

Martin Luther on Peace and War: A Systematic Approach

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These theses are the attempt to represent systematically the main aspects from the political ethics of Martin Luther, developed especially between 1523 and 1526.¹ I focus Luther's ethics on the debate of peace and war and may do this without touching the historical dimension.

1. Martin Luther does not take up the scholastic debates on just war. He instead develops his point of view of peace and war biographically as well as theologically, starting with his understanding of justification by God and going back to the Bible as the fundamental authority.
 - a. Biographical view: The development of Luther's theology took place in the surrounding of a monastery even beyond his Reformation break-through, and not at the court of the Elector nor at the copper mine of his father. Accordingly his perception is mainly guided by his religiousness and derived from it through a concentration on personal aspects also in his ethics.

Luther's biographical development is well known just as his critical look at the influence through the monastery, so that I may restrict to a quotation, showing his concentration on personal aspects. At the end of „The Freedom of a Christian“ Luther describes the moral attitudes of a Christian: „For a Christian, as a free man, will say, ‘I will fast, pray, do this or that as men command, not because it is necessary to my righteousness or salvation; but that I might show due respect to the pope, the bishop, the community, a magistrate, or my neighbor, and give them an example. I will do and suffer all things, just as Christ did and suffered far more for me, although he needed nothing of it all for himself, and was made under the law for my sake, although he was not under the law.’ Although tyrants do violence or injustice in making their demands, yet it will do no harm as long as they

¹ I would, in particular, like to thank Pastor John W. Siegmund for his help with translating my thoughts into English.

demand nothing contrary to God². The first sentence emphasizes the priority of justification before any good work, even before the possibility to do good works, thus marking Luther's decisive soteriological conclusions. Only the Christian, who in his faith is freed from his sins, can do good works, for which the second sentence gives examples. That Luther will fulfil works for the Pope's sake, although he, as a tyrant, has no right to demand them of him, shows how dominant Luther's personal view is. The Pope is not faced as a dignitary, but as just one concrete person whom a Christian could serve.

- b. Theological view: Luther in search for the graceful God facing his own and invincible sins, recovered the Gospel which speaks of justification only through faith without any works (Rom 3,28). This led him to a reserved and even a declining attitude toward human actions. Luther looks at works with this soteriological background and therefore rejects them as the wrong way to salvation. Only for the faithful works receive subaltern an ethical connotation³.

In correspondence with the ecclesiastical tradition Luther notices that every man is a sinner and therefore cannot stand before God. He emphasizes man being connected in the history with God, thus practically avoiding an ontological definition of man⁴. To be more precise Luther interprets sin as

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- 2 Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, eds., *Luther's Works*, hereafter LW (Philadelphia), vol. 31, 370 (= WA 7, 37, 8–15: „Ein freier Christ spricht so: Ich will fasten, beten, dies und das tun, was geboten ist, aber nicht weil ich dessen bedarf oder dadurch fromm oder selig werden wollte. Sondern ich will es dem Papst, dem Bischof, der Gemeinde oder meinem Mitbruder, meinem Herrn zu Willen, Exempel und Dienst tun und leiden, so wie mir Christus viel größere Dinge zu Willen getan und gelitten hat, was ihm viel weniger nötig war. Und wenn schon die Tyrannen Unrecht tun, dies zu fordern, so schadet es mir doch nicht, weil es nicht gegen Gott ist.“).
 - 3 Cf. LW 31, 361 (*The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520): „Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person.“ (= WA 7, 32, 15–17: „Also muss der Mensch in der Person zuvor fromm oder böse sein, ehe er gute oder böse Werke tut“).
 - 4 Cf. LW 34, 139 (*The Disputation Concerning Man*, 1536): „Paul in Romans 3 [: 28], ‘We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works,’ briefly sums up the definition of man, saying, ‘Man is justified by faith.’“ (= WA 39 I, 176, 33–35: „Paulus fasst in Röm 3, [Vers 28, wo es heißt:] wir erachten, dass der Mensch durch Glauben unter Absehen von den Werken gerechtfertigt wird, in Kürze die Definition des Menschen dahin zusammen, dass der Mensch durch Glauben gerechtfertigt werde“). – This definition is formal striking. Man is not defined with „to be“ (esse), instead his nature develops from the meeting with God, where

the self-idolization of man⁵. From this follows first that man's depravity is to become selfish, being turned inwardly to himself⁶, twisting God's spiritual goods for his own selfishness. Second, he lowers God to the level of a junk-dealer⁷, because he does not trust the Gospel, but wants to earn God's grace with his works instead of accepting it as a present. Thirdly, sin messes up the world, because it mixes up the competences and tasks of God and man. This third implication of sin is politically relevant. One aspect of the self-idolization, following Luther, is, that man even presumes to be the final judge and reclaims the authority to judge and to punish, although God has reclaimed this competence in Rom 12,19 for himself. Since

something happens to him. Therefore his nature can only be defined in a narrative way, but not statical with a description of his condition. Cf. Albrecht Peters, *Der Mensch* [HST 8], vol. 2, (Gütersloh: 1994), 29: „Diese umfassende und erschöpfende 'Definition' (Th.20) menschlicher Existenz lässt sich nur als ein Weg ausschreiten, nur als eine Geschichte erzählen; hierzu muß der Horizont dieses todverfallenen Erdenlebens radikal aufgesprengt werden“.

- 5 Cf. LW 31, 10 (*Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, 1517): „Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.“ (= WA 1, 225, 1 f: „Der Mensch kann von Natur aus nicht wollen, dass Gott Gott ist; er möchte vielmehr, dass er Gott und Gott nicht Gott ist“).
- 6 Cf. to the „homo in se incurvatus“ LW 25, 345 (*Lectures on Romans*, 1515/16): „And this is in agreement with Scripture, which describes man as so turned in on himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself.“ (= WA 56, 356, 4–6: „Und dies bestätigt die Schrift, die den Menschen beschreibt als so sehr in sich verkrümmt, dass nicht nur die leiblichen, sondern auch die geistlichen Güter sich verbiegen und er sich selbst in allem sucht“).
- 7 Cf. LW 44, 32 f (*Treatise on Good Works*, 1520): „That is the reason I have so often spoken against the display, magnificence and multitude of such works and rejected them. It is as clear as day that these works are not only done in doubt or without the faith we are talking about, but that there is not one in a thousand who does not put his confidence in the works and presume that by having done them he wins God's favor and lays claim to his grace. They turn the whole thing to a fairground. God cannot tolerate this: God has promised his grace freely, and wills that we start by trusting his grace and perform all works in that grace, whatever those works may be.“ (= WA 6, 211, 29–36: „Das ist die Ursache, warum ich so oft gegen den Pomp, die Pracht, die Menge solcher Werke geredet und sie verworfen habe. Es liegt hell zutage, dass sie nicht bloß im Zweifel oder ohne solchen Glauben geschehen, sondern dass auch unter tausend nicht einer ist, der nicht sein Vertrauen auf sie setzte und vermeinte, dadurch Gottes Huld zu erlangen und seiner Gnade zuvorzukommen. So macht man einen Jahrmarkt daraus, was Gott nicht dulden kann. Denn er hat seine Huld umsonst zu schenken versprochen und will, dass man bei dieser anhebe mit seiner Zuversicht und in ihr alle Werke vollbringe“).

Luther understands war as well to be a measure of the judging God, his interpretation of Rom 12,19 is important for his critical look at the doctrine of the just war. He leads this argumentation only indirectly. We will refer to it in the next thesis.

For the faithful good works express the cooperation that God wants from them⁸, so that the three characteristics of sin reverse. First, the Christian is orientated not towards himself, but towards the benefit of his neighbours⁹. So secondly he conforms with God, whose given grace he accepts cheerfully and complies with God's two main commandments (i. e. to love God and his neighbours), freed from the self-fixation on his own spiritual welfare¹⁰. Thirdly, his cooperation does not infringe upon God's competences, but does whatever he finds before his eyes and is not concerned with the valuation criteria of the world¹¹. This third aspect becomes

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- 8 Cf. LW 44, 52 (*Treatise on Good Works*, 1520): „But you might ask, ‘Why does God not do it all by himself, since he is able to help everyone and knows how to help everyone?’ Yes, he can do it; but he does not want to do it alone. He wants us to work with him. He does us the honor of wanting to effect his work with us and through us“. (= WA 6, 227, 28–31: „Sprichst du aber: Warum tut's Gott nicht allein und von selber, wo er's doch kann und einem jeden zu helfen weiß? Ja, er kann es wohl, er will es aber nicht allein tun. Er will, dass wir mit ihm wirken und tut uns die Ehre an, dass er mit uns und durch uns sein Werk wirken will“).
- 9 Cf. LW 31, 365 f (*The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520): „Here [i.e. in Phil 2,1 ff] we see clearly that the Apostle has prescribed this rule for the life of Christians, namely, that we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor“. (= WA 7, 35, 9–12: „Sieh da [in Phil 2,1 ff] hat Paulus ein Christenleben deutlich so zusammengefasst, dass alle Werke dem Nächsten zugute ausgerichtet sein sollen, weil jeder für sich selbst an seinem Glauben genug hat und alle Werke und das Leben ihm überlassen sind, seinem Nächsten damit aus freier Liebe zu dienen“).
- 10 Cf. LW 45, 118 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „For cursed and condemned is every sort of life lived and sought for the benefit and goods of self; cursed are all works not done in love. They are done in love, however, when they are directed wholeheartedly toward the benefit, honour, and salvation of others, and not toward the pleasure, benefit, honour, comfort, and salvation of self“. (= WA 11, 272, 1–5: „Verflucht und verdammt ist alles Leben, das sich selbst zu Nutzen und zugute gelebt und gesucht wird, verflucht alle Werke, die nicht in der Liebe gehen. Dann aber gehen sie in der Liebe, wenn sie nicht auf eigene Lust, Nutzen, Ehre, Ruhe und Heil, sondern auf anderer Nutzen, Ehre und Heil von ganzem Herzen gerichtet sind“). – Cf. furthermore: Michael Trowitzsch, *Gott als ,Gott für dich'. Eine Verabschiedung des Heilsegoismus* (München: 1983), 82 ff.
- 11 Cf. LW 44, 26 (*Treatise on Good Works*, 1520): „In this faith all works become equal, and one work is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away,

deepened through Luther's understanding of vocation (Beruf). The Christian remains in his vocation and duty, accepting God's vocation and works for the benefit of his neighbours.

2. The „doctrine of the just war“, strictly spoken, does not receive additions from Luther, but is reduced to the legitimacy of a solely defensive war. Luther's two new impulses about peace and war are on one hand his doctrine of the two governments (Zweiregimentenlehre), on the other hand his understanding of vocation (Beruf) in connection with his view of the three classes in society (Dreiständelehre).
 - a. Luther accepts as natural law the insight that defence with military instruments is legitimate (*vim vi repellere licet*¹²). In addition he interpolates three further conditions to delimitate even the defensive war. First, the causes and the aims of the war must be secularly assignable and must not be loaded religiously. Secondly, negotiations must be conducted and therewith means of de-escalation must have been brought into operation. Thirdly, the claimed will is to accept the rules of law and to compromise¹³, as far as this averts a further escalation of the war.

whether they be great, small, short, long, many, or few. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake, but because of faith, which is always the same and lives and works in each and every work without distinction, however numerous and varied these works always are, just as all the members of the body, live, work, and take their name from the head, and without the head no member can live, work, or have a name. It further follows from this that a Christian man living in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but he does whatever the occasion calls for, and all is well done“. (= WA 6, 206,33–207,5: „In diesem Glauben werden alle Werke gleich und ist eins wie das andere; es fällt aller Unterschied der Werke dahin, sie seien groß, klein, kurz, lang, viel oder wenig. Denn nicht ihrer selbst wegen sind die Werke Gott angenehm, sondern des Glaubens wegen, welcher als ein und derselbe in allen und jeglichen Werken ohne Unterschied ist, wirkt und lebt, wie zahlreich und unterschiedlich sie immer seien: so wie alle Glieder vom Haupt ihr Leben, ihr Wirken und ihren Namen haben und ohne das Haupt kein Glied leben, wirken oder einen Namen haben kann. Daraus folgt dann weiter, dass ein Christenmensch, in diesem Glauben lebend, keines Lehrers bedarf guter Werke, sondern was ihm vorkommt, das tut er“).

- 12 Cf. LW 46, 120 (*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526): „Self-defense is a proper ground for fighting and therefore all laws agree that self-defense shall go unpunished“. (= WA 19, 647, 8–10: „Wehren ist eine redliche Ursache zu streiten! Darum billigen es auch alle Rechte, dass Notwehr ungestraft sein solle“).
- 13 Cf. WA Br 10, 35, 128–133 (*Sendbrief in der Wurzener Fehde*, 1542): „Ich trete, sage ich, in dem Fall zu dem Teil, der Recht und Frieden anbietet und leiden kann oder begehrt. Denn wenn gleich der andere Teil das höchste Recht hätte und billig

With the first condition Luther rejects any kind of religious war. This already implies a refusal of the just war doctrine, since these wars were legitimated by theological-ethical arguments. In contrast Luther accents that solely the defence as a secular and political sanction can legitimate a war. The second and the third condition limit the defensive war procedural. An attack must not immediately be answered in a military way. It must rather be tried to border the conflict and to avert a war with negotiations¹⁴ and the willingness to compromise, especially in the acceptance of a settlement by arbitration¹⁵.

These arrangements indicate that the law occupies for Luther a central position. With his theological ethics Luther has supported the build-up of constitutional conditions leaning towards the establishment of the governmental monopoly on legitimate use of physical force, as concluded

Zorn verwenden könnte, so verdammt er sich doch selbst damit, dass er Gott in seine Gewalt eingreift, selbst Richter und Rächer sein will und damit die Gegenseite zur Notwehr zwingt“. – Not translated in LW.

14 Cf. LW 46, 40 (*Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, 1525): Luther appeals at both parties in the beginning Peasants' Wars: „For God's sake, then, take my advice! Take a hold of these matters properly, with justice and not with force or violence and do not start endless bloodshed in Germany“. (= WA 18, 329, 6–9: „So lasst euch um Gottes Willen belehren und beraten und greift die Sachen an, wie solche Sachen anzugreifen sind, nämlich auf dem Rechtsweg und nicht mit Gewalt oder mit Kampf, damit ihr nicht ein unendliches Blutvergießen anrichtet in deutschen Landen“).

15 This term (acceptance of an arbitrament) shall combine the following references of Luther.

First, the cue to the proportionality of means: „A prince must punish the wicked in such a way that he does not step on the dish while picking up the spoon, and for the sake of one man's head plunge country and people into want and fill the land with widows and orphans“ (LW 45, 124 = *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523). (= WA 11, 276, 13–16: „So muss auch ein Fürst die Bösen so strafen, dass er nicht einen Löffel aufhebe und eine Schüssel zertrete und um eines Schädels willen Land und Leute in Not bringe und das Land voll Witwen und Waisen mache“).

Second, the control of the own emotions: „He cannot govern who cannot wink at faults“ (LW 45, 124). (= WA 11, 276, 20 f: „Wer nicht kann durch die Finger sehen, der kann nicht regieren“).

Third, compliablensness considering the exceeding worth of peace: „Thus a certain peasant in the neighboring village of Dabrun said that a man who has two cows should contribute one of them to keep the peace. It is better to have one cow in peace than to have two cows in war (=LW 8, 279 = *Lectures on Genesis*, 1535/45). (= WA 44, 784, 17 f = „Wer zwei Kühe hat, soll die eine darum geben, dass der Friede erhalten werde. Es ist besser, eine im guten Frieden als zwei im Krieg zu besitzen“).

in the „Ewige Landfriede“ from 1495, together with the prohibition of personal vendetta¹⁶.

- b. All ongoing considerations about a just war of aggression are generally rejected by Luther¹⁷, without entering decidedly into the scholastic debates. Axiomatically and without exception the rule applies: „Whoever starts a war is in the wrong“¹⁸.

By referring to the legitimacy of defensive wars exclusively on the grounds of both natural justice and jurisdiction, Luther substitutes the law for the ethical criteria of the just war. Thereby there is no place for these criteria in his political ethics, although the main terms may be discovered¹⁹. The word justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) means for Luther in secular and political contexts rights, laws and jurisdiction²⁰. According to that Luther analyses war in legal diction. Right and command are necessary for a just war²¹.

16 Cf. Herfried Münkler, „Politisches Denken in der Zeit der Reformation.“ In *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen Band 2*, ed. Iring Fetscher and Herfried Münkler (München: 1993) 615–683 and Gerta Scharffenorth, „Luthers Lehre vom weltlichen Regiment Gottes. Die Reichsverfassungsreform als Problem des Friedensauftrags der Christen.“ In *Den Glauben ins Leben ziehen ... Studien zu Luthers Theologie*, Gerta Scharffenorth (München: 1982) 205–313.

17 Cf. LW 45, 63 (A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion, 1522): „I am and always will be on the side of those against whom insurrection is directed, no matter how unjust their cause; I am opposed to those who rise in insurrection, no matter how just their cause, because there can be no insurrection without hurting the innocent and shedding their blood“. (= WA 8, 680, 32–35: „Ich halte und will es allezeit halten mit der Seite, die Aufruhr erleidet, wie unrecht ihre Sache auch sein mag, und will wider die Seite sein, die Aufruhr macht, wie recht ihre Sache auch immer sei, weil Aufruhr nicht kann ohne unschuldiges Blut und Schaden geschehen“).

18 LW 46, 118 (*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526). (= WA 19, 645, 9: „Wer Krieg anfängt, der ist im Unrecht“).

19 Reading Luther from the scholastic doctrine of the just war, emerges the following result: The right intention (*recta intentio*) of the belligerent power lies in the concentration on secular aims, in particular the reconstitution of peace and alignment. That the war must be forced (*debitus modus*) and is therefore the last resort (*ultima ratio*) Luther has taken up with insisting on negotiations. The authority of the sovereign (*auctoritas principis*) is strengthened by Luther with his doctrine of the two governments, likewise it is relativized through his reference to the law and his demand for willingness to compromise. The only convincing reason (*causa iusta*) is the state of defence.

20 Cf. LW 46, 95 (*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526): „In the second place I want you to understand that here I am not speaking about the righteousness that makes men good in the sight of God. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do that; and it is granted and given us by the grace of God alone, without any works or merits of our

Occasionally Luther speaks about punishment and vengeance in connection with war, thus using terms that are common to the doctrine of just wars. However, Luther reproduces, first of all, the Biblical findings from Rom 13,4 (the governing authority being God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer) and Deut 32,35 („vengeance is mine, and recompense“, says God). The main point of his remarks is that he delegates these acts to God and combines them with the policy of the law. „Paul says in Romans 13 [: 4]: that it is the duty of the sword to protect and punish, to protect the good in peace and to punish the wicked with war. God tolerates no injustice and he has so ordered things that warmongers must be defeated in war“²². Thereby he invokes Rom 12,19, in accordance with Paul Luther holds firm that God has reserved punishment and revenge for himself, so that they do not belong to mankind's power of

own, as I have written and taught so often and so much in other places. Rather, I am speaking here about external righteousness which is to be sought in offices and works. In other words, to put it plainly, I am dealing here with such questions as these: whether the Christian faith, by which we were accounted righteous before God, is compatible with being a soldier, going to war, stabbing and killing, robbing and burning, as military law requires us to do to our enemies in wartime. Is this work sinful or unjust? Should it give us a bad conscience before God?“ (= WA 19, 624, 30–625, 7: „Aufs zweite schicke ich hier voraus, dass ich für diesmal nicht rede von der Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott eine gerechtfertigte Person macht; denn dies tut allein der Glaube an Jesus Christus, ohne alle unsere Werke und Verdienste, aus lauter Gnade Gottes geschenkt und gegeben, wie ich das sonst so oft und manches Mal geschrieben und gelehrt habe. Sondern ich rede hier von der äußerlichen Gerechtigkeit, die in den Ämtern und Werken besteht und vor sich geht; das heißt, auf dass ich es ja deutlich sage, ich handele hier davon, ob der christliche Glaube, durch welchen wir vor Gott als gerechtfertigt erachtet werden, auch neben sich dulden kann, dass ich ein Kriegsmann bin, Krieg führe, würge und steche, raube und brenne, wie man dem Feind in Kriegsverläufen nach Kriegsrecht tut, obgleich solche Werke auch Sünde oder Unrecht sind, woraus man sich ein Gewissen zu machen hat vor Gott“).

- 21 Cf. LW 46, 170 (*On War Against the Turk*, 1529): „In the first place, the Turk certainly has no right or command to begin war and to attack lands that are not his. Therefore his war is nothing but an outrage and robbery.“ (= WA 30 II, 116, 9–11: „Weil das sicher ist, dass der Türke gar kein Recht noch Befehl hat, einen Streit anzufangen und die Länder anzugreifen, die nicht sein sind, ist sein Kriegführen ohne Zweifel ein reiner Frevel und Räuberei“).
- 22 LW 46, 118 (*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526). (= WA 19, 645, 16–19: „Das Amt des Schwertes sei es, zu schützen und zu strafen – zu schützen die Rechtschaffenen in Frieden und zu strafen die Bösen durch Krieg. Und Gott, der Unrecht nicht duldet, fügt es auch so, dass die Kriegführenden bekriegt werden müssen“).

disposition²³. More precisely Luther gives this restriction two interpretations. Beside the eschatological restriction, that God is judge on the Day of Judgement, there is the institutional restriction saying that God has directly constituted the secular authorities and mandated them here on earth to carry the sword, whereas neither the subjects (for example, the peasants) nor the clergy have this warrant²⁴. So Luther's thoughts on war lead to his doctrine of the two governments, where they are theological substantiated.

3. The doctrine of the two governments forms together with the concept of vocation the central idea of Luther's political ethics. This doctrine implies that God as the Lord of this world has instituted two governments to carry out his will in the world²⁵. The spiritual government shall lead the Christians with proclamation of God's Word to salvation and eternal life. The secular government shall keep peace with the sword and justice and by this means organise the external life

23 Cf. WA Br 10, 33, 50–58 (*Sendbrief in der Wurzenzer Fehde*, 1542): „So hat wahrlich Gott auch die Rache hart verboten in Röm 12,19: ‚Die Rache ist mein, ich will vergelten‘. Wer nun Gott das Gericht und die Rache nehmen will, den wird sein Urteil treffen nach Röm 13,2. Und wenn mir jemand meinen Vater und Bruder erschläge, so bin ich dennoch über den Mörder nicht Richter noch Rächer. Und wozu bedarf man der Rechte und der Obrigkeit, ja wozu bedarf man Gottes, wenn ein jeder selbst Richter, Rächer, ja Gott selbst sein will wider und über seinesgleichen oder seinen Nächsten, besonders in weltlichen Sachen“? – Not translated in LW.

24 I must admit that Luther concedes – again according to the bible – exceptions from the governmental monopoly on legitimate use of physical force: the directly from God appointed judges in the Old Testament, for example Samson (cf. LW 46, 110 = *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526 = WA 19, 641, 14–21). But Luther completes that these exceptions are seldom and that anyone, who refers to this, must do it with eschatological seriousness and must verify the divine vocation objective (with a sign from God) and subjective (through his moral conduct). „Therefore first become like Samson, and then you can also do as Samson did“ (LW 45, 104 = *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523). (= WA 11, 261, 24 = „Darum werde zuvor wie Simson, so kannst du auch tun wie Simson“).

25 Cf. LW 45, 91 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that – no thanks to them – they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace“. (= WA 11, 251, 15–18: „Darum hat Gott zwei Regimenter verordnet: das geistliche, welches Christen und fromme Menschen macht durch den heiligen Geist, unter Christus, und das weltliche, das den Unchristen und Bösen wehrt, dass sie äußerlich Frieden halten und still sein müssen, ob sie wollen oder nicht“).

of society. Both governments are in like manner directly appointed by God and receive their assignments from Him. They both fight together with God against sin and evil, but with different means and clearly marked functions²⁶. For the individual Christian the obedience to both God and to the secular authority is therefore compatible.

- a. Luther's reception of Augustine's doctrine of the two realms in his treatise „Von weltlicher Obrigkeit“ stresses neither the cosmological nor the philosophic-historical connotations, but instead emphasizes the soteriological and ethical aspects. Hence, not the fight of the two realms is the centre stage, but God's government over the whole of creation.

For Luther the heathen powers are not the main enemy of the living Christian faith, but rather sin. This enemy has indeed been defeated through Jesus Christ. The forgiveness of the sins, that he has obtained, is effectively addressed to the Christians through the Gospel. However Luther had to face that the distribution of this Gospel in the form of the New Testament, which he had translated, was forbidden by some territorial lords²⁷. Thus the question arose for him about the functions and the authority of the secular government. Exactly this question, as evident in the title of his treatise „Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei“ from 1523 is answered in it.

- b. By emphasizing God's direct institution of both governments, Luther overcomes the dispute about the hierarchical relationship of the two swords. At the same time he supports thereby the distinction between religion, politics, moral and justice. As a result for Luther the secular authority becomes relatively autonomous. It receives from God its assignments, namely external peace and societal life under just conditions, and is apart from that responsible for its politics.

26 Cf. LW 45, 92 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „For this reason one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other“. (= WA 11, 252, 12–14: „Darum muss man die beiden Regimente sorgfältig voneinander unterscheiden und beide bleiben lassen: eines, das fromm macht, das andere, das äußerlich Frieden schafft und bösen Werken wehrt. Keins reicht ohne das andere aus in der Welt“).

27 Cf. LW 45, 83 f (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523). (= WA 11, 246 f). Bans were enacted by the Bavarian dukes, the prince-electors Joachim I from Brandenburg and duke Georg from Saxony.

The controversy in the late Middle Ages about the exegesis of Luke 22,38 was focussed on the question, who had at first received the two swords from God and had kept one for himself and delegated the other one. The Curial standpoint, as expressed in the bull „Unam Sanctam“, as well as the opposite standpoint, as expressed by Marsilius from Padua, connected this with a hierarchical structure of the corresponding institutions church and state (or the persons: Pope and King)²⁸. In contrast Luther claims the coexistence of both governments under the guidance of God. Both have different tasks to fulfil and therefore cannot compete with each other²⁹. In particular the governmental monopoly on legitimate use of physical force counts among the means God has delegated to the secular authority. This also includes defensive war, limited of course by the standards set by God.

As a result in view of war two important consequences arise. For one thing Luther has, as already mentioned, rejected any religious justification of a war – be it by the secular or the spiritual government – because both of them would become intermingled and corrupted. For another thing Luther has not accepted an intrusion by force of the state in religious matters, not only in case of the forbiddance of the Bible³⁰, but as well in regard to the

28 Cf. Volker Mantey, *Zwei Schwerter – zwei Reiche. Martin Luthers Zwei-Reiche-Lehre vor ihrem spätmittelalterlichen Hintergrund* (Tübingen: 2005) and Arnold Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, vol. 2. revised (Darmstadt: 2000), 311–325.

29 Cf. LW 45, 107 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „Besides, we cannot conceive how an authority could or should act in a situation except where it can see, know, judge, condemn, change and modify“. (= WA 11, 263, 26–28: Grundsätzlich gilt für Luther, „dass jede Gewalt nur da handeln soll und kann, wo sie sehen, erkennen, richten, urteilen, wandeln und ändern kann“).

30 Cf. LW 45, 111 f (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say: It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey, for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority“. (= WA 11, 267, 1–8: „Wenn nun dein Fürst oder weltlicher Herr dir gebietet, es mit dem Papst zu halten, so oder so zu glauben, oder dir gebietet, Bücher abzugeben, sollst du so sagen: Es gebührt Luzifer nicht, neben Gott zu sitzen. Lieber Herr, ich bin euch schuldig zu gehorchen mit Leib und Gut; gebietet mir nach dem Maß eurer Gewalt auf Erden, so will ich folgen. Befehlt ihr mir aber, zu glauben und Bücher abzugeben, so will ich nicht gehorchen. Denn da seid ihr ein Tyrann und greift zu hoch, gebietet, obwohl ihr weder Recht noch Macht habt“).

public handling of people of a different creed, namely heretics and Jews: „Gedanken sind zollfrei“³¹ (Thoughts are duty-free). The idea of religious freedom as well as the insight that religion may evoke or amplify acts of war, if religion is not restricted to its duties and means, can therefore be found in Luther's writings. With this, Luther stresses the individual freedom of conscience.

Despite the theological upgrading of the secular authority to an institution on equal footing beside the church Luther does not suggest this government to assume an independent existence that completely makes its own laws. With its monopoly on physical force it remains nevertheless restrained by the rule and sovereignty of God. And the spiritual government has to remind the state time and again critically of God's pretences – sine vi sed verbo (without force, but proclaiming the Gospel). Luther's numerous letters to the dukes and princes are the best evidence for his definition of the two governments and their tasks³². Thus the obedience of the Christians to the secular government is limited. In nearly all writings concerning political ethics Luther refers back to Acts 5,29 („We must obey God rather than men“). The disobedience of the Christians however is also limited. He is not allowed to get around the stately monopoly on physical force and is therefore restricted to forms of passive resistance.

- c. Initial point of the doctrine of the two governments is the question how Math 5,38 (renunciation of violence) and Rom 13,1 f (use of

31 Cf LW 45, 108 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „Thoughts are tax-free“. (= WA 11, 264, 28 f). – Regarding the Jews cf. Luthers scripture „That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew“ from the same year (LW 45, 199–229 = WA 11, 314–336). At the end of this text, having argued heavily against the Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament, Luther accounts that no stately violence is allowed against the Jews. The citizens should accept them friendly, allow them to work and earn and let them stay – even if some of them are obstinate and will not proselytise to the Christian faith. – Regrettably Luther has later on cancelled this position and formulated awkward sentences against the Jews and enforced political sanctions that are beyond the pale and are diametrically opposed to his doctrine of the two governments. Even making reference to his possibly senile stubbornness cannot exculpate these statements; cf. furthermore: Walther Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden. Ein Quellenbuch mit zeitgenössischen Illustrationen, mit Einführungen und Erläuterungen* (Frankfurt/Main: 1982), 115–178.

32 Cf. Eike Wolgast, *Die Wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Stände. Studien zu Luthers Gutachten in politischen Fragen* (Gütersloh: 1977) and Hermann Kunst, *Evangelischer Glaube und politische Verantwortung. Martin Luther als politischer Berater seiner Landesherrn und seine Teilnahme an den Fragen des öffentlichen Lebens* (Stuttgart: 1976).

force) are consistent in the Christian's perspective. Against the hierarchical grading in two levels of ethics Luther distinguishes two relations of any Christian: For himself (as a private person) he has to bear misery, for others (as a civil servant) he must not tolerate it, but has to fight against the inflicted injustice³³.

The monastic differentiation between generally binding commandments (*praecepta*) and the Gospel's recommendations (*consilia*) Luther has rejected³⁴, because they falsify the Gospel to commands, as well as establish gradations in faith which threatens the certainty of salvation. His basically relational understanding of being Christian leads him to the distinction between private person and civil servant in order to specify the relationship between renunciation and use of force³⁵. In the office of civil servant the Christian is not only allowed to use force but must in some cases use it, not as an end in itself, but as an expression of brotherly love which manifests itself in protecting the victims. Not self-defence but emergency relief legitimises the civil servant's use of force. With this Luther assumes that the civil servants, when using force, correspond to the commandment of Christian love, even if there are from time to time (private) persons that execute their office badly³⁶. These thoughts Luther has unfolded in his

33 Cf. LW 45, 96 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor“. (= WA 11, 255, 17–20: „An dir und an dem Deinen hältst du dich nach dem Evangelium und leidest Unrecht als ein rechter Christ für dich. An dem andern und an dem Seinen hältst du dich nach der Liebe und leidest kein Unrecht für deinen Nächsten“).

34 Cf. LW 45, 87 f (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, 1523). (= WA 11, 249, 9–23).

35 Cf. LW 31, 304 f (*Two Kinds of Righteousness*, 1519). (= WA 2, 150 f).

36 Cf. LW 46, 94 (*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526): „The occupation of a judge is a valuable divine office. This is true both of the office of the trial judge who declares the verdict and the executioner who carries out the sentence. But when the office is assumed by one to whom it has not been committed or when one who holds it rightly uses it to gain riches or popularity, then it is no longer right or good. The married state is also precious and godly, but there is many rascals and scoundrels in it. It is the same way with the profession or work of the soldier; in itself it is right and godly, but we must see to it that the persons who are in this profession and who do the work are the right kind of persons, that is, godly and upright“. (= WA 19, 624, 22–29: „Ein Richteramt ist ein köstliches, göttliches Amt, sei es der Mundrichter oder der Faustrichter, welchen man Scharfrichter nennt; aber wenn es einer vornimmt, dem es nicht aufgetragen ist, oder wenn der, der den Auftrag dazu

doctrine of the three classes in society and applied in his understanding of vocation.

4. Luther has developed his understanding of vocation from 1. Cor 7,20 and John 21,19–24 and has connected it with Plato's doctrine of the three classes in society. Plato's doctrine, as a pattern for society, together with the corresponding understanding of vocation that applies it to the individual, open up active cooperation for the Christian in politics and even in the army as a possible and equal scope for brotherly love.
 - a. The three classes and the variety of tasks are predefined by God to arrange the communal life in society³⁷. Whereas the secular authority in the doctrine of the two governments is concentrated on the state and focussed upon the monopoly of force, the word about the armed forces (politeia) emphasizes the societal function of political rule. It is seen in the doctrine of the three classes as part of society beside „oconomia“ (economy) and „ecclesia“ (includes education and religion).

Only by reducing Luther's political ethics one-sidedly on the two governments and not including the three classes, can one name him a supporter of a strong state and align him with Bismarck and even Hitler, as Karl Barth has done³⁸. It may be true that Luther supported at the threshold of the modern era the strengthening of the state. In addition he concentrated the state on persons (and not on institutions or functions)³⁹. But on the other hand Luther had always conceived it as constitutional state and by this means transferred with political reasoning the connection with God.

hat, es nach Geld und Gunst ausrichtet, so ist es schon nicht mehr recht noch gut. Der eheliche Stand ist auch köstlich und göttlich; dennoch gibt es manchen Bösewicht und Buben darin. Ebenso ist es auch mit dem Kriegsstand, -amt oder -werk, das an und für sich recht und göttlich ist; aber darauf muss man schauen, dass es auch die Person gibt, die dazu gehört, und dass sie rechtschaffen ist“).

37 Cf. LW 3, 217 (*Lectures on Genesis*, 1535/45): „This life is profitably divided into three orders: (1) life in the home; (2) life in the state; (3) life in the church“. (= WA 43, 30, 13 f. „Nützlichweise ist dieses Leben in drei Stände unterteilt worden: der eine ist das haushälterische Leben [vita oeconomica], das andere ist das politische [politica] und das dritte ist das kirchliche [ecclesiastica] Leben“).

38 Cf. Karl Barth, „How my mind has changed.“ In *Der Götze wackelt. Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. Karl Kupisch (Berlin: 1961), 181–209, 194; and Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten*, vol. 5 (Gütersloh: 1993), 33.

39 Cf. Hans Richard Reuter, „Martin Luther und das Friedensproblem.“ In *Suche nach Frieden: politische Ethik in der frühen Neuzeit Band I*, eds. Norbert Brieskorn and Markus Riedenaier (Stuttgart: 2000), 63–82, 74.

And most notably Luther has required the collaboration of Christians in political offices and professions in which they can concretely form Christian love⁴⁰. That this connection of office and Christian love needs a particular explanation in cases requiring force is, as has been presented, the occasion for the special analysis of secular government. For this reason Luther developed over and above Plato's doctrine his concept of the two governments.

- b. Luther has definitively shaped the modern concept of vocation by dissolving it out of monastic constriction and adopting it to all ongoing human labours and works in society. More precisely he affirms a double equality of all professions in the face of God. On

40 Cf. LW 37, 364 f (*Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528): „But the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government. All who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word are in a holy, proper, good, and God-pleasing order and estate, sich as those who preach, administer sacraments, supervise the common chest, sextons and messengers or servants who serve those persons. These are engaged in works which are altogether holy in God sight. Again, all fathers and mothers who regulate their household wisely and bring up their children to the service of God are engaged in pure holiness, in a holy work and a holy order. Similarly, when children and servants show obedience to their elders and masters, here too is pure holiness, and whoever is thus engaged is a living saint on earth. Moreover, prinves and lords, judges, civil officers, state officials, notaries, male and female servants and all who serve such persons, and further, all their obedient subjects – all are engaged in pure holiness and leading a holy life before God. For these three religious institutions or orders are found in God's Word and comantment; and whatever is contained in God's Word must be holy, for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it“. (= WA 26, 504, 30–505, 10: „Aber die heiligen Orden und rechten Stifte, die von Gott eingesetzt sind, sind diese drei: das Priesteramt, der Ehestand, die weltliche Obrigkeit. Alle, die im Pfarramt oder im Dienst des Wortes vorgefunden werden, sind in einem heiligen, rechten, guten, Gott angenehmen Orden und Stand – wie die, die predigen, die Sakramente reichen, dem allgemeinen Armenkasten vorstehen, Küster und Boten oder Knechte, die diesen Personen dienen. Dieses sind lauter heilige Werke vor Gott. Ebenso, wer Vater und Mutter ist, das Haus wohl regiert und Kinder erzieht zu Gottes Dienst, ist auch lauter Heiligtum und heiliges Werk und heiliger Orden. Desgleichen, wo Kinder oder Gesinde den Eltern oder Herren gehorsam sind, ist auch lauter Heiligkeit; und wer darin erfunden wird, der ist ein lebendiger Heiliger auf Erden. So auch Fürst oder Oberherr, Richter, Amlteute, Kanzler, Schreiber, Knechte, Mägde und alle, die diesen dienen, dazu alle, die untertan und gehorsam sind: Alles lauter Heiligtum und heiliges Leben vor Gott, weil diese drei Stifte oder Orden in Gottes Wort und Gebot gefasst sind. Was aber in Gottes Wort gefasst ist, das muss heilig sein, denn Gottes Wort ist heilig und heiligt alles, was an ihm und in ihm ist“).

the one hand they are all unable to earn righteousness before God; on the other hand all of them afford the opportunity to express Christian love not only spontaneously but also in an organized way⁴¹.

With it we return to the initial point of our deliberations: to Luther's starting-point with justification and to his laying great weight on personal constellations. For Luther vocation cannot compete with justification solely by faith. It can only be conceivable as God's mandate to Christians to give their collaboration a definitive form. And this can take place in all professions that correspond to God's commandments. So Luther holds the opinion of the negative as well as the positive equality of all vocations before God. He doesn't deny however that the world draws distinctions in the assessment of specific jobs and professions, but declares these differences for a Christian as being soteriologically as well as ethically irrelevant. Christians should not conform to the worldly esteem of a profession, but fill this job according to concrete social necessity⁴².

This becomes valid also for the soldier. The Christian may practise this profession knowing that he can exercise Christian love by protecting the citizens and retaining or restoring civil peace, all this – of course in the

41 Cf. WA 10 I.1, 308, 6–12 + 14–20 (*Auslegung von Joh 21,19–24* in der Kirchenpostille, 1522 Evang. am St. Joh Tag): „Du möchtest einwenden: Wenn ich nicht berufen bin, was soll ich dann tun? Antwort: Wie ist es möglich, dass du nicht berufen seiest? Du wirst ja immer schon in einem Stand sein, du bist immer schon Ehemann oder Ehefrau, Sohn oder Tochter, Knecht oder Magd. Nimm den geringsten Stand für dich: Bist du ein Ehemann, meinst du, du habest nicht genug zu schaffen in diesem Stand? So Ehefrau, Kind, Gesinde und Güter zu regieren, dass alles im Gehorsam gegen Gott geschehe und du niemandem Unrecht tust? [...] Ebenso wenn du ein Sohn oder eine Tochter bist, meinst du, du habest nicht genug mit dir zu tun, dass du züchtig, keusch und Maß haltend deine Jugend hältst, deinen Eltern gehorsam bist und niemandem mit Worten oder Werken zu nahe trittst? Weil man es verlernt hat, solche Befehle und Berufe zu achten, geht man statt dessen hin und betet Rosenkränze und tut dergleichen, was nicht dem Beruf dient, und keiner denkt daran, dass er seinen Stand wahrnehme“. – Not translated in LW.

42 Cf. LW 45, 95 (*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523): „Therefore, if you see that there is lack of hangmen, constables, judges, lords or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential government authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish“. (= WA 11, 255, 1–4: „Wenn du sähest, dass es am Henker, Büttel, Richter, Herrn oder Fürsten mangelte, und du dich geeignet dazu fändest, solltest du dich dazu er bieten und dich darum bewerben, auf dass ja die notwendige Gewalt nicht verachtet und matt würde oder unterginge“).

framework God has set. Regarding his salvation the Christian will not employ his works as a self-portrayal in front of God, but rather as an expression of his collaboration with God, performing them for the sake of his neighbour. He will politically respect the limitations of his vocation and will therefore combat only in a defensive war, but in any other case he will put up passive resistance in reference to Acts 5,29. And as an individual he will not abuse his vocation, otherwise he would become a murderer.