

The World

Introduction

Bonhoeffer and Köster shared the sense of being in the center of a world crisis. As German citizens this had a political relevance and as Christians it sharpened and shaped their theological thinking. The demands of the world were of a magnitude which made it impossible to contemplate both the nature of the church and salvation in isolation. The world and its demands set the agenda and context in which Christians of that time had to act and discern ways of remaining faithful followers of Christ. How Bonhoeffer and Köster responded to this challenge in their separate contexts requires careful unpicking.

The historical context of Bonhoeffer's and Köster's world was Germany's Third Reich period. It represented an environment where the intrusion of the state into every aspect of life was coupled with an attempt to demand total allegiance of every citizen. The Nazi state ideology sought to claim total commitment and conformity, thus effectively negating the claim God places on those he calls to follow. This total claim, indicative of totalitarian systems, is contrary to the Christian view of being in but not of the world. The totalitarian claim of the Third Reich came as a gradual process and was only expressed bluntly at a late stage. At first, the focus was on the half-truth that every Christian was part of the world and had therefore an obligation towards it. The Nazi's method was to equate being German with being part of the German people (*Volk*). At one level German identity (*Volkstum*) corresponded with a culture that had been informed and shaped by strong Christian traditions. However, at another more basic level, it simply referred

to a racial identity. The struggle of a disciple inhabiting such a context was to remain faithful to God's story, a story always engaged in the transformation of the world. Part of the gospel's transforming power was finding new and apt expressions of making the reality of Christ appropriate to every culture and time. However, therein lay also a danger, especially when the world began to use and twist the gospel story for its own purposes. In these instances a disciple had to remain faithful and discerning. An important safeguard and reference point in this task was to manage the double claims on the life of the disciple correctly. First there was God's claim and secondly there was the disciples' commission into the world. In drawing a distinction between the two, freedom and inner space are created that resist any attempts of the world to claim the whole person.

Yet, when a follower of Jesus faces a political system of the world demanding total conformity (*Gleichschaltung*) a conflict becomes inevitable. Helmut Moltke, one of the conspirators arrested after the failed assassination attempt against Hitler, exasperated the Nazi Judge Roland Freisler by his Christian stance. During the trial Freisler shouted, "We and Christianity are the same in one thing only: We demand the entire person!"¹ In a letter to his wife Moltke wrote: "I stood before Freisler not as a landowner, not as a nobleman, not as a Prussian, not even indeed as a German—no, I stood before him as a Christian and as nothing else."²

During this late stage³ of the Third Reich the clash between the two opposing worldviews was in the open. Yet, both prior to and after these desperate last gasps of the Third Reich, every Christian had and still needs to ponder how to apply the words of Jesus, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."⁴

Individuals Shaped by Their Context

Bonhoeffer and Köster were equally exposed to a totalitarian ideology by the simple fact of being German citizens. Both had serious misgivings from as early as 1932 and both had the courage to voice these publicly and maintain a critical opposition towards their own state.⁵ They inhabited the same world. However, their life stories were set in different and unique sets of

1. Barnett, *For the Soul*, 203.

2. *Ibid.*, 203.

3. The assassination attempt was made 20 July 1944.

4. Matt 22:21.

5. Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 90. Graf-Stuhlhofer, *Öffentliche Kritik*, 140–152.

circumstances. Their political outlooks were shaped by family backgrounds and circumstances as were their respective tasks and realms of influence. Access to sensitive information and hard facts about the dark side of the regime were available to Bonhoeffer through his family connections while Köster was far removed from these. The context in which each had to make responsible ethical choices was quite different and distinct.

In spite of the unique set of circumstances surrounding each of these individuals, both, by virtue of their opposition to their world (the political realities of the Third Reich), were forced to reflect theologically on the Christian's role and duty towards the world. What were the key concepts that guided them in this struggle and are these still useful today? Rather than researching the historical context both prior to and during the Third Reich this thesis' focus is to explore how men like Bonhoeffer and Köster were able to see beyond the immediate historical context, discerning dangers where others merely saw opportunities. Part of the answer to this question is that both knew and critically evaluated concepts, ideas and words that were used at the time, either unthinkingly, inappropriately or simply with the intent to mould people in order to support a particular viewpoint that favored the worldview of the time.

Language provides the framework for thought. Concepts and meanings are transported by language and our worldview is primarily built by the words we use in order to describe it. Words and concepts are however rooted in history; they come to the present from the past. However, the meaning of words is not locked in the past, for every living language continues to develop and change. Nevertheless, clear thinking demands an awareness of how critical ideas and concepts have evolved and developed. The language of the Third Reich used concepts that had deep German historical roots but frequently used these to support their nationalistic slant—a slant not only heard and believed by the general public, but also by Christians who were members of Germany's varied churches. Being a follower of Jesus in the world always demanded a certain political response to the world. What then was the political language available to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Arnold Köster?

Exploring Available (Theological) Language

Clearly, the reference point for Bonhoeffer and Köster was the Bible. Yet, this is where the problem begins. Can one find a uniform message in the Scriptures concerning a disciple's life in the world? How can one coherently interpret key passages like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), the

apostles' instructions concerning "governing authorities"⁶ and the message of Revelation with its veiled but unmistakable warnings concerning destructive political power?

The theological language available to Bonhoeffer and Köster was Luther's *Zwei Reiche Lehre*, his teaching on the two realms. Luther's thoughts were a theological attempt to wrestle with the issue of Christian political responsibility, freedom and duty to Jesus. This Lutheran political theory had become deeply embedded in German history, culture and outlook. In varying degrees all German political structures since Luther were partly shaped and informed by his treatise on *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*.⁷ Luther's original target audience was the German nobility, who had sought his advice as they felt torn between their obligation to rule (i.e., punish criminals, defend their subjects) and their desire to follow the ethical precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. Subsequently, German nobility considered it their basic Christian duty to support and further Christian values in their realms. The abdication of the German Kaiser in 1918 brought an end to the monarchy and the introduction of democracy. The turbulent period of the Weimar Republic (1919–33) made it a necessity to rethink and reconstitute the state, its political structures and the role of the "governing authority" (*Obrigkeits*). For the first time the right of religious freedom and freedom of expression became part of the new democratic state constitution. This brought legitimacy to Free Church organizational structures; nevertheless, many of its members still expressed unease concerning the state's new neutral position in matters of faith.⁸

Luther's political theory provided the language and resource for every thoughtful protestant Christian attempting to evaluate and respond to these changes. Paradoxically, it was also the language used by Christians who were either ardent supporters of the Nazi regime like the German Christians or Christians who preferred to remain politically neutral and disengaged. Some scholars claim that "the failure of the German church to oppose Hitler in the 1930s is widely seen as reflecting the inadequacies of Luther's political thought."⁹ What are these "inadequacies"? Are they found in Luther's teaching itself or in its subsequent interpretation? What were these interpretations and what did each one seek to address? How did these views impact Bonhoeffer and Köster and how did they respond?

6. Rom 13:1–7; 2 Pet 2:13 NRSV.

7. Luther, *Christian in Society*.

8. Zimmermann, *Zwischen Selbsterhaltung und Anpassung*, 12.

9. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 207–8.

Luther's Teaching

A cornerstone of the reformation was Luther's rediscovery of the gospel, primarily expressed by the phrase "justification by faith alone." At a practical level the growing community of those who shared this insight had to find ways of living this faith in the historical circumstances and context of the sixteenth century. Faith was not—and never is—just a matter of doctrine. Convictions translate themselves into practice and thus need to respond to the world a believer indwells and encounters. Part of the context of Luther's ethical and political considerations was his polemic against the Catholic view that Christians were called into different levels of perfection. According to that view perfect obedience was only possible to those who had committed themselves to a monastic life. Christians who chose to remain in the world had to adhere to a less strict regime. "In order not to make heathens of the princes, they [the sophists] taught that Christ did not command these things but merely offered them as advice or counsel to those who would be perfect. . . . Their poisonous error has spread thus through the whole world until everyone regards these teachings of Christ not as precepts binding to all Christians alike but as mere counsels for the perfect."¹⁰

However, Luther's teaching was also a polemic against radical claims of emerging groups whose intention was either to withdraw from the world, or reimagine society in a totally different way. In either case the nub of the question was; what are the responsibilities and duties of a disciple of Christ whose life is intricately tied to a world with its own unique structures and orders? Luther began to address these questions in the year 1522. The basic outline of his political theory was given in a series of six sermons which he delivered before the princes at Weimar. The treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, was completed in the same year and published in 1523.¹¹

The unique contribution of Luther's teaching on the two realms lies in the fact that he sought to differentiate clearly between matters of individual faith and freedom versus life in the world and duty. He then attempted to unite these key areas of life into a coherent whole. By defining these distinctive roles and responsibilities of the church and the world he gave the Christian community a theological model which subsequently shaped the political world of Germany.¹²

10. Luther, *Christian in Society*, 82.

11. *Ibid.*, 79–80.

12. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 326–50.

Historical Context and Necessities

Luther's theological rediscovery of the Christian gospel and his attempt to reform the church triggered political consequences of great magnitude. When the church authorities rejected the reform attempts made by this insignificant German monk, he and those who had accepted the new teaching were forced to make tough decisions.¹³ The radical break with the all-pervasive presence of the Roman Catholic Church made it necessary to adapt and change the political situation on the ground. The Christendom worldview of the sixteenth century western world was all-encompassing. There was no clear distinction between secular and sacred, both were tied together into an intricate web. A political leader had to fulfill and maintain various obligations that were part of the political feudal system of the day, including the charge to protect the lives of his subjects and to support the church in its task of preserving the faith in the realm. A member of the clergy had pastoral responsibilities in his parish and frequently gave counsel and advice to the ruler. Political rulers had little desire to interfere with the pastoral and spiritual duties of their priests, but were nevertheless obliged to use their executive powers to combat heresy. Luther's political ruler, Duke Frederick the Wise, had to deal with this rebellious monk if he believed him to be a heretic. Luther's life and the survival of the reformation were politically dependent on the protection and support of the German princes. Sixteenth century Germany was a conglomeration of fiercely independent states (*Länder*) each ruled by a prince (*Landesfürst*) who had pledged an oath of allegiance to the Spanish Catholic Habsburger emperor Karl V. The emperor's ability to interfere in internal affairs of the various states was however limited.

The break of some of Germany's *Länder* with the unified Western church, marked a paradigmatic shift which in turn produced political uncertainty, friction and stress. An important part of this general upheaval was also the Anabaptist movement. It consisted of groups of Christians who rediscovered the Scriptures and sought to think outside the Christendom paradigm. Werner Packull made a distinction between what he called Communal and Princely Reformation. "Communal Reformation was implicitly or explicitly premised on the notion that the local congregation constituted the hermeneutic community, qualified to discern the meaning of Scripture."¹⁴

13. Oberman, *Luther*, 197–206.

14. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, 9.

These radical grass-root community experiments needed a political environment that gave them legitimacy and support denied to them by Lutheran and Catholic rulers. These new political experiments were most successful in distant and forgotten corners of the empire or in independent regions like Zurich where powerful and autonomous city authorities were persuaded and won over by these new ideas.

Once it became clear that the Catholic Church resisted the reform efforts¹⁵ Germany's princes of the various states had to decide either to remain Catholic, which was the explicit order of the emperor Karl, or to seek some kind of new religious independence. Some of these princes also were concerned about possible peasant uprisings and attempts from the bottom end of the hierarchical structured society to construct a different and more just and egalitarian society.¹⁶ The political leaders were faced with difficult choices. Should they stick to the tried and tested path of maintaining a close cooperation with ecclesial authorities? After all, part of the role of religion was to provide cohesion to a very diverse and otherwise fragmented empire. Or should they listen to and be persuaded by these new ideas? At a political level the question was whether these new ideas could be practically applied. Who would give moral leadership? What was the role and responsibility of each ruler and would it not be political suicide to break one's oath of allegiance?

The purpose of this all too brief historical summary is firstly to draw attention to the political context that prompted and shaped Luther's political theory of the *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*. Second, it also reveals that every model of political thought demands frequent reapplication especially during times of significant political change.

Two Kingdoms

Cargill Thompson argues in his book *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* that Luther's political theory was informed by St. Augustine's *City of God*.¹⁷ However, Luther was too creative as a theologian to simply copy Augustine's thoughts. He developed and sharpened these ideas and applied these to speak into the context he himself faced.

Luther developed a genuine political theory in a way that Augustine, whose ideas always remained in the realm of the nebulous and abstract, never did. Whereas Augustine's ideas were so vague as to be capable in subsequent

15. The pope excommunicated Luther in January 1521.

16. Bender, *Anabaptist Vision*. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*. Snyder, "Birth and Evolution."

17. Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

centuries of being interpreted in a wide variety of different ways, Luther's were relatively clear, concrete, and unmistakable in their meaning.¹⁸

Paradoxically, what is said clearly and unmistakably is never above subsequent distortion and misleading simplifications. Theologians have continued to debate and argue about a proper interpretation of Luther's teaching and have over the centuries come to different conclusions. The eminent German Lutheran scholar Paul Althaus wrote in 1957 a defense entitled, "Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms in the Line of Fire."¹⁹ The title alone makes it clear that unmistakable meaning has proved to be elusive. The task at hand is thus fraught with difficulties and needs to be focused in its intention. The aim is to gain an insight into the basic ideas of Luther's teaching and to explore how the various developing interpretations of the so called *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* impacted Christians like Bonhoeffer and Köster facing the Third Reich ideology.

A distinct feature of Luther was his extensive use of dichotomies.²⁰ This was also true for Luther's teaching on the two realms (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*). His political insights were often directly related to other dichotomies he had employed in order to describe the reality of the Christian faith.

According to Luther every human being was utterly corrupted by sin and therefore unable to attain, even through the most rigorous efforts, a right standing before a holy God. Salvation must therefore be in its entirety an act of God and freely granted to the sinner. Justification remained impossible for humans but was made possible through the saving grace which was granted in and through Jesus Christ. A sinner's trust (faith alone) in the crucified and risen Christ altered his standing before God. Yet, even though this resulted in a passive righteousness of the believer, the person was still rooted into this life and world and therefore remained a sinner.²¹ "Justification does not remove sin or make the Christian perfect; it simply means

18. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 3.

19. Althaus, *Um die Wahrheit des Evangeliums*, 263–92. The chapter title is: "Luthers Lehre von den beiden Reichen im Feuer der Kritik." Althaus addressed these issues as early as 1935. He gave a lecture in Hannover which was subsequently published under the title *Church and State according to Lutheran Doctrine (Kirche und Staat nach lutherischen Lehre)*.

20. Some of Luther's key concepts are: Law and Gospel; Flesh and Spirit; Old and New Man; *simul justus, simul peccator*.

21. Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, 83. Commenting on Rom 4:7: "Believers inwardly are always sinners; therefore justified from without. . . . By 'inwardly' I mean, as we appear in our own judgment and opinion, by from 'without' I mean, as we appear before God and His judgment. We are righteous 'outside ourselves' when our righteousness does not flow from our works; but is ours alone by divine imputation."

that his sins are no longer counted against him.”²² Nevertheless, becoming a new creation had direct ethical consequences, for the savior was also Lord. A Christian was now part of two separate kingdoms. His allegiance to the world (temporal authority) remained simply by virtue of being born into a particular societal structure. However, by virtue of the new birth into the kingdom of God, the Christian was now also part of the spiritual realm. “He [the Christian] is obligated to the emperor and to Christ at the same time; to the emperor for his outward life, to Christ inwardly with his conscience and in faith.”²³

What God offered, salvation, was furthermore informed by the dichotomy of law and gospel. In both God’s will was revealed. The law revealed God’s will and acted as a “relentless accuser.”²⁴ It brought to light the tragic effects of sin in every human being. Nevertheless, the harsh and condemning labor of the law awakened, scared and prompted the human soul to search for God’s mercy and to find it in the gospel. The merciful *yes* of the gospel went beyond and overcame the wrathful *no* of the law. Thus although the law was superseded by the gospel there remained a continuing secular or political role for the law. “We are not freed from the Law by the Gospel and are still subject to it, the Christian also needs the Law in this world. For since he remains a sinner, he remains in need of the Law to curb his sinful nature. Thus the Law is still binding not only on unbelievers but also on Christians in this life. It provides the basis of natural law and of human laws which are ultimately an emanation of divine law.”²⁵

Luther’s teaching on the two realms built on previous faith-related dogmatic insights and incorporated these into his political theory, the *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*. The foremost concern for Luther was to draw a clear line between what was to be seen as the spiritual and what was to be seen as the temporal realm. In his view, mixing these two distinct realms with each other was a recipe for disaster.²⁶ A unique strength of this teaching was distinguishing between “what is specifically Christian and what is generically human,”²⁷ thus providing a realistic account of the tension a Christian experiences regarding life in the world. The fine art of drawing a distinction may

22. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 21.

23. Althaus, *Ethics*, 62.

24. *Bekennnisschriften*, 194: “Denn das Gesetz klagt uns ohne Unterlaß an, dieweil wir es nicht vollkömmllich halten können.”

25. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 27.

26. Nygren, “Luther’s Doctrine,” 301.

27. Braaten, “Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” 500.

be summarized by pointing out three distinct but complementary levels or layers²⁸ in Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*.

A useful analogy might be a painting. Looking at a finished painting one would initially see all of it. For instance, background, groups or clusters and the details of a single character set in the foreground. Further reflection might lead one to contemplate how the artist moved from one level to the next. Did the painter start with the individual face, filling in the background at a later stage, or vice versa? Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* can be likened to a complex and intricate painting that seeks to discern order and symmetry in how God provided structure for the world and how he personally and mercifully engaged in the gospel story with the world.

God versus Devil

Luther's distinction between God's kingdom (*regnum dei*) and the devil's kingdom, also referred to as the kingdom of the world (*regnum diaboli, regnum mundi*), provides the background for the other features. In this, Luther's thoughts were very close to Augustine.²⁹ The reality of a conflict raging within God's creation, ever since Genesis chapter 3, determined and influenced how God's will and rule were worked out. At this background level the duality of the two kingdoms represent a total antithesis. The Scriptures reveal the ultimate and final victor, yet, until the eschatological finale, all of life, and in particular the use and exercise of political power, was shaped by this struggle between God's versus the devil's rule. The dynamics of human history and life were dramatically shaped by this antithetical background setting. It was this larger conflict that made the other layers of the painting necessary.³⁰ They became the tools or "weapons God uses in order to restrain and counter the '*regnum diaboli*.' The character and method of the other layers is therefore largely determined by the needs of that struggle."³¹

28. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 36–61. Thompson refers to them as three elements.

29. Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 286–88.

30. Althaus, *Ethics*, 50. Paul Althaus was of the opinion that Luther largely abandoned this focus at a later stage of his life. He wrote: "If this observation is correct . . . Luther no longer bases his doctrine on the opposition between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan which originally characterized his doctrine."

31. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 39. Nesson, "Reappropriating," 306: "Luther's two kingdoms teaching is not about two separate and unrelated realms, but rather about two different types of divine activity. . . . In God's contest with the kingdom of Satan, God employs two distinct strategies to thwart Satan's influence and bring forth the kingdom of God."

Two God-Ordained Orders

To continue with the painting analogy, set within the larger background, people cluster and populate the painting. According to Luther, God provided a twofold order for humanity. On the one hand there was a worldly order (*weltliches Regiment*) and on the other there was a spiritual order (*geistliches Regiment*).³² The key insight was that *both* are God-ordained orders and were therefore not in conflict with each other. Although God remained largely hidden in the worldly order he nevertheless provided life sustaining structures for all of humanity through it. For Luther the realm of this worldly order included not only political authority and governments but also other life preserving structures. His list included marriage, family and households, property, business and the various stations and vocations God had instituted. The principle function and task of *weltliches Regiment* was to establish external peace and to restrain chaos. Its primary task was the ordering of the external world, which included the use of the sword in order to punish and protect the people from “all manner of rascality.”³³ These external structures, upheld by the rule of law, customs and norms of a human society, were framing and maintaining a context in which life could flourish.

Of equal importance was the *geistliches Regiment*, the spiritual kingdom which had been established by Christ. Luther insisted that “neither one is sufficient in the world without the other.”³⁴ This spiritual rule addressed the inner person for it was the work of the Holy Spirit that transformed hearts and established righteousness before God. The offer of salvation was extended through the gospel not through the works of law. The church’s task was to proclaim the message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Temporal government on the other hand needed to preserve order by justly punishing evildoers. Although Luther addresses a society structured around the Christendom paradigm he nevertheless was somewhat weary of it. “Christ’s government does not extend over all men, rather, Christians are always a minority in the midst of non-Christians.”³⁵

Luther argued that God employed a twofold strategy when dealing with the world. On the one hand, often referred to as his left hand, God maintained order via secular or temporal governments.³⁶ However, with his

32. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 38.

33. Luther, *Christian in Society*, 92.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Nesson, “Reappropriating,” 306: “God uses two hands in the battle against Satan: 1) a right hand strategy that involves the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Holy Sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s

right hand, God reached into the world through the message and life of his son Jesus Christ. The realm to the left was dominated by law, government (*Obrigkeits*) and justice. The realm to the right was concerned with the gospel, church, salvation and forgiveness. Christians, amongst themselves were not given the task of preserving order; after all they are instructed to suffer injustice willingly. However, the neighbor's well being was best served by these orders of preservation until the gospel message could be heard and received. Thus temporal structures, in as much as they are good ("*gut Regiment*"³⁷) served the gospel by establishing peace and justice. Therefore God's eternal purposes, made known by the proclamation of the gospel (right hand), needed the temporal context of an ordered world (left hand). According to Luther, each was tied to the other in as much as no good reign could be sustained without the revelation and instruction of God's word and conversely godly preaching and teaching required order and protection.

The Individual Christian Is "Christ & Weltmensch"

Having surveyed the painting's background and the two dominant clusters or groups, the eyes are now drawn to the individual person positioned in the foreground. Luther's focus was the life of the individual Christian which manifested itself in a duality of existence.³⁸ First there was the external and natural order, the realm of the flesh. For Luther the term flesh referred to basic physical needs and necessities but spoke also of the sinful cravings of the flesh. Human existence in this realm was always set in the context of complex interconnections with other people. These human interactions were ideally fair, orderly and conducted in a loving and responsible manner. Luther contrasted the corporal existence with the Christian life lived solely in relation to God, by virtue of a personal faith. Luther insisted that faith can only be discovered freely and embraced individually. Such a faith issued into a new life in the Spirit. Essentially, Spirit-life expressed itself concretely in obedience to the double command, to love God and to love one's neighbor.

Supper and 2) a left hand strategy that involves the establishment of just order in society through the institutions of the state, economy, law, education, family and church. Always these two strategies complement one another. Never are they in competition with each other. God is ambidextrous and very coordinated in the use of both hands to save and preserve the world."

37. Althaus, *Um die Wahrheit*, 267: "Es kann kein Reich oder Polizei ohne das Priestertum und Lehre oder Erkenntnis der Wahrheit glücklich und ruhig bestehen; herwiederum auch kein Priestertum oder heilsame Lehre der Wahrheit recht gehalten und geführt werden ohne zeitlich Regiment guter Polizei."

38. Thompson, *Political Thought*, 58.

The Sermon on the Mount was a detailed description of this new Spirit-life available to all those who, knowing of their own poverty of the Spirit, were now equipped by the presence of the Spirit.

This two-fold tension, belonging both to God's new kingdom and the world, was an existential experience for every Christian. Being part of the structures of the world inevitably demanded active involvement and the humble acceptance of world-related roles and responsibilities. In the temporal or secular role (*Amt*) a Christian might be placed in a position of authority or service. Within that realm it was the role of the external law to guide and assist. However, a believer's inner rule, guide and hope was the gospel. Set within the complexities of life, a ruler's or magistrate's role was to judge fairly, which potentially demanded (especially in Luther's lifetime) the pronouncement of a death sentence. Fulfilling one's duty in this worldly realm did not exclude the inner struggle a Christian magistrate would face as he would at the same time sincerely pray for the offending person and offer the gospel message of forgiveness to the accused. Luther was keen to stress the distinction between the two realms but also recognized that at an existential and ethical level these two areas overlapped and were united in a kind of creative and painful tension within the Christian person. What he envisaged was not a settled and harmonious union but one which willingly endured and lived the tension of law and gospel, flesh and spirit, obligation and freedom.³⁹

Luther's political theory was forged by the pressures and constraints of sixteenth century Germany. Subsequent generations had to apply and adjust Luther's teaching to new political developments. A critical test of the *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* came with the Third Reich and the corresponding use and abuse of Luther's teaching. At that time political talk within the wider Christian Church was significantly shaped by the language employed by nineteenth century theologians and political theorists.

39. Nestingen, "Two Kingdoms," 270: "Making the distinction is as critical as it is problematic. Left undistinguished, the law overpowers the gospel, asserting obedience to itself as a condition of salvation. Or the gospel undermines the law, reducing the specific promise, 'Your sin is forgiven for Jesus' sake,' to a generic endorsement, 'That's okay, don't let it bother you.' Confused, law and gospel destroy one another. At the same time, the gospel is an alien word that comes from outside human experience; the law is one of the ineluctable powers of everyday life that constantly subverts the gospel for its own functions. Truly distinguishing law and gospel is not the stereotypical separation of imperatives from indicatives, the former to the thrown away, but, as Luther described it, like writing in the water."