

Luther and Society

Response by Mark U. Edwards

With Thomas A. Brady's paper and Geoffrey Rudolph Elton's critique, the battle is well joined over the meaning of the »Three Estates« in Luther's thought. I would like to call attention to the rhetorical use of these concepts, and their resultant variability, in actual situations that Luther faced. I am convinced that political decisions and events beyond his control forced him on occasion to adapt his theology as he went. To put it more strongly, on occasion he was even induced to develop a theological rationalization for a political decision with which he disagreed and which badly accorded with this previous »social teaching«. This is particularly true in his polemical writings.¹ The resulting contextual and ad hoc nature of his theological arguments can go a long way towards explaining the ambiguous, equivocal, and even contradictory use to which he put some of his key concepts. Let me offer an example.

In the spring of 1539 while the Protestants were negotiating with imperial representatives in Frankfurt and there was widespread fear that religious war was imminent, Luther composed his »Septuaginta propositiones disputandae, de tribus hierarchiis, ecclesiastica, politica, oeconomica, & quod Papa sub nulla istarum sit, sed omnium publicus hostis«. ² Intended for the quarterly disputation at the University of Wittenberg, which was Luther's responsibility that April, these theses developed from the notion of the three hierarchies a justification for the right of Protestant resistance to Catholic attack. In theses 51 to 57 Luther wrote:

»51. Evidens est, papam non esse magistratum, neque ecclesiasticum neque politicum, sed neque oeconomicum.

52. Tres enim hierarchias ordinavit Deus contra diabolum, scilicet oeconomiam, politiam et Ecclesiam.

1 See Mark U. EDWARDS: Luther's last battles: politics and polemics, 1531-46. Ithaca, NY; Leiden 1983.

2 WA 39 II, 39-44.

53. Ecclesiasticum non esse convincit, quod Evangelium damnat et conculcat per suas blasphemias in iure canonico.

54. Politicum non esse convincit, quod iura civilia sibi subiecit, sicut et Evangelium.

55. Oeconomicum non esse convincit, quod nuptias et coniugium prohibet, quibus libitum est, non tantum sacerdotibus.

56. Sed est illud monstrum, de quo Daniel dicit, quod adversatur omni Deo, etiam Deo deorum.

57. Et quod Paulus Danielis verba secutus vocat adversarium Dei, hominem peccati, filium perditionis.³

The papacy was no true authority at all but rather the antichrist. Hence normal considerations concerning resistance to superior authority did not apply to him. So Luther concluded in thesis 66: »Ita, si papa bellum moverit, resistendum est ei sicut monstro furioso et obsesso seu vere ἀρκετολύκω.« And he added in thesis 70: »Nec salvat reges, principes, sed nec Caesares, quod iactantur Ecclesiae defensores, cum scire teneantur, quid sit Ecclesia.« With this argument, Luther had provided a *theological* justification for resting the emperor, a policy that he had earlier opposed, *but only if the emperor were acting in this apocalyptic context as a servant of the papal antichrist*.

I am curious how Brady and Elton might integrate this example into their understanding of Luther's »Three Estates«. Elton states simply that 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 segregation and distribution of power within it«. Yet in this particular case, Luther employed the notion of three hierarchies to redefine the power relationship between superior and subordinate secular authority under certain conditions. Moreover, Luther stated that there were only three types of authority ordained by God, which implies a certain universality for these three hierarchies. He also seems to suggest here that these hierarchies are more than modes of social relationship. They are also forms of authority.

I myself would like to call attention to the defining context as well as the rhetorical nature of Luther's argument. Luther's goal was to convince others of the propriety of resting even an imperially led attack on the Protestant estates. In terms of theological convictions, Luther believed that it was contrary to God's law to resist duly constituted superior authority. Injustice was to be

3 The words he employs for »hierarchies«, hierarchias and magistratum, were translated by contemporaries as »hierarchias«, »Ertzgewalten«, »Oberkeit« and »Regiment«.

suffered in patience by true Christians. God could be trusted ultimately to save them. But the Protestant rulers were unwilling to accept this position. So, under pressure from the princes and their counselors, Luther adjusted to political realities, first in 1530, by »allowing« a positive law justification for such resistance, and, then in the late 1530s, by arguing that if the emperor attacked the Protestants on account of their faith, he would not be acting in his capacity as a superior secular authority but rather as a servant of the papal antichrist.

Combined with his apocalyptic vision, therefore, the concept of the »Three Estates« or »Hierarchies« was used by Luther to justify or rationalize theologically the exception to the general rule that superior secular authority was not to be actively resisted by Christians. Since he wished to identify the papacy as the great exception to the divine order of the world, he imbued the three hierarchies with greater institutional concreteness and universality than was generally his practice. There are only three divinely ordained hierarchies. The pope belongs to none of the three. Therefore, he is the antichrist. In this argument he approached the medieval notion of three divinely ordained social groupings. The political context, which was not of this choosing, and the rhetorical goals, which were set by the princes, help explain the use to which he put these malleable concepts.

In general, I sometimes wonder whether our concern to ferret out and identify all the nuances of Luther's political thought might not blind us to the fact that some of his pronouncements may have been little more than rationalizations for developments that would have proceeded with or without his arguments and that, given a choice, he would have opposed. Take, for example, the development of the »landesherrliche Kirchenregiment«. Various scholars have shown that this institution was already well advanced before Luther appeared on the scene. And it did not require an ambiguous junction of the »Two Kingdoms« and the »Three Estates« for this institution to come to maturity. In fact, there is ample evidence that the development of the »landesherrliche Kirchenregiment« proceeded despite Luther's misgivings. Yet once he realized that he could not prevent these developments, or even came to see them as unfortunate necessities given the wretched condition of the church, he was prevailed upon to issue statements that actually rationalized them. Pity the scholar, then, who attempts to reconcile the convictions that motivated Luther to oppose a particular development with the rationalizations he produced to justify the development when circumstances dictated a change of course.

Consider the seizure of the bishopric of Naumburg by Electoral Saxony and the forced election of a Protestant bishop.⁴ On four occasions Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues recommended against forcing the election of a Protestant bishop, and four times their advice was rejected by the elector and his counselors. Finally, the theologians acquiesced to the elector's plan, and were then assigned the task of justifying this decision.

When it came time for the election of Nikolaus von Amsdorf as the new Naumburg bishop, the Naumburg council questioned whether it could properly agree to a new election seeing that it had sworn in its oath of homage to the now deceased bishop that, in the case of a vacancy, it would remain obedient to the chapter as its governing authority. Luther was assigned by his prince the task of overcoming their qualms.

According to Philipp Melancthon's notes, Luther told the council that »Dieses ist gegründet, gewiß und offenbar: So ein regierender Bischof in einem Artikel oder mehr den das Evangelium verfolget, so ist das Kapitel samt dem Patron, oder, so Mangel am Kapitel, der Patron samt den Ständen schuldig, denselbigen Verfolger, so sich nit bessert, zu entsetzen, unangesehen, daß die Stände als Untertan dem Bischof Pflicht getan.«⁵ The same was true in relation to the chapter if it would not undertake a proper election or lent support to a persecutor.

To the weighty objection that although it might be that one should abandon improper teachers and depose them, one should not withdraw from secular obedience or feudal tenure to the bishop and chapter, Luther replied: »Das ist gewiß, daß die Pfarrgüter und Gerechtigkeit zum Dienst folgen sollen und müssen, wie das Evangelium spricht: ›Dem Arbeiter gehört sein Lohn.‹ ... Dieweil sie dann das bischöfliche Amt vom weltlichen nicht sundern lassen und wir ihnen, als Verfolgern, das bischöfliche Amt nicht lassen können, so muß das Ander auch dem rechten Bischof folgen, ...«⁶ The estates were apparently convinced by this argument, and the elector had his way with Naumburg.

Perhaps Brady or Elton or other members of this Congress could integrate this argument into Luther's view of the »Two Kingdoms« or »Three Hierarchies«.

4 On the seizure of Naumburg, see Peter BRUNNER: Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg. Gütersloh 1961; Edwards, 172–182.

5 WA Br 9, 597, 1–6 (3706).

6 WA Br 9, 598, 46–48. 58–60 (3706).

The point, of course, is not whether this act of integration is possible, but whether the assumption on which it would rest is a valid one. Do we have here a concrete application of a general »Two Kingdom Theory«? Or do we have a post hoc theological rationalization of an independent political decision? I suspect it is more the latter than the former.

It would be wrong, however, to interpret this as mere opportunism. When Luther was called upon to advise consciences, especially in political matters, he turned not to some »doctrine« but rather to the Scripture. There he sought advice that was appropriate for the specific situation with which he was dealing. As the situation changed, Luther was forced to search Scripture for new insights to fit the changed circumstances. Thus, for example, in the later years of his career as he was increasingly called upon to advise the rulers of Protestant territories and cities, he found that the apocalyptic themes and books in Scripture helped him better to understand and advise others concerning the various threats posed by the papacy, the Turks, the »fanatics«, and the Jews. Luther was consistent in his method of advising in political matters – he always sought this advice in Scripture – even as the advice changed with changing circumstances.

In general, much of Luther's »social teachings« are pastoral and occasional in nature rather than systematic. Luther applied his understanding of Scripture to specific circumstances, not intending to lay down timeless verities. We should remember that in a very real sense he worked out his position as he went along, more interested in consoling consciences with prudent, scripturally based pastoral counsel than in framing dictums for all time.