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common or profane ([Acts 10:15](#)). Luther seems to have seen this point clearly in his exegesis on [John 1:14](#) 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. In the flesh which is a 'common' creation of God Luther sees the incarnate Christ identifying himself with sinful humanity and draws great comfort from it:

Thus the most precious treasure and the strongest consolation we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that He became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into great glory ...³⁰

Having become a true and natural man Christ 'dwelt among us':

He did not withdraw from people, retire into some shelter, escape into the desert, where no one could hear, see, or touch Him. But he appeared publicly, preaching and performing miracles, thereby enabling all the people who were about Him, among whom He moved and lived, to hear and touch Him.³¹

It is this incarnate Christ whom we must proclaim in Asia today. For Christ alone is the hope for Asia.

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The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms

John R. Stephenson

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The facet of his thought commonly referred to as the doctrine of the two kingdoms has provoked some of the most intractable confusion and bitter controversy in post-war continental Luther scholarship, and the ripples of this debate which reached these shores have all too often amounted to a litany of sweeping statements which have done nothing to enhance the Reformer's reputation in England. Yet even before Hitler's war Luther had endured a century of disfavour among the leading academic and ecclesiastical circles on this side of the Channel. So marked was British—more particularly, English—distaste for Luther in the opening years of this century that the American church historian Preserved Smith devoted an article to the subject in 1917, listing Anglo-Catholicism, rationalism, socialism and—since 1914—visceral hostility to all things German as four factors which

³⁰ LW 22, 110.

³¹ LW 22, 112.

had conspired to tarnish the Reformer's image in the minds of the English of that time.¹ Fifteen years later the celebrated Modernist H. D. A. Major was to lament that, 'Today Martin Luther, the greatest protagonist of the Reformation, is viewed as a vulgar, violent and mistaken man as hostile to humanist culture as he was to social democracy.'² The European conflict of the next decade provided the cue for the most damaging slur of all on the Reformer's memory, so that when in 1945, a third-rate pamphleteer denigrated Luther as 'Hitler's spiritual ancestor'³ his thesis had already been expressed by Archbishop William Temple, who had died the previous year. The smouldering dislike of the Reformer having been thus fanned into a blaze of contempt, it is to be feared that—despite the post-war Luther studies of Professors Rupp, Atkinson and Watson—Major's words are as true today as when he wrote them half a century ago. And there is no dimension of Luther's thought which has aroused such antipathy as his doctrine of the two kingdoms. It need only be recalled that a recent writer of humanist persuasion has, in the context of the outworking of this doctrine in the Peasants' War, seen fit to compare the Reformer with none other than Robespierre!⁴ Before such charges can be countered, the structure and content of the two kingdoms doctrine must be outlined.

GOVERNMENT OR KINGDOM?

The perplexity which bedevils scholarly discussion of the doctrine of the two kingdoms is reflected in the fact that the most eminent Luther scholars are unable to agree among themselves about its very name. There is good reason for this discord among the learned, for under the rubric 'two kingdoms' there lurks not one doctrine but two. On the one hand, Luther was concerned with the antithesis, expressed most sharply by the New Testament and St. Augustine, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. His first forays into theology as an Erfurt friar had caused him to become acquainted with the ceaseless combat between those who follow Cain in adhering to the *civitas terrena* and living in bondage to the finite goods of this transient life and those who follow Abel in cleaving to the imperishable Good which will be enjoyed in the everlasting Sabbath prepared for the members of the *civitas Dei*. On the other hand, however, Luther was also concerned with correctly apprehending God's present sovereignty over Christendom, the *Corpus Christianum*. In this case the model of the journey of the pilgrim people of God through a hostile world which is at root a *civitas diaboli* was no longer adequate. Hence, in addition to thinking in terms of the implacable enmity which obtains between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil, Luther could also explain how God exercises his sovereignty over all men through two 'governments' represented by spiritual and secular authority respectively. His so-called doctrine of the two kingdoms is in fact a pragmatic combination of these two conceptual pairs, the first of contrasts and the second of correlates. These two schemes are reflected in the preferred terminology of the opposing factions of Luther scholars. Should the accent be placed on the dualism of the kingdoms of God and the devil, then favour will be shown to the formulation 'doctrine of the two kingdoms' (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*). Alternatively, should chief emphasis be given to

¹ 'English Opinion of Luther', *Harvard Theological Review* (1917) p.157.

² 'Editorial Preface', *The Modern Churchman* (1932), p.225.

³ P. Wiener: *Martin Luther. Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*. (London, 1945) cf. the spirited reply by E. G. Rupp. *Martin Luther—Hitler's Cause or Cure?* (London, 1945).

⁴ Richard Marius: *Luther* (London, 1975), p.203.

the inter-relation of God's two complementary modes of rule, then one will speak, as do the majority of Luther scholars, of the 'doctrine of the two governments' (*Zwei-Regimente-Lehre*). Since the two kingdoms doctrine which emerges from a coalition of these two strains in the Reformer's thought encompasses the entirety of divine activity in both preserving the fallen Creation and leading it to salvation in Christ, it could be used as a kind of conceptual clotheshorse on which to spread out the whole of [P. 296](#) his theology. But even though this scheme would be ideally suited to provide the author of yet another comprehensive account of Luther's thought with a systematic structure in which to arrange his successive chapters, it cannot be sufficiently stressed that the Reformer's motive in recasting this traditional concept—or concepts—was not speculative but pastoral. This is made plain by the writing of 1523 which forms the most propitious source for our understanding of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, the significantly titled *On Secular Authority—to What Extent We Owe It Obedience*. In this brief treatise the Reformer sought to return an answer to two fundamental questions. First, what is the purpose and task of secular authority and what—in view of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount—should be the attitude of a Christian called to exercise it? Secondly, what are the proper limits of secular authority and what is the fitting relationship between it and spiritual authority?

Luther avers at the outset of *On Secular Authority* that the exercise of governmental power is not founded on the consent of the governed (as has been almost universally supposed since the Enlightenment), but on the ordinance of God. He accordingly appeals to [Rom. 13:1](#) and [1 Pet. 2:13](#).⁵ The reason for the establishment of secular authority lies in the divine will to preserve the fallen Creation and to prevent sinful man from tearing God's world apart. At this juncture Luther invokes the two kingdoms dualism: 'We are obliged here to divide Adam's children and all men into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God (*reych Gottis*) and the second to the kingdom of the world (*reych der welt*).⁶ The first of these categories is made up of 'all proper believers in Christ, who, in theory at least, have no need of secular government, for 'true Christians' are taught by the Holy Spirit to persevere in well-doing and to be prepared meekly to endure whatever injury and injustice may be inflicted on them.⁷ It is quite otherwise with those who belong to the *reych der welt*, and it is for the purpose of restraining these unruly spirits that God has established, quite apart from his own kingdom, another 'government' (*regiment*), based not on the free direction of the Spirit but on the coercion of the sword.⁸ Indeed God has established two governments which correspond to and cater for the subjects of the two kingdoms: 'God has therefore ordained two *regiment(s)*: the spiritual which by the Holy Spirit produces Christians and pious folk under Christ, and the secular [p. 297](#) which restrains un-Christian and evil folk so that they are obliged to keep outward peace, albeit by no merit of their own'.⁹ It is essential to grasp that Luther regards secular government within this framework as an integral part of the good divine work of preservation, for—especially when it conscientiously respects its appointed limits—civil authority acts as a curb against the kingdom of the devil. Accordingly, although its coercive authority must partially take the form of punishment and notwithstanding the fact that, as a tool of God's

⁵ WA 11. 247, 21–30.

⁶ WA 11. 249, 24–25.

⁷ WA 11. 249, 36–250, 9.

⁸ WA 11. 251, 1–8.

⁹ WA 11. 251, 15–18.

wrath, it must work his *opus alienum*, the eye of faith may discern in secular authority a manifestation—albeit usually blurred and at times outright paradoxical—of divine love. Perception of the divine benevolence which undergirds the exercise of order-creating authority in all spheres of light ought not, however, to lead to an unbalanced, ‘enthusiastic’ and ultimately idolatrous estimate of the function and competence of secular rule. The business of government at all levels is to patch up and preserve a non-ideal reality, and were its task to be compared with that of the modern hospital, then it might more properly be likened to the casualty department than to that of plastic surgery. That is to say, as a preservative of the fallen Creation secular authority operates under the law, being only indirectly related to the gospel which, as the life-giving message of the forgiveness of sin for Christ’s sake, plants the new Creation in the midst of the old. As it is customarily employed, the term ‘social gospel’ is therefore a theological nonsense. Luther has a parable in *On Secular Authority* which speaks directly to the enthusiasm of the ‘social gospel’. To rule the world with the gospel would, he contends, be like a shepherd putting wolves, lions, eagles and sheep all together in the same fold. In blissful naïveté the shepherd bids these creatures of disparate temperament enjoy their fodder in peace unhindered by the coercion of dogs or clubs. The sheep, surmises the Reformer, will indeed follow the ways of peace, but not for long.¹⁰

THE USE OF LAW

In teaching that government is to take place under the law, or rather according to the ‘first use of the law’, Luther is far from advocating a biblicistic theocracy with the law of Moses on the statute book. As he contended against the legalist Karlstadt, the Mosaic law is simply the ‘Jewish common law’ (*der Juden Sachsenspiegel*)¹¹, its enduring validity being contingent on its consonance with the dictates of natural P. 298 law. The Mosaic law in general and the Decalogue in particular are simply the clearest summary of a natural moral law revealed in the consciences of all men. Even Christ’s ‘golden rule’ is nothing more than an expression of such law: ‘For nature teaches how love acts, namely, that I ought to do as I would have done to myself.’¹² In company with the natural knowledge of God, the natural knowledge of binding moral precepts is obscured and suppressed by the wilful egotism of Adamic man. Even so, enough remains of the primal deposit for God to turn to good account in his work of preservation. In this context Luther delights in heaping praise on the sages and rulers of pagan antiquity. Such an encomium is to be found in the *Fürstenspiegel* which the Reformer wrote in 1534/35 in the guise of an exposition of Ps. 101. The dominant concept of the exposition is *Regiment*, a term which makes no fewer than ninety-five appearances in this short writing. In the course of his explanation of Ps. 101:5 Luther contends that, since its business is with bodily and temporal goods and not with the eternal salvation of souls, God has subjected the ‘*weltlich regiment*’ to reason: ‘The pagans are therefore able to speak and teach well on this subject, and have in fact done so. To tell the truth, they are far more skilful than Christians in these matters’.¹³ The Reformer therefore counsels those who would acquire wisdom concerning the administration of secular government to heed the literary treasures of pagan antiquity.

¹⁰ WA 11. 252. 3–11.

¹¹ WA 18.81, 14–17 (*Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, 1525).

¹² WA 11. 279, 19–20.

¹³ WA 51. 242,6–8.

The preservation of ‘the poets and histories, such as Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, Cicero, Livy and afterwards the fine jurists of old’ is to be ascribed to a kindly Providence which wished the pagans to have ‘their prophets, apostles, theologians and preachers for the *weltlich regiment*’.¹⁴ Secular government can function quite independently of the Christian faith, so that Luther could point out from the pulpit that the emperor need not be a saint or even a Christian: ‘*Satis est ad Caesarem, ut habeat rationem*’.¹⁵

It would be quite mistaken to infer from Luther’s admission that secular authority can be exercised independently of the ethos of Christendom that he deemed this an ideal state of affairs. On the contrary, firmly convinced that the business of government ‘as a special way of serving God pertains to Christians above all others on earth’,¹⁶ the Reformer did not neglect to augment the literary genre of the *Fürstenpiegel* or ‘manual of the Christian prince’ which had been a constant p. 299 feature of the Church’s homiletic tradition since the days of St. Augustine. The third part of *On Secular Authority* and the expositions of [Ps. 82](#) and [101](#) fall into this category. The duly called minister of the Word has, in Luther’s opinion, not only the right but also the solemn duty to remind the bearer of the sword of his duty before God: ‘If a preacher in his official capacity says to kings and princes ... “Consider and fear God and keep his commandments,” he is not meddling in the affairs of secular authority (*weltlich Oberkeyt*). On the contrary, he is thereby rendering service and obedience to the supreme authority (*hohesten Oberkeyt*).’¹⁷ For his own part Luther counsels the Christian prince in *On Secular Authority* to trust in God and to be diligent in prayer; to use his office for the service of his subjects; to sift his minister’s advice with due discrimination; and to deal firmly with evildoers, yet erring on the side of leniency rather than severity.¹⁸ These pages are imbued with Luther’s characteristic appeal to commonsense, urging the prince to eschew slavish adherence to positive written law, subjecting the latter ‘to reason, whence it has welled up as from a fountain’: ‘let reason remain master of law.’¹⁹ It would thus appear that Luther can hold that—theoretically—secular government and Christendom have nothing to do with each other, while averring at the same time that—practically—they have everything to do with each other. His view of the ideal relationship of God’s two modes of rule is that while they ought to be distinct from one another, they are yet inextricably linked: ‘neither is sufficient in the world without the other.’²⁰ But since the two governments rarely, if ever, complement one another according to the ideal theological blueprint of the Middle Ages, Luther’s view of the *weltlich regiment* must lack total consistency. While both governments were instituted to withstand the power of the devil, both in fact oscillate between the opposing kingdoms. The Reformer can accordingly contend both that ‘God intends the secular *Regiment* to be a model of ... the kingdom of heaven’²¹ and—changing into eschatological gear—that ‘Both kingdoms existed simultaneously at Rome, Emperor Nero ruling one against Christ

¹⁴ WA 51. 242,36–243, 3.

¹⁵ WA 27. 418,4.

¹⁶ WA 11. 258,1–3.

¹⁷ WA 51. 240, 7–10.

¹⁸ WA 11. 278, 17–23.

¹⁹ WA 11. 280, 16–17; 272, 16–17.

²⁰ WA 11. 252, 14.

²¹ WA 51, 241, 39–40.

and Christ ruling the other through his Apostles Peter and Paul against the devil.’²² The inconsistency here lies not in Luther’s mind, but in the changeable countenance of society.

The writing of *On Secular Authority* was partly occasioned by a p. 300 query raised by the greatest living authority on jurisprudence in the Empire, Johann Freiherr von Schwarzenberg, who was troubled by the apparent disharmony of Scripture which could affirm the coercive power of the sword in the apostolic writings while at the same time, supremely in the Sermon on the Mount, seeming to rule out recourse to or participation in its operations. The solution proffered by medieval Catholicism to the dilemma posed by the incongruity of the moral teachings of Moses and Jesus or—to adopt the Thomist idiom—between the old law and the new had been the division of Christians into the secular and religious estates. Those in the former category, including *par excellence* the bearers of the sword, were obliged simply to fulfil the divine precepts; while those who quitted the world for the cloister were to attain perfection by freely taking on them the yoke of the higher morality prescribed in the ‘evangelical counsels’ of the Sermon on the Mount.²³ By bringing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers out of cold storage, Luther was able to annul the medieval division of Christians into secular and religious. And his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount was not, as is popularly supposed, restricted to its role as fodder for the ‘second use of the law’, in which context its impossibly high standards would provoke smitten consciences to turn from the hopeless path of justification by works to crave absolution from the gospel. For the Reformer also acknowledged that the severe demands issued by Jesus in [Mt. 5–7](#) are commands binding on all Christians.²⁴ Even so, the application of his exegetical maxim, ‘*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*’, made it plain that the Sermon on the Mount could not possibly mean what the pacifist (or anarchist?) Anabaptists took it to mean. Luther was accordingly led to distinguish between the various situations in which the Christian must necessarily find himself. Always charged *coram Deo* with the commandment to love, the Christian is brought face to face with this immutable imperative in widely differing circumstances. Should only his own interests be at stake in a given situation, then the law of love dictates the path of renunciation of self prescribed in [Mt. 5–7](#) which took Jesus to the Cross. On the other hand, the Christian may be called to practise love in a context where not his own but his neighbour’s interests are at stake. In this case the Sermon on the Mount does not apply. Luther accordingly distinguishes between two persons present within each believer: the Christian as he exists before God and for himself (*Christperson*), and the Christian in society (*Weltperson*), clad in a p. 301 particular office (*Amt*)—for example, that of parenthood or governmental authority—which entails responsibility for others.²⁶ As *Weltperson* the Christian can in good conscience both seek redress for his neighbour from the civil power and, when called to do so, himself exercise that power for the benefit of others. The exercise of secular authority in faith can even be considered as a form of worship, (*Gottis dienst*): ‘As a special kind of *Gottis dienst* the sword and the authority of government pertain to Christians before all other folk on earth.’²⁷

²² WA 51, 238, 38–239, 1.

²³ See *Thomas Aquinas; Summa Theologica* II–II, qu. 183, 184, 186.

²⁴ WA 11. 245, 23–25; 259, 17–19.

²⁶ WA 11. 255, 9–15.

²⁷ WA 11. 258, 1–3.

THE RIGHT HAND AND LEFT HAND OF GOD

A difficulty can now be resolved which has led to sharp debate in postwar Luther scholarship. It has already been remarked that *On Secular Authority* opens with the Reformer availing himself of a characteristically Augustinian dualism, resolutely distinguishing the *Reich Gottes* from the *Reich der Welt* and adamant in his insistence that the order of secular government was instituted for those who belong to the latter. Onesidedly relying on this item of Luther's teaching, Johannes Heckel deemed it impossible for the Christian to be labelled a 'citizen of two kingdoms' (*Bürger zweier Reiche*). There are two grounds for supposing that Heckel's interpretation is unfaithful to the totality of Luther's thought. First, since the Christian is not entirely free of sin until perfectly sanctified in heaven, being *simul iustus et peccator*, it is not only the unregenerate who needs the restraints supplied by the 'first use of the law'. Secondly, since the Christians does not simply lead a life of uncluttered piety before God but always exists in this world as one shouldering the responsibilities of an office (*Amt*) or calling (*Beruf*), he is rightfully subject to secular government. Luther explicitly states as much in a disputation of 1539: 'The Christian *qua* Christian moves within the first table of the law, but he also exists apart from the kingdom of heaven as a citizen of this world (*civis huius mundi*). Hence he has a dual citizenship (*utrumque politeuma*), being subject to Christ through faith and to the emperor through his body.'²⁸

The Reformer was wont to characterise the first of these dimensions within which the Christian lives as the 'kingdom of God's right hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Rechten*) and the second as the 'kingdom of God's left hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Linken*). Commenting on [Ps. 110](#) in 1518, Luther is moved to define the 'right hand of God' as the 'kingdom (*königreich*) of Christ, which is a spiritual, hidden *reich*.' The counterpart to this kingdom, to wit, the 'visible and bodily *reich*', is aptly [p. 302](#) termed the 'left hand of God'.²⁹ A sermon delivered on 15th December 1532 illuminates Luther's understanding of the 'two kingdoms', which are here understood as identical with the 'two governments' and conceived without regard to the antithetical realms of God and the devil. Thinking of the sphere proper to the 'first use of the law', the Reformer contends that it 'is indeed our Lord God's *Reich*, albeit a temporal law and *regiment*. He wills us to respect this *Reich* with his left hand, but the *Reich* at his right hand is where he rules in person.'³⁰ This passage is important on two counts. First, it underscores the fact that the secular kingdom is not simply identical with the kingdom of Satan; rather, the 'kingdom of the left hand' was instituted to restrain evil. Secondly, as an example of Luther's use of *Reich* in the sense of *Regiment*, it points to the elasticity of these concepts in his thought. There is no clear-cut distinction between *Reich* and *Regiment*, *regnum* and *regimen*, in his usage.³¹ The expression 'two kingdoms' therefore often sounds more dualistic than it really is. Properly understood, it is usually little more than shorthand for God's two modes of rule.

While mention of the 'two kingdoms' almost invariably conjures up the figure of Martin Luther, he is demonstrably not the parent of the concept in either of its two senses. The idea of the opposing kingdoms of God and the devil was rooted in the Bible and mediated to medieval Christendom through the theology of S. Augustine. And the idea of the two correlate powers through which God governs the Christian world was outlined as

²⁸ WA 39 II. 81, 16–18.

²⁹ WA 1. 692, 8–11.

³⁰ WA 36. 385, 6–9.

³¹ cf. Paul Althaus; *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1972), p.49.

early as 494 by Pope Gelasius I in a letter to Emperor Anastasius I: 'There are, august emperor, two means by which this world is principally governed, namely the consecrated authority of the pontiffs and the royal power.'³² The ideal relationship between the bearer of the secular sword and the one whose only legitimate weapon was the sword of the Spirit was doubtless initially intended to rest on mutual equality and careful avoidance by each of infringement in the other's proper sphere. Gelasius' successor Symmachus thought to strike a fitting balance with his suggestion to the same emperor, 'Defer to God in us and we shall defer to God in you.'³³ For the purposes of this paper it is essential to recollect the runaway inflation of the papal claims during the millenium which separated Luther from Gelasius I. Boniface VIII's *Unam Sanctam* of 1302 represents the pinnacle of this development with its insistence that the secular sword is rightfully p. 303 subordinate to the spiritual sword wielded by the Pope and that it ought to be exercised on behalf of the Church. Boniface claims for the Pope the right to judge and, should the need arise, to depose secular rulers, while averring that the successor of Peter, as the '*homo spiritualis*' of [1 Cor. 2:15](#), is subject to the superior jurisdiction of God alone.³⁴ Only against the backcloth of these claims can we comprehend the vehemence of Luther's reaction to the medieval blurring of the boundary between the spiritual and secular spheres. Forgetful of the sharp antithesis of law and gospel, the medieval Church has illicitly compounded the two to produce a Pelagianising account of the justification of the sinner. The Reformer likewise found the Christendom of his day guilty of standing the divinely established order on its head by permitting the higher clergy to assume political authority and by encouraging secular rulers to employ coercive means in the resolution of religious difficulties: 'The Pope and the bishops should look to their episcopal duty and preach God's Word. This task they have neglected to become secular princes, ruling through laws which pertain only to the body and property. They have finely turned (God's order) inside out, for while they are supposed to rule souls inwardly through God's Word, in fact they rule castles, cities, land and people outwardly, torturing soul with unspeakable murder. Secular lords are likewise meant to rule land and people outwardly. Neglectful of this task, ... they wish to rule souls in a spiritual capacity.'³⁵ In view of this dual danger, Luther contends that, 'I am constantly obliged to beat, hammer, drive and knock in the distinction between these two kingdoms, even though I should write and speak about it so often that it becomes wearisome. For the accursed devil is unceasingly cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into one.'³⁶

LIMITS TO THE TWO GOVERNMENTS

The second part of *On Secular Authority* deals with the question of the proper limits of spiritual and secular government and with the grave problem of the extent of the subject's duty to obey commands which go beyond the competence of their giver. The Reformer was prompted to turn his mind to these issues by the outbreak of bloody persecution of 'evangelicals' which marked the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. 1st July 1523 saw the Augustinian friars Henricus Vos and Jan van P. 304 den Eschen burned at the stake in

³² Denzinger-Schönmetzer: *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no. 347.

³³ Denzinger-Schönmetzer: op. cit., no. 362.

³⁴ Denzinger-Schönmetzer: op. cit., no. 468.

³⁵ WA 11. 265, 7–19.

³⁶ WA 51. 239, 22–25.

Brussels marketplace; and meanwhile, nearer home, Luther's *bête noire* Duke George had forbidden the sale of his translation of the New Testament in ducal Saxony and demanded the surrender of those copies already distributed. Against this background Luther enquires 'how long the arm (of secular government) may extend and how far its hand may reach, lest it should overreach itself by assaulting God in his *reych und regiment*'³⁷ His answer is that 'secular government has laws which extend no further than the body and property and what is external on earth.'³⁸ Yet even within the bounds of the 'kingdom of the left hand' no secular ruler is entitled to unquestioning obedience. Already in the treatise *Von den guten Werken* of 1520 Luther teaches that the duty to obey earthly rulers rests on the supreme authority of the Decalogue, the scope of whose fourth (fifth) injunction he widens to embrace territorial and spiritual parenthood as embodied in secular rulers and bearers of ecclesiastical office. The subject's duty to obey is, however, qualified by the *clausula Petri* of [Acts 5:29](#): 'Should it transpire, as is in fact often the case, that secular authority and *Obrigkeit*, as it is called, should try to persuade a subject to act contrary to God's commands, or to prevent him from keeping them, then his obedience is at an end and his duty is abrogated. We must here echo St. Peter's statement to the Jewish rulers: 'We must obey God more than men.'³⁹ Luther immediately gives a concrete instance of the application of the *clausula Petri* with his contention that no upright soldier should render obedience or otherwise give succour to a prince who 'wishes to go to war in a manifestly unjust cause.'⁴⁰ The same counsel is given three years later in *On Secular Authority*⁴¹ and then repeated in a pamphlet on the ethics of war published in 1526. The reason given in the latter for not performing military service 'when you know for sure that (your lord) is in the wrong' has an unmistakably Martinian ring: 'for in this case you can have no good conscience before God.'⁴² Nor was this principle forgotten by the aged Reformer who, in a letter of 7th April 1542, urges the soldier caught up in an unjust campaign to 'run from the field ... and save his soul.'⁴³

While physical coercion must necessarily be employed in the 'kingdom of the left hand', it has no place in the 'kingdom of the right hand'. p. 305 Secular government has lawful jurisdiction over the body, 'but God neither can nor will let anyone rule over the soul but himself alone.'⁴⁴ The meaning of this statement is not that each soul is capable of immediate and private communion with God independently of the divinely willed means of grace. For in keeping with the incarnational tenor of his theology as a whole, Luther consistently taught that inward grace is not bestowed except through the outward Word and Sacraments.⁴⁵ Nor would it be far-fetched to ascribe to the Reformer a mediatorial conception of the ministerial office: Christ himself preaches and celebrates the three

³⁷ WA 11. 261, 30–31.

³⁸ WA 11. 262, 7–9.

³⁹ WA 6. 265, 15–19.

⁴⁰ WA 6. 265, 21–26.

⁴¹ WA 11. 277, 28–31.

⁴² WA 19. 656, 22–25.

⁴³ WABR 10. 36, 157–158.

⁴⁴ WA 11. 262, 9–10.

⁴⁵ WA 18. 136, 9–18.

sacraments of baptism, eucharist and absolution through the pastor.⁴⁶ Yet notwithstanding this high doctrine of the ministry, Luther taught with equal consistency that the distinction of true from false doctrines is *per se* no concern of the secular authorities: 'How one believes or does not believe is a matter for the individual conscience and hence involves no injury to the secular power. The latter ought therefore to be content to attend to its own affairs, permitting men to believe this way or that ... and persuading no one by force. For faith is a free work which no one can produce by violent means.'⁴⁷ The cynic may hold that when Luther remarked in 1521, 'Burning heretics is not to my liking,'⁴⁸ he was at least partly motivated by concern for self-survival. It is therefore profitable to recall that when he himself held the upper hand in the form of the favour of the Saxon princes, the Reformer remained true to the principle of toleration. In his open letter of 1524 *Against the seditious spirit*, Luther refrains from invoking the assistance of the secular arm against the enthusiastic preaching of Thomas Müntzer. Even though the latter's teaching leads souls to destruction, it can only be countered by spiritual weapons; and the Saxon princes should intervene in Allstedt only in the event of a breach of the peace: 'Simply let them preach with vigour and confidence ... against whom they will. For as I have said, there must needs be sects (cf. [1 Cor. 11-19](#)) and the Word of God must take to the field and engage in battle ... If their spirit is genuine, it will have no fear of us and will endure; and if ours is genuine, neither will it fear them or anyone. Let the spirits go at it hammer and tongs. Should some souls be led astray in the process, so be it, this is the way of war. Some are bound to fall and suffer injury where battle is waged, but anyone who fights with integrity will p. 306 receive a crown. Should they wish to do more than fight with the Word, however, that is, should they wish to smash and smite with their fists, then Your Graces ought to intervene.'⁴⁹ As Heinrich Bornkamm comments, 'These words are of epochal significance in the history of toleration.'⁵⁰

THE RELEVANCE OF A VIA MEDIA

The post-war period has seen Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms become the butt of severe and at times intemperate criticism. In brief, this facet of his thought has been held responsible for an alleged surrender of political and social reality to their own devices by German Protestantism which is supposed, whether directly or indirectly, to have paved the way for the triumph of the Third Reich. The Reformer is charged with having planted a virus of unquestioning servility in the bloodstream of the German people; with having encouraged a fateful quietistic retreat from everyday life; and with having sundered the bond which subjects secular life to the restraints of Christian morality. Granted 'autonomy' by a failure of nerve on the part of its spiritual mentor, the German nation is thought to have been blown through the succeeding centuries bereft of ethical ballast and to have fallen in the fullness of time like a ripe apple into the hands of the National Socialists. Perhaps the most famous and influential expression of this accusation was given by Karl Barth in 1939 under the guise of a 'letter to France'. Seeking to uncover the root of the 'extraordinary political stupidity, confusion and helplessness of the German

⁴⁶ WATR 3. 672-674; WA 50. 245, 1-20; 246, 20-29, cf. also *Confessio Augustana*, art. 5.

⁴⁷ WA 11. 264, 16-20.

⁴⁸ WA 7. 645, 36.

⁴⁹ WA 15. 218, 19-219, 6.

⁵⁰ *Martin Luther in der Mitre seines Lebens* (Göttingen, 1979), p. 146.

people', Barth contended that the latter 'is suffering from the heritage of the greatest Christian German, to wit, from Martin Luther's error concerning the relationship between law and gospel and between secular and spiritual order and power, an error whose effect was not to limit and restrict his natural paganism (*Heidentum*), but—on the contrary—to afford it ideological glorification, sustenance and encouragement.'⁵¹ The ultimate cause of Barth's distaste for the two kingdoms doctrine would thus appear, on the basis of his 'letter to France', to have little to do with the substance of the Reformer's ethics but rather to lie in the structure of his own theological thought. For as has been noted above, Luther's view of the operation of secular government within the 'kingdom of the left hand' presupposes a universal revelation of divine-cum-natural law in the conscience; in other words, it breathes P. 307 the air of natural theology. In the opinion of the present writer, this is one of the most admirable features of Luther's doctrine, but, in presenting apologetics with a sound starting-point, the Reformer indicated a 'point of connection' whose very existence Barth was bound to deny.

There are at least three grounds for dismissing the charge that, with his two kingdoms doctrine, Luther was in some way 'Hitler's spiritual ancestor'. First, it would seem that the so-called 'doctrine of the two kingdoms' was not in fact the part of his social teaching which exercised the greatest influence in his native land during the four centuries which followed the Reformer's death. For this role was played by the entirely un-dualistic conception of the three 'hierarchies' (economic, political and ecclesiastical) through which God was held to govern Christendom.⁵² While this scheme may well have fostered paternalist attitudes, it is sheer fancifulness to link it with fascism. Second, it is quite mistaken to suppose that German Protestantism on the eve of the Third Reich was predominantly Lutheran in any meaningful sense. Since the House of Hohenzollern adopted the Reformed faith in the opening years of the seventeenth century, a relentless war of attrition had been waged against the Lutheran Church by the rulers of Prussia. Police measures were taken against advocates of Lutheran Orthodoxy by the Great Elector; the martinet father of Frederick the Great forcibly suppressed the liturgical expression of the Lutheran faith in the 1730s; and Frederick William III drove a coach and horses through the Lutheran Confessions with his compulsory union of 1817. By the following century German Lutheranism had become one school of thought among several instead of a distinctive Church. It is notorious that distinctively and predominantly Lutheran Scandinavia has had a far happier political development than was vouchsafed to Germany itself, and a recent writer on Luther's social ethics has argued that there is a direct connection between these and the Scandinavian welfare states.⁵³ Luther: Beveridge's spiritual ancestor! Third, the error of National Socialism consisted not in unduly separating the two kingdoms, but in neglecting the limits imposed on the one and the rightful liberties of the other to fuse the two into a totalitarian unity which was a parody of both. The accusation that Luther advocated unbounded obedience to the commands of the secular power can only rest on ignorance of his repeated stress on the *clausula Petri*. And his advice to the soldier to decline to fight in an unjust war was relevant p. 308 precisely to the Third Reich. It may, however, be conceded that there are two ineradicable stains on the Reformer's reputation in the field of social ethics. The first stems from his well-publicised advice to the princes to make short shrift of the rebellious

⁵¹ *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (Zürich, 1945), p. 113.

⁵² WA 50. 652.

⁵³ G. W. Forell: *Faith Active in Love. An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York, 1954), pp. 18, 22–25.

peasants, and the second from the elderly Luther's immoderate outbursts against the Jews. The most remarkable feature of these two sets of utterances in the present context is not that they mirror Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, but that they contravene principles which are central to it. In the first case, Luther forgets his own counsel that the prince should eschew severity and punish with leniency; in the second, that faith is a free work which cannot be produced by violent means. The two kingdoms doctrine affords the most efficacious remedy for Luther's own excesses.

While the continued usefulness of the three hierarchies conception may not be immediately apparent, the doctrine of the two kingdoms remains relevant today. Both spiritual and secular rule still oscillate between the realms of God and the devil. And, as at least two-thirds of the globe exists in the grip of a totalitarian ideology which is wilfully oblivious of the mystery of transcendence and of its corollary, namely the limits which are set to the exercise of secular power, mankind is summoned as never before to beware of any governmental or social system which assaults God in his *Reich und Regiment*. Meanwhile, where Christendom is still free to discharge an untrammelled prophetic ministry to the world about, its spokesmen in the several confessions and denominations often seem wont to absolutise one or other of those two half-truths which can be succinctly labelled 'verticalism' and 'horizontalism' respectively. Thus while Dr. Edward Norman's mordant analysis of present trends justly merits respect and, on the whole, assent, it must be asked whether he could in the end of the day be exculpated of the charge of rending the two kingdoms asunder by hinting that the Christian faith and political reality are not even indirectly related. Nor are voices lacking which suggest that the Church's primary task is to act as the midwife of political and social change, substituting a transient secularist creed from the faith once delivered to the saints. Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms manages to combine the insight that the Church's prime duty is to publish abroad the message of both the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake and the future restoration of our vitiated human nature in eternity with the acknowledgement of the essential God-pleasingness of the performance of provisional secular tasks in faith. And his realisation of the pre-eminence of the heavenly over the earthly vocation, and of the perils which beset the Christian in both these spheres, provides a salutary antidote to the idolatry of enthusiasm which would identify p. 309 law and gospel, summoning heaven and earth and producing hell. Avoiding these pitfalls, the Reformer became the architect of a *via media* which might be trodden with profit today.

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The Early Church as a Caring Community

Robert Banks

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This article gives pastoral insights into the personal and social caring of the Early Church. The author details some of the implications of these for social work today.