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Luther's Social Ethics Today

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RECENT YEARS have witnessed a renewed interest in Luther's social ethics. The futile attempts to understand his teaching on justification apart from its social-ethical consequences have demonstrated the importance of the latter. Moreover, the present debate about the relationship between the church and the secular world calls for a re-examination of Luther's teachings about the orders and about vocation. I would therefore like briefly to review Luther's social ethics as interpreted in recent literature and discuss its significance for our present situation, both negatively and positively.

I

Unfortunately, and owing to a certain imprecision in Luther's own use of the terms, his so-called *Zwei-Reiche Lehre* has often been misinterpreted. The two German words *Reich* and *Regiment* have been translated by the one English word "Kingdom."¹ This word is the proper translation for *Reich*. The *zwei Reiche* or two kingdoms are those of God and of Satan. Luther sees all of history as a gigantic struggle between God and the Devil. His hymns as well as his sermons and even his letters are vividly expressive of this dramatic dualism. He ascribes everything that furthers life, whether temporal or eternal, to God, and everything that hinders it to the Devil.

This conflict is not identical with the one between church and state, for on the one hand the Devil is able to subvert both church and state for his own purposes, and on the other hand both church and state are destined to serve the purposes of God, and in this sense are part of the kingdom, or better of the kingly rule, of God. For kingdom means less the "sphere" of God's rule than his kingship, his "act" of ruling. To say it in modern terms: "redemptive history" involves not only the church, but also the state, not only Christendom, but also the world; for God exercises his rule through what Luther calls the *zwei Regimente*.

This latter term is difficult to translate. Usually the word "kingdom" is used again. However, Luther's *zwei Regimente* are not the opposing kingdoms of God and the Devil, but rather the two modes by which God governs his kingdom. One can speak of the two "orders"² as long as the latter are understood, not as static legal constitutions, but as modes of divine

1. Cf. H. R. Gerstenkorn, *Weltliches Regiment zwischen Gottesreich und Teufelsmacht* (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1956).

2. Other possible renderings include "governments," "portfolios," "regimes," "dispensations."

activity and rule. For this is what Luther wants to say: God rules his kingdom through two orders, that on the right and that on the left.³

God's order on the right represents his proper work (*opus proprium*), viz. the gospel of forgiveness and salvation in the name of Christ. Here he exercises authority principally through the gospel as it is brought to men by the word and the sacraments. Sometimes Luther simply identifies this order with the order of the ministry proclaiming the word. But the identification is not absolute,⁴ for the preacher is an instrument of this order only in so far and as long as he really subjects himself to the authority of the word. If he waters down or perverts the word, he has ceased to serve God and has changed over into the kingdom of the Devil. The ministry depends on God's first order, but God's first order does not depend on the ministry.

Ultimately, this order is invisible, for it is an expression of the working of the Holy Ghost. It is also non-coercive, for the only compulsion it employs is that of the Holy Ghost, and its only weapon the word. It can never be completely institutionalized, for it belongs to the level of personal life, the encounter between the gracious, inviting God and the willing, unconstrained response of the human heart in faith and love. Serving God under this order, we cannot use force or compulsion of any kind. As he loved us, so we must love our fellow men. As he suffered from us and for us, so we must suffer from them and for them. The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are the ethics of the first order. Here is the place for non-violence. For the order on the right is incompatible with violence.

However, there is more in the Bible than the Sermon on the Mount and more to God's activity than giving us the Bible or the gospel. This to be sure is his proper work. But it is not his only work. He also rules through the order on the left, through the "strange work"⁵ (*opus alienum*) of compulsion.

In other words, God not only works inwardly on the hearts of men through the gospel, but he meets them also outwardly through the whole web of social relationships. He not only invites them through the first order to love and serve their fellow men, but he practically compels them to such service through the second order.⁶ Frequently this order is identified with that of the state or of secular authority. Luther himself calls it the order of the sword, and explains that true Christians living according to the Sermon on the Mount would be victimized or killed without the power of the state to protect them.⁷ While secular government cannot enforce the Sermon on

3. "Right" and "left" are to be understood, not in the modern political sense, but in the ancient sense according to which the minister at the right hand of the king ranks above the one at the left.

4. Cf. Lennart Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), p. 175.

5. Luther borrowed this term from Isaiah 28: 21.

6. Cf. H. Bornkamm, *Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1960), p. 10.

7. Cf. K. Haendler, in *Lutherische Monatshefte*, 3 (1964), 557f.; Bornkamm, *Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen*, p. 10; P. Althaus, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed., III, 1929.

the Mount (for that would contradict its very meaning), it can create the conditions under which it may be fulfilled by individual Christians.⁸ It can promote the good by checking evil and evil-doers.

But the second order must not be limited to the state as constituted secular authority. It meets man in every social relationship. In every order of social life, in the home, at school, on the farm, at the work-bench, behind the counter, men are forced to serve each other. As the human organism is not healthy unless its members serve each other, so the law of service is written into the very structure of society.⁹

"Wherever man meets man, the 'natural law' is in function: it accuses him who acts selfishly . . . , and at the same time it makes man perform deeds of service to his fellowman. . . . The doctrine concerning those in authority must be seen in this all-inclusive perspective. God created the world and ordered it in such a way that people, at least to a certain degree, *have* to serve each other . . . , at least in an outward way."¹⁰ Even the cruel judge, the profiteering merchant, the lazy worker are—though in a limited way—serving their fellow men. We are always surrounded by people who need our service, and if we fail to render it, either the forces of secular authority or other natural consequences of our acts will make us pay for our neglect. The thief will be hanged, the greedy merchant will lose his customers, the lazy worker will lose his job, the disobedient child will land in the reformatory as a delinquent, the cruel prince will call a revolution on his neck, and so forth. God's order to the left operates on all these levels. He continues his creative work (*creatio continuata*) by protecting his creation from chaos and self-inflicted disintegration.¹¹ Whether or not one wants to call this activity of God in the second order a "natural revelation" is ultimately irrelevant. For its impact operates, not on the level of conscious reasoning and argument, but on that of ordinary experience. The fact that men block this experience from entering their conscious minds (cf. Rom. 1: 18b) does not affect its reality. God operates in such a way that men *ought* to recognize their mutual belongingness. We must concede that only the gospel offers the key to God's acting in nature and history. But this key fits the keyhole. It unlocks a real situation which, though not understood, may yet be experienced even without the gospel.

Luther frequently undergirds this thought by reference to the laws of the Old Testament, especially those of the decalogue. God's strange work is the imposition of the law, and the office of secular government consists in enforcing the law. But here again we must guard against interpreting his terms too narrowly. He sees the commandments of the Old Testament as a particularly lucid expression of right and wrong, but he refuses to detach

8. Cf. H. Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik* (Tübingen; Mohr, 1951-55), Vol. I, p. 596; G. Wingren, *Luther's Lehre vom Beruf* (Munich: Kaiser, 1952), p. 19.

9. Cf. A. Siirala, *Gottes Gebot bei Martin Luther* (Helsinki, 1956), pp. 191ff.

10. G. Hillerdal, in *Lutheran World*, 10 (1963), 12f. Cf. also R. Bring, "Der Glaube und das Recht nach Luther," in *Gedenkschrift für Werner Elert* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1955), pp. 149-51.

11. Cf. K. Haendler, in *Lutherische Monatshefte*, 3 (1964), 557.

them from what we would now call their *Sitz im Leben*, i.e. their particular sociological reference. The Law of Moses is the national code of positive laws for Israel. It does not concern non-Jews except as a particularly lucid expression of moral duty. And it would be of no concern to them except for the fact that all men have a sense of right and wrong. They have an innate sense of justice which compels them to acknowledge in their own conscience the just claims which their fellow men have on them.¹² This law of the conscience is not a "natural law," as understood by scholasticism or the Enlightenment, for it is not based on reason. Reason may indeed propose changes and improvements in the positive laws,¹³ but it will also invent excuses and "rationalizations" to evade the constraint of conscience. But though men may refuse to acknowledge the right when they should do it, they will unerringly recognize it when they have been wronged. This innate responsiveness to right or wrong, even more than any outward constraint, makes the second order of God compelling.

II

Luther's emphasis on secular vocation as the sphere in which the Christian can and should prove his faith and love has deeply influenced the rise of Western culture and society in the last three centuries. His interest in, and concern for, the whole world of politics, commerce, culture, and the arts has a strikingly modern ring. But the practical conclusions which he drew from his promises sound all the more reactionary. This brings us to a consideration, both negative and positive, of the modern significance of Luther's thought.

Two points are repugnant, if not unintelligible, to modern Western man (especially in North America): Luther's rejection of revolution and his condemnation of the profit motive. His attitude in the Peasants' War is well enough known.¹⁴ Although he admitted that the peasants had a just cause, he insisted that they were wrong in rebelling against the princes, and that the latter were right in cruelly suppressing the rebellion. In the same vein he thought that children ought to accept the mates that their parents selected for them, whether or not they concurred in their parents' choice. For one's own person one must follow the Sermon on the Mount to the letter. Not so well known is Luther's stand against the capitalism which was beginning to come into vogue in his time. He condemned high profits on goods in short supply, credit buying and selling, monopolies, underselling, speculation, price fixing, large corporations. A merchant should expect to make no more profit than a common labourer would earn. The same Sermon on the Mount which prevents a man from using violence on his own behalf prevents him also from accumulating property. Greed is the worst sin in Luther's book.

12. Cf. Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens*, p. 168; Bring, "Der Glaube und das Recht," p. 148; Hillerdal, in *Lutheran World*, 10, 13.

13. Cf. Bornkamm, *Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen*, p. 11.

14. Cf. Hillerdal, in *Lutheran World*, 10, 13f.; Althaus, in *R.G.G.*³, III, 1936; Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens*, p. 202.

Of course, the head of a family must provide for wife and children, but only through his own labour, not by letting his money work for him. A Christian should not lend money to others in the hope of having it returned; much less should he demand interest. And just as the government has the duty to protect the individual citizen against injury or violence, so it must also direct economic life for the good of all, e.g. by establishing fair profits and prices on the market. Of course it must not be forgotten that Luther, when he left the ultimate authority in political and economic matters to the prince, expected the prince himself to observe the word of God, even as the preacher should if necessary warn the prince as openly and forcefully as Luther himself did.¹⁵ He argued from the concept of an integrated society, with a prince at the top of the pyramid who acknowledged his personal responsibility to God for the whole social organism. Thus the two orders met in the person of the sovereign. Obviously such a situation exists no longer, at least in Western civilization. There are no more absolute monarchs who could—as it were—in their own person reconcile the two orders. Modern democracy has made rulers of all of us, and today's tensions are no longer tensions between sovereign and subjects, but rather between the different power groupings in society. We cannot apply Luther's insights directly to the realms of politics or commerce and (to use a single example) undo either the American Revolution or American capitalism. What we can do as Christians is employ the doctrine of the two orders for an understanding of our own problems and apply it for their solution. In this context the following positive points may be made.

1. Luther's view stresses the continued, ever-present activity of God in all its biblical comprehensiveness. God is not only a Sunday visitor to Christian churches nor is he mainly interested in life's "religious province," but all of life and history mark his presence. Since God is concerned with both the sacred and the secular, the Christian must be too. He lives in both orders, that of the gospel and that of the law, and in both he serves his Lord. This concern with God's continued presence and action in the world has been largely lost to modern Christendom. It continues a shadowy existence in the catechisms and books of doctrine, but it fails to find expression in the voice of the church. Again and again we deplore and condemn the secularism of contemporary culture, and forget that Christendom itself has aided and abetted the process. Yet the same period of history that witnessed the emancipation of Western man from his domination by Christian concepts saw Pietism bring the world-denying aspects of Christianity to the fore. While giving a healthy impetus to evangelism and all sorts of eleemosynary activities, Pietism with its biblicism, individualism, and other-worldly piety prevented Christendom from attempting to apply Christian ethics to modern commerce and politics.¹⁶ This detachment of the church from the concerns of society has been detrimental, however, not only to the church's attitude

15. Cf. Hermann Diem, *Luthers Predigt in den zwei Reichen* (Munich: Kaiser, 1947), p. 28.

16. Cf. T. G. Tappert, "Orthodoxism, Pietism, and Rationalism, 158-1830," in H. L. Letts, *Christian Social Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), Vol. II, pp. 78f.

towards the state, but also to its own inner life. Increasingly Christendom itself has become *incurvatus in se* (bent on itself)—to use Luther's classical description of sin. This self-sufficient narcissism has made itself felt even more in the free churches of North America than in the folk and state churches of Western Europe. We are in grave danger of trying to live unto ourselves in spite of our profession of love for all men. While we openly confess God as the creator and sustainer of all of life, secretly we think of him as primarily interested in the ecclesiastical establishment: church-going, Bible-reading, private devotions, support of, and attendance at, as many church functions as possible. It is almost as though one could measure the Christian commitment of a man by the number of hours per week that he spends at church functions. Christian life is being normalized and standardized in the channels of our respective denominational pieties. This sort of observance is being fostered both negatively and positively. Negatively we try to induce repentance by exposing laxity in church attendance and in other approved virtues. Positively we try to cement the requisite biblical foundations under our respective denominational observances, and train our members to become quiet, co-operative church members of the standard type. In the process, conversion, which for St. Paul was the release from an ancient legalism, becomes the personal acceptance of a legalistic code of behaviour. Initiative and creativeness in living the Christian life are reduced to a minimum, and life in society and in the church run on two tracks, often parallel, but never crossing each other. Strangely enough it must be conceded that this reduction of Christian concern to matters ecclesiastical has often been interpreted as a consequence of Luther's doctrine of the two orders. In reality, however, the opposite is true, for according to Luther the same God works in both orders, and a Christian has to prove his faith and love in both. He serves God, not only in the church, but also in the world, not only by obeying, but also by commanding, not only with patience, but also with violence, not only as a private person, but also in his vocation. This sanctification of vocation is one of the pillars of Western civilization. It implies not only that the believer *can* serve God in every honest vocation, but that he must serve God in it. Here he will earn either heaven or hell.

2. Luther's social ethics fill the New Testament concept of dying-and-rising-with-Christ with concrete meaning. Our preaching of the cross is frequently forced and unnatural. We seek to induce an artificial feeling of repentance and remorse which bypass the real concerns of our people. Yet as long as repentance does not impinge on their real life, they cannot appreciate the comfort of the gospel itself. Luther, on the other hand, recognized the sting of the law in every human condition. Man bears the cross in his vocation, his marriage, his community—in short, in every human relationship. He meets the cross of the law whether or not he hears the gospel. But when he hears it, he learns the meaning of the cross, viz. service of the neighbour, and so he triumphs and overcomes in the midst of his crosses. Daily life becomes the arena in which he dies and rises with Christ.

The recognition of this truth frees the preacher from the necessity of

having to start every sermon with the law, as though the latter were a negative introduction to the gospel. To be sure, no one can appreciate the gospel unless he has first experienced the crushing load of the law. But this load is being experienced by everyone in the demands and conflicts of daily life.

An immigrant coming to Canada is subject to Canadian law from the moment he steps on Canadian soil. These laws limit his freedom in many ways. Five years later, at naturalization, no one lectures him again on these laws; he has experienced their power long ago. But he is given a new status as a Canadian citizen. If he appreciates this status, he will also win a new and more positive attitude towards the laws of the land. Similarly, we are living under the law even before we hear the word of God. But when we hear it, it shows how our crosses can also become our crowns.

3. Luther's social ethics warn us implicitly against over-simplifying the moral decisions that confront us today. Many voices seem to imply that the moral crisis could be solved either by strict conformity with traditional morality or by absolute abrogation of all moral restrictions. Neither solution satisfies the demands that God places on us, for man stands always in the cross-fire of the two orders. He needs a certain versatility and flexibility to find the right answer.¹⁷ As an individual he must be ready to practise absolute love and patience, but in his vocation he may not give in all the time, but may have to defend the right. The relationship between these two contradictory duties cannot be defined once for all. Every individual has to decide for himself in every individual case. The duty of having to make such decisions is one of the crosses of vocation. The church cannot free men from this decision. But it can help them to make the right decision by clarifying God's demands in both orders.

The deeper unity of both orders consists in the truth that both are expressions of God's love and that we can serve God in both. They have different methods, but the same goal. They are part of the same kingdom. There is therefore no peculiarly Christian ethics over or beside secular ethics.¹⁸ Faith leads us, not into a separate existence, but into a sharpened and deepened participation in the ethical problems and tasks of mankind. Luther's social ethics can help to restore this common front of church and world, so that both may unite on God's side in the struggle between the two kingdoms.

17. Cf. Hillerdal, in *Lutheran World*, 10, 20f.; Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens*, p. 166.

18. Cf. H. Diem, *Luthers Predigt in den zwei Reichen*, p. 15. Of course, this is no plea for immorality or moral laxity. But the Christian has no ethical obligation which is not—in principle—everyman's ethical obligation. What distinguishes the Christian is a deeper sense and awareness of this obligation, its seriousness, and its promise.