Between the Times: The Church’s Political Vocation in Eschatological Perspective

Jens Zimmermann
Trinity Western University

Abstract
Taken the so-called return to religion for granted, how should one conceive of church state relations? In this essay, the author attempts to answer this question for the Protestant tradition by comparing the theologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This comparison shows important differences between these two thinkers, deriving from Barth’s emphasis on divine transcendence and Bonhoeffer’s contrary stress on the natural order of things. Yet in our present cultural situation, the church has most to gain by emphasizing the common ground between Barth and Bonhoeffer in avoiding a conflictual model of church-state relations. Both theologians offer a Christocentric and complementary view, according to which church and state foster, in their different ways, the formation of our humanity.

Orthodox theology has always recognized the dual citizenship of Christian existence: the Christian lives in the future age with its beginning kingdom of God embodied by the church on the one hand, and in the waning, present age with its demands by the secular state for allegiance and societal duties on the other. Recent events in world history have exacerbated this inherent tension of the Christian existence. In the United States, identification of the state as providential instrument for world peace has occasioned a new wave of Christian evangelical enthusiasm that shapes politics and culture in the image of this faith. Here the state seems to be taken over by the church. In Canada, by contrast, the church is told in no uncertain terms to “butt out” of the state’s attempt to redefine marriage, even though the character of marriage as a union between one man and one woman originated in the church’s sacramental view of marriage as analogous to Christ’s relation to
the church rather than in natural law theory. At the same time, Europe faces a truly profound crisis of its political and social values. It is indeed not too much to say that this identity crisis extends to Western civilization as a whole. This identity crisis emerges under the twin influences of interior intellectual decay and outward pressure to articulate so-called Western values beyond a free market economy, consumerism, and democracy.

The cultural critic Terry Eagleton is surely correct in arguing that the West’s fashionable neglect of fundamental worldview questions is a luxury it can no longer afford, “for just as our culture has adjusted to thinking small, history has begun to act big.” Intellectuals are no longer used to thinking globally and politically, yet current societal and political crises force the West “more and more to reflect on the foundations of its own civilization.” Eagleton urges us to examine the foundation of our political and social values, for “the West … may need to come up with some persuasive-sounding legitimations of its form of life, at exactly the point when laid-back cultural thinkers are assuring it that such legitimations are neither possible nor necessary…. It will need, in short, to sound deep in a progressively more shallow age.” It will need to do so particularly in light of its close encounter with nations who combine politics and religion with great conviction and with very little concern for the separation of the secular and the sacred.

Indeed, the exact nature of the secular-sacred relation is perhaps the most important question Western cultures have to wrestle with at present. Unfortunately, Western views of religion are still strongly influenced by an instinctual “fear of religion,” and the media’s single-minded focus on political Islamism distracts from the actual issue. For the real problem is that the secularism that prompts the West’s fear of religion derives from a false view of human rationality, based on epistemological views stemming from Enlightenment rationalism and from a scientism, represented in part by the so-called New Atheists. As Charles Taylor has shown, however, this view of religion derives from an ideologically driven view of history which equates human maturity and progress with the decline of religion. This “subtraction narrative” of secularism results in a social imaginary that cannot make sense of religion as part of modern culture. For this interpretive framework, any religious conviction is by definition a cultural regress into the dark abysses of our mythological past. European states like France and Germany have lost the

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1 Thomas Aquinas, for example, could not find an argument against polygamy based on natural law, but only on theological, sacramental grounds: “Jesus cannot have plural churches, man cannot have plural wives.” Russell Hittinger, *The First Grace: Rediscovering Natural-Law in a Post-Christian World.* (Washington: ISI Books, 2003), p. 12.
3 Eagleton, *After Theory,* p. 73.
4 Eagleton, *After Theory,* p. 73.
ability to understand religion, and, perhaps worst of all, remain blind to the fact that their own secular liberal vision of the state with its humanistic, democratic values constitutes itself a faith.\(^6\) This fear of religion influences even American views of church-state relations. For although secular Americans, in contrast to Europeans, generally find religion compatible with a modern outlook on life,\(^7\) they generally fail to understand the original purpose of the nonestablishment clause as protecting the church from state interference, and they often interpret it to imply the exclusively private, nonpolitical nature of religion. The exclusion of religion from what counts as rational and from public life, however, is an anomaly and estranges western cultures from their own Christian roots. As Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out repeatedly, the Western fear of religion, its lack of self-understanding, and its empty secularism combined with aggressive consumerism alienates us from other cultures: “The Muslims … feel threatened, not by the foundations of our Christian morality, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations…. It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions; rather, it is the attempt to construct the human community in a manner that absolutely excludes God.”\(^8\)

Yet this crisis in Western thinking and self-understanding is also an opportunity for the church to proclaim the gospel and to help the West sort out its confusion, but only if the church understands and articulates clearly the relation of church and state. How should we approach this task? I suggest that this task requires at least three things: first, an acceptance of our current postfoundational or postmetaphysical climate; second, a Christological and incarnational focus from which flows; and third, an emphasis on God’s redemption and restoration of humanity as the basis of politics.

1. Clearing the Ground for Religion

To describe our current intellectual culture as postmetaphysical is not merely an academic judgment. The basic notion that there are no automatic, transcultural, or a-historic norms and principles has pretty much made its way into popular thinking. Intellectually, this philosophical mood requires the historicizing of all phenomena; the rejection of absolute values such as an abstract universal reason

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\(^6\) This negative view is tempered by Jürgen Habermas’s valiant efforts to reintegrate religious sources into the public policy making. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, the supposed religious neutrality of his ethics of communication is compromised, however, by their reliance on Christianly-derived values of personal dignity and equality. See Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 54.


or natural law. While many still feel uneasy about accepting such postfoundational claims, there are two areas in which they help us in considering church-state relations.

First of all, as the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo recently observed, the end of metaphysics also means the end of philosophical atheism. With the death of scientistic and historicist rationalism, “today there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be an atheist, or at any rate to dismiss religion.”

Vattimo concedes, of course, that philosophy is still conspicuously silent about God, but for him this is merely because most philosophers are habitual atheists whose “silence with respect to God has no basis in any philosophically relevant principle…. If the meta-narrative of positivism no longer holds, one can no longer think that God does not exist because his existence cannot be established scientifically. If the meta-narrative of Hegelian or Marxist historicism no longer holds, one cannot argue that God does not exist because faith in God belongs to an earlier stage within history of human evolution, or because God is just an ideological representation at the service of domination.” To put it simply: no metaphysics, no philosophical atheism; without philosophical atheism, religion becomes once again a legitimate voice at the public negotiation table for values.

A second advantage of the general interpretive postmetaphysical climate is the increasingly spreading insight that liberal secular humanism and its supposed neutral political values are, in fact, themselves as much a matter of faith as is religion. In his book The Trouble With Principle, for example, Stanley Fish shows that the principle of religious neutrality, on which basis liberalism excludes religion from public life, is itself a faith. Fish argues that, for instance, the typical liberalist argument that religious education is indoctrination while proper state regulated education is exposure to facts, is itself a presupposition based on certain philosophical assumptions about reality. In exposing the error of liberalism’s dualism between neutral fact and interpreted indoctrination, Fish argues for the interpretive nature of all our knowledge. To use Charles Taylor’s term, we are always “involved” agents whose desires and goals shape our interpretation of self and reality. Or, to say it with Fish, “the choice is never between indoctrination and free inquiry but between different forms of indoctrination issuing from different authorities.” In the postfoundationalist thought of Vattimo and Fish, Christianity is no longer a crutch for the intellectually weak but is on equal footing with,

and enjoys the same political weight as, other convictions that shape our vision for the common good.

An apparent disadvantage of this postmetaphysical climate, however, is that theological formulations concerning the essence of humanity and the common good can no longer appeal with absolute certainty to natural law and universal reason as abstract ideas commonly accessible to all. By emphasizing the interpretive nature of truth, postmodern thinking has rightly tried to counter our human tendency to rationalize ideologies by appealing to universal reason and natural principles. But Christian theology welcomes this caution, because Christian theology begins not with universal reason (though it is by no means opposed to this notion)¹³ but with God’s self-revelation in Jesus the Christ. We find this Christological foundation for the political vocation of the church and the purpose of the state most clearly in the theologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

2. **Karl Barth and the Christological Foundation of Church-State Relations**

The basic hermeneutic principle of understanding texts in their historical context becomes especially important for Karl Barth’s writings on church and state. We may even go so far as to say that his entire theology with its insistence on God’s transcendence stems at least in part from his conviction that only the strongest emphasis on God’s radical transcendence of creation can counteract our proclivity to set up comprehensive explanatory systems to justify inhumane political action. Barth’s entire theology is a constant reminder of God’s freedom from any such totalities. As is well known, Barth himself dates the beginning of his own theological struggle with liberal Protestantism to the day he saw the signature of his former German theology professors on a public declaration endorsing Germany’s participation in the First World War.¹⁴ This ethical failure of respected theologians demonstrated to Barth the subordination of God to politics and ideology. Barth was especially shocked to see that even a theologian (Wilhelm Hermann) who had powerfully taught him the experience of God in Christ had now used this experience to legitimize the war. Experience of God had now turned into “an al-

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¹³ The relation between reason and faith is, of course, a longstanding discussion among Christians, who have, nonetheless, traditionally argued on the whole that universal reason is possible and enlightens Christians and non-Christians alike because God’s light illumines all things. Christians, in other words, base the universality of reason on the eternal Logos in whom all things “hang together” (Col. 1:17 NRSV).

legedly religious war ‘experience’”; in other words, Barth was shocked to learn that German Christians experienced “their war as a holy war.”

Barth saw the same kind of idolatry in the German church’s inability to offer unified resistance to the Nazi regime. He saw the reason of his colleague’s indifference to and positive endorsement of Nazi ideology in the theological cancer of combining God’s revelation with an ideology or conceptual system. For Barth, all theological attempts “to combine revelation by means of the unfortunate word and to another authority we consider for some reason important, [such as] existence, structure, state, or nation, court the danger of erecting idols beside God.”

It is for this reason that Barth urged Christians to “dismiss all natural religion and to dare to depend solely on the one God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.”

For the same reason, the Barmen declaration of the Confessing Church, written by Barth, contains in its first article the statement, “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation.”

It bears repeating that Barth’s rejection of natural revelation (and not so much natural theology as a possibility) originates in the historical fact that natural revelation was used to prop up ungodly political theologies.

Yet Barth’s Christological focus still allows him to go beyond limiting state authority to asserting its positive role within God’s providence. For example, in his essay “Divine Justification and Human Law,” Barth contends that Reformation theology did not go far enough in its insistence that divine justification and human law can peacefully coexist: “clearly we need to know not only that the two

15 “Especially with you, Herr Professor, … we learned to acknowledge ‘experience’ as the constitutive principle of knowing and doing in the domain of religion. In your school it became clear to us what it means to ‘experience’ God in Jesus. Now, however, in answer to our doubts, an ‘experience; which is completely new to us is held out to us by German Christians, an allegedly religious war ‘experience’; i.e. the fact that German Christians ‘experience’ their war as a holy war is supposed to bring us to silence, if not demand reverence from us.” Karl Barth to Wilhelm Hermann, 4 Nov. 1914, quoted in Bruce L. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1997), p. 113. While McCormack does not believe in Barth’s own immediate “conversion” from liberalism, he does give full credence to the significance ascribed by Barth to the impact of this document. McCormack, Dialectical Theology, p. 112.

16 Remarks from a public lecture given by Barth in 1933 entitled “Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom” (The First Commandment as Theological Axiom). Busch, Karl Barths Lebenslauf, p. 237.

17 “Theological Declaration of Barmen,” 8.12; Presbyterian Creeds and Confessions; last modified Sept. 29, 2010; http://creeds.net/reformed/barmen.htm.


19 German title: Rechtfertigung und Recht.
Barth argues that the New Testament regards the state as one of the angelic powers that, according to Col 1:15–20, has its existence in and through Christ, through whose death and resurrection they have been restored to their original order to serve the kingdom of Christ.

Barth thus concludes that church and state are two concentric circles of one Christological sphere, and both serve Christ in the causes of justification and sanctification. The state’s task is to provide a peaceful environment for the preaching of the gospel and thus for the justification of any potential believer. However, should the state choose to become a demonic state, the suffering of the church in pursuing its task of proclaiming the kingdom of God also serves to sanctify its members. In short, the state is neither independent, established by natural law or by the demands of sociality, nor a product of the fallen world, but ultimately is an instrument of grace. Thus, the state:

is not a product of sin but one of the constants of divine providence and government of the world in its action against human sin; it is therefore an instrument of divine grace…. [The state] renders a definite service to the divine providence and plan of salvation, quite apart from the judgment and individual desire of its members. Its existence is not separate from the Kingdom of Jesus Christ; its foundations and its influence are not autonomous. It is outside the Church but not outside the range of Christ’s dominion—it is an exponent of his Kingdom.

Because this is so, Christian existence is by definition consciously political. For Christians, to be nonpolitical would be to rebel against God’s explicit creation
ordinance. Because Barth grounds his view of church-state relations Christologically, he can also claim that “apart from the Church, nowhere is there any fundamental knowledge of the reasons that make the State legitimate and necessary.” For Barth, the conception of the state is not determined by natural law but by revelation. From a theological, Christological perspective, human law’s sole function is to clear space for the proclamation of the gospel. Moreover, the cosmic, incarnate word of God as the positive unifying tie between church and state is more than a general principle. What is the gospel, after all, but the good news that in Christ humanity is restored to its original image? The church proclaims God’s reconciliation with creation and the restoration of humanity in the incarnation. Since all of creation finds its fulfillment in Christ, the “Christian community participates—on the basis of and by belief in the divine revelation—in the human search for the best form of political organization,” and the best form is the most humane one.

3. Analogous Kingdoms: Restored Humanity as the Eschatological Basis for Politics

Barth in no way denies a fundamental contrast between the church and the state, but his eschatological view of creation makes this contrast temporary, because both institutions serve all of humanity in the same cause of justification. For Barth, “The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one among all others is the man Jesus.” The historical event of the incarnation is the paradigm of human dignity that transcends any cultural or biological determinations of who we are. Barth can thus advocate a Christologically-grounded focus on the importance of human dignity: “Since God became man, man is the measure of all things.” The incarnation elevates the concrete human being immeasurably above any abstract idea of what humanity is, without thereby making

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29 Barth refers here to Rom 13:12 and comments, “and rebels secure their own damnation.” Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 185.
30 Barth, “Church and State,” p. 140.
31 “This may sound strange, but this is the case: all that can be said from the standpoint of divine justification on the question (and the questions) of human law is summed up in this one statement: the Church must have freedom to proclaim divine justification. The State will realize its own potentialities, and thus will a just State in proportion as it not merely positively allows, but actively grants, this freedom to the Church.” Hence for Barth the law of freedom for the gospel is the only true foundation for state law: “we cannot measure what this law is by any Romantic or Liberalistic idea of ‘natural law,’ but simply by the concrete law of freedom, which the Church must claim for its Word, so far as it is the Word of God.” Barth, “Church and State,” p. 147.
33 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (trans. Harold Knight and G. W. Bromiley; vol. 3; bk. 2; The Doctrine of Creation: The Creature; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), p. 132.
34 Barth, “The Christian Community,” p. 172. Barth is aware that personal sacrifice is sometimes unavoidable, but such sacrifice may only be asked to save the lives of others, not for a so-called greater, man-made cause.
humans gods. Christianity is the only religion in which God himself becomes a concrete human being who vicariously sacrifices himself for the lives of others. This unique mystery makes Christianity the only effective measure against political ideologies which would, in the name of humanity, sacrifice human life for a greater abstract idea.\(^{35}\)

The essence of humanity is seen in Christ, and all our political practices, whether Christian or not, should try to cultivate this image because in doing so we pursue our common, true humanity. The only difference between non-Christians and Christians is that the latter experience this reality by faith and through the indwelling of the Spirit, although such a reality is nonetheless the eschatological goal of the human race as a whole. *Civitas caelestis* and *civitas terrena* are indeed two distinct communities but one humanity under God, addressed by God in Jesus Christ to live in expectancy of the Kingdom of God. Barth remains true to his eschatological emphasis in arguing that neither the state nor the church properly embody the coming kingdom. The state’s very function is to provide peace in a fallen world for the proclamation of the kingdom, and the Church itself exists between the ages and even at its “very best is not an image of the Kingdom of God” but its provisional embodiment.\(^{36}\)

Barth argues on eschatological grounds that the existence of the state is “an allegory,”

>a correspondence and an analogue to the Kingdom of God which the Church preaches and believes in. Since the state forms the outer circle, within which the Church, with the mystery of its faith and gospel, is the inner circle, since it shares a common center with the Church, it is inevitable that, although its presuppositions and its tasks are its own and different, it is nevertheless capable of reflecting indirectly the truth and reality which constitute the Christian community.\(^{37}\)

The church desires “that the shape and reality of the State in this fleeting world should point towards the Kingdom of God, not away from it. Its desire is not that human politics should cross the politics of God, but that they should proceed, however distantly, in parallel lines.”\(^{38}\) Thus the church’s political responsibility is to call “the State from neutrality, ignorance, and paganism into co-responsibility before God, thereby remaining faithful to its own particular mission.”\(^{39}\)

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\(^{35}\) Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 172.

\(^{36}\) Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 169.


\(^{38}\) Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 170.

\(^{39}\) Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 171.
This analogous relation between church and state allows Barth to deduce a number of guidelines from Church life for the Christian's political decisions: servant leadership; rejection of tyranny and anarchy; an emphasis on human dignity and social justice; aversion to secret politics; an emphasis of common humanity over local, regional, or national interests in politics; and peaceful conflict resolution wherever possible. Barth cites these as mere illustrations of how one can apply kingdom principles to political life. In fact, for him the “real church must be the model and prototype of the real State. The Church must set an example so that by its very existence it may be a source of renewal for the State and the power by which the State is preserved.”

Barth asks, “How can the world believe the gospel of the King and his Kingdom if by its own actions and attitudes the Church shows that it has no intention of basing its own internal policy on the gospel?”

It is for this reason, too, that Barth rejects the formation of Christian political parties. Instead of trying to carry the church into the state, Christians should participate in politics which foster true humanity and provide the utmost liberty for the preaching of the gospel. Christians can best help in the political sphere “by constantly giving the State an impulse in the Christian direction and freedom to develop on the Christian line.” For Barth, to be political means to be in service to the ultimate polis, the city of God, the new Jerusalem which will descend upon the new earth.

In proposing this model of church-state relations, Barth is very much aware of the interpretive nature of all human knowledge. Because the city of God is eschatological and will only be revealed with Christ’s second coming, we should ever resist turning our interpretations into eternal principles. Even our best political achievements should be held somewhat provisionally because the church “trusts and obeys no political system or reality but the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things (Hebrews 1:3; Barmen Thesis 5), including all political things.”

4. Mediating Transcendence through the Political: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer shares Karl Barth’s Christological focus of the church and state’s common purpose in fostering the restoration of our humanity whose transcendent norm we find in the incarnation. Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that all of reality must take its measure from God’s revelation, and that all reality is gathered up in Christ and moves toward this center. He too rejects a division of the world into secular and profane spheres and of the radical separation of church and state,

41 Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 186.
42 Barth, “Christian Community,” p. 188.
because this distortion of Luther’s two-kingdom concept had been used by theologians to support the Nazi regime as a divinely ordained order of government. Also like Barth, Bonhoeffer insists on the deeply political nature of Christian existence because all human societies participate in one reality under God.44

Bonhoeffer also agrees with Barth that in their different ways church and state should cooperate in their common task of preparing humanity for the coming kingdom of God. Yet there are subtle and important differences between the two;45 one can always see in Bonhoeffer’s work an instinctual resistance against Barth’s radical emphasis on God’s transcendence, and we find it again on the issue of church-state relations.

Bonhoeffer is not nearly as skeptical as Barth towards natural law. To be sure, Bonhoeffer’s theology has much the same event character as Barth’s in that all of our notions concerning the ultimate nature of things must be interpreted in light of God’s self-revelation in Christ. Bonhoeffer laments the opposition of nature and grace within modern Protestant theology, whereby “everything human and natural sank into the night of sin.”46 In other words, Bonhoeffer admits that the Catholic caricature of Protestantism’s denial of any natural good is not completely unfounded.47 Protestantism has lost, he argues, the proper relation between nature and grace, or what he calls the penultimate relation of a world pronounced good by God but fallen into sin, and its ultimate redemption already but not yet fully accomplished by Christ.48 Bonhoeffer seeks to recover this relation “from the gospel itself.”49 In light of the gospel, the natural is that part of sinful creation which “after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Christ,” that is, whatever created thing or being, despite the fall, is not completely closed off from Christ.50 Bonhoeffer seeks to recover this relation “from the gospel itself.”

44 “In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 55.

45 One difference, of minor importance, is that Bonhoeffer makes the same argument as Barth on the basis of Luther’s teaching concerning the two kingdoms, a principle Barth had rejected as focusing too much on the difference of church and state rather than seeing their unity in Christ. Bonhoeffer believes that such a reading is a misunderstanding of Luther’s concept.


47 See, for instance, Jacques Maritain’s description of Protestant anthropology as “the purest pessimism,” where grace is “not life, but a covering cloak. Yes it is the purest pessimism… Make way there for this sullied creature, since man must live in the hell which is this world.” Jacques Maritain, *True Humanism* (trans. Margot Robert Adamson; 6th ed.; London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), p. 9. Maritain demonstrates his superficial understanding of Protestantism by claiming that, ironically, while this miserable Protestant sinner has no freedom left, the cry to God for grace and liberty remains nonetheless his own initiative.


fer admits that this distinction is relative from our human point of view and that even what is unnatural, or closed off from Christ, is so only in light of his incarnation, death and resurrection. Bonhoeffer’s well known division of reality into penultimate and ultimate things allows him to give much more independent weight to natural life than Barth, although Bonhoeffer embraced an equally Christocentric theology. Yet Bonhoeffer argued that the natural world enjoys a relative autonomy and integrity, precisely because Christ, as the ultimate reconciliation of world and God, determines both form and content of the penultimate reality we inhabit. Hence the penultimate, natural world, including human reason adapted for its exploration, even in their dependence on God, constitutes an objective reality that resists any final interpretations of its essence by either theological or nontheological means. At the same time, from a Christian point of view, our fullest and best understandings of natural life point forward to the ultimate purpose of life as participation in God’s kingdom. Thus Bonhoeffer can argue in rather un-Barthian fashion that “where law is sought in what is naturally given, the will and the gift of the creator are honoured even in a world rent by conflicts, and at the same time the way is pointed toward the fulfillment of all law, when Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit will give to each one of us what is our own.” In other words, it is the task and ability of natural reason, embodied in laws, to secure individual rights even if the divine foundation of these laws is not recognized.

Perhaps the best way to describe the difference between Bonhoeffer and Barth on the nature of Christian existence is to say that Barth is more concerned with the freedom of God and Bonhoeffer is equally concerned with human freedom, especially in everyday life. Barth, for example, praises Bonhoeffer’s idea of divine mandates (state, church, culture, work, and marriage) in which Christ’s lordship over creation is made manifest because they cannot be deduced from nature but rather they shine their light into nature from above; they derive their validity not from what is, but rather from what should be in light of God’s commandments. Yet even so, Bonhoeffer’s description of the mandates is still too weighted toward

51 See for instance Bonhoeffer’s rejection of the Catholic Church’s distortion of marriage into an order of grace within its domain alone (and thus the view of marriages external to the church as illegitimate) as equivalent to the Nazi state’s view of marriage as securing a pure bloodline. Both distort the natural integrity and right of marriage, turning it from a natural order into an order of grace or nationalistic institution. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 204–205.

52 “In Jesus Christ life as an end in itself expresses its createdness, and life as a means to an end expresses its participation in the kingdom of God [Gottesreich].” Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 179.

53 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 182.


55 Karl Barth, Die Kirchliche Dogmatik (Die Lehre von der Schöpfung III; 4 § 52; Das Gebot des Schöpfers 1; Teil; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), p. 22.
immanence for Barth. He does not like the word “mandate” but wants something more tentative. This may sound like hairsplitting on Barth’s part (and probably is), but it shows us Barth’s ever-present zeal for God’s transcendence: God tells us that we live within these “mandates” not because they themselves are his commandment or concrete mandate to us but because the imperative of his word becomes concrete only as each ethical situation arises.56

Bonhoeffer agrees with this interpretive, concrete view of ethics, but thinks that in Barth’s rather positivistic view of revelation “the world is in a certain sense left to itself,” by separating nature and grace which have been joined in the incarnate Word of God.57 Bonhoeffer fears the consequences of portraying the Christian life as a constant series of agonizing decisions, a minute-by-minute reflection on taking the correct steps.58 For him, this is a misunderstanding of divine transcendence and remains a dualistic mode of thinking within divine and human spheres. God’s divine call to a restored humanity, however, is immanent as well as transcendent. We live within a divine order of a family, of marriage, and within an order of work and property, and their distortions by both church and state do not invalidate them. In Christ, these mandates become the boundaries within which we live an affirmative Christian live. Here God’s “ought” is already structurally in the “is,” and because of this immanent transcendence, God’s “commandment prevents life from disintegrating into innumerable new beginnings, but instead gives

56 “Is it not the case that this indication of our instruction about God’s mandate and our human actions, which either correspond or do not correspond to it, becomes necessary, because God’s word tells us that we exist in these contexts [in diesen Verhältnissen], and that his commandment finds us ever again within these relations, within which we will encounter Him in our concrete actions again and again? But is it not also the case, that the very indication of these relations does exactly not have quite the character of an Imperative, nor, strictly speaking, that of a ‘Mandate,’ but that this exhortation becomes an imperative, a concrete commandment or Mandate only in the power of the divine commanding itself, that is, in the actual ethical event?” Barth, Die Kirchliche Dogmatik, p. 23.


58 Bonhoeffer chides the ahistorical ethicist in this passage, but Barth’s reluctance to have God fully present in day-to-day operations, to have him present in structures, incurs the same admonition: “The ethical as topic has its particular time and its particular place. This is so because human beings are living and mortal creatures in a finite and fragile world. They are not essentially and exclusively students of ethics. It is part of the great naïveté or, more accurately, folly of ethicists to overlook this fact willfully, and to start from the fictional assumption that human beings are every moment of their lives having to make an ultimate, infinite choice; as if every moment of life would require a conscious decision between good and evil; as if every human action were labeled with a sign, written by divine police in bold letters, saying ‘permitted’ or ‘prohibited’; as if human beings incessantly had to do something decisive, fulfill a higher purpose, meet an ultimate duty. This attitude is a misjudgment of historical human existence in which everything has its time (Ecclesiastes)—eating, drinking, sleeping, as well as conscious decision making and acting, working and resting, serving a purpose and just being without a purpose, meeting obligations and following inclinations, striving and playing, abstaining and rejoicing. It is the presumptuous misjudgment of this creaturely existence that must drive a person either into the most mendacious hypocrisy or into madness.” Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 365.
it a clear direction, an internal steadiness, and a firm sense of security.”  

God’s command, as Bonhoeffer puts it, is not only in ethical boundary situations, but in the midst and fullness of life. God’s command is thus the free affirmation of ordinary life in all its ugly and joyful detail: “Before God’s commandment, a human being is not Hercules standing in perpetuity at the crossroads, struggling forever to make the right decision, someone worn out by conflicting duties, again and again failing and starting anew…. Rather human beings are allowed to be actually on the way…. The commandment’s goal is not avoiding transgression, not the agony of ethical conflict and decision, but rather the freely affirmed, self-evident life in church, marriage, family, work and state.”  

When the divinely ordained function of the mandates breaks down, then the ethical, the agony of decision making is, of course, required. For Bonhoeffer, the true mission of the church to the world consisted not in challenging the world with spiritual pomp and religious vocabulary foreign to it, but in enabling the church to live holistic Christian lives in each of the divine mandates. This is what he meant by a religionless Christianity: Christians who are fully in the world because they serve a God who died for the life of the world.

**Conclusion**

The historical context within which Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s political theology was formed is an important reminder that all our deliberations concerning church-state relations must indeed begin with the incarnation and its cosmic, eschatological import. Between Christ’s first and second coming, the world exists in an eschatological trajectory in anticipation of God’s kingdom. Within this context, the church as the body of Christ is God’s instrument for furthering his salvific work on world and humanity. The church stands for and works toward the salvation of the world which has already occurred in Christ and whose eschatological anticipation unites the church with the rest of humanity. Insofar as the church is indeed the new age, she is uprooted from the old, passing eon. But insofar as she exists as the new humanity of a new age firmly within the old, she remains in the world and suffers with it.

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61 Franklin H. Littell, “Bonhoeffer’s History, Church, and World,” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought* (ed. Martin E. Marty; New York: Association Press, 1962), p. 40. Bonhoeffer argued that if Christ came into the world and died for our salvation, then “being-for-others” is the only proper experience of divine transcendence: “Faith is participation in this being-for-others of Jesus. Our relationship to God is not a ‘religious’ one to the highest, most powerful, and best conceivable Being, but the concretely given, reachable neighbour (Nächste) is the transcendent. God in the flesh.” Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 501.
We also must retain their emphasis on the incarnation as an event whose affirmation of the created order is preceded by the judgment and restoration of a fallen creation. The orders of creation and our interpretation of them are not self-validating but “obtain their value wholly from outside themselves, from Christ, from the new creation.” The incarnation embodies God’s restoration of humanity to communion with him within real physical and historical structures. With Barth, it is helpful to think of Jesus as the cosmic Lord, an emissary of the real city of God to come, whose citizens are called already to embody the values of the coming government as laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. The task of the church is to call the state to account by its example. As Stanley Hauwerwas pointed out in his recent essay on Bonhoeffer, “sanctification, properly understood, is the church’s politics. For sanctification is possible only within the visible church community.” Yet the church itself also profits from its existence within the state insofar as the roles we all play as citizens of the *civitas terrena* help shape us into the Christ-likeness of a new humanity. Barth and Bonhoeffer teach us an important truth concerning the church’s political vocation, namely that the church must be the church “in order that the world can be the world.”

The church must, therefore, be countercultural, but it cannot be a counter culture. By the time such countercultural movements are established, they tend to become their own subcultures that reduce political activism to small, controllable “radical” gestures. If the church is to hold the state’s feet to the fire of truth, it must always be vigilant in examining its own presuppositions and motivations.

Bonhoeffer saw most clearly that the interpretive nature of truth and our human finitude calls for two basic political tasks. The one is to enjoy life in the structures of a reality redeemed by God through the right, responsible use of which blessings flow to all members of society. The second task is the agonizing decision-making when the church fails to act as the conscience of the state, especially when the state deliberately disregards human dignity. For such extreme cases, Bonhoeffer argues that even violence, as part of the created order, is legitimately used in opposing dehumanizing evil. After all, the purpose of suffering is

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64 Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 44.
65 Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 45.
66 Bonhoeffer warns of this generally in his *Ethics*, pp. 176–179, but he also notices these problems in reflecting on his America experience. As early as 1931, Bonhoeffer concluded from his short exposure to American theology, that rather than truth, a spirit of community and fairness dominated, issuing in an equation of Christianity with tolerance. Thus evidence of Kingdom living was falsely equated with getting along. He also noticed that in their ardent desire to shape the world according to Christian principles, many American churches became thoroughly inundated with worldly ones. See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 355 ff.
to overcome evil, not to feed its domination. Bonhoeffer contends that violent resistance to evil requires much prayer and thought, but that such a decision must in the end be surrendered to the forgiveness of Christ, for none of us can foresee all possible ramifications of such serious choices. We can never claim that we know the will of God in such matters with utter, ultimate certainty, for such a view repeats the first disobedience when human beings believed the tempter’s hollow promise that, like God, they could be the ultimate judge of good and evil. Instead, we Christians act based on our best rational judgment developed from our Christian frameworks, but we surrender our best decision to a merciful judge.

In terms of the West’s identity and its inability to deal with aggressively religious nation states, the unity of state and church in their common mission to humanize life in light of humanity’s reconciliation with God in Christ is an important resource to provide both the Western church and the state with much-needed backbone and humility. We need the church’s unified embodiment within its own walls of order, servant leadership, freedom, human rights and the upholding of the divine mandates in light of the god-man Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic church often seems to be the only reasonably united voice in this regard as witness to the reality of the city of God in whose service the state, too, should strive for the best possible human existence on this earth.

At the very least, we know this: according to the two theologians we examined in this article, we cannot abandon the civitas terrena because the Christ event shows that humanity is God’s concern. The incarnation, death, and resurrection took place to renew humanity so that we can say, with Bonhoeffer, that the goal of the Christian life, a goal shared with all human beings, is our true humanity. As Christians we must follow Bonhoeffer’s affirmation of life and Barth’s call into politics to remind both church and state of their political vocation in the light of eternity.

67 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 302.
68 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, pp. 288, 294.
69 “Christian life means being human in the power of Christ’s becoming human, [it means] being judged and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new life in the power of the resurrection.” Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 159. See also Bonhoeffer, Letters, p. 480.