

Introduction to Volume 5

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The topic is as old as the Gospels in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Matthew we read that Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay taxes to the Roman occupation forces. Jesus' response is well known: "Render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21). This response, which seemed to draw a clear line between the spiritual and the secular realm, is assuredly one of Jesus' better-known statements; it must have left the hearers somewhat baffled as to what, concretely, came under each heading.

Elsewhere in the New Testament the apostle Paul addressed the topic of what it meant to be a Christian living in society, in terms of specific issues, such as the Christian and governmental authority—the response to hostile Roman Empire—or the Christian and marriage, but at once placed those into the broad context that Christian believers knew they were in the end times. The early Christian community's conviction that they were living in the end of days meant that it was not necessary to think through all theological or moral issues that being a Christian posed. The shortness of time until the end rendered the exposition of what the followers of Jesus should believe and do somewhat moot. Thus, Paul left the Corinthian congregation ambivalent about marriage, generally a long-term proposition. And his advisory seemed to be borne by the reality of the end

times. Celibacy, he intimated, was the ideal, but then added that “it is better to marry than burn with desire” (1 Cor. 7:9), hardly a ringing endorsement of the married estate.

In the centuries that followed, as Christian communities became more numerous and influential in Roman society, critical observers commented on the Christian aloofness from society. Christians stayed away from the venues of popular Roman entertainment. The refusal of Christians to serve in the Roman military or as judges appears to have been a universal principle that allowed the Roman state to view Christians as disloyal citizens who had to be forced to pledge loyalty to the emperor. At the same time, the Christian self-understanding underwent a change, in that a bifurcation occurred in within the Christian community. While most Christians practiced faith to a degree, a smaller number strove for holiness and Christian perfection. This explains the rise of the monastic ideal, the commitment to live in poverty and celibacy, distant from the world and society, though always with a commitment to acts of Christian mercy in the world. In the Middle Ages, monasteries and convents were lodging places, hospitals, soup kitchens, and much more. The biblical rationales for the pursuit of perfection were undoubtedly the categorical pronouncements of Jesus, such as his challenge to the young “ruler” to sell all that he had and follow him. In addition, there were the strictures of the Sermon on the Mount.

As has been pointed out frequently, an incisive change occurred when, early in the fourth century, the Christian religion first became a “licensed” religion and a few decades later was the sole authorized religion of the Roman Empire. The church concluded an alliance with the body politic. It was supported and defended by the Roman state, which had first become evident when Emperor Constantine (c. 280–337) convened the Council of Nicaea and his sister paid for building churches. And when the Roman Empire succumbed to the onslaught of the “barbarians,” the church miraculously survived and her principles became normative for European society.

The privileged recognition of the Christian religion forced the church to rethink its traditional stance of aloofness, if not hostility, toward the society of which it was part. This was superbly done by St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) in North Africa, who in his vastly influential work *De Civitate Dei* (*On the City of God*)¹ argued that from the beginnings of history, two powers stood in

1. This concept of world history guided by Divine Providence in a universal war between God and the Devil is part of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as most recently stated in the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* document.

tension with one another: the community (“city”) of God and the community (“city”) of this world. Christians were citizens of both. Part of Augustine’s brilliance lay in the way he elucidated this reality.



A page from 1475 printing of *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), originally published in 426 CE.

This broader topic included the question of whether true Christians may serve as soldiers. Until the fourth century Christians would have generally answered the question negatively; now, St. Augustine’s powerful reflections persuaded them that there were “just” wars in which a Christian might surely participate as soldier. This was a new understanding of the issues of

2. Conduct of war is clearly a matter of moral concern. Even when a nation is justified in waging war on another, there are moral limits on what it may do in prosecuting the war. Defining and enforcing such limits has been a long a concern for international agreement and law. As the key phrases below indicate, it is very problematic if citizens of a land can use these criteria to form opinions about the justness of the case.

1. Proportionality—The proportionality of the use of force in a war.
2. Discrimination—The combatants discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.
3. Responsibility—A country is not responsible for unexpected side effects of its military activity.

3. Thomas Aquinas was a Scholastic theologian in the Dominican order.

war and peace.² The right to go to war concerned the legitimacy of the concept of a “just” war, that a nation must give in order for it to have a moral right to wage war. Augustine’s presupposition was that the decision by a country or a ruler to go to war had to be based on a legitimate political and legal process. Augustine’s criteria were revised and expanded, notably by Thomas Aquinas³ (1225–1274) in the thirteenth century, but the basic notion that it was proper for a Christian to participate in a “just” war continued to be universally affirmed.

There was another fateful legacy for Luther in the realm of social ethics. It was a mode of thinking about relationship of church and state in a society that allowed no public expression of religion than Christianity. Church and state had a symbiotic relationship, where each supported the other and where to be member of one meant one was also member of the other. The term of this relationship was *corpus Christianum*, the Christian body.

The Ottoman Empire’s aggressive foray into southeast central Europe in the late 1520s brought their forces just outside the gates of Vienna. Because of this threat the deliberations on the religious issues of just about every diet were overshadowed by the emperor’s effort to get the estates to contribute financially to raising an army for defense. Both situations prompted Luther’s reflection as captured in the treatises *On War against the Turks* (1529) and *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526).

Luther was heir to the medieval tradition. It is evident, from some of his earliest publications in the indulgences controversy, that his vision of a vitalized Christian faith had ramifications for the public square as well. In 1519 he published the first of several sermons on usury, a major point of controversy in business circles at the time. His treatise published in 1524, titled *Business and Usury* in this volume, addresses this subject.

In his *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German People Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate* (1520),^a Luther started out with some theological reflection, but then went on to discuss at length the several areas in German society that desperately needed reform, such as the curricula at universities, but also the

^a See TAL 1:369–465.

curtailment of imports. Clearly, Luther understood renewal to have relevance for the market square in addition to church and theology. In this volume, he returns to this issue in *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524). Luther argued vigorously against those who considered a formal education unnecessary, and perhaps even an obstacle, to the Christian life.

Luther's religious piety and education led him to assert that the Holy Spirit inspired through diligent study and prayerful reflection. Further, he averred that personal revelation must be tested by the church. Only those who were properly trained for the office of ministry and those duly educated as doctors (i.e., teachers) of theology had the right to preach and teach publically and with authority.

At this same time in Luther's Germany, a peasant rebellion rose against the ruling class, who were wealthy landowners. Luther judged the rebellion of the peasants to achieve their political and economic goals to be totally unacceptable because it was against the established order of societal living. Early on, Luther had expressed sympathy for the peasant grievances, but later he shied away from endorsing their actions.

In his *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* (1525), Luther's underlying notion was that God ruled and worked in the world in two ways—through the gospel for the believers, and through law for all humankind.^b The gospel pertained solely to the relationship with God, while the law was God's way to have harmonious and orderly structures that allowed humans to live in peace and fellowship one with the other. The *Twelve Articles* offered a summary of peasant grievances, with the important addendum, “if any were found to be incompatible with Scripture, they would be withdrawn.” Precisely at this point lay Luther's fundamental misgiving. The *Twelve Articles* were in error, according to Luther, because the peasants mistakenly assumed that economic or political issues

^b William J. Weight, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). Kurt Matthes, *Das Corpus Christianum bei Luther im Lichte seiner Erforschung* (Berlin: Curtius, 1929).

can be resolved with Scripture. But this was a new Luther speaking, not the author who had written *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in 1520.^c

Nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians coined the term “orders of creation” to refer to the sphere that here was labeled “law.” These “orders,” such as government or marriage, were universally human and operated on principles that were secular. It thus becomes understandable, to cite one flagrant case in point, that many German Lutheran theologians remained silent in 1933, when the new Nazi government promulgated a law with the inoffensive title “for the restoration of a professional civil service,” even though it was evident that the purpose of the new law was to remove socialists and Jews. Several Lutheran theologians argued that governments could pass such a law.

Some four centuries earlier Luther himself addressed the subject of the Jews and their teachings. The three treatises on this subject included in this volume reveal an evolution in Luther’s thinking. When the 1523 treatise *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* was published, it was greeted with appreciation for its sympathetic tone. Luther hoped that “dealing in a kindly way with the Jews and instructing them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them would become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs.” Twenty years later, Luther’s treatises *On the Jews and Their Lies* and *On the Schem Hamphoras and On the Lineage of Christ*, both published in 1543, had an altogether different tone. Luther now treated the Jews with the “arrogance and scorn” that he had condemned in 1523.

Several “explanations,” based on psychological, sociological, or theological grounds, are given for Luther’s tone and his shocking suggestions, but these do not soften the harsh and bitter tone. One hardly knows whether to be more astonished at the crudity of Luther’s language or at the cruelty of his proposals: let their synagogues be burned, their houses razed, their prayer books seized, let them be reduced to a condition of agrarian servitude, and—as a “final solution”—let them be expelled from the country. With these recommendations, Luther ventured away from even the most generous understanding of religion and embraced tenets of what might be called “cultural” anti-Judaism. The fact that Luther was largely repeating the anti-Jewish

^c See TAL 1:369–465.

commonplaces of the time and that much of his theological argumentation was borrowed from earlier Christian polemics against Judaism is a mitigating factor, though by no means an excuse for Luther's views. Many of Luther's colleagues rejected *On the Jews and Their Lies*, and the immediate effect of Luther's severe proposals were minimal.^d

^d Sources consulted in this introduction include: Thomas Schirrmacher, "Why Ethics Needs Accurate Church History—Reflections on Books on Constantine the Great," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 39, issue 1 (2015): 76–78; Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Nonresistance, Defense, Violence, and the Kingdom in Christian Tradition," *Interpretation* 38 (October 1984): 380–97; Carter Lindberg, "'Canonization' and Luther on the Early Profit Economy," in *The Reformation as Christianization: Essays on Scott Hendrix's Christianization Thesis*, ed. Anna Marie Johnson and David A. Maxfield (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 49–78; Kathryn D'Arcy Blanchard, "If You Do Not Do This You Are Not Now a Christian: Martin Luther's Pastoral Teachings on Money," *Word & World* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 299–309; Jane Strohl, "Luther's New View on Marriage, Sexuality and the Family," *Lutherjahrbuch* 76 (2009): 159–92; John C. Raines, "Luther's Two Kingdoms and the Desacralization of Ethics," *Encounter* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 121–48.