CRISIS IN THE DOCTRINE OF THE STATE*

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It is with certain trepidation that I broach the present subject, for the doctrine of the state has had a long and distinguished history. The consequence of that history is that positions have been held tenaciously by most people who have given it attention, especially our own compatriots. To challenge the doctrine, worked out laboriously by left-wing Puritanism in the seventeenth century and taken over by the founding fathers of this country and written into its fundamental documents, is no light matter. Yet if in the Reformed tradition we believe in examining our positions, constantly striving to bring them into harmony with the will of God expressed in Scripture, it is well that we do the same with the topic before us. This becomes especially desirable when one considers the origins of that doctrine and the crisis before us today. Let us look at each of these briefly.

Our doctrine of the state, we have already affirmed, has come to us largely out of left-wing Puritanism. All of Puritanism held the Calvinistic doctrine that the church should govern itself and be independent of the state but the right wing of this religious movement advocated the doctrine of a Christian state. Men in the right wing like Oliver Cromwell protested the establishment of any one church as the recognized church of the land, but they would support a plural establishment in order that England might be a godly nation with the state itself in the service of the Lord. Others in the right wing would gladly have achieved Presbyterian establishment in England as it had already been accomplished in Scotland and at one point, in 1644, it was almost effected. The rapid spread of independent sects in 1645 and 1646, however, forestalled this possibility and, when a frightened Parliament sought to disband the Puritan army in 1647 because of the radical ideas current in it and the army refused to go home, modern democracy was born. Professor Nichols, who makes this judgment, avers that "democratic left-wing Puritanism had challenged theocratic right-wing Calvinism." A year later Parliament was purged of Presbyterians and the "army democracy" prepared to organize a new state and a new church system for England.1 So not only was the establishment

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of one church disallowed by these radical thinkers but any group of churches or any religion whatsoever. Separation of church and state was proclaimed by the Anabaptists, Independents and Quakers, and later by Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and it was proclaimed on the ground that whereas the church lives in the sphere of grace the state should be guided only by reason and natural law which are understood by all rational men. Along with this conviction the left-wing group believed in the church as a “gathered” community of like-minded people, the ecclesiastical equivalent and prototype of the “social contract” doctrine in the political field, and in the illumination of the individual and the group by the Holy Spirit through further inquiry and discussion, another powerful stimulus to democratic civil government.2

The allusion to reason and natural law as justification for distinguishing between grace and nature, church and state, indicates the other root of democracy. We observed above that the American doctrine of the state has come largely from left-wing Puritanism. It has come in part also from a theory of natural law and reason developed by political philosophers and accepted by Puritan theologians and ministers of the Word of God. Ernst Troeltsch traces the development of these ideas from Althusius, through Grotius, Locke and Hobbes to the modern democratic doctrine of the state. John Locke is, of course, admittedly the master theorist of political philosophy whose influence was unsurpassed in the shaping of Anglo-American democratic doctrine. A son of the Calvinist-Puritan tradition, Locke expounded a theory of the state which is far removed from the older theological formulation. Troeltsch sketches it as follows:

He blends the various ingredients which composed the previous theories of Natural Law in an entirely fresh way; he starts neither from Stoic rationalism nor from Scriptural revelation, but from a utilitarian empiricism, from which, however, he often reverts towards the older ideas. His Natural Law results psychologically from the idea of the equality and freedom of all mankind in the Primitive State; in his conception the state of Nature was one in which peace and reason prevailed; men possessed equal natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and, in order to maintain these rights, the individuals, by means of a social contract, formed a body politic. This body had the power to protect these natural rights of man; and out of this social contract there arose the forms of government which individuals found necessary for their welfare. This Natural Law is under Divine guidance, it is true, and is Divinely reiterated in the Decalogue, and is thus in agreement with Revelation; but that

2Nichols, op. cit., pp. 32ff.
which it produces is solely for the good of individuals, and not for the glory of God.
The ecclesiastical communities stand completely alongside of the State, and are free associations which in all political and moral questions must adjust themselves to the order of the State. . . . Further, Locke regarded the ruling authorities which have emerged from the process of history as—indirectly—appointed by God, and he was a firm supporter of the positive law of that period, which to him in England seemed to be a particularly happy incorporation of Constitutional Natural Law, and which also implicitly contains this Natural Law as its own presupposition, and its own standard. But these loud echoes of the Calvinistic Christian Natural Law do not drown the underlying tones, which are quite different: the complete removal of the idea of the glory of God as the religious end of the State, the idea of the sole sovereignty of God, of the theoretical inequality of individuals, and their obedient adjustment to things as they are. Here in Locke's theory the dominating idea is rather one of the most versatile individualistic rationalism, purely utilitarian and secular in character, which can be abstracted as it stands from the religious setting of Locke's theory; at a later date this often actually took place. This rationalism rests upon such an independent basis, both in philosophy and in public law, and corresponds so closely to the secular idea of progress, and to the political necessities of the day, that its inclusion in the religious framework no longer had much inward significance. It stands alongside this framework, not within it, just as the religious associations exist alongside of the State. That, however, is the spirit of the Enlightenment and not the spirit of Calvinism. 3

In another connection, when he is discussing the contribution of eighteenth century Evangelism to American political thinking, Nichols makes a similar judgment which it is interesting to note here as we sketch the background of the common American doctrine. After observing the flagging political interest of eighteenth century evangelicals in their pre-occupation with experimental religion he notes the omission of “the Puritan urge to theocracy, the demand for a common life integrated by the Word.” This, however, has been quietly dropped.

If the evangelicals were Puritans, he affirms, they were Puritans of the radical left wing. . . . They had accepted the compartmentalization of religion from economics and politics and science, and in these latter areas even men like Jonathan Edwards and Wesley were rationalists, sons of the Enlightenment. Their political and economic thought and practice were no longer related to revelation, but to the laws of nature. 4

We are aware, of course, that in practice left wing Puritans and evangelicals were as theistically motivated as Calvin, Cromwell or Cotton,

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3 Troeltsch, op. cit., pp. 637-639.
4 Nichols, op. cit., p. 62.
but their theory, that which had been thought through and debated, had cut the doctrine of the state loose from theological foundations and was to have far-reaching consequences in a later day.

It is our contention that that day has arrived. The tree planted in the seventeenth century, and watered, pruned and fertilized in the eighteenth, has borne fruit. We live in a day when the secular state is magnified, glorified and deified. The doctrine of the state transmitted to us from John Locke and reshaped by the rationalist philosophers of the Enlightenment and the founders of this republic had in it remnants of the earlier theological teaching. Its doctrine of natural law was based on a theological foundation. During the nineteenth century, however, philosophical positivism removed this old foundation so that today the state has no transcendental connections. It is free, autonomous and, as Brunner has said, "this freedom has been its ruin." This constitutes the crisis in the doctrine of the state.

Evidence of the crisis can be assembled with ease: the rise of totalitarianisms; the intentionally and deliberately atheistic state; the deification of the state; the deliberate perversion of justice; the disappearance of international law; these all witness to the chaotic "state" in which society finds itself in political theory and practice. The seriousness of the situation is presumably acknowledged by all. It becomes distressing when one reflects on the possibility of still further deterioration in national and international life or on the important role which the state plays in the life of its people. For the state has a monopoly on power and it does not bear the sword in vain. Since it is the broadest organization of society, what happens to the state, or to our thinking about it, happens to us all.

It is our thesis that society in general and the Christian community in particular must, (1) give serious attention to the doctrine of the state so that each responsible citizen may hold a position reflective of his considered judgment; (2) be aware of the disastrous consequences of a doctrine which is deliberately atheistic; (3) realize that inasmuch as neutrality vis-a-vis the living God is as much an impossibility in the affairs of a state as in one of its citizens, the state, as the principal form of man-in-community, will either serve God or the gods; and that, (4) it is the task of the church to lead the way to a doctrine of the state which is built on a recognition of God as the Lord of nations who must be confessed in every area of life of which the government of the people is one of the most important.

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We have said that there is serious need in society today for attention being given the doctrine of the state. The evangelicals of the eighteenth century should not be our examples here. Nor should we emulate the Anabaptists in their tendency to look at the state in a negative way. The state is an ordinance, a gift of God, which must be received with thoughtfulness and thanksgiving. Theology, which has to do with God and his relation to the world, must be concerned with it. The fact is, as Alden D. Kelley reminds us, that politics was for centuries conceived to be a branch of theology. "The most significant thing about the modern state," he quips, "is that it is modern, dating back only a few hundred years." Only since then has there developed a wholly secular or autonomous political theory. Withdrawal from the world and the problems of society and culture with an interest only in the church and salvation may have been permissible and even encouraged in certain sects during the Reformation, but it was far from Reformed doctrine. The Anabaptist articles of Schleitheim of 1527 may refer to the magistrate's office as "carnal" and state that his sword must be rejected by Christians inasmuch as it is "outside the perfection of Christ," but this was sheer heresy to Calvin and to the Belgic Confession. Calvin called politics holy work and magistrates "vicars of God" who "are occupied not with profane affairs or those alien to a servant of God, but with a most holy office, since they are serving as God's deputies." The careful treatment that Calvin gives the subject in the last chapter in the Institutes is indicative of the importance that he attached to it.

If it is necessary to have a doctrine of the state, what shall it be? Specifically, what shall it be for Christians? The asking of that question suggests others: whence does the state derive its authority, from the people or from God? If from the people, is there no appeal beyond the will of the majority? Is the state subject to moral norms superior to it? What is the nature of the justice which it dispenses? What is its purpose? Is that purpose only to maintain order with justice for humanitarian ends? If so, what are humanitarian ends and, again, what is justice? Finally, is it possible, or permissible, for a Christian, a person whose God is the Lord, to dissociate himself from God when he is working out political theory?

These questions may have obvious answers for us and there would be no difficulty if other persons felt the same. The problem arises in a society

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\[\text{9The Belgic Confession of Faith, Article XXXVI.}\]

\[\text{10John Calvin,}\ op. cit., IV. xx. 6.}\]
in which there are wide differences of opinion on fundamentals. That
does not mean, however, that Christians need to give up their convictions
in the doctrine of the state. They do not do it elsewhere. Why, then, do
so many persons who are literate theologically and desire something better
throw up their hands when they think of the problems of a pluralistic
society and resign themselves to the doctrine of the secular or neutral
state? There is no shame in holding a minority conviction but there is
shame in shirking one’s responsibility to think on an important subject—
and this is especially true of us who are called to positions of religious
leadership—or in not having the courage of our convictions once we have
achieved a reasoned position.

The position of Cromwell was a reasoned position; so were those of
Locke and Rousseau. Moreover, there are fundamental differences be­
tween each of those positions and the others. One might suppose this
not to be true of Locke and Rousseau, both of whom held the social con­
tract theory of government and popular sovereignty as against ideas of
theocracy and the establishment of religion of earlier date. The difference
between them, however, was great. Locke stood for a liberal and limited
government under law, Rousseau an absolute and unlimited despotism of
the majority. They are contrasted by Nichols in a discussion of the recep­
tion of democracy in late eighteenth century Roman Catholic France.

From Calvinist Geneva, Rousseau carried over only such ele­
ments as could be combined with the politics of pagan Greece,
or of the Jesuits. Rousseau’s social compact, like the vows of a
Jesuit, alienates forever all rights and grounds of appeal from
the community. ‘The social compact gives the body politic abso­
lute power over all its members.’ There is no ‘higher law’; the
general will is the source of all laws. The general will is the
criterion of morals, of what is just and unjust. The voice of the
people is in fact the voice of God, just as for the Jesuit the
voice of the general or the pope was the voice of God, or for
the Marxian the party is the voice of God. Liberty is participation
in the ruling party of a one-party State. And just as the
Inquisitor coerced the suspected heretic, so Rousseau’s citizens
would be ‘forced to be free.’ Rousseau urged the death penalty
for heresy from his civic religion. The Jacobins were thus ‘in­
vverted Catholics,’ and from the Revolution on the two dogmatic
systems were to struggle without mercy. Neither was ever to
understand the first principles of liberal democracy, how a re­
sponsible person faces a moral decision on principles rather
than by authority, and how truth is discovered by discussion.11

The comparison of Locke and Rousseau illustrates the second point
in our thesis, the necessity of an awareness of the disastrous consequences
of a doctrine which is deliberately a-theistic. In spite of their similarities

11Nichols, op. cit., p. 47.
American Civil Liberties Union to delete the words "under God" from being considered a Christian nation and the Supreme Court has recently declared that "we are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a supreme being." Yet the pressure to eliminate religion from public life continues and the end is not yet. One now reads about action by the Locke never ushered God altogether out of his system of political philosophy. Rousseau and his compatriots did with results in French history which are a warning to all who reflect on the grim tale. There is no need to call to mind other despotisms, from antiquity to Hitlerian Germany or Russia in our own day, which, in their doctrine of the state, cut themselves loose from divine norms and sanctions and followed their own way. They all illustrate the truth endlessly reiterated in Scripture, that a people that seeks the Lord is blessed while those that reject him, sooner or later, must suffer the consequences.

The relevance of this topic to our national situation is obvious. America had the amazingly unique and interesting good fortune to be founded by godly citizens, many of whom had a passion for holy living. Their grandsons drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the fundamental law of the land. Their own struggle with tyranny, ecclesiastical as well as otherwise, and the currents of thought of the late eighteenth century were such that they wrote into their Constitution, which is also our Constitution, the provision that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That they did not mean irreverence to God or to do injury to his church I am certain. I am also sure that they did not intend to eliminate religion from public life or set the nation on a course in that direction. They wanted only to protect the citizenry from ecclesiastical tyranny of which they had seen, and felt, too much in old Europe. On the day that the first amendment to the Constitution was adopted, September 25, 1789, the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for: "A day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness."12 The manner in which this first amendment to our Constitution is being implemented in our national life, however, is serving to accelerate the secularization of American society to eliminate God from wide areas of public life. Hitherto our practice made up, in large measure at least, what I conceive to be a certain lack in our theory. The statements of Bryce and de Tocqueville13 bear witness to this. Our nation has always

12The Church Herald, July 26, 1963, pp. 6f.
the salute to the flag and the statement by the same General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America which approved the doctrine of a "neutral" state that the practice whereby "ministers serve as military chaplains, paid by the state, raises serious questions."\(^{14}\)

It is time that we re-examine the myth of religious neutrality on the American scene. It has been said often, but not too often, that to leave God out of our national and public life is tantamount to asserting that, in our national opinion, he is not important. Neutrality towards God, for a state as for an individual, is impossible. A people that is not for him is against him. God has to do with nations and with cultures, not only with the church, and to relate the lordship of God exclusively to his chosen people and the kingship of Christ only to the church is a pietistic error which should have no place in Reformed thinking. God is the God of nations; he is America's God and he should be acknowledged as such. This, I believe, is the most vital question facing us as a people. "The question whether the state serves the living God or its own gods is of decisive significance," says Professor A. A. van Ruler and he points out that it will be one or the other. In reality, he affirms, the fancied "neutrality of the state is a naivete of the grossest kind" (een onnoozelheid van de ergste soort), and he later writes with characteristic vigor that it would be one thousand times better for the state to persecute the church than to seek to be neutral for then its position is at least clarified.\(^{15}\)

Winthrop S. Hudson, an able and here, at least, a typical Baptist writer, may quote approvingly James Bryce's observation that "it is accepted as an axiom by all Americans" that the civil power ought to be neutral, and he may argue that state neutrality is a boon to a nation's religious health\(^{16}\) but his one-sided pragmatism leaves fundamental questions unanswered. For prudential reasons it might seem smart to adopt a position of religious neutrality for the state but theologically it is, in my judgment, wrong for a Christian to advocate this doctrine. To have to accept that doctrine as a \textit{modus vivendi} when a better possibility fails is one thing; to cherish and propagate it is another.

The better possibility is the official acknowledgement by the state of its dependence on and service to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of nations and the King of kings. This need mean no establishment of any denomination as the church in America, the only fear that prompted the inclusion of the first amendment to our Constitution, but it would mean our fundamental dedication as a nation to

\(^{15}\)A. A. van Ruler, \textit{Religie en Politiek} (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach N.V., 1945), pp. 236, 238.
\(^{16}\)Winthrop S. Hudson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 27ff.
God and it would put an end to a lot of irritating chatter by a few whose purpose seems to be the complete secularization of our society. I believe that I understand now why such acute scholars as Hoedemaker, Noordmans and van Ruler have steadfastly opposed the alteration of Article XXXVI in our Confession. They have wanted the Confession of the church to express what ought to be even if, because of the exigencies in which a state finds itself, it cannot be.17 Recently a Presbyterian writer concluded an article on the "school problem" with some relevant questions. Because they reflect my own thinking I close with them:

The nation must ask itself, What is the logical outcome of a consistent policy of neutrality toward religion? Can the answer be anything less than the elimination of all religious expression from those aspects of public life controlled or sponsored by the government? . . . Not merely against individuals but against an entire nation Elijah hurled the stinging rebuke: 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him' (1 Kings 18:21). Is not this exactly what we have been doing? We have stumbled between the opinion that God does have a place in our national life and the opinion that he does not. In our limping we have admitted him to certain areas but excluded him from others. The showdown between the religious and the secular state is upon us. We must make up our minds.18

The manner in which virtually our entire nation went to prayer at a time of national catastrophe points back to the Christian heritage which God has given us and ahead in the direction that we should take as a nation in the future. God ought not only to be acknowledged by us as a people when tragedy comes upon us but in happier moments as well, but then not only as the practical demands of life evoke occasional or frequent religious commitment but because the conviction is rooted in theory which has been written into the fundamental law of the land. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord!"10

17 In 1950 the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church adopted a statement reflecting the thinking of these churchmen and others who have given attention to the subject in which one reads the following: "... governments in fulfilling their calling may not be neutral nor adopt world views of their own choosing, but rather in their ruling, they must seek to represent God’s kingly rule, and honor Jesus Christ as Supreme Ruler of earthly kings. Then men will see that the service of a true humanity is found only where the service of God is sought." Foundations and Perspectives of Confession (New Brunswick, New Jersey: New Brunswick Theological Seminary, 1955), p. 26.


10 Ps. 33:12.
In Tunisia, a missionary stopped in a gas station where a keen young soldier approached his car. After looking it over, the soldier said, "I wrote you three months ago and did not get a reply." The soldier was a Muslim who had been taking a Bible correspondence course. Some of his lessons had not arrived. He was eager to continue his studies. The missionary wrote down the right address. The North African Mission is in contact with this man once again.

In Vellore, South India, a young Hindu whose home was 200 miles away, came to the Bible Correspondence Office wanting to become a Christian. Nine years ago, when he was fifteen, he studied the Gospel of Mark through the mail. He was interested in Christianity ever since he took the course and talked about becoming a Christian with his friends and his family, although he did nothing about it until he came to Vellore itself to find employment. This young man is now under instruction. In all likelihood, he will be baptized in the Central Church of Vellore.

During the summer, Time magazine relayed headline news from the daily papers of Colombo, Ceylon. Somarama, the Buddhist priest who shot and killed Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister of Ceylon, a fellow Buddhist, had himself baptized a Christian twenty-four hours before he was hanged in the Welikade Jail. Time said Somarama wanted the forgiveness of sins he could not find in Buddhism. He found it in a Bible given to him by a member of the Ceylon Home Bible League.

The sequel to this is that a missionary placed an ad in a subsequent issue of the Ceylon Observer, the paper from which Time gathered its material. He quoted Psalm 130, "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." An invitation followed for those who wished to receive further information. To date, more than 2500 Buddhist monks wrote for a free Bible, 2800 Buddhist temple librarians requested a Bible for their reading rooms, and a Missouri Lutheran missionary who followed up others who answered the original ad, has a total of 11,000 contacts to whom he mails a sermon each week.

*Paper read at the Fall Meeting of the Midwest Fellowship of Professors of Missions and Related Fields, October, 1962, at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill.
Each of these incidents came to my attention since I was asked to read this paper. They are indicative of what is happening around the world through the medium of the printed page.

Strange things happen to people through printed words. Several years ago, the editors of *Life* published that significant volume called, *The World's Great Religions*. In the section entitled "A Triumph of Unity," which was devoted to the Church of South India, there was a picture of a group of village folk sitting in front of Reverend Joseph John on the veranda of his parsonage. The caption of this picture says,

"Petition for Help in starting a school is presented to the Rev. J. John on the veranda of his house by a deputation from Anjalam, three miles off. Sitting on floor in front of him is Ponnusamy, his ex-Communist assistant" (p. 290).

Ponnusamy is not only an ex-Communist. He is an ardent Christian. As late as 1955, he was a Communist editor and agitator. He now writes plays and books for the Christian Literature Society, Madras. What accounts for the change? Several things, and literature is one among them.

In 1953, Ponnusamy was sent by the Communist party from Ramnad to the Chittoor District to organize the weavers of that area. He demanded large sums from the owners of the looms and threatened to organize strikes among the weavers if the capitalists did not pay the amount he demanded. Ponnusamy used this money to publish Communist handbills and a small newspaper which he distributed throughout the same area to further the Communist cause.

One day Ponnusamy needed medical attention and so stopped at Deenabandapuram, or the Village of the Poor. Ponnusamy had heard of Doctor Ranji and Reverend Joseph John who had organized the work of this village. He was so impressed with what he saw that he paid several visits to the place. It was this kind of uplift in which he was interested.

One day, Mrs. John gave Ponnusamy a Gospel of John and the first two lessons of Light of Life, the Bible Correspondence Course based on this gospel. He studied the material primarily for its methodology. He mailed his first sheet to Box 66, Vellore, and continued through the course in order to see how it worked. Later, he enrolled in The Acts course because as a Communist trainee in Trichinopoly, he had studied excerpts from Acts which dealt with communal living. Ponnusamy received a certificate for completing The Acts course early in 1955.

In July of that year, Ponnusamy walked forty miles to Vellore to receive treatment for his eyes at the Mary Taber Schell Hospital, one of the hospitals connected with the Christian Medical College. He came to my office for a letter of recommendation and a slip which would entitle him to a free pair of glasses. After I handed him both letters, he indicated