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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 Bolognesi

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 state¹ 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

¹ 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."²

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.³ 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

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

³ 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 restoration⁴.

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

⁴ 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](#))⁵.

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 ([1 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 ([1 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*.

[1 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

⁵ 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](#))⁶, 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'⁷. 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, too⁸. 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 demands⁹, 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

⁶ Nearly all the commentaries of this book emphasize this dimension.

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

⁸ 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).

⁹ 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*¹⁰. It must be a ministry of justice. There is no relationship whatsoever between men that has not been vindicated by God¹¹. 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'¹², 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 reproposing 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

¹⁰ 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).

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

¹² 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 God¹³.

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

¹³ 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 him¹⁴.

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

¹⁴ 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 them¹⁵. 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

¹⁵ 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'.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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]¹⁸ 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'.¹⁹

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

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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*²¹ and offer 'divine service'.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴ 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 freedom²⁵ and in that concerning civil government.²⁶

²⁰ '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

²¹ *Comm ad Gal.*, WA 40, 1, 292, 6.

²² WA 11, 260, 34: Gottesdienst.

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

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* [1559].

²⁶ 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'.²⁷ 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'.²⁸ 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.'²⁹

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'.³⁰ 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.'³¹ 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.'³² 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.'³³ It is easy to understand from this that to Calvin's way of

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

²⁸ *Inst.* IV, 20, 1.

²⁹ J. Calvin, *Comm. aux Ephésiens* 5:21.

³⁰ *Inst.* IV, 20, 1.

³¹ *Inst.* IV, 20, 2.

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

³³ 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.³⁴

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'³⁵ and therefore does not have indiscriminate validity. That distinguishes Calvin from the school of theonomy.³⁶

According to Calvin there are in man two worlds that can be traced back to different kings and laws.³⁷ 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.'³⁸

'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.'³⁹

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.

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

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

³⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, G. Bahnsen, cf. W. Godfrey, *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Inst.* III, 19, 15.

³⁸ J. Calvin, *Inst.* IV, 20, 4.

³⁹ *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.'⁴⁰

Anabaptism distinguishes sharply between the role of the state and that of Christians (*Confession of Schleithem*, 1527).⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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 lidenende 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.

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

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

⁴² 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 predicanen 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.’⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.’⁴⁶ 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 ...’⁴⁷ 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).

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ U. Gastaldi, L. Santini, E. Campi, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Samuel T. Logan, ‘New England Puritans and the State’ in *Theonomy. A Reformed Critique*, *op. cit.*, pp. 352–385.

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

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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],⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ ‘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

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651].

⁵⁰ 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’.⁵¹ 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.’⁵² 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.⁵³

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 ...’⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ Herman Dooyeweerd considered the principal function of the state to be the power of the sword.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ Now that

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

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

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

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

⁵⁵ A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 81.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ The Manifesto of Manila [1989],⁵⁹ 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'.⁶⁰

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'.⁶¹

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.⁶² They are certainly not true of all Evangelicals. Social action does not direct one's

⁵⁸ "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).

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

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

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

⁶² 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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?

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ Hebden 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.

⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.

⁶⁷ 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).

⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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

⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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

⁷⁰ 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).

⁷¹ 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'¹. '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

¹ James Comblin *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Orbis, 1989)