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CLASSICAL PATTERNS OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

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Throughout the history of Western civilization man's allegiance has often been torn between God and country, religious faith and patriotism, the divine order and the political order. The world had earlier known theocracies where little distinction existed between the divine and the political. It had also known, in the Greek city state and in Rome, the dominance of the political over the spiritual. But Christianity introduced a new principle into the relationship between the secular and the divine. Christ taught that man should "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25), thus setting the stage for an ensuing struggle between two orders which have each tended to make absolute claims.

This struggle has taken various forms in history; but, particularly during the medieval-Reformation era, alternative ways of conceptualizing church-state issues developed which have become the classical models for the Christian church. Roman Catholicism sought to include the political order within a comprehensive theological perspective, on the assumption that every aspect of reality should be seen as under the control of a creative, sovereign God. Lutheranism, Anabaptism, and Reformism, on the other hand, developed variations of the idea that church and state were separate orders, each justified in its own sphere of operation.

THE CATHOLIC MODEL

During the early Christian era the church asked little from the state other than the freedom to worship and witness peacefully. The conversion of Constantine and the recognition of Christianity as the religion of the empire, however, led the church to use the power of the state to suppress heresy and schism and to assert that the ruler must obey the church in all things spiritual. This view was typified by Augustine, who believed that while the civil government existed because of sin, it was nevertheless a divine remedy for sin.

By the eleventh century all people were considered to be members of a single Christian society, and a differentiation was no longer made between those who formed the state and those who formed the church. Under God this society had two heads, the pope and the emperor, and two sorts of

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authority, the spiritual rule of priests and the temporal rule of kings. Yet no real division was considered to exist between these two hierarchies of governing officials, for both were conceived as part of a divinely unified plan to rule society in accordance with God's law. The temporal rulers had the responsibility to prescribe those things which would lead men to supernatural happiness and to forbid those things which would divert men from it. In fulfilling these spiritual duties, they served at the direction of the spiritual rulers, who were the agents of God and the guiding force behind the Christian state.

With the passing of time, however, various people began to assert the superiority of spiritual rule over all temporal rule. Innocent IV, one of the great popes of the thirteenth century, claimed that the unique power of his position as the "vicar of Christ" conferred a pre-eminence over all other forms of authority. In his view, both temporal and spiritual power ultimately resided in the church, and thus were vested in the pope. This theory led Boniface VIII to assert that the earthly authority had in fact been established by the spiritual. Consequently, the temporal power was not only to be judged by the church, but could only exercise its authority "at the command and with the permission of the priests."

At the time of the Reformation, therefore, the Catholic model held the pope to be the supreme head of Christendom, with the right and power to unseat kings if the good of the spiritual realm demanded it. While purely secular matters were admitted to be the responsibility of the kings, the moral reasons justifying interference by the pope were wide in scope and vague in nature. In contrast, the church was considered to be completely free of any secular authority with regard to spiritual activities, for it was subject only to the will of God as expressed through the pope.

THE LUTHERAN MODEL

Luther was strongly influenced by the medieval idea that God reigned everywhere in life, though he largely rejected the concept of a single Christian society. Instead, he viewed all individuals as divided into those who had been justified by grace through faith, and those who had not. The first were related to God as members of the kingdom of salvation, while the rest were related to him through the wider kingdom of creation.

Within these two kingdoms God had established instruments through which he governed the state and the church. The state was necessary to bring about a type of outward righteousness among the unfaithful and unsaved, enabling them to participate in such things as family life and economic activity. By thus keeping sin within limits, the secular rulers served as a tool of God's wrath, but they also constituted a divine blessing as an expression of God's mercy.

The church, on the hand, was to proclaim the Word of God, by which individuals could become good and righteous, and thereby attain everlasting life. The church was also to admonish the temporal rulers whenever they misused their power or failed to prevent injustice among their people. This did not mean that the secular rulers had to subordinate themselves to the churchly hierarchy, as the Catholic church demanded; but they were expected to acknowledge the authority of the Word of God and heed it.

DIRECTION

Since the secular rulers were God-given and God-ordained, it followed that all citizens must be obedient to them, even if they were unjust and corrupt. Luther had a precedent for this insistence on obedience in Paul's admonition to the Romans to "be subject to the higher powers" (Romans 13:1) whom God had instituted to punish the wrong-doer. Such obedience was particularly important for Christians, who thereby strengthened God's hand against human wickedness, set a good example for others who would not submit to authority willingly, and maintained the good reputation of the gospel. The citizen who was not a true Christian, in contrast, obeyed out of fear of the consequences, since it was to curb his depraved nature that government was originally established.

This grounding of man's obedience toward worldly authority in God's ultimate sovereignty meant that such obedience was to be virtually unconditional. However, Luther tried to balance this obligation with Acts 5:20: "We must obey God rather than men." When the state violated its responsibilities or ordered Christians to sin, they were no longer obliged to obey. Since obedience to political authority was a form of obedience to God, government as an aspect of God's rule possessed validity only insofar as it served God.

Church and state, the spiritual and temporal governments, were thus unified by the sovereignty of God, and the loyal submission of the Christian to both was required. At the same time, they were separate modes of God's activity in the world. The state was an expression of God's creation, necessary for the maintenance of peace and order; but obedience to its laws was insufficient for achieving salvation. The church was an expression of God's redemption, necessary for the propagation of the gospel; but it was not to undertake political activity. Ideally, each "government" helped the other, for the state enabled the church to carry out its work under orderly conditions, while the church furnished pious and cooperative citizens necessary for the political stability of the state.

THE ANABAPTIST MODEL

The Anabaptists also believed that all individuals were divided into two kingdoms, but for them the kingdoms were that of God and the devil. These were distinct entities and in continuous conflict, because one was the center of God's activity, while the other was under the control of Satan.

In spite of this belief that the devil ruled the world, however, the Anabaptists agreed with Luther that the state was ordained by God, and was a sign of his providence. Since sin would otherwise make orderly living impossible, government authority was necessary to punish evildoers and protect law-abiding citizens. As an agent of God's punishment, the state expressed his divine wrath; but as a hindrance to evil, it revealed his divine love and mercy. Thus even a tyrannical government upheld God's will to some degree.

The church, on the other hand, was a group of disciples, committed to a distinctive ethic and sharing a relationship with one another that was as essential as their relationship with God. This required the church to be separated from the world, and association with the state was at best sub-Christian. Moreover, as a voluntary community in which all members

determined the nature of Christian thought and behavior, the church could not tolerate any intrusions or restrictions by the state on its internal life. The spiritual kingdom was the center of God's activity, and if government attempted to rule the hearts of men, it was overstepping its divinely-ordained jurisdiction.

Since the state was instituted by God, however, it was empowered to ask obedience from its citizens, even from those who refused to associate with its ruling functions. For the Anabaptists, this meant that willingness to be obedient to governmental authority was one aspect of the Christian's more general obedience to God. This obedience demonstrated gratitude for his love to mankind by establishing government, and it followed the clear example of Christ in the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, their obedience was limited by their understanding of the state's legitimate functions. Since these functions embraced only the exercise of public law and order, no obedience could be asked for in the spiritual realm and, if required, was to be passively but legitimately refused. As Menno Simons put it, "If they wish to rule and lord it above Christ Jesus, or contrary to Christ Jesus in our consciences . . . this we do not grant them."

Church and state, the kingdom of God and of the world, were thus viewed as two distinct entities. The state was a punishment for man's sin, a means of effecting necessary peace and order, but without use to the true Christian. The church was the body of voluntarily dedicated believers, separated from the world and seeking to live the life of Christian discipleship.

THE REFORMED MODEL

Calvin largely retained the medieval vision of a single Christian society in which Christ was the Head of the church as well as Lord of the world. Within this society, the church and state had separate functions, but there was constant interaction between them as partners in service to people's needs. The state represented the exercise of God's sovereign power in the world through political rulers who were his servants and officials. According to Calvin, "Secular government rests upon God's providence and sacred prescription," and is like a "symbol of the kingly authority of our Lord Jesus Christ."

As the representatives of God, the secular authorities were obliged to seek the welfare of their citizens by assuming responsibility for promoting their religious life. This required protecting the preaching of the gospel and the church which had this service to perform, looking after and supporting the external worship of God, defending the pure doctrine of the church, and establishing social harmony by shaping the conduct of citizens according to the law. In this way the state contributed to the salvation of its citizens as well as provided an orderly and beneficial temporal setting for their daily life.

The church, on the other hand, was the "congregation of elect people," to whom God had entrusted the proclamation of the gospel and the responsibility for helping to establish and maintain proper discipline within society. This meant that it had to support the state in its use of coercion. But the secular rulers, being subject to the Word of God, also had to allow themselves to be enlightened by the preachers of that Word and to take care that their actions were in constant harmony with it.

DIRECTION

Because the state thus fulfilled the tasks prescribed by God's historic and salvific purposes, individuals could not "resist the magistrate without, at the same time, resisting God himself." For God demanded not merely outward obedience, but recognition of the institutions of secular government as evidence of his providential and fatherly care. His design in human government was security for the good and restraint of the wicked, and the persons he had invested with civil authority were placed there for the good of all. This was true even with regard to unjust and tyrannical rulers, who were installed in power by God to punish the sins of the people.

Church and state, the spiritual and temporal kingdoms, were therefore united under the lordship of Christ to serve the religious and civil needs of the people. The church was the instrument through which Christ accomplished his spiritual work among men and through which he also sought to direct society. The state was to insure that in a Christian society religion received public recognition and that peace and order prevailed among the citizenry. When political rulers fulfilled these obligations, they acted in harmony with the "order of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ," even though it was a spiritual kingdom and the rule of magistrates was an earthly one.

Four different models thus became the legacy of the medieval-Reformation era to the Christian church. The Catholic vision saw all of reality as a mirror of God and his purposes for mankind, a *corpus Christianum*. The state, though maintaining its integrity within the temporal order, was an instrument by which man was aided in living the Christian life. Luther saw the state as an expression of God's creation, but accorded the church alone historical responsibility for man's redemption. The Anabaptists believed that the state was at best an expression of the wrathful benevolence of God, while Christ ruled in the gatherings of Christians separated from political life. Calvin, while separating the functions of church and state, held that the state exercised a godly, salvific purpose in cooperation with the church.