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## The Christian Voice in the Civil Realm

Gifford A. Grobien

In a day when Christendom is fast dissolving, if not already a memory, and in which governments deny the rule of reason, not to mention the divine law, some Christians find themselves yearning for a situation described, many say, by Luther himself: "I would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than by a foolish Christian." That is to say, the faith and confession of one who governs is not as important as his justice and prudence. One problem with this quotation, however, is that Luther never actually wrote it.<sup>1</sup> There is one particular instance where Luther says, "It is said that there is no better temporal rule anywhere than among the Turks. . . . But we must admit that there is no more shameful rule than ours." However, this is an isolated rhetorical device used in his letter *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in order to emphasize the necessity of the reform of political rule in Germany.<sup>2</sup> When the broader scope of Luther's view of the Ottomans is surveyed, especially in the representative treatise *On War against the Turk*, it becomes apparent that he warns against their rule and urges both prayers and military action for protection against them.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the appeal of this apocryphal saying raises the question of whether its underlying sentiment has merit. Does the faith of a ruler matter as much as his prudence? Does the failure of our country's Christian heritage to retain significant moral influence even in such basic areas as marriage and the life of the weak and defenseless indicate that Christianity matters less than good moral sense? Approaching these questions confessionally, we recall the Lutheran understanding of political

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough discussion of this apocryphal saying and Luther's view of Islamic rule, based on evidence from his writings, see Gene Veith, "Luther's 'Wise Turk' Quote That He Didn't Say," Cranach: The Blog of Veith, posted August 31, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2012/08/luthers-wise-turk-quote-that-he-didnt-say/> (accessed January 6, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 44:203 (hereafter AE).

<sup>3</sup> AE 46:155-202.

government and the Christian's relation to it. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession affirms lawful civil ordinances and encourages Christians to participate in civic responsibilities. Article XXVIII confesses that church and civil powers should not be mixed. The church is concerned with forgiving sins through preaching and the administration of the sacraments, while the political authority is to make, execute, and judge civil law. These two powers are to be "held in honor and acknowledged as a gift and blessing of God" (AC XXVIII 18). Likewise, in the treatise *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, Luther refers to two governments or kinds of authority, the ecclesial and the civic. The ecclesial government rules over the soul and eternal life, while the civil government rules over temporal matters such as bodily life and property. The authority of ecclesial government is the word of God alone, while the authority of the civil government is the wisdom of the men who hold the office. Strictly speaking, neither Luther nor the Confessions speak of two kingdoms, as though there were different regions or subjects under each authority. Rather, all men are subject to both kinds of authority. Further, the two different kinds of authority are not law and gospel, for both the law and the gospel rule in the church, even though the primary function of the law in the church is different from the law's function in civil government. Thus, all men are subject to both law and gospel under civil and church government. The distinction is that civil authority rules over temporal, bodily matters to enforce outward social order, while church authority rules over the soul and eternal life by calling to repentance, forgiving sins, and bestowing new life in Christ.

Civil authority, according to Luther, is itself to be ruled by an understanding of the law and should exercise this law according to love and wisdom. This is in contrast to rule by force, tyranny, and capriciousness.<sup>4</sup> While one could argue that a wise unbeliever would be a better ruler than a foolish Christian, a ruler is much more likely to be wise if he is a Christian. A truly Christian ruler, at least, would seek to have his understanding enlightened by God, to humble himself, and to use his position to serve and benefit those he governs. And only a Christian truly knows how to love, one of the virtues Luther attributes to a wise ruler.

Luther acknowledges that there are "very few who would also like very much to be Christian princes and lords."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, rather than focusing on hypothetical questions regarding which kinds of public

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<sup>4</sup> AE 45:118.

<sup>5</sup> AE 45:118.

servants are better than others, questions of what the church can confess and do in the current political situation in which she finds herself will be addressed here. "Church" here signifies the body gathered around Word and Sacrament whose ministers speak publicly on her behalf. When the church does not speak publicly, regularly, and clearly, society grows ignorant of true Christianity, substituting civil religion for true religion. Moreover, public, regular, and clear speech and activity are not a mixing or usurping of temporal rule, but the church living humbly, charitably, mercifully, and steadfastly as the body of Christ on earth. Christian public speech and action err neither in overstepping the boundary of the church nor in timidly doing too little; rather, such speech and action are the proper vocation of the church on earth. From the setting of the congregation and perspective of the church, the most important question is not how to find the best politicians and promulgate the best laws in an attempt to improve society, but how the church is to speak clearly and act faithfully, whether or not these words and actions garner sympathy from the political community.

### I. Religion in the Context of Political Liberalism

The contemporary American, liberal political system differs greatly from Luther's context. Understanding the unique factors of political liberalism and their relation to religious expression helps one to understand the role of the church in this context. The term *liberalism* does not mean the more liberal people of a society or political spectrum, or parties with the name "Liberal"; it refers instead to the political philosophy or perspective that claims to value liberty and fundamental civic rights and freedoms. Because of the importance of individual freedom, rational discourse, in order to share the ideas of free individuals, is also highly valued within liberalism. Among secular liberals, a corollary to the primacy of rational discourse is the claim that religious discourse is problematic in the public square. Religious discourse is not rational but based on faith in revelation and is, therefore, inaccessible to those outside of the faith. In this view, religious claims should not be determinative in making civil law or public policy. Religious voices need not be excluded or suppressed from the public square, so long as they do not impinge on others' "essential constitutional liberties."<sup>6</sup> Yet, in circumstances where policies and law are

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<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 611, quoted in Rupert J. Read, "Religion as Sedition: On Liberalism's Intolerance of Real Religion," *Ars disputandi* 11 (2011): 86.

being established, only claims grounded by reason should be admissible. Religious points of view that can be translated from religious language to secular, rational language would be acceptable. These views would not be limited by the language of revelation or by religious rituals but would have appeal beyond their religious context to those using mere reason. Such appeal gives them force in the public square and soundness for public policy. A translation from faith to reason requires religious people to “cultivate the epistemic virtue to reflect on their religious conviction from an outside point of view and . . . to express it through a secular vocabulary.”<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, religious adherents may even express their views in religious language by assuming a forthcoming translation, that is, that somewhere along the line their views will be translated to secular terms, even if this translation is done by someone else.

Christians confess that all truth comes from God, whether through reason or revelation, so that reason and revelation are not in conflict with each other. If this is the case, one could argue that the demand for translation is acceptable.<sup>8</sup> Yet there are at least two challenges to this view. First, while reason properly exercised does not contradict revelation, reason is rarely exercised properly. Reason injured by sin is not always able or willing to discern or receive truth; neither is it always willing to accept truth presented in revelation. Thus, because of the fallen nature of reason and the recalcitrance of human beings to refuse to recognize their fallen reason, the truth of reason and revelation often appears to be varied. Furthermore, knowledge obtained through reason is shrouded by sin and thereby fragmented and wrong in some ways. In spite of the agreement of truth in revelation and reason, there remains the difficulty of demonstrating the rationality of religion to the world. This difficulty is the fundamental stumbling block to the reception of religious claims in the public square.<sup>9</sup>

Second, by demanding that religious claims be translated to the language of public reason, political liberalism is implicitly demanding that religion conform to its standards. Liberalism presumes superiority. It recognizes no distinct value in the revelatory, dogmatic, spiritual, or ethical claims of religion. Religion is reduced to ceremonies and rituals that

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<sup>7</sup> Bernd Irlenborn, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Habermas on the Role of Christian Faith,” *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 434.

<sup>8</sup> Irlenborn, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 435.

<sup>9</sup> Irlenborn, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 438.

have no meaning and that cannot be discerned or attained through reason.<sup>10</sup>

There is a further challenge in liberal political systems. Constitutional structures tend to dull the distinct voices of various groups. Toleration, generally accepted as a good political practice, encourages the multiplication of interest groups. In order to produce new legislation and public agreement of policies, these many groups must work toward various compromises. The compromises, however, work against the unique voice of each group. In a liberal system, groups are not coerced into accepting views contrary to their values, but refusal to compromise typically results in marginalization. In order to have some voice, even if it is a tempered one, the distinct views of various groups are sidelined in the name of progress.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, some supporters of the liberal political model encourage the participation of fundamentalist and extreme groups in the mainstream conversations and processes of society because it tends to temper their views. Congress itself, as holding the legislative power, "molds the activity of religious leaders and does so in a way that makes their lobby efforts more broadly palatable."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a liberal system, especially one that demands translation of religious language, leads either to compromise or to marginalization.

## II. The Religious Character of the State

Modern political liberalism, furthermore, reveals itself to be a kind of "secular fundamentalism," a religion of sorts.<sup>13</sup> Ideally, we imagine in the modern liberal state that the government serves the people by exercising political authority on its behalf. The government serves at the will of the people. In practice, modern states develop institutions and a corresponding identity that are distinct from the people. Even if the government claims an attitude of benevolence, the governmental and social institutions that grow up in liberal, bureaucratic states reduce the government's accountability toward the people. A distinction between the people and the state opens up.

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<sup>10</sup> Read, "Religion as Sedition," 87.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Edwin Bailey, "The Wisdom of Serpents: Why Religious Groups Use Secular Language," *Journal of Church and State* 44, no. 2 (2002): 267.

<sup>12</sup> Allen D. Hertzke, *Representing God in Washington: The Role of Religious Lobbies in the American Polity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 158, cited in Bailey, "The Wisdom of Serpents," 268.

<sup>13</sup> Read, "Religion as Sedition," 93.

In such situations, the state depends on loyal citizens in order to perpetuate its authority. State authority still derives from the people, not because the government stands in the stead of the people and serves them, but because the state has garnered a sufficient loyalty from the people to execute certain policies and agendas. “[T]he state depends on the loyalties of its citizens in order to continue to exercise the authority it claims over them.”<sup>14</sup> In order to encourage and retain these loyalties, states support practices—even rituals—that form citizens toward state loyalty. Formation is the cultivation of qualities that aim at certain goods and that are cultivated by practices that pursue these goods.<sup>15</sup> Patriotic practices such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, singing the national anthem, flying flags, and reciting the stories of patriotic heroes like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are parts of a nationally formative liturgy.<sup>16</sup> Many of these patriotic rituals are not ancient practices but originated in the nineteenth century in an attempt to develop the national identity of people over and against local and concrete identities (e.g., ethnic, religious, economic, or regional).<sup>17</sup> Contemporary news contributes to a national grand narrative, highlighting those events that loyal citizens should deem important.<sup>18</sup> Such narratives, rituals, and practices form the people with the kind of habits and imagination that are loyal to the state. “The character formation the state enacts, therefore, is oriented towards the privileging of state ends.”<sup>19</sup>

Practices formative for identifying with the state try to mimic certain aspects of formation along ethnic, economic, or religious identities, yet there are important differences. These latter, concrete identities nurture what we might call traditional goods: marriage and procreation, occupations that contribute to others in a community, the organized self-defense of a people, practical education, and reconciliation with God in Christ. In traditional societies, government also supported such goods, yet

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist: Christian Formation against the State,” *Political Theology* 12, no. 1 (2011): 50.

<sup>15</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 52.

<sup>16</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” in *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10–12.

<sup>18</sup> Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” 117.

<sup>19</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 50.



in modern liberal states, national goods are becoming increasingly abstract and idealized. Liberty and justice in eighteenth-century America meant, among other things, the right to own property, the right to work to develop wealth, and the right to equal justice under the rule of law—an existential justice that would be experienced before a jury. Even when these rights were not extended to all, or were violated, they were meaningful—for the farmer who could own land, the artisan who could sell his craft, the minuteman who could own and carry a firearm, and the citizen whose voice and vote had impact.

What, however, is the meaning of liberty and justice today? Certainly the concrete aspects have not yet been lost. Americans own land, buy and sell, own firearms, and vote, but the concepts of rights are increasingly distanced from daily life. Liberty and justice are part of a rhetoric of the ideas of liberty and justice. They refer not just to property or equal protection under the law, but to the liberation of other nations, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, to a freedom of any sort of expression, even if such expression is deviant action, and to the implied immunity of the American state from critique. Finally, liberty and justice mean different things to different people, and each person, when he hears these terms, begins to fill them in with what he conceives to be their meaning. Less and less are they connected with common, concrete realities of economy, defense, and ordered political rights.

If the state is successful at abstracting political goods, it immunizes itself from particular forms of life that people may take; it places itself beyond the criticism of smaller communities that would be oriented around local, parochial social goods, such as property, guns, independent occupations, and particular kinds of education.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the successful abstraction of political goods undermines, makes obsolete, or dissolves these concrete community goods.

On the surface, however, it appears that the opposite is true. The state claims that all people have rights and may pursue them, and that it will not interfere with these rights. In reality, the state supplies and enforces the “forum in which these competing rights and interests are negotiated.”<sup>21</sup> As a referee of the debate over goods, the state increasingly determines that no particular conception of goods is permitted to dominate or win out over other conceptions. The state actually works against a clear answer to the questions over what is good in order to maintain a public atmosphere

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<sup>20</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 52.

<sup>21</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 52.

of unlimited expression. Thus, the public sphere is an arena for perpetual debate, not a forum for reaching conclusions about what is good. People and social institutions are encouraged to pursue their particular goods privately, but conclusions over concrete goods are excluded on the grounds that they restrict the freedoms of others.<sup>22</sup>

If the state is actively working against the articulation of and establishment of particular, concrete goods, and instead encouraging the perpetuation of discussion and disagreement, the state is supporting a shell of goodness rather than good itself. This formal good promoted by the state Craig Hovey labels "independent moral freedom."<sup>23</sup> Freedom of choice is greater than actually making a choice. That is, the potential for greatest possibility is valued more than actually choosing a direction, a choice which by nature excludes other options. In this way, dissent in the modern state is valued because it verifies and validates the state's claim that individual freedom is the one public good. Dissenters are upheld as modeling this good of the state, yet the content of their proposals may be downplayed or ignored. In fact, the call of the dissenters can never be acknowledged as a true good because this would limit the possibilities of freedom available to the public by closing off these possibilities in favor of one or another good.<sup>24</sup> Hovey writes, "Liberalism can tolerate religions only if they either strip themselves of 'intrinsic' aspects (i.e., are no longer truly a way of life, and are therefore in the end of no deep significance for their practitioners), or if their 'intrinsic' aspects are basically unthreatening to liberalism. . . ." <sup>25</sup> Thus, modern states form citizens to pursue their goods privately by claiming that they do not form citizens toward goods but merely referee the right to pursue their goods privately. State institutions maintain their authority by "guarding against competing notions of good and value in the public domain."<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the state's control of public debate and rationality has elevated the abstract concept of independent freedom to the highest good, while practically limiting the place of other goods in the public conversation. Freedom as an abstraction really means freedom as "indeterminable,"

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<sup>22</sup> Hovey, "Neither Cyclops nor Sophist," 53.

<sup>23</sup> Hovey, "Neither Cyclops nor Sophist," 54-55.

<sup>24</sup> Hovey, "Neither Cyclops nor Sophist," 55-56.

<sup>25</sup> Read, "Religion as Sedition," 92.

<sup>26</sup> Hovey, "Neither Cyclops nor Sophist," 53.

except to each individual.<sup>27</sup> Freedom has taken precedence over goodness, for freedom has become undefined, while goodness is determined by the passions and proclivities of individuals unbounded by moral conversation. Such freedom of choice dominates not only in politics and economics but also in religion, so that the truth about God is also avoided in favor of the concept of “god.” The concept “god” is then defined by each person; god becomes what each person makes or conceives one’s god to be. God becomes a mere symbol, used in the public square and in political contexts, but only to have the definition of god filled in by each person who hears the term. Thus everyone can be satisfied, for the god honored by the government appears to be god as each person conceives of him in his heart. By forbidding the definition of god, the state approves of all definitions except those that would actually confess a God to whom people are accountable.<sup>28</sup> The self-idolatry of this situation is evident.

There is still a further threat of idolatry residing in the state itself. A truly just and free country requires more than just majority rule. It also includes affirmation of human rights, constitutionally determined limits on state power, equal protection under the law, independent courts, free press, educated citizens, a vital, independent private sector of society, the tolerance of loyal opposition, and the like. Some of these, such as human rights, appeal to a different authority than the government, such as natural law or God. Different authorities also demand distinct institutions, such as the church, family, or even workers clubs or social clubs. Without these kinds of institutions independent from the state, without a structured place for appeal external to the state, there is only tyrannical statism. The state becomes the only power structure. With the reduction of authority to one institution, the state, a society becomes inherently intolerant, excluding all points of view that challenge, conflict with, or oppose the state position.<sup>29</sup>

In excluding other institutions, whether local, social, religious, or occupational, the state assumes the roles of these other institutions. The greatest threat is when the state replaces religious life, for the undefined god-concept is filled by the state and its actions. In the United States, this is complicated by the heritage of American exceptionalism: the national perception that the United States has a unique moral, political, and eco-

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<sup>27</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, “Messianic Nation,” in *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 92–93.

<sup>28</sup> Cavanaugh, “Messianic Nation,” 93.

<sup>29</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 149–153.

conomic status among all countries to exemplify and promote the free and democratic society. America's economic strength, unparalleled military power, and successful political institutions—both domestically and in comparison with other countries—lead many Americans to accept these systems with little criticism or question. Furthermore, the United States actively promotes and asserts its ways abroad. While few acknowledge as much, this attitude and these actions assume a god-like character of superiority, extension, and immunity from judgment by other points of view. In spite of rhetoric that acknowledges freedom of worship, the American experience demonstrates “the taking over of the omnipotence and omniscience of God by the political authority.” Rhetorically, the undefined god is whoever (or whatever) one wants it to be. Pragmatically, the undefined god is redefined as the state.<sup>30</sup>

The result is the American civil religion that ritualizes and idealizes the American state. Yet it is a state that is not truly political in the sense of being a community of citizens, for it fails to nurture concrete goods oriented around daily life. It is a state that has made itself the god of a religion by making transcendent its core value: independent freedom, by which its citizens are free to pursue whatever things give them pleasure and to worship whatever god they desire, so long as this god corresponds to the omniscient, omni-competent, and all-determining state. This god of the state comes complete with its own liturgy of allegiance, anthems, symbols, and prayers.

### III. The “Two Kingdoms” Revisited

The call for the church, then, is not that she be subsumed into the idolatry of the state, but that she call it to account. Robert Benne suggests rejuvenating the doctrine of the two kinds of authority in order to activate Christian participation in politics. He reminds us that the underlying concern addressed by the doctrine is that the world not be mistakenly ruled by the gospel, and that the gospel not be confused with the law in ruling the church.<sup>31</sup> It does not mean that religious views may not be expressed or used as reasons in the public square. He encourages Christians to know that their political concerns are not so out of touch that Christians would immediately be removed from office simply for expressing their views, or

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<sup>30</sup> Cavanaugh, “Messianic Nation,” 94–96.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Benne, “How Should Religious Convictions be Expressed in Political Life?,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (2012): 106.

that their policies could have no appeal, or that they can have no influence in politics.<sup>32</sup>

Benne further warns against what he calls “straight-line thinking” from theological convictions to uncompromising political policies. To expect to impose the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, replete with debt forgiveness, pacifism, and widespread socio-economic benefit plans, as a political policy is naïve and unloving. He notes that there are equally straight-line thinking policies on the right: policies to prohibit abortion, issue education vouchers, and strengthen the military.<sup>33</sup> This disagreement among Christians indicates to Benne that political ideology dominates faith, with religion merely being co-opted for political purposes.<sup>34</sup>

To avoid such co-opting, Benne advocates what he calls “critical engagement.” He emphasizes that Christians and non-Christians should work more deliberately in using reason and experience to transition from theological or philosophical convictions to public policies.<sup>35</sup> In this move from core convictions to policies, Christians may come to different conclusions due to their varying capacities for prudential judgment, genetic inclinations, integrity, ordering of values, psychological states and convictions, predispositions to certain policy agendas, and situations.<sup>36</sup> These differences should be respected and used as opportunities for further discussion, not division.

Furthermore, Benne argues, Christians should bring to bear in their political vocations the “moral and intellectual” tradition of Christianity, as well as a character renewed by Christ. Christians have greater insight into the world than non-Christians because they have more than reason and experience upon which to reflect; they also have the revelation of Scripture and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that Christian revelation and convictions should be implemented in a straight-line fashion, but that Christian truth should be presented for critical reflection by those engaged in policy-making.

What Benne suggests fits well into political philosophical arguments that are respectful of religion, even while wanting religious claims to be

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<sup>32</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 106.

<sup>33</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 107–108.

<sup>34</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 108.

<sup>35</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 108.

<sup>36</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 109.

<sup>37</sup> Benne, “Religious Convictions in Political Life,” 109–110.

made in a way that is accessible to reason. These views often call for sustained, deliberate, reflective dialogue in the pluralistic public square. Yet Benne does not address the underlying problem: he suggests nothing to mitigate the hegemony of the state. While compromise is the way of temporal politics, state-managed public debates that marginalize the church's voice tempt the church to change her voice. The voice of reason and policy described by Benne risks overshadowing the voice of truth.

#### IV. The Church as Divine Ordinance

This public-private divide imposed upon religion by the state should be challenged by the church. The church should speak and act like the church as her first priority and be less concerned with how the public receives this voice. One of the ways the church does this is by nurturing her communal identity apart from the state or political authority. As noted above, modern identity that is heavily influenced by the private-public split tends to see only two universal social units: the individual and the state. Yet this conception of society overlooks the ordered communities into which God has placed human beings: besides the political community, there is also the church and the household, which itself may be subdivided into family and economy. One may recognize these ordered communities as what Luther called the three estates or orders.<sup>38</sup> Bonhoeffer referred to them as "mandates" in order to emphasize their dynamic nature over against those who abused this teaching by justifying "the static elements of order" per se rather than the divine authority behind the orders.<sup>39</sup> In the theology of the divine orders, human sociality is not reduced to the individual and the state but exists as church, as family and economy, and as political society. Note here especially that political society does not require the modern conception of the encompassing, bureaucratic state, but rather authority that restrains and inflicts temporal punishment upon outward wickedness and that supports the common good.

Thus, a community of people consists not only of individuals in relation to the state but of people relating to each other in and through the orders of church, family, work, and government. One order does not have priority or primacy over the others, nor is one or more of the orders optional. Each exists according to God's command in this world; each exercises authority in a certain way and in mutual relation with the other. The church proclaims the revelation of God and offers to all men the

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<sup>38</sup> AE 38:364–365; cf. AC XVI.

<sup>39</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 389.

means of salvation in Christ. Even from a more political perspective, religion gives meaning to life that secular philosophy is no longer able to give, especially in the face of “contemporary existential and social pathologies.”<sup>40</sup> In the family, a man and woman are joined as one flesh and normally bring forth offspring to be raised and educated under the authority of the father. In work, people possess and labor with the matter and produce of creation in order to provide particular goods for others. And in government, the wicked are punished, and the church, family, and work are regulated to serve the common good. Again, no one order may usurp the authority of another without forsaking its own authority. Each order has a unique, indispensable role to play in the world.

One way to understand the unique authority and contribution of the orders is to borrow from political philosopher Jeffrey Stout’s conception of social practices. Although his understanding of “social practice” may be transient and has no mandate underlying its permanence, it compares in significant ways with the divine orders or mandates. For him, a social practice is a cooperative activity that produces goods for the participants and that forms the participants to appreciate the goods and to improve in their ability to achieve the goods. Striving according to the practice’s standards of excellence develops both understanding of the purposes of the activity and human powers to achieve the standards. Social practices reveal the goods valued by practitioners and the accompanying virtues exercised by these practices that are needed to attain the goods. Social practices often bring forth institutions that recognize, define, and formalize the standards of excellence and goods of a practice.<sup>41</sup> For example, the social practice or divine mandate of work has all sorts of institutions that are founded to support different occupations, improve skills and temperaments suitable for the occupation, and to better achieve the fruits of labor. Such institutions include schools, employment, certifications, quality control, labor unions, companies and corporations, and so forth. Marriage and family are their own institution, which causes people to realize and to appreciate the goods of human love and service and leads to the procreation and education of children. The goods of the church include knowledge of the divine word, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and growth in good works, all of which are institutionalized in the liturgies, classes, associations and reconciled relationships of the church.

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<sup>40</sup> Irlenborn, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 435.

<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 274. Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

It is important that the institutionalization of the divine mandates help to develop not only the attainment of goods but their appreciation. Untutored little children appreciate very little the benefit of sacrificial love and service for others. But as they spend months and years in a family, experiencing the benefits of mutual love and being taught to act in love, they begin to appreciate and embrace the practices of love and service. Newlyweds may have a deep sense of the good of sacrificial love, but they experience it and appreciate it in a new and deeper way through the one-flesh union of marriage.

Because the attainment and appreciation of goods is connected to certain practices and institutions, the preservation of goods requires the preservation of corresponding practices and institutions. The good of forgiveness and eternal life does not remain outside of the church. Creativity and production, as well as associated virtues such as industry, self-discipline, and patience, would be greatly weakened without work. And an appreciation for life (as presented in little children) and longsuffering love for others would be severely injured without marriage and family.

### V. The Public Church

The church, therefore, is not just one voice among many in a secular political system. It is not a group for social activism. The church is its own distinct community and order alongside of and in partnership with the temporal political community. The church is not private, even when it gathers as two or three in a home or in the catacombs. Because the church is public, it cannot be coerced out of the public realm; rather, it engages with others in the public realm, even those who are not part of the church.<sup>42</sup> We can even understand the church as having political form, not exercising the temporal authority of the government, but as a gathering of members into a communal body—the body of Christ. “Christian living cannot simply be written off as dissent within a framework that works to enlist dissent in underwriting the state’s superiority.”<sup>43</sup> Even if the church is dismissed, excluded, or persecuted by the state, the church must recognize that “its polity does not exist *primarily* to dismantle the state or oppose state formation but it exists first to serve its own stated ends.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Steven Kettell, “On the Public Discourse of Religion: An Analysis of Christianity in the United Kingdom,” *Politics And Religion* 2, no. 3 (2009): 426.

<sup>43</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 65.

<sup>44</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 65.



The end or purpose of the church militant is to be a people in this world gathered around Word and Sacrament, forgiven of sin, reconciled to God, and sanctified for good works. The church has practices that form members toward these purposes. Theologically, we understand that these are more than just practices; these practices are means of grace, means of salvation, means of sanctification. Some of these practices or means are: gathering around, preaching, and listening in faith to the Word of Christ; receiving Holy Baptism; communing in the body and blood of Christ; confessing sin and receiving absolution; and exerting oneself in holiness in order to love and to serve others. By being formed in the church, “Christians . . . positively resist being formed by the state.”<sup>45</sup> This may mean greater and greater marginalization. Faithful Christian living may lead to political change, or it may not. The book of Revelation suggests that faithfulness often will lead not to political change but to marginalization. Yet, when the church recalls that she is to confess and act faithfully, and not ultimately to bring political change, she will be ready not only for marginalization but for martyrdom.

Martyrdom signals the impotence, not of the church, but of the state. Whatever it may threaten, in the end, the state can only kill the body. Yet, it cannot even take away the body. The martyred Christian still has his body for the resurrection; he still has life in Christ. Martyrdom reveals the people of the church to be formed differently from the state, in direct opposition to the claim that only the state can form people. Martyrs reveal the empty violence of the state and the people of the eternal kingdom.<sup>46</sup>

There is yet a fight to be made in the temporal kingdom. There may be periodic political improvements, and the church should not shirk from seeking these within the context of faithful confession and faithful action. Since January 1, 2014, for example, the doctor who has performed surgical abortions in Fort Wayne in recent years is no longer permitted to carry on his gruesome trade since no local physician is willing to extend hospital privileges for his patients—a requirement recently enacted in Allen County.<sup>47</sup> We thank God and the steadfastness of faithful Christians who have brought this about. Such fruit comes from faithfulness, from an unwillingness to compromise, and from an unwillingness to be co-opted as an approved dissenter in the system of state idolatry. Such faithfulness, at

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<sup>45</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 65.

<sup>46</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 67.

<sup>47</sup> As of this printing, the situation is unchanged. Allen County remains free of surgical abortion providers.

times, even means being willing to translate the language of faith into the language of reason. Yet this is done rightly only when the translation does not attenuate the meaning. Such faithfulness may even mean that Christian politicians in the act of legislating may need to compromise with their secular counterparts. Yet such compromise should never be presented or understood as satisfactory to the church.

Such faithfulness is formed by a life centered in the congregation, living in and from the divine service, and being faced by others with true needs to whom we humble ourselves in true service. Such faithfulness more often than not suffers dismissal, exclusion, and marginalization at the hands of secular society, for Christians forsake the celebration of individual freedom of choice—the secular good imposed by the state—giving up the so-called freedom of possibility in order to live in the certainty of Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> When the church disregards state goals, when it refuses to be co-opted into the state enforcement of so-called rights, even in dissent, it actually embodies a “formation impossible even for states.”<sup>49</sup>

In this way the church lives in the world. Thanks be to God when a faithful Christian serves in political office. Thanks be to God when a wise man serves in political office. How much better it is when the man is both wise and a Christian. Yet whether or not such a situation occurs, the church is ordered to live and remain until the end of this world, standing in relation to the government but never being subsumed into government; speaking the truth to the government and never compromising her voice for political gain; and acting in humble service toward all men, whether that is in harmony with the state or whether it leads to a martyr’s death.

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<sup>48</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 65.

<sup>49</sup> Hovey, “Neither Cyclops nor Sophist,” 66.