDER FIRE

by Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (General Editors)

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995 ISBN 0-310-61700-6 Hb 243pp)

and

## Cynic Sage or Son of God?

by Gregory A. Boyd

(Wheaton: Bridgepoint Victor, 1995 ISBN 1 56476 448 6 Pb 416pp)

*Reviewed by David Parker*

*Jesus under Fire* and *Cynic Sage or Son of God* are two of many books now available which respond to the efforts of an extreme liberal wing of scholarship, most publicly associated with the Jesus Seminar, to reinterpret the traditional view of the historical reliability of the gospels and consequently the person and work of Jesus Christ. Their work which has received wide media exposure, is seen especially in *The Five Gospels* (Macmillan, 1993) in which the Seminar's findings about the authenticity of Jesus' sayings are presented so that the general public may catch up on what has become well known in academia. Using a scheme of colour coding, the scholars indicate that less than twenty per-cent of the canonical sayings are considered genuine.

*Jesus under Fire* is a collection of eight essays by North American philosophers, apologists and NT scholars, edited by two professors from Talbot School of Theology. It takes a broad approach as it seeks 'to help the church and the people of the broader community understand the issues currently being disseminated throughout the popular culture, and to be able to counteract these ideas and respond to them intelligently and responsibly'.

Its best contribution is in the first three chapters by Craig L. Blomberg, Scot McKnight and Darrell L. Bock which give a good outline of the methods and conclusions of mainline NT studies on the nature and interpretation of the gospels and what they indicate about the person of Jesus, backed up by plenty of references to contemporary literature and standard authorities. The historical background to the current phase of the 'Quest for the historical Jesus' is particularly useful, as is Bock's chapter, 'The words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, jive or memorex?'

However, after this promising beginning, the book tends to lose its focus in the chapters treating the works of Jesus, his miracles, resurrection and uniqueness (the last two being perhaps the least satisfactory of all). The final chapter on the non-canonical sources for the life of Jesus is something of an addendum—the material would be better placed in the first chapter—but more seriously, it does not respond to the issues in this area raised by the revisionists. The book thus ends as a work in apologetics rather than NT scholarship.

This is in itself a useful contribution, and the essays do bring out many of the issues at stake in the current debate; furthermore, they present a highly rational argument for the traditional view of Jesus and the gospels. No one expects the sceptical scholars to be convinced by such treatment, but the material is useful for the swinging voter.

The other, larger, volume, written by Bethel College Theology professor, Gregory Boyd, takes a much wider and more comprehensive approach, offering an extended

treatment and critique of the methods and work of two key figures in the revisionist camp. In a well structured and strongly argued presentation, he targets John Dominic Crossan and Burton L. Mack, both of whom have written extensively on the origins of Christianity, the development and interpretation of early Christian documents and the person of Jesus.

After introductory chapters on the background to the current developments and an outline of the main theories of Crossan and Mack, Boyd goes on to show that their work is based on an unjustifiable post-Bultmannian scepticism of the value of the gospels as historical sources for the life of Jesus. He further points out their structuralist view that the Gospel of Mark originated as one of the vital tools in the myth-making exercises of the early church which various groups used in their struggle to identify themselves in relation to each other and the outside world.

Since the gospels are able to give no reliable picture of the historical Jesus, this must be sought elsewhere. For this reason, the revisionists turn to various non-canonical documents, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter and several different layers in the so-called Q document which is widely held to be one of the sources of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These documents, it is claimed, reveal Jesus, a Jewish peasant, to be a sage within the traditions of the egalitarian counter-cultural movement of the Hellenistic world, which also flourished in Galilee, known as Cynicism.

As a Cynic Sage, Jesus had no thought of divinity or messiahship, and did not see his death as in any way redemptive. These are ideas which, according to the revisionist position, are part of the later myth-making process of the early church which issued at length in the canonical documents and the traditional orthodox Christological beliefs. Jesus the Jewish peasant died a brutal and expected death; his body was treated like that of other executed people, placed in a common grave and would probably have been taken by animals.

In rejecting this reconstruction, Boyd asserts that it has no solid evidence in its favour and has plausibility only to those who assume it and look for it in the first place. Involving continual question begging, it could not be discerned from an objective, fair-minded reading of the texts or other historical evidence.

Thus in the final part of his book, Boyd goes on to argue for the reliability of the key documents, Mark, the Pauline epistles and Luke-Acts, as historical sources, using more or less standard arguments and favouring early dating of Acts and Mark. He concedes that faith is necessary whichever portrait of Jesus is to be accepted, but all the available evidence points firmly in the direction of the traditional view, not the revisionist one being so strongly popularized by the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. This, he concludes, becomes plainly obvious once the presuppositions, worldviews and methods of the revisionists are exposed.

These two books are complementary in their treatment of the topic and both helpfully offer large numbers of explanatory notes, bibliographies and references for further reading in what is a topic of continuing importance for all Christians. The treatment is necessarily defensive and does not set out to expound in any detail the person and work of Christ, much less offer any new insights on these topics. It is as Boyd declares, 'more critical than constructive' and is not meant to break new ground but, gathering up the work of other scholars, to press home the logic of the conservative case against the 'arbitrary presuppositions, the faulty lines of reasoning, the circular methodologies, and the speculative assumptions that characterize the Cynic thesis'.

The value of these two volumes then lies in their critique of this particular form of revisionist views of Jesus Christ and their explanations of methods, tools and findings of mainline evangelical scholarship.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY BIBLICAL HISTORICAL AND EVANGELICAL VOLUME 2

by James Leo Garrett, Jr.

(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995 ISBN 0-8028-2426-9  
Hb xi + 872pp Indexes)

*Reviewed by David Parker*

James Leo Garrett Jr of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has published the second and final volume of his Systematic Theology only five years after the first. It follows the pattern of the earlier volume and covers material from the work of Christ to Eschatology. Garrett follows a conventional theological scheme in his presentation, including in this volume also chapters on the Spirit, the Christian life and the church, treating the topics biblically and historically before offering a systematic conclusion. However, he does not hesitate to place his own emphasis and style upon the material, nor is he bound to the classical scheme but includes topics such as missiology, discipleship, stewardship, music in worship and issues relating to church, state and culture in his coverage.

He often makes special reference to issues and writers of interest to Baptists, (Southern Baptists in particular) but these issues certainly do not dominate the book, making it suitable for a wide range of evangelical readers. Many matters of interest to contemporary evangelicals are mentioned, with copious reference to the leading authors, both academic and otherwise. Topics in this category include spiritual gifts, healing and the atonement, sanctification, prosperity theology, the Lordship controversy and the ministry of women. There are detailed presentations on the atonement and on eschatology, including popular evangelical views which are given sympathetic but rigorous treatment.

A particular feature of Garrett's work is the amount of bibliographical details that he includes. He refers to a large number of theologians, both ancient and contemporary, on any given topic, usually gives their names in full together with dates of birth and death and information about their publications. In addition, he often lists in the footnotes comprehensive bibliographies on various topics as they are introduced. This, together with the extensive summaries of their work in the text, makes Garrett's volumes particularly suitable for the advanced student who is seeking a wide coverage and detailed information about sources and examples of particular theological views.

In places, such as the section on Eschatology, Garrett also provides helpful guidelines on how to approach certain difficult or controversial topics and in others draws attention to the issues which must be considered in relation to the topic. Furthermore, each chapter and section ends with a summary of the material covered. Notwithstanding the subtitle of the book, this style of approach might be called 'descriptive theology' and illustrates well the author's aim (as stated in the Preface to Volume 1) of examining the biblical sources and the historical development of theology before coming to any conclusions.

However, the limitation in this method is that there is less scope for explanation and evaluation of the great number of views presented, although it is surprising how much space is found for quotations from significant theologians, church documents and even hymns. Garrett has a fine ability to summarise succinctly the views of the theologians he quotes, and he consistently presents alternative views and interpretations. But frequently he lets the arguments speak for themselves rather than discussing them at length. (He even does this for arguments for and against infant and believers' baptism!) On some occasions he indicates his views with a caustic remark, such as warning about the folly of rejecting centuries of tradition or by making a brief statement about the evident strengths



or deficiencies of the arguments. Yet where he believes the conclusion is clear or perhaps of specially crucial importance, (as in the section on Liberation Theology) he confidently declares his views and proceeds to build on this position when discussing related material in subsequent chapters. Thus, despite the extremely wide range of ideas presented, the careful reader is expertly led to a clearer understanding of the issues at stake and is given the ability to come to informed conclusions about them.

## **HISTORIANS OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: THEIR METHODOLOGY AND INFLUENCE ON WESTERN THOUGHT**

by Michael Bauman & Martin I. Klauber  
(Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995)

*Reviewed by Ray Laird, Bible College of South Australia, Adelaide*

Some years ago I took an honours course in historiography at university. In that course we studied various historians, surveying their work and looking at their presuppositions, their context and their methodologies. I have thought from time to time that something similar on historians in the Christian tradition would be very useful. To my utter delight, in this volume edited by Michael Bauman and Martin Klauber, here it is! These two evangelical academics have directed a collaboration in a production that surveys Christian historiography from the Old Testament era up until our own century. Twenty nine authors present a collection of essays on the major historians who have shaped our thinking about our Christian past.

The book is extensive. It begins with Old Testament historians and moves through Luke to Eusebius, Augustine and the Venerable Bede, then on to John Foxe in the sixteenth century, and then to the nineteenth and twentieth century historians beginning with Baur and D'Aubigne and, after discussing another eighteen leading historians of this era, ending with Marty and Oberman. It will be seen that, somewhat inevitably, the bulk of the book focuses upon the later writers. Some will be disappointed that their favourite historian does not appear, but the task of selection is difficult indeed. By and large the editors have done well.

This book is informative. It is packed with details about the historians and their work that are not otherwise easily accessible, certainly not in the distilled manner of this volume. The historians, whose works have informed and encouraged succeeding generations, spring to life as we hear of the circumstances of their lives, the formative factors of their thinking and the insights they brought to their tasks.

The book is theologically acute. The work of each historian is evaluated as to the theological stance that informs the history produced. Some of the contributions are outstanding in this regard. Timothy Phillips' critique from an evangelical viewpoint of Isaak Dorner is a good example of this approach. The wealth of Dorner's contribution is noted but not without demonstrating the omissions and distortions that occur when an historian's theological presuppositions are allowed to dictate the agenda and govern understanding of history.

Also, most, if not all, of the contributors to this book assist in the task of understanding the theological issues that come to the surface in particular periods. Douglas McCready's article on 'Catholic Tübingen Church Historians' leads us through the attempt of the Tübingers to formulate the relation of faith to history in the context of the rise of historical criticism of the Bible on one hand, and the Romanticism of nineteenth century Germany on the other. This is great work! Theological students will find much of interest and value in this volume.

The book is instructive. An introduction by Bauman entitled 'The Nature and Importance of Religious Historiography' sets the scene and whets the appetite for the essays that follow on specific historians. Klauber concludes the collection with a very brief essay somewhat misnamed 'Historical Method in the Christian Tradition' in which he highlights the consistent themes that appear in the work of the historians that have been discussed. These contributions together with the relevant material on the specific historians are a useful introduction to the historian's craft. The book would have profited greatly from a longer final chapter discussing historical method in a fuller way. Perhaps the editors thought sufficient had been written in the specific essays.

The book is resource-laden. It features useful bibliographies at the end of each chapter. Together with the excellent footnotes, these provide a valuable resource for the student of history. Many fruitful lines of investigation, opened up in the chapter discussions, may be pursued through the resources supplied.

As in most publications that bring together a multiplicity of authors there is some unevenness among the contributions. Generally the standard is high, so the odd aberration is quite forgivable. Given the output of some historians, variations in the presentation of bibliographies are understandable. In some cases it is too much to expect exhaustive bibliographies of primary works in a volume of this nature. It is a pity that all the authors did not follow the habit of some in providing brief bibliographies of significant secondary sources.

Nevertheless, the weaknesses are minimal and the editors are to be commended both for the idea and for the implementation of that idea into what is a very useful addition to the fields of history and theology. It is one of those books that Alexander Whyte had in mind when he encouraged his students to 'sell their beds and buy their books'.

## **INDIA: THE GRAND EXPERIMENT**

by Vishal Mangalwadi

(Pippa Rann Books, 1997, 365 pages, £16.95)

Available from South Asian Concern, P.O. Box 43 Sutton, Surrey SM2 5WL, UK.

*Reviewed by Jonathan Ingleby, lecturer at Redcliffe College and formerly principal of Hebron School in South India.*

*'If India is a free republic today, that is also the consequence of British rule', observes Nani Palkhivala, one of India's foremost jurists.*

Where did the notions of freedom come from? What made them a part of the modern Indian mind? Can freedoms survive if those notions are forgotten or rejected?

Vishal Mangalwadi's thesis is this:

*'India's independence resulted from the struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi, but India's freedom is a product of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our individual, intellectual, religious, economic, legal, municipal, press and political freedoms are a result of a grand experiment undertaken by the followers of Jesus Christ. ...'*

*'My main concern is not with the past for its own sake, but as it throws light on the challenges of the present and the future of the new globalised world which is being created by trade and commerce.'*

This is a surprising book and also a brave one. Anyone who numbers Lord Macaulay among his heroes of Indian history, and who dares to suggest that Gandhi's ideas were essentially 'made in Europe' is certainly not overly concerned with being politically correct.

Mangalwadi's thesis may be unusual but I suspect that in broad outline it is also right. India's 'experiment with freedom' began with the evangelical statesmen, chaplains and missionaries who had so much to do with the development of the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. The fact that the experiment seems to be faltering today is a result of the waning of that influence, first because of the secularist version of freedom that superseded it and then, more recently, because of the growing influence of Hindu nationalism.

In order to make his case Mangalwadi looks at the thinking and practice of these evangelicals—men like Charles Grant and William Carey—and then traces their influence on key aspects of Indian life—social norms, education, the press, the economy and government. He brings the story up to date with a fascinating (and alarming) chapter on the rise of cultural fascism.

While accepting Mangalwadi's overall thesis, I have two main criticisms of his method. Firstly, he is inclined to put his protagonists in 'camps' and to treat all those within a particular camp as having a common purpose, without sufficient consideration of the complexity of their motives and situations. Take Alexander Duff, for instance. He is held up by the author as a key evangelical thinker who played a crucial role in introducing higher education into India. Yet Duff's presuppositions were not always those of evangelical Christianity. His roots were in the rational Calvinism of the Scottish Enlightenment and his educational approach was opposed by the Baptists at Serampore and by his Church of Scotland colleague in Bombay, John Wilson. In different ways, they were uneasy about Duff's iconoclastic approach to Indian culture. Looking back, we also have a right to question whether Duff got it right. Did not the missionary tradition of higher education produce more secularists than Christians, and why was this?

Secondly, I feel that overall the book gives too much credit to the evangelicals. To take another example from education, the introduction of English medium education and of higher education (the Wood Despatch) is largely put down to them. But this is only part of the picture. Macaulay himself was not an evangelical, and I doubt whether J.C. Marshman (confused by Mangalwadi with his father Joshua Marshman) or Charles Trevelyan were either. The truth is that nominally evangelical missionaries did not always make common cause and the reformers were not all evangelical missionaries.

I make these points not to be carping but because I believe in the importance of what is being said. What we need is more history of this sort and in more detail. For example, as Mangalwadi himself points out, too many historians have read only the secular, humanist source material and ignored the missionary archives. In general India's present 'crisis of freedom' needs to be informed by accurate, painstaking historical research, which will explode the dangerous myths that abound. Mangalwadi has made a start.