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# CHURCH, WORD, AND SPIRIT

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# *The Godless World and the Worldless God*

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Let us begin with a critical question addressed to Christianity, especially to the Christianity of the Reformation. Has not the Christian faith lost its relationship to the world? Is it even possible to harmonize modern knowledge, the modern mastery of the world, the contemporary "world-feel," with this faith? When we try to do so, is the result not some kind of rigidity or forced distortion?

I am reminded of a conversation with an upper school teacher who instructed biology and religion. Following a lecture I had given about the relationship between belief in creation and the theory of evolution, she surprised me with this remark. She said that she had never realized up until then that the two aspects of the world, the biological and the theological, were relevantly related to each other. I then asked her how her lessons in biology and religion related to each other when she taught them to the same pupils. I wondered if she had ever been interested in harmonizing them, or had at least sensed that such a harmony was an important question. Her naive answer stopped me short: "At recess I simply shifted gears and felt that I was entering into totally different territory." Perhaps such an instance of infantile harmlessness is more the exception than the rule, especially among educated people. But it does reveal the misguided possibilities that do exist that make it possible to repress the relationship of the Christian faith to the world and one's understanding of the world. When this is done, the believing person is isolated in a peculiar way and cut off from his or her relationship to the world. This can even lead to a split personality which undermines the personal unity of the believer who exists in the world.

The urgency of the question we are raising can be seen in the fact that, since Luther, decisive changes have taken place in our relationship to the world: sober empiricism holds sway in history and the natural sciences. The question about God seems to be set aside here; methodological atheism is the rule. Even Christian historians and scientists do this, either in full and critical consciousness of doing so, or in the naive and unreflected way practiced by the teacher I mentioned. Technology and organization appear to make the world totally at humanity's disposal and to free it from any religious sense of "absolute dependency." As the hymn goes, "We plow and sow the seed upon the land"—but of course we use machines to do so! When it comes to "growing and prospering," we generally place more trust in synthetic fertilizers and the marketing control of international economic agreements than we do in "the hand of God." It seems that human beings have

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taken over control, and God finds himself banned to the realms beyond, whose heaven is of such insignificant rank that God has to share these emergency quarters with the sparrows. It is no wonder that the rumor of "the death of God" is spread abroad, nor that we confront God with the alternative either to make himself knowable in our kind of world or to be content with our writing him off completely.

The Reformation, especially the Lutheran stream, seems to be open to the suspicion that it has not come to terms with the world. The thesis that humanity is justified by faith may well have revealed a new relationship to God, a new im-mediacy of God. But what is the use if this God has lost his contact with the world and thus to the existence of human beings in the world? We cannot have a relationship with him outside this world any more than we can do that with ourselves. We work in our laboratories and at our desks; we fight in the marketplace and seek to assert ourselves in the competition; we have bodies with drives whose biological origins we research; we feel that we are responsible for social justice and progressive forms of life. Indeed, if God does not appear in the midst of our complex worldly structures, then he becomes an utterly unreal appearance. It has been a long time since anyone was interested in emigrants, whether they are going into the realms beyond or into humanity's inward regions.

Is this then the hallmark of our reality, at which we have arrived in spite of or because of the Reformation? Are we to state that now a godless world and a worldless God are in confrontation with each other? This is the decisive question. There are, in fact, serious people who accuse Lutheranism of having failed to come to terms with the world, and thus of having missed the whole thrust of the modern age. We can clarify this by examining some of these accusations in greater detail. First, do we not find in Luther's Small Catechism, which is the standard for the doctrine of the Lutheran tradition, something like the patriarchal, old-fashioned world of yesterday, in which the father figure dominates? Has this not had its influence in the authoritative political structures whose aftereffects we still feel today? Do we Germans, at least, not have difficulties with the theological mastery of free democracy, because of our tradition? Does this cult of authority not run totally counter to all mature relationships to the world? Is not the thesis that every state and condition of humanity should be understood itself as directed by God, so that each person should stay where he or she is—is this not in effect a paralyzing restraint upon every kind of modern mobility and desire to rise higher?

Second, when it comes to sexual ethics, the church of the Reformation has apparently not known what to say in our time, just as little as it has known what to say about marriage and divorce. This critical assumption need not imply any doubt that marriage is a "divine institution." But there is a question here which is left open: Does not the will of God make completely different claims upon us when the relationship of the sexes is understood as a partnership, when the equal rights of women are asserted, and when the father's authority is no longer the same?

In believing that we are true to the Reformation concept of faith, are we not bound all too strongly to the tradition of the father's dominance, rather than hearing the contemporary and very realistic word and being open for the future? Can we—date we—seek to be restorative and reactionary in the name of faith? Even

the most tested of traditions can become deadening law when they no longer relate meaningfully to the contemporary situation. We need only remember how post-exilic Judaism kept transferring the ashes of the law's traditions from urn to urn, ending up with the cultic literalism of the rabbinic schools. There we have an exemplary case of how traditions can die before our eyes. When we see how Lutheranism defines one's relationship to the world, we must ask whether we are not moving in the same deadly direction.

It is really a rather astonishing question to ask whether the Reformation may have failed to grasp the modern age and might even have hindered the development of a theologically mature relationship to the world. This is astonishing because we generally tend to think that Luther freed us from clericalism and the enforced immaturity of theocratic systems—and certainly our impression here is not entirely wrong. Was he not the one who wiped out the dividing line between the sacred and profane areas of life and even said that the mother bearing children or the maid sweeping the floor was performing an act of worship in the worldly realm? Did he not provide the theoretical foundation for the emancipation of the world with his doctrine of the two kingdoms?

This question—whether Luther's theology opened faith's relationship to the world, only to have it then subjected to new blockades, by whatever intellectual devices they may be—leads us to the fundamental issue that orders Luther's theological understanding of the world: his doctrine of the two kingdoms.

It is true that this doctrine was a decisive breakthrough and did draw our understanding of the world into the sphere of faith. However, we can only accept this doctrine today in a modified form. We are scarred children now, and we have seen how a secularized, "conformist" Christianity has been able to use this doctrine as its ideological alibi. The abuse of the doctrine was done and is being done in this fashion: One asserts that God's sovereign claim applies only to the spiritual side of life (the proclamation of the word, pastoral care, and so on). The secular side of life, on the other hand, is a zone in which economic, political, and social laws alone are supreme. In this realm the commandments of God are looked upon as incompetent and out of place. They are merely "irrelevant," disturbing, and also completely ineffective interventions. Therefore, this doctrine, which has so often been maltreated, requires some clarification and safety clauses for us, in view of the fact that we have been taught by experience to be more careful, if not more clever. Such clarification could not have appeared to Luther as necessary at the time when he made his breakthrough with this doctrine.

For our context the important thing is the decisive intention of the doctrine, not all the defects that have been attached to it in the course of theological work on it. We are interested in the breakthrough situation itself, which opens up the world. That is, the situation in which the world is seen as the arena for our task, not as the arena to be rejected and avoided. This rejection of the world and distancing from it is what we find in Augustine and, later on, in some variations of Pietism.

When I probe for the decisive impulse of this doctrine—that which leads to the concept of the two kingdoms—then I come upon a dramatic conflict of faith: the

collision between the radical demands of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and a world structure which seems to make the fulfillment of those demands impossible. The world appears to be in essential contradiction to all that the Sermon on the Mount calls for. There we read that it is not overt adultery alone which is wrong, but that if a man even looks at a woman lustfully he has committed adultery (Matt 5:28). Or, "if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away." Or, "Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." This series of radical statements could easily be continued.

Now when we look at life realistically, we must immediately see that it is not possible to fulfill these demands literally. The fact that this is impossible is not due to my subjective lack of readiness to do so. Perhaps that is present as well; but the problem is with the objective circumstances that create an undefeatable barrier. I can agree that it is proper to require of me that my lust be controlled; but I cannot control the very emergence of elementary lust in myself. That is something like a vital process which happens beyond the scope of my will and self-control. How then can it be the theme of an accusation and be understood as "adultery in my heart"?

We have spoken of the emergence of these forces in the inner ego. We find the same kind of thing in objectified and super-personal form in the structural laws of the world. What would happen, we may ask, if I were not to resist evil and did turn the other cheek when I was struck? Would that not lead to chaos and the unrestricted rule of the mightiest? Don't we see that the fabric of our world is permeated by orders which resist evil and make our life possible? Could it be that God does not desire that life continue and has recalled his creation purposes? Isn't there something like a Christian professional ethic which binds us to these orders, just as we understand them to be ordained by God? A judge cannot simply love the enemy of society for the sake of "loving one's enemies" and then let him go. He must confront the criminal and, where necessary, put him behind bars. And what is the situation with the father and the mother? Even if they were radically anti-authoritarian, they could not permit every lie, every egotistic act of their child to pass by in the name of love. They can seek with all their energy to find out why a child misbehaves; yet there will still be situations where they must resist the child, where they must "resist one who is evil." If they let everything go, then the child would become an unbearable brat. Later on, when the child is no longer able to cope with his own life, he might well blame his parents for being so "loveless" in raising him, because they adhered to the law of convenience and least resistance—and he would be right.

Why do circumstances not permit me to follow Christ's love command unpromisingly and literally? We can put the reason this way. The earthly orders and structures within which we have to act have a kind of autonomy which we cannot avoid, as the enthusiasts and sectarians sought to do and proclaimed as possible. Within the framework of a legal structure, the judge must resist the evil of criminality and may not simply accept it. The statesman may not stand by passively when hostile powers attack his country; he cannot "turn the other cheek" to them but must resist those who act against the interests of his state. By virtue of the

autonomy of the political sphere, he must assert himself and thus consolidate his power. It is forbidden for him to go merely along the "lower road." The merchant must function within the law of competition and cannot "give in" in the name of "neighborly love." If he did so, he would violate the interests of his own employees and thus break the love commandment in another direction.

We should not make statements like this without referring to two further points which will help us avoid possible misunderstandings. The first thing we must remember is this: if the structure of the world seems to make the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount unfulfillable, then we must not conclude that this means that the world is related to God in a radical contradiction. For the one in whose name the unconditional love command was given is also the one who ordained the orders of the world. Following the flood, these orders were solemnly instituted in order to give boundaries to a world which had become uncontrollable in its sinfulness—thus in order to make human existence possible (Genesis 9). If human beings were simply left to their personal and collective egotism, they would destroy themselves. But those who have been destroyed can never come to terms with the reason for their existence. In order to attain that goal, they must at least be able to exist physically. For this reason, the orders have always been understood as measures of providential care and love. But that which is ordained in love also limits the possibilities of radical love. Is love in conflict with itself here? We see here, in point of fact, an aspect of the ultimate contradictions of existence. What is the reason for them? Based upon what we know about the fall of humanity in sin, we can say at this point that the brokenness of human existence, the "chasm" between God and the world, has participated in the creation of these tensions. This is one of the reasons why the coming kingdom of God is not a future within the boundaries of history, an age that this present age could produce out of itself.

Now to the second point: that humanity and its world are incapable of following the radical claims of the Sermon on the Mount also implies judgment, and it places humanity under accusation. It is impossible to evade this judgment with the tragic argument and say, as Bertolt Brecht does, that "I myself would like to live in conformity with the will of God, but circumstances do not permit." It is impossible for me to emancipate myself from the "circumstances" of the world in the special sense which would lead me to say, "Here am I, and there are the circumstances; I have been prevented from being who I would like to be by them, by something outside of myself." For I conclude that humanity's "sacred egoism" and the "will to assert oneself" in the political world are merely the cosmic form of all that is already found in my own heart. When I look at the world outside myself, then I must say, "This is my world; tatwam asi—there am I." I must identify with my world. Thus it is not the "wicked world" which puts me in opposition to the commands of the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, I myself do that. Just as certainly as I am the representative of this my world, I recognize that I am the initiator and the cause of the tension of which we spoke.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms may be questionable, but we must emphasize that it does not evade the basic question. For it is an attempt to express in an intellectual construct and to make understandable the contradiction between the radical

demands of God and the conditions of the earthly order which resist those demands.

We can clarify what we mean here by referring to the "covenant of Noah" which God concludes with the world after it has been resurrected from the waters of the flood (Genesis 9). Here we have a new beginning, almost like the first creation morning. Again we hear creation promises and creation commands as in the hour of origins, when the world was called into being. Again human beings are called upon to assume dominion over the earth. God's world is entrusted to them anew. They are again commanded to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth.

But in all this there is an alien tone which was not heard in the undefiled world of creation. We read now about the human dominion over the earth that "the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered" (Gen 9:2). We no longer hear the eternal liturgy of the creation world which subsisted peacefully in its own hierarchy because it was focused upon its creator. This new beginning is marked from the outset with the stigma of the breach of covenant. Dominion is no longer simply granted and is no longer unquestionably respected as having been granted. Rather, it must be fought for. It is bound up with "fear and dread." The break with God which rests upon this world as a mortgage following the flood is also a break among human beings. If it is not to lead to self-destruction, then it must be prevented with force. Therefore, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:6).

The world after the flood, the "fallen" world, needs to have a legal order. If the death penalty is understood as its extreme measure, we may ask how it is related to the will of God. In the text it is ordained, but does that mean that it accords with his real and his original will? Certainly not! It would be absurd to look for such threats in the creation story. What we have here is a new, modified will of God, so to speak. It is God's will as it deals with the broken situation of the fallen world and as it works in that world in a form which this world can bear.

In his commentary on Genesis, Luther distinguished between these various statements of God's will by using a vivid picture. In the intact world of the original creation God could rule the world by simply lifting one finger (*uno moto digito*). That was possible because humanity was so completely focused upon God and attended to every move he made, just as an orchestra concentrates upon the conductor and obediently follows every gesture he makes.

At the fall, everything suddenly became different. When human beings turned away from God, they could no longer see God's gestures. Therefore, God must grab them with his fist in order to assert his will. The institutional form of this ruling fist is the state, according to Luther. Therefore the orders of history, such as the state, law, and the economy, are not to be understood as the original "orders of creation." They are rather a kind of "emergency order" that is appropriate to the new situation of fallen humanity. One could also say that they are orders of the patience of God by virtue of which he ensures that the fallen world continues to exist and continues to make use of those means that are available to it and that have been instituted for its preservation and survival.

Jesus himself made this distinction between statements of the divine will of God. When speaking to the Pharisees of the inviolability of marriage ("What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder," (Matt 19:6), Jesus receives the question, "Why did Moses, in the name of God, allow 'divorce?'" Jesus answered, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." Here there is a very clear distinction between the original, actual will of God proclaimed at the beginning of creation and the statements of his patience, which tolerates the hardness of fallen humanity. Where there is adultery and crisis, the original order of creation is violated. But to uphold it with force would, by the very nature of things, be fatal and cruel. Therefore, God deals with this alienated world in terms of its possibilities and supports it with the orders of his patience.

The Creator establishes certain laws of this fallen age: "fear and dread" maintain in this age, and it must function in terms of power and force. But he does this in such a way that, by virtue of the miracle of his providence and blessing, these laws do not necessarily have to destroy the world but rather serve to sustain it. As Gerhard von Rad puts it in his exposition of the "Covenant with Noah," these are orders which "are valid in the distorted relationship of creatures to one another, which has been caused by the act of rebellion." They are emergency orders in which power and force are assigned a legitimate function.

The intellectual construct we call the doctrine of the two kingdoms states then that there is correspondence between the direct will of God, symbolized by the creation order, and the other form of his will, expressed in the orders of the world. These latter orders are the institutions of his will in which God deals with the situation of a fallen world. In them he maintains the world even with its questionable means, and he supports it in patience. They too are signs of loving providence, which wants to sustain and create open space for salvation. The kingdom "on the right hand" is then the expression of the immediate creation will; the kingdom "on the left hand" is the worldly kingdom, in which the will of God, broken by human hardness of heart, is now institutionalized in the form of orders.

Whoever does not distinguish between these two kingdoms and thus between the "actual" and the "unactual" will of God will produce distorted pictures of humanity and its world. It is easy to recognize two possible forms in which the repudiation of this distinction can express itself. The first is found in the assumption that the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount—what we have called the "actual" will of God—are to be proclaimed as the constitutive law of the world, with no regard for the condition of this age. The world is then dealt with as though it still existed in its original, created state, or as though the eschaton of the last day had already dawned. To seek to rule the world in this sense with the Sermon on the Mount and thus to make it into a law has been and is the fateful error of all fanatics and utopians.

A second possible way to overlook the difference between the actual and unactual will of God consists of regarding the orders of this age as the original "creative orders," so that existing circumstances are made sacred and receive theological legitimacy. In this way, even war can be understood and sanctified as an ordinance of God. God appears as the "God who makes weapons." The politi-

cal state becomes the institutional expression of the will of God. The result is that the intensification of the power of the state, up to and including the development of the totalitarian state and ideological tyranny, is no longer opposed by any theological inhibitions. Historical examples from both right and left extremes, ranging from the German Christians of the Third Reich to the conformist Christians in Marxist states, can be found in macabre variety.

Human beings of this age, after the fall and after the flood, become distorted as soon as they forget that these two dimensions—symbolized by the kingdoms to the right and left hands—overlap in their persons. They then lock themselves one-sidedly into one or the other. Either they become fanatics and dismiss this world, which means that they miss God's working in this world entirely, or they absolutize this world and make of its "law of the jungle" the true counterpart to God's commandments.

Without an understanding of the two kingdoms it is not possible to develop a theological anthropology. No degree of ridicule to which this doctrine has been subjected, especially in the nineteenth century, should be allowed to blind our eyes to this basic fact. Yet the ridicule should serve to remind us that this important distinction can also be used to make God a worldless deity, and the world a godless realm. We must move from the breakthrough of Luther, in his profound grasp of the tension and the realism of this distinction, to newer questions and answers that have been posed by the passage of time and the movement of history. If we are to proclaim the gospel today, we cannot simply restate the insights of the Reformation in modern terms. It is more honest to accept what we can of the Reformation, admit what the Reformation left unsolved, and move on, as those who are part of the *ecclesia semper reformanda*—the church which is always being reformed.

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