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From Carl Schmitt to Dorothee Sölle: has political theology turned full circle?

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The phrase 'political theology' is used with an overwhelmingly left-wing emphasis in contemporary discussion. This has not always been the case. Fifty years ago, the same phrase was being used by the National Socialist Carl Schmitt in support of an extreme right-wing movement, namely, Hitler's Nazism. Schmitt himself is not of great interest to theology; his *métier* was political philosophy. But the fusion he and the National Socialists advocated between the church and state was important both historically and theologically, because it found support in large sectors of the Lutheran Church. In 1933 the German Christian movement was ready and willing to proclaim 'Germany our goal, Christ our strength!' Significantly, at a critical moment in the nation's history, a number of leading Lutheran theologians—Althaus, Elert, Hirsch, Künneth—threw their support behind Hitler's nationalistic attempt to revive his country's fortunes. It is not sufficient to dismiss these men either as fools, or as mere pawns in the political process. How did they attempt to justify such a position theologically?

The answer to this question, at least in part, is to be found in the development of the Lutheran ethical tradition, the cardinal tenets of which may be summed up in the phrases 'two kingdoms' and 'the orders'. Luther made an important distinction between the kingdom on the right hand (the personal sphere in which the radical demands of Christ should be carried out literally and directly) and the kingdom on the left hand (the world of the 'orders' of government, business, and family, where certain factual requirements determine the way obedience to God's commands takes place). In this second sphere, obedience is less 'direct' and assumes more the nature of compromise. To take one example, the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount urge the renunciation of all force and violence. In encounter between private individuals this may hold good but, in the spheres of state and family, force plays a very necessary role in punishing the lawbreaker and disciplining the child. Both kingdoms are God's kingdoms, and in both the motive of love should be operative. The mode of action, however, can be very different, depending on whether one is stationed in the kingdom on the right or the kingdom on the left.

Luther's doctrine certainly has its strong points, and, in the form of making some distinction between how one behaves in different spheres,

is probably much more pervasive than is generally realized. There is little doubt, however, that the degenerate, highly bifurcated form in which the 'two-kingdoms' doctrine developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played its part in exposing German history to dangerous political excesses. Lutherans tended to understand the doctrine as a summons to leave the political sphere free from spiritual considerations, at the mercy of its own autonomous tendencies. The church adopted a passive role which implicitly supported the *status quo*. Churchmen who were involved in politics made little attempt to criticize accepted norms and practices. Bismarck is an interesting example of a politician who, although a devout Lutheran in his private life, and whose faith was not without some beneficial effect on his political actions, still pursued the goals of national egoism and used the mixture of devious and brutal means needed to realize such goals in an unquestioning and unscrupulous way. Again, why did such a small proportion of the German Church oppose Hitler when he came to power in 1933? Part of the reason seems to lie with the strong inclination towards passivity and uncritical acceptance of political authority, whoever wielded it and however it was wielded, which the Lutheran ethical tradition had inculcated in the German nation.

In theologians such as Althaus, Elert and Künneth, however, there is found more than a mere repetition of what had become fossilized Lutheran doctrine. There is actually an extension of its teaching, in the addition of the orders of nation and race to the three basic orders of politics, economics and family. In the highly charged atmosphere of 1933, talk like this was grist to the National Socialist mill. Paul Althaus was a contributor to the notorious 1934 Ansbach Proposals, in which the German Christians replied to the Confessing Church's Barmen Declaration with its rejection of any compromise between the church and Nazism. In the Ansbach Proposals, family, nation and blood were seen as 'the means by which God creates and preserves our earthly life. . . . Moreover, inasmuch as the will of God always confronts us in our here-and-now world, it likewise binds us to a historical moment in the family, the people, or the race, that is to say, to a certain distinct point in its history.' Thanks were even given to God for bestowing the Führer as 'a pious and faithful chief of state' in the country's hour of need, and for granting 'good government' in the form of the National Socialist state.¹

As the full horrors of Hitler and Nazism came to light, so inevitably there was a strong reaction against the type of theology which had helped and sustained him and his party in their rise to power. The reaction was led by the rising theologian of the day—not himself a Lutheran but a very influential figure in the early years of the Confessing Church—Karl Barth. In a famous letter to France in 1939, Barth wrote: 'The German people suffer from the legacy of the greatest of all German Christians, from the mistake of Martin Luther regarding the relation of Law and

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Gospel, of temporal and spiritual order and power, by which the Germans' natural paganism has been ideologically clarified, confirmed, and strengthened rather than being limited and contained.² In due course Barth developed his own distinctive approach to political ethics. In 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community', he advocated a strictly Christocentric approach, which viewed church and state as concentric circles, with action in the one being analagous to action in the other. In this way the church provided the state with a rationale for humanity, justice, democracy, etc.³ Barth's ideas were developed under the watchword of 'The Kingly Lordship of Christ' (*die Königsherrschaft Christi*) and were clearly intended as a distinct alternative to the traditional Lutheran 'two-kingdoms' (*Zwei Reiche*) doctrine.

In post-war Germany, Barth's rival concept met with a mixed response. A number of important Lutheran theologians, notably Ernst Wolf and Helmut Gollwitzer, sided with *die Königsherrschaft Christi*. In terms of practical politics this meant support for such causes as socialism and pacifism, and opposition to German rearmament and the nuclear arms race. The attempt at a more direct application of Christian directives in the political sphere led in a distinctly left-wing direction. Probably the majority of Lutheran theologians, however, remained faithful to the 'two-kingdoms' doctrine, though often in a considerably modified form. The most outstanding advocate of such a modified form of the doctrine is surely Helmut Thielicke, writer of a four-volume *Theologische Ethik*.⁴ According to Thielicke, Luther understood the 'two kingdoms' in too static a way. The kingdom on the right hand—the radical ethic of Jesus such as is found in the Sermon on the Mount—represents an eschatological category which must always act as a critical searchlight, calling into question the norms and values of the kingdom on the left. Thielicke also makes a distinction between orders which derive from creation, and are thus (relatively) unambiguous, such as marriage; and those which stem from the Fall, and are therefore highly ambiguous, such as the state. The ambiguity of the state consists in the fact that, though it exists to curtail egoism and the use of force, the 'war of all against all', it actually makes use of egoism and force in order to do so. Thielicke develops this theme in the concept of the 'Noachic covenant'. In Genesis 9:1–6 we find God 'condescending' to the fallen state of the world, tolerating the laws of conflict by which man lives in the world, and making use of force in order to restrain force. In view of this, Thielicke is readier than, say, Barth or Gollwitzer to accept the possibility of the justified use of force, though in the present age nuclear weapons can have meaning only as a deterrent; the actual use of them would be senseless. Moreover, the fact that Thielicke stresses the fallen element in the state (unlike Althaus, who called the state a creation order) does allow him scope for a more critical appraisal of any current manifestation of the state than was possible in the defective theology of the German Christians.

Thielicke's understanding of the world 'between two aeons' leads him to an aversion of political and economic extremes. Enthusiastic radicalism, such as is represented by Marxism, is too idealistic. It overleaps the present condition of the world and fails to make allowance for man in his fallen state. In its Christian guise, it tries to transfer the kingdom of God and its radical laws directly into this aeon. *Laissez-faire* conservatism, on the other hand, is guilty of the opposite extreme, of wallowing in a fallen creation, and of prolonging the present state of the world beyond reason. Between these two extremes a wide variety of political approaches may be legitimate, though all should have the common aim of bringing the present world under the critical searchlight of the world to come. One could sum up Thielicke's modified 'two-kingdoms' doctrine by saying that it rules out support for the extremes of Left and Right as a theological option, but allows scope for a great variety of different approaches in a very broad Centre. The question remains, however, whether a Christian ethic, operative in the social and political sphere, should not point in a more *definite* direction than Thielicke allows.

A Lutheran theologian who has taken a more eclectic approach is Heinz-Dietrich Wendland. Like Thielicke, he has argued that the orders need to be placed in a more eschatological perspective than has traditionally been the case in Lutheran theology, but he has also spoken in Barthian terms of a lordship of Christ extending beyond the walls of the church. All men, in Wendland's view, are capable of comprehending humane goals which are an expression both of 'natural law' and the Christian love commandment.⁵ Wendland was an important figure in the ecumenical movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and subscribed to the then dominant notion of 'the responsible society'. This concept was considered a yardstick by which both communism and capitalism could be critically evaluated; its origins, of course, can be traced in the writings of such pre-war pillars of ecumenism as William Temple and Reinhold Niebuhr. 'The responsible society' meant a society where the state was held responsible for a just distribution of wealth, the individual was guaranteed freedom, and the state was responsible to, and could be controlled by, the electorate. 'The responsible society' corresponded closely to what may be described as the western consensus ideal, which favoured a democratic political constitution and a mixed economy.

With theologians such as Wendland and the American John C. Bennett as its articulate supporters, this ideal held clear sway at the World Council of Churches from 1948 to 1966. In the mid-sixties, however, it started to come under fire from various quarters. Conventional assumptions and attitudes were suddenly thrown into the melting-pot. Deep-rooted antipathy to communism relaxed somewhat as cold-war relations thawed, and a number of leading European theologians and Marxists took part in the Christian-Marxist dialogue.

The upshot was to make Christians more critical of their own tradition and more appreciative of some of the insights of Marxism. The countries of the Third World began to make more of an impact on the World Council of Churches, and the recognition dawned that, even though western democracy might have brought greater freedom and equality within the societies of the West, at the same time these societies had been systematically exploiting the poorer countries—a situation in itself giving scope for economic injustice and undemocratic government. The first protests of the liberation theologians were heard. Gustavo Gutiérrez rejected economic development because it did not begin to touch the interlocking international system of trade which was permanently weighted against the poorer countries.⁶ Hugo Assmann said bluntly that development was a lie, and that the programmes intended to implement it fell under ‘imperialist’ control.⁷ Application of the ‘Christian Democratic’ ideal was tried in Chile in the late 1960s and found wanting; it appeared to be nothing less than a pallid replica of its oppressive capitalist predecessor.

Suddenly, the possibility of a collaboration between Christians and Marxists became a very real option. It actually seemed to be the only option left. In the view of the Argentine Protestant theologian José Miguez Bonino, the crux of the matter is that Christian ethics has lacked an instrument for analysing the real dynamics of society and for assessing the churches’ active role in it. Because of this, the articulation of Christian love has been haphazard, arbitrary, sentimental, and has easily fallen prey to the ‘very secular’ interests of those in power. It is here that Christian ethics should take Marxism seriously, because ‘it offers a scientific, verifiable and efficacious way to articulate love historically.’⁸ The themes of revolution and radical change also found an echo in some of the theology produced in Europe in the 1960s. Jürgen Moltmann wrote his influential *Theology of Hope* and, in the wake of the revolutionary year of 1968, submitted a series of theses basically sympathetic to current trends in his *Religion, Revolution and the Future* (1969). The names of J. B. Metz and Dorothee Sölle joined Moltmann’s in a phenomenon soon described as ‘political theology’. The era of ‘the responsible society’ seemed to have passed.

During the 1970s there is little doubt that political and liberation theology has been the dominant trend in Christian writing on socio-political matters. Political theologians and liberation theologians are here spoken of together, even though there are important differences between the two; the early theologies of liberation actually criticized Metz and Moltmann for remaining too uncritically western in many of their assumptions and attitudes. But it is the similarities rather than differences between the two movements to which attention is drawn here. Recent political and liberation theology has certainly had many important things to say. It has shown how all theology, whether it is aware of this or not, possesses a political dimension; theology which

deliberately steers clear of politics simply tends to preserve the *status quo*. Latin American theologians claim this is what European theologians have been doing for far too long. Political theology has rightly emphasized the social dimension of Christian love, the need for change in structures as well as individuals, the importance of 'preventing' wounds as well as 'healing' them. Liberation theology has drawn attention to the appalling inequity of relations between North and South, and the continuing imbalance of wealth and resources which cries out for fundamental redress. The two movements have called many Christians out of an attitude of complacent self-satisfaction into a thirsting after righteousness and justice. They represent a theology which is vibrant and alive.

At the same time, there are dangers and weaknesses in this trend. Much political and liberation theology has a disturbingly arrogant tone. Criticizing imperialism in others, it betrays more than a little hint of imperialism in reverse. It shows signs of hardening into a 'left-wing orthodoxy'.⁹ Political theology needs to enter more into dialogue with other sorts of theology—with political theology of different coloured hues—if it is not to become sterile and blinkered. Political and liberation theology is open to criticism on the following counts.

First, a number of liberation theologians, as well as a sympathetic European theologian in Dorothee Sölle, have a rather uncritical alliance with Marxism. This alliance is certainly quite understandable in a South American context. There the 'free' West seems to have failed the developing countries, the prevailing governments are mainly right-wing dictatorships, and the less than attractive ways in which Marxism has been applied in Eastern Europe are not so close at hand. Of course there is recognition of the oppressive record of communist Russia, but it is the barbarities of home-grown governments, often backed by western arms, which attract greater attention. Yet whatever the appeal of short-time collaboration between Christian and Marxist in the face of a common foe, in the long term they can never be anything but uneasy partners. Shared insights must not blind to underlying incompatibilities. Marxism's all-inclusive materialism has no place for God, and, whatever the impassioned humanitarianism which inspires many Marxists, it has no deeply rooted place for man either. There is truth in Girardi's reproach that 'What the Christian will reproach the Marxist for, in the last analysis, is not the fact that he is a humanist, but that he is not humanist enough',¹⁰ and typical of Thielicke's more recent writing is the assertion that 'Only he who has the alien dignity which being in relation to God confers, can escape the enslaving grip that values him as a thing and drops him when he no longer has utility as such.'¹¹ There is a pragmatism, seemingly endemic to Marxism, which puts man's dignity in constant peril.

Secondly, political theology is insufficiently discriminating in its application of models to different political situations. The Bible has

been exposed to some rather arbitrary treatment. While the liberation theologians have rightly stressed the prophets' concern for justice, they have also shown an aptitude for straining the text: e.g., José P. Miranda's attempt to politicize Paul's message of salvation from the law,¹² and the widespread interpretation of the Exodus story as a summons to political liberation which tends to ignore the special circumstances relating to Yahweh and the people of Israel. The application of the Exodus motif becomes even more dubious when transferred from the South American to the European situation, which is what Sölle does in her essay 'Resistance: Toward a First-World Theology'.¹³ The western situation is not the same as the Third-World situation, and we do well to recognize this. In his 'Thesen zum Thema "Revolution"' (like Moltmann's theses written in 1969), Wolfgang Schweitzer made the point that while revolutions today appear to be unavoidable, especially in South America, it is not true that the future and humanity of man in our time can be preserved only in this way. Structures in industrialized countries must be changed, but in a peaceful way, for it is highly unlikely that a catastrophic type of revolution in a highly industrialized people would bring the goal of a just order nearer.¹⁴ In a nutshell, there is a place for reform as well as revolution. There is a halting recognition that this may be true even in South America in some recent writings of liberation theologians, notably Leonardo Boff. Boff accepts that South American Christians will probably not witness the liberation of their continent from hunger and alienation in their generation. What they will have to do, therefore, is 'work liberatively within a pervasive system of captivity'.¹⁵

One of the criticisms made by early liberation theology of European political theology was its failure to deal sufficiently with the concrete and practical. Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* is certainly vulnerable to this charge. He writes impressively: 'From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward-looking and forward-moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present'.¹⁶ But what is the object of this hope? Moltmann never really makes this very clear. Can an object of hope which is so opaque, however, revolutionize and transform the present effectively? One has one's doubts. To be fair to Moltmann, he has made his position clearer in more recent writings. Thus in March 1976, in 'An Open Letter to José Miguez Bonino', he argued vigorously for democratic socialism in opposition to all theoretical arguments for a socialist dictatorship, however transitory it is meant to be, for there has been no evidence yet of such dictatorship moving towards democracy.¹⁷ The criticism may also be made of liberation theology, however, that it too needs to deal less in generalities and grapple more with specific courses of action. If theology is to be committed to the task of revolution, there needs to be more awareness of the complexities and ambiguities which participation in the revolutionary process entails. Two important issues

which demand deeper treatment are:

1) *The question of violence in the revolutionary process.* Are there limits to the violence Christians are prepared to inflict (e.g. the use of torture)? Are these limits which will divide them from Marxists with whom they may be working? Or are pacifism and non-violence the truly Christian modes of revolution?

2) *The question of what happens in and when the revolution succeeds.* What form of government is to be sought? How are tendencies to élitist control of the working-class through a centralized bureaucratic state machinery to be avoided? How can the state be used effectively as a means, without becoming an all-embracing end?

Some liberation theologians, like Bonino, have begun to grapple with these questions, but they need to do so much more seriously and thoroughly.

A final reason for disquiet is this. If political and liberation theologians do not take care to consider seriously what, in the final analysis, distinguishes them from colleagues of an extreme political hue, they *could* find themselves trapped in the same pitfall as the German Christians. The fault of the German Christians, and the Lutheran theologians in their midst, was that they surrendered the political process to the autonomous direction of an extreme right-wing movement. In a situation of national extremity, National Socialism was given a free hand, and Christian scruples about the violence inflicted, and the opponents against whom it was inflicted, were held of no account. When political and liberation theologians submit to Marxist leadership, in situations which cry out for drastic change, are they not guilty of precisely the same error? Here too there can be surrender to autonomous processes and exploitation by a political extreme—the difference simply being that in this case it is a left-wing extreme. A beginning made in the name of a Christian motive can easily end in submission to an alien authority. Do we see signs of history repeating itself?

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By way of postscript, mention may be made of other possible models for Christian action in the socio-political sphere. For example, the notion of 'the responsible society' is one that is by no means beyond redemption, or at least the possibility of reseriving. It does attempt to do justice to two notions—those of freedom and equality—which are often at odds with each other, but which are both deeply rooted in an ethic based on the Christian gospel. 'Responsibility' and 'society', however, need to be thought out again on a wider scale than was previously the case. We must consider justice between countries as well as justice within countries; far greater weight must be given to the needs and rights of the developing countries. In this respect, the

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'North-South' Report of the Brandt Commission is greatly to be welcomed in its basic emphases. Attention may also be drawn to the fact that a Lutheran tradition which seems to have learnt from past mistakes, and has become more open to insights from other approaches, is displaying fresh signs of vitality. There has been a wealth of writings by German Lutherans in the socio-political sphere in recent years, but, as yet, little of this work has been translated. Martin Honecker and Heinz Eduard Tödt are two theologians writing currently who are surely worthy of such an honour. It would be ironic, and in a sense rather pleasing, if a tradition which played a culpable part in the development of a heinous political theology fifty years ago, turned out to offer the most coherent alternative to a political theology today which may be less heinous, but reveals many of the same weaknesses.

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NOTES

- 1 The Ansbach Proposals may be found in Karl H. Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World* (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis 1976), pp.190-1.
- 2 Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (Zollikon, Zurich 1945), p.113.
- 3 Karl Barth, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community', *Against the Stream* (SCM Press, London 1954), pp.15-20.
- 4 Thielicke's *Theologische Ethik* was published in four volumes over the period 1951-64. Parts of it, about half in all, have appeared in translation, under the titles *Theological Ethics, Volume I: Foundations* (A. & C. Black, London 1966), *Volume II: Politics* (A. & C. Black, London 1969) and *The Ethics of Sex* (James Clarke, Cambridge 1964).
- 5 Among the more important of Wendland's books are *Botschaft an die soziale Welt* (Furche, Hamburg 1959), *Die Kirche in der revolutionären Gesellschaft* (Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh 1967), and *Grundzüge der evangelischen Sozialethik* (J. P. Bachem, Cologne 1968).
- 6 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *In Search of a Theology of Development* (A SODEPAX Report, 1969), pp.121f.
- 7 Hugo Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation* (Search Press, London 1975), p.49.
- 8 José Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: the Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1976), pp.114-15.
- 9 Trutz Rendtorff used this phrase about theology of revolution in *Theologie der Revolution: Analysen und Materialien* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1968).
- 10 Giulio Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity* (Gill & Son, Dublin 1968), p.137.
- 11 Helmut Thielicke, *The Hidden Question of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1977), p.63.
- 12 José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (SCM Press, London 1977), pp.169-92.
- 13 Dorothee Sölle's essay, 'Resistance: Toward a First-World Theology', was published in *Christianity and Crisis*, 39, 1979.
- 14 Wolfgang Schweitzer, 'Thesen zum Thema "Revolution"', *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, 13, 1969, pp.229-30.
- 15 Leonardo Boff, 'Christ's Liberation via Oppression: An Attempt at Theological Construction from the Standpoint of Latin America', in Rosino Gibellini, ed., *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* (SCM Press, London 1980), p.129.
- 16 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (SCM Press, London 1967), p.16.
- 17 Moltmann's letter is to be found in *Christianity and Crisis*, 36, 1976, pp.57-63.