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CULTURE AND COHERENCE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The Finlayson Lecture for 1984

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The six ages of Christianity

From Pentecost to the twentieth century, Christian history may be divided into six phases. Each phase represents its embodiment in a major culture area which has meant that in that phase it has taken an impress from that culture. In each phase the expression of the Christian faith has developed features which could only have originated in that culture whose impress it has taken within that phase.

For one brief, but vital, period, Christianity was entirely Jewish. The Christians of the first generation were all Jews — diverse, perhaps, in background and outlook, Hebraist and Hellenist, conservative and liberal — but without the slightest idea that they had “changed their religion” by recognising Jesus as Messiah. It remains one of the marvels of the ages that Christianity entered its second phase at all. But those unnamed “men of Cyprus and Cyrene” introduced some Greek speaking pagans in Antioch to the Jewish national saviour, and those law-righteous apostles and elders at Jerusalem agreed that they might enter Israel without becoming Jews. The result was that Christianity became Hellenistic-Roman; the Messiah, Saviour of Israel was recognised to be also the Lord, Saviour of souls. It happened just in time, for soon afterwards the Jewish state disappeared in the early holocausts of AD 70 and AD 135. Only the timeous diffusion of faith in Jesus across cultural lines gave that faith any continuing place in the world. Without its diffusion at that time its principal representatives would have been the Ebionites and similar groups who by the third and fourth centuries lay on the very fringe of the Christian movement, even if they themselves could claim to be the enduring legacy of James the Just and the Jerusalem elders.

In the process of transmission the expression of that faith changed beyond what many an outsider might recognise. To see the extent of the change one has only to look at the utterances of early Jewish Christians as reflected in the New Testament, the utterances which indicate their priorities, the matters most on their hearts. “We had hoped that he would be the one to set Israel free”, says the disillusioned disciple on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:21, TEV). On the mount of ascension, the preoccupation is the same. Realising that they stand at the threshold of a new era, the disciples ask, “Lord will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Statements and questions like these could be uttered only by Jews, out of centuries of present suffering and hope deferred. They can have no meaning for those who belong to the nations,

whether in the first or the twentieth century. These come to Jesus with quite different priorities, and those priorities shape the questions they ask, even about salvation. A first century Galatine Gentile would never have brought to Jesus as a matter of urgency the question of the political destiny of Israel; though he might have raised that of the destiny of the soul. The fact remains that Jesus Christ fulfilled the different statements, and answered the different questions; or rather, he convinced his Jewish and his Gentile followers, as he convinces his followers today, that the answer to their deepest questions lay with him, even when the question and the answer did not seem to fit. No doubt the words of Cleophas on the Emmaus road, or of the disciples on the mountain, betray an inadequate understanding of his person and work. Nevertheless, he does not reject that understanding as altogether misplaced. He does not say, "I am not in the business of giving the Kingdom back to Israel, you should keep out of politics and concentrate on inner spiritual realities." He accepts the statement and the question in the terms in which they are posed — terms which centuries of peculiar experience had conditioned Jews to frame them. But — "it is not for you to know when" (Acts 1:7). There is no reason to think that Gentile statements about the ultimate will be any more final, or Gentile questions about it any more penetrating, than Jewish ones. There is no reason to suppose that Christ's answer to our own fundamental statements and questions, conditioned by quite different experiences, will be any less oblique than those he gave to Cleophas or the disciples. We know only that the full answer must ultimately be no less satisfying.

Those Christian Jews in Antioch who realised that Jesus had something to say to their pagan friends took an immense risk. They were prepared to drop the time-honoured word Messiah, knowing that it would mean little to their neighbours, and perhaps mislead them — what concern was the redeemer of Israel, should they grasp the concept, to them? They were prepared to see the title of their national saviour, the fulfilment of the dearest hopes of their people, become attached to the name of Jesus as though it was a sort of surname. They took up the ambiguous and easily misunderstood word "Lord" (Acts 11:20; contrast, e.g. Acts 9:22, which relates to a Jewish audience). They could not possibly have foreseen where their action would lead; and it would be surprising if someone did not warn them about the disturbing possibilities of confusion and syncretism. But their cross-cultural communication saved Christian faith for the world.

The second age of Christianity

The second of the six phases of Christianity was Hellenistic-Roman. This is not, of course, to say that within that age Christianity was geographically confined to the area where Hellenistic-Roman culture was dominant. Important Christian communities lay, for instance, in Central Asia, and East Africa, and South India. But the dominant expression of the Christian faith for several centuries resulted from its steady penetration of Hellenistic thought and culture during a period when that culture was also associated with a single political entity, the Roman Empire.

The second phase, like the first, left its mark on all later Christianity. Of the new religious ideas which entered with the Christian penetration of Hellenistic

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culture, one of the most permeative for the future was that of orthodoxy, of a canon of right belief, capable of being stated in a series of propositions arrived at by a process of logical argument. Such a feature was not likely to mark Christianity in its Jewish period; Jewish identity has always been concerned either with what a person *is* or with what he *does* rather than with what he believes. But when Christian faith began to penetrate the Hellenistic Roman World, it encountered a total system of thought, a system to which it was in some respects antipathetic, but which, once encountered, had to be permeated. The system had a certain inbuilt arrogance, a feature it has never quite lost despite the mutations through which the Hellenistic-Roman legacy has gone in its transmission over the centuries to other peoples, and despite the penetration effected by Christian faith. Basically it maintained that there is one desirable pattern of life, a single "civilisation" in effect, one model of society, one body of law, one universe of ideas. Accordingly, there are in essence two types of humanity: people who share that pattern and those ideas, and people who do not. There are Greeks — a cultural, not an ethnic, term — and there are barbarians. There are civilised people who share a common heritage, and there are savages, who do not.

In many ways the Jews and their religion already represented a challenge to this assumption. Whatever degree of assimilation to it many Jews might reflect, the stubborn fact of Jewish identity put them in a different category from almost all the rest of the Hellenistic-Roman universe. Alone in that universe they had an alternative literature, a written tradition, of comparable antiquity. And they had their own dual classification of mankind: Israel, *the* nation, and the nations. Hellenistic-Roman Christians had no option but to maintain, and to seek to reconcile, aspects of both their inheritances.

The total system of thought had to be penetrated, by the Gospel, Christianised. This meant the endeavour to bring the intellectual tradition into captivity to Christ and using it for new purposes, and it also meant putting the traditions of codification and of organisation to the service of the Gospel. The result was orthodoxy; logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation and maintained through effective organisation. Hellenistic-Roman civilisation offered a total system of thought, and expected general conformity to its norms. The Christian penetration of the system inevitably left it a total system.

The third age — Barbarian Christianity

Hellenistic-Roman civilisation lived for centuries in the shadow of fear; fear of the day when the centre could not hold, when things fell apart, when the over-extended frontiers collapsed and the barbarian hordes poured in. Christians fully shared these fears. Tertullian, who lived in the age of persecution, though he would not countenance Christians in the army — Christ has unbelted every soldier, he says — prayed for the preservation of the Empire; for when the frontiers collapse, the Great Tribulation would begin. For the people living under the Christian Empire the triumph of the barbarians would be equated with the end of Christian civilisation.

Two great events brought about the end of Hellenistic Roman Christianity. One had been widely predicted — the collapse of the Western Roman Empire

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before the barbarians. The other no one could have predicted — the emergence of the Arabs as a world power and their occupation of the Eastern provinces where the oldest and strongest Christian churches lay. The combination of these forces led to the end of the Hellenistic-Roman phase of Christianity. That it did not lead to the slow strangulation of the total Christian presence in the world was due to the slow, painful and far from satisfactory spread of Christian allegiance among the tribal peoples beyond the old frontiers, the people known as barbarians, the destroyers of Christian civilisation. What in fact happened was the development of a third phase of Christianity, what we may call a barbarian phase. Once again, it was only just in time: centuries of erosion and attrition faced the peoples of Christianity's Hellenistic heartlands. Once again, Christianity had been saved by its cross-cultural diffusion.

The culture gap to be bridged was quite as great as that between Jew and Greek, yet the former faith of classical civilisation became the religion of peasant cultivators. The process was marked by the more or less ready acceptance by the new Christians of a great deal of the cultural inheritance of the classical civilisation from which they derived their Christianity. Further, when they substituted the God of the Bible for their traditional pantheons, the language and ideas had passed through a Greek-Roman filter before it reached them. The significance of this we must consider later.

Nevertheless, the barbarian phase was emphatically not a simple extension of the Christianity of the patristic age, but a new creation, conditioned less by city-based literary, intellectual and technological tradition than by the circumstances of peasant cultivators and their harsh, uncertain lives. If they took their ideas from the Hellenistic Christian world, they took their attitudes from the primal world; and both ideas and attitudes are components in the complex which makes up a people's religion. As with their predecessors, they appropriated the Christian faith for themselves, and reformulated it with effects which continued amid their successes after their own phase had passed away. If the second phase of Christianity invented the idea of orthodoxy, the third invented the idea of the Christian nation. Christian Roman Emperors might establish the Church, might punish heretics, might make laws claiming allegiance to Christ, might claim to represent Christ, but tribal peoples knew a far stronger law than any Emperor could enforce; that of custom. Custom is binding upon every child born into a primal community; and conformity to that custom is simply unthinkable. A communal decision to adopt the Christian faith might take some time in coming; there might be uncertainty, division, debate for a while but once thoroughly made, that decision would bind everyone in that society. A community must have a single custom. It was not necessarily a case of strong rulers enforcing their own choice. In Iceland, which was a democracy with no central ruler, the Assembly was divided down the middle between Christians and non-Christians. When the decision for Christianity was eventually made, the non-Christians felt bitter and betrayed, but no one suggested a division into communities with different religions. Religion in fact is but one aspect of the custom which binds a society together. There can be only one Church in a community. And so barbarian Christianity brings to fruition the idea of the Christian nation.

Once the idea of the Christian nation was established, a new hermeneutic

habit easily developed; the parallel between the Christian nation and Israel. Once nation and church are coterminous in scope, the experiences of the nation can be interpreted in terms of the history of Israel. In Western Christianity this habit has long outlived the historical circumstances which gave it birth, and has continued into the age of pluralism and secularisation.

The fourth and fifth ages of Christianity

The fourth cultural phase of Christianity was a natural development of the third. Inter-action between Christian faith and practice in its Hellenistic-Roman form and the culture of the northern peoples produced a remarkably coherent system across Western and Central Europe. When the Eastern Roman Empire, which effectively prolonged the Hellenistic phase of Christianity for several centuries in one area of the world, finally collapsed before the Muslims, this new hybrid Western form of Christianity became the dominant representation of Christianity. In the sixteenth century this Western formulation was to undergo radical revision through the movements of Reformation. The Protestant version of this was particularly radical, not least (through its emphasis on vernacular Scriptures) in stressing the local encounter of man with the Word of God. Reforming Catholicism, on the other hand, stressed the universal nature of the Church, but unconsciously established its universality on the basis of features which belonged essentially to Western intellectual and social history and indeed, largely to a particular period of it. Both forms, however, belonged unmistakably to Western Europe; their very differences marked a growing cultural divergence between the north and the south of the area.

One major development that took place within the West over those centuries set a challenge to Christian faith as hitherto received in Europe and required its reformulation. As we have seen, a necessary feature of barbarian Christianity was communal decision and mass response. But Western thought developed a particular consciousness of the individual as a monad, independent of kin-related identity. Christianity in its Western form adapted to this developing consciousness, until the concept of Christian faith as a matter of individual decision and individual application became one of the hallmarks of Western Christianity.

This Western Phase of Christianity developed into another, with which it should probably be taken: the age of expanding Europe. The population of Europe was exported to other continents and the dominance of Europe extended, until by the twentieth century people of European origin occupied, possessed or dominated the greater part of the globe. During this vital period, Christianity was the professed, and to a considerable extent the active, religion of almost all the European peoples.

Seen in the context of Christian history as a whole, this period saw two remarkable developments. One was a substantial recession from the Christian faith among the European peoples. Its significance was not at first manifest, because it was not regular and steady. Beginning in the sixteenth century, it had reached notable proportions by the eighteenth, when it appeared as if Christianity might still claim the masses of Europe but was losing the intellectuals. In the eighteenth century however, and for much of the

nineteenth, there was a Christian counter-attack, which halted the movement of recession in Europe and brought spectacular accessions in the new towns of North America. The sudden quickening of the recession, therefore, in the twentieth century took observers by surprise— though predictions of its extent had been current a couple of centuries earlier. Only in the twentieth century did it become clear that the great towns which were the source and the sign of Europe's dominance, had never really been evangelised at all.

The other major development of the period was the cross-cultural transplantation of Christianity, with varying degrees of success, to multitudes of people outside Europe. It did not look overwhelming by 1920; the high hopes once entertained of the evangelisation of the world in one generation had by that time drained away into the trenches of the First World War. But we can see now that it was enough. The seeds of Christian faith had been planted in the Southern continents; before long they could be seen to be fruiting abundantly. All the world Empires, except the Russian, have now passed away; the European hegemony of the world is broken; the recession of Christianity among the European peoples appears to be continuing. And yet we seem to stand at the threshold of a new age of Christianity, one in which its main base will be in the Southern continents, and where its dominant expression will be filtered through the culture of those continents. Once again, Christianity has been saved for the world by its diffusion across cultural lines.

Christian expansion and the sixth age of Christianity

Let us pause here to consider the peculiar history of Christianity, as compared with other faiths. Hindus say with some justice that they represent the world's earliest faith, for many things in Indian religion are the same now as they were before Israel came out of Egypt. Yet over all those centuries, the geographical and cultural centre has been the same. Invaders like the Aryans have come and made their mark; great innovative movements like that of the Buddha have come, and flourished awhile, and then passed on elsewhere. The Christians and the Muslims with their claims to universal allegiance have come and made their converts. But still the same faith remains in the same place, absorbing all sorts of influences from without, not being itself absorbed by any.

By contrast, Iranian religion has been vital enough to have a moulding effect at certain crucial times on Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in succession; and yet as a separate, identifiable phenomenon in the world, its presence today is tiny. Christianity, on the other hand, has throughout its history spread outwards, across cultural frontiers, so that each new point on the Christian circumference is a new potential Christian centre. And the very survival of Christianity as a separate faith has evidently been linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission. Indeed, with hindsight, we can see that on several occasions this transmission took place only just in time; that without it, the Christian faith must surely have withered away. Nor has its progress been steadily outwards, as Muslims may claim of their faith. Its progress has been serial, with a principal presence in different parts of the world at different times.

Each phase of Christian history has seen a transformation of Christianity as it has entered and penetrated another culture. There is no such thing as

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“Christian culture” of “Christian civilisation” in the sense that there is an Islamic culture, and an Islamic civilisation. There have been several different Christian civilisations already; there may yet be many more. The reason for this lies in the infinite translatability of the Christian faith. Islam, the only other faith hitherto to make a comparable impact in such global terms, can produce a simple recognisable culture (recognisable despite local assimilations and variations) across its huge geographical spread. This has surely something to do with the ultimate untranslatability of its charter document, the Qur’an. The Christian Scriptures, by contrast, are open to translation; nay, the great Act on which Christian faith rests, the Word becoming flesh and pitching tent among us, is itself an act of translation. And this principle brings Christ to the heart of each culture where he finds acceptance; to the burning questions within that culture, to the points of reference within it by which men know themselves. That is why each phase of Christian history has produced new themes; themes which the points of reference of that culture have made inescapable for those who share that framework. The same themes may lie beyond the conception of Christians of an earlier or another framework of thought. They will have their own commanding heights to be conquered by Christ.

Diversity and coherence in historic Christianity

If we were to take samples of *representative* Christians from every century from the first to the twentieth, moving from place to place as will be necessary if our choice is to be representative, would they have anything in common? Certainly such a collection of people would often have quite different priorities in the expression of the faith. And it is not only that the priorities are different; what appears of utmost importance to one group may appear intolerable, even blasphemous, to another. Even were we to take only those acknowledged as forming the tradition of Christianity represented by Western Evangelicals — how does the expression of the faith compare among Temple-worshipping Jew, Greek Council Father, Celtic monk, German Reformer, English Puritan, Victorian Churchman? How defective each would think the other on matters vital to religion?

And yet I believe we can discern a firm coherence underlying all these, and indeed, the whole of historic Christianity. It is not easy to state this coherence in propositional, still less in credal form — for extended credal formulation is itself a necessary product of a particular Christian Culture. But there is a small body of convictions and responses which express themselves when Christians of any culture express their faith. These may perhaps be stated thus:

(1) The worship of the God of Israel. This not only defines the nature of God; the One, the Creator and the Judge, the One who does right and before whom man falls down; it marks the historical particularity of Christian faith. And it links the Christian — usually a Gentile — with the history of a people quite a different from his own. It gives him a point of reference outside himself and his society.

(2) The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth. This is perhaps the test which above all marks off historic Christianity from the various movements along its fringes, as well as from other world faiths which accord recognition to the Christ. Once again, it would be pointless to try to encapsulate this ultimacy

for ever in any one credal formula. Any such formula will be superseded; or, even if adopted for traditional reasons, it may make no impression on believers who do not have the conceptual vocabulary the formula will imply. Each culture has its ultimate; and Christ is the ultimate in everyone's vocabulary.

(3) That God is active where believers are.

(4) That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

These convictions appear to underlie the whole Christian tradition across the centuries, in all its diversity. Some of the very diversity of Christ in expression, indeed, has itself arisen from the pressure of the need to set forth these responses in terms of the believers' framework of thought and perception of the world. To them we should perhaps add a small body of institutions which have continued from century to century. The most obvious of these have been the reading of a common body of Scriptures and the special use of bread and wine and water.

Southern cultures and the Christian future

Once more the Christian faith is penetrating new cultures — those of Africa and the Pacific and parts of Asia. (The Latin American situation is too complex for us to pause to consider its peculiar significance here.) The present indications are that these southern expressions of Christianity are becoming the dominant forms of the faith.

This is likely to mean the appearance of new themes and priorities undreamt of by ourselves or by earlier Christian ages; for it is the mark of Christian faith that it must bring Christ to the big issues which are closest to men's hearts; and it does so through the structures by which people perceive and recognise their world; and these are not the same for all men. It must not be assumed that themes which have been primary in the Christian penetration of former cultures will remain primary for all the new ones. They may not possess those points of reference which made orthodoxy, for instance, or the Christian nation, or the primacy of individual decision absolutely crucial to the capture by Christ of other world views. Pious early Jewish Christians would have found their Greek successors strangely cold about Israel's most precious possession, the Law of God and its guide to living. Many of them would have been equally disturbed by the intellectual complexities into which christological discussion was leading Greek Christian. In each case what was happening was the working out of Christian faith within accepted views of the world, so that those world views — as with the conversion of believers — are transformed, yet recognisable.

As the process continues in the Southern continents, Christians whose tradition has been shaped by other factors will still be able to look out for the signposts of historic Christianity so far: the worship of the God of Israel, the recognition of the ultimate significance of Christ, the knowledge that God is active among the believers, the acknowledgement of a people of God transcending time and space; and join in the common reading of the Scriptures, and in the special use of bread and wine and water.

For in this survey I have left on one side a vital theme. I have talked of the transmission of Christianity across cultural frontiers and the way that this has produced a series of Christian transformations across the centuries. These

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transformations may be seen as the result of the great principle of translatability which lies at the heart of Christian faith and is demonstrated both in the Incarnation and in the Scriptures. It might be valuable to link this process with Paul's vision in Ephesians 4 of the full-grown man unto which we are to grow together — as though the very diversity of Christian humanity makes it complete. The image is hard for us to appropriate because of the very individualism so crucial a part of our own world view. But it looks as though Paul was less impressed by the passing of faith to the Gentiles — mightily as he rejoiced in it; still less by the new shape which Christian faith took in Gentile hands — much as he himself may have been responsible for this; than by the fact that through Christ one nation had been made out of two. Jew and Gentile, who had not in centuries been able to eat in each others' houses without recalling the whole covenant of God into question, now sat down together at the table of the Lord. It was a phase of Christian history that did not last long. Not long after Paul's time Gentiles so dominated the Christian church that in most areas Jews were hardly noticeable in it. Christianity became a Gentile matter, just as in its earliest days it had been a Jewish matter. But, for a few brief years, the one-made-out-of-two was visibly demonstrated, the middle wall of partition was down, the irreconcilables were reconciled. This was, surely, not simply a historical episode, but a paradigmatic one, to be repeated, even if briefly, again and again. It is repeated as people separated by language, history and culture recognise each other in Christ. And in the recognition is not based on one adopting the ways of thought and behaviour and expression, however sanctified, of the other; that is Judaising, and another Gospel. Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates "a place to feel at home". But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one also can live there. Here we have no abiding city. In Christ all poor sinners meet, and in finding themselves reconciled with him, are reconciled to each other.

Some aspects of this topic are explored further in "The Gospel as the Prisoner and the Liberator of Culture", *Faith and Thought* 108 (1-2) 1981, 39-52 (reprinted in *Missionalia* 10(3) 1982, 93-105 and *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7 (2) 1983, 219-233) and in "The History of Christian Expansion reconsidered", in Monica Hill (ed.) *How Churches grow* (London: MARC Europe 1984, 34-43). I have tried to deduce from the historical deposit the nature of "historic Christianity" as a whole in the section "Christianity" in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Living Religions*, Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin 1984, 56-122.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

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I must begin with a word of caution. This is indeed holy ground and I don't want to treat it as some kind of academic exercise. We do indeed have a barrage of technical terms to reckon with but these are always, I hope, tools of worship and adoration rather than equipment for mental gymnastics.

The problem with which the doctrine of the trinity is concerned contains three basic elements.

First, there is the unity of God. God is one. Amid all the emphasis on God's triune-ness this remains the most basic point in our faith. "Hear, O Israel, Jehovah our God is one Jehovah" (Deut. 6:4). We must never lose sight of that. Pagan religions had a multiplicity of deities, virtually one to each life-force. In Christianity we have one, exclusive Source of life and energy: one Creator, one elemental Power, one Monarchy. However we go on to define other elements in our doctrine, we have to keep this as our guiding principle: no proposition can be allowed to tamper with the emphasis on divine unity.

The second element in the problem is the deity of Christ. This is a point on which the New Testament is emphatic. It is found in all strands of the tradition: Christ is *theos*, Christ is *kurios*, Christ is *Son of God*, Christ is Son of Man. He has all the attributes of God. He performs all the functions of God. He enjoys all the prerogatives of God. And bear in mind the first point: the Unity of God. When we say that Christ is God we cannot mean that He is another God. There is only one God and if Christ is God we can say so only in a sense that fully safeguards our monotheism. The godhead of the Lord is the godhead of the one God.

The third element we have to reckon with is the personalness of the Holy Spirit. He is not simply a divine attribute or a divine function. Nor is He shorthand for God's immanence in the world. He is an agent in His own right, clearly distinguished from both the Father and the Son.

We have, then, three facts to accommodate: the unity of God, the deity of the Son and the personalness of the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to solve the problem by cutting the knot, denying either the Son's deity or the Spirit's personality. We then end up with an Adoptionist Christology in which the Son merely *becomes*, in some sense, God: or with a Modalistic view of the trinity according to which the persons are only aspects or phases of the one person, God.

This is what in fact appears to be happening in many of the modern discussions. In their efforts to escape from the parameters of the historic terminology such scholars as Lampe, Wiles and Mackey succeed only in giving a restatement of old positions or ancient heresies. The *Scottish Journal of Theology*, reviewing Professor Mackey's book, *The Christian*

Experience of God as Trinity concluded: "This book, though it forces us to re-examine our assumptions and the expression of our faith in the tribune God, cannot be seen as giving a positive answer to the question of (the) Trinity. Nor can it be commended as making any real contribution to the important, current ecumenical debate on this central Christian doctrine. It is, in fact, essentially, *an anti-trinitarian tract.*" (italics mine). E. L. Mascall passed a similar judgement on Lampe and Wiles: "In comparison with the richness and fecundity of traditional Christianity both their Christology and their theism appear sterile and bleak. For all that our leading Anglican unitarians have to offer us in its place is one third of the Church's God and one half of the Church's Christ". (*Whatever Happened to the Human Mind*, 1980, p. 127).

If these verdicts are correct (and I think they are) there is little to be gained by focussing on current discussions. I propose instead to focus on the historic doctrine, examine its terminology and ascertain its relevance for our situation today.

Person

Let us begin by looking at the term *person*. The word, as you know, is from the Latin *persona*, meaning first of all a mask and then, by extension, an actor. Later, it came to mean more or less what it means today: a being who performs functions which involve legal accountability and moral responsibility. At this level, it was clearly distinguished from *animal* and *res* (a thing) and this distinction (especially the latter) is obviously still important for theology.

We must always bear in mind Augustine's caveat that in using the word *persona* we are not speaking in order to say something but in order to avoid being silent. There is obviously a profound pessimism in this remark, as if Augustine despaired of finding any meaningful content for the word *persona*. But it would be unhelpful, whatever the respect due to this great Father, to accept his word in a spirit of total helplessness because it is possible to identify real positive content in this historic term.

It reminds us, first of all, that the distinctions between Father, Son and Holy Spirit are real distinctions. There is one *ousia*. There are three *personae*. We state the unity in terms of *ousia*. We state the distinctions in terms of *persona*. These are not simply modalistic or chronological distinctions. They are real, ontological distinctions. In other words, there are *differentia* in the depths of God's own being that correspond to these three *personae*, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

These distinctions appear clearly in many parts of the New Testament. We find them, for example, in the Annunciation, with its reference to the Father's action, the Son's action and the Spirit's action: "*The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which will be born of you will be called the Son of God*" (Luke 1:35). In 1 Cor. 15:24 we have a similar distinction, this time between the Father and the Son: the Son delivers up the kingdom to the Father. "From this one passage," writes Tertullian, "we have been already able to show that the Father and the Son are two

separate persons, not only by the mention of their separate names as Father and Son but also by the fact that He who delivered up the kingdom and He to whom it is delivered up must necessarily be two different persons." (*Aversus Praxean*, Chap. IV). The narrative of the Lord's baptism again emphasises the same distinctions: the Son is baptised, the Father speaks in the voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. It is quite impossible to fit this pattern into a modalistic or monarchian framework. Certainly what we see here is only the economic trinity, God in His redemptive action. But behind the redemptive action of God there lie real, distinctions in the very depths of deity itself.

Secondly, *persona* speaks of agency. This is complicated by the principle that the external acts of God (the *opera ad extra*) are to be seen as works of the triune God conceived as one single agency. Creation is the work of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: and providence, too, is the work of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But it is possible, I think, to look more deeply and find divisions of function which point to ultimate ontological distinction.

The most basic of these is the action of each Person on the other Persons. For example, we have the Father sending the Son, we have the Father upholding the Son, we have the Son praying to the Father, we have the Son yielding Himself, and at last yielding the kingdom to the Father. We have the Son glorifying and obeying the Father. We have the Father sending the Spirit. We have the Son sending the Spirit. We have the Spirit interceding with God for the church. In other words, we have agency from Father to Son, agency from Son to Father, agency from Spirit to Son, from Son to Spirit and from Spirit to Father. In all of these, there is a division of functions, involving real, personal, almost individualised agency.

But there is also divisible agency with regard to God's actions on believers. For example, in the New Testament the stress falls very often on the agency of God the Father in our redemption. His love is the root and foundation of the life of the church. It is God the Father who elects, who calls, who justifies, who adopts, who sanctifies and who glorifies. We cannot assert this rigidly, excluding the involvement of the Son and the Holy Spirit, but in the majority of instances it is God's agency that is to the fore in these redemptive acts.

In other connections, it is the Spirit's distinctive agency that is in view. He is the One whose fruit we bear, who convicts of sin, righteousness and judgement, who leads us, who bears witness to our sonship and who helps us in our weakness.

The Son's agency is so prominent that it scarcely needs proof. Yet in Tertullian's controversy with Praxeas this was the crucial issue. Was it the Father who was crucified on the cross of Calvary? Was the Father born in the Virgin's womb? Did He become His own Son? These were the logical implications of strict monarchianism. Christ was only God the Father under another name: the Father was born of the Virgin, the Father became His own Son and the Father was crucified. If we recoil from these conclusions, we have to accept that the Son alone is the subject of the

incarnation and of the crucifixion and of the resurrection. In this connection, there is marvellous precision in John's Prologue where the apostle states that *the Word* was made flesh: the *Logos*. It was not *ho theos*, God the Father or the Deity. It was specifically God the Son who became enfleshed and it was that same Son who underwent the whole experience of humiliation and who at last was exalted in the paradox of Golgotha. The Word became flesh: and it was the Word as flesh who was crucified, dead and buried.

Thirdly, *persona* equals *relation*. There are relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit analogous to those between human individuals. They are not identical with those between human *personae*: but they are analogous. The Bible encapsulates this emphasis on relationship in several key concepts. It is present, for example, in the idea of the Son as *agapetos*. He is the beloved, His dear Son, the Son of His love (Col. 1:13). It is also present in the idea of the Son as *monogenes*. Here the emphasis falls more on the *mono* than on the *gene*. It stresses the uniqueness of the relationship. No man or angel occupies this position. Not even the Holy Spirit is *monogenes*. Christ is the only Son, God's own Son, God's beloved Son.

But the emphasis on relationship is enshrined above all in one great word from John's gospel: "The Word was with God" (Jn. 1: 1). The preposition which John uses here is not one of the common words for *with*. He does not say *sun* or *meta* or even *para*. Instead, he creates this marvellous sentence using the word *pros*: the Word was *towards* God. The witness of Father and Son is not some mere proximity: it is a face-to-face relationship, rich in self expression, rich in glorious out-goingness, rich in what we might almost call its eternal extrovertiness, the outward-lookingness of the divine *agape*. Sometimes, the scholastics (including Reformed scholastics) suggest that God's most fundamental concern is self-love. Herman Hoeksema, for example, writes, "God's absolute and pure Self-centredness is expressed and manifest especially in His love" (Reformed Dogmatics, page 103). This is surely close to blasphemy. At the heart of love there is always *pros*: the turning of the face of the one toward the other. That is where the Son was: *pros ton theon*. And the relationship was mutual. He was His Father's delight.

There is no way that this is going to fit into a modalistic construction. We are not speaking of a mode with a mode, an abstraction with an abstraction or a phase with a phase. We are speaking of person with person.

We begin with our Jewish inheritance with its emphasis on the unity of God: but we move quickly to this other emphasis on pluralness in God: and that pluralness is always richness, manifoldness and inexhaustibility. God is *Elohim*, a plural noun taking singular adjectives and predicates, because the glory of all the *els* is compacted into what He is. There is so much *El-ness* (god-ness) in Him that there is no place for any *El* but Himself. And for us, as Christians, at the very heart of this depth and fulness in deity there lies this *witness* of John's Prologue: godness so complete and inexhaustible that we must speak of *God with God*.

Fourthly, *persona* means rationality. This word has to be handled with

some care. It was Boethius who spoke of a person as “the individual substance of a reasonable (*rationalis*) nature” (see Barth, Church Dogmatics, I: 1, p. 409). But in this context, *rationalis* referred not simply to the logical and the computative. It designated the psychological as distinct from the inanimate and the animal. I would suggest that when we speak of rationality as characterising the divine persons we are using it in the same sense as when in Christology we speak of Christ as having a *reasonable* soul. Here, the word is affirming, over against Apollinarius, the whole truth of the human psychology of Christ. Hence, *rationalis* means not simply intellect. It also means the affective and the emotional because these are part of the rationality that distinguishes us from *the thing* and *the animal*. When, for example, we speak of the Holy Spirit as a person, we are ascribing to Him thought, intellect, purposefulness, volition, affection and, above all, emotion. In so speaking, of course, one is conscious that in so much of our inherited theology there is no place in our concept of God for any kind of “passion”. There is no room for suffering and little place for feeling. “We believe in one God”, wrote John of Damascus, “passionless, unchangeable, unalterable” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book I, Chapter VIII). Obviously, as I define person I am transgressing these parameters, because I do not see how they can be reconciled with the biblical picture. In the divine personalness of each of the hypostases there is a rationality which includes affection and emotion. The Spirit is grieved; and that is already something impossible for an abstraction or a mode.

One final thing with regard to *persona*: each of the persons has His own unique property or characteristic which is His and His alone. This is the doctrine of the *idiomata*, bequeathed to the church by John of Damascus: “In these *hypostatic* or *personal* properties alone do the three holy subsistences differ from each other, being indivisibly divided not by essence but by the distinguishing mark of their proper and peculiar subsistence” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book I, Chapter VII). These personal properties, as you know, were that the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds and the Father neither is begotten nor proceeds (He is ingenerate). We must be conscious that there is a deceptive simplicity about all this. It is easy to use the labels to designate the distinctives: and probably quite impossible to identify the actual meaning of the labels. The Son, for example, is distinguished by *eternal generation*. But what does that mean? In the Arian controversy, the concept “begotten, not made” had an important negative function in emphasising that the Son was not created. The concept of the eternal generation was also used to emphasise the fact that just as in a human son there is the whole nature of his father so in the divine Son there is the whole nature of His Father. The great inadequacy in all this is that one cannot build upon it any distinction between the Son and the Holy Spirit because the Father’s nature is also found in its entirety in the Holy Spirit. All the progress we can make before we fall over the edge of revelation is to say: to beget is not to create and to beget means that the whole of the begetter’s nature is in the begotten. There meaningful progress ends.

The Holy Spirit’s distinctive is that He proceeds and it is safe to say that

with regard to the content of this we know virtually nothing. Our insight is exhausted in the statement of John of Damascus: "Though the Holy Spirit proceedeth from the Father, yet this is not generative in character but processional. This is a different mode of existence, alike incomprehensible and unknown, just as is the generation of the Son", (ibid). We are simply reading back from the economical trinity, from the fact that the Spirit in His redemptive activity comes from the Father and the Son, to an eternal reality corresponding to this temporal procession. What this ontological procession actually is or what is meant by the Father and the Son spirating or breathing the Spirit, we simply do not know.

Homoousios

A second term which deserves attention is *Homoousios*, another of the key concepts of our inherited theology. It was used first of all by Athanasius at Nicea to define the Son's relation to the Father and later applied by the Cappadocians to the Holy Spirit. Both Son and Spirit are the same in *substance* as God the Father.

Four brief comments must suffice.

First, the term *homoousios* was brought forward specifically as a test of orthodoxy. Today, many scholars are instituting contrasts between the ancient creeds and those of the Reformation, very much to the detriment of the latter, suggesting that those of the Fathers were distinguished by being doxological and devotional. So far as Nicea is concerned, this is about as far from the truth as it is possible to be. Nicea was an occasion of endless politicking, involving wrangling, jostling, intrigue, scheming and compromise. What Athanasius and his bishop, Alexander, wanted was not a doxology, but a word which enshrined orthodoxy and excluded heresy. It had to be a word which no Arian could adopt. Arius took the position that the Son was *hetero-ousios*. He was of a different substance. He was a different being from the living God. The semi-Arians said the Son was *homoi-ousios*: He was like God. Many orthodox men were perfectly happy with that because it could bear a perfectly scriptural meaning and even claim direct support from the fact that the New Testament defines Jesus as the *homoion* of God. But Athanasius insisted that what was needed was not only something which would express the truth but something which would safeguard it. That was why he chose *homoousios* rather than *homoiouosios*. No Arian could say *homoousios*. Neither could a semi-Arian. Only someone who had an unqualified commitment to the deity of Christ could regard Him as *one and the same in being* with God the Father.

Secondly, the word *homoousios* affirms not merely generic identity but numerical identity. The orthodox view is not that the Son belongs to the same genus or species as God the Father but that the Son has the same being (or is the same being) as God the Father. What is asserted is a numerical identity. Indeed, this is what must be asserted, if we are to remain monotheists. The Lord our God is one. There is one divine *ousia*, one *substantia*, one *theiotes*, one divine nature, one godhead. Hence, the *homoousios* must be numerical. There is one God, one being who is God,

and Christ's deity must be fitted into that fundamental perspective. The three do not form three Gods having a merely generic identity. They form one God with a numerical identity.

Thirdly, the Fathers defined the content of *homoousios* largely in terms of attributes. This was especially true of Athanasius. "Unless the Son possesses all the attributes of the Father it could not be true that He who sees the Son sees the Father" *Orations Against the Arians*, 1:21). Or, even more explicitly: "There is no single attribute which the Father has which the Son has not" (Ibid, III:6). This emphasis rests on solid New Testament foundations. Christ is the *pleroma* (fulness) of God (Col. 2:9). All the fulness (the entirety) of deity is in Him. He is in the *morphe* of God (Phil. 2:6), possessing all that constitutes deity.

Everything that enters into our definition of God is there, including self-existence. Remember the convenient definition (convenient although far from satisfactory) of God given in the Shorter Catechism: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable." In these terms, *homoousios* means that the Son and the Spirit along with the Father are infinite, eternal and unchangeable. What the Father is the Son is. Anything which is a perfection of God is also a perfection of the Son: otherwise, said Athanasius, how could a man say that when he has seen the Son he has seen the Father? You cannot say that unless the *pleroma* is in the Son. When we say this, of course, we are not merely saying that *theos* is a predicate of Jesus or of Christ. We are also saying that Jesus is a predicate of *theos*. There is in God no un-Christlikeness at all.

Autotheos

Closely linked with *homoousios* is the word *autotheos*. In Patristic theology (including Tertullian and Athanasius and, to a lesser extent, Augustine) there are clear traces of subordinationism. This appears in the emphasis that the Father has all the attributes from Himself, whereas the Son has them only from the Father; that the Son's self-existence is given to Him by the Father; that the Father *communicated* deity to the Son; and that the Father is the *fons deitatis*, the fountain of deity. In other words, there is this one Person who is God in His own right, God the Father, and the Son and the Spirit who are God in some secondary and derived way. In the Athanasian Creed, there is already a protest against this subordinationist tendency: "In this trinity none is before or after another: none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal and coequal." Despite this, however, the subordinationist strain has continued right down to the present day, even in orthodox Christology. The valuable work done by John Calvin in this area has been largely ignored, apart from the prevalence of a certain suspicion that he was unsound on the doctrine of the eternal sonship. Calvin was responding to the challenge of a certain Valentinus Gentilis who alleged, "The Father alone is *autotheos*." He alone is essentiated by no superior divinity. Only He is God *a se ipso*: "The Logos of God is not that one *autotheos* whose Logos it is." Calvin's response was that such assertions were against every Scripture which makes Christ God. Subordination has

no place when we are speaking *simpliciter* of the deity of Christ: "When, apart from consideration of the Person, we are speaking of His divinity, or, which is the same thing, *simpliciter of the essence*, I say that it is truly predicated of it that it is *a se ipso*. (*Institutes* I:XIII, 25). The Son derived sonship from the Father but He did not derive His essence from the Father. "The Father is the fountain of the deity not with respect to the essence but the order. The Father is not the *Deificator* of the Son" (*Institutes* I:XIII, 25). In fact, said Calvin, if the Son is not *autotheos* he cannot be *theos* at all because self-existence is the most distinctive property of deity. If Christ is not God in His own right, if He is God only by derivation, then we are tampering with His very deity.

There are two points I would make on this.

First of all, as far as I can see, the problem arises from a failure to see the full significance of the *homoousios*. Subordinationism, in all its forms, assumes that there are two essences, the one derived and the other underived. The answer to that is to say, Look, the Son's *ousia* cannot be derived from or subordinated to the Father's *ousia* because it is the same *ousia*. They have one and the same being, one and the same substance, and that makes all derivation of being impossible.

Filioque

Secondly, we must try to relate this *autotheos* to the so-called *filioque* clause. That means a whole new block of thought: we move on from *homoousios* via *autotheos* to *filioque*. In the earlier creeds (Nicea, for example) we are told that the Spirit proceeds from God the Father. The *filioque* means that we are adding a clause which says, "and from the Son". This clause probably circulated in the church informally and unofficially before it came into the creeds at all. It was taken up by the Synod of Toledo in 589 in the form *et a filio*. But Toledo was only a local council and lacked the moral authority to alter by itself the language of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed. After Toledo, however, versions of the Creed containing the *filioque* clause came to be widely used in the West, especially in Spain and France. For a time the Popes refused to give any sanction to the change of wording, but it was finally approved by Pope Benedict VIII in 1044. This precipitated the breach with the Eastern Church which became a formal reality in 1054.

There are many voices even in the Western church today arguing that it is inadvisable to press the *filioque*, largely because of its implications for ecumenism. Three comments may be made.

First, it is important to remember that this is a debate about Christ, not about the Holy Spirit. What is at issue is the standing and function of the Second Person of the Trinity. To deny that the Son participates in the procession of the Holy Spirit is to reduce *His* status.

Secondly, there can be no doubt that in the economical Trinity the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. It is Christ who baptises in the Spirit: "He has shed forth this which you now see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The Spirit is the Son's delegate and the Son's Vicar as much as He is the Father's. It seems fair to assume that this order of redemption

corresponds to a real order in the depths of God Himself.

Thirdly, it is worth pondering whether the whole controversy proceeds on a misunderstanding. The objection of the Greek Fathers (and of some contemporary theologians) is that the *filioque* leads to two *principia* in the godhead: two *fontes deitatis* or two sources of divinity. The Greeks always thought that that compromised the divine *monarchia*, the divine unity. I cannot resist the temptation to say that the answer is to dispense with the whole idea of *principium*, *arche*, *fons*: throw the whole gaboodle out the theological window. So far as I can see there is no place in our thought of God for *principia*: not even to say that God is the cause of His own existence, because the truth is that God's existence is uncaused. God simply *is*. The divine *ousia* has no *principium*. The divine ousia has no *arche*. The divine ousia has no *fons*. If we accept that, then the Greek objection falls because then we no longer have two *principia*: we have no *principia* at all. The unity lies in the simple unity of the essence itself. The idea of *principium* tempts us to go back to a God behind the *ousia*, who accounts for the *ousia*. That is a road down which I can't go.

Perichoresis

Let's move on to another of the great words, *perichoresis*. This, too, is part of our inheritance, but a very much neglected one. It is the coinage, largely, of John of Damascus, who, in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (Book IV, Chapter XVIII) speaks of "the *perichoresis* of the subsistences in one another." The Latin equivalents were *circumincessio* and *circuminessio*. The basic idea is implicit in John 14:10, "I am in the Father and the Father in me." But within that general idea there are three more specific concepts.

First, *koinonia* or sharing. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have certain things in common. The divine essence, they have that in common. The divine government, the *monarchia*, they have that in common: the divine Son is in the midst of the throne (Rev. 7:17), at the very heart of the monarchy, possessing all the authority (Mt. 28:18). They have the *doxa* in common: "the Lord Jesus Christ, the *doxa*" says James. He *is* the glory, the shekinah. And the love, too, is common. It is mutual. Each loves the other. Each is lovely to the other.

Secondly, the *perichoresis* means the indwelling of each by the other. We have already seen the *pros*, the towardness, of John 1:1. Here we have this new dimension, this intimateness, this interpenetration which human love might wish it could aspire to but finds impossible. In God it is possible for each person to be in, almost inside the other, in a unique intensity of mutuality: "I in the Father and the Father in me."

Thirdly, *perichoresis* includes the idea of the circulation of the divine power; not circulation from a *principium*, but an unbegun circle and an unending circle. At this level, the *circumincessio* involves a sharing of energies, the El-ness of God in unceasing circulation through the divine persons.

Trinitarian religion

I come at last to my final section: Trinitarian religion. What are the implications of this particular doctrine for the Christian life?

First of all, it is the one thing which can sustain our worship of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Remember Pliny's definition of a Christian: "They are people," he says, "who sing hymns to Christ as to a god." That was the driving force behind Athanasius' great struggle. To worship one who was *heterousios* or even *homoiousios* was, as he saw it, a reversion to paganism. Do we want to end up worshipping angels or super-creatures? What right do we have to bow the knee unless the Saviour is, in the absolute sense, the Son of God? Those called to teach the worshipping church have to preach this doctrine week in, week out, both to justify doxology and liturgy and to motivate to doxology and liturgy.

Who is He, in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
'Tis the Lord, Oh wondrous story,
'Tis the Lord, the king of glory.

We can never end it there. We must go on to say:

At His feet we humbly fall.
Crown Him, crown Him, Lord of all:

There doxology and theology merge.

Secondly, there is a very direct link between the nature of God as triune and the structure of human existence as societal. I come back again to John's *pros* (Jn. 1:1). The Word was *with* God. "Let us make man in our image," said the triune God: in the image of our *withness*, in the image of our pluralness, and in the image of our multiformity. Hence the divine observation that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Man lives in marriage and man lives in families and man lives in community: and when God's own Son becomes man He chooses twelve simply *to be with Him*. In all Christ's human life he has *withness*, except in that terrible moment when, already forsaken by His disciples, He experiences rejection by God Himself. A human life without *withness* is truncated and impoverished. It is surely important to emphasise that. Many psychological problems among Christians are due to violations of this social instinct: an instinct which belongs to the very core of our being as made in the image of God.

Thirdly, there is a direct link between Trinitarian theology and our own Christian lives. Not only human existence in general but our Christian lives must be societal. In those lives there must be sharing, *koinonia*. The Lord's Supper, with its rich symbolism of giving and receiving, illustrates this. Everything is being shared: the gifts, the joys, the sorrows, the strengths, the weaknesses. The church is a *synagoge*, a coming together. It is an *ecclesia*, an assembly. These words bring us back again to the fact that we bear the image of the God who has never been except as triune and cannot be except as triune. Just as we were created for withness, we were redeemed for withness, which means that our churches are supposed to correspond as closely as possible to the life of the triune God. God is love. The church is love. Without love we are nothing. We are

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

called, in the church, to reflect the love of the eternal Father for the eternal Son, remembering all the time that each Christian, like each Person of the godhead, has his own distinct personal property. We must render to God precisely the service which reflects our own uniqueness.

Finally, the religious significance of *perichoresis*. I have spoken of *perichoresis* as the indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit in and through each other. Each is in the other. I think it is fair to say that in the New Testament there is a redemptive *perichoresis* of incredible wealth and complexity. Indeed, what happens in redemption is virtually the opening of the circle of trinitarian life to admit the church. That must be said with great care and with much qualification because the otherness of God remains a fact eternally and there is always a great gulf between us and Him. But do you remember how much emphasis there is in the New Testament on points which, taken together, give us a redemptive *perichoresis*? There is our own *koinonia* with the Father (1 John 1:3), our *koinonia* with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14), our *koinonia* in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), our *koinonia* in the sonship of Christ (Eph. 1:5) and our *koinonia* in the sovereignty of Christ (Eph. 1:6). There is the *indwelling* of the believer by the triune God. Each divine Person is in the church and in each believer individually. And there is the *circulation* of the divine energy: what Henry Scougal called "the life of God in the soul of man." We are rooted and built up in Him (Colossians 2:7). We can even say, "I can do all things in the strength which He imparts" (Phil. 4:13).

So we have a *perichoresis* which includes sharing, indwelling and circulation. Last of all, it includes *with*. "Father, I will that they also whom thou has given me be with me where I am: that is, in the glory I had with thee before the world was." That is the end of the road: "With Him". With God. There we shall see Him as He is, face to face.

But let us never forget the cost: that in order to secure our *withness*, God sent forth (*exapeteilen*), sent out from Himself, His own Son. He came to be forsaken by God, to be the One without God, in order to bring us to God. That journey on His part into the Far Country, that loss of *perichoresis*, is an even bigger mystery than the Trinity itself.

CALVIN ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Gordon J. Keddie

Wishaw

Introduction

In the twentieth century, the popular mind assumes the radical separation of Church and State. It is almost axiomatic, in the so-called Christian West, that these institutions will be, not only separate, but actually *opposed* to one another, as the “religious” *versus* the “secular”! The State is commonly regarded as the a-religious, neutral agency, which governs a religiously and philosophically pluralistic society, striking a balance between the multiform factions among the citizenry and — not least — steadfastly resisting the ethical teaching of any particular church. The Church, on the other hand, is the aggregation of Christian groups and is simply the religious sector of the broader community. It is, of course, the ever-shrinking minority and therefore the whipping boy of every new wave of anti-establishment reform.

No such concept of Church and State existed in the Europe of the Reformation, far less in the minds of the great Reformers of the Church. John Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva, saw these institutions as God-instituted and, coordinately subject to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. “Calvin,” writes William Mueller, “. . . thought in terms of the *corpus christianum*. The church and the state are both subject to the sovereign rule of God, the *regnum Dei et Christi*.”¹ Calvin’s treatment of the institution of civil government, therefore, assumes a particular understanding of the Lordship of Christ. Christ’s kingly authority is all-embracing and must encompass the very *raison d’être* of the State. The State is a divine institution subserving the will of God while the world lasts. The officers of the State, therefore, have certain obligations with respect to the revealed Word of God. The State can never be neutral and can never be regarded as existing merely to balance the broad spectrum of interests in society, as if obedience to God’s Word were irrelevant and Christ-denying pluralism the irreducible norm.

It is our purpose, in this study, to examine Calvin’s doctrine of civil government as he sets it forth in his *Institutes*. Three principal concerns of the Reformer will be examined. These are the three principles he enunciates as being essential to a Christian understanding of the State. They are:

1. The divine institution of the civil authority;
2. The centrality of God’s law to the law of the land — necessitating a positive attitude to, law and government on the part of Christians;
3. The principle of obedience to rulers.

Underlying the whole discussion is the conviction that Church and State are separate institutions. Calvin carefully delineates this distinction in *Institutes*, Book IV, chapter 9, and roundly condemns the Papal

usurpation of temporal power. Later, in chapter 11, he explains the doctrine of the “power of the keys”. This power is held by the Church and applies to magistrates and rulers as men under the law of God. Church power, however, is never to bear the sword in the exercise of discipline, for that belongs to the civil power alone. The civil power, on its part, may not interfere with the discipline of the Church.

I. THE DIVINE INSTITUTION

A. *The two governments*

Calvin distinguishes two governments in the world. One is spiritual and “resides in the soul or inner man and pertains to eternal life”, while the other is concerned with “the establishment of civil justice and outward morality”.² This distinction is rooted in an eschatological perspective which informs Calvin’s teaching on the Kingdom of God. Professor T. F. Torrance comments:

The advance of the church between *initium* and *complementum* and the reign of Christ between the two advents, Calvin sees in the historical perspective of the two ages, the old world and the new world to come, but like the New Testament he thinks of them as overlapping.³

Christ’s *spiritual kingdom* and the civil jurisdiction thus co-exist until the Parousia, when, in the words of the Apostle John, “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15). These are quite distinct in the view of Calvin; the civil power, while deriving its authority from Christ and representing the morality of the Gospel in the public sector, is not to be understood as the earthly representative of the eternal kingdom, for that is the prerogative of the Church. Civil government is a temporary institution and, remarks Wilhelm Niesel,

is not the same thing as the spiritual reign of Christ, but neither does it function in juxtaposition with it, but it exists for the good of those who in this perishable world belong to Christ and his eternal kingdom.⁴

B. *Civil government is divinely ordained*

The civil power, then, glorifies Christ by ruling according to the mandate given to it by God. In the event that the government denies God’s revealed will and thereby shows itself not to be “founded on Christ”, God will take the glory to himself in the inevitable destruction of that government, for, as Calvin asserts,

He threatens speedy destruction to all kingdoms which obscure Christ’s glory by extending themselves too much.⁵

The civil power is to be seen as ordained of God and its officers are to be regarded as His vice-gerents — but within the limits of their office.⁶

Calvin was quick to reject the separatistic attitude of the Anabaptists. These “fanatics” say that the institution of civil government is a “thing polluted”, with which Christian men can have nothing to do.⁷ This approach, in effect, held that the eternal state of believers had broken through into the present age in such a way as to cancel out the *necessity* of civil government. This, Calvin hotly denies:

spiritual government, indeed, is already initiating in us upon earth certain beginnings of the Heavenly Kingdom, and in this mortal and fleeting life affords a certain forecast of an immortal and incorruptible blessedness. Yet civil government has its appointed end, so long as we live among men, . . . [which] . . . I admit to be superfluous, if God's Kingdom, such as it is now among us, wipes out the present life.*

It is because of the wickedness of men, who would impede the progress of the Gospel and the Lord's people, that God has graciously ordained civil government. Thereby may public evil be restrained and, more significantly still, public righteousness be promoted.

C. *The tasks of civil government*

1. *The tasks outlined.* Civil government, says Calvin, is as necessary to humanity as "bread, water, sun and air" but "its place of honor is far more excellent". Why Calvin thinks this is so is clear from his outline of the basic functions of government. He discerns three fundamental tasks;

(a) "It provides for their living together." It orders the life of society in such a way as to "see to it . . . that men breathe, eat, drink and are kept warm". Government provides for the maintenance of life and limb for its citizenry. The Reformer does not elaborate upon this, but we are surely to assume that this would include the provision of an adequate standard of living for the poor and the indigent. That Calvin would not have had in mind the kind of wealth redistribution taken for granted in modern state socialism is surely indicated by his emphasis, in the same paragraph, on the role of the state as the guarantor of private property — "it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound". It is, however, fundamental that "humanity be maintained among men".

(b) "Rightly establishing religion." This involves the protection of the position of the Church with respect to (i) the outward worship of God and (ii) what Calvin calls her "sound doctrine of piety".¹⁰ The former refers to the State's role as the guarantor of the Church's freedom to preach the Truth and conduct public worship according to the Word of God. The latter phrase — "sound doctrine of piety" — is more difficult to interpret. One suspects that Calvin here had in mind something similar to that expressed a century later by the Westminster Assembly in Chapter XXIII, 3 of the Westminster Confession. This states that,

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered and observed.¹¹

(c) "Civil righteousness." Two elements are discernible here. Firstly, there is the regulation of societal relationships within the State.

Secondly, there is the promotion of a more "general peace and tranquillity", by which Calvin seems to mean foreign policy. Hence he deals at some length in the *Institutes* (IV, xx, 11-12) with the right of a

government to put the nation in a state of military preparedness and, if necessary, to engage in wars of defence.

2. *Differing interpretations.* There has been considerable debate over the question as to which of the above-mentioned areas is more basic for Calvin. Niesel, for example, says that the establishment of religion is the more important to the Reformer. Calvin, says Niesel,

has left us in no doubt about the fact that the pre-eminent duty of the secular power is to secure the right worship of God. The other duty, which is concerned with peace . . . is clearly subordinate to the former.¹²

On the other hand, Charles Hall takes the diametrically opposite view. According to him, Calvin,

believed that the state exists for the basic purpose of preserving the ordered structure of human society, and thus to further the salvation of the elect.¹³

The resolution of the question would seem to lie in a consideration of Calvin's view as to the content of the law which should be administered by a God-honouring civil authority. Clearly, the nature and content of that law will provide an adequate pointer to the principal purpose of the government enforcing it. This law to be enforced, asserts Calvin, "extends to both Tables of the Law" (of Moses). In addition, even the heathen philosophers admit that stable government is impossible "unless piety is the first concern". It is also clear that Scripture praises holy kings. For these reasons it is the utmost folly for Christian rulers to "neglect the concern for God" and "give attention only to rendering justice among men". With perhaps a tinge of righteous indignation, Calvin concludes,

As if God appointed rulers in his name to decide earthly controversies but overlooked what was of far greater importance — that he himself should be purely worshipped according to the prescription of his law.¹⁴

The conclusion seems inescapable that Calvin regards "rightly establishing religion" as the prime duty of a civil government. "Civil righteousness" is clearly secondary in his thinking, though necessary to the proper accomplishment of the establishment of religion. Basic social order — "living together" — is simply assumed.

It is perhaps worth noting in passing, that the Anabaptists, whose errors Calvin was never slow to counter, most vigorously rejected any civil establishment of religion, although they did expect the State to administer justice. Pilgram Marpeck, in a debate with Martin Bucer in 1531, went as far as to say,

I conclude before my God that earthly power in all its works has no place in the kingdom of Christ . . . and that all who seek to support the kingdom of Christ through (temporal) authority will be punished and destroyed.¹⁵

Calvin's point is just the opposite; civil government *is* kingdom-work and punishment and destruction will follow if it *does not uphold* God's law and the Church of Jesus Christ, His Son.¹⁶

D. *The calling of the magistrate*

Commensurate with this high view of the role of the State is Calvin's estimate of the calling of the magistrate. "Ruling" is a gift of God. Indeed,

... it has not come about by human perversity that the authority over all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers, but by divine providence and holy ordinance.

Civil authority is a calling,

not only lawful before God, but the most sacred and by far the most honourable of all callings in the whole life of mortal man.¹⁷

It is a "holy ministry"¹⁸ and "the highest gift of (God's) beneficence to preserve the safety of men".¹⁹ As "vicars of God" they are to remain faithful to the divine law, for they will render an account of their administration hereafter.²⁰

One might well ask, in view of this strong language, whether Calvin gives to the civil magistrate the place reserved for the minister of the Gospel. When one compares the above with what he says about the pastoral office, one meets with similar language.

God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among us in highest honor and esteem, even as the most excellent of gifts.²¹

What is the solution to this apparent impasse? Perhaps it is in avoiding opposing these statements to one another, but rather looking at them in the respective contexts within which they are set. Thus it will be noticed that when Calvin speaks of the calling of the civil magistrate, he specifically says of it, that it is "the highest gift of (God's) beneficence to preserve the safety of men".²² It is evident that he sees the magistrate as God's vice-gerent in the non-ecclesiastical world, having a "holy ministry" in the realm of civil affairs. He is, as it were, Zerubbabel, standing alongside Joshua — the minister of the Words — but in no way detracting from the latter's position or prerogatives.

II. THE LAW OF THE LAND

A. *Civil law and Biblical law*

If, says Calvin, the magistrate is a "living law", then the law is a "silent magistrate". The laws of the land are the "sinews of the commonwealth", without which any civil authority would sink into oblivion.²³ Calvin will not, however, be drawn into a detailed discussion of the legal system for a model Christian State, and, indeed, would have avoided the subject altogether had it not been for those who denied the legitimacy of governments which ruled according to "the common law of nations", rather than the "political system of Moses".²⁴ Calvin, in other words, rejects Mosaic theocracy as a model for civil government under the New Testament economy.

What law, then, is to be enforced by the civil magistrate? Calvin, following Thomas Aquinas and mediaeval theology in general, distinguishes within the Law of Moses, the *moral* law, which is eternally binding and should, therefore, find expression in all civil law, from the *ceremonial*

and *judicial* laws, which he believes to be abrogated by Christ. As the ceremonial practices under “the church of the Jews” expressed piety, yet are distinguishable from piety itself, so the judicial practices of the Mosaic economy can be distinguished from the “precepts of love” which undergirds them and which remain after the judicial system has passed away.²⁵

Granted that this is true, Calvin sees no objection to a nation making laws that it deems profitable for its own life.

“Yet these must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love, so that they indeed vary in form but have the same purpose.”²⁶

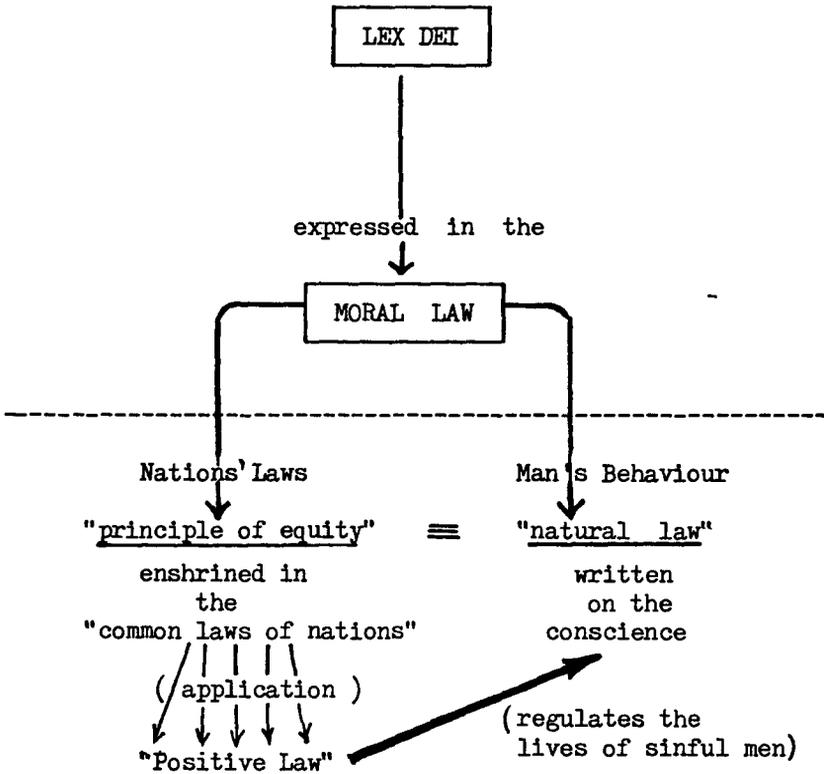


Figure 1. Calvin's scheme of the inter-relationship of God's Law and the Positive Law of nations.

This “perpetual rule of love” — the basis of all civil law outside of the moral law — leads us to consider that other somewhat nebulous category, “the common laws of nations”.

B. *The common laws of nations*

What are the “common laws of nations” in Calvin’s view? Two closely related concepts are introduced to the discussion at this point. These are *equity* and *natural law*. (Figure 1.)

Equity is what Calvin calls that *purpose* encapsulated within the law which transcends the various forms the law may take in different situations. This is the permanent innermost content of the law. It is to be the same for all men everywhere.

Natural law refers to that which is engraved on the consciences of men. For Calvin, equity is equivalent to natural law, because, in his thinking, natural law

is not the sum total of rational principles, as the Stoics conceived it, nor the result of man’s rational thought, as Aristotle described it, nor is it a mere instinctive urge, but rather the law of the living God.²⁷

For Calvin, “the *lex naturae* is rooted in and related to the *lex Dei*.”²⁸

Central to this natural law is the Moral Law of God. That which is expressed in the Decalogue is the *principle of equity* that suffuses natural law — and this is the core around which all civil law ought to be constructed.²⁹ Says Calvin,

“It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws.”³⁰

He goes on to give examples to show how the *moral law* — equity and natural law — may find its application in *positive law*, i.e., the law of the land, in different forms adapted to specific situations encountered. According to the extent of the problem, the severity of the law may vary from place to place. Thus,

God’s law forbids stealing. The penalties meted out to thieves in the Jewish state are to be seen in Exodus (Exod. 24:1-4). The very ancient laws of other nations punished theft with double restitution; the laws which followed these distinguished between theft, manifest and not manifest. Some proceeded to banishment, others to flogging, others finally to capital punishment.³¹

C. *The Christian principle of positive political involvement*

Underlying this entire discussion is a principle which Calvin is seeking to establish. It is that Christians must have a positive attitude to the law and to politics.³² This the Anabaptists had rejected. For Calvin, however, civil power is an institution of God for the good of men and, of course, particularly for the Church of Jesus Christ. He therefore concludes that the business of civil government may never be rejected as if it were a device of Satan. Rather it is the work of God within its own divinely appointed sphere.

III. CIVIL OBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE

When the civil power operates on a Christian basis — in Calvin’s terms,

when the principle of equity expressed in the moral law of God is faithfully and effectively applied in the positive law of the land — then the problems facing Christians, in their relationship to the State, will be minimal. On the other hand, any non-Christian subjects would have certain difficulties of their own and would doubtless lobby for more “permissive” legislation, notwithstanding any prevailing circumstances of general peace and the maximum availability of Gospel ordinances.

But what if, as is more often the case, the government in power is tyrannical or, on more or less subtle ways, conducts public affairs in a manner inimical to the progress of the Gospel and prejudicial to the welfare of Christians?

A. *Obedience to the “powers that be” is required of all*

Calvin lays a heavy emphasis on the principle of obedience to rulers. The first duty of the Christian is to recognise the nature of the magisterial office as “a jurisdiction bestowed by God”.³³ (Compare I Peter 2:17; Proverbs 24:21) Calvin quotes Romans 13:5 — Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience sake” — to point out that our obedience is to arise out of a conscientious desire to obey God Himself, rather than from a fear of punishment. To do otherwise and resist the law, is to deny what God has ordained.³⁴

Furthermore, even bad rulers are to be obeyed,³⁵ for when we examine God’s Word, declares the Reformer, we discover that unjust and incompetent rulers have been raised up to punish the wickedness of the people.³⁶ Calvin adduces evidence for this along two lines:

1. The special operation of the providence of God in appointing kings according to His pleasure. He devotes a whole section to the case of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27).³⁷

2. The sanctity of the royal person in Scripture (Job 12:18; Proverbs 28:2; Jeremiah 27:6, 17; 29:7). This cannot, however, be taken to imply that Calvin thought that wicked rulers and governments have *carte blanche* to continue as the legitimate authority indefinitely. He cites I Samuel 8:11-17, where the prophet tells the people about the “rights” which the kings they so desire will exercise with respect to them and their property. These “rights” were not sanctioned in the Mosaic Law, but were certainly to be recognised as valid by the people.

It is as if Samuel had said: the willfulness of kings will run to excess, but it will not be your part to restrain it: you will have only this left to you: to obey their commands and hearken to their word.³⁸

B. *Magistrates and constitutional change*

The Reformer is sensitive, however, to the consideration that if subjects have the responsibility before God to obey their rulers, then rulers in their turn are responsible before God to rule their own people well. If the people have genuine grievances against irresponsible government, what can they do to rectify the situation? For example, is there ever a justification for revolution?

1. *Levels of legitimacy of governments.* At this point, Calvin’s intense

conservatism comes to the fore. As hinted in his comment on I Samuel 8:11-17, quoted above, there is, for Calvin, a sense in which the government in power may continue to be legitimate *as far as its subjects are concerned*, long after divine approbation has been removed. As Niesel puts it,

“The legitimacy of a secular government is not a secure and permanent possession. It stems from the relationship in which the rulers stand to the Lord of all lords and depends on how far these rulers remain in obedience to God.”³⁹

There are two levels of legitimacy in view here.

(a) Rulers who deny God’s precepts for civil government are illegitimate *before Him*, however long they may remain in power.

(b) While *any* government remains in power, in the providence of God, it is always to be regarded *by the people* as the legitimate government in the sense that they never have warrant to do anything other than obey its rule. Thus Niesel concludes,

Rulers who . . . attempt to eliminate from the sphere of earthly affairs the living God who has called them to their office, . . . and set themselves up in His place, are in Calvin’s opinion, no longer legitimate. But this certainly does not mean that they are no longer in possession of authority.⁴⁰

The people must obey the *de facto* government: they may not seek by direct action — force of arms — to overthrow it. What then can they do?

2. *The role of the common people.* Calvin maps out what he thinks is the proper course of action for the common people under a bad government. The common people — the Christian commonality — are to have a *politically passive* role. They should engage, however, in the twin exercises of self-examination and prayer.

(a) *Self-examination.* The people ought to turn their attention from the abuses of the government to the way they conduct their own affairs.

Therefore, if we are cruelly tormented by a savage prince, if we are greedily despoiled by one who is avaricious and wanton, if we are neglected by a slothful one, if finally we are vexed for piety’s sake by one who is impious and sacrilegious, let us first be mindful of our own misdeeds, which are without doubt chastised by such whips of the Lord.⁴¹

Humility is thus to restrain impatience and the afflictions of governmental injustice are received as the chastisements of the Lord that work a deeper obedience and godliness in the Christian’s life.

(b) *Prayer.* The people ought also to pray for God’s help in raising up good government — and simply wait upon Him.⁴²

3. *Magistratus populares.* There is a class of persons who can institute a process of constitutional change. These Calvin calls the *Magistratus populares* “appointed to restrain the wilfulness of kings”.⁴¹ These constitutional magistrates have the task of protecting the freedom of the people. They, therefore, may depose a licentious monarch and organise a new government.⁴² Hans Baron has shown that there is a close corres-

pondence between the views of Calvin and those of Martin Bucer.⁴³ The Strassburg theologian refers to the *magistratus inferiores* of the German cities. These constituted the civil authorities of free cities within the realms of territorial princes and electors. As such they were, by their very existence, a check to the absolutist tendencies of the latter. Bucer argues for their retention as a political species on the ground that they will stay the erosion of freedom at the local and urban level — an erosion already well advanced by the rapid development in the late Middle Ages of centralised nations with absolutist monarchies. Calvin's *magistratus populares* — in France represented by the Estates General — fill the same role in a centralised state that Bucer's *magistratus inferiores* do in a German city. The point is simply that legal restrictions must be placed upon the rulers' powers in order to prevent a slide into tyrannical absolutism. To effect this, a class of governmental "watch-dog" is required.⁴⁴

4. *Revolution.* There is always the possibility that God will overthrow a bad government by revolution — using what for Calvin is the illegal "wrath of men". This can never be a legitimate means for law-abiding Christian citizens, but they may well have cause to thank God for the good effects of the lawless activity of others in this matter!

Although they were directed by God's hand whither he pleased, and executed his work unwittingly, yet planned in their minds to do nothing but an evil act.⁴⁵

5. *Civil disobedience.* The final consideration is the question of civil disobedience. However much Calvin emphasises the necessity of obedience to civil authority, he is careful to qualify that with the affirmation that obedience to God supersedes that due to kings. He reminds us of Peter's words, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Civil disobedience is inevitable where there is a conflict between God's clear will and the rule of the civil power. Calvin writes,

I know with what great and present peril this constancy is menaced, because kings bear defiance with the greatest displeasure . . . But since this edict has been declared by the heavenly herald, Peter — "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) — let us comfort ourselves with the thought that we are rendering that obedience which the Lord requires when we suffer anything rather turn aside from piety. And that our courage may not grow faint, Paul pricks us with another goad: That we have been redeemed by Christ at so great a price as our redemption cost him, so that we should not enslave ourselves to the wicked desires of men — much less be subject to their impiety.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Calvin's concern in his exposition of the Kingship of Christ — a subject beyond the purview of this study — is always to emphasise its essentially *spiritual* nature.⁴⁷ The Kingdom of Christ is not materially qualified. It is not measurable in terms of the possession of wealth or power. Its utility

for the people of God is in their awareness of the glorious rule of Christ ordering all things to their eternal benefit, whether their lot here upon earth be easy or hard.

With respect to the area of civil government the same concern is to be found. Calvin is not interested in devising some Utopian scheme for the ideal Christian state — the institution (civil government) is too temporary and the world fatally flawed by the Fall, for us to be in the position of being able to elaborate a precise structure for such a State. Nevertheless, Calvin does outline carefully, those Biblical principles which serve as guidelines for the Christian community, whether in government or in opposition.

- (1) The State is a divine institution and its officers have a divine calling.
- (2) Civil authority is therefore to be obeyed.
- (3) Should the civil power renege from its God-appointed function, then let the people see the “finger of God” in its tyrannical depredations and repent of their personal sin and pray for deliverance.
- (4) Recognise the grace of God in raising up constitutional magistrates who are able to keep the balance between tyranny and anarchy — if such magistrates there be.
- (5) Let the State fulfil its great purpose, namely, fostering the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ, through the proper establishment of the true religion and the maintenance of peace at home and abroad, in terms of a positive law that enshrines the principle of equity in the moral law of God.

Calvin knows nothing of a modern pluralistic society, where every imaginable heresy receives the protection of the law and the Gospel of Christ is positively rejected in the councils of the nations. This would have been, for him, the evil fruit of the Anabaptist abandonment of the State to the Devil. For Calvin, the Scriptures teach that only the faith of Jesus Christ is to be accorded the positive support of the State. This is the essence of Christian civil government.

NOTES — Principal Scripture passages quoted by Calvin are in parentheses.

1. W. Mueller, *Church and State in Luther and Calvin*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954, p 127.
2. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1. (N.B.: The edition referred to is that of Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960.)
3. T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956, p 118.
4. W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p 230.
5. J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, Dedicatory Epistle.
6. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 4. (Exod. 22:8; Ps. 82:1, 6; John 10:35; Romans 12:8; 13:1-4)
7. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 2.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 3.
10. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 2.
11. *The Confession of Faith*, Inverness: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1970.
12. Niesel, *op. cit.*, p 233.
13. Charles A. M. Hall, *With the Spirit's Sword*, Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1968, p 159.

14. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 9. (Deut. 1:16-17; 16:19; 17:16-19; Psalm 101:4-7; Jer. 22:3)
15. Donald J. Ziegler, "Marpeck *versus* Bucer; a sixteenth century debate over the uses and limits of political authority," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 2 (1971), p 106.
16. See 5. above.
17. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 4.
18. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 7. (Proverbs 8:15; 24:21; I Peter 2:17).
19. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 25.
20. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 6.
21. *Inst.*, IV, iii, 3.
22. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 14.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 15. This need not imply that Calvin is uninterested in the theory of the Christian State, as is suggested by Wilhelm Niesel:
 "When he (Calvin) speaks of the secular government, he is not concerned about the state as such, nor even the Christian state; but about Christ and about the significance which the civil power has for our life in fellowship with this Lord." (Niesel, p.230)
 Niesel appears to set Calvin's first concern — the progress of the Gospel — in opposition to his second — Christian civil government. But surely the two go hand in hand — and in harmony. Calvin would never say that any State should *not* be Christian! His lack of a willingness to weave the fabric of an elaborate programme for a Christian State may well be due to his own practical preoccupation with the work of the Gospel and even to a willingness to entertain a broader conception of the Christian State than some others who developed a structure for the Christian State going beyond the stated views of the Genevan Reformer, e.g. Martin Bucer's *De Regno Christi, 1550*.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Mueller, *op. cit.*, p 158.
27. *Ibid.*, p 157.
28. R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, Vol. VI, Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1962, p 268.
29. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 16. (Exodus 22:1-4; Deut. 19:18-21).
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. J. T. McNeill, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," *Church History*, 17 (1949), p 155.
33. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 22. (I Peter 2:17; Prov. 24:21; Romans 13:5).
34. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 23. (Romans 13:1-2; Titus 3:1; I Peter 2:13-14; I Tim. 2:1-2).
35. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 24.
36. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 25. (Job 34:30; Hos. 13:11; Isa. 3:4; 10:5; Deut. 28:29).
37. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 27. (Jer. 27:5-8:17).
38. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 26. (I Samuel 8:11-17).
39. Niesel, *op. cit.*, p 240.
40. *Ibid.*, p 241.
41. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 29. (Dan. 9:7).
42. *Ibid.*, (Prov. 21:1; Psalm 2:10-11; Isa. 10:1-2). Some scholars believe that Calvin has republican sympathies. Baron, for instance, says that he opposed hereditary monarchy on the ground that "heredity of the throne impairs divine selection of the ruler". ("Calvinist Republicanism", p. 39) McNeill takes much the same tack. Calvin does favour a form of government which blends aristocracy and democracy, *Institutes*, IV, xx, 8, but the democratic element is to check the potential excesses of rulers already in office and does not necessitate the view that hereditary monarchy is inimical to the divine selection of a ruler. The point of the *magistratus populares* is that they, or their equivalent, should exist irrespective of the precise form of government. In modern terms, we would say that an independently elected lower tier of government provides a legitimate and necessary check to the totalitarian tendencies of centralised States.
43. H. Baron, "Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots," *Church History*, 8 (1939), p 35.
44. Compare Calvin's role in the Amboise Conspiracy of 1560, when he refused to support Condé even though he was the King's brother. See J. T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government", *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 42, (1964), p 87. Compare also Calvin's comments on Romans 13:1-5 in the *Commentaries*, where he distinguishes between the

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“higher powers” and the supreme. He believes that Paul speaks of *magistratus populares* in these verses.

45. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 30.

46. *Inst.*, IV, xx, 31.

47. *Inst.*, II, xv, 4.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE STATE

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The issues raised by this paper are wide-ranging and practical. We live within a state system which guides as well as frames our lives. In a way the state sets the milieu in which we live and move and have our being. This does not mean that the state is some uncontrollable monster and we but blind victims. In a democracy we have a particular responsibility within the structure of the state. For the Christian the issues raised include the whole relation of Christianity to culture; the fundamental question of the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

When this paper was suggested two particular issues were prominent: the question of capital punishment and the activities of the Greenham Common Peace Women. In both issues it seemed that an individualistic ethic was being applied to what the state should or should not do. The issues were often presented in terms such as: If I as an individual would not or should not act in such and such a manner, then neither should the state. Thus, at one fell sweep, if carried through, this removes the police, armed services and judiciary. Indeed, it is a subtle recipe for anarchy. The commandment — thou shalt not murder — was taken as a prohibition of any action by a lawful government to take any action that would threaten life. This clearly ignores the context of Exodus 20.

These issues are still with. Further events help sharpen this for us. There was the NGA dispute with Eddie Shah at Warrington and the miners' strike. Here we have crystallised the area of where limits should be drawn in terms of resistance against authority. Or we can think of the GCHQ dispute — the rights or otherwise to belong to a trade union.

1. PRESSURE POINTS.

Each historical period has its own features which must be considered. Obviously a paper dealing with the "individual and state" written in Russia has different parameters to deal with than one written in the UK. Yet perhaps it is we, and not the Eastern bloc Christians, who suffer most in this area. We are often less aware of the subtle pressures of the state in the West. Have we really faced up to the situation where the state has declared tacitly that its line is officially pluralistic, religiously neutral? Let me briefly sketch in some of the pressure points on us.

(a) We live in a global village in which world-wide communication is instant. Faults of government are placarded around the world calling for instant emotional reaction rather than national assimilation. The media engenders impressed reaction as opposed to considered reply.

(b) We live in a technologically governed society. Increasingly government is ruled by the technocrats. Reflect on how Margaret

Thatcher studied computer analysis of the local election results before going to the country in 1983. As man develops technologically so does his power to manipulate (advertising) and destroy.

(c) We live in a society of attitudinal paradoxes. Increasing sophistication marches hand-in-hand with growing barbarity — such as abortion and infanticide. It is now conceivable that the state legislate that parents have the right to passively murder their child.

Another paradox lies in expectancy. While on the one hand the media engender a false expectancy of a higher standard of living in the face of diminishing resources; there is a reversal to a diminishing expectancy where the unacceptable is blandly accepted — 3 million unemployed. Instant desire is coupled to bland fatalism.

(d) However there is one particular problem I would highlight. It is structural sin. The individual can be caught in structural sin induced by society. Think of Jeremiah caught up in the sinful foreign policy of the nation. Think of Daniel identifying himself with the sin of the people — when there is no indication that he himself was guilty (cf. Dan. 9:4f).

There was an interesting article on this issue in *Third Way* (8 Sept. 1977) by George Carey. Carey's article was a response to two earlier contributions: one by John Gwyn-Thomas against the ideas of structural sin, and one for it by Ronald Sider. Carey noted that evangelical strength and weakness revolves around the personal. There is a stress on personal faith and individual responsibility. Yet the Bible also talks about community, and the corporate responsibility of community.

Sin has invaded all of life. It may have seemed unfair to some of Adam's children that they should suffer because of their father's sin. It may have seemed unfair to the family of Achan that their destiny should be bound up with his sin. But such is the solidarity concept of Scripture. Hitler built evil into the structure of society. And today many repent of these evil structures (cf. Daniel). That is an extreme example. But what about the subtle structures built around us by the state, big business and industry. Carey writes:¹

We reflect, by and large, the traditions and expectations of our culture. The way we spend our leisure, the political ideals we live by, the prejudices we adopt, are given us by our society... "I" is thus submerged in the mass of humanity.

We might protest that this overstates the case — but is there not an element of truth here? Carey goes on to say this about children brought up in our society and faced with the issues of belief.²

The response of the children, humanly speaking, is already fixed and controlled by their society. People are quite right in saying that "it is more difficult to believe in Christ these days", not because it is more intellectually difficult but because the sinfulness of unbelief is now built into the way people live and think and it is hard for them to shrug off the influence of society.

Today we face all the horrors of state recommended materialism. We are reminded of Jules Henry's two modern commandments. The first:

Create More Desire. The second: Thou Shalt Consume.³ Is this not a reality in our society?

2. THE FUNCTION OF THE STATE.

This is no place to delve into the philosophically chaotic confusion as to the nature and function of the state. I take the state to be comprised of a nexus of law and government whose will is executed by the judiciary, police and armed services. The individual, of course, may well be in government, moving for legal reform, or employed in the execution of the will of the state. Let me say a word about the man and the office. The two are distinguishable. Today the party line tends to control the man in office and thus denigrate the office. Someone might have no respect for Margaret Thatcher, but have respect for the office of prime minister. But I believe we are in danger of losing this distinction. We need to take heed to Calvin when he said:⁴

I speak not of the men as if the mask of dignity could cloak folly, or cowardice, or cruelty, or wicked flagitious manners, and thus acquire for vice the praise of virtue; but I say that the station itself is deserving of honour and reverence, and that those who rule should, in respect of their office, be held by us in esteem and veneration.

Those within office today seem in practice to operate in a closed universe. God may be acknowledged — but not in the affairs of state. Shades of Lord Chesterton who in the eighteenth century remarked: “It’s a sad day when religion interferes with a man’s private life.” But the Christian asserts that the state is not autonomous; it is answerable to God. This is not an abstract concept for it implies that each individual who holds office is answerable as to their faithfulness before God in carrying out the task delegated to them by God. God ordained the state as a delegated authority. Oh that this idea were ingrained in the minds of all politicians! They are not autonomous, they have a charge in trust from God. Listen to Abraham Kuyper as sets forth one of the contributions of Calvinism:⁵

In politics also it taught us that the *human* element — here *the people* — may not be considered as the principal thing, so that God is only dragged in to help this people in the hour of its need; but on the contrary that God, in His Majesty, must flame before the eyes of every nation . . .

What then is the function of the state? John Whitehead tells us that the function of the state is twofold: to protect and promote the good of society, and to deter crime and bring to punishment those who foster evil.⁶ Herman Dooyeweerd suggests that the basic function is rooted in the power of the sword.⁷

In whatever way we consider the matter, this foundational function of the geno-type “State” can nowhere else be found but in an internal monopolistic organisation of the power of the sword over a particular cultural area within territorial boundaries.

We can unpack this power of the sword in a little more detail. There is the sword in justice — to operate and control man's sinful tendencies in the civil and criminal spheres, bringing to justice and meting out punishment. There is the sword of war — the right of a state to defend itself from invasion of its territory. The sword of order — to thwart rebellion and anarchic forces within society.⁸

The function of the state is well summed up by Calvin:

Its function among men is no less than that of bread, water, sun and air; indeed its place of honour is far more excellent. For it does not merely see to it, as all these serve to do, that men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm, even though it surely embraces all these activities when it provides for their living together. It does not, I repeat, look to this only, but also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offences against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among men. In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.

This definition of the state sees it operating not only as the integrator of public justice, but for the positive promotion of the welfare of humanity. This is perhaps a needed balance against the reduction of the function of the state to the power of the sword alone!

Having said this, a caveat: the state is a legitimate authority ordained for man's benefit in a fallen world by God, but the legitimacy of the state is conditioned by its promotion of its ends. The state has authority. But viewed biblically, authority is always an avenue for service.

3. ESSENTIAL TENSIONS

3 (1) *The Tension Between the State and the Individual.* The title of this paper would seem to indicate a sharp cleavage between the state and the individual. Yet in reality both are polarised abstractions. Neither the state nor the individual exists in and of themselves. When God gave the Law to Moses we find an interwovenness between individual behaviour (the ten commandments) and corporate responsibility (the calling to exercise justice). Confusion abounds due to this interwovenness. Think of the way in which the ten commandments have been used in the nuclear debate — an individualistic application to the corporate area. Perhaps we could make a rule of thumb distinction here and say that, for the state, the primary function which will qualify its activity is justice; whereas for the individual the primary function which should qualify behaviour is love and faith.

But where are the boundaries between the two? When does the state transgress into what properly belongs to the individual? Equally are there areas which belong to the state which *per se* are not the prerogative of the individual? Is it legitimate for the state to have a policy of conscription? As one who was not involved in the years of conscription I would say that

I believe the state has a right to call upon its citizens to serve the state (cf. Joshua 1:12f). On the other hand we have the invasion of the state into areas which are not its primary concern. We can think of the duty of the state to provide a framework for education — but its intrusion where it dictates against parents' wishes what should be taught. Or there is the intrusions of the state into the family. These intrusions undermines the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Would it be going too far to say that the Welfare State, while on the one hand a valuable demonstration of the first part of Calvin's definition, also contributes to a sapping of the individual will?

The tension between state and individual is sharply seen in the issue of human rights.⁹ The problem is that in the name of human rights equally atrocious behaviour often results. Paradoxically men are prepared to kill to promote human rights. And such behaviour is not confined to the left-right conflict of Central America. We can think of the equally atrocious behaviour on both sides in many industrial disputes. We need to affirm afresh that a state never grants human rights — it can only recognise them and seek to live in the light of them. Also we need to affirm that no right is in itself ever absolute. The state has a nexus of responsibilities — and so does the individual. All rights are correlative to responsibility. And the biblical emphasis would be on responsibilities rather than rights. To hold to a right as an absolute is a recipe for anarchy.

The state and the individual have different spheres of interest — the former justice, the latter love. It belongs to the state to engage in the national defense of its territory and the provision of law within society to promote justice and peace. The individual does not seek to take the law into his own hands but seeks redress at law.

Yet the individual is part of the state. The individual is involved in the state. He is not some abstract being in distinction from the state. In a democracy the individual has responsibilities within the state. Not just to live in conformity to authority, but by taking his due part in the process of standing for election, voting, serving the community within office. In a democracy we help mould public opinion and form consensus.

But beware — to think that a democracy is necessarily more open and responsive to the Christian interest could well be a dangerous illusion. To hold that the West is in its democratic structures of state more conducive to the Gospel could well be a delusion. Is it not true that even our democracy is at heart an expression of humanistic man? It stands today for an official humanistic-pluralistic viewpoint¹⁰. and so as Kuyper indicates:¹¹

All transcendent right in God, to which the oppressed lifted up his face, falls away. There is no other right, but the immanent right which is written down in the law. The law is right, not because its contents are in harmony with the eternal principles of right, but because it is law. If on the morrow it fixes the very opposite, this also must be right.

Biblically neither state nor individual is sovereign. But in our modern world there is an oscillation between these two poles. We even now have the spectacle of a Conservative government that exercises increasingly

centralist control.

3 (2) *The Tension Between Form and Freedom*. There is often an unhealthy polarisation between two streams of thought — state absolutism where the freedom of the individual is lost; and an anti-state absolutism where the starting point is an idea of absolute right belonging to the individual.

On the one hand there is a push for freedom which tends to chaos for freedom becomes unrestrained. There are no tracks, no order or form, within which the freedom is contained. Camus quotes Chigalev as saying: “Beginning with the premise of unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism.”¹² While Camus himself says: “Every human freedom, at its very roots is therefore relative.”¹³

Wary of unrestrained freedom, and holding to a God of order we tend to cast our vote for form and order. We can cite:

Exodus 22:28. Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler . . .

Eccles. 10:20. Do not revile the king even in your thoughts . . .

Titus 3:1. Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities . . .

1 Peter 2:13f. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.

There is no word about obeying these authorities because we agree with them or because they are uniformly on our side. It is a call to respect authority at a human level. Order is better than chaos.¹⁴ We obey, whether the authority is good or bad. As Calvin puts it: “If . . . you conclude that obedience is to be returned to none but just governors, you reason absurdly.”¹⁵ Calvin builds a strong statement of our duty to obey those in authority. But it is not a blank cheque for he also writes: “But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception . . .”¹⁶

We obey out of regard for God — not men. But we must ever be open to that point where the state must be resisted. We live in a time when the state becomes increasingly pagan and claims increasing control over all of life. And there are limits beyond which the state must not go *or resistance becomes our responsibility*. There is a real tension here between form and freedom; between order and liberty. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks: “Am I right when I suggest that the danger of Calvinism is always to over-stress order?”¹⁷

3 (3) *The Tension Between Idealism and Reality*. When we look at the problems generated by the state there is often a swing away from form to freedom. An *ideal* of freedom is embraced. But there are no ideal answers in a fallen world. There are no final solutions to the problems of a fallen humanity at a purely human level. So the ideals of many concerning freedom are in tension with the reality of life — the reality of sin. Paradoxically idealism often leads to violence — think of the student riots of the 60’s; the warcries of the Greenham Common Peace Women. Udo Middleman notes that so often idealism leads to a point where men are willing to fight injustice with injustice. He tells how when Lenin was in Lausanne in 1917 and was speaking about the ideal of the classless society he said: “When the Revolution comes, we must have no compassions. We must destroy without pity.”¹⁸ An ideal can be a powerful driving force within society. But as Camus has noted: “In the twentieth century, power

wears the mask of tragedy.”¹⁹

3 (4) *The Tension Between Caesar and God.* The most famous text on the tension between state and individual is Jesus word: “Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” It is a simple formula — but the question remains as to where the legitimate extent of Caesar’s claims begin and finish. And surely God has a claim over every area of life? The text helps to highlight that the Christian is a citizen of the state, and also a citizen in God’s Kingdom. The question is: when do the demands of the state impinge on the call of God?

In Acts we seem to have a ready solution. When the state interfered with the preaching of the Gospel it had overstepped its bounds. Peter *et al* replied to the Jewish authorities: “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29). Yet against this we can set Romans 13:1: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” It seems a clear standoff.

Indeed the Bible can be tantalisingly ambivalent on this whole question. While Elijah is in hiding we find a godly man called Obadiah continuing to serve Ahab. We find that Naaman is permitted to return home and bow down before Rimmon! So here are two civil servants who do not seem to be called to fight a battle for God against Caesar at this particular point. However, we also have the example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. They do not bow down but stand on principle against the state. But even to say that may be naively simplistic. Daniel and his friends were in high office in the Babylonian court. Surely on a day to day basis they compromised in certain areas? Further it would be simplistic to say Shadrach was right and Obadiah wrong. Different situations call for different positions. There is a time to stand up and speak out and there is a time for compromise. We need to learn which battle to fight and when. Are we perhaps, as Christians, guilty of merely reacting to issues? Are we guilty of failing to work out criteria to decide where to do battle? What are the issues on which to battle — evolution; abortion; genetics; Scripture?

We face a subtle Caesar today. Caesar was an obvious issue for the early church. It brought conflict. Francis Schaeffer writes:²⁰

Let us not forget why the Christians were killed. They were not killed because they worshipped Jesus . . . Nobody cared who worshipped whom as long as the worshipper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centred in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels.

Such is the modern subtlety of Caesar that the issue is less well defined. Caesar asked for worship on the basis of an assumed divinity. Is not the state still a divinity in its own eyes? We see this readily in Communism where the Party demands worship and obedience. But is this not also true of the West? The state makes a tacit claim to be the total sovereign order.

Indeed this near divinity seems implicit in the unqualified biblical texts which we see calling for submission to the authorities. But a warning. Speaking to those temporal authorities who have forgotten the God on whom their existence and power depends, Luther writes:²¹

[God] has a word to say in this wickedness: "You know well that you are gods and have power; that you have learned and grasped very quickly. But when will you learn from whom you have it? What becomes of Me? What becomes of My commandments which I have given you?"

Having acknowledged their authority Luther can nevertheless also say:²²

You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls.

Caesar or God — it is a difficult question. There is no ready guide as to when we step out against Caesar. There is a tension here that will have to be worked-out step by step.

3 (5) *Tensions — A Preliminary Conclusion*. At this juncture I would like to make some preliminary conclusions.

(a) It seems to me there is no simple biblical definition of the state. Any attempt to make a simple transposition from the OT Theocracy to the modern situation is fraught with problems. We do not live in a Theocracy. Therefore attempts to apply God-given regulations for the Theocracy are not germane in a one-to-one correspondence. For example: Ronald Sider makes appeal to the OT principle of Jubilee and suggests that if we are to move to a more equitable society we should consider the application of this principle. But this fails to take into consideration that the principle was given within the context of the Theocracy. It further fails to consider the urban-exemption clauses attached to the principle in the OT.²³

(b) While we live in two commonwealths (citizens of the Kingdom of God and also members of an earthly state) and while there may be occasion where these two are in conflict — it does not follow that in principle they need be. It would be unbiblical to blindly regard Caesar as always antithetical to the Christian interest.

(c) Having said this, it is clear that the ethos of our state presses in an anti-Christian direction. The structures of our nation may have been built on the concept of a God who exists and who has revealed Himself. But today this ethos is gone. Francis Schaeffer does a splendid exposé of this in "A Christian Manifesto". In that work he quotes a former Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court as saying: "Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes."²⁴ God is merely given a token nod and man makes his own morality and law.

The tragedy is that when the significant shifts in ethos were taking place the voice of the church was largely silent. Schaeffer writes:²⁵

And those Bible-believing theologians who did see the theological danger seemed totally blind to what was happening in law and in the total culture. Thus the theologians did no better in seeing the shift from one world view to a totally different world view. Nor did Christian educators do any better either. The failed responsibility covers a wide

swath. Christian educators, Christian theologians, Christian lawyers — none of them blew loud trumpets until we were a long, way down the road toward a humanistically based culture.

(d) We also have to guard against the idea that there are certain aspects of life that are neutral. For example the idea that it is permissible for a Christian to be involved in politics, but that there is no such thing as a Christian stance on political issues. This is a dangerous neutralism. Bernard Zylstra writes:²⁶

Those who pay homage to the fiction of neutrality maintain that many segments of modern culture are merely technical. It is then thought that a corporation, a union, a school, a government can be run by making exclusively factual, technical decisions which have no relation to one's ultimate perspective on the basic issues. . . . Neutralism is the view that man can live wholly or partly without taking God's Word into account.

(e) The Christian must be prepared to face up to the possibility of coming into collision with the state. If the state becomes increasingly centralist; if it acquires domination over the details of life (family, education, etc.) if it, with a humanistic mentality, legislates in moral areas — then conflict between the Christian and the state is not only possible but inevitable. The Christian prophetic voice needs to be raised against our all pervasive state. Is our policy one of uneasy acquiescence to the state or that of a prophetic word?

(f) Yet in calling for a prophetic word a caveat must be entered. When we desire to press against the state and call for change, is our desire a self-centred human ideal or is it focused on God as the centre of all?²⁷

4. THE QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE

The thorny question that lies behind the words of Jesus: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" is a simple one. To what extent can the Christian engage in civil disobedience? Despite a heritage that includes both Puritans and Covenanters I think our Calvinistic blood makes us instinctively recoil from such a thought. Let us explore this a little more deeply.

4 (1) *A Review of Christian Resistance.* Let us adduce one or two examples from Scripture which might help as pointers. As we look at these examples can I say that I believe those examples taken from situations where godly people are outside the Theocracy are particularly pertinent.

First of all Exodus 1:17: The situation is the people of God in Egypt. Pharaoh, worried at a possible source of rebellion, takes preventative measures and instructs the Jewish midwives to kill Hebrew males at birth. Then we read: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live." The midwives had a specific injunction from the king — the representative of state power — and quite simply disobeyed.

Think of the reign of Ahab: we find Elijah and Micaiah fearlessly

standing opposed to the injunctions of the state. It reaches the point of a personal vendetta against the prophets as Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah, and Ahab has Micaiah carried off to prison. But note an interesting thing: Elijah knew when to stand up and confront Ahab and he knew when, under God, to keep a low profile. There was a time for confrontation and a time for hiding. We must not be naive and think that because there is an issue the only course of action is a frontal attack. Further we need to note the role of Obadiah, a civil servant in the pay of Ahab. He also appears to be within the will of God as he keeps a low profile in the very courtroom of Ahab. He knows the issues — but he ventures no silly confrontation that is going to weaken further the cause of the Lord.

Again, think of Jeremiah complaining to the rulers of God's people that their foreign policy was all wrong. His complaint was no little point made in the safety of the debating chamber. It was a stand that brought oppression and prison for Jeremiah.

Or think of Daniel. Throughout the book of Daniel we have examples of civil disobedience. It starts in chapter one over a question of diet. It goes on through the larger issues of bowing down before a gold statue (ch. 3); and an attempted ban on prayer (ch. 6). Darius issues his decree. The state had spoken. And we read:

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room . . . three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed. (Dan. 6:10).

The state said one thing. And Daniel went straight ahead and disobeyed. Perhaps we need to note that Daniel and his three friends, when they had disobeyed, had no complaint against the state which demanded punishment for the breaking of its law!

Coming to the New Testament we find that the charge against the early Christians was basically a political charge. In Acts 17:7 we read: "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

So the Bible has many examples of individuals who stood out against the state, who were willing to disobey the clear decrees of the state. But in a sense it is much more dramatic than that. In Acts 5 we find God Himself defying the actions of the state. Remember the story: the apostles have been arrested by the Jewish authorities and put in the public jail. "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. (Acts 5:19).

Similarly in Acts 12 we have Peter's escape from the prison in like manner. In other words God intervenes directly to thwart the actions of the state! He defies the local authorities to free the apostles, and later to free Peter again. Such action is, humanly viewed, highly illegal! The authorities had acted. God Himself calls for respect of the authorities. But here God thwarts them!

Turning from Scripture to history we find that the Reformation has been seen as a massive resistance movement against the lawful authorities. Calvin notes that rulers are not above the law, but subject to it, and commenting on Daniel 6:22 writes:²⁸

For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy them — (conspuere in ipsorum capita — “to spit on their heads”) than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of His rights, and, as it were, to seize upon His throne and draw Him down from heaven.

Schaeffer, in the work already mentioned, draws heavily upon two giants of our Scottish tradition — Knox and Rutherford. He notes that Luther and Calvin reserved the right of rebellion basically to the civil rulers, but that Knox went further. And he cites Jasper Ridley as saying:²⁹ “The theory of the justification of revolution is Knox’s special contribution to theological and political thought.”

Schaeffer goes on to argue that the necessary consequences of Rutherford’s position is that citizens have a moral obligation to resist unjust and tyrannical government. Could it be unjust to try and ban a trade union? While we are subject to the office of government, we are not to be subject to the person in office who asks that which is contrary to Scripture.³⁰

Could I commend Schaeffer’s work in this area. It is a frightening call that he issues, but a very relevant one. I was intrigued to find him quoting Charles Finney talking of “The right *and duty* of revolution.”³¹

4 (2) *The Principle of Resistance*. Let me stay with Schaeffer’s thesis. His argument is that our attitude towards the state must not be governed by pragmatism, but by principle. He writes:³²

Please read most thoughtfully what I am going to say in the next sentence: If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been made autonomous, and as such, it has been put in the place of the Living God.

There is no power, no individual, no state — that is ultimately independent of God. All things are relative within creation — relative to the God who created them and sustains them in being. The New Testament, even when it calls us to respect authority, brings out this relativity by imposing limits upon the relevant authorities. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4 we find that the call to pray for the authorities is contextualised by the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the flourishing of the gospel! In 1 Peter 2:13-17 we again find an implicit limitation. The authorities are those who punish wrong and commend right. In other words it goes beyond a mere exercise of justice to the praise of the good.

Traditionally the state has been seen as worthy of regard as long as it remains broadly within the limits of maintaining the right. But what is the right? Who decides? Tyranny has been defined as ruling without the sanction of God. Rutherford, for example, held that a tyrannical government is always immoral. He considered it a work of Satan and that.³³

A power ethical, politic, or moral, to oppress, is not from God, and is not a power, but a licentious deviation of a power; and is no more from

God, but from sinful nature and the old serpent, than a license to sin.

John Whitehead argues that the implication of Rutherford's thesis is that the "vast majority of civil governments in the world today (are) illegitimate."³⁴ Be that as it may: if we can establish a principle that not all authority is to be blindly obeyed; it is also clear that just because an authority is not godly, it does not necessarily follow that we should press for change. Change does not of necessity mean improvement of government. "Change", as Spurgeon said, "is not necessarily good as the pigeon said when it was taken from the nest and put into the pie." Luther tells two fables to make this point, of which I quote one:³⁵

We read of a widow who stood and prayed for her tyrant most devoutly, asking God to give him long life etc. The tyrant heard it and was astonished, because he knew very well that he had done her much harm, and that this was not the usual prayer for tyrants. People do not ordinarily pray such prayers for tyrants, so he asked her why she prayed thus for him. She answered, "I had ten cows when your grandfather lived and ruled. He took two of them and I prayed that he might die and that your father might become lord. This is what happened and your father took three cows. I prayed again that you might become lord, and that your father might die. Now you have taken four cows, and so I am praying for you, for now I am afraid that your successor will take the last cow and everything that I have . . .

Do you understand these fables? There is as great a difference between changing a government and improving it as the distance from heaven to earth. It is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better, and the danger is that you will not.

So, if we have a principle that makes civil disobedience a possibility, we also see that to press for change is not necessarily going to improve anything. Let us always remember that God tolerates a sinful fallen world. He could blot it out at any moment. But in His sovereign will He chooses to allow evil to continue. One of the problems of our day is that people press against all sorts of injustice and the Christian response lacks cohesion, it becomes diffuse, disorganised and ineffective.

There are perhaps three responses to a situation where the state is pursuing an ungodly course. There is revolution; there is reaction; and there is reformation.

4 (3) *The Practice of Resistance*. The danger of *revolution* is, that insidiously the end tends to justify the means. It is intriguing to find a Marxist like Marcuse commenting that: "Every revolution has also been a betrayed revolution."³⁶ The problem of *reaction* is that it has no goal. Would it be unfair to suggest that this is perhaps the major position adopted by Christians? Something flares up into the limelight and we react against it. We react against some individual ethical issue — say abortion — but fail to see the whole world-view involved. Constructive *reformation* is the need both within our churches and within society. We can put this another way by looking at Samuel Rutherford. Rutherford outlined three levels of resistance.³⁷ These courses of resistance are for the individual

rather than the church.

1. He must defend by protest. In our society this would be by means of the due process of law and petition. There are still many issues where appropriate action can be effective through the individual right to make their point of view heard.
2. We must flee if possible. We might tend to think that this may have been a viable option in the past — say for the Reformers to flee from one country when life otherwise became impossible — but does not pertain today. But we can think of the so-called “draft-dodgers” in the USA who fled to Canada to avoid the draft into the Vietnam war because they sincerely held that that was an unjust war. Think also of the Russian dissidents who have fled to the West.
3. He may use force if necessary to defend himself and others.³⁸

We need to note that force is the last option — not the first. Valid protest is undermined if it is to be readily associated with force. The Greenham Common Peace Women and Trade Unions have often radically undermined their position by the illegitimate use of force.

4 (3) 1. Selecting the Battlefield. Is it possible that Christians sometimes fight the wrong battles? Is it not easy to become engaged in some internal matter of great significance — as to whether there should be some major expenditure on a new carpet for the chancel — and miss out in the battle for the worldview of our society? We need to pick and choose the issues upon which to take a stand. We need to learn the art of compromise — and also where not to compromise. We can compromise in the crucial areas and dig our heels in about the trivial. Again, we need to accept that not everyone is called to fight on the same front.

Let me go back to Elijah. Remember Elijah’s tactics. A time to stand and confront Ahab and a time to run away. (Not his disobedient running away, but his obedient low profile period after he announced the drought to Ahab). We tend to think of the prophets always courageously confronting society and evil. But not so! Elijah knew when to make a strategic withdrawal. There were also one hundred prophets in hiding (1 Kings 18). There is a time to stand out and a time to wait patiently. Nevertheless endless patience is suicidal. Endless patience merely avoids the reality that calls for confrontation. We can think of Israel become too patient under the yoke of Egypt and virtually being driven into the position of confrontation by the Lord.

Elijah is a good example. On the one hand he speaks against blind zealotry, for he knew when to retreat. On the other hand he speaks against endless patience, for he knew when to produce the moment of confrontation. Let us also note that it is Elijah — or God working through His servant — who is in control of the situation. Elijah is not reacting. He selected the moment; he selected the battlefield. Have we something to learn here?

4 (3) 2. The Strategy of Resistance. We need to think more on this issue. It is not just a question of pious resistance to the evils of society and state. We must seek to think through what we are doing. We need to be aware of strategy. Often the short term frontal attack — which we are prone to

pursue — is not going to be the most effective. Remember that the early church did not rise up against Rome. Undoubtedly there were evils in the Roman Empire. But the church set itself to a long term strategy. Paul did not make a frontal attack on slavery — but he sowed the seeds that spelled the end of it. We need to get that mentality where we see ourselves building and praying for the future generations. (Cf. Daniel as an old man wrestling in prayer for the generations to come!)

Again we need to learn to work together. Though paradoxically often the protest of an individual can be more effective than a crowd: think of the Black Band Women in South Africa, or Victoria Gillick. Often the mass demonstration can be counter-productive.

4 (3)3. *The Attitude of Resistance*. Today when protests are carried out it seems to be part of the protest to gain political capital out of being arrested. Arrest is seen as a further example of the injustice of the state. But biblically we must accept this if we step outside the law of the society in which we live. Daniel, for example, makes no protest against the sentence passed upon him.

That is one aspect of attitude. Another is the need to be positive resistors. A great problem of the church is that it is seen as a negative resistor. We need to be positive. We need to stand for the sanctity of life — not just against abortion etc. Gary North writes:³⁹

A resistance movement which is strictly negative cannot hope to survive. But a positive philosophy of resistance which does not acknowledge the inevitability of a decisive public confrontation between God's representatives and Satan's is also futile. Those who are unwilling to prepare for a literal, historical, risky confrontation with a rebellious society are as suicidal as those who refuse to enter a cave temporarily during a time of danger.

5. CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The function of the state is the promotion of justice and the welfare of those within its boundaries. Any drift away from this is a move towards godlessness. Whitehead claims that once a society has been established and developed upon a biblical basis, such as ours, and then deliberately turns its back upon that basis, then that state is even less legitimate than pagan Rome.⁴⁰ If this is true then we are needing a much deeper prayerful concern for the state to which we belong. We are needing to deepen our appreciation of the issues around us and seek to be salt and light. We are needing to identify with our nation, just as Daniel so passionately identified himself with the problems of his nation.

Having said that let me identify what I believe are erroneous responses to the problems raised concerning this issue. Let me suggest five responses to the issues of the state which I believe are unhelpful.

1. It is wrong to claim that the state is simply the god of this world and therefore decide to have nothing to do with it. Apart from the biblical error I believe in such a position it is a practical impossibility. We can not avoid living out our lives within some form of state.

2. The opposite view is also dangerously unhelpful — namely to see the state as divinely ordained *and therefore* grant it absolute obedience.
3. This might seem nearly heretical — but I believe it is not a good idea to actively resist all injustices within a society at the same time. We need to pick our fights. I do not mean that we do not oppose evil where it is found — but that we do not seek to make mountains out of molehills. We must beware of glorious victories in minor areas while the overall battle goes against us. We must with limited resources be careful not to so dissipate our energies on a wide front that we are found wanting where the battle is most crucial. One thinks of the social reformers who tended to concentrate on a single issue. Elizabeth Fry sought for prison reform; Wilberforce sought the abolition of slavery; Shaftesbury fought for the right treatment of children.
4. Again, and here we have another converse, we must beware of a total fragmentation of the issues which causes us to lose sight of the overall picture. It is easy to become so involved in an area in which we are interested to become unsympathetic towards our brother who is fighting on another battlefield.
5. Finally, it is wrong to rebel against the state without taking into account what we produce in revolt. For example, thinking in this consequential manner, take prohibition in America which simply gave birth to bootlegging and gangsters. Have we weighed the consequences of a certain course of resistance? I am not saying that there may not be a time for force — but when we do will we have considered the consequences?

A word in conclusion: we need to confess with shame that part of the problem of our day lies in a failure of theological nerve coupled with a social irrelevance on the part of the church. We have failed to be salt within society. We have failed to develop a coherent social and political theology. The evangelical voice in this field has all too often been either a simple reaction or a thinly disguised version of the political left within our society. What is needed is a coherent and radically prophetic biblical stand. Having said that I believe there are signs of hope within our evangelical culture today as we see a steady increase in social thinking and activity.

The Christian, living before the watching eyes of the world, in all of life including his response to the state, must seek to bring the salt of the Gospel to bear on the issues of our day. Albert Camus has said: “The question of the twentieth century . . . has gradually been specified: how to live without grace and without justice.”⁴¹ The Christian must stand for both grace and justice. I think Camus has it right. We live in a world devoid of grace and justice — apart from God. The Christian in seeking to live out the reality of a life transformed by grace must show forth grace; and at the same time stand for justice. But he must be realistic for there are no easy solutions; he must not look for some ideal life in a fallen world; he must seek to have a realistic view of history. He must be prepared for struggle — and above all he must pray.

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27. Cf. Middleman, *op. cit.*, p 117.
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29. Schaeffer, *op. cit.* p 97.
30. *Ibid.*, p 101.
31. *Ibid.*, p 67.
32. *Ibid.*, p 130.
33. Rutherford, quoted in Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 10.
34. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 10.
35. Luther, quoted in Harrison, *op. cit.*, p 12.
36. Herbert Marcuse, quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death*, IVP, 1973, p 114.
37. Samuel Rutherford. See Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, p 103ff.
38. See the useful chapter on "Violence and Force" in Os Guinness, *Dust of Death*.
39. Gary North, *op. cit.*, p xvii.
40. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 6.

THE STATE AND WAR IN A NUCLEAR AGE

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A Question of Superior Power, Prophetic Protest or Political Statecraft?

The subject of the Christian and war is an enormous one. The literature on the subject is almost as large. I have been asked to look at the subject in relation to the State. Even that is too great a task for this one paper. Therefore, I have elected to look at the State and War within the context of one historic, theological debate on the matter — that between the reformed and anabaptist traditions, and in one contemporary setting — that of the nuclear age. My modest intention is simply that any insights offered by such a limited study may serve to stimulate our thinking about the universal issues of the State and War.

The State and War have long been the subject of debate amongst Christians, but the development of new weapons of undreamt-of destructive capacity would seem to have cast the whole issue into a new mould and forced upon us new ethical dilemmas and the necessity for new moral decisions. The evangelical ethicist David Cook has suggested in his recent book, *The Moral Maze: A Way of Exploring Christian Ethics*, that we rarely make moral decisions as such. "Most of the time", he says, "... when we are faced with moral issues or problems, we react. We do not think about the moral dilemma, but simply respond to it. This is not to say that our reaction is immoral or subjective. On the contrary, our reactions are highly moral. They are a reflection of our moral teaching, heritage and tradition. They reflect the ways in which we have been morally educated and trained. In one sense, that we respond to moral situations making moral judgements without a great deal of thought is a tribute to the success of our moral inculcation. We do not need to think about most issues, for our moral reaction comes quite naturally."¹ Cook argues that "For most moral situations the old tried and tested rules may be applied without thinking about it. Such decisions are taken automatically.

The problem is that every now and then, and only now and then, the rules do not cover the particular example, or the law breaks down. Then we are faced with exceptional circumstances. Such exceptions are rare but do require our moral response. In a sense, we are suggesting that the necessity for moral decision-making procedures arises most actively in a crisis. The crisis is either that the old system will not cope with the problem or that our judgement is criticised and we are called on for justification."²

Such an analysis of moral decision-making is particularly germane to the ethical issue before us in this paper — the relationship between the

State and War in the modern era. No-one can doubt that the circumstances of the modern state and modern warfare are exceptional and present us with the need for a new moral response. Until the rise of nation states like Nazi Germany, representing a new capacity for institutional evil and organised human slaughter on a massive scale, many pacifists, Christian or non-Christian, did not question their moral response of total opposition to warfare on the principle of the inviolable sanctity of all human life. Similarly, until the rise of modern atomic weapons, representing a new capacity for the destruction not only of the enemy but of the planet, many advocates of the just war did not question their moral response of qualified support for war, on the basis of the principles of proportionality and discrimination. But now, with the rise of powerful nation states and the development of modern atomic weapons, that together have the capacity not only to wage war, as this has been understood historically, but in a matter of minutes to destroy millions of the human race, and make the whole earth uninhabitable except, as one writer has called it, as “a republic of insects and grass”, we are presented with a new moral crisis. It is a moral crisis that demands of us the recognition of the necessity for moral decision-making procedures in place of the old instinctive moral rules and the wisdom gathered by history. The established Christian moral approaches to issues of State and War do not seem to be coping with this modern problem, and the traditional arguments in this matter are being increasingly criticised and called on for justification.

To return to David Cook’s analysis, he argues, “Our usual moral reaction mechanism may not be successful for we may be faced with a genuinely new moral problem, a new amalgam of old problems, a conflict between established principles and procedures, or some surprising new features which causes strain on our traditional way of handling the problem. We do not go through all the thinking and checking procedures unless it is necessary. The breakdown and failure of the usual reactions would make this necessary. So too would the demand for justification and our acceptance of the need to justify our own actions. In so doing, we would go through some procedure of moral decision-making . . .”³ Cook concludes, “We need to know what to do if we are confronted by a new moral issue or some new development in an old problem.”⁴

It is certain that we are faced with both a new moral issue and a new development in an old problem. As Gerald Segal, lecturer in International Relations and Strategic Studies at the University of Leicester, has written, “It is also true that nuclear destruction is not entirely unique in human experience. There have been gargantuan disasters, some of which have been man-made. One day’s fire bombing of Tokyo in the Second World War killed more people than did the Hiroshima atomic blast. The great plagues of 1348-50 wiped out more than a third of the population between India and Iceland. But these all pale in comparison to the destructiveness and the effectiveness of modern nuclear weapons. There can be no doubt that nuclear war, even on the most limited scale, cannot be seen as just another war.”⁵

This new moral dilemma has caused many Christians to question the

justification for their traditional moral attitudes to the State and War. In an essay on his own attitude to warfare and the state, John Stott has described the changes in that attitude over his own lifetime, from an instinctive pacifism to an acceptance of the discriminate use of state force for just ends and by just means. "But now", he writes, "in my thinking the pendulum has swing again, as I take note of the appallingly indiscriminate nature of atomic weapons. The contemporary build-up of the super-powers' nuclear arsenal is a horrendous reality. The nuclear warheads of the United States alone could annihilate the complete world population 12 times over. What is this lunacy?"⁶ So Cook's criteria for the need to undergo a moral decision-making process are met in this analysis of the State and War in the modern world. A new situation has arisen, and it has called into question old responses. In his book David Cook offers such a method of moral decision-making as a "clarificatory tool", a method designed to clarify what we are doing when we make moral decisions, rather than a method to force particular moral assumptions into our procedures.

I would like to employ Cook's methodology in relation to this pressing, contemporary ethical debate about the relationship between State and War in a nuclear age, for three reasons. First, it fits his own criteria of when it is necessary to re-assess moral positions. Secondly, one of the most disturbing aspects of the present nuclear debate is the extreme polarisation between the positions of unilateral nuclear pacifism and the crusading advocacy of total military superiority. This is a sterile exercise in "vertical" thinking on the nuclear problem. By scrutinising our methodology of moral decision-making we can re-establish a middle ground on which to build a Christian consensus on what would be an appropriate and effective public and spiritual response to the issues of state and war in a nuclear age. And thirdly, Cook's methodology has forced me to re-evaluate my own Reformed theological tradition and find in it new resources for developing a Christian ethical response to this new moral dilemma. I believe the same methodological exercise would benefit all Christians engaged in a similar re-assessment of their own traditions.

Only the barest outline of Cook's novel method of moral decision-making can be given here and only the briefest use made of it in relation to the issue before us.⁷ I shall, therefore, first delineate the stages in Cook's "way of exploring Christian ethics" before employing them to open up some of the main aspects of the problem.

Cook's methodology

1. Cook reminds us that moral decisions are required only in exceptional circumstances and are to be distinguished from moral reactions that are inculcated in us by moral tradition. He argues that in making moral decisions we must first be aware of what the moral problem is that we are concerned with. We must set it down in order to clarify the nature of the moral dilemma in question.

2. Having established the nature of the moral problem under scrutiny,

the next stage is to “consider all the factors”. Cook recommends that an exhaustive list be drawn up of all the possible factors that may bear upon our thinking on the moral problem.⁸ He thinks that it is simply common sense to draw up as full a list as possible of all the factors impinging on the problem. By involving other people in this second stage, we are more likely to avoid forgetting some important factor that should be taken into account.

3. These first two stages are obviously meant to clarify in our minds the exact nature of the moral problem and the significant circumstances that influence it. The third stage introduces the “first important principles” that need to be identified and set in order of priority in any moral situation or decision-making. Cook argues that the Christian will derive these moral principles from three sources. The primary source is Scripture, which the main ground of Christian moral teaching has used as the means of discerning God’s will for mankind. The question is then raised as to the particular teaching or principles in Scripture that may be relevant to the situation. Cook provides a helpful checklist of the biblical sources of ethical principles, from the perspective of Creation, the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁹ Our concern here will be “. . . to clarify the theological and moral principles at stake, as well as specific biblical teaching, and reference to other parts of Scripture as a balance and complement to particular passages”.¹⁰ Scripture is the fundamental and authoritative source of our moral principles.

The second source of our first principles is tradition, the rich and varied bodies of Christian reflection on revealed truth in relation to moral issues in the experience of the Church amid changing historical circumstances. Such a study of tradition offers a variety of Christian ethical formulations to draw on, as well as showing us pitfalls to avoid and lessons to be heeded.¹¹ Thirdly, Cook argues, we can draw on the present reality of the life of the Spirit in the community of the Church. The Spirit can guide the Church as it seeks to understand what the appropriate moral principles and responses are for our present circumstances and new moral dilemmas.¹² At this third stage, the Christian turns to these three sources to discern appropriate Christian values in readiness for the final three stages in Cook’s method.

These can be set out briefly.

4. Cook argues that it is not enough to establish our moral principles before arriving at a moral decision. We must also consider what our “aims, goals and objectives are” in making such a decision. This involves giving thought to the consequences of any action taken and distinguishing between the desirable and the possible in deciding the direction we want to go. As he says, “In any situation it is important to know the motivation and desires of those involved and the likely consequences of putting their motives into action, by seeking to fulfil their aims.”¹³

5. The penultimate stage requires us to consider all the “alternatives, possibilities and choices” open to us in our response to a particular moral dilemma. According to Cook, our first reaction to an ethical problem may not be the best one, and we should carefully reflect on alternative ways of looking at the situation before making up our minds on the

matter.

6. The final stage in Cook's moral decision-making procedure is an exercise in human empathy. He believes that morality involves taking other people seriously, and so a fully informed moral decision must take account of "other people's viewpoints". He readily admits that this may not be an easy thing to do, especially if strong disagreement exists with the other person or viewpoint. However, this last stage is designed to avoid the selfishness of only taking our own interests into account.

To understand the distinguishing characteristic of Cook's methodology we must step back for a moment and consider the way in which he relates these last three stages to the relevant moral principles and all the factors to be considered in the situation. As well as being a Christian ethicist, Cook is a philosopher and teacher of logic. His interest in the way people think has led him to appreciate the insights of Edward de Bono and the method of thought described as "lateral thinking". Such "creative thinking" seeks to look at a problem from fresh angles rather than in the accepted terms by which it has been formulated and knowledge gained on the subject. This latter approach to the thought process de Bono calls "vertical thinking". It involves digging deeper into the existing hole of a problem to find a solution rather than approaching it sideways by means of lateral thought, digging other holes.¹⁴ Cook sees a fruitful connection between this creative way of thinking and the way in which we do Christian ethics. He argues that, too often, when we come to make moral decisions, especially those demanded by the new moral problems of our modern world, we do not consider the moral dilemma from fresh angles. Instead, we usually think "vertically" in the traditional terms of existing approaches to ethics. What is required is a method of moral decision-making that can cope with "a new moral issue or some new development in an old problem" by examining it from fresh angles in the manner of lateral thinking.

Cook's methodology offers just such a creative, "lateral" approach that looks at all the factors involved in the dilemma and all the relevant principles from the thought-provoking angles of our ultimate goals, alternative options and other people's viewpoints. Out of the creative interplay of the different stages of this method we will be in a better position to make an informed moral decision and to see how we arrive at such an ethical conclusion. Let us now consider his method in relation to just such a crisis, that of the Christian approach to State and War in the era of nuclear weapons. What follows is an outline of how Cook's procedure might be employed and some indications of how helpful a method it may prove on this subject in the context of my own partisan use of it.

Cook's method applied

1. First, what is the moral problem? It may be stated in the following way. In an age in which the modern state and modern nuclear weapons both have the proven capacity for indiscriminate and total destruction, what is the appropriate response of the Christian conscience; what is the

appropriate theological strategy for Christian action towards the State and nuclear warfare in the light of the Word of God?

2. The second stage is to consider all the factors impinging upon the moral problem outlined above. Again, it is not possible here to give an exhaustive list but let me suggest a few important factors that should certainly be included.

(a) The nature of the States involved in conflict in a nuclear age. If we are to know what our Christian attitude to such states in relation to nuclear war is to be, then we must understand the nature of these states. We must analyse them politically and ethically. For most of us in the West that involves a distinction between democratic and totalitarian states. This distinction will, in itself, determine something of our thinking as Western Christians. We must also realise that each state and country brings to the question of war its own historical experience of statecraft and of warfare.

(b) The nature of modern nuclear warfare. No one is in any doubt about the destructive power and horror of nuclear weapons, whether in so-called tactical use or in an escalation to total use in what has been termed "mutual and assured destruction". This is not in dispute. The debated question is not about the indiscriminate destructive consequences of using weapons but rather about how to avoid their use.

(c) Traditional attitudes to the State and War in the Christian Church. We are drawing upon traditions developed over centuries that have only had to reflect upon these uniquely modern dilemmas within the last forty years. If they are to be of any use to us in developing contemporary Christian ethical decisions then they must be subject to careful scrutiny and re-evaluation. Undoubtedly, the pacifist approach has been more strongly reassessed and developed in relation to the dilemmas of a nuclear age than other traditions. Christians in the Just War tradition have not, until recently, been so fruitful in producing a literature of theological and ethical revision. One tradition, in particular, is particularly disturbing in the way it is being applied to issues of state and war in a nuclear age, and that is the position advocating war as a moral crusade. It is a view that is increasingly influential among certain sections of fundamentalists in the US in their opposition to the Soviet Union, where nuclear warfare is contemplated and justified in terms of a moral crusade.

(d) What are the key features of a nuclear confrontation amongst states? Some would argue that the sheer build-up of weapons threatens nuclear disaster. The prospects for their use are so appalling that even their possession is immoral and an intolerable act by the state. I would argue with Gerald Segal that we need to bear in mind two basic aspects of the problem of nuclear weapons. First, nuclear weapons have been invented, and the genie, once escaped from the bottle of knowledge, cannot be replaced. Second, it is political conflict that tends to determine the use of weapons, and continuing conflict in politics seems to be the normal historical process in international relations. If this is the case, then we are stuck in a world with nuclear knowledge and our moral calculations must take that into account. Two moral

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responses to that situation seem to me inadequate. The first is simply to concentrate upon the effects of nuclear weapons and argue that they are so horrific that there can be no further argument and no further moral thinking on the matter. This is the stance that many on the pacifist wing of the nuclear debate take. Secondly, there is the response of those who argue that all war is hell anyway and that all we can do is harden ourselves, quite literally, against its likely if not inevitable consequences. This is the view of those who are thinking of surviving a nuclear holocaust by building shelters.

In order to develop a third, more appropriate moral response we must draw upon political as well as theological analysis. This requires that we carefully study the nature of the modern nuclear confrontation and ask detailed and informed questions about international relations, military strategy and arms negotiations. Such questions engage us in political thinking and raise ethical questions which lead to a different position from the two inadequate responses outlined above. It is possible to ask moral questions as well as strategic questions about the holding of nuclear weapons and their use in deterrence. One cannot rule them out of court simply by arguing that the consequences of using such weapons are unthinkable and that's the end of the ethical dilemma, or that we must hang on to them and be willing to use them to survive. Between these two positions there is a middle ground, a way of thinking about the reality of nuclear warfare in a critical and an analytical way. We can subject such an analysis to Christian moral criteria. The key feature of nuclear confrontation is not the weapons as such, but the political relationships and conflicts between states that leads to the use of such weapons. America, Britain, and Germany were already in conflict and the nuclear bomb was developed in fear that the Germans would develop it first and use it against Britain and America in an existing political conflict. When we talk about nuclear war in the modern age, we are talking about a political issue, first and foremost, and not the technical issue about how many warheads each side possesses. The solution to the nuclear problem is, therefore, also a political one.

3. These are only some of the background factors among many others that Cook's method allows us to take into account, but they do serve to illustrate the value of such an exercise. They bring us to the third stage in Cook's approach, establishing the relevant "first important principles" for this moral problem. These are to be derived from three sources: Scripture, the Spirit in the Church, and Christian tradition. Only preliminary remarks can be made about the use of the first two sources to allow for fuller treatment of the third source, tradition.

(a) Scripture as a source for Christian moral decision-making. As mentioned above, Cook has provided a helpful checklist of the biblical material that should be considered. In relation to the State and War, I would only add that the way one interprets Scripture is of key importance in moral decision-making on this issue. Some of the evangelical thinkers in the Anabaptist tradition see this point very clearly when writing about the State and War. Leonard Verduin, for example, argues for the

progressive nature of God's dealings with the world as revealed in Scripture, which distinguishes between "an early and a later gracious interference with the downward plunge of fallen man".¹⁵ One of Verduin's main criticisms of the Magisterial Reformation theological tradition is that it interprets Scripture in a "flat" way and fails to make this "early and late" distinction that sees the ethics of the Gospels and New Testament writings superseding the moral teaching and practice of the Old Testament records. He believes that the "flat theology of grace" held by most reformed theologians has prevented them from developing a proper doctrine of the State. Whether one derives one's view of the State from the New Testament only, or in conjunction with the Old Testament Scriptures will obviously have profound implications for the moral decision-making process in its use of Scripture.

Similarly, the way in which the Cross is interpreted in its meaning for Christian discipleship will determine the kind of ethical principles on war and peace derived from Scripture. Again, in the Anabaptist tradition, the suffering servanthood of Christ upon the Cross as the culmination of the way of non-violent resistance and powerlessness is regarded as definitive for Christian practice in the world. As Ronald Sider has said in his book *Christ and Violence*, "In every strand of the New Testament literature and with reference to every kind of situation (whether family, church, state, or employment), the way of the Cross applies. Jesus' cross, where He practised what He had preached about love for one's enemies, becomes the Christian norm for every area of life."¹⁶ The nature of one's interpretation of the content of Scripture is, therefore, of key importance when the Bible is used as the main source for Christian moral principles.

(b) The guiding of the Spirit in the life of the Church. Cook sees this source as having a special contribution to make to the problem of forming moral judgements about new ethical dilemmas. "When the Christian is called to pass a moral judgement on modern issues where there is no biblical teaching and no experience to draw on from tradition, he is not helpless and left with nothing to say. The Christian then, in particular, looks to the work of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct his thinking, so that the will of God in the new situation may be discerned. Such a procedure would soon be reduced to subjectivism . . . unless there was some means of checks and balances, for the Spirit guides and directs in . . . the context of the whole people of God."¹⁷ For those Christians involved in the peace movement and in campaigning for unilateral nuclear disarmament, this source is a central and significant one in forming and arguing for their moral stance. We must take seriously this movement of opinion in the Church today and its claim that in it can be discerned the leading of the Holy Spirit. What is the Spirit saying to the churches on this life and death issue?

Whatever our viewpoint as Christians, this is a question that we cannot ignore in formulating our moral decisions.

(c) Christian tradition. I wish to give more attention to this source for our first principles in moral decision-making because I believe it leads us to the heart of the moral dilemma about nuclear weapons. In particular, I want to focus upon the debate between two theological and ethical

traditions, those of the Anabaptist and Reformed Churches. I do so because these two traditions hold very different views of the nature of the State, and it is the Christian's relationship to the State that I believe to be one of the key issues in determining our moral decisions about nuclear weapons.

As I have argued above, the solution to the nuclear dilemma is, fundamentally, a political problem, rather than a technical one about the numbers and capabilities of nuclear weapons or simply a question of the degree of moral outrage at the undisputed horror of nuclear war. If this is the case, then the Christian's understanding of the State and politics will be crucial in determining his moral stance on this issue. This can best be illustrated by a brief case-study of the resurgent Anabaptist tradition's view of the State in contrast with the view of the Reformed and Calvinist traditions. It should be noted, in passing, that it is this Anabaptist view of the State that is influencing the thinking and practice of many younger Evangelical Christians in the peace movement in this country, as in the United States. Richard Mouw, a Calvinist philosopher from the United States, has identified some of the fundamental differences between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions in their understanding of the State which they can fruitfully discuss in dialogue together.¹⁸

Mouw himself comments, "In the Christian community as a whole, and especially within 'conservative evangelical' borders, the political differences between these two perspectives bring many current tensions into bold relief."¹⁹ Drawing on an analysis of the writings of the leading Anabaptist scholar, John Howard Yoder, he has highlighted three key themes in Yoder's thought which bear upon our own concern with the State and War in a nuclear age.

First, there is the Christian attitude towards the State and political involvement that Yoder terms "revolutionary subordination". This attitude does not regard governmental domination over others as worthy of the Christian's calling to servanthood but accepts submission to the state's authority, like all social obligations, as "the voluntary subordination of one who knows that another regime is normative."²⁰ The Anabaptist tradition refuses to accept the State and its use of force as normative in any way for the Christian or to permit the Christian to be involved in the political order, especially as an agent of government. The Christian should, however, be concerned about governments and their policies, be subordinate to government authority even if not obedient to it, and exercise a prophetic witness to the State and politicians in the light of Kingdom norms. This attitude obviously differs from a Reformed perspective which accepts governmental authority as a positive good in society, an authority which the Christian has a duty to obey and even participate in, inasmuch as it enforces the just standards of a righteous society established by biblical norms.

The second theme in Yoder's work is the Anabaptist refusal to "manage society". His reading of the New Testament convinces him that it is not the Christian's responsibility to participate in the management of society or to try and "run God's world for Him" because this would inevitably involve the Christian in coercion as the world's way of

conducting human affairs and effectively achieving social goals. Rather, it is the Christian's duty to witness to those who do manage society and the State through the radical Christian alternative of the New Testament pattern of decision-making and community which eschews all coercion. In contrast, the Calvinist tradition holds that the Christian does have a responsibility under God for the running of the world. It accepts that a degree of coercion is necessary to achieve legitimate social goals through political activity. The Anabaptist and Reformed positions therefore lead to very different views of the State and Christian involvement in society.

The third theme in Yoder's writings on the State and War, the acceptance of powerlessness by the Christian, highlights these differences even more clearly. Yoder believes that the powerlessness of Jesus on the Cross should be "consistently and universally" imitated by Christians in their own powerlessness in relation to the powers of this world.²¹ Reformed theology would not see the meaning of the Cross only in terms of Christ's powerlessness as the means of victory over the powers of evil in the world. It would be seen more as a decisive and unique victory by Christ that now enables Christians to use "the powers", including the power of the state, to promote justice and righteousness in the world without thereby being separated from God's love.²²

Through the writings of men like Yoder, Ronald Sider and, in Britain Alan Kreider, we have today a resurgent Anabaptist theological and social tradition that is very much concerned to be involved in society but which still refuses to hold office in the state or accept political responsibility for the management of society if that involves coercion. As Willard Swartley and Allan Kreider have stated it, "... Christians are called to a distinctive Christian ethic; they do not need to be burdened with policing society."²³ According to this approach, it is the calling of the Christian church to demonstrate to the state and society an alternative new society based on the power of the gospel and not the sword. Christians must stand prophetically over against the state in its demonic use of power in many areas of government and all aspects of warfare. In this tradition, opposition to nuclear weapons is properly expressed by non-violent witness and even civil disobedience that seeks to challenge the state and change people's attitudes through the values and methods of another "normative regime", the Kingdom of God. The Anabaptist perspective on the state and war that undergirds this kind of Christian practice is proving increasingly attractive to those Christians in Britain, who feel called to non-violent protest against nuclear weapons.²⁴

If the Anabaptist view of the state can be characterised as one of "revolutionary subordination" then the Reformed approach may be summarised in the phrase "critical transformation". Following on from the Magisterial Reformation belief that a Christian could be a magistrate and accept responsibility for the exercise of power in society, (as expressed in chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession), the Calvinist conviction is that the Christian should develop a critical mind to see how the power of the state and social institutions might be used to transform society according to the biblical norms of justice and righteousness. In the light of this perspective on the state, those influenced by the

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Reformed tradition in their moral decision-making are more likely to regard political involvement in government, with all the tensions that entails, as the proper way of dealing with the moral problem of war in conjunction with the Church's calling to prayer, evangelism and the prophetic preaching of the Word to the State as well as to individuals.

I have outlined these distinctions between the two theological and church traditions at greater length because they seem to me to play such a pivotal role in any use of Cook's method in relation to the moral dilemma of the state and war in the era of ever more sophisticated and deadly nuclear weapons. Out of the Anabaptist tradition comes a commitment to the first important principle of "revolutionary subordination through powerlessness", while "responsible citizenship through the transformation of power" emerges as a primary principle in the Reformed tradition. These two contrasting moral principles, based on differing interpretations of the same authoritative Scriptures, have led Christians to variant moral decisions about the state and war. Before we can reach that final stage of moral decision about the new ethical dilemma presented to us by nuclear weapons, we must subject our thinking so far to the "lateral thinking exercise" of the three remaining stages of Cook's decision-making process.

4. The fourth stage is to establish our aims, goals and objectives in making any decision about a moral problem. For the Christian pacifist, the aim must be a world in which all nuclear weapons are abolished. For the advocates of a moral crusade against communism, the goal is a world that knows total security through the superior military power of one state or alliance. Neither of these aims deals realistically or constructively with the moral problem we are faced with, in my judgement. I would suggest a third objective, derived from Calvin's view of the state found in the last chapter of *The Institutes*, that offers itself as a more scriptural and credible goal. This aim is determined by the view that the state has a limited but important authority, in the divine economy, to maintain what can only be a provisional but nevertheless essential order of justice in a fallen world and requiring a legitimate use of force to exercise that authority. The state's ministry is to maintain the precarious viability of human society through the deterrence of evil and the ensuring of a minimum of good conduct in society. This limited function can never remove the elements of risk or tragedy from human affairs but it does provide the only possible civil framework for human survival under divine sovereignty until the advent of the Kingdom.²⁵

By adopting this limited objective of maintaining a provisional peace through the powers of the state, I am arguing for a middle position between the pacifist and militarist goals of security through total, immediate nuclear disarmament or total, escalating nuclear superiority. This third aim recognises that we will have to live with the real and ever present danger of nuclear disaster as long as we possess the knowledge and resources to make such weapons and until the Parousia. Any goal we adopt in relation to nuclear weapons must be consonant with these realities. Therefore, our preferred objective must be the political control and management of that danger, (Whether through policies of deterrence

and/or multilateral disarmament negotiations is a matter for further debate), rather than the prospect of its removal though unilateral disarmament or the nightmare of its realisation through a first-use nuclear strategy. Whichever aim is adopted will obviously have an effect in the conclusions reached with this decision-making process.

5. The fifth stage in Cook's method involves a consideration of the alternatives, choices and possibilities open to us in this moral dilemma. Contrary to Mrs Thatcher's dictum in another context, there is an alternative, and there are choices in the range of Christian and political strategies on nuclear warfare. This is hard to realise when the whole debate has been so polarised between two absolute positions. However, there is a spectrum of informed opinion, moral judgement and theological insight that traverses the middle ground between pacifism and crusading militarism. This can be seen from the range of Christian viewpoints to be found in a recent British collection of essays on the subject, called *Pacifism and War* in a series aptly titled "When Christians Disagree".²⁶ There is also, for example, professional and academic work being done on alternative defence strategies that rely on conventional rather than nuclear weapons. We need to see the diversity of Christian and secular opinion as a resource to challenge and stimulate our thinking rather than as a justification in itself for adopting one of the polar positions in the nuclear debate.

6. The sixth stage requires us to look at the moral problem from other people's viewpoints. One of the tragic aspects of the nuclear debate is the way in which the advocates of sincerely held views are being traduced by their opponents. So, on the one hand, the women of Greenham Common have been maligned and threatened for their peaceful protest against Cruise missiles while, on the other hand, Christians who support a policy of nuclear deterrence to prevent war are often denied any claims to the name of peacemakers. Even if we disagree strongly with either viewpoint, it is still incumbent upon us to try and understand the motivation and experience that leads people to hold such positions. Again, we cannot think about the state and nuclear war without humbly entering in to the appalling experience of those who have already suffered from the state's use of nuclear weapons, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of those who are presently oppressed under the rule of totalitarian states. In both instances, this involves entering in to the suffering of our Christian brothers and sisters. Nagasaki, after all, was the great Christian centre in Japan when the bomb was dropped on it, and Moscow has more worshippers on a Sunday than many Western cities. This sixth stage in Cook's methodology should not seem alien to those who confess the name of our sympathetic high priest, the incarnate, crucified and ascended Son of God (Heb. 4:15).

Finally, having gone through these six stages in "lateral moral thinking", we come to the point of moral decision in which we must bring all the elements in our process into faithful and creative alignment under the lordship of Christ. I have only been able to make partial use of Cook's methodology in this paper but even that should be sufficient to indicate how others might employ it more competently than I have done, to

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explore the moral problem of nuclear weapons in their own thinking and so arrive at their own conclusions. Personally, Cook's approach to moral decision-making has brought into prominence the key feature of the Christian's relationship to the state in understanding and resolving this moral dilemma. As four professional and academic analysts have concluded in their study of this issue, the problem is fundamentally a political one.

"Our prescription is threefold. First nobody is served by wishful thinking or a false prospectus. The result of a failure to achieve the impossible is likely to be disillusionment or despair. The nuclear issue is too important for the occasional outburst of campaigning to be followed by weary apathy. It requires continual attention. Second, there is much that can be done through the time-consuming and intricate mechanisms of arms control to ease the strains of the nuclear age. We can at least ensure that nuclear weapons are not allowed to drive diplomacy or intrude too early into crises. *Third, and probably most important, we must never forget that the sources of war are to be found in political relations and not in some mechanical outcome of an arms race. In the end there is no substitute for old-fashioned statecraft calming the impulses of war. As much patience and intricate handiwork must go into loosening the nuclear knot, as was used in its original weaving*".²⁷ (my italics).

I would agree with that analysis of the nuclear dilemma and argue that it is the Reformed rather than the Anabaptist theological tradition which affirms the Christian value of political statecraft and is therefore better equipped to guide Christian decision-making on the long march to arms limitation, the raising of the nuclear threshold and the maintenance of a provisional peace in a nuclear age. My decision is to support that kind of peacemaking, in fellowship with my pacifist brethren, until this dark age gives way to the age of shalom in the new creation, where there will be no more bombs and no more tears.

1. David Cook, *The Moral Maze*, (London, 1983), p 78.
2. *Ibid.*, p 80.
3. *Ibid.*, p 80
4. *Ibid.*, p 81.
5. Gerald Segal, *Nuclear War and Nuclear Peace*, (London, 1983), p 3.
6. Jim Wallis (Ed.), *Peace Makers: Christian Voices from the New Abolitionist Movement*, (New York, 1983), p 55.
7. An outline of Cook's methodology can be found on pp 82-85 of *The Moral Maze*.
8. *Cook applies his own methodology to the moral problems of abortion and euthanasia in chapters 5 and 6 of The Moral Maze*, pp 86-172.
9. A fuller treatment of the Bible as a source of Christian values can be found on pp 50-58 and a helpful discussion on the uses of the biblical text in ethics on pp 45-50 of *The Moral Maze*.
10. *Ibid.*, p 83.
11. For a treatment of tradition as a source of moral teaching, see pp 58-60 of *The Moral Maze*.
12. *Ibid.*, pp 60-62.
13. *Ibid.*, p 83.
14. *Ibid.*, pp 77, 78. See also, Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking*, (Harmondsworth, 1977) but note with caution de Bono's criticisms of orthodox Christianity in works like, *Future Positive*, (Harmondsworth, 1980), e.g. pp 31, 32, 85, 200.

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15. Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, (Grand Rapids, 1976), p 32. See also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, 1972), on this issue of hermeneutics and Christian ethics in relation to war and state.
16. Ronald Sider, *Christ and Violence*, (Tring, 1980), p 34.
17. Cook, op. cit., pp 61, 62.
18. Richard J. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama*, (Grand Rapids, 1976), pp 98-116.
19. *Ibid.*, p 98.
20. Yoder, o. cit., p 192. For a fuller treatment of Yoder's approach, see *The Christian Witness to the State*, (Newton, 1964), by the same author.
21. *Ibid.*, p 97.
22. Mouw, op. cit., p 115.
23. Oliver R. Barclay (ed.), *Pacifism and War*, (Leicester, 1984), p 55.
24. See, for example, the reference to *Sojourners* magazine, itself strongly influenced by the Anabaptist tradition, in Steven Mackie's pamphlet, *Civil Disobedience as Christian Obedience*, (BBC, 1983), p 22; and the valuable work of Dr Alan Kreider and the London Mennonite Centre.
25. This interpretation of the Calvinist view of the state and its function in a fallen world is stated in an original way by W. A. de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*, (Harmondsworth, 1976), chs. 5 and 13, esp. pp 131, 338-345.
26. Barclay, op. cit. See also, Roberts G. Clouse (ed.), *War: Four Christian Views*, (Downers Grove, 1981); Richard Harries (ed.), *What Hope in an Armed World*, (Basingstoke, 1982); Ronald J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope*, (London, 1982); and David Atkinson, *Peace in our Time?* (Leicester, 1985).
27. Gerald Segal, Edwina Moreton, Lawrence Freedman, John Baylis, *Nuclear War and Nuclear Peace*, (London, 1983), p 156.

REVIEWS

Thunder Over Scotland : The Life of George Wishart

by James William Baird

Handsel Press £4.50

An American Presbyterian minister of Scottish ancestry “spent five years literally walking in the footsteps” of Wishart, and produced a 200-page account which “though fictionalized is based on all the historical material we could find.” Dr Baird presses into service his considerable powers of imagination, and has succeeded creditably in his aim to let Wishart live again. The Reformer to whom John Knox owed so much has been comparatively neglected by his fellow-countrymen. If they object to American dramatics, the remedy is clear. Admittedly, the cosy dialogue is at times irritating, but the essential facts about Wishart are accurately presented as we follow him from Montrose to Cambridge, Bristol, Zurich, Geneva, then back to England briefly, before returning to Scotland and the malign vengeance of Cardinal Beaton – first in the bottle dungeon in St Andrews Castle, and then at the stake in 1546. The Reformation was still fourteen years off, and one is humbled by the faithfulness of such as Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, “watchmen of the night . . . who worked when all was gloom.”

Sometimes the author is mistaken or invites challenge. He has Knox aged forty in 1907, puts “mayor” where he means “provost,” promotes Hugh Latimer to being an “Excellency,” gets Scottish names slightly wrong, and perpetrates the appalling “Bobby Burns.” But these are minor things. Within the candidly-admitted limitations of his brief, Dr Baird has given us a timely reminder in this Christian Heritage Year of a young man whose testimony to the faith and whose contribution to the “uproar for religion” is still inadequately recognized.

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The Motherhood of God: A Report by a Study Group appointed by the Woman's Guild and the Panel on Doctrine on the invitation of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Ed. by Alan E. Lewis.

The Saint Andrew Press. 71pp., £1.00.

The Group, whose report this is, was formed directly out of the use, by the President of the Guild, in public prayer, of the phrases “God our Mother” and “Dear Mother God”. The remit of the Group was to look at the theological implications of the concept of the Motherhood of God. They attempted to examine the desire of some, mainly women, to understand and speak of God in ways which reflect more fully the femine experience of life.

Let it be said at once that the Group insist that they conducted their study neither under pressure from secular feminism nor through an attraction to Mariolatry (which they decisively reject). The Report takes Scripture seriously and, because of that, cannot help stressing the Fatherhood of God in both Testaments and the understanding of God as Father stressed by the Incarnate Son. The members of the Group are careful to insist that this does not attribute

gender to God nor does it in any way encourage or teach male domination. They cannot avoid noticing that Scripture does identify in God other qualities or attributes which are "motherly" — His kindness, gentleness, tenderness. Does this entitle us, even occasionally, to address Him as "Mother God"? All of God cannot be contained within one image or metaphor and the Bible makes no attempt to do that. Should we content ourselves with thinking about God in the way the various metaphors encourage us or should we go one step further and actually address God in terms of some of these images?

A minority of the Group acknowledge the motherly qualities of God but feel bound by Scripture to address Him as Father. The majority of the Group, influenced by those who feel distanced from the Church by its exclusively male language for God, feel that there would be value in addressing God in these other ways. To back their conclusion they cite the motherly attributes of God revealed in Scripture and the examples within Mediaeval devotion.

While respecting the sincere convictions of all involved in the exercise behind this book, and appreciating the controversy which the appointment of the Study Group caused, it is difficult, however, for a non-Presbyterian not to dismiss it as trivial. Richer, more illuminating and rewarding studies on the doctrine of God exist elsewhere and, by comparison, this is lightweight. Nevertheless, if we learn from it that Almighty God is greater than the images provided by human language, then it may possibly justify the price if not the time and effort the Group spent on its preparation.

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