

CHAPTER IV

*The State and the Doctrine of Man—A Comparative
Study of Some Christian Positions*

THERE is a contrast in Christian thinking about the state between those Christians who regard the state as entirely, or almost entirely, the result of the fall of man, as the divine provision for dealing with the consequences of sin, and those who, while not denying this negative role of the state, emphasize its positive functions as an instrument of human cooperation, as a constructive agency for human welfare that expresses the social nature of man.

The extremes can easily be distinguished from one another but actually there are among Christian thinkers endlessly varied combinations of emphases and nuances, each a part of a particular configuration of thought and experience. Also there is considerable confusion in theology at this point because of differences in the initial definition of the state in relation to the social life of man as a whole. If the state is defined most narrowly as the instrument of coercion and the more constructive social agencies are identified with other aspects of the community, it is natural to say that the state exists only to restrain man's sin.

I shall give some examples of Christian thinking on this issue.¹

In general, there is a difference between Catholic thought

¹ Recent thought is well canvassed in Nils Ehrenstrom's *Christian Faith and the Modern State* (Willett, Clark, 1937), Chaps. 7, 8, 9.

and the thought inspired by the Protestant Reformation, especially that of Luther. Catholicism emphasizes the Aristotelian idea of the state as an expression of the social nature of man and sees it as governed by the natural law that can be known universally to human reason. The Catholic contrast between the natural and the supernatural is the background for a doctrine of man that exempts man's nature, including his reason, from the worst consequences of the fall and of original sin. Since the state belongs to nature, it shares this exemption. Man is in need of revelation and grace for his salvation but this need does not imply as dark a view of his natural condition as we find in the theologians of the Reformation. Professor Rommen, in summarizing the Catholic view of the origin of the state, says that "the state proceeds by inner moral necessity from the social nature of man for the sake of the more perfect life, the fuller realization of personality for all its members in a working sovereign order of mutual assistance and mutual cooperation."² In another passage he says:

"The great thinkers have maintained that the state would have developed out of human nature even in the *status naturae purae*. This doctrine was elaborated especially by late Scholasticism after the Reformation contended that the origin of the state lay in sin. It is true that the masters taught that some qualities of the state originate in sin; for instance, its coercive power. But they taught, too, that in the state of pure nature political authority would have been necessary, though only a directive, not a coercive one."³

Luther was at the other extreme. He saw in the political authorities a dark but providential coercive power which exists only to keep man's sin in check, to restrain disorder and anarchy, to be the ultimate social power without which society would destroy itself. The state was for him an agent of God, symbolized chiefly by the sword, with authority to defend

² H. A. Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought* (B. Herder Book Co., 1947), p. 137.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 228-229.

society against enemies from without and to punish crime and sedition within. He broke completely with the Catholic contrast between nature and super nature and with the view of nature as little damaged by the fall.

Luther had a dualism of his own which contrasted the preserving work of God through coercive political power with the saving work of God through the persuasive power of the gospel. His emphasis upon this contrast hardened into a conception of the separation of the Gospel and the Church from the political responsibilities of the secular order which has been a handicap to Lutheranism in dealing constructively with the political problems of justice and freedom, a handicap which has had its most fateful consequences in Germany and from which German Lutheranism is struggling to free itself.

Luther describes the role of the political authorities, contrasting it with God's redemptive work through the Church in the following passage:

"Since few believe and still fewer live a Christian life, do not resist the evil, and themselves do no evil, God has provided for non-Christians a different government outside the Christian estate and God's kingdom, and has subjected them to the sword, so that, even though they would do so, they cannot practice their wickedness, and that, if they do, they may not do it without fear nor in peace and prosperity. . . . If it were not so, seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely one true Christian, men would devour one another, and no one could preserve wife and child, support himself and serve God; and the world would be reduced to chaos. For this reason God has ordained the two governments: the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people, and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they must needs keep the peace outwardly against their will."⁴

Luther not only saw the origin of the state in man's sin, he also found in the state a special embodiment of sin. It

⁴ "On Political Authority," *The Works of Martin Luther* (Muhlenberg Press), Vol. III, p. 236.

is ironical that later Lutheranism often became in practice highly complacent about the state, allowing it moral autonomy in its own sphere, but Luther had no such complacency. He says of the princes in words that are often repeated: "You must know that from the beginning of the world a wise prince is a rare bird in heaven, still more a pious prince." He goes on to say: "They are usually the greatest fools and knaves on earth; therefore one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good from them, especially in divine matters, which concern the salvation of souls. They are God's jailers and hangmen, and His divine wrath needs them to punish the wicked and preserve outward peace."⁵

This contrast between the two realms which Luther presents here is a subject of continuous discussion among Lutherans and among all students of Luther. On one side it is a vindication of the independence of the Gospel and the Church. These have their own way of working and are outside the sphere of the political power. It is also a way of affirming that God is Lord of the state and that the rulers are responsible to him whether they know it or not. In spite of the scorn which Luther expressed for the rulers, he took for granted that they were within the Church and that they did receive Christian moral instruction from the Church. But the separation of the two realms in explicitly secularized societies left no way by which the Church could speak effectively to the rulers about their responsibility to God. Luther showed no interest in the provision of political checks upon the rulers though he made clear that they are as much a part of the problem of human sin as they are means of restraining it. Luther's emphasis upon order made him strangely indifferent to the problem of justice and the need of defence against the injustice of those who have the political power.

There is validity in Luther's realism about the conflict be-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

tween Christian love and the necessary functions of the state, between what a man's duty may be in his office and what he would choose to do as a Christian in his private relations with his neighbors, but he separates these two realms so completely that there is no way of keeping the political order under the ultimate criticism of love.

One of the most fateful weaknesses of Luther's approach can be seen clearly in a democratic society in which Christians have political power without being subjected to the particular occupational hazards of Luther's princes which made him so fully aware of their limitations. Luther's distinction between the Christians and the world and the suggestion that Christians—of course he guards himself by saying "true Christians"—do not need to be under government is one of his greatest errors and a curious one in view of his own emphasis in other contexts on the sins of the redeemed. In our society Christians, who are by any test sincerely devout, are among the rulers, as voters or office-holders, and need instruction concerning their Christian vocation as citizens on more complicated decisions than those suggested by the sword or the hangman's rope, and these same Christians represent particular social interests and, with the very sinful blindness which Luther emphasizes as characteristic of sinful man, defend those interests beyond the point of justice. So they need relevant guidance for their vocations and they need to be checked by effective use of power by other citizens who suffer unjustly at their hands.

It is surprising in view of the usual stereotypes of Calvin that, in spite of his harsh doctrine of total depravity, he was closer to the Catholic view than to Luther in his thinking about the state. Underlying his explicit statements about magistrates and political institutions there is a conception of the "common grace" that enables men to live together in civil society. What Calvin says about man's capacity for polit-

ical order and about his understanding of the moral law is quite remarkable. He says that "man is naturally a creature inclined to society, he has also by nature an instinctive propensity to cherish and preserve that society; and therefore we perceive in the minds of all men general impressions of civil probity and order." He says that "not a person can be found who does not understand, that all associations of men ought to be governed by laws, or who does not conceive in his mind the principles of those laws."⁶ Calvin lived before the world was broken, before the deeper moral chasms appeared in what was once Christendom. Today we cannot speak with his confidence about what men actually "conceive," though we may have more confidence than the moral relativist that there is a moral order that can be discerned from many points of view.

Given this view of man's civil capacities it is not strange that Calvin held a positive view of the origin and function of the state. He says that "the authority possessed by kings and governors over all things upon earth is not a consequence of the perverseness of men, but of the providence and holy ordinance of God, who has pleased to regulate human affairs in this manner; for as much as he is present, and also presides among them, in making laws and in executing equitable judgments."⁷ When he discusses the functions of civil government he says that it should "regulate our lives and manner requisite for the society of men, to form our manners to civil justice, to promote our concord with each other, and to establish general peace and tranquillity."⁸ One can see advantage in Luther's separation of the two realms when one finds that Calvin says that "this civil government is designed, as long as we live in this world, to cherish and support

⁶ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. II, Chap. II, Par. XIII.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, Chap. XX, Par. IV.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Par. II.

the external worship of God, to preserve the pure doctrine of religion, to defend the constitution of the church."⁹

All Christian thinkers, Catholic and Protestant, are nourished and stimulated by the thought of St. Augustine. His thought is rich and many-sided and his great book, *The City of God*, was written over so long a period that it reveals contrasting emphases within it. It makes some difference whether he is speaking of the pre-Christian Roman state or about the "Christian" empire. There is ambiguity in his view of the relation between the state in its various historical stages and the "Earthly City" which he generally associated with the forces of evil. I think that Augustine shared the positive view of the origin and the role of the state which we find in developed Catholic thought and, to some extent, in Calvin, but that he had fewer illusions about the actual political order. His view of human nature was very dark, with great stress upon the destructive pride and egoism of man, but he was also insistent that man could not exist if he were totally depraved, that the possibility of existence for any beings, including the devil and the evil angels, depends upon the good in them, though it is perverted good.¹⁰ He had a great sense of the transitoriness and relative character of all political orders but he also had genuine appreciation of the earthly peace which they make possible. He says, for example, of the earthly city "which does not live by faith" that "it seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "Vice cannot be in the highest good, and cannot be but in some good. Things solely good, therefore, can in some circumstances exist; things solely evil, never; for even these natures which are vitiated by an evil will, so far indeed as they are vitiated, are evil, but in so far as they are natures they are good." *The City of God*, Bk. XII, Chap. III.

this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away."¹¹

Contemporary thinkers are much harder to classify than the great traditions which they represent. There is so much interaction between them and they are all so greatly influenced by contrasting historical situations that it is impossible to find pure types among them.

I first became vividly aware of this contrast in Christian thinking at the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1937. At that time there seemed to be a theological division in terms of geography between Protestants on the European continent on the one hand and the whole Anglo-Saxon world on the other. This was deceptive because there were wide differences among thinkers on the continent but it was true that Anglo-Saxon theologians and lay political thinkers were unanimously on the side of the positive interpretation of the state's origin and function. They generally held a more hopeful view of human nature, they took for granted the idea of the limited state which was no great threat to the freedom of society. It is true that in the United States there has been a strong tradition of suspicion of the state and an individualistic tendency to assume that private agencies are inherently better than the state, but Americans who held such views could make no connection with the theological emphasis upon the state as primarily a remedy for and an expression of sin. They had forgotten the element of truth in the assertion in the Federalist papers that government is "the greatest of all reflections on human nature."¹² The continental theologians, for their part, lived under welfare states which embodied the posi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. XIX, Chap. XXVII.

¹² From No. 51 written by Hamilton or Madison. The context is as follows: "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."