

"The Revolt and the Wedding: An Essay on Social Ethics in the Perspective of Luther's Theology," in *The Reformation and the Revolution*. Sioux Falls, S. Dak.: Augustana College Press, 1970, pp. 79-88; here 83-85.

But it is important, I think, to see the principle behind the actions and how it functions. In Lutheranism this principle has been known traditionally as the "Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms." This is the basic principle behind Luther's view of social ethics for it is in the light of the interaction of two Kingdoms, this age and "the coming age," that Luther made all his ethical decisions. The idea is, for Luther, that God administers the affairs of this earth through a kind of two-fold rule, through two Kingdoms; the one is most appropriately called, I think, the secular or political kingdom, and the other, the eschatological. Both of these Kingdoms, note, are God's; both the secular and the eschatological. The only ultimate enemy is Satan. But it is in the secular where man now lives and must engage himself socially and politically. The eschatological Kingdom comes as the end or limit to the secular when and where God wills.

Those names, the secular and the eschatological, are not the names Luther used for the two Kingdoms. I have chosen them, however, because I think they convey better in our time what is at stake. For the fact is that when we come to talk about the two Kingdoms today we must exercise extreme caution. We have tended to understand them far too statically and the sins that have been committed and still are being committed in the name of the two Kingdoms are legion. The Doctrine has been identified, for instance, with the separation between church and state conceived as static entities, an idea which has been used to justify all sorts of social crime and injustice. On the one hand it is used to excuse the Church and Christians from social activity and on the other, to prevent the Church from exercising a prophetic role in society. It was used, for instance, in Nazi Germany by some to excuse Christians for their inactivity when millions of Jews were slaughtered. It has been and still is being used today to sanction a separation between Church and state which forbids the Church, its members or its spokesmen, to exercise a prophetic role in protesting the social ills of our nation. For this reason the very idea of a doctrine of two Kingdoms has come under heavy theological attack in our time. And rightly so. For if we are to use this principle today we must understand what we are about. Frankly, I am one who believes that to be a Christian involves one necessarily in the kind of tension in which Luther found himself — in a tension or dialectic between this age, this **saeculum**, and the next, God's eschatological Kingdom, — and that therefore it is impossible to avoid some sort of two Kingdoms doctrine. But if that is so, then we must take extreme care so that all know what we are doing.

That is why I have chosen to call the two Kingdoms the secular and the eschatological, this age and the next. But that means their interaction must be conceived in a much more dynamic manner.

Note carefully: it is not state **versus** church (although some such separation may be a **consequence** of the two Kingdoms doctrine). Nor is it the earthly **versus** the heavenly; nor the worldly **versus** the spiritual; not even the secular **versus** the sacred. For when we look at Luther's actions in the revolt and the wedding it becomes apparent that the doctrine of the two Kingdoms as Luther conceived it is not the kind of idea one would ordinarily hit upon. Luther's understanding of the matter is entirely controlled by his belief in God's eschatological action. God's eschatological Kingdom is a Kingdom entirely of grace. There is nothing men can do on their own to bring in or break into that Kingdom. One participates in the reality of that Kingdom only by faith and anticipates it by hope. And it is only because of that faith and that hope that one even begins to see two Kingdoms at all. In other words, it is only because of the eschatological Kingdom that one begins really to see the secular kingdom, and to see it for the first time as God's other kingdom where one must now live and act.

Before faith, the secular was hidden and ambiguous. It was always contrasted unfavorably with "the sacred," a realm which was **really** supposed to be the object of man's striving. Before the advent of eschatological faith we don't know whether we have a right to live secular lives. That is why Luther's marriage is such an interesting parable of what is involved. Because of his eschatological faith he was driven back into the secular and it is the secular that **becomes** the sacred. As he said in a letter to Spalatin (June 16, 1525), "The world and its wise men have not yet seen how pious and sacred marriage is, but they consider it impious and devilish in me." The world and its wise men are not even aware of the sacredness of the secular. Because without faith, they believe that man's task is to be on his way to some other world. It is only the eschatological which lights up the secular and reveals its sacredness. That, it seems to me, is the real bite of the doctrine of the two Kingdoms and it is that which stands behind Luther's view of social ethics.

### III

When we see this secular-eschatological dialectic it becomes apparent, I think, why we get into trouble so often trying to understand and apply Luther's doctrine of the two Kingdoms. The problem does not lie where most critics attempt to locate it. The problem does not lie in the **fact** that Luther made a distinction between two Kingdoms. The problem lies rather in the fact that the world already has a whole variety of two Kingdom doctrines of its own with which the reformation view almost inevitably gets entangled and confused. The world, for instance, already has its own view of the secular versus the sacred. The world already has its own ideas about the material versus the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, the real

and the ideal and so on endlessly. The world has its own ideas about how religious people ought to act. And our inevitable tendency is to get sucked in by one of the doctrines all ready-made by the world. And that holds whether we **plan** to be religious or not.

What vitiates our efforts in the sphere of social justice more than anything else is precisely the "two Kingdoms" doctrine which we already hold — a doctrine which is really pseudo, a fake. It is our dream of some better place, our longing for a "utopia" (in the Greek: ou-topos, no-place!). And we think we are going to reach this other place, this other Kingdom by the application of some magic formula, something like *laissez faire*, perhaps, or "free enterprise and individual initiative," or even a "proletarian revolution." We are always going someplace else. We are heading towards a world "safe for democracy," or a "classless society." Always it is not taking care of people, human beings, that is important, it is the myth, the piety, for which we can, if need be, sacrifice and slaughter millions. What is going on in Vietnam today if it is not to a large degree simply the sacrificing of thousands daily on the altars of our mythologies? Not only that but here at home we tyrannize our fellow men, shut the black man out of our society, beat down the underprivileged, tear up the earth, deface it and turn it into one vast garbage dump. Why? Because of our myths! The answer we get is some muttering about free competition or states' rights or individual initiative — even ideas which once worked become ideologies, myths, with which we attempt to cover our sins. Caring for human beings or for this world is not our aim. We are always on our way to some "better world" under the cover of our mythologies. And if we can top this all off either by drawing the Church into it or by stilling the voice of prophetic criticism by saying that the Church has nothing to say in such matters, then we will "have it made."

But this is precisely what a real doctrine of two Kingdoms refuses to allow. Its great contribution to the problem of social ethics is exactly to strip men of their mythologies. For the very fact that it insists that whatever other Kingdom there is, the eschatological, comes solely and absolutely by God's power alone means that the only real task for men is to repent, to turn around and take care of this world as best they know how — without myth, but with reason, love and justice; to be pragmatic: to solve problems concretely. The eschatological vision makes it clear that the secular is our sacred task. It tears the mask from our pretensions and bids us become human beings. That, I think, is the real significance of Luther's resistance to the Peasant's Revolt, whatever we may think of his final action. He saw quite clearly that if one is to apply this principle, then there could be absolutely no exceptions. Not even those who undertake revolutions for the sake of so-called "Christian