

FALLEN POWERS

Consultation on Good Power: Divine and Human

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In his prospectus for this conference, Miroslav Volf wrote the following (I am making a few corrections in the text that was sent us):

We live in a cultural climate suspicious of power. Theologians too have seemed stuck with a profound ambivalence toward power. Over the last five decades or so, theologians have increasingly voiced critiques of power. . . . At the same time, many theologians have stressed the importance of empowerment. . . . It is essential to overcome this cultural and theological ambivalence about power and to find ways to embrace and foster “good power.” A key theological challenge is to conceptualize God’s power and human creaturely power in such a way that it is clear that both are good and that God’s power, rightly understood, grounds rather than subverts good human power. We invite you to write a paper that would take up this challenge.

I think that one of the deepest “dialectics” in the modern world is that between coercion and freedom; coercion is bad, freedom is good. Almost all the social justice movements of the twentieth century advertised themselves as *liberation* movements; and the stated goal of many therapeutic strategies is to enable the “traumatized” person to gain her autonomy. Likewise, if the appeal to “public reason” worked as John Rawls thinks it can and should work, no one in the polity would be coerced. These are just three quick examples of the point.

It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the ambivalence of theologians with respect to power is a reflection of this deep dialectic of modernity, and it would be important to reflect on that dialectic itself. My own view is that it is a fantasy to suppose that human life in general, and political life in general, could be devoid of coercion; liberation as such cannot be our

social goal. One has to ask, “Liberation from what?” and “What after liberation?” Liberation that is not set within the context of justice is liberation for the lions and the eagles of the world.

I have decided to set myself a much more modest task in this paper, however. In his note to me personally, Miroslav said that “it would be great if you could reflect with us on the nature of God’s power as it relates to political power.” A good deal of my own work in recent years has been in political theology. One cannot work in political theology in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first without bumping up against the pervasive influence of John Howard Yoder; in turn, any attempt to understand Yoder’s thought must deal with what he says about power. I judge that a good deal of the ambivalence of theologians about power, especially, though not only, political theologians, is due to Yoder’s influence. I myself do not regard that influence as healthy. So I have decided to offer for your consideration a critical analysis of Yoder on power.

I.

After discussing the origin and proper goal of political authority in his little book, *On Princely Government*, Thomas Aquinas remarks that

It now remains for us to consider further the excellence of that state of blessedness which will be the reward of those who fill the kingly office worthily and with dignity. For if blessedness is the reward of virtue it follows that a greater degree of blessedness will be owed to greater virtue. But it requires outstanding virtue for a man to control not only himself but others also; and such virtue will be the more outstanding the greater the number of those to be governed....The worthy exercise of the kingly office requires, then, excelling virtue and must be requited by a high degree of blessedness (Chapter IX).

One finds a similarly high estimate of political authority in the concluding chapter, titled “On Civil Government,” in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. There Calvin remarks that “The Lord has not only testified that the office of magistrate is approved by and acceptable to him, but he also sets out its dignity with the most honorable titles and marvelously commends it to us” (IV, xx, 4). Some, says Calvin, hold that it is on account of “human perversity that the authority over

all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers....” Not so. It is on account of “divine providence and holy ordinance” (*ibid.*). “Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men” (*ibid.*).

Admittedly there are differences of emphasis behind these strikingly similar estimates of the dignity of the political ruler. Aquinas would agree with Calvin that we ought to see in the existence of political authority not just the endeavors of human beings but “divine providence and holy ordinance”; but whereas the dimension of providence that Aquinas emphasizes is that which consists in God’s providential maintenance of God’s good creation, the dimension that Calvin emphasizes is that which consists of God’s providential provision of remedies for our fallenness. The difference is no more than a difference of emphasis. Aquinas would not deny Calvin’s point, that political authority must deal with the malfunctioning of the political community and its members; neither would Calvin dispute Aquinas’ point, that political authority enables the proper functioning and the flourishing of the political community. This last is clear, for example, from Calvin’s casual remark that political authority “embraces” such activities as seeing to it that “men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm...when it *provides for their living together*” (*ibid.*; italics added).

When Thomists and Calvinists read around in political theology of the past thirty or forty years, they encounter a very different mentality from that expressed in these founding documents of their own traditions. Not everywhere, of course; present-day political theology is a melange. But there is a strand, powerfully developed in recent years, that clearly breathes a different spirit.

Consider this passage from John Howard Yoder’s influential book, *The Politics of Jesus*, in which he is commenting on chapters 12 and 13 in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

[T]he function exercised by government is not the function to be exercised by Christians. However able an infinite God may be to work at the same time through the sufferings of his believing disciples who return good for evil and through the wrathful violence of the authorities who punish evil with evil, such behavior is for humans not complementary but in disjunction. Divine providence can in its own sovereign permissive way “use” an idolatrous

Assyria (Isa. 10) or Rome. This takes place, however, without declaring that the destructive participation in it is incumbent upon the covenant people.¹

Part of what accounts for the perspective coming to expression in this passage is Yoder's conviction, expressed a few pages earlier in his text, that there "is a very strong strand of Gospel teaching which sees secular government as the province of the sovereignty of Satan" (194). One cannot imagine Aquinas or Calvin writing such a sentence.

Or consider this passage from Oliver O'Donovan's recent book, *The Desire of the Nations*:

Secular institutions have a role confined to this passage age (*saeculum*). They do not represent the arrival of the new age and the rule of God....Applied to political authorities, the term 'secular' should tell us that they are not agents of Christ, but are marked for displacement when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed. They are Christ's conquered enemies; yet they have an indirect testimony to give, bearing the marks of his sovereignty imposed upon them, negating their pretensions and evoking their acknowledgment. Like the surface of a planet pocked with craters by the bombardment it receives from space, the governments of the passing age show the impact of Christ's dawning glory. This witness of the secular is the central core of Christendom.²

One cannot imagine Thomas or Calvin describing political authorities as "Christ's conquered enemies" – some, yes, but not in general. And as for myself, I do not understand how the New Testament theme, that in this present age all authority has been given by the Father to the Son, is compatible with the claim that political authorities do not represent "the rule of God" and are not "agents of Christ."

It is rather often said that what accounts for the profound difference of spirit which breathes in this strand of present-day political theology from that which breathes in Thomas and Calvin is that whereas Thomas and Calvin were articulating a creational-providential approach to political authority, Yoder, O'Donovan, *et al.* have been developing a christological approach. Though that will do as a description of Yoder's approach, O'Donovan's is somewhat broader than just christological. The thing to say, rather, is that both Yoder and O'Donovan are convinced that the role of the state in the order of redemption must be at the center of any Christian political theology.

¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vincit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co.; second edition, 1994), p. 198.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1996), pp. 211-2.

It is this that makes the accounts of Yoder and O'Donovan seem so strange, inscrutable even, to Thomists and Calvinists, for whom the focus is on the role of the state in the order of creation-preservation.

Yoder and O'Donovan do not deny the order of creation-preservation, nor do they deny that the state has a place in that order. The point is so unemphatically made, however, that it is easily missed. In their books one finds no chapter, not even any section of any chapter, on the topic. What they develop is only the role of the state in the order of redemption. Its role in the order of creation-preservation is consigned to passing comments.

Yoder argues that the state should be considered as one of the “powers” (*exousiai*) of which the New Testament speaks. These powers, though they “have rebelled and are fallen” (142), were nonetheless “created by God” (*ibid.*); now, “despite their fallen condition,” they “remain a sign of the preserving patience of God” (141) – a manifestation of “the continual providential care of God which preserves us as human” (149). O'Donovan is somewhat more emphatic. As one of six “theoretical theorems” concerning political authority, he propounds the thesis “that any regime should actually come to hold authority, and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence in history, not a mere accomplishment of the human task of political service.” Elaborating, he says that “Behind every historically successful regime, there is the divine regime of history. The continuity achieved by the one presupposes the operation of the other, because it does not lie within the power of political orders to secure the social conditions for their own indefinite prolongation” (46). Political institutions “are the work of Providence in the changing affairs of successive generations” (20). Given these statements, one would expect O'Donovan to develop at some length the way in which political authority manifests God's providence. That he does not do.

I do not deny – indeed, I insist – that states are often menacing; and when they are not actually menacing, they are potentially so. They need redemption. However, it is my thesis that understanding what that would come to presupposes understanding what they're meant to be in the first place.

II.

What is it that accounts for the popularity, in the latter part of the twentieth century, of these redemptive-order accounts of the state in which the role of the state in the story line of creation-preservation remains on the margins, occasionally acknowledged but never developed? Let me offer a suggestion.

In his well-known essay, “Church and State,” dating from 1938, Karl Barth poses the question, “Is there a connection between justification of the sinner through faith alone, completed once for all by God through Jesus Christ, and the problem of justice, the problem of human law? Is there an inward and vital connection...” (101).³ Barth goes on to say that exploring the connection between justice and justification is only one way of approaching the larger question he has in mind. One might also approach it using *order* as one’s main topic, or *peace*, or *freedom*, or *service*. What, for example, is the connection between “what we are accustomed to call ‘Divine Service’ in the worship of the Church as such, and another form of service, what may be described as a ‘political’ service of God...” (101-2)?

Barth goes on to observe that the tradition of Reformation theology fails us here; no doubt he was of the same view concerning traditional Catholic theology. The Reformers clearly and powerfully emphasized “that both realities exist: divine justification and human justice, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, faith in Him and the office and authority of the secular power, the mission of the Church and the mission of the State, the hidden life of the Christian in God and also his duty as a citizen...” (102). The Reformers “took great pains to make it clear that the two are not in conflict, but that they can very well exist side by side, each being competent in its own sphere”

³ The essay is to be found in the collection, Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Book [Doubleday & Co.]; 1960).

(102). But there they dropped the discussion, when what we need to know is “not only that the two are not in conflict, but, first and foremost, to what extent they are connected.”

In short, there is, in Barth’s view, a deep “gap” at this point in the theological tradition which we “can neither overlook nor take lightly.” We cannot be content to think that “human justice [is] merely clamped on to the truth of divine justification, instead of being vitally connected with it” (102). The ever-present danger, when one’s teaching on justice is allowed to sit side-by-side, unintegrated, with one’s teaching on justification, is that either one’s teaching on justification becomes a purely spiritual message or one’s teaching on justice becomes purely secular. To prevent these “sterile and dangerous separations” (105) we must ask, “is there an actual, and therefore inward and vital, connection between the two realms” (106)? We cannot stop with distinguishing them.

These are important words, and I propose to heed them in what follows. As I read the history of political theology in the latter part of the twentieth century, they have also been exceedingly influential words. Political theology in the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly Protestant political theology, has been worlds apart from the liberal progressivism characteristic of Protestant political theology at the beginning of the century; and though the shock of the two world wars would have made it different anyway, the power of Barth’s influence cannot be doubted.

It is in good measure because of Barth’s influence that one can no longer discuss the role of the state within the order of creation-preservation and call it off there; one must also discuss the role of the state within the order of redemption. It is in good measure because of his influence that even less can one blur the order of redemption into the order of creation-preservation so as to come out with Christian nationalism of one sort or another. And as I read the history of political theology in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is also because of Barth’s influence that those so-called

christological political theologies have emerged in which the role of the state in the story line of creation-preservation remains on the margins, never developed in its own right. It's not clear to me that Barth himself would approve of this appropriation of his thought. In the essay mentioned, he does not say that our discussion of the state must focus on, let alone confine itself to, its place in the order of redemption; he says that we must not follow the Reformers in allowing our discussion of the role of the state in the order of creation-preservation to sit side-by-side with our discussion of the role of the church in the order of redemption; we must discuss how state and church, and membership therein, are connected. We must integrate the two discussions.

III.

Given the intellectual power, and the prominence in recent years, of political theologies that focus on the order of redemption and consign the order of creation-preservation to the margins, it would be a mistake for one like myself who is dubious this approach and wants to return to the tradition, albeit with a Barthian twist, to tip the hat of acknowledgment and move on. We must engage this development, partly for the polemical purpose of highlighting what's distorted about this approach, but also so as to learn; important points have been made about the divine rule and its relation to the state that we must all take account of. As a first step on this path, I propose discussing the thought of the person who is, after Barth, the fountain head of this approach, namely, John Howard Yoder.

Let me begin my discussion of Yoder by elaborating the point made above: Yoder holds that the state is an instrument and manifestation of God's providential rule. Indeed, though Yoder never tires of attacking creation-order theologies, he himself not only regards the state as an instrument and manifestation of God's providential rule, but as belonging to the order of creation!

Having just reeled off a list of structures of various sorts, explicitly including "political structures," Yoder goes on to say, in a crucial passage, that "all these structures can be conceived of

in their general essence as parts of a good creation. There could not be society or history, there could not be humanity without the existence above us of religious, intellectual, moral, and social structures. *We cannot live without them.* These structures are not and never have been a mere sum total of the individuals composing them” (143).

Yoder goes on to say that “unfortunately, however, we have no access to the good creation of God. The creature and the world are fallen,” and the structures within which we live share in this fallenness. “They are no longer active only as mediators of the saving creative purpose of God” (141). They “do not enable humanity to live a genuinely free, loving life. They have absolutized themselves and they demand from the individual and society an unconditional loyalty. They harm and enslave us” (143).

Shortly I will say something about the stark dark rhetoric of this passage: “no access,” “absolutized themselves,” “unconditional loyalty,” “enslave us.” In the meantime, what must also be acknowledged is that however oppressive these structures may be, there remains one good thing about them: they provide *order*, and the order they provide is indispensable to human existence. “Even tyranny...is still better than chaos” (141). Thus it is that the continued existence of political and other sorts of structures is “a sign of the preserving patience of God” (141), a sign of “the continual providential care of God which preserves us as human” (149). Human life cannot endure in chaos.

Given the above convictions, one might expect Yoder to urge on Christians that they work and pray to alter the structures of human life, including then the political structures, so that they do not merely provide order but enable some modicum, at least, of “a genuinely free, loving life.” One would expect him to urge on Christians that they work and pray for political structures more like those of Denmark, say, and less like those of Nazi Germany. And Yoder does do this. Or at least, on first reading he appears to do this; later some reasons will turn up for suspecting that this first

reading may not be the correct reading. He says, speaking to Christians, that “we are called to contribute to the creation of structures more worthy of human society” (155).

Of course social structures almost invariably involve power of one sort and another; and if one believed that power was invariably evil, one would presumably argue that Christians should simply wait and pray for deliverance. That is not Yoder’s view. He rejects the argument “that everything having to do with the structure of this world is impure or unworthy for the Christian because of the coercion or violence that governs society” (154). The disciple of Christ will of course choose not to exercise certain kinds of power; adherents of any ethical system whatsoever would do the same. But this renunciation of the exercise of certain kinds of functions “is not because they are powerful;...power in itself, is the good creation of God. The disciple chooses not to exercise certain types of power because, in a given context, the rebellion of the structure of a given particular power is so incorrigible that at the time the most effective way to *take* responsibility is to refuse to collaborate, and by that refusal to take sides in favor of the victims whom that power is oppressing” (154).

All in all, it’s a picture whose substance traditional Thomists and Calvinists would not disagree with – though their rhetoric would be different. And they would want to add some things to the picture. For example, they would want to say more than Yoder ever does about the proper function of the state. Yes, the state does provide the substratum of order that is indispensable for human activity in general. But the state is called to do more than provide order. The state is called to secure justice of certain sorts, and to promote certain aspects of the common good; Thomists and Calvinists would not be content with the quick remark that the state, along with other structures, should enable “humanity to live a genuinely free loving life.” Nonetheless, though they would find the picture incomplete and its rhetoric lacking in subtlety and qualification, there is nothing in it that they would want to rub out.

As I have hinted, however, this is by no means the whole of the picture Yoder sketches. Indeed, what I have just now presented comes close to being obscured by the rest – so much so that I would guess many readers of Yoder will be surprised to learn that it’s there. It is not what gets emphasized. So what we must now do is uncover is the pattern of Yoder’s *dominant* line of thought – the line that comes close to obscuring the features just noted.

IV.

Though Yoder regards the state as belonging among the orders of creation and as a manifestation of God’s providential rule, he is acutely unhappy with traditional Thomist and Calvinist political theologies. The “theology of the orders of creation,” he says, “has generally affirmed that Jesus Christ has little directly to do with them, but that rather these several orders (the state, family, economy, etc.) have an autonomous value unrelated to redemption and the church, by virtue of their being the product of a divine act of creation” (144). Yoder cannot accept this.

There is a second consideration that spurs and motivates Yoder’s discussion. The overarching goal of *The Politics of Jesus* was to attack the notion, prevalent at the time of writing, that whatever may have been the ethic that Jesus taught and practiced and that Paul preached, it has no social relevance – no bearing on the problems of structure that face us when we deal with social ethics. When dealing with social ethics, we have to find some other source of guidance than Jesus and Paul. Yoder’s goal in his book was to fill this gap in theological ethics by showing that there is no gap in the reality of things; the gap exists only in theology. It is entirely of the theologian’s making.

Yoder notes that corresponding to this gap in traditional theological ethics there was a certain puzzle in traditional New Testament interpretation – namely, what to make of the language in the epistolary literature of “powers.” The practice had arisen of dismissing this talk as dispensably antique. “Since the onset of New Testament studies it has practically been taken for granted that

when the apostle speaks about angels or demons or powers this is a dispensable remainder of an antique worldview, needing not even to be interpreted or translated but simply to be dropped without discussion” (139).

But as good fortune would have it, at the same time that Yoder was disturbed by the gap in theological ethics, others were developing a fresh interpretation of what Paul and the other New Testament writers were saying with their references to “powers” – an interpretation that made their teaching relevant to our modern situation. And quite astonishingly, when these two are placed side by side – the gap in theological social ethics with the fresh interpretation of powers – what we “behold is that the unmanageable imagery [of the powers] has the same shape as the missing piece in the ethical puzzle” (139).

Accordingly, what spurs and motivates Yoder’s discussion of the state, in addition to his unhappiness with creation-orders theology, is the attempt to show that a proper interpretation of the powers is the missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of theological social ethics. Let it be added that these two motivations coincide, in the sense that when we see how a proper interpretation of the powers fills the gap in theological ethics, then we also see what the state has to do with Christ, the church, and the order of redemption.

Let us see, then, how Yoder interprets Paul’s language of “powers” and the claims he makes as to how Jesus and Paul taught us to deal with the powers. Let’s have before us two or three of the New Testament passages under consideration. In Colossians 1:15-16 Paul says that Christ

is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.

In Colossians 2:15 we read that God

disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in Christ [or, in the cross].

And in Romans 8:38, Paul says that

I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What are we to make of this language? Yoder notes that he is heavily indebted in his interpretation to the booklet, *Christ and the Powers*, by the twentieth-century Dutch theologian, Hendrikus Berkhof.⁴ Berkhof acknowledges that Paul's variegated terminology – “angels,” “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “dominions,” etc. – may well correspond to different sorts of things that Paul had in mind; it's not likely that he was using all these terms as synonyms. Nonetheless, says Yoder, “the best we can do today is to come to some understanding about the general trend of meaning which the total body of thought has for us. We may quite agree with Berkhof that Paul probably had such a very precise understanding in mind; but it could be well pointed out that it would hardly matter if he had not” (fn. 2, p. 137).

So what is “the general trend of meaning which [this] total body of thought has for us”? Following Berkhof, Yoder suggests that we can best take Paul as speaking about the intellectual, ethical, religious, political, and social structures that give order and stability to human existence. Or if someone objects that it is anachronistic to claim that Paul was speaking of such structures, let this be the point: “with careful analysis we observe that it can be said of all of these ‘structures’ what the apostle was saying concerning the powers” (143). There is more to human reality than just individuals and their actions. There are *structures*; and “these structures are not and never have been a mere sum total of the individuals composing them. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. And this ‘more’ is an invisible Power, even though we may not be used to speaking of it in personal or angelic terms” (143).

What, then, was Paul saying about the powers? Three things, basically – and now I repeat points made earlier, though with a difference: earlier, in order to show the underlying similarity to

⁴ Scottdale, PA: Herald Press; 1962. Translate by J. H. Yoder.

traditional lines of thought, I avoided mentioning that it was really Paul's doctrine of the powers that Yoder saw himself as explicating. Now we must hear those points with that doctrine in mind.

In the first place, "These structures were created by God. It is the divine purpose that within human existence there should be a network of norms and regularities to stretch out the canvas upon which the tableau of life can be painted" (147). In short, these structures, in their "general essence," are "parts of a good creation" (143).⁵ Indispensable parts. It's not that God created human beings and then *in addition* created these structures. These structures are necessary conditions of human existence. To repeat a passage cited earlier, "There could not be society or history, there could not be humanity without the existence above us of religious, intellectual, moral and social structures. *We cannot live without them*" (143).

Second, though created good, these "powers have rebelled and are fallen. They did not accept the modesty that would have permitted them to remain conformed to the creative purpose, but rather they claimed for themselves an absolute value. They thereby enslaved humanity and our history. We are bound to them; 'slavery' is in fact one of the fundamental terms used in the New Testament to describe the lost condition of men and women outside of Christ. To what are we subject? Precisely to those values and structures which are necessary to life and society but which have claimed the status of idols and have succeeded in making us serve them as if they were of absolute value" (142). Our "lostness consists in our subjection to the rebellious powers of a fallen world" (144).

Before we move on to what Yoder sees as the third aspect of Paul's teaching concerning the powers, let me hold up to the bright light of reality what he is saying in this second point. Our states,

⁵ This point in Yoder has been so often overlooked or neglected that it's worth quoting another passage to the same point: "It is important...to begin with the reminder that [the Powers] were part of the good creation of God. Society and history, even nature, would be impossible without regularity, system, order – and God has provided for this need. The universe is not sustained arbitrarily, immediately, and erratically by an unbroken succession of new divine interventions. It was made in an ordered form and 'it was good.' The creative power worked in a mediated form, by means of the Powers that regularized all visible reality" (141).

Yoder says, “absolutize” themselves, demand from us “unconditional loyalty,” “enslave us”; we are “unconditionally subjected” to them (143). Once the spell cast by the hypnotic quality of the language weakens, one is led to wonder whether Yoder is perhaps talking about some other world than the one you and I live in. Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands: do they enslave their citizens? Do they absolutize themselves? Are their citizens unconditional subjects? What is going on here?

Let me offer a suggestion. Yoder makes clear in a footnote (fn. 28, p. 160) that he does not want to get into the debate over whether the powers, as Paul understood them, are “personal demonic intelligences.” He rather thinks “the student of the ancient world” will wind up less clear than “the person in the pew” as to “what would have to be meant by ‘intelligences’ or by ‘personal’.” But he does not want to get into the issue. Whether or not it was impersonal structures Paul had in mind when speaking about the powers, or personal demonic intelligences, his teaching about the powers in fact applies to structures.

And since the state is obviously one of the structures of human existence, it just follows that the state can be thought of as a fallen power. Indeed, we won’t go wrong if we go beyond saying that it can be thought of thus, to saying that in fact it “*is an invisible Power*” (145; italics added). The state *is a fallen power*. Or better, *states* are fallen powers.

Let us suppose that Yoder is right in claiming that it’s debatable whether or not Paul thought of the powers as personal intelligences – in our sense of “personal intelligences.” What must not be lost from view is that Paul’s way of speaking about the powers does strongly suggest that they have some sort of supra-empirical status, an implication of this being that though those entities that you and I have in mind when we talk about social structures are *subject* to the wiles of the Pauline powers, they are not to be *identified* with those powers. I do not deny the propriety of extrapolating, from what Paul says, to the claim that our states are *under the influence* of fallen powers; but I submit that there is nothing in Paul that authorizes us to conclude that our states *just are* fallen powers. Paul’s

language unmistakably suggests an ontological *distance* between our familiar social structures, such as states, on the one hand, and the powers, on the other. Our structures are *subject* to the fallen powers; they are not *identical with* them.

Add to this the following point. When we speak of individual human beings as *fallen*, we naturally distinguish between the human being himself, on the one hand, and his *condition* of fallenness, on the other. With that distinction in hand, we can then go on to say that the human being remains a thing of *excellence* and the object of God's love in spite of his or her fallenness. But Yoder has effectively deprived himself of the possibility of making any such distinction, and saying any such thing, when it comes to the state – or any of the other social structures he cites. No doubt one could, in principle, distinguish between those *actual structures* which are states as we find them, and the *intrinsic structure* of the state as such; that done, one could then go on to say that no matter how fallen the former, the latter remains a thing of excellence. In one passage, which I have now already quoted two times, Yoder does speak of the “general essence” of structures as “parts of a good creation.” But it is going to be rhetorically difficult to maintain such a distinction between actual structures and their intrinsic structures. And in fact Yoder operates with no such distinction. He cites states as among the structures that insure order in human existence, he says that to all such structures we can apply the Pauline doctrine of the powers, and he concludes that states are fallen powers. Hence it is that we get his rousingly negative, unqualified language: states “absolutize” themselves, “enslave” us, demand from us “unconditioned loyalty”; we are “unconditionally subjected” to them.

Now for the third aspect of Yoder's interpretation of Paul's teaching about the powers. How are we to understand the fact that even after the Cross and Resurrection, we have states? One might suppose that before the Cross and Resurrection, God was biding time, getting ready for the

battle. But what sense are we to make of the fact that we still have to live with those fallen powers that are the states of the world?

We are to understand it as a sign of God's providential care for humanity in this time of the divine patience. Recall that structures, including then political structures, are *necessary* for human existence; they provide the *order* without which there could not be human existence. For God to have abolished these structures would have been to dispense with human existence. "Our lostness and our survival are inseparable, both dependent upon the Powers" (143).

There is a second way in which the state, and all our other social structures, fit into God's providential care for humankind. In addition to the fact that always some political structure or other is needed to insure the order necessary for human existence, God is able to use the *particular* actions of *particular* states for God's own good purposes. Assyria was an instrument in God's hand for bringing judgment on Israel (Isaiah 10), Pilate was an instrument in God's hand for bringing about the crucifixion of Jesus.

V.

Yoder's overarching strategy is to look at states, and the manifestation of divine rule therein, through the lens of the New Testament's teaching about the fallen powers and Christ's conquest thereof. States are to be regarded as fallen powers. States are evil. They oppress and kill people. They all do. Seeing this, somebody might propose getting rid of them. But what's the alternative to states? Chaos. Continued human existence is not possible under conditions of chaos. Human existence needs order. And states – all states – secure order. Willy-nilly they secure order. There cannot be such a thing as a state that does not secure order. Sometimes the order secured is precarious; but if it is a state, it is securing some degree of order. So given the necessity of order for human existence, states are necessary. States are *necessary evils*.

We must not conclude that, on Yoder's view, being oppressive and murderous is a necessary feature of political structures; part of the force of saying that political structures were part of God's good creation is that it is *not* a necessary feature. Not necessary; but nonetheless, actual. And you and I are not going to change the actuality. You and I are not going to undo the fallenness of Paul's fallen powers.

Yoder nowhere speaks of its being the proper function of states to secure the intrinsic social good of justice of certain sorts, and of actual states as succeeding in that function to one degree or another. Neither does he anywhere speak of its being the proper function of states to secure the intrinsic social good of well-being of certain sorts. States are for securing order. And order, on Yoder's view, is a purely instrumental good. Yoder mentions no intrinsic good that states achieve, only the instrumental good of order. That, so I have been suggesting, is no accident; it is a natural consequence of identifying states with – or thinking of them on the model of – Paul's fallen powers.

Not only is the state an indispensable component of God's providential rule of human life. God also uses states as a means to the achievement of God's redemptive purposes. The actions of Assyria, motivated by whatever warlike considerations the Assyrian king had in mind, had certain causal effects on Israel; the actions of Pilate, motivated by his refusal to stand up to the shouts of the crowd, had certain causal effects on the fate of Jesus; etc. This is evident to any human eye. The biblical writers look beyond what is evident to any human eye and invite us to see such happenings as part of a larger causal order in which not only are human political authorities agents but God is an agent as well. And part of what is to be seen when we discern this background is that not only were the Assyrian king and Pilate achieving their goals, but God was achieving God's redemptive goals *by way of* their achieving their goals. God was using their actions for God's own redemptive purposes.

Thomas and Calvin would once again agree that one of the ways in which God acts in history is by way of the actions of political authorities. This is one aspect of how states fit within

God's rule, not only redemptive, they would say, but also providential. But both would want to say something more. They would want to focus not just on power and efficacy but on *authority*. God has *authority* over us, not just power. Likewise the king of Assyria and Pontius Pilate had authority and not just power – assuming that their reigns were legitimate. And both Thomas and Calvin were persuaded that not only was the *power* of Pilate and of the Assyrian king an instrument of *God's power* but the *authority* of Pilate and the Assyrian king was also somehow related to *God's authority*. God's providential rule is not just power but authority, not just *potentia* but *potestas*; and that authority is exercised, in part, in and through the authority of the state.

This point about authority is completely missing in Yoder; in this respect he is, ironically, like a great many “secular” political theorists.⁶ It's not that he rejects the idea of authority upon considering it; he does not so much as consider it. Indeed, not only does he not consider whether the authority of the state might in some way represent the authority of God; he simply does not think of the state itself in terms of authority. He thinks of it purely in terms of power.⁷

Once again, the limitations imposed by developing one's doctrine of the state on the model of Paul's teaching about the fallen powers come to light. I do not doubt my Greek-English lexicon when it tells me that a good translation of Paul's word *exousiai* is “authorities.” But there is nothing in what Paul says about the powers which suggests that they have the right to issue commands to us, nor is there anything in what he says which suggests that they not only have the right to issue commands to us but that behind those commands somehow lie God's commands. The powers are just that: *powers*. They exert power over us; they do not have authority. Legitimate states, by contrast, do have authority.

⁶ O'Donovan breaks sharply with Yoder on this point.

⁷ Yoder's way of thinking of the role of Assyria within the providence of God is then no different from the role of two female bears in the providence of God as we find it gruesomely described in II Kings 2:23-4. The prophet Elisha went “to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, ‘Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!’ And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.”

It's worth adding that not only does Yoder have nothing to say about the authority of the state, and hence nothing to say about the relation between the authority of the state and the authority of God and Christ; his way of thinking also imposes severe constraints on how we should see the state and its actions as serving the divine causality. God uses the powers; and "the church must be sufficiently experienced to be able to discern when and where and how God is using the Powers" (155). But Yoder is adamantly opposed to the traditional interpretation of Paul's statement in Romans 13:1 ("there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God") which holds that God institutes those (legitimate) political authorities that do in fact hold sway. Not so, says Yoder; we are not to see God's providential rule in the existence of this state here and that state there, nor in the fact that these persons hold political office here and those, there. The existence of actual governments is a purely secular matter; there is no providence behind it. Providence with respect to the state is limited to assuring that some state or other exists, and to using whatever state happens to exist for God's own redemptive purposes. It's worth quoting at some length what Yoder says on the matter:

God is not said to *create* or *institute* or *ordain* the powers that be, but only to *order* them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place. It is not as if there was a time when there was no government and then God made government through a new creative intervention; there has been hierarchy and authority and power since human society existed. Its exercise has involved domination, disrespect for human dignity, and real or potential violence ever since sin has existed. Nor is it that by ordering this realm God specifically, morally approved of what a government does. The sergeant does not produce the soldiers he drills; the librarian does not create or approve of the book she or he catalogs and shelves. Likewise God does not take the responsibility for the existence of the rebellious "powers that be" or for their shape or identity; they already are. What the text says is that God orders them, brings them into line, providentially and permissively lines them up with divine purposes.

This is true of all governments. It is a statement both *de facto* and *de jure*. It applies to the government of dictators and tyrants as well as to constitutional democracies. It would in fact apply just as well to the government of a bandit or a warlord, to the extent to which such would exercise real sovereign control.

That God orders and uses the powers does not reveal anything new about what government should be or how we should respond to government. A given government...is simply lined up, used by God in the ordering of the cosmos (201-2).

VI.

Our understanding of Yoder's line of thought about the state and its place in God's economy will be confirmed and deepened if we go a bit further and consider his views concerning the stance the Christian should take toward the state.

"If our lostness consists in our subjection to the rebellious powers of a fallen world," what then can possibly be the "meaning of the work of Christ?" Subordination to these powers is a necessary condition of human existence; if we were not subject to structure "there would be no history nor society nor humanity" (144). So Christ's work cannot consist of, and obviously has not consisted of, destroying the powers. Of what does it consist instead?

We learn from Paul that Christ "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them." What this means, says Yoder, is that Christ, rather than destroying the powers, broke their sovereignty.

How did Christ do that? Not by "some kind of cosmic hocus-pocus" (158) but by what he did concretely in history. That consisted, at bottom, of two things. For one thing, Christ *subordinated* himself – including subordinating himself to the governmental authorities. He "permitted the Jews to profane a holy day (refuting thereby their own moral pretensions) and permitted the Romans to deny their vaunted respect for law as they proceeded illegally against him" (143).

Secondly, Jesus subordinated himself *freely*. That is to say, he subordinated himself voluntarily rather than because he felt he had no choice, and he subordinated himself while retaining the conviction that the structures to which he was subordinating himself were wrong. Christ exercised his subordination by living, in these two ways, "a genuinely free and human existence" (144-5).

It was his subordination, freely undertaken, that “broke” the “sovereignty” (144) of the powers. “Here we have for the first time to do with someone who is not the slave of any power, of any law or custom, community or institution, value or theory. Not even to save his own life will he let himself be made a slave of these Powers. This authentic humanity included his free acceptance of death at their hands. Thus it is his death that provides his victory”(145).

The believer is to go out and do likewise. She too is to subordinate herself. At the beginning of Romans 13, Paul enjoins “every person” to “be subject to the governing authorities.” Just as Jesus rejected the revolutionary option of the Zealots, so the believer is to reject all temptation to join the revolution. “The subordination that is called for recognizes whatever power exists, accepts whatever structure of authority happens to prevail” (198).⁸

And she too is to subordinate herself in freedom. She is to subordinate herself voluntarily rather than to save her neck; she may even join Jesus and Polycarp in offering her neck to the executioner. She is to subordinate herself while retaining for herself the freedom to decide whether what the state does is right or wrong; subordination to whatever powers there be does not imply “active moral support or religious approval of the state” (201).

Such subordination does not imply willingness to participate in whatever the state does, nor in whatever the state asks of one. A striking feature of Yoder’s thought is that it does not, in his view, even imply willingness to participate in activities of the state that are essential to it and that are used by God as means to God’s ends. authorized by God. In our world, states cannot exist without exercising the police function. But exercising the police function inevitably involves doing violence and harm to others; and Christians will not participate in doing that. The function of exercising vengeance, which Paul in Romans 12:19 says belongs to God and in Romans 13:4 says belongs to the governmental authorities, “is not the function to be exercised by Christians. However able an

⁸ Human reason tells us that *some structure of other* is necessary for human existence; what Jesus teaches us is that we are to subordinate ourselves *to the structures that be*.

infinite God may be to work at the same time through the sufferings of his believing disciples who return good for evil and through the wrathful violence of the authorities who punish evil with evil, such behavior is for humans not complementary but in disjunction” (198).

When it comes to warfare, the dissent of the Christian will be more radical yet. Not only will she not participate in warfare; she will insist that it is not part of God’s providential plan that states will engage in such a function (203-5). If her state goes to war, she will not only refuse to participate but also make clear her disapproval of such action by her state or any other. Nonetheless, even in time of war she will subordinate herself. She will honor her government, neither trying to overthrow it nor trying to escape its jurisdiction.

These give the outer parameters of the Christian’s mode of subordination to the state. The believer will not participate in either policing or warfare; and of warfare, she will express her systematic disapproval. The question that remains is, what is the Christian’s mode of subordination within those parameters? A couple of times Yoder takes note of the need for critical discrimination in the Christian’s stance toward the state. For one thing, if we are to obey our states on some matters but not on others, we must be capable of critical discrimination (207-9). And second, if we are “to contribute to the creation of structures more worthy of human society,” we must again be capable of critical discrimination (156).

Where do we get the principles for making such discriminations? Where do we look for guidance? Yoder does not say; and that is astonishing. Recall that *The Politics of Jesus* was written as a polemic against those theologians who think that when it comes to social ethics, we have to find some other source of guidance than Jesus. The argument of the book is that when we rightly understand Jesus – and Paul’s interpretation of Jesus – Jesus is sufficient. We do not have to

supplement what we learn from Jesus with an appeal to natural law or any other such source.⁹ So what do we learn from Jesus? We learn that we are to *subordinate ourselves in freedom* to the structures we find around us, including the political structures. The freedom that determines the mode of subordination includes making up one's own mind on the political issues of the day, rather than just going along with the habits and practices of the extant structures. But on where one looks for guidance in making up one's own mind, we are told next to nothing. What we learn from Jesus proves to be almost exclusively about self-chosen subordination and hardly at all about where to look for guidance in living out one's particular stance of self-chosen subordination. Indeed, I think it is impossible to finish Yoder's chapter on "Revolutionary Subordination" without feeling that the subordination he has in mind comes to little else than *just* subordination, period. The structure of marriage remains the same, but now the wife *voluntarily* submits to that structure; the structure of a slave economy remains the same, but now the slave *voluntarily* submits to that structure; etc.¹⁰ A most ironic outcome for someone who opened the discussion by presenting himself as unremittingly hostile to every form of an ethic of inwardness!

The closest Yoder comes to offering a principle for Christian social ethics is when he says that "the Christian is called to view social status from the perspective of maximizing freedom. One who is given an opportunity to exercise more freedom should do so, because we are called to freedom in Christ" (182). The suggestion is never developed. Are we entitled to infer, from the freedom to which the Christian is called in Christ, that we ought to struggle for liberal democracies

⁹ Cf. p. 149: "We have asked whether the New Testament provides any concept with which it would be possible to interpret the structures and the history of a secular society. In the Pauline understanding of the powers we have discovered a line of thought very apt to deal with this kind of matter."

¹⁰ Consider this passage: "The subordinate person becomes a free ethical agent in the act of voluntarily acceding to subordination in the power of Christ instead of bowing to it either fatalistically or resentfully. The claim is not that there is immediately a new world regime which violently replaces the old; rather, the old and the new order exist concurrently on different levels" (186). And this passage: "The wife or child or slave who can accept subordination because 'it is fitting in the Lord' has not forsaken the radicality of the call of Jesus; it is precisely this attitude toward the structures of this world, this freedom from needing to smash them since they are about to crumble anyway, which Jesus has been the first to teach and in his suffering to concretize" (187). Why is *smashing* the only alternative?

as opposed, say, to monarchies? Yoder does not say, nor does he say anything that would help us in deciding. And in any case, he pretty much undercuts the thought that maximizing freedom is the fundamental principle for a Christian social ethic when he immediately goes on to say that “that freedom [to which we are called in Christ] can already become real within one’s present status by voluntarily accepting subordination, in view of the relative unimportance of such social distinctions when seen in the light of the coming fulfillment of God’s purposes” (182). I submit that there is nothing more to Yoder’s social ethic than self-chosen subordination – no guidance for making up one’s mind concerning most of what states do, no guidance for pressing states toward becoming more just.

Yoder would protest that I am neglecting the heart of the matter. In addition to subordinating herself voluntarily to the structures of the ambient society, the Christian participates in that new and free society which is the church. The church is, for the Christian, the primary agent of social reform; and the church is not at all inward. The “very existence of the church,” says Yoder, “is its primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the lordship of Christ to the powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated. The church does not attack the powers; this Christ has done. The church concentrates upon not being seduced by them. By existing the church demonstrates that their rebellion has been vanquished” (150).¹¹ Agency proves not to be out of the hands of the powerless after all.

One might ask how Yoder can say this about the church, given the conceptuality of the book. Given that the church has human beings as its members, the church also requires structures; that is Yoder’s necessity principle. And if we are to regard structures in general on the model of the fallen powers, as Yoder constantly urges, then it follows that we will have to do the same for the church’s structures. Those structures too are fallen – fallen powers! Presumably then the paradigm

¹¹ The “primary social structure through which the gospel works to change the structures is that of the Christian community” (154).

of liberated subordination will apply as much to the Christian's conduct within the church as to the Christian's conduct within the structures of the ambient society.

Though it is astonishing, given the program of the book, that Yoder's paradigm should come so close to being one more example of a social ethic of inwardness, I think it is nonetheless easy to see why things turned out this way. To think of political structures on the model of fallen powers, and then to confine one's political theology to looking at the state through the lens of the Pauline teaching about the powers, is to leave oneself without any source of guidance for the critical discernment with which one is to exercise one's subordination to the actual state under which one lives. Nowhere does Paul urge critical discrimination in dealing with the fallen powers; nowhere is Jesus described as exercising such discrimination. Jesus *opposes* the powers.

The lack of guidance for life within the parameters proves starkly evident in a passage about what Yoder calls "social discernment." Social discernment, he says, "is not simply a way of helping the needy with their social problems, . . . nor does it mean simply to guide individual Christians by helping them to do good deeds or to avoid sin. It is rather a part of Christians' proclamation that the church is under order to make known to the Powers . . . the fulfillment of the mysterious purposes of God . . . by means of Jesus in whom their rebellion has been broken and the pretensions they had raised have been demolished" (156). True; such discernment is not *simply* a way of helping the needy nor is it *simply* a way of guiding individuals. But is it not *also* a way of helping the needy and is it not *also* a way of guiding individuals? Is it *simply* the preachment that the sway of the powers has been broken in Christ?

In the Epilogue to the chapter on "Christ and Power," written some twenty years after the original publication, Yoder remarks that "The vision of a dialectical interlocking of created goodness and rebelliousness, in what makes the world the way it is, has been found illuminating by many" (159). To this he adds that the "Pauline perspective is . . . clear about the intrinsic complexities of

institutional and psycho-dynamic structures, such that basically good creaturely structures can nonetheless be oppressive” (161). If this thought had been developed, that the basically good creaturely structure that is the state can act oppressively *while nonetheless remaining basically good*, a very different pattern of thought would have emerged from that which does in fact emerge in *The Politics of Jesus*. Developing this alternative line of thought would have required saying much more about creaturely goods than Yoder ever does, and more about the state than can be said by regarding it as one of Paul’s fallen powers. Or rather: it would require no longer looking at states as fallen powers. *Subject* to fallen powers, indeed; but not *themselves* fallen powers.