THE KINGDOM AND THE STATE
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The question of the relationship of church and state is one of the truly perennial problems with which the West has been faced all during that era of its history which is commonly designated by the words Anno Domini. Somehow it seems that the issues involved in the confrontation of these historical realities refuse to yield to our theoretical schemes or our organizational structures. The nearly two thousand-year history of church-state relationships has consequently been a history of almost continuous tension. Why should this be so? I submit that the answer must at least partially be sought in the essential nature of the Christian religion itself.

In order to delineate this point a bit further, we would suggest that the problem of church and state is deeply rooted in the biblical realism, i.e. in the biblical view of revelation as historical revelation, as entrance and presence and activity of the living God in history. The tension, in other words, must not be conceived of in the general sense of a tension inherently involved in a society where religious and political forces are at interplay, but more specifically as given with this particular religion, or rather, with the revelation of this particular god. The God of the Bible is revealed as the God of history, the Lord, who has created the heavens and the earth, and whose redemptive activity will be consummated in the new heaven and the new earth. Reality, however, as divine creation, does not thereby itself become divine, while God, in his presence in the world, does not cease to be the sovereign and transcendent Lord. That is the mystery of revelation.

In sharp contrast to this biblical realism stand most non-Christian religions with their basically monistic orientation. In heathenism there is no Lord, and there is no historical revelation. H. Kraemer has used the phrase "naturalist religions of transemipirical realization," meaning thereby that reality is basically interpreted in terms of nature, not history, and that the religious practice and cultus is seen as a means by which man seeks to realize the identity of his real self with the divine reality. In the biblical realism and its view of historical revelation all our monistic and dualistic structures are broken through; these categories are shown to be wholly inadequate to express what is involved in the relationship of the Lord to his world.

All this is of primary importance for the subject under discussion. In the context of a view of reality in which there is no Lord, and in which there is no true "over-againstness," the problem of church and state, as the West has known it during the past nineteen hundred years, is not

bound to arise. In pagan primitive society, where all reality flows, as it were, from one ground of divine being, kingship and priesthood become identical, or, in the words of T. M. Parker, "a primitive king is a priest, because he is a god." The same thought is expressed by A. A. van Ruler in his statement that in heathenism "the throne and the altar are essentially rooted in the same ontological ground." It is then the revelation, as the divine Word and the divine acts, which poses the question of religion and politics, of the church and the state, in all its sharpness and urgency.

It may be objected that we have moved far beyond the thinking and the conditions of primitive society, and that as moderns we live from a basically different view of reality. That is indeed the case, and our views concerning the nature and function of the state have been modified accordingly. It could even be said that the dominant views of modern political thought are exactly the opposite of the primitive apotheosis of the ruler. The tendency in recent centuries has rather been to interpret the state exclusively in terms of man himself. The idea of the social contract, for instance, is the embodiment in the realm of political theory of an essentially anthropocentric mode of thinking. The ultimate residence of sovereignty and authority is taken to be the populace. In other words, according to this view, the governing authorities find their ground and foundation in the will of the people. In short, the state has been humanized.

Since the eighteenth century the view of the secular and neutral state has gained widespread acceptance. To an "enlightened" age the divorce of religion and politics, of the church and the state, seemed the logical remedy for the perennial tension that for so long had plagued the body politic of the West. In an era in which man believed so firmly in man, and the deity of deism was regarded as far removed from historical existence, the idea of the secular state found enthusiastic acclaim as a strong and secure bulwark against the forces of oppression and intolerance. And still today, both in and outside of the church, one can find an extreme reluctance to submit the whole concept of the neutral state to any kind of a truly fundamental critique. It is sometimes disturbing to notice, how even in theological circles the crucial issues that are at stake in this question are either evaded or rather summarily dismissed with some slogan about "the American principle," coupled with a vague reference to "the spiritual nature of the church." And before we know it, the tenets of an essentially secular social-political theory are wholeheartedly and uncritically endorsed, and even gain the status of established dogma, while even the questioning of its finality becomes suspect.

In the meantime, the handwriting is on the wall. How extremes do

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"Christianity and the State in the Light of History, 1955, p. 3.
"Droom en Gestalte, 1947, p. 159.
"Ibid., p. 7.
meet! It belongs to the pathos of our time that, after the state had been neutralized and humanized, the world had to witness the new apotheosis of the state in the heart of European civilization. In Nazism we have come face to face with a resurgent heathenism and its religious foundation of the cult of Blut und Boden. The historical revelation was cast aside, only to be transplanted by the old underlying paganism and naturalism. And for whoever has eyes to see, it was there to see that this substratum of our hearts and our culture has not been eradicated as radically and as completely as we often have presumed it was. Moreover, it has been proved to be possible for the humanized state to turn into the demonic state.

A world threatened by political idolatry is desperately in need of the prophetic proclamation of the totalitarian God of the Bible. The church, as the bearer of the revelation and the consignee of the message of the kingdom, is, in the total context of her mission in the world, also called to a political apostolate. The state—for its life's sake, and for the people's sake!—needs the revelation. But why not let the church confine herself to the realm of the soul and the "spiritual" aspects of life? At this point we must pause to notice what, it seems to me, is a fundamental characteristic of the divine revelation and activity.

We are learning again to read the whole Bible as an eschatological book. This means that, while seeking to avoid the sectarian and escapist approach to eschatology, we are learning again that the Bible must be understood as, from beginning to end, proclamation of the kingdom. This is indeed the vision that suffuses the whole biblical witness to God's redemptive activity in the world: the kingdom of God! The election of Israel, for instance, and the theocracy based on the Torah, the coming of Jesus Christ and the gospel of the kingdom, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the church with her mission in the world, they are so many moments in God's redemptive dealings with the world in which he is establishing his kingdom. Historical revelation implies more than that God is active in history; by his activity he creates history. In other words, history is not merely the scene or the stage on which the divine drama develops; it is part of the drama.

For a fruitful theological discussion of the problem of the state it is indeed of the utmost importance that we do not lose sight of the wide sweep of God's historical dealings, and that we allow the world-historical dimensions of the biblical revelation to exert their full influence in our deliberations. If the Christian religion were essentially a private affair, exclusively concerned with inward reality and the relationship between God and the soul, then the state and the question of the political order would not be of primary concern to the church. But one would have to excise large sections from the biblical revelation to make such a thesis stick. In the context of the message of the kingdom the Bible has indeed
much to say about the work of God in the inner recesses of the human heart. This also belongs to God's redemptive activity. In the work of the Spirit we receive nothing less than the first fruit, the earnest, and a foretaste of the kingdom to come. But the God who works in the human heart is the Lord of history, who rules the destiny of nations, "who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing" (Isa. 40:23).

This God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. In Christ the kingdom has broken into existence with fulfilling power. In Christ God has acted in a decisive manner, and has triumphed over sin and death, and over all the principalities and powers. To him therefore belongs the name which is above every name, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord . . . " (Phil. 2:9ff; cf. Col. 2:15, I Pet. 3:22).

In Jesus Christ history has received its center and its fulfillment. In his cross and resurrection he has conquered the powers of sin and chaos. God so loved the world! And now the new age has been inaugurated, and in a real but hidden way it is present. We live under the dispensation of the regnum Christi, the kingdom of Christ. This is indeed a hidden kingdom, and therefore discerned by faith (Luther called it the regnum fidei). The kingdom of Christ takes in this world the form of the regnum crucifixi (Butzer). On the basis of an analysis of world conditions one would hardly arrive at the conclusion that it is Jesus Christ, who is King of kings and Lord of lords (I Tim. 6:15), and that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given him (Matt. 28:18). With this confession, however, the church stands or falls.

This confession also must be understood in terms of the biblical realism. It is therefore probably better not to say, as is sometimes done, that the lordship of Christ and his rule over all the principalities and powers, is now true "in principle" and that at some time in the future it will become true "in reality." It is now true in reality (though not empirical reality) and it will be revealed. Christ's rule is real, but hidden and veiled, and therefore grasped by faith, and in the final act of revelation this truth will be unveiled (apocalypse). Then all men shall see that Christ is indeed Lord.

Does this confession have any direct implications for our view of the state and the governing authorities? This question has of late evoked some vigorous theological debate. Before we go into the more controversial aspects of the issue, we should consider briefly a point on which there

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6Cf. T. F. Torrance, Kingdom and Church, 1956, p. 77. This fine study contains very illuminating data on how the Reformers conceived of the presence of the kingdom as a hidden kingdom. A modern work that deals with this question in a very incisive manner is A. A. van Ruler's De Vervulling van de Wet, 1947.
exists an almost universal consensus in the Christian church, namely that
the powers of government are ordained of God and exist because of their
institution by God (Rom. 13:1). This implies then that, from the biblical
point of view, the governing authorities find their ultimate ground in the
will of God and not in the will of man. Of course, the powers may not
know this or acknowledge this. They may think that they find their being
in themselves, and they may act accordingly. They may seek the source of
their authority even in their own divine nature instead of in their institu-
tion by God. In sum, as we stressed already, the state can become demonic.

Yet, we have thus gained an insight which is already in itself of far-
reaching significance. For, how shall the state know this about itself unless
it be through the proclamation of the church? In its confrontation with the
church, as bearer of the divine revelation, the state learns of its own true
nature and comes to a genuine self-understanding. The best guarantee
against the apotheosis of the state is the proclamation of the God of the
Bible and his kingdom.

The powers that be are ordained of God. Nevertheless, one can detect
a dual attitude toward the state throughout the entire New Testament. In
view of what has been said above this is quite understandable. It is the
will of God that existence shall not perish in the chaos of sin. It is there-
fore his will that there shall be powers and authority to protect society
against the threat of anarchy and nothingness. But these powers can, in
turn, themselves become a threat to an ordered and just society. The state
is not divine, nor is it eternal. It belongs to existence “between the times”
and must always be viewed with an eschatological reservation. The state
is not ultimate, only God and his kingdom are.

But the same must be said of the church. Without minimizing or ob-
scuring the distinction between the state and the church, it must be em-
phatically stated that the church also belongs to existence “between the
times.” The church finds, in a very special way, its origin and nature in the
divine activity and presence in Jesus Christ. But the church is not divine.
Nor may the church be identified with the kingdom. She definitely belongs
to the regnum gratiae, not the regnum gloriae. There is an intimate rela-
tionship between the church and the kingdom, and in a very unique and
real, but hidden way the kingdom is present in the church, but such a
consideration should never lead us to abandon our eschatological reser-
vation when we speak of the church. All existence has, as it were, been put
between parentheses; it is intermezzo: existence between the ascension
and the parousia.

7 Van Ruler, loc. cit., pp. 152ff.
8 To speak, as H. von Campenhausen does (Biblical Authority for Today, ed. by
A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer, 1951, p. 306), of a “provisional affirmation
and eschatological rejection of the state,” seems to me a bit too strong. The
In the midst of the chaos of sin God has established his "new order" in Jesus Christ: the order of justification, reconciliation, and sanctification. This is the order of the new age; the future of the kingdom has entered into the present. The kingdom of Christ is firmly rooted in the victory of the cross and the resurrection. Does the state, as being among the principalities and powers that have been subjected to Christ, belong to this "new order?" Can it, for instance, be said that "the state shares in the mysteries of the cross" (van Ruler), and that "the true basis of government is . . . Jesus Christ himself?" (Bonhoeffer).

O. Cullmann, among others, has answered this question in the affirmative, and has defended his position quite ably in his book Christ and Time. He asserts that "... it should not be disputed that for Paul there is since Christ no other divine order than that of the kingdom of Christ. This then is the sole foundation of the state." 10 There are still those, however, who do dispute this, and who maintain that in such a view the order of creation and the order of redemption are not properly distinguished. They hold that such a fallacy can only lead to confusion. Among those, however, who do adhere to the view that the state belongs to the order of creation, and has not by virtue of the victory of Christ been brought into the realm of redemption and the kingdom of Christ, some can be found who accept the possibility that through the mediation of the church the state can come to an acknowledgment of Christ as Lord, and can thus be brought within the scope of God's redemption.11

It seems to this writer that the view, which in its theological approach to the question of the state, envisages both the church and the state as divine institutions, which each according to their own nature, and therefore in their own way, fulfill a function in the overarching reality of the kingdom, merits our very serious and very careful consideration. In this view are incorporated the most cardinal elements of the New Testament witness. In a sense it is quite correct to say that the New Testament on the whole is "reticent . . . in the face of that entity which today we usually speak of as the state."12 This is true in the sense that the New Testament does not contain a full-fledged theory on the state, as, we may note in state as such does not stand under eschatological rejection. Its provisional nature becomes indeed very pronounced when the state is viewed in the light of the approaching kingdom. But also the messianic rule will come to an end in the final consummation of all things (1 Cor. 15:28)!

9D. Bonhoeffer, Ethics (ed. by E. Bethge), 1955, p. 301.
10Christ and Time, 1951, p. 204.
11G. B. Caird, for instance, in a recent study (Principalities and Powers, 1956) opposes Cullmann in his view that through the cross and resurrection of Christ the state has received a new status, and has been placed within the order of the kingdom of Christ. He does hold that all authority finds its basis in the divine decree, but that the authority of the state belongs to the order of creation (p. 25). He also deems it possible, however, that these powers can be reconciled to God by the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20, pp. 27ff.)
12Von Campenhausen, op cit., p. 293.
passing, the New Testament does not contain a theory on anything. It is not concerned with dissertation, but with proclamation. And this is from beginning to end proclamation concerning Jesus Christ as the Lord, and concerning the coming and present kingdom. In that sense the whole New Testament expresses the most central truth we must know about the origin, the authority, and the function of the state.

When thus the church and the state are both understood from the perspective of the kingdom and God’s historical-eschatological dealings with the world, the true basis for their duality also becomes apparent. This duality is rooted in the divine dealings themselves. God’s activity in the world is revealed in its disparate nature. The church and the state may never be identified or their natures confused, precisely because their divergence has this deep and ultimate ground. The perspective of the kingdom, instead of annulling the duality, accentuates it. At this point we may pause to note the fact that a man like Calvin did clearly perceive that "... the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very different and remote from each other." But distinction could for him never imply separation, since at the same time he was actuated by the desire to do full justice also to the fact that the civil authorities, as vicegerents of God, were instituted by him to fulfill an office in his service.

It would be foolish to urge that we repeat or imitate the theocratic venture of Geneva. In our attempts to copy the past we always display a lack of courage to live the present. But as a paradigm, an experiment, a dream and a prophetic deed, this and similar ventures deserve better than to be lightly dismissed as ill-fated fancies of an obsolete and discredited past. We may not consider these ventures as having been very "successful." This is in the nature of the case; “successfully” we shall never live in the tensions “between the times,” unless we resolve them in our own abortive way.

The church is the Body of Christ. That cannot be said of the state. The church is the communion of saints. That cannot be said of the people of a nation in general. The church is called to fulfill her ministry in the world as a ministry of reconciliation. That is not the function of the state. And so we could go on. But on the other hand, the church does not exist in and for herself. She exists in and for her Lord and for his kingdom, and therefore for the world, and therefore also for the state. The church is used of God. "The essence of the church lies, in its deepest sense, exclusively and only in that to which she is used" (van Ruler). That is the core of the apostolic nature of the church, that she is used as God’s instrument in his dealings with the world! And for the church to live and act as if she had come in the place of the world in God’s dealings, to

\[13\text{Institutes, IV, 20, 1.}\]
make herself the alpha and the omega of the redemptive activity, and then
to lead a secluded and introvert existence, would purely and simply mean
disobedience to the will of God. The church can only be truly church in
the world when she is church for the world. That does not mean that
the church is called to service of the world, but that she is called to ser­
vice of God in the world, and that she lets herself be used by God for his
redemptive activity in and with the world.

The *imperium* of the state is different from the *ministerium* of the
church. The state has an ordering function. The civil authorities are a
restraining power against the forces of chaos and anarchy. The state is
indeed involved in "der Kampf mit dem Chaos;" its primary function is
to maintain law and order and to establish a social-political order in which
justice prevails. And once again we stress that the chaos which threatens
existence and society is the chaos of sin. Through the existence and opera­
tion of the various spheres of authority, and through that of the governing
powers in particular, life is preserved. And this is the will of God: that
existence shall be preserved for the kingdom.

It always sounds a bit naive when, in order to stress the limited func­
tion of the state (and who does not fear the absolute state?), it is said
that the state is "only" a restraining power, and that its function is
"merely" one of maintaining law and order. As if this in itself were not
a superhuman work! For this task the state bears the sword! To consider
the question, whether the view which envisages the ideal state as an en­
larged edition of the policeman on the corner and one which confines itself
solely to the preservation of law and order is an adequate one, would
carry us too far afield and does not fall within the scope of this study.
Practically the question has been overtaken by historical developments
themselves. The modern states we know of do quite a bit more.

The church is profoundly concerned with the question of a just social
order, because she recognizes this as the will of God for humanity. The
church also knows that in such an order the opportunities to proclaim the
gospel are the greatest. For "kings and all who are in high positions" the
church sends her supplications, prayers, and intercessions to the throne of
God's grace, recognizing as she does that their task is essentially beyond
human power, and realizing the importance of an order in which we may
lead a quiet and peaceable life (I Tim. 2:2). 10

10This aspect of the question is strongly emphasized by Karl Barth. Cf. his *Recht­
fertigung und Recht* (1944). He defends the position that the state can only be
neutral in the truth question. But by being true to its nature, as *Rechtsstaat,*
preserver and maintainer of an order of justice, it renders its service in the king­
dom. In this manner the message of justification, as proclaimed by the church,
can run its course unimpeded (p. 19). Cf. also *Against the Stream* (1954):
"... the deepest, ultimate, divine purpose of the civil community consists in
creating opportunities for the preaching and hearing of the Word, and, to that
extent, for the existence of the church" (p. 30).
The church prays for the state. Does she also proclaim the Word of God directly to the state and call it to obedience to that Word? Or does the state not need the revelation; can it live by a "natural revelation" or by its own ratio? These are crucial questions. The core of the question of church and state may lie precisely here, in the issue of the state and the revelation. It is to be regretted that this question is so frequently overshadowed by a one-sided emphasis on another (also very important!) issue, namely that of religious and civil liberties. When one studies the history since the days of Constantine one must say with the French, that to understand much will mean to forgive much. There have been some unpleasant experiences with states that had a "confessional basis." The corpus christianum of the Middle Ages was not an ideal situation. But some history has taken place since the eighteenth century also! And the question is whether we, in this second half of the twentieth century, can still believe so unreservedly and wholeheartedly in the neutral state as the preserver of our heritage of freedom. We may some day discover to what large degree we still lived on the past which we thought to have sworn off for ever when we inserted certain phrases in the documents that underlie our political order.

Of course, the neutral state does not really exist. Underlying the actions of the state is always some kind of a "faith" or "Weltanschauung," no matter how vaguely defined. The most fundamental categories with which we deal in our deliberations on the theory and practice of government are "filled" concepts; they contain certain confessional or ideological elements from which they derive their real meaning for us. Every culture and every political order is based on certain metaphysical or theological presuppositions. We should have no illusions about that! How can we talk about such concepts as order, authority, freedom, or "the natural rights of conscience," etc., without entering into the domain of "beliefs?" And do we not believe that the real meaning of these concepts must be derived from the revelation? At any rate, the neutral state can only exist if the state ceases to function, stops to enact laws, and closes the courts. It is no wonder that it was mainly the ideologically tainted view of the order and unity of the pax romana that led the tolerant Roman state to persecute

10Cf. a statement, which in 1950 was adopted by the Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church, and which can really be regarded a draft for a modern confession (published in translation by The New Brunswick Theological Seminary under the title Foundations and Perspectives of Confession, 1955). I quote the following sentences: "Since we do not ourselves know justice nor understand the right meaning of authority, order and freedom, governments must constantly seek God's will for our common life" (p. 27). In other words, and this is specifically stated, the state may not be neutral vis à vis the revelation. The following sentence is also important: "The civil authorities and the church both serve the royal plan of God, but not in the same way" (p. 28).
The early Christians, and that, in these latter days, it was in the name of the "New Order" that Hitler's state did the same.

The church proclaims the Word of God "to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:9-10). And the apostle to the Gentiles, who lived and spoke from the perspective of the historical-redemptive activity of God and its world-historical dimensions, or, in other words, viewed matters in the light of the *regnum Christi*, did not hesitate to speak of the state as the *diakonos* of God, and of the ruling authorities as the *leitourgoi* of God (Rom. 13:4, 6). The state, in its political activity, is called to a sacred service! Here we find indeed a very "high view" of the state. The plans and purposes of God are wide in scope, and the power of his Word and Spirit operate in the field of history. In other words, they reach far beyond individual existence or the inward life; they encompass the world and the social, political, and cultural structures of communal existence. This faith underlies the views expressed in the preceding paragraphs, and consequently they are in a sense as realistic as this faith can be considered to be.

Is a biblical-theological perspective of the nature and the function of the state possible? If so, how must we conceive of it? These have been the central questions with which we have been concerned in this discussion, which, in spite of the rather ambitious title, does not pretend to offer more than some marginal notes. A host of questions arise when one once enters upon this field. Especially significant, of course, is how any theological perspective can be related to the social-political realities under which we live. This question would require a separate treatment. But the question of our starting-point is very urgent. Slogans are apt to petrify our thinking, and I fear that they have often figured too prominently in the theological discussion on the state. The fact that certain ideas and principles have become deeply ingrained in the national consciousness should not deter the church from subjecting them to critical theological analysis.

The church cannot offer the world a blueprint for a utopian existence. Nor can she supply the solutions to all the perplexing questions of history. The church proclaims Jesus Christ as the Lord of lords and the King of kings, and she calls all men and all nations to obedience to him. And thus the church lives as she prays: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

17H. Berkhof points to the appeal of the apostle Paul to the emperor as a possible "hint" that, although on personal grounds this appeal was unnecessary, he was determined to go to Rome in order that he could "penetrate with the gospel to the nodal point where all the threads were gathered and decisions for the whole world made" (*Biblical Authority for Today*, p. 254).