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## **Luther's Political Ethics**

In seeking to understand Luther's teaching about political morality, it is helpful to start with a few general remarks about his orientation. He was no ideologue in the sense that he felt revelation or theological reflection had bestowed an infallible blueprint which could be directly applied to social construction. As Rupp says, "Though he had a theology of politics, he was at all points removed from the systematic, doctrinaire theoretician." Luther's attitude to political policy is more pragmatic, adaptive and compromising. Again Rupp: "His political judgements were those of a keen, common-sense empiricism and he had a distrust of the high-sounding slogans of contemporary idealism...."<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Luther is in opposition to those Anabaptist sectarians who found in the Sermon on the Mount a legislative program to be unconditionally implemented.

The substance of Luther's political theology is set out in his treatise on *Secular Authority*. There we see that human history and organization is divided into two kingdoms or rules: the spiritual and the temporal.

But it must be stressed that this is, in an important sense, only a functional division. Luther's thought remains resolutely theocentric. The two realms are unified theologically by the conviction that the sovereign God has ordained both realms for the righteous regulation of the human creation. This distinction between the two realms and rules is conventional in the history of Christian thought, going back to the New Testament. On the one hand, there is the Kingdom of the world, ruled by the secular authority; on the other, there is the Kingdom of God ruled by Christ.

The Kingdom of the world — by far the larger — is governed by law symbolized by the sword. Law means, in this context, basically the decalogue which replicates the natural law. Christians, who live under the grace of Christ, need neither the law nor the sword's coercive sanctions. The indwelling Holy Spirit, spontaneously moves them to

love the neighbour. But that very same love of neighbour demands that Christians defend the law of the secular authority. For without the external restraints of the state, non-Christians would destroy each other as the big fish eat the little fish. Out of regard for the need of his ungodly neighbour to live in an ordered society relatively free of the predations of the wicked, the Christian must assume responsibility for the state and be prepared to serve as magistrate within it. By failing to assume this worldly, political vocation, the Christian, in effect, consents to the chaos, anarchy, and violence which must of necessity erupt among sinful men in the absence of coercive restraints.

The spiritual realm is ruled by God through the Word which has been appropriated by faith. It is amongst this elect minority that the way of life promulgated in the Gospel and particularly the Sermon on the Mount applies. They are bound in obedience to Christ to resist not evil, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to abjure all access to law courts and oaths. They are ruled by the Holy Spirit who renders the hard moral sayings of Jesus a practicable program in the appropriate context. But it is totally unrealistic about human nature to suppose that this eschatological ethic of God's Kingdom can apply beyond the bounds of the justified. To do so is to doom humans to a lesser rather than higher possibility for social life; lesser because without the law and the sword humans would sink to the level of 'ravenous beasts'.

In more modern language, it is culture that humanizes, even if it does not redeem.

Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is the result — at least in part — of his need to reconcile two seemingly contradictory strands in the scriptures. On the one hand, there are the hard sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount enjoining disciples to resist not evil, forswear law courts and oaths, to give their cloak as well to whoever demands their coat, and to love their enemies. On the other, there are the ample precedents especially in the Old Testament of violence being perpetrated in the name of God to punish violations of the law and, moreover, there are explicit injunctions in the New Testament to respect and obey the civil power since all authority derives ultimately from God. Romans 13 is the paradigmatic statement of this view. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God..." (13:1)

Luther disdains the Catholic resolution of this dilemma which consists of dividing Christians into two classes. On this view, the majority of lay Christians are bound by law (*praecepta evangelica*) and subject to the sword, that is, civil sanctions. They are not bound by the extraordinary demands of the Sermon on the Mount. The other group

consists of the religious orders, who desiring to be perfect, take upon themselves the super-erogatory works of the Sermon as counsels of perfection (*consiglia evangelica*). In this manner, the authority of Jesus' words is maintained, while the obvious difficulties they pose are resolved by limiting their application to those who have spiritually withdrawn from the world.

The words of Jesus, in Luther's contrary interpretation, apply to all Christians; they are not restricted to the role of counsels of perfection for religious orders. At the same time, the rule of law and the sword — of the whole apparatus of secular, civil government — is also affirmed, in the first place, by recognizing its role in regulating the life of non-Christians. We have already noted that because non-Christians lack grace and redemption, they would, left to their own devices, devour each other like wild beasts. In order to assure some social order and peace, God has ordained the institution of the state to restrain wickedness and punish evil-doers. This assessment echoes Augustine's view of the state as *divinum remedium peccati*.

Thus the integrity of God's word in the Bible is maintained: the hard moral sayings of Jesus are addressed only to true Christians; the endorsement of civil institutions and sanctions which entail coercion applies to non-Christians. But inasmuch as disciples of Jesus are under obligation to love their non-Christian neighbours, Christians must also work to protect and serve the state which is necessary for the well-being of those living without the grace of Christ. This loving responsibility of the Christian towards worldly government also means that in the appropriate circumstances — to be indicated below — Christians will take upon themselves the morality of law and its correlative sword. The authority of God's commands in the bible is thus vindicated: Christians must obey *both* the law and the gospel ethic; non-Christians are capable only of a legal morality backed up by the sword.

There are, however, restrictions upon the authority of the state. The state cannot coerce conscience or impose belief; it cannot oblige the citizen to participate in an unjust war, for example. It must limit itself to its divinely ordained role of preserving life and property.

Apart from the authority and integrity of the bible, the theological warrants for Luther's teaching of the two realms are the doctrines of creation, providence, and the divine sovereignty. The natural orders of nature and history are not arrogated unconditionally to the devil; they continue to reflect the derivative goodness impressed upon them by the creator. Moreover, God continues to guide the entire human enterprise as a reflection of his righteousness. Even the unsaved world still falls under his concern. The provision of the institution of the state and

its attendant offices of prince, legislator, magistrate, soldier, and even hangman, are evidence of this providential care. God's sovereign rule encompasses — though in different forms — the entirety of creation.

The point has been insisted upon that Christ's radical ethic of the Kingdom of God pertains only to those who by repentance and faith in Christ, have taken upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom; it is not a legislative program for the world of the unredeemed. The question which now emerges is whether Luther thought even true Christians could actually and fully implement this life. Did he, like some of the Anabaptist communitarians, hold to the perfectibility of man?

There are suggestions in *Secular Authority* (1523) that this is the case; that Christians can actualize the form of life commanded by Christ's moral sayings taken literally.

And if all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, no prince, king, lord, sword, or law would be needed. For what were the use of them, since Christians have in their hearts the Holy Spirit, who instructs them and causes them to wrong no one, to love every one, willingly and cheerfully to suffer injustice and even death from every one. Where every wrong is suffered and every right is done, no quarrel, strife, trial, judge, penalty, law or sword is needed. Therefore, it is not possible for the secular sword and law to find any work to do among Christians, since of themselves they do much more than its laws and doctrines can demand. Just as Paul says in I Timothy 1:19, 'The law is not given for the righteous, but for the unrighteous.'

Why is this? Because the righteous does of himself all and more than all that all the law demands.... If the whole world were Christians, all these words of Christ in Matthew ch. 5 would apply to it and it would keep them.

Although Luther may at one point have held that the righteousness of God enabled an actual moral righteousness in the disciple, this cannot be accepted as his mature view. Numerous passages provide evidence that assertions like the one above cannot be interpreted in a perfectionist way. They may be read as conveying an ideal, an intention, a direction of the life of the saved. Disciples hunger and thirst to do the will of their Father in heaven, even though during their earthly pilgrimage, while they are still in the body, they never do fully realize it.

We must distinguish righteousness in God where it means moral will and redemptive initiative — especially the latter — from righteousness in the redeemed where it means less frequently, moral obedience to God's will, or, more often — correlative to God's gracious righteousness — the justified status of the faithful sinner.

*The Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* (1522) points to the dialectical co-existence of sin (including the dimension of moral failure) and faith in the life of the Christian. The difference between the

Christian and the non-Christian is that the person of faith enjoys a changed relation to sin: it is not something he wills to do and it no longer counts against him in the sight of God.

He [the apostle Paul] teaches us that by faith we are not so freed from sin that we can be idle, slack, and careless, as though there were no longer any sin in us. There is sin; but it is no longer counted for condemnation, because of the faith that strives against it. Therefore, we have enough to do all our life long in taming the body, slaying its lust, and compelling its members to obey the spirit and not the lusts, thus making our lives like the death and resurrection of Christ and completing our baptism — which signifies the death of sin and the new life of grace — until we are entirely pure of sin and even our bodies rise again with Christ and live forever.

This passage (which I take to be normative of Luther's ethical position) points to a radical ethic of grace but not a perfectionist one this side of the grave. This interpretation is consistent with Luther's understanding of the paradoxical nature of Christian life: the Christian is *simul justus et peccator*. A pertinent passage occurs in the *Table Talk*:

When we finally stop lying, deceiving, stealing, murdering, robbing, committing adultery, we shall have become pious, that is, when they use the shovel to put us under ground. For Paul says: 'He that is dead is freed from sin.' (Romans 6:7)

In the preceding we discussed the moral *capacity* of even the true Christian to abide by the radical ethic of the Gospel, concluding that *in via* the Christian is capable of incorporating it in only a shifting and ambivalent way. I return now to the problem adumbrated above which is posed by Luther's schematization of God's two-fold rule over the spiritual and secular realms, and the contention that the Christian is subject to both rules. The dilemma is how the individual Christian is to classify himself in any specific moral situation. When is he acting as a member of the Kingdom of God ruled over by Christ and his radical moral way of non-violence, and when as a citizen in the Kingdom of the world whose order and security he is bound in obedience to God to maintain by the sword? How is the line to be drawn between the realms and their contrasting moral modes?

Guidance cannot be obtained by falling back on a distinction between the empirical church and the civil society for there are, Luther insists, more non-Christians than real, faith-filled Christians in the observable church. Accordingly, it is not possible to declare for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount when acting within the fellowship of the church, and opt for a coercive ethic of law when acting outside it. Moreover, such a move would seem to truncate the scope of Jesus' moral sayings by restricting them only to a church milieu.

Luther in one way universalizes the radical ethic of the Kingdom of God by contending that the Christian should always act in a submissive, suffering, non-retaliatory way *when the threats affect himself*. A Christian always adopts Christ's way of the cross, the way of innocent suffering, when, to use Mill's language, the effects of aggressive actions are self-regarding. But when they are other-regarding, when they touch upon the well-being, peace and security of others, then the Christian must take up the sword to resist evil. In this interpretation, Luther is in continuity with his Augustinian tradition.

The difficulty with this construction is that I find it very difficult to know when the consequences of an evil deed impinge only upon me (in which case, acquiescent non-violence would be called for) and when I am functioning as a representative person so that the consequences of oppression devolve also upon those for whom I am responsible (thus calling forth a policy of coercive restraint of the evil-doer). When am I not acting in a representative office as father, husband, teacher, citizen?

The inevitable result seems to me that the division between the kingdom of the world and the Kingdom of God with its correlative regiments of coercion and non-retaliation dissolves in the effective hegemony of the worldly, temporal rule. This conclusion is reinforced by the acknowledgement that sin continues to exercise its power even in true Christians, thus requiring that they too be subject to law and the sword. All this appears to lead to the emasculation of the radical Gospel ethic and the espousal of the ethic of law and sword whose effect is a conservative stance and a *de facto* endorsement of the prevailing political authority. The following observations on Luther's view of vocation corroborate this conclusion.

### Vocation

Luther's doctrine of vocation also underlies his understanding of political ethics. Christians ought not to eschew political offices in favour of a renunciatory asceticism, for in so doing they may disobey the command of God who summons them to serve men and glorify Him in those worldly tasks.

According to Max Weber, the modern meaning of calling (*Beruf*) as a worldly task appointed by God derives in large measure from Luther. The idea of a holy vocation certainly existed in pre-Reformation Catholic circles, but it was a calling to the moral perfection of the monastic life. Luther was to shift the meaning of the word 'calling' so that it came to designate not a counsel of perfection in the monastic sense, but a divine summons to obedience in ordinary secular activities. It is true, as Weber explains, that there are certain anticipations of

this "positive valuation of routine activity in the world" in the Middle Ages and late Hellenistic antiquity. But the perspective that regards "the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume", Weber declares to be 'unquestionably new'. It is Weber's view — which he judges to be so patent as to be a platitude — "that this moral justification of worldly activity was one of the most important results of the Reformation, especially of Luther's part in it." (p. 81) Weber set himself the task of ascertaining exactly what were the practical consequences of this momentous shift in the meaning of calling.

We must hasten to interpolate that Weber does not find Luther responsible for the emergence of capitalism! The specifically Lutheran form of the conception of worldly calling functioned as a conservative force, legitimating existing social arrangements. It was the appropriation of the idea of worldly labour in a calling by the Calvinists, and its subsequent transmutation by them, that culminated in the ideological catalyst that helped generate the rational acquisitive ethos of modern capitalism. Grounded increasingly in a powerful sense of divine providence, the Lutheran interpretation of worldly calling took a quietistic and conservative turning. The believer's acceptance of his particular circumstances as a faithful response to the divine providence which placed him in them, served to legitimate the existing state of affairs.

The social/historical conditions that underlie the formulation of Luther's conservative or traditionalistic vision of economic life, possibly may be found in the peasant uprisings. His apprehension over the prospect of political anarchy may have evoked Luther's conviction that a faithful obedience to one's calling in the world entailed the acceptance of the particular historical social and economic conditions in which the believer found himself.

This religious validation of every-day, regular economic and social activity derives ultimately from Luther's relentless application of the soteriological principle of *sola fide*. If salvation results only from the operation of God's unmerited grace upon the sinner, then no type of good works, no matter how moral, refined or abstemious can possibly conduce to salvation. But, paradoxically this devaluation of all human activity from the soteriological perspective, leads to the positive revaluation of all. Since the monastic rigours of poverty and celibacy, for example, cannot effect reconciliation with God any more than raising cabbages or mending shoes, then the result is to elevate the status of the homely, mundane activities. Eventually the monastic counsels of perfection come to be seen as selfish and therefore, disobedient. Ultimately, God vindicates only those persons toiling in their providentially appointed everyday tasks. As Weber says, "The fulfillment of

worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God ... and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God."<sup>3</sup>

Luther tried to deal courageously with the tensions that mark the existence of the Christian seeking to deal responsibly with the ambiguities and violent forces of political life. Some of his answers may be found wanting; at the least they continue to provide a compelling provocation for forging one's own understanding of political vocation.

#### NOTES

1. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 288.
2. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 80-81.
3. *Ibid.*