

Luther and Society

By Geoffrey Rudolph Elton

I am no Luther scholar and cannot pretend to have begun to cover the literature whose overwhelming mass causes Thomas A. Brady, with just cause, to cry for mercy. Thus I am very poorly qualified to enter the lists in possible opposition to one who has clearly read and thought intensively about these matters. Such claim as I may have to contest Brady's analysis and conclusions rest on tenuous ground: I can recognize mistakes in that perilous enterprise, the translating into modern English of what Luther actually wrote or said in sixteenth-century German, and I do know enough about the genuine doctrine of the three estates to question Brady's interpretation of it in Luther.

Let me first look at my doubts whether Luther is here always translated correctly and cited properly in context; it will be agreed that errors in these matters cannot but invalidate much argument. And on several occasions Brady seems to me to render Luther in ways that subtly alter the meaning, such errors occurring both in Brady's own translations and in those by others that he has used. Take the definition of the two kingdoms on p. 200 »Seen with the eyes« is a somewhat imaginative and (I think) misleading version for »eusserlich« (seen from the outside); more important, Luther does not say that the spiritual kingdom is ruled by grace and the forgiveness of sins, but says that that kingdom rules by those means. When the means employed by a system of rule are made to appear as the principles that govern within it, not only is a manifest error committed but we are led to think in parallel and distinct terms about the two kingdoms whereas Luther was talking of the impact that one had on the other. What here mattered to him was the relationship of the spiritual kingdom to earthly man, not that kingdom's internal structure. The point has real importance because Luther, so far from putting both kingdoms on one level, was concerned to differentiate the character of the spiritual (perfect, and not subject to rule but in its turn exercising rule over the temporal) from that temporal which is subject to government both in its own structure and by subjection to the spiritual. I seem to see Luther's teaching on the liberty of a Christian man

lurking there somewhere in the background; the mistranslation makes it impossible to see this.

Rather more damage is done by the errors incorporated in the quotation on p. 203 which, as Brady rightly says, shows that Luther identified his alleged estates as modes of social relationships. Luther's definition of what he was here talking about should not have been omitted: we should have been told that he was here not presenting a reasoned definition of the three orders but using them to summarise the purpose for which God had instituted any orders at all – namely so that man »may exist with God and a good conscience«. The effect of the omission is compounded by the disappearance of a sentence in the middle of the passage which reads »for God created man so that people should live together in decency and honour«: this again emphasizes the purpose and not the character of the orders. Translating »muszt« as »must« (a distinctly stronger term than the German original) then creates the impression that to Luther those three »states« formed the sum of all inescapable ways of life (necessary conditions of existence), whereas he was advocating their use to those who hoped to be at peace with God, a meaning which would have been clearer if »muszt« had been rendered as »ought to«.

On two occasions, a passage torn from its context acquires, or at least suggests, a different meaning from that implied in the original. Thus when Luther was ascribing to his orders what Brady calls universal scope and symmetrical form (pp. 206) he does not seem to me to have intended what has been read into the passage. He did say that the orders existed throughout all kingdoms, the whole world, and for the time of the world's existence, but he employed this rhetoric in the service of preserving good order from the threat of chaos, not by way of a philosophical analysis. Those three states had been made generally available by God for man to resort to and to escape the collapse of society. Furthermore, he made a distinction: two of them had a permanent shape (household and church), but the political order he agreed might change through time. Thus I cannot see that the passage declares true universality or any sort of symmetry. Perhaps more troublesome is the brief quotation on p. 208 which supposedly shows Luther as convinced that ordinary folk could not govern their own affairs even though he knew that there existed certain kinds of democratic rule: that passage is used to underline the growing authoritarianism of Luther. But in context Luther was not concerned with the right or best form of a polity; he was talking about the right of resistance which he doubted could be exercised

by those small and muddled units of government where »democracy« ruled. In actual fact, he was there justifying resistance to certain forms of constituted authority, namely to the emperor (no true monarch like the kings of France or England because he shared his authority with the electoral princes) and to Charles V particularly because he was menacing the Protestants in the pope's cause and thus lost his claims to loyal obedience. The passage comes from the Table Talk, which should have been warning enough not to seek a systematic thought in it; altogether one must never forget the danger that lurks in every attempt to turn Luther into a serious, let alone a consistent, student of political thought.

It may be held that these are all quibbles and do not affect Brady's argument about the »Two kingdoms and the three estates«. I will say nothing about the former on which I still find James Cargill-Thompson's discussion¹ both illuminating and satisfactory; as he shows, the concept poses problems only if one tries to give consistent precision to Luther's use of terms, or to extract a genuine philosophical doctrine out of his emotional and far too abundant employment of catchwords in the cause of theological strife or pastoral edification. But the »three estates« business is in a real mess. True, all past attempts to employ that threesome – attempts serving a fair variety of purposes – have always produced messiness. Few if any of the medieval or early-modern representative assemblies reflected a recognizable structure by estates, however much they adopted the title; the term was regularly bandied about at the time, so that German historians have invented the word »Ständestaat« as a categorical description for a multiplicity of arrangements hardly any of which contain genuine estates – definable bodies representing an identifiable sector of the community. It is sufficiently well known that the two Houses of the English Parliament broke every rule underlying the concept of estates; nevertheless, the theorists and practitioners of the 15th to 17th centuries cheerfully adopted the term and made up the necessary trinity by adding the king as himself a separate estate. The Parliament of king, Lords and Commons was typically described as being composed of three estates, a twist which has caused much trouble. In it hid the fact that this supposedly most significant of Ständestaaten altogether lacked the chief characteristic of the type – the juxtaposition of monarch and

1 W. D. J. CARGILL THOMPSON: The »Two kingdoms« and the »Two regiments«: some problems of Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*. The journal of theological studies 20 (Oxford 1969), 164–185.

estates. Despite the talk of three estates, in fact, England was no Ständestaat but a parliamentary monarchy, not a polity divided between the ruler and the representatives of the people (estates) but a unitary realm with its unity visible in the Parliament of which the king was a member.

This almost frivolous perversion of the meaning of the word »estates« in England can alert us to the possibility that when Luther spoke of »estates« he may not have been thinking of the allegedly traditional meaning either. It is here that Brady ties himself into a confusion. He begins by reminding us of the old trinity of oratores, bellatores, laboratores – Lehrstand, Wehrstand, Nährstand – and then, following in the main Wilhelm Maurer, alleges that this »typical doctrine of social structure« reached Luther by way of the Christian-Aristotelian past. Luther, we learn, before about 1521 understood the three estates »in a quite traditional sense« but later revised his views in order to meet the threat of social upheaval. There is here a monstrous non sequitur for which Maurer, it seems to me, offers no justification. As Brady himself shows, Luther's three estates were from the first defined as matrimony, government and church: where, even supposing that »political« satisfies as a translation for »regieren-der«, can we find matrimony or the private household among the three entities that pray, fight or labour? On the contrary, whatever Luther may have imbibed of tradition, his concept of three estates surely from the first was altogether different from the meaning that tradition had assigned, nor can I see that he ever changed his view in any fundamental way, though events possibly caused him to vary his emphases in the polemical use of a notion he entertained throughout.

That notion differed drastically from the traditional three estates. In tradition (such as it was) the members of a given commonwealth belonged to one of three estates into which the community could be divided, and these estates were defined by the social functions supposedly exercised (spiritual welfare, defence, supply and maintenance). Luther, on the other hand, leaves no doubt that in his view of a commonwealth all members belonged simultaneously to all three estates or orders; these estates are not mutually exclusive sectors of the population but definitions of three relationships into which all individuals enter when they become members of a society. Everybody relates to others in three modes of existence: as members of a familial household (what Luther often called »oconomia«), as members of a political construct (a state), and as members of a church. If Brady had given us the full quotation from Luthers's »Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis«, part of which he cites against footnote 18, he would

have made the point for me: for there Luther says explicitly that each of the three orders involves everybody. The order of the family is not confined to parents and children but includes everybody present in the household, servants being specifically mentioned; the political order includes not only rulers and magistrates but also all who are ruled by them; the church includes not only the administrators of worship (priests and pastors) but also those who worship under their guidance.

Luther's so-called Doctrine of the Three Estates thus has absolutely nothing to do with the political organization of a community or with the separation and distribution of power within it. Instead it is concerned with the conviction that we are all members of one another. Its only link with traditional estates doctrine lies in the fact that, moved by convention, Luther found three modes in which this fact of communal existence might be expressed – as he says in one place, God's »estates« reflect the trinity, though perhaps wisely he makes no effort to connect any one of his idiosyncratic estates with any of the three persons. Unconcerned with political structure, Luther does not seem to me to have needed his view of the social structure to help him towards a more authoritarian stance as he experienced threats of public disorder. If he wished to repress rebels he needed other weapons – and of course he found them quite simply in apprehension which led to appeals that the wielders of the sword might exert themselves. But the wielders of the sword did not compose an estate for Luther; they were functionaries charged with punishing disruptive evil in a community (his temporal kingdom) permeated with good order through God's appointment of three kinds of cohesive social relationship, open to all and demanded of all in equal measure if they wished to remain at peace with God.

The confusion which reads Luther's Stände as directly derived from medieval estates doctrine, with which it disagrees in fundamentals and particulars, is assisted by the confusion that Luther himself created in his use of a very loose terminology. As Maurer pointed out, in his description of the means God had designed for the proper social ordering of his creation Luther used »Stand« much more rarely than other words – »Stifte«, »Orden«, »Ämter«, »Regimente«, and later in life quite commonly »Hierarchien«. (This incidentally suggests that we should not speak of Luther's doctrine of the three estates, but of the doctrine of the three estates invented by commentators for Luther). All those terms contain traps. Stand, as we have seen, draws the mind inexorably towards a totally different kind of estate, though Brady might have been saved from error if he had

been familiar with the English Book of Common Prayer. All who get married by that exemplary rite will recall the description of »holy matrimony, which is a honourable estate«; but no one so married ever supposed himself assigned to an estate of the realm. (Nor do German couples entering into the Ehestand recall notions of Ständestaaten.) What Luther means by »Stand« is better expressed in modern German by »Zustand«, a condition in life. »Orden« (orders) is another of those medieval terms which carry splendidly various overtones and almost no precise content; Luther, I think, understood by it a community of belonging, and »Stift« (foundation) carried much the same meaning for him. As for »Amt« or »Regiment«, these words – as Maurer rightly says about the first – describe the estate or order in action: »Amt ist der Stand in Funktion«. A Stand or Stift becomes an Amt when its potential for serving its social role (solicitude or instruction or rule or indeed love) is activated. As for those hierarchies, that term can be really dangerous to the modern mind which immediately jumps to the conclusion that they must represent specific ranking systems of superiority and subordination, or at the very least a differential scale of values. I am not in a position to say categorically that Luther never employed the term in ways that might suggest varied degrees of virtue and of power over men, but I feel fairly safe in saying that as a rule he used it in the strict etymological sense suggested by the Greek word. A hierarchy is a scheme of priestly or holy governance – an order, that is to say, organized in a fashion pleasing to God (like »holy matrimony«). Although the idea of higher and lower »hierarchies« can arise readily enough, the hierarchy as a group enshrines not a concept of people ranked higher or lower but a concept of collectives into which people, or indeed angels, can be gathered. That is to say, for Luther hierarchy has the same meaning as estate, order, foundation and all the rest; and only disaster awaits him who would wish to make Luther assign subtly differing contents to terms he employed with reckless and thoughtless free will as all signifying one and the same thing.

To sum up: Luther's doctrine of estates is not concerned with a political scheme capable of being turned to repression, or with the coercive preservation through authority of a given social system. What really underlay his thinking on the social order was a distinctly »medieval« conviction that man alone is lost in solitude and helplessness. He held that both in heaven and on earth God had built his creation not on individuals but on social groupings. The angels in heaven existed in their hierarchies. For man on earth, so much more in need of mutual assistance, God had decreed simultaneous membership of the house-

hold, the polity, and the church. Refusal to accept any of these three co-existent relationships was rebellion against God. No doubt, resistance to authority could in consequence be interpreted as inadmissible rebellion, but what mattered was not the refusal to accept subordination but the refusal to belong. God wished men and women to work out their problems within and not outside the orders he had decreed. The real offence lay not in disobedience as such but in the elevation of the individual over the social order, the self-chosen withdrawal from the community. This offence stemmed from the sin of pride. After all, the classic case had occurred not on earth but in the hierarchies of the angels: to Luther, the prototype of such a sinner was not, perhaps, Thomas Müntzer but Lucifer.