Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

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Chapter Four

Towards a Theology of the State

Haddon Willmer

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards a Theology of the State

THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN MY TITLE IS 'TOWARDS'. I do not come to you as an expert with the answers. I am a theologian *in via*, on the road, because the theologian can never be more than a man and a Christian. Seeing through a glass darkly is therefore natural to him. Christian existence is not different from human and political existence in this respect: in both church and state human communities are always going forward into the unknown, unprescribed yet not unconditioned future as it becomes present. Our position as theologians does not differ from our positions as people and as Christians. It is not as though we have an assured theology and on that basis move towards maturity and effectiveness as persons; we are always working towards a satisfactory theology, with a faith seeking understanding. *Semper reformanda* applies as much to the thinking, the theology of the church, as to its order and actions.

This paper is a thought-experiment and confession of faith together. Many Evangelicals have little time for theology as thought-experiment. They are competent and courageous in other specialisms and so they prove in practice the indispensability of experiment and imagination. But in theology it is different. Safety first — and last — pinions the wings of the mind, for imagination is of the devil. So either they do

without theology altogether or they claim to be in possession of it, by inheritance, without working very hard for it. Theology cannot be made so neat and easy. It is too close to prayer and speculation and fantasy, too vulnerable to self-examination, and to life, for tidiness. It becomes, as liberation theologians say, reflection on practice, though in a broader way than they conceive. We can only manage to be really theologians if we are naturally reckless or we believe in God over and above all our theologizings, or both, like Karl Barth or G. K. Chesterton.[1]

Besides the character of theology, there is another reason for this 'towards', which is specific to the subject of the state. In social ethics and in practice we have to deal with the state as it is today and as it might be tomorrow. The Roman Empire of the first century and the kingdom of Solomon are not the subject of Christian social ethics, however educative reflection on them might be. We cannot take over a theology or ethic developed in relation to those states, without testing the assumption that the state as we have it today is of the same species. Of course there are similarities; apart from anything else, states now in existence have been influenced in their formation by the sacred and secular images of David and Solomon, Athens and Sparta, Augustus and Constantine. But there are differences too, so that we distort or deny *our* state and its possibilities if we force them into the straitjacket of ancient examples. The modern state is modern. Our state system is, in large part, a post-medieval European development. The novelty came into view in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, in which the nations decided the basic shape and principles of the modern European inter-state system amongst themselves, ignoring Pope Innocent X's fulminations against a treaty 'null and void, accursed and without any influence or result for the past, the present, or the future'.[2] And in other respects, the state, as we know it, has developed even more recently. It is arguable that dominating features of the state today have appeared in the last one hundred years with Bismarck as its symbol. War, cultural engineering and welfare have enlarged the state's activities, and made it inescapable for all of us for good or

1. Cf. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London, 1963); G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who was Thursday.*

2. G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason (1648-1789)* (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp. 9f. Cf. M. Donelan (ed.), *The Reason of States* (London, 1978), chap. 1.

ill.[3] Down to the time of Erasmus it was no hardship to be a wandering scholar. Indeed, down to 1914, one could travel through Europe without a passport. But who would choose to be stateless today?

The omnipresence of the modern state puts it on the agenda for Christian social ethics in a way that may not have been the case in the past. It would be wrong to suggest that no theological attention has been given to the modern state, but in England, at least, it has not been very serious, coherent or effective in enabling Christians to have a common mind and a message that makes saving sense of the state. We oscillate in an unprincipled way between support for and denigration of the modern state. Sometimes we interpret the modern state as though it stands in the tradition of Egypt under Joseph's direction as interpreted favourably in *Joseph and his Amazing Technicoloured Dream Coat* —

> Seven years of famine followed —
> Egypt didn't mind a bit:
> the first recorded rationing in history was a hit.

In another mood, to explain the same characteristics of the state, we descry the dragon of Rev. 13 causing all to have the mark upon their foreheads as the condition of sharing in buying and selling. We must get beyond this selective, magpie, dilettante use of the Bible.

Romans 13

It will, of course, be said that I am making the problem too difficult. The Bible, you may say, does speak plainly, theologically and ethically, about the state in one or two places, in ways which prevent oscillation under pressure of circumstances between positive and negative views of the state. Moreover, what the Bible says transcends differences between the state of biblical times and the state today. Romans 13:1-7 is the best example, if not almost the only one to be found in the New Testament. It is at least the only one I have space to discuss here. And it should be noted that I am discussing it from a limited point of view: I am asking

3. E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons* (London, 1973), especially pp. 61ff., 154ff., 295ff.

whether it speaks theologically — in a way we can make our own — of the state as we have it and are likely to have it nowadays. The brief answer is 'No'. There is a great deal in this text that we can accept without difficulty, not least its assurance that God is over all.[4] But I at least do not find it easy to make sense of the particular way in which it understands God to be over all things and of some of the consequences it draws. In particular, verse 3, 'For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad', does not describe any state we know or might make. Our own country is no exception. We can be thankful that we do not for the most part have government by terror and atrocity. But it cannot be claimed that we have government which puts no obstacles or disincentives in the way of doing good. Our tax and social security systems, for example, do not uniformly encourage goodness, a sense of fairness, enthusiasm for hard work and enterprise, the values of the family. The larger the state gets the more important are its ambiguous effects on people's motivation and values.

We have all heard it said that Socialism stifles initiative — and Toryism erodes compassion. Now, it may be replied that the state, the cabinet and the civil service — the real government — are always better than the rhetoric of the competing parties suggests. In fact it is often argued that parties pathologically distort the real issues, dividing and polarising unnecessarily and thwarting good government.[5] But that is merely to say that, blinded by fear and ambition in the political battle, the parties misconstrue the specific failings of government, not that there is a state (above parties) without fault. Government on this view is still a disincentive to good works, but the fault is now seen to lie with the party system. However illuminating that may be as analysis of our political problems, it does not affect the issue — for in the terms of Romans 13 the party system should be counted as *part* of the powers that be in our country. They are disincentives to virtue — to fellowship and efficiency — *because* of the party system, without which our state would not be itself.

Moreover, even if it were true that our state in fact did good, we must reckon with the fact that the political processes by which it is worked are democratic. That not merely

4. Cf. E. Käsemann, 'Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13' in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, 1969), pp. 196-216; *An die Römer* (Tübingen, 1974), pp. 338-339.

5. S. E. Finer (ed.), *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform* (London, 1975).

stands in some tension with Paul's view of the divine ordination of the state and the consequent duty of submission. Less easy to handle is the assumption institutionalized in our kind of democracy, that governments are fallible, likely to misuse and be corrupted by the power they have. That basic assumption is not compatible with Romans 13:3. So our politics which institutionalize opposition have as part of their rhetoric the continual accusing of government as being a terror to good works — and this is more than rhetoric. The history of the development of our democratic, parliamentary state is also the history of a people's experience of the political unworkability of Romans 13 and of their attempts to cope with its consequences.

So then Romans 13 does not outline a theology of the state which we can take over. There are common ways of using the passage which do not do the text the credit of taking it seriously. Many Evangelicals may find the state as we know it 'as *by and large* concerned for the good' — but there is no qualifying 'by and large' in Paul's words. Some say 'Paul knew that no state was like his description'[6] but why then did he bother to write what turned out to be a momentously influential text which many have taken to endorse states like Nero's and Hitler's, taking verse 1 so concretely as to evacuate verse 3 of any force? Or was Paul simply saying government as compared to anarchic chaos is a good thing? That is an agreeable sentiment which endorses our positive interest in the state in principle, but it does not begin to do the theology of the state for us, or tell us how it should be done.

States in the Bible

If the Bible does not give us a theology of the state directly in a text like Romans 13:1ff., does it offer one indirectly, if one reads between the lines? When its whole story is read does it open up some perspectives within which the state is illuminated theologically? Perhaps it does: for the state appears repeatedly in its story of the saving works of God in the history of his people. On closer consideration, however, the state seems to be no more than part of the earthly *context* of the story of the people of God. Sometimes they are in conflict with the state, sometimes they benefit from it. In David and Solomon and their successors, God's way with his people

6. These suggestions came from some of the Conference discussion groups as a response to this paper.

takes stately form, but that arrangement did not last. The prophets re-opened the distinction between God's way with his people and the state, accepting the disasters of political history as the judgement of God. Out of this history, the kingdom of David is left to the New Testament as a symbol for the kingdom of God, a kingdom which Jesus is reported to have said is not of this world (Jn. 18:36), and was not going to be restored to Israel in that future which is our responsibility (Acts 1:6,7). The state is the stage setting for part of the play, not it seems, one of the *dramatis personae*, and when the story moves on, so the scene is changed and the state disappears from view. Take as an example the story of Joseph in Egypt. Egypt is the nearest the biblical world gets to our kind of centralized state, and Joseph becomes the ruler of it. It might look as though this story would provide a model of our kind of state under God's statesman, and that a positive theology of the state might be drawn from it. But the interest of the story focuses narrowly on 'Jacob and Sons' and God's dealings with them. That is why the narrative has no sensitivity about Joseph's inhumanity when he exploited the famine to buy up all the people's land and flocks, thus reducing them to slavery (Gen. 47:13ff.). Anyone interested in the state in itself might notice that such an oppressive extension of state power, such hard bargaining, does not fit morally with the giving and interpreting of Pharoah's dreams which were intended to enable Egypt to be prepared for famine and so to be brought through it. Moreover, it is the kind of conduct law and prophets denounced. In short, there is no coherent theory of the state in this story which can be affirmed by any one who has a biblical view of God or man. But Genesis is untroubled. It is interested in Joseph, not the state, so it records the process as another sign that God was with Joseph and he was (in Tyndale's words) a lucky fellow. Of course, it still happens that politicians use the state as though it existed to further their personal career, their family fortunes or the concerns of the powerful but we do not want to take such statemanship as a theological model. It offends both Christian and secular moral sense to approve what may admittedly have to be endured.

I am aware that this is a one-sided abbreviated summary of the Bible's presentation of the state. But it is one side. It must be reckoned with carefully if we want a biblical theology of the state rather than an eclectic exploitation of some of the Bible's sayings and stories (which will be vulnerable to con-

tradiction derived from other sayings and stories). It appears that when the Bible tells stories which involve the state, it is not concerned with the state and it need not surprise us if little or no coherent theology of the state with ethical grip is to be seen in them.

The formation of the new international people, the church, in the New Testament seems to strengthen the barrier between the way of God's people in this world and the state. The lack of interest in the state now becomes more of a conscious non-negotiable theological principle. At least, so it has often been interpreted. The church is made up of the regenerate to whom more is possible ethically than to the citizens and rulers of the state in general. The promise of the Gospel and its way is true and real within the church, within the personal and small community spheres where spiritual spontaneity operates and everything may be done in conscious faith. The gospel belongs to believers, and so its interpretation of the nature of human existence, its ethics and its promise are available in church, but not in the state, for the state does not, and cannot, believe the gospel. A great gulf seems fixed between what the church knows is true and demanding and effective for itself, and what is possible for the world.

The New Testament speaks in a theological idiom to which the distinction between church and non-church seems essential. It is a high dividing wall which stands in the way of the development of a theology of the state. The wall is broken through in conversion — but conversion is individual and personal. We, after the end of Christendom, no longer hope for the conversion of the state; most of us would not believe it was real conversion if it seemed to happen. The wall may somehow be broken at the end of time, when the kings of the earth will bring their glory and honour into the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 22:24). But, of course, a theology of the state must talk about what exists now, before that has come to pass. What meaning (if any) have all those things, including the state, which fill up the times before the end? Certainly when reading Revelation one is tempted to say that the meaning of the state is the wrath of God and the endurance of the saints. That is, simply, there is a sharp distinction between state and gospel, state and church.

Viewing the State from the Gospel

The Bible, then, does not give us a ready-made theology of

the state and even does a good deal to discourage the quest for one. Should we not accept the verdict of the Bible? Yet if we give up the quest we encounter a problem which Howard Marshall tackled in his paper in relation to demonology. Whatever reasons we as biblical Christians may have for not having a positive or theological view of the state, few if any of us practise accordingly. We do not live in an apocalyptic state nor do we want to. We are involved with and dependent on the state. Practically we have a positive view of it. Many of us serve the state or are paid more or less directly by it, without objecting, even with enthusiasm. The good order of the state enables us in some measure to be and do good. So we have good reason for not wishing its breakdown. The reading of the New Testament which I have been reporting would impel us into a standing inconsistency with ourselves. We need a more positive theology of the state to make honest men and women of ourselves. We do not really believe in the state as wrath of God. It gets nearer to what most of us believe to see the state as part of what may take place here and now, thanks to the creative forgiving and the mysterious patience of God. And that theme we should explore theologically. It turns out, so I believe, against first appearances, to be what the heart of the gospel commits us to.

There are two reasons why our first ways of looking at the biblical history and the New Testament yielded no adequate theology of the state. First, we were merely doing concordance work (looking up 'state' and trying to collate into a coherent picture all the references to it in the Bible) and not theological work, which is the attempt to think of, from and for God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Secondly, we noted the division the gospel has produced between church and non-church, as though we were historical observers studying only on the church side or even having some viewpoint above the world. Thus we saw that the historical, communal, institutional *outcome* of Christ is division between those believingly conscious of the gospel and those not. There is another way of reading the gospel, from the inside. We may identify with and participate in the *process*, which is the gospel, living in its spirit, which grieves over the division, as Christ wept over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41), reaches out beyond it in love and hope and does not accept the division as irremediably fixed. From this viewpoint what determines a Christian theology of the state is not the inescapable distinction of church and state, but the way of God in Christ, the gospel, which we

believe by living in and by it.

I need not remind you that God's way in Jesus is the way of the justification of the ungodly. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us — that is the way of God's love for the world. God's love was not, and so is not, reserved for those who love him, or merit it. God's love is movingly active before we turn to him: 'while we were yet sinners' (Rom. 5:6ff.). At this point, the distinction between church and non-church no longer determines us (2 Cor. 5:14ff.). The church exists and stands only because there is a God who justifies the ungodly, a God who does not wait for their permission to enact his love for them. The church believes in him and that is why it is happy to be the church. By believing that, however, its mere existence must become a sign of hope for the world. For the world now may see itself in the church — and learns that the world is not to be determined by its own sin — there is a God who is sovereign and who forgives; that is, when the chips are down, he is not determined in what he does to his creatures by what they do to him.

The church believes this good news, this incredible exciting news. That is what makes it church. But given the content of the message, with the process and passion of God which the message discloses, it cannot believe it for itself unless it believes it for others. Evangelicalism has insisted that each must accept Christ for himself; but that breeds an individualism which is not evangelical, true to gospel. The gospel says: Each must accept that Christ died for the other man, for other people, for all. 'Because he died for all', one can say, 'even I have some hope, some right to think he died for me because I am one of that "all".' We are forgiven — so we forgive. And the forgiveness comes out of that free recreative initiative of God which is what we put our trust in. To the exercise of forgiveness we are called. We are reconciled — because he who knew no sin did not hold fast to his purity but was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. And what is that righteousness? It is to be discovered as we take up the ministry of reconciliation, in our turn and in the same love that God in Christ showed.

God's becoming man in the incarnation is his moving to the other — man — showing himself to be for the other. This is the love which God is; as creator, judge and redeemer, he is essentially for the other. Jesus is the man for others. He is a social being and socially creative. In his being and action he includes others. He is not simply individual.

In his ministry, he attacked the leaders because they did not exist for others and did not bring them into community as their office required. He himself gathered and shepherded the lost sheep of the house of Israel, neglected by the official shepherds. When his disciples told him to send the crowds away to get food he said, '*You* give them something to eat'. The gospel to the elder brother is not an unnecessary invitation to return to the home he never left, but to rejoice at the return of the other, the prodigal sinner. The life of Jesus is the sign of the gospel in this repeated variegated turning to the other, by which he included tax-collectors and sinners in fellowship. Only those were left out who refused to see that the inclusion of sinners, the ultimate others, is the good news.[7] Jesus did not actually include everybody, but the movement of his mission was this unresting seeking for the lost. The universality is implicit; incomplete but inescapable. Our following in the way of Jesus is always drawn on by the same universal horizons.

Universally for Others

Now in relation to the gospel both church and state stand under the same call (or the same condemnation when they disobey). They are not universal in their practice or intention. They are *called* to universality but they do not fulfil it. But while we should criticize, we should be slow to condemn. For the logic and spirit of the gospel is not to dismiss the sinner from service and hope, but to forgive him by enabling him to begin again and serve fruitfully. In the spirit of the gospel the same goes for people gathered and ordered in institutions, like church and state. They are imperfect, inadequate. They fall short of their calling. Churches and states hover between exclusive tribalism and tentative reaching out towards the fullness of God's family in heaven and earth.[8] We who know the gospel should pray for and foster that partial but real reaching out to others which is institutionalized in church and state, rather than write them off when they fall short.

Mrs. Thatcher once contrasted the Good Samaritan and the welfare state. She would put more faith in spontaneous unorganized neighbourliness than bureaucratic provision. I

7. Cf. Haddon Willmer (ed.), *Christian Faith and Political Hopes* (London, 1979), pp. 127ff.

8. D.E. Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity* (London, 1976), chap. 1.

wonder what the Good Samaritan would say about it. I fancy that he would have said that uncoerced neighbourliness is part of the joy of being human in God's image and fellowship. But he might say that it would also have been good to have a state which encouraged priests and levites to be more neighbourly, that discouraged the unneighbourliness of thieves, and that (since the Good Samaritan would not be on the road every day, though people have accidents there every day) it would be good to set aside someone to be on permanent watch. The feeding of the five thousand roots the work of Tear Fund in the gospel although Tear Fund's operations have more similarities with a state's methods than the miracle of Jesus. In the same way, the state as systematic and extended love of neighbours is a form of the Good Samaritan. In the state, the Good Samaritan may be given a longer reach — the *sign* of God's love given something more of that abiding presence, that ever watchfulness, that faithfulness which are characteristic of God in his heavenly fullness. And the Good Samaritan is the man on God's side, the man who responds to and shares in the love of God by practising it.[9]

The basic movement — towards others, for others, to affirm, uphold and improve their being in fellowship together — which occurs savingly in Jesus Christ and in God's election of his old and new peoples is also fundamentally but not unambiguously characteristic of the state. Out of faithfulness to the gospel, a theology of the state will make much of this *possibility*; it is no more than posssibility. When we decline to interpret the state theologically in these hopeful and demanding Christocentric terms, theology practically denies the gospel by failing to be 'for others', having the kind of outreach with wide horizons that is revealed in Jesus Christ. Do we have a gospel 'for others' as individuals, but not for others as they are bonded together in the forms and activities of the state?

In David Cook's terms, I am asking for the development of a participant existentialist theology of the state, not an observer theology. The state is a possibility we as people redeemed to humanity in Christ are called to seek to realize, in so far as it may be an instrument for fulfilling our human calling to love our neighbour effectively. The state is not given ready-made. It is continually made or not made by people so that they may be together by being for one another.

9. This was written before I had seen R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London, 1978), pp. 177ff.

We all share in realizing or blocking the possibility, willingly or unwillingly. The state that relies democratically on its citizens is likely, so Bernard Crick argues, to be more effective as a state as well as more open than a coercive undemocratic one.[10] But there is no state that can exist without getting its members somehow to contribute to its making.

If the state is a human task, a human calling, and that human calling is defined in Jesus Christ, Christians must seek to participate in all states, even if the only participation allowed by the powers that be is to pay taxes, to obey the good laws and suffer for resisting the bad and to pray. Prayer can hardly be stopped, but we are reminded of the subversive significance of political prayer by the story of Daniel. To pray for the state is also to confess its sins and lament its short-comings, and to open it before God, if there be no other forum, to the disturbing vocation of being human. The Christian certainly wants fuller participation, a more open and neighbourly life than such a state is likely to foster. Neighbourly love cannot be encouraged very much by a state that does not trust and enable its members to work for each other. But in all states, following the way of Christ points in that direction and will exploit every opportunity of moving along that way.

Critical and Supportive

It is clear that this approach yields a positive affirmation of the state as a calling, as human possibility; it is supportive. But it is also critical; it gives us a plain yet inexhaustible criterion for judging the state. As we know too well, the state as organized people, or public person 'for others', is in practice more often empty promise than successful performance. The state — or those who possess its commanding heights — often exploits its profession of being for others and serving human values in order to maintain its grip on gullible people whom it uses and even destroys. Then the state denies its promise which is in harmony with God's way. Because the state or man in the state has a *real* possibility of being for others, its not being for others is so painful a disappointment, so grave a guilt and so unnecessary a lost opportunity.

10. Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament* (2nd edn., London, 1970), p. 18.

But it will be said, the theologian ought to know beforehand that the failure is inevitable, for the state and man in the state are both fallen. There has been a good deal of talk about the fall in this conference, and it seems to me we have a lot more work to do on its significance for social ethics.

I would like to make two comments. First, according to the doctrine, nothing human is unfallen. Therefore it may not be used selectively to explain the difference between relatively successful and unsuccessful human enterprises as though only the latter are fallen. The relatively good is as much fallen as the relatively bad. In our practical concern for the state, we do not expect unfallen perfection; we are concerned for preferring and fostering the relatively good as much as possible. Remember Paul's qualifications in Rom. 12:18, '*If possible, so far as it depends on you,* live peaceably with all'. Even though we are all fallen, practising such relative distinctions is possible and worthwhile. Secondly, it follows that Christians are not to interpret the fall as though it dooms to hopelessness every human endeavour. For Christians do not *believe in* the fall. They believe in God the Redeemer and they think with him in and about the world and themselves. God's preservation of the murderer Cain, a kind of shadow of redemption, is a sign that from the beginning God did not let fallenness and evil have a free course. The coupling of the execution of judgement and the restraint of destructive revenge is part of the essence of the state (Gen. 4:9-15).

Christians approach the state hopefully, because they think in terms of the 'for-other' reality of the gospel. Whether they expect little or much from the state, they ought to find it interesting that in the state (as in other human organizations of which it is an example), both the supportive and the critical are present in a variety of its institutions and processes.

On the supportive side, there can be no state without institutions which create power out of the energies of a crowd of people, power with intelligible and usable forms. To make laws and take decisions about what the community will be and do requires particular kinds of power, which must be fashioned out of available resources, above all, out of people who in the state become citizens. But the state is not only the making and making available of power; it also must include the direction of power, through institutions and processes of criticism, checking and balancing. To exist, states need both 'body' and 'will' and on the critical side, 'intelligence' and 'conscience'. The police are a stark example here. A people

without police are not a secure or efficient community. So police power must be created by and for community. But once made, police power must be controlled or it will work against community. This example of course points us to urgent practical tasks in our own country as elsewhere. If the state is both the making and the criticism of communal power, for the fulfilment of the human vocation in the way of Christ, we can expect that the Christian affirmation and criticism of the state can be played out within the political process, not just by commenting on it from outside. As citizens and politicians we may live the Christian life within the processes of the state, and we may work with other men, who are not Christians, but whose thinking and action is shaped by their participation in the human task of the state, so that it takes on in some measure the 'for-other' character of God's way.

Conflict and Coercion

There has been no room in this paper for descriptions of the modern state and states, but I hope it may be evident that some of the essential elements of the state that the reader cannot help but be acquainted with are being spoken of, albeit with an abstractness that derives more from brevity than theology. It is well to emphasize that the state is not unitary or simple, however much the way we speak about it may give that impression. It is complex and conflictual. The social, industrial, and ethnic conflicts of peoples and traditions take on stately form (e.g. devolution and the 'United Kingdom'). Further, because the state has a multiplicity of tasks and purposes, in response to various real or felt needs, it develops manifold institutions so that conflict gets institutionalized in its framework and policies. There is a tension between the Treasury and spending departments, or between education and industry (as the Green Paper on Education, 1978, showed). The mere existence of the state as coercive (however gentle and just it may be) provokes conflict with a humanity properly dreaming of freedom and so feeling oppressed.[11] The state is one form of human reckoning with the coercive limits of created existence. It has an uncertain relation with finitude; it embodies and enacts a general recognition of

11. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate them* (London, 1970), pp. 32, 47.

finitude but at the same time, it is not bound to accept any one particular finite order as necessary.[12] So, for example, we may agree there ought to be a wages policy because there is, at any point in time, only a finite cake to share, but 'we' leave ourselves free to refuse a policy which would bear hardly on our group, because 'we' count ourselves a special case. If all groups decline to accept at least some share of the burden of finitude, the state as a recognition of the general fact of finitude becomes unjust or unworkable or both. To this insecurity in principle of the state must be added its ambiguity. Sometimes it uses its coercive powers to organize people to defy the coercive limits of their situation (and so a nation is made to fight to the death or the U.S.A. wastes resources to put the first man on the moon). Or we may use coercive powers to enable us to perceive more accurately what are the limits of human being and how we may live harmoniously and hopefully with and within them. Both the police and the present-day ecological and environmental debates are relevant examples here. They both illustrate that it is not enough to define the state as conflictual. The state exists only where there is some measure of social and more than momentary *resolution* of the conflicts which are inherent in man's social existence and action. The state has value precisely because running conflict and unresolved clashes of interest are not to be lived with. However conflictual its components the state cannot be described simply in terms of them.

Forgiveness and Futility

Even when power-making and power-criticizing functions are present, states may still fail for lack of adequate resolution of the conflicts between these aspects. They may even not get that far, they may not be able to build power adequate to the situation they are in; or they may fail in self-criticism, either by complacency or by judging themselves by inadequate criteria. The state is always in some measure a failure — like most human enterprises — sometimes a total failure. Whether it knows it or not, the state survives failure by something akin to that forgiveness of God which is his mercy over all his works. There is a dark night of institutions, as David Jenkins has called it. The state lives through a cross and finds renewal like life from the dead in the vocation to

12. Cf. Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue* (Danube edition, Hutchinson, London, 1969), pp. 348-349.

being human together. There might here be the call for a special Christian ministry to the state. For the state desperately seeks permanence in a world where everything passes away, and all language becomes self-justificatory in politics where it is made so costly to admit mistakes. The pride of the state which appears essential to its being is a destructive guilt, through which it denies and loses its humanity, pretending it is as God. It is not: a state lives, like everything human, by the patience and forgiveness of God.

The church witnesses to forgiveness, not least by sharing in the ministry of forgiveness. When the state falters or fails, we experience what Paul calls *futility* in Romans 8:20. In a creation that promises so much, the good seems so long in coming, or is thwarted before it bears fruit. Politics is littered with the debris of unfinished enterprises, lost opportunities, seemingly insoluble problems like N. Ireland and unbearable pains like the Holocaust and the long-drawn-out hunger of millions to which no end is as yet in sight. No wonder people become apathetic about the state especially as an instrument for fulfilling the human vocation. At this low point it is not ethics we need so much as theology, or better a gospel, faith and spirituality, as in Romans 8, that hopes and shares hope for salvation even in and for this world.

I think we have sometimes talked in this conference as though if only we were to get our social ethics right, we should be able to do the right thing and escape the confusions and mistakes of politics as we know them. That is only half the story and on its own it is untrue. It may indeed be altogether untrue.

For life, and politics, continually requires us to make decisions with inadequate knowledge or wisdom or goodwill — to act out of weakness — and so to blunder on into futility. Ethics will not save us from that at every point. What we need is to be ready and able to live through the mistakes we make. The kind of permanence the state may rightly seek to have is not unbroken, simple continuance but repeated renewal, within and against futility. Let us, in and for the state and so effectively for man, trust and look to God who raises the dead, and not rely on even the best ethics with its delusory perfectionist promise. We should affirm the state supportively and critically, as a human enterprise, because in itself, even in its futility, it is also a standing resistance to despair in the midst of futility. We should also criticize and resist the state when it allies itself with the denial of futility, when it grasps

heaven, Babel-like, or accepts inhumanity with resignation, or when it is the agent of all that makes futility seem the real end of this world.

Reading List

J. H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, Kansas, 1964).
U. Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz* (London, 1978).
E.W. Lefever (ed.), *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives* (Baltimore, 1972).
Karl Barth, *Against the Stream* (London, 1954).
D. A. Lane (ed.), *Liberation Theology — an Irish Dialogue* (Dublin, 1977).
Industrial Mission Association, *Theology and Politics* (Manchester, 1978).
H. Willmer (ed.), *Christian Faith and Political Hopes* (London, 1979).

Questions for Discussion

1 How recent a development is the state as we know it today, and what future has it got? How should such considerations affect the development of a theology of the state?

2 Does the Bible give us a ready-made theology of the state, or at least a do-it-yourself kit with clear instructions?
If yes: what is it?
If no: what is the next move?

3 What does the unity of God mean if we cannot rely on God to be the same God for all men, or the same in both church and state? If he is the same, what is the real difference between church and state?

4 Is Jesus Christ the 'one word of God' (Barmen Declaration) or is the theology of the state to be developed on some other basis?

5 What promise of an adequate theological ethic of the state is there in the style of argument revolving round the calling of the citizen, as used in the Koinonia Declaration, e.g. para. 2:

> The Bible gives us guidelines as to what the duties of the citizen as well as civil government are. Accordingly we believe that it is the duty of the civil government to protect everybody within its territory, and further that each man has the right to such protection, in order to enable him to do good, that is, to fulfil his calling (without obstruction by anyone whatsoever) towards God and therefore also towards his neighbour as his fellow citizen and fellow human being, in all human relationships. This means *inter alia* that:
>
> i. the citizen as a human being has the divinely ordained right and duty of displaying charity, that is, *inter alia,* in being merciful, practising community, promoting justice and mutual admonition, towards all people, irrespective of who they are, and especially to the weak and underprivileged;
>
> ii. no responsible Christian can properly exercise his calling and duties with regard to a political society unless (a) he is able to obtain sufficient information, having a bearing on his calling and/or duties in the State; (b) he is able to freely express his responsible opinion and his right to be heard is acknowledged.

6 What theological bases are there for Christian loyalty to the *imperfect* state, or must we choose between compromises that go against conscience and a principled anarchist opposition to the state?