"My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18.36)

Conflict and Christian Existence in the world according to the Fourth Gospel

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We accept as fact that the NT evinces doctrinal pluralism. /1 If this is so for such fundamental issues as christology, it will be true, a fortiori, for the question of the Christian's attitude to the state and political involvement in general. What is implied in the Revelation of John does not accord easily, if at all, with what is written in Romans 13.1-7 and 1 Peter 2.13-17 and, so far, all our efforts to understand the circumstances in which these points of view emerged have done little to reduce the tension. In the history of Christian political thought two Johannine statements on the lips of Jesus have loomed large: "My kingdom is not of this world" (18.36) and "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (19.11). It is to the understanding of these two texts that this study devotes itself.

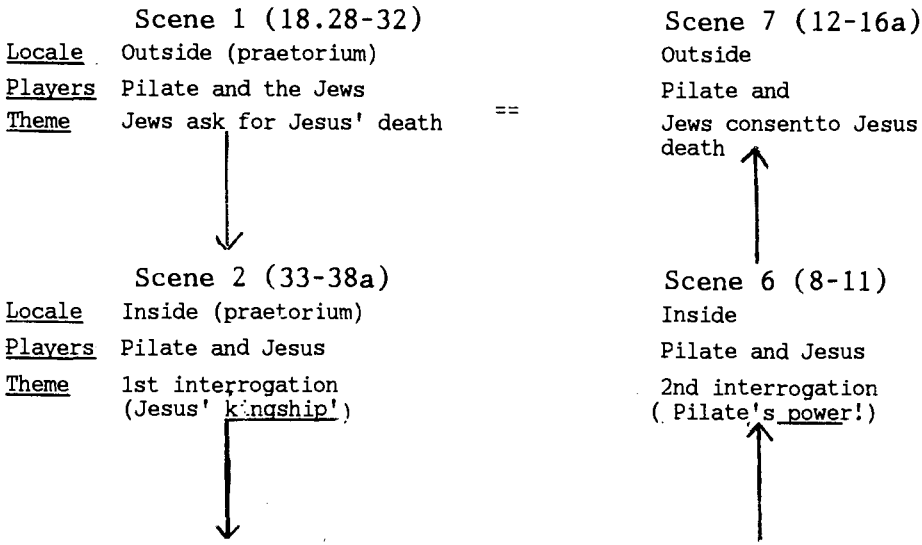
In reply to Pilate's question whether he is "king of the Jews", Jesus answers in terms not of kingly title but of kingdom, "My kingdom (basileia) is not of this world" (18.36). Do we, with the grandsons of Jude, the "brother" of the Lord, interpret this in a "spiritualist" sense - that is,that Jesus' kingship is purely heavenly and has nothing to do with this world: "It is not worldly or on earth, but heavenly and angelic, and will be established at the end of the world" (Eus. Hist.,20,4) Or do we, in the light of John 17.11,16, accept Augustine's distinction between kingship that is in the world, but not of it: "His kingdom is here till the end of time....but it does belong here because it is only in the world as a pilgrim" (In joh. CXV 2: PL 35, 1939)

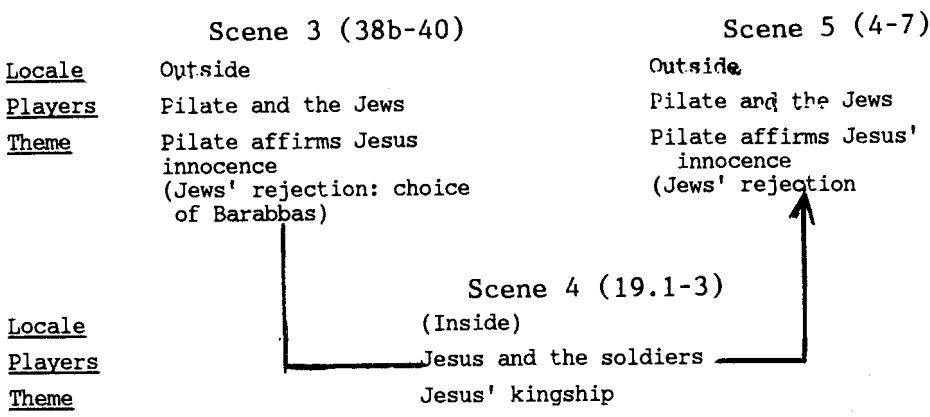
Again, a little later, in answer to Pilate's questioning, Jesus states, "You would have no power (or, authority: exousia) over me unless it had been given you from above (anōthen)" /2 Rudolph Bultmann /3 and Heinrich Schlier /4 find here the truth that all civil power ultimately derives from God and have built thereon a finished theory of the rights and duties of citizen and state. Others

like H. von Campehausen /5 and Ernst Haenchen /6, believe that the text tells us little about the nature of the political order.

Since both texts are set in John's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, they first must be studied in that context.

The theme of "the Kingdom of God", so prominent in the Synoptics, has, in John, all but given way to the theme of "Christ's kingship". Indeed, Christ's kingship - culminating in his exaltation or enthronement on the Cross - is a thread which binds together the entire Passion story. Jesus' trial before Pilate (18.28 - 19.16) is a carefully structured literary unity in which "kingship" links together several typically Johannine motifs. Most scholars divide this trial into seven scenes with two stage settings, the outside court of the Praetorium where "the Jews" are gathered, and the inside room of the praetorium where Jesus is held prisoner, with Pilate going back and forth from one to the other, thus giving "external expression to the struggle taking place within his soul, for the certainty of Jesus' innocence increases at the same rate as does the political pressure forcing him to condemn Jesus". /7 The diagram shows the carefully balanced chiastic arrangement of the trial.





This structure evidences three deeply theological interests. 1. The krisis or judgment of the world. The genesis of the drama lies not with Jesus and Pilate but with Jesus and the "Jews": they are the real contenders. Pilate is caught in the middle between clashing forces - Jesus (representing the world above) and "the Jews" (representing the world below). Despite his temporizing and indecision, he cannot escape coming down on one side or the other. Hence a key motif in the drama is "judgment" (krisis) - the encounter between Jesus and Pilate. And the ground for such encounters in John is always christological. Since Jesus is sent by the Father, his word encompasses the whole of our existence. Neutrality is impossible. To shut out Jesus' word of truth (truth incarnate) can only mean succumbing to the world's ways of acting and thinking. As Raymond Brown puts it, "Pilate, the would-be neutral man, is frustrated by the intensity of the partipants. Having failed to listen to the truth and to decide in its favour, he and all who would imitate him inevitably finish in the service of the world." /8 In his presentation there is an instance of Johannine irony. On the surface Pilate is judge and Jesus is the accused. In reality, Jesus (Truth) is judge and accuser; Pilate and the Jews" are the accused. Pilate rejects the truth and "the Jews" reject their Messiah. But, in the end Jesus is triumphantly enthroned on the Cross as true king and Messiah, not only of the Jews but of the whole world.

In a word, the krisis, the judgment, is a matter of recognizing Jesus' kingship.

2. The basileia or kingship of Jesus The centrality of "kingship" in this pericope is seen in the frequency with which Jesus is named "king (of the Jews)" (18.33,37,39; 19.3,12, 14,15). The Scenes 2 and 6 reflect on (a) the meaning and (b) the origin of kingship. Furthermore, in Scene 4 - the point on which the drama turns - we behold Jesus actually crowned as king (19.2,3) - Johannine irony again! We see, finally, the parallel unfolding (with its climax in Scene 7) of the two intertwined themes: Jesus' kingship and Jewish rejection of the claim. When we recall that the Johannine passion narrative is the story of Jesus' glorification, it is tempting to suggest that John has manoeuvered theencounter with Pilate in such a way as to culminate in a "royal epiphany" - "Behold your king7" /9

For John there is thus a very close tie between judgment and Jesus' kingship. When he is king, enthroned on a Cross, he will draw all people to himself (12.32; 3.14f.,8.28). As truth incarnate, no one can remain indifferent to him: depending on whether or not they give ear to his voice, people will decide one way or the other. Jesus' kingdom, though not of this "world" is nevertheless in it, for here is where the choice must and will be made.

3. Jesus' political inculpability The trial before Pilate also contains a two-fold apologetic interest. The charges against Jesus were not genuinely political: they were calumnies used to manipulate Pilate. John wants his reader to know (a) that Jesus was put to death not because he was a political revolutionary, but because, being sent by the Father, he witnessed to the truth that "the world" cannot bear; and (b) that the Roman empire consequently has no good ground for persecuting Christians. In the light of this we have reason to suspect that the texts, 18.36 and 19.11, do not directly address the question of the state's authority or of the Christian's political commitment. But do they perhaps do so indirectly?

Basileia and Exousia

1. Jesus' kingship (Scene 2) Pilate means his question in a political sense (ie "Are you the king of the Jews?"). A

simple denial will not suffice for the title has messianic (and therefore) political overtones of national liberation. Hence Jesus' three-stage answer is designed to disclose step by step the meaning of his basileia.

(a) Jesus' first answer (18.34) puts the dialogue on the proper footing. Taking the initiative, Jesus asks Pilate whether he is prepared to listen to the voice of truth or prefers to submit to rumour and manipulation. (The apologetic motiof is also present: it is really "The Jews", "the world", that seeks Jesus' death.)

(b) Jesus' second answer (18,36) does imply that Jesus is king, but it first excludes two misconceptions: (i) his kingdom does not belong to, is not modelled on the "world": as Lindars comments, "Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of this world of men apart from God, but a kingdom of men in relation to God": /10 and (ii) it must not be viewed as political and its power does not rest on armed strength or political manoeuvrings. By implication the "spiritualist" reading is also excluded: since Jesus is the light of the world made flesh, to deny that "judgment" occurs in this world would be to deny John's "realized eschatology". (John uses an above/below dialectic to express the same eschatological reserve that Paul conveys through the "already/not yet") Thus "world" often takes on a theological colouring: the "world" is the sphere of darkness that cannot be open to the light of truth, and so can only be opposed to God. Hence John's insistence that Jesus' presence affects the "judgment" of the world: "the world....hates me because of the evidence I bring against it" (7.7)

(c) Misunderstandings excluded, Jesus' third answer (18.37) redirects our attention from Jesus' kingdom to himself. "To be king" is "to bearwitness to the truth." As Brown observes, "John has not portrayed Jesus as a preacher of the kingdom but as a unique revealer who alone can speak and show the truth about God. Jesus has no real subjects as as would be true if his kingdom were like other kingdoms, rather he has followers who hear his voice as truth. Only those who belond to the truth can understand in what sense Jesus has a kingdom and is a king." /11 As the Father's unique revelation, Jesus is truth itself. Encounter with him leaves no room for neutrality, but makes clear whether

each belongs to God (Truth) or to the "world" (Falsehood). Jesus' presence removes the self-deception and blindness of those who erroneously claim to belong to the light: unbelief in Jesus shows thatsuch people in fact belong to the"world". With Jesus, the criterion that tells whether we do or do not belong to God is no longer "religion", but "hearing the voice of Jesus," and the verb akouein, constructed with the genitive, refers to listening with understanding and acceptance.

To summarize: Jesus' kingdom is not confined to man's interior. Hence, to the extent that the Christian community (in John's view) takes Jesus' word seriously, it may find itself in conflict with political powers, for Jesus' word disclose what may be false and sinful in the state: since the state disposes of coercive power, it may fail to use that power for love and service. Ultimately, the discordance of Christian existence derives from faith in and obedience to the truth revealed in Jesus. Is this conflict a matter of chance or necessity?

2. Pilate's "power" (Scene 6) Irked by Jesus' silence, Pilate asks)19.10= if Jesus is unaware of the power he has over him; Jesus replies that Pilate's power is nothing unless it comes from above (anōthen). Does "power" in vs11 mean the same as in vs10 and so imply that all political power and authority proceeds from God and therefore requires obedience from the governed? Or does "power" in vs11 merely refer to the concrete role (in judging Jesus) that Pilate must play in God's economy? Bultmann contends that the exousia of vs11 means legitimated authority, power, right"; but von Campenhausen, on the other hand, insists that we may not assume the same meaning for exousia in Both verses. The word exousia can have two meanings: (i) being able to perform an action without external hindrances, and (ii) the right to do something or right over something, hence legal authority. The context of 19.11 indicates a meaning closer to (i): Jesus speaks not of power in general, but, concretely, of Pilate's power "over me". "What Pilate has", says Barrett "is potestas: it rests entirely with him to release or to execute Jesus". /12 Since the divine economy required that Jesus' "lifting up" be realized on the Cross, Pilate's concrete role was therefore necessary: cf. the die hypsothēnai of 12.34. Jesus would be saying that his suffering and death

can happen only because they fulfil the Father's will. Power "from above" (anothen) would therefore not refer to the Emperor, but to God. Lindars puts the matter well:

> Jesus is willing to acknowledge that, if Pilate is true to his derived authority, and remembers its true source, he is not to be blamed for carrying out his duty, even though it will be the sentence of death. For even that is the fruit of the divine will. What is so serious and poignant is the fact the Jesus stands before Pilate as a result of man' unbelief, of their refusal to accept him as the one who came forth from God and was sent into the world by him. /13

Hence Jesus goes on to say (in 11b) that the Jewish authorities have "the greater sin": and sin, in John, is christological, the refusal to believe that God's salvific purpose in present in Jesus. "The implication seems to be that, since Pilate has been given a role in the passion by God, he is acting against Jesus unwittingly or unwillingly: but the one who handed Jesus over is acting deliverately," /14 whether that be a reference to Judas or, as is more likely, to the Jewish people.

Brown goes on to observe that Bultmann interprets the statement in vs11 in terms of the State and the World: the State, represented by Pilate, may misuse, its power, but it does so without the personal hatred of truth that characterizes the World. In putting Jesus to death the State (Pilate) is serving the World (the Jews) as it must do when it does not decide against the World. In similar vein Schlier writes. "When political power acts against the truth it is always less guilty than the intellectual and spiritual forces of the world" /15 It is probably true that this kind of view, held by certain German writers, understandably reflects the theological agonizing about the role of the State prompted by the Nazi experience. But other scholars, like Haenchen and von Campenhausen, have wisely asked if this is not a reinterpretation or re-application of John in the light of a modern theological problem, rather than an exposition of the evangelist's own viewpoint. Of course the struggle between Jesus and the Jewish authorities is a struggle between truth incarnate and the world, but the

introduction of the abstraction "the State" seems anachronistic.

Conclusion

John 18.36 cannot be used to defend a spiritualized, disincarnate mode of Christian existence. And 19.11 need not mean divine sanction of the State power. Christian existence is de facto (and is it also de iure?) a conflict because listening to Jesus' word of truth does provide the world's animus. To be more precise than that is difficult for John's interest is almost exclusively christological. And though John admits that Christian existence involves conflict - even with political powers - he provides no recipe for the "how" of this engagement. Nonetheless, the Christian cannot therefore be absolved from concrete political choices. This would be to succumb to the error of the "spiritualist" exegesis of these texts. John denies that Christianity is an alternative or parallel power to the state: but he does not deny that our actions as Christians will impinge on the political order.

Since the "world" - of John's day and of ours - is marked by murder and mendacity, true Christian principles in the spirit of Jesus will be quite other: willingness to die rather than escape at any price (12.24); service rather than dominion (13.13-17) or respectability (8.41); love for our fellows rather than egoism (13.34f); freedom of spirit to criticize the world despite its enmity - "the world...hates me because of the evidence I bring against it" (7.7) But let it be noted, such principles, with their potential for inspiring political options, remain quite general and do not furnish us with concrete blue-prints for political programmes.

Notes

1. Cf J.D.G. Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the NT (SCM, London, 1977) Even if some of his conservative critics claim that there is more unity and less diversity than Dunn postulates, there is agreement on his central thesis: the NT does not offer theological uniformity.

2 The logic the verse is difficult. Some have even arg-

ued that the clause "therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin" makes sense here only if Jesus is saying that Pilate has been given power over him by "the Jews" who in fact delivered him into Pilate's hands.

3. R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A commentary (ET, OUP, 1971), p513

4. H. Schlier, "Jesus und Pilatus nach der Johannes Evangelium in Die Zeit der Kirche (Freibourg: Herder, 1956) pp56-74. Cf also "The State according to the NT" in The Relevance of the NT (Herder and Herder, NYork, 1968), pp215-238

5. H. von Campenhausen, "Zum Verständnis von Joh", TLZ (1948) 387-392

6. E. Haenchen,"Jesus vor Pilatus (Joh, 18.28-19.15", TLZ (1960), 93-102; reprinted in Gott und Mensch (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), pp144-56

7. R.E. Brown, The Gospel according to St John, Vol II (Anchor bible, Doubleday, NYork), p858

8. Brown, op.cit., p864

9. ibid, p884

10. B. Lindars, Commentary on John (New Century Bible, London, 1972), p559

11. Brown, op.cit.p869

12. C.K. Barrett, Commentary on John's Gospel (SPCK, London, 1955), p451

13. Lindars, op.cit., p568-9

14. Brown, op.cit. p879

15. H. Schlier, "Jesus and Pilatus," p71