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Church and State in Light of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms

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The time has come for the churches in America to address public issues theologically in the public arena. It is no longer sufficient, if it ever was, to concentrate almost exclusively on private matters within the relatively restricted confines of ecclesiastical communities. Both the focus and the context of such theologizing is too narrow to permit the churches to have the opportunity to speak to the great and pressing issues of the day: world hunger, pollution of the natural environment, nuclear warfare, and injustices in human society.

The attempt to develop a public theology is an exceedingly subtle and complex enterprise, and especially so in a religiously pluralistic society where no formally established consensus exists to provide a commonly accepted set of criteria and standards as a basis for theologizing on a broad systematic scale. But it may be possible to make a beginning by focusing attention on some particular aspects of the larger agenda. This essay is intended to represent one such effort. It proceeds from an understanding of a particular doctrine in a particular tradition, viz., the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, and it seeks to develop an historical perspective on an important issue, viz., the relation between church and state. It does so within the particular context of the American experience. Its aim is to engender understanding in the public arena.

I. THE MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The beginning of America, and particularly the founding of a new federal republic, is a primary exemplification of what has come to be known as the "modern" consciousness. The beginning of the modern period in the history of the Western world (the latter half of the seventeenth century) is marked by the shifting of patterns. What was gradually coming to an effective end was the pattern that had dominated the life of the Western world during the medieval and reformation periods, viz., that of a church-dominated state and culture, commonly referred to as Christendom—the attempt to regard western Europe as the

corpus Christianorum, a Christian state and culture. What was coming into effective being as a substitute for that was the pattern of an autonomous civilization and society, whose basic structures (political, ethical, economic, and intellectual) were said to be independent of Christianity and the church. This movement for an autonomous civilization as a substitute for a Christian state and culture sketched out its program in the great intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, known as the Enlightenment, and was put into effect by the great revolutions (American and French) at the end of the eighteenth century.

To oversimplify for the sake of making a point, one could say that the medieval-

reformation pattern, which dominated the Western world at least from the fourth century to the end of the eighteenth century, was that of *uniformity.* By contrast, the pattern which was to dominate the modern consciousness was the dual one of *liberty* and *equality,* particularly the former. The great presupposition of the medieval consciousness was its fundamental conviction that the being and well-being of the civil society was dependent on uniformity of religion, which uniformity could be coerced, when that became necessary, by the power of the state. The grand presupposition of the modern consciousness has been that the being and well-being of the civil society depends upon a regime which is characterized by freedom of religion, and that the only way by which religion could extend its influence in the civil society is by persuasion alone. The shifting of patterns, then, is to be suggested by referring to the movement from uniformity to liberty and, in Sidney Mead's fine phrase, "from coercion to persuasion."[1] The older regime was characterized by established churches, the latter by religious liberty, which was to be effected in certain ways and circumstances by separating church and state—often misconstrued as an implied separation of religion from society.

It should be noted that the church as establishment did maintain a sense of responsibility for the character of life as exemplified in the total life of the community. That is to say, it regarded the public sectors of the community to be as central to its concern and ministry as was the private life of those individual persons who made up the community. What happened in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay is a good illustration of the point I am trying to make. From the time of John Winthrop and on, the Puritans who settled in Massachusetts Bay had it as their purpose to establish "a due forme of government both civill and ecclesiasticall."[2] It was their intent to fashion a society, a network of social structures, in which and through which the sovereign will of God could be made to prevail over the entire life of the community. To put it the other way around, it was their intention to establish structures for society that would enable persons in the totality of their existence, public as well as private, to live in obedience to God's will. They hoped that persons would render this obedience freely and voluntarily. But they were realistic enough to know that what they called the "natural man" would not do so. Hence they devised the "wholesome

[1]Sidney E. Mead, "From Coercion to Persuasion," *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 16-37.

[2]John Winthrop, " A Modell of Christian Charity," *The Puritans,* ed. Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: American Book Company, 1938) 197.

laws," so-called, which were intended to restrain the more obvious expressions of human sinfulness. And the civil magistrates were given the power to enforce those laws in the interest of ordering a Christian society.

By way of contrast, generally speaking, the surrender of the principle of religious uniformity and the concomitant support of the civil power, in the interest of accepting as a ruling motif the pattern of religious liberty, meant also a willingness and a tendency to relinquish responsibility for the life of the total community. In the long run, that was to lead, to the individualization and privatization of religion. It was this pattern that was to dominate the religious life of the American nation, particularly in the nineteenth century. It continues to the present, though it is perhaps less dominant and dominating today than it once was.

II. INDIVIDUALIZATION AND PRIVATIZATION

Two powerful modern religious movements on the American scene in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth engendered and supported the pattern of religious liberty and the consequent individualization of religion. One of them was Pietism; the other was the Deism which emerged out of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. For the sake of understanding, we should pause to remind ourselves of the character of each.

Pietism represented a de-emphasis on the institutional and doctrinal aspects of Christianity in favor of the spiritual and moral transformation of the individual person. It put primary stress upon the necessity for personal religious experience, which was marked by consciousness of sin, awakening to grace, and commitment to the Christian life. Pietists put great stress on the necessity for the living out of a "new life," which was characteristically exemplified by moral earnestness, a rigorous standard of personal conduct, and frequent examination of conscience. Pietists also tended to stress an active role for the laity, and they became known for their efforts to reform society by means of charitable and humanitarian enterprises. Hence it was out of the pietistic impulse that the great Inner Mission movements emerged on the continent of Europe and in England.

Deism is the movement which was to be particularly influential in the formation of the religious impulse in America. This is not obviously so because it managed to remain hidden. After a brief public splurge in the post-Revolutionary era, it went underground, where it has remained nonetheless through the years as a powerful engendering and shaping force in American religion. There are some scholars who believe that it has provided all along the essential substance of what is now being referred to as the civil religion. Deism is the doctrine that there are certain universal truths—fundamental to all religions, natural to humankind, evident to human reason, and sufficient for basic spiritual needs. These "truths" were specified in various ways by different persons, but usually they could be reduced to three essential propositions: (1) there is a God, who created the universe and instituted its laws; (2) this God demands worship and a life of virtue in obedience to his will; and (3) there is a future life of rewards and punishments as the sanction of morality, in which the virtuous will be rewarded and the vicious punished. The assertion of the universality of

natural religion is an implicit denial of special revelation. Deism was ultimately non-Christian; yet it was also perhaps the historical product of a Christian culture from which it drew many of its aspirations and the fundamental shape of its basic affirmations. It was regarded by its proponents, including the founders of the American nation, as an attempt to purify Christianity of abuses which had crept in during the course of history, and especially of abuses in the intellectual foundations of religion. In stripping away revelation, tradition, authority, miracles, and mystery, however, the Deists managed to strip away what was essential to Christianity and the church. Eventually they developed a rival religion. And it may very well be the case that the religion which they developed has become the real religion of the modern world.

It was the Pietists and the Rationalists (Deists) who were in the forefront of the struggle against the pattern of religious uniformity in the interest of the new pattern of religious liberty. It was they who were primarily responsible for the fact that the pattern of religious freedom was established as the American way, guaranteed by the Constitution and, most particularly, by the

First Amendment to the Constitution. (In this sense, it can be claimed that Pietism and Deism were "modern" movements.) And, very importantly, it was these two movements who were mostly responsible for the individualization and privatization of American religion. Despite basic differences between them, they could and did come together in the important matter of giving a privatistic and individualistic shape to American religion because they were in agreement on the following points: (1) they both viewed religion from a practical and moral, rather than a speculative and doctrinal, standpoint; (2) they agreed that religion was essentially an affair between the individual person and God; (3) they agreed on the definition of the church as a voluntary association; and (4) they both tended to be anti-clerical and anti-ecclesiastical.

In my own view of the matter, rightly or wrongly, we have here pointed to the strategic and, some may say, neuralgic heart of the matter. In the shifting from medieval to modern patterns, that is to say, a major consequence has been the privatization of religion. The role of the churches has been restricted, so far as their primary mission is concerned, to individual persons and their private concerns. This has been made abundantly clear in at least two important ways. First of all, the character of Christian institutions themselves has changed as the major areas of the common (i.e., public) life have been removed from the responsibility of the churches. Instead of the "church" in the medieval and reformation sense (i.e., as the integrating institution of the total life of the community), the modern period is characterized by the "denomination." (This is true primarily of Protestantism in America, but it has become true also for those churches who prefer to stand in the catholic tradition.) What is a denomination? It is not, as Sidney Mead and others have pointed out, primarily confessional, nor is it territorial; nor does it have any official connection with the civil power. The denominational organization of Christianity implies a plurality of ecclesiastical groups in a regime of religious toleration or religious freedom. Hence the denomination restricts itself to only one or two of the functions of the traditional church. According to Sidney Mead,

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> [the denomination]...is a voluntary association of like-hearted and like-minded individuals, who are united on the basis of common beliefs for the purpose of accomplishing tangible and defined objectives. One of the primary objectives is the propagation of its point of view, which it in some sense holds to be "true."[3]

The denomination, then, is an association for worship, for a modicum of theological and religious education, and for a degree of ethical discipline. Usually it is quite ineffective outside the area of family relations. It entrusts the remaining functions of the traditional church (e.g., education) to non-ecclesiastical organizations: the state, business groups, and the public school. The basic theory of denominational organization is that no one group is the true church of Christ in and of itself. Each denomination is but the particular name of a part, a member, of the larger whole; and the larger whole is "the church." Each denomination is only a different way of expressing in outward worship and organization the larger life of the church in which all share.

There is a second way in which the individualization and privatization of American religion has been made clear, and that is the general adoption of what has been called the voluntary principle. In a situation of religious freedom, the churches (denominations) could no longer rely on the coercive power of the state in the carrying out of their purposes and the

execution of their mission. They were made entirely dependent upon their own voluntary efforts. In Mead's phrase, they had to rely on "persuasion" rather than "coercion." In the areas of mission and social ministry, this led to the formation of literally hundreds of voluntary societies which were organized on local, state, and national levels. What came into being was a large and intricate network of voluntary associations, blanketing the land in what has come to be called "the benevolent empire." One group of societies was directed toward the mission of bringing Christianity to the heathen at home and abroad (e.g., the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, organized in 1810); another group of societies was concerned with education (the American Education Society, 1815; the American Bible Society, 1816; The American Sunday School Union, 1824; the American Tract Society, 1825); a third group of societies promoted a variety of humanitarian causes and projects for social and moral reform. The best known of the latter came to be the Temperance societies and the Anti-Slavery societies.

When I claim as a descriptive generalization that American religion in nineteenth-century America came to exemplify the patterns of individualization and privatization, it is not my intention to deplore that situation nor to criticize in a negative way either the mode of denominational organization that became prevalent or the voluntary principle which has been so magnificently implemented and realized in our society. It is rather to point to the fact that American religion has been directed more towards the needs and concerns of individual persons than it has to public questions.

[3]Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Denominationalism,* ed. R. E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977) 71.

There have been exceptions to this, of course. The anti-slavery movement was directed towards a very important public issue, and the temperance movement did finally resort to an abortive attempt to impose a moral viewpoint on the American public by a constitutional. amendment. Moreover, one of the more important episodes in the entire history of American religion, in my estimation, was the Social Gospel movement which saw the true task of Christians as a job of rescuing the poor by a revision of the political, social, and economic structures of the American society. But these have been exceptions; the fact that it seems appropriate to refer to them as such is an indication that the pattern which has functioned normatively is quite different. American religion has been individualistic and privatistic.

III. RECENT SHIFTS

If I correctly perceive what is going on presently, considerable questioning of the continuing viability of this pattern is quickly coming to occupy the center of the stage. I am not entirely sure I know why this is happening. Perhaps it is the fruition of a long tradition in Christian ethical teaching, exemplified, for instance, by the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, which has insisted that the question of the common weal, or the public good, also belongs on the agenda of the churches. Perhaps it is simply a response to a host of demands for the restoration of those rights long denied by the controlling segments of our society: rights of blacks, rights of Native Americans, rights of homosexuals, rights of women, etc. Many of us, myself included, were brought up short for the first time and made to see the viability for Christian ethics of questions of the public weal by the civil rights movement which developed as

a consequence of the prophetic insight of Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps it is simply an awareness that has been brought home to us by the proliferation of a congeries of issues which we can no longer avoid: issues of human sexuality; issues of the environment and our responsibility for the stewardship of the earth; issues of war and peace in a world where the horrible prospect of nuclear annihilation of the human race, once regarded as an impossibility, seems increasingly to be imminent; and issues of population and world hunger and poverty, and all sorts of injustices in the economic order. For whatever reason, or reasons, our attention is being drawn more and more to these questions and issues, and many voices insist that we direct our attention to them.

It is my opinion that a radical shifting of focus is taking place. Think of the fact, for example, that many bishops in the American Roman Catholic hierarchy, once regarded as the most conservative of groups in the worldwide Catholic community, are actually taking a public stand against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and advocating actions, such as the withholding of federal tax payments, as a manifestation of basic conviction. Or think of the fact that Billy Graham, who for decades has told us that if only individual persons will decide for Jesus all public and social problems will automatically be solved, is actually devoting his energies and influence to a campaign against nuclear warfare. Even members of the far religious right, led by the so-called Moral Majority, albeit in a tribalistic and idiosyncratic fashion, are insisting that religion must enter the public arena. And there are a number of influential church leaders and scholars

who are beginning to insist that the time has come, as a matter of first importance, to do theology in the public arena, that we must now develop a public theology and not speak only to ourselves within the walls of the churches. Martin Marty, certainly one of the most perceptive observers and analysts of the contemporary religious situation in America, has recently written a volume entitled *The Public Church* in which he indicates his hopes for the prospect of developing in a pluralistic religious situation some modes of thought and action on the part of religious groups, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical, which can be addressed to the public situation.[4] It does appear that we are living in a time of radical re-shifting of patterns, and there are those, consequently, who insist that we are at the end of the "modern" age.

IV. PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE TWO KINGDOMS

Questions of the nature of public theology and of the nature of the public church are complex and subtle. What in the Western theological tradition might authorize and enable us to address such questions in the present situation? There is a strand of thought in what might be called the catholic stream of the western Christian tradition, represented by Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, that might help us with this task. This has been recognized in contemporary Lutheran ethical thinking by such persons as Karl H. Hertz and Ulrich Duchrow.[5] They have suggested that this perspective on things could authorize our involvement in public issues and, in fact, thrust us, willy-nilly, into the public sector. It is not likely that such a perspective would entail adoption of new structures—e.g., the abandonment of the pattern of religious freedom in the relationship between church and state—but it would enable the development of different consequences both for the character of our society and the mission of the churches. There is

perhaps no better way of understanding this perspective than to examine briefly Luther's own teaching, which he set forth quite fully, in 1523, in his essay, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*.[6]

For Luther, secular authority referred primarily, though not exclusively, to the authority and power exercised by the state. In his medieval setting, this meant princes, kings, and emperors—as well as judges and other governmental officials. It was authority which rested primarily on the power of the sword. When Luther contrasted this authority and power with what he called the authority of the gospel, it was this use of the sword to enforce the will of the ruler upon subjects that became the clearest mark of the distinction between the two kingdoms. It was presupposed by Luther that secular authority was ordained by God, and that in a real sense the rulers exercised their power in sub-

[4]Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[5]Karl H. Hertz, *Politics Is a Way of Helping People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974); *Two Kingdoms and One World,* ed. Karl H. Hertz (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); and *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society?,* ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Department of Studies, 1977).

[6]This essay appears in *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 45.75-129.

jection to God. It was also presupposed that government exists in order to provide justice and order in society. God has ordained government as part of his providential work to preserve and protect a world which, because of sin, would otherwise fall into chaos. While secular authority was primarily identified with the state, it was related to the authority exercised by parents, teachers, employers, and others, including the church. For our purposes, it might be possible to broaden the picture even more. In our society there are other power structures which order and shape our lives. It might well be that what Luther had in mind when he spoke of secular authority is as much in evidence on Wall Street, on Madison Avenue, and in other socio-economic institutions as it is in the Pentagon. Despite all the injustice and distortion which persons have carried into these fundamental structures of the common life, they are God-given and necessary for human life. And for this reason, the Christian, according to Luther, has a necessary commitment to the secular world, a commitment that supports and makes proper use of these power structures.

It has to be kept in mind that these two kingdoms are in no sense to be regarded as being in opposition to each other. Ultimately both kingdoms rest in the sovereignty of God. In a real sense they supplement each other in the world, one providing for an external justice, the other for an inward justification. The gospel cannot rule the world; but neither can the rule of force make persons truly pious. The two kingdoms, then, are two ways in which God encounters and expresses his gracious concern for this sinful world. Luther's understanding is that before God the Christian is totally justified; but insofar as the Christian is in the world he or she remains sinful. No one is by nature Christian or pious, but everyone is sinful and evil. For this reason, God has placed law and government as a restraint upon all. There is a sense, therefore, in which Luther would allow us to say that the Christian is subject to both kingdoms.

But only in a sense. The crucial thing is that we understand that the Christian is subject to secular authority *for the sake of the neighbor,* not for his or her own sake. The fundamental

presupposition for all ethical decisions lies in a proper distinction between what I need and what my neighbor needs. Luther insisted that in what concerns one's self, one is governed by the gospel and suffers injustice for one's self as a Christian; but in what concerns the neighbor and belongs to him or her, the Christian will be governed according to love and allow no injustice to the neighbor. Insofar as government and the structures of society are a blessing and a necessity for others, the Christian must do whatever he or she can to make its authority effective, and this involves willing obedience, payment of taxes, holding office, etc. True, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded his followers *not* to make use of civil authority by going to a court of law to decide disputes among themselves. They should not defend *themselves* with the sword. They do not need to have the enemy punished, for they are to endure evil willingly. But, and this is the point, *the neighbor does have need of justice.* For this reason, the Christian is bound to take up the sword, to serve in any manner whatever (whether that be as judge, lord, prince, or soldier). This understanding of *need* rests in the realization that the Christian already possess all things in Christ: the Christian can gain nothing more for himself or herself through involvement in the world than that already granted in Christ. Thus Christians have the freedom to commit themselves without reservation to the

neighbor. Insofar as the Christian lives in Christ, life in the world can be turned towards the neighbor and the neighbor's need. The Christian loses nothing by this. The Christian's service to the state, then, to the public order, is understood by Luther to be in the service of love. Love, expressed directly in personal relationships or, more indirectly in the quest for justice, comprehends both kingdoms and both spheres of the Christian's life. Love does what reason and natural law command.

Thus the Christian (and collectively the church) maintains a twofold posture in the world. On the one hand, the Christian exists under the authority of the Word, the gospel, and so this person's relationship to the world and its power is one of almost complete detachment. He has no need of it because he already possesses all things in Christ. On the other hand, he participates fully in the life of the world and, precisely because of having no need of it, he is able to participate for the sake of others—for the sake of the neighbor. The one posture is passive; the other is active. On the one hand, said Luther, it is the mark of the true Christian to be willing to suffer evil and injustice without avenging or bringing suit in court; the Christian will not make use of secular power and law for himself or herself. On the other hand, the Christian may take up the very opposite posture: for the sake of others, a person may and perhaps should seek vengeance and help, most certainly for justice, and do what can be done to obtain such ends.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC ARENA

If one inquires how all of this relates to the notion of the church's involvement in the public arena, a twofold response seems both apparent and appropriate. First of all, the Christian and the church have a necessary commitment to human life in the world and, therefore, commitment to culture and society. It is not a prerequisite that society be Christian or that it be Christianized in order to serve the needs of the neighbor. The church is not meant to compete with society or offer itself as a substitute for it. Rather it is to cooperate with society and its power to the extent that love and law serve the same end, viz., the good of the neighbor. This

means that a Christian may adapt even to a form of civil religion that reinforces the socio-economic or political orders that exist. The point at which the church must take its stand against society is where there arises within it any pretension to ultimacy. Hence the risk that the church takes in its involvement with society is great indeed. The danger is that the church may become just another of the power structures within society that shape and order our external lives and fortunes. It must always be borne in mind, therefore, that there is constantly the need for grace.

In the second place, there is a clear sense in which the church is not marked out in the world by its ability to influence or change the society in which it lives. There is a sense in which the posture of the church is one of powerlessness. Perhaps we should not be too surprised, therefore, that the church seems to have made so small an impression in our own society. The church is not marked in the world by its use of the sword. It is marked by its reliance upon and its proclamation of the gospel.