

Rendering to Caesar: A Theology of Church-State Relations¹

Dr Roland Chia

In a White Paper entitled *Maintenance of Religious Harmony*², published in 1989 and accepted as a Bill by parliament in 1990, the Singapore Government adumbrates its position concerning religion and politics. Emphasizing that for Singapore, 'the safeguards for political rights and democratic values must be secular, not religious, institutions' (21), the White Paper postulates the separation of religion from politics. By this it refers to the prohibition of the promotion of any political party or cause by religious groups or leaders and under the cloak of religion (20). Recognizing the fact that the division between religion and politics is really a matter of 'convention' (24), and that any such division in reality is not entirely possible, the White Paper nevertheless insists that such an approach is the most appropriate one, especially in the case of multi-religious Singapore. The White Paper also acknowledges the fact that 'some religions explicitly deny the possibility of this separation, because to their followers the faith encompasses all aspects of life'(25). It concludes, however, that it is precisely because some faiths proffer a holistic view 'that they must collide if they all attempt to carry out to the full their respective visions of an ideal society' (25). The document makes clear that 'the purpose of attempting to separate religion from politics is therefore not to determine the validity of various religious or ethical beliefs which

¹ This is the revised version of a paper presented at a conference on "Nation-Building and the Churches in Singapore" which was held on 11-12 September 2003. This conference was organised by the Centre for Christianity in Asia, the Bible Society of Singapore, the National Council of Churches of Singapore, and Asian Journeys. The papers of the conference will be published in a book. I would like to thank the editor of the volume, Dr Lee Soo Ann, for allowing me to publish my paper here.

² *Maintenance of Religious Harmony*. Cmd. 21 of 1989. Presented to Parliament by Command of The President of the Republic of Singapore. Ordered by Parliament to lie upon the Table: 26 December 1989.

have political or social implications. It is to establish working rules by which many faiths can accept fundamental differences between them, and coexist peacefully in Singapore' (27).

The purpose of this paper is to delineate a theology of Church-State relations. It is therefore not the aim of this paper to provide a study of the historical, political and sociological embodiment of that relationship. This will be the task of the other speakers at this conference. The purpose of this paper is to construct a theological framework within which reflection on the relationship between the Church and the State can be responsibly conducted. In this way, this paper is very different from the rest of the papers presented at this conference. It serves a dual role: as the basis for the assessment of the role that the Church has played in the Nation-State thus far, and as a compass, providing direction for her role in the future. Put differently, in this paper we seek to explore what the brief christological confession in Philippians 2:11, that Jesus Christ is Lord, mean for the Christian and for the Church in the public sphere. We explore the meaning and implication of the sovereignty of Christ in relation to every earthly power and sovereignty, and reflect on the relationship between the eschatological community, the Church, and the earthly *polis* in light of this. It is on the basis of this broad theological foundation that we can articulate the distinct and complementary roles of the Church and the State.

Christ, Caesar and Pilate

We begin with a theological analysis of two narratives found in the Synoptic Gospels, in order to glean from them important insights pertaining to our theme which will be developed more fully in the rest of the chapter. The first is the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and the Herodians concerning the issue of paying taxes to Caesar that is recorded in Mark 12:13-17. This passage is often seen as the *locus classicus* of Jesus' teaching on politics, even though the context shows that the words that Jesus spoke were carefully crafted to deal with a very difficult and tricky situation. Jesus had to answer the *agents provocateurs* of his enemies, namely, the Pharisees on the one hand, and the opportunistic Herodians on the other. The situation that obtained and the dishonest intentions behind the question regarding taxes demand an elliptic and

almost evasive response from Jesus. ‘We would do well to develop an eye for paradox, for nuance, and for subtlety if we wish to grasp the meaning of this and similarly elliptical passages.’³ A simplistic reading of Jesus’ response would lead to an erroneous conclusion, not uncommon in some circles, namely, the strict dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. This approach, which finds distant echoes in the political philosophy of John Locke, insists that political matters are of no concern to religion, that a hiatus divides *private* religion from the naked *public* square. This common misreading of the statement, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’ (Mark 12: 17) is no doubt perpetuated by modern secularism. But as Richard Bauckham has pointed out so clearly, ‘absolute demarcation between Caesar’s sphere of authority and that of God ... is unlikely to have occurred to Jesus or his Jewish hearers, who would have taken for granted that God’s law applies to the whole of life’.⁴

The distinction that Jesus made between the things of Caesar and those of God introduces a depth to the discussion, bringing it beyond the question of paying taxes to the more profound issue of ultimate authority and lordship. This distinction dedivinizes the Roman emperor, exposes the idolatrous pretensions of the Empire and refutes all claims of earthly authority to ultimacy. Thus, while the questioners had used the simple verb ‘give’, in his reply Jesus uses the compound, which, according to Cranfield, means ‘to give back or pay something which one owes as a debt’.⁵ By this, Jesus acknowledges his followers’ obligations to the State, even a pagan State, on the one hand, while on the other he rejects the idolatrous claims of the State expressed in the coin. Jesus is therefore not saying that there are indeed two separate and independent spheres; rather he maintains that there are obligations to the State (i.e., to Caesar) that not only does not infringe the rights of God, but they are in fact ordained by God. The Christian faith therefore introduces what Lugo has called a ‘competing sovereignty credo’⁶ – ‘Jesus is Lord’ – which is in radical

³ Luis E. Lugo, ‘Caesar’s Coin and the Politics of the Kingdom: A Pluralist Perspective’ in *Caesar’s Coin Revisited. Christians and the Limits of Government*, edited by Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 2.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 48-9.

⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1959), p. 372.

⁶ Lugo, ‘Caesar’s Coin’, p. 5.

opposition to all forms of political absolutism or State sovereignty. The Christian faith is therefore inimical to the approaches taken by some Enlightenment thinkers, chiefly Rousseau, who sought to collapse religion into the State, thereby creating a 'civil religion'. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau famously articulates his preference for Mohammed to Christ, for the former was able to keep intact the unity between religion and State, while the latter, in his view, severed it. He also maintained that the cultivation of good citizens is only possible with the institution of civil religion, in which the homeland becomes the 'object of the citizen's adoration'.⁷ Rousseau is right in that it is precisely the monistic fallacy that is expressed in the concept of 'civil religion', what Stauffer terms as 'the metaphysical glorification of policy'⁸ – which, in Jesus' day was 'emperor-worship' – that Jesus rejects in the story of Caesar's coin.

The second narrative that can shed important light on our theme is the trial of Jesus before Pilate that is recorded in all four Gospels. The Reformers, in developing their concept of the relationship between Church and State from this passage, emphasizes the words of Jesus in John 18:36: 'My kingdom is not of this world'. This emphasis has no doubt led some of the writers of the Reformation to miss other important insights that can be gleaned from this episode, the complexity of which we hope to bring out in this brief analysis. When we begin, not with Jesus Christ, but with Pilate, focusing on what he says and does, we will begin to fill in the gaps which the Reformers have left. In John 19:11 we find in the words of Jesus the confirmation that Pilate indeed had 'power' over him, but that this power is not an accidental power: it is the power given to Pilate 'from above', an expression which denotes heavenly derivation.⁹ Yet this power can be used for good or evil, as Pilate's own formulation of the matter in the previous verse makes quite clear: 'Don't you realise I have power either to free you or crucify you?' (19:10). As Barth has pointed out, 'As power given by God, it could be used either way towards Jesus without losing its divine character'.¹⁰ Pilate, of course, did not release Jesus, but used his power, the power given to him by God, to crucify Jesus. But what must be emphasized here is that the separation of Church

⁷ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 181.

⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p. 127.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 362.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Community, Church and State* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), p. 110.

and State, for which the Reformers argued on the basis of John 18:36, ‘was not, and is not the only teaching which the Church may glean from the passages concerned with the encounter between Jesus and Pilate’.¹¹

The expression ‘from above’, however, must be further clarified, and its theological meaning and significance must be brought into sharper focus. The power which Pilate possesses – the power to free or crucify Jesus – is described as originating ‘from above’ in a sense that, in his use and even abuse of this power, Pilate carries out his divinely given role in salvation history. This is why apart from Mary, Pilate is the only other historical figure that is found in the Creed, particularly in relation to the second article. Ridderbos explicates the reason for this: ‘In that providential arrangement, “given from above”, Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus is a stage in the process in which Pilate himself must fulfill the will of God’.¹² Thus Pilate, who allowed injustice to prevail, was the human instrument of the justification of man that was accomplished and completed once and for all through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This does not excuse Pilate or exonerate his unjust judgement, but the larger context to which Jesus points does in some sense help to ‘shape and limit Pilate’s guilt’.¹³ The release of Barrabas, who was imprisoned for insurrection and murder, and the execution of Jesus who was declared to be guiltless in his place, seem to point in the same direction. In the very act of the political authority which perpetuates this gross injustice, the will of God is fulfilled as God made him ‘who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). ‘Where would the Church be’, Barth could therefore ask with full theological warrant, ‘if this released Barrabas were in the place of the guiltless Jesus? if, that is, there had been no “demonic” State?’¹⁴

What is often overlooked, and must now be given due attention, is the fact that, strictly speaking, neither Pilate nor the State condemned Jesus. On the contrary, it is the testimony of all four Gospels that Pilate declared Jesus innocent and considered him to be a ‘just man’ (Matt 27:19-24; Mark 15:14; Luke 23:14, 15, 22; John 18:38; 19:4, 6). In John 19:12 we are in fact told that Pilate tried to release Jesus, but was prevented from doing so by the Jews. Here, again, we see the profound link between the justification

¹¹ Barth, *Community, Church and State*, p. 109.

¹² Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 603.

¹³ Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 603.

¹⁴ Barth, *Community, State and Church*, p. 112.

of man and Pilate. The Pilate who was constrained to be the instrument of the death of Jesus Christ that was ordained by God is the same Pilate who has confirmed the presupposition of the event, that is, who has affirmed the innocence of Jesus Christ. It is also in precisely this act – the pronouncement of acquittal which Pilate in the end did not make – that his true duty lies. If Pilate had opposed the wishes of the Jews, and acted in correspondence to his objective judgement regarding the innocence of Jesus, the State would have revealed its true face. But this Pilate did not do, and his surrender to the will of the Jews, is for the Evangelists a clear deviation from his true duty (Mark 15:15). Up to the very end, when he uttered ‘Here is your king’ (John 19:14b) from the judgement seat, Pilate showed his contempt for the Jews’ resolve to destroy Jesus. Pilate emphasises here the kingship of Jesus, thereby presenting Jesus to the Jews on the basis of their accusation. By according Jesus the title of kingship, Pilate is ‘again confronting the Jews – with undisguised mockery – with the absurdity of their accusation: “Here, then, is your king whose claims you take so seriously that even the emperor in Rome has to be on his guard!”’¹⁵ ‘In this encounter of Pilate and Jesus’, Barth rightly observes, ‘the “demonic” State does not assert itself too much but too little; it is a State which at the decisive moment fails to be true to itself.’¹⁶

It is hoped that this brief analysis of the two narratives has revealed the complex nature of the subject under consideration. Neither the naïve separation between the Church and State typified in the proposal of John Locke nor the equally naïve confluence of the two in the conception of Rousseau’s ‘civil religion’ is tenable. The burden of the entire exercise is to enable us to attain a more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the significance of the conjunctive adverb in the phrase ‘Church and State’, and to prepare us for the discussion below.

¹⁵ Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 606.

¹⁶ Barth, *Community, State and Church*, p. 113.

Towards a Theology of the State

As we attempt to construct a theology of the State, we do well to begin by examining, albeit very briefly, the different approaches which are found in Western theology, namely, in the Roman Catholic and the Protestant traditions. Following antecedents that can be traced to Aristotle, the Catholic theology of the State is established on the basis of doctrine of creation in general, and on a theological anthropology in particular. That is to say, the State, according to the Catholic tradition's appropriation of the Aristotelian approach, is the product of human beings, the supreme consummation of human rationality, purposed for the flourishing of human life and society. The State in this view is therefore the 'highest development of the natural society', to use Schelling's description, the fulfilment of the purpose of human nature within the natural and creaturely sphere.¹⁷ For the Reformers, however, the *point de depart* for thinking about the State is not a theology of nature, but a theology of grace; that is, by taking seriously the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, the Reformers developed their understanding of the State in light of the Fall. Seen from this perspective, the State is not principally the epitome of human achievement, the genius of human organisation, but a divine institution provided by God in order to protect human beings from self-annihilation due to sin. This is articulated with clarity by Luther who maintain that the State, alone possessing the power of the sword, externalises the image of the divine justice when it exercises its authority in rewarding the righteous and punishing evil-doers. For the Reformers, therefore, sin has made civil government or the State necessary.

In the perspective of the Reformers, a theology of the State cannot be divorced from christology, for it is in and through Jesus Christ and for his sake that the State exists, as Colossians 1:16 makes perfectly clear. The State, like all of God's creation, is created through Christ, who is the Mediator of Creation, and therefore the sole medium between the State and the Creator. The State, as is all creation, is directed toward Christ, for Jesus Christ is its goal, and the purpose of its existence is to serve Christ. From this we can argue that the government is a creature of God regardless of the basis of its political, sociological and historical origin, and, by extension, the persons who exercise this government are God's

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 333.

ministers. This is seen in the assertion made by Paul, that 'the authorities that exist have been established by God' (Rom 13:1c), where the government in its very being is conceived as a divine office. By this Statement we are again emphasising the profound relationship between the State and Christology, for the God from whom the State receives its power and authority, whose servant it and its representatives are, cannot be understood apart from the Person and the Work of Jesus Christ. This emphasis, Barth maintains, cannot be dispensed with, for only when the State is placed within the Christological sphere will we recognise that Christ is the foundation for the imperative 'Submit yourselves ... to the king' (1 Peter 2:13f), that is, civil obedience is for the sake and honour of Christ. It is upon the basis of the divine commission of the State that we can develop an understanding of its authority. The claim of the government, insofar as it is in keeping with its power and mission, is the claim of God and is binding on conscience. The government demands obedience 'for conscience sake' (Rom 13:5), which can also be interpreted as 'for the Lord's sake' (1 Pet 2:13).

How, then, are we to conceive of the extent and limit of the government? It would be a mistake to conclude from the above discussion that the idea of a totalitarian State is theologically justifiable. Despite all that has been said thus far, the idea of the State must be subjected to eschatological relativization¹⁸ if a proper theology of the State is to be constructed. Such a theological move is necessary because the New Testament itself presents the State as a provisional order and a temporary institution. The affirmations that we have made regarding the State, based on Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1ff., must therefore be accompanied by a 'nevertheless'. The limitation of the State with regard to its mission is both temporal and substantive in nature. The State is to play the role that is given to it by the divine commission in the period between the Fall and the Final Judgement. Concerning the substantive limitation of the State, we recall that its main duty is to reward the good and punish evildoers (Rom 13:3). But although the State is given the right to distinguish good from evil, its ability to do so is constrained by the limitation of its knowledge in this respect. This means that the State may not always be able to recognise and therefore will not always resist the evil before God

¹⁸ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*. Volume II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 251.

which we call sin. If it is indeed able to do this, the State would then be an opponent of all forms of selfishness. This is obviously not the case, however, for selfishness may be said to be the normative impulse of historical life. We therefore concur with Helmut Thielicke when he maintains that ‘the State, when it restrains evil, is not aiming at sin itself – in whose representation it has a share – but simply contesting the excesses of selfishness. It resists the selfishness which is inimical to order’.¹⁹ The riddle of the State thus forces theology to consider the riddle of man itself. That is to say, although the State is an institution that is ordained by God, it falls under the great antithesis between Creation and Sin. The State is thus not immune to the contradictions that are intrinsic to all fallen earthly realities.

As we turn our attention more specifically at the duty of the State, we must continue to bear in mind the tension of dignity and limitation of the State already discussed. The State is responsible for creating a legal system without which human civilisation would be impossible. By some such system the State ensures that peace and order prevail without which all forms of creative cultural activities would be impossible. The task of the State is therefore to defend and promote the common good of civil society and its citizens. Common good may be defined as ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’.²⁰ The State is therefore the integrator of public justice, to use Bernard Zylstra’s phrase, which ‘must prevent the violation of the internal sphere of one societal structure by another’.²¹ Here too we notice the paradox and the contradiction of the State, for in order for it to fulfil its divinely appointed purpose, the State must use its power of compulsion. The State alone wields the sword to bring law, order and peace to human society (Rom 13:4). In this way, the State exists as a sign of the fact of Original Sin, for it is because of the perversion of man’s nature that human society needs a State in this form. Indirectly, therefore, the presence of the State is the divine call to repentance. Thus, according to Brunner, ‘the Christian recognises the State, which exists whether he will or no, and whose peace and security he

¹⁹ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* II: 252.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1906 (See also no. 1910).

²¹ Berbrad Zylstra, ‘The Bible, Politics, and the State’, in James W. Skillen, ed., *Confessing Christ and Doing Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Public Justice Education Fund, 1982), p. 51-52.

“inherits” as a gift of God, as a divinely salutary means of discipline; to adjust oneself to the State and to accept it is both an act of discipline and an act of repentance’.²² But the State, which is ordained by God to be the defender of the good and the preserver of conscience, can easily become the ‘beast out of the abyss’ of Revelation 13.²³ The State can become demonic by demanding the worship of Caesar, blaspheming God, and making war with the people of God. This was indeed what happened to the State in the case of Pilate who ordered the crucifixion of Christ in order to satisfy the populace. Paul also spoke to the demonic State when he referred to the ‘rulers of darkness of this world’, and when he comforts believers by assuring them that these ‘powers’ will not succeed in separating them from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:38f).

Having sketched out the contours of a theology of the State, we ask, How then should we understand the relationship between the Church and the State? There is always the temptation for the Church to forge inappropriate alliances between the altar and the throne, especially when the political atmosphere for such alliances is conducive. But, as Dostoevsky has so emphatically shown in the ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ in *The Brothers Karamazov*,²⁴ such alliances are as harmful as they are dangerous. To be sure, as Dostoevsky points out, such collaborations can be motivated either by a misplaced compassion or institutional self-aggrandisement. But when the coercive power of the State lends support to the truth claims of the Church, the result will be adverse for both the Church and the State. The problem with such an alliance, as George Wiegell sees it, is both theological and ethical:

... for Christians the first reason for the Church to eschew any excessive reliance on the State is our overriding concern for the integrity of the Church. The Gospel has its own power, and the Church must bear witness to that. Moreover, a Church dependent on the authority of the State is open to forms of manipulation that are incongruent with the Gospel and that dangerously narrow

²² Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 446.

²³ Barth, *Community, State and Church*, p. 115.

²⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 254-55, 256-57.

the Church's necessary critical distance from all worldly sovereignties.²⁵

The weakness and utter failure of the alliance between the Church and the State is instanced in history in the Constantinian era which did not bring to realisation the vision of a Christianised world. But, as Yoder has rightly pointed out, the end of the Constantinian age did not come about because of pressure from the sectarians who criticised it. Rather the demise of this grand experiment was 'because of the contradictions within its own self-assertion. It is not an approach that has not been given a chance but one that, given centuries to work with, has defeated itself'.²⁶ The dichotomy between the Church and State that is here maintained must of course give cognisance to a final unity. This point was brought out in our discussion of Caesar's coin and the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Thus despite all evidence to the contrary, the Church believes that Jesus Christ is not just Lord of the Church but also Lord over the world. To quote Yoder again: 'The explicit paganism of State, art, economics, and learning did not keep the Church from confessing their subordination to him who sits on the right hand of God'.²⁷ It is the Lordship of Christ over the 'powers' that enables the Church to speak to the world (and thus to the State) in God's name, not only in the proclamation of the Gospel, but also in ethical judgement.

The Significance of the State to the Church

What role, if any, does the State play in relation to religion in general, and the Church in particular? We recall again the christological emphasis in our discussion above, and reiterate the assertion that the government is instituted for the sake of Christ, and so serves the Church as it serves Christ. This approach, as we have already stressed, should not lead to the conclusion that the Church has dominion over the government. Rather by this assertion, we acknowledge the simple fact that the Head of the Christian congregation, the Lord of the Church, is the same Lord whom

²⁵ George Wiegel, *Soul of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 24.

²⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 178.

²⁷ Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, p. 56.

the government serves. The service of the government to Christ is the exercise of its commission to ensure law, order and peace, and in this way the government serves the Church indirectly by creating an environment which makes the 'quiet and peaceable life' possible (1 Tim 2:2). By thus establishing peace and ensuring order, the government fulfils its divine commission and indirectly serves the Church, thereby allowing both Church and State to serve the same Master.²⁸ By thus fulfilling its divinely appointed role, the State shows itself to be not just the product of sin, but also an instrument of grace, as it unconsciously participates in God's plan of salvation. It does this not just by creating an environment in which peace can prevail, but in establishing this environment it also allows man to have time by protecting him from the invasion of chaos, time for the preaching of the gospel and for repentance. Seen in this light, the State by establishing laws to allow for freedom, peace and human flourishing, it shows itself, in a sense, to be part of Christ's Kingdom. To be sure, the State is not the Church – nor can it ever be – but it is not outside of the range of Christ's dominion, and thus may be said to be an exponent of the Kingdom.²⁹

The government has no authority over the spiritual office of the Church. The government can demand in some ways that the spiritual office of the Church does not interfere with its secular office, although it must be stressed here that the Church's mission includes obedience to the civil government. But the government possesses no authority over the Christian mission itself. With regard to the public exercise of the Church's mission, the government has the right to ensure that everything is done in accordance to outward justice.³⁰ The government has authority over individual members of the Christian congregation and can demand obedience from them. Insofar as the demands of obedience by the government is in conformity to the Word of God, the government does not distinguish itself as a second authority that stands next to the authority of Christ, but is rather a manifestation of Christ's authority itself in a particular form. In this sense, a citizen does not cease to be a Christian, but his service to Christ takes a different form as he discharges his civil duties and obligations. On her side, the Church requests of the State and

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 346.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Against the Streams* (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 21.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 346.

the government that she is allowed to be what she is. Put differently, the Church requests that the government allows the Church to be Church, that is, to be that community which worships and serves the God and Father of Jesus Christ her Lord. This is no small request, for on the side of the State, such a request is in essence a plea that the State neither claims nor seeks final authority over the Church's ministry of the word and sacrament. Put differently, this is a request for a *limited State*. This request 'implies a deep critique of the totalitarian temptation, in both its hard (Fascist or Communist) and its softer (modern bureaucratic) embodiments'.³¹

The religious loyalties or secularism of the government must be addressed if we are to understand its significance and service to the Church. The question may be put more sharply and theologically in this way: What should be the government's attitude towards the First Commandment? Must the government give accent to this Commandment? And, in the context of multi-religious Singapore, should the government show loyalty to one religion and not to another? The question can and must be answered at two levels. The first has to do with the individuals who exercise government. From the Christian perspective we must say that these persons ought to put their faith in Jesus Christ.³² Of course in actuality, some persons in government may either be adherents of other religions or they may be atheists. But even if persons in the government are Christian believers, it is our contention that the office of the government itself remains independent of religious decisions. The reasons for this are already adumbrated in the previous section when we discussed the vision of Constantinianism. The office of the government should remain religiously neutral and attend only to its proper task – the protection and praise of the righteous. To be sure, this task itself, which is ordained by God, cannot be understood in any other way except as a religious task. In the context of a religiously plural society, the government should protect all religious institutions and their members so long as they do not undermine the office of the government. The government will also seek to ensure that the various religious institutions and their members do not give rise to tensions and conflicts that would harm or endanger the stability of the country.

³¹ Wiegand, *Soul of the World*, p. 37.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 349.

However, the government, as God's ordained instrument to establish and maintain peace and order in human society, must recognise the limits of its control over religion. This proposition, which is already encountered in the concept of the limited State, must now be elaborated further so that the parameters of State involvement in civil community, of which the Church is a part, may be clarified. The Second Vatican Council's 'Declaration on Religious Freedom', *Dignitatis Humane*, has articulated very clearly the limits of the State in relation to human freedom, particularly religious freedom. As the title of the document suggests, the State should allow religious freedom, and, by implication, confessional pluralism to flourish because of the innate and inviolable rights of persons. In this document, the Council maintains that respect for the dignity of human beings implies religious liberty because 'the exercise of religion consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly towards God'.³³ The Council develops its argument on the basis of reason, revelation and the example of Jesus, who refused to assume the role of a political Messiah and impose the truth by the use of force.³⁴ Although the basis of the Council's arguments is respect for human dignity, the Statements in this important document have profound implications to the relationship between the civil government and religious institutions. Religious liberty, for instance, means that 'in matters religious no one is forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs'³⁵, and this implies that individuals must be immune 'from coercion in civil society and that constitutional limits should be set to the powers of the government'.³⁶ According to Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray, the State must recognise the Church's claim, under the rubric of *libertas ecclesiae*, for immunity in juridical order regarding religion. The Church must therefore be allowed to vigorously pursue its social ministry in civil society. In this way, Murray sees *Dignitatis Humanae* as a forerunner of the Council's final document, *Gaudium et Spes* (the Church in the Modern World). He notes that '*Gaudium et Spes* is clear that the Church's

³³ Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 'Declaration on Religious Freedom' (*Dignitatis Humanae*), section 3, p. 681.

³⁴ *Dignitatis Humanae*, section 11.

³⁵ *Dignitatis Humanae*, section 2.

³⁶ *Dignitatis Humanae*, section 1.

ministry is religious, not political in nature; yet the animating religious vision of the Gospel has substantial political potential'.³⁷

The Church's Service to the State

Let the Church Be Church

We now ask the converse question, What is the Church's service to the State? To answer this question satisfactorily we must provide a sketch of ecclesiology, for it is only when we clarify the meaning of the Church that we can begin to understand her service to the State and to society. The Church understands herself as a community of salvation that is brought into being by Word and Spirit, and that is given a mission of proclamation and reconciliation. As a community of faith, the Church makes no political pretensions and claims no political privileges, but exists as a sacrament and a sign of God's immeasurable grace to humanity. This being the case, the Church 'must in no way be confused with the political community nor be bound to any political system. For she is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person'.³⁸ As the people of God, called out of darkness into the light of God's kingdom, the Church has been entrusted with a privileged mission as ambassadors of reconciliation, which she must strive to fulfil authentically and openly, without concealment. In the words of the Barmen Declaration, the Church undertakes this task by reminding 'the world of God's Kingdom, God's commandment and righteousness and thereby of the responsibility of governments and the governed' (Thesis No 5). This task in a sense requires the Church to take interest in the socio-political ethos of the society in which she conducts her mission. As a witness of the fact that the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost, the Church must conduct her mission with a special interest in the downcast – the poor, the socially and economically weak, the oppressed. This does not in anyway imply that the Church must adopt a political theory (e.g. socialism) or embrace a truncated theological approach (e.g. liberation theology); rather it reminds

³⁷ John Courtney Murray, The Issue of Church and State at Vatican Council II, *Theological Studies* 27 (March 1966): 599-600.

³⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* 76.2.

the Church that she must stand for justice in the political and social sphere.

Put differently, then, the Church's engagement in the political and social sphere is connected with her task of summoning the whole world to submit to the dominion of Christ. Her engagement is part of her calling to call sin by its name, to warn humankind against sin, and to point humankind to the 'more excellent way' (1 Cor 13). If the Church fails to do this, she would incur part of the guilt for the blood of the wicked (Ezek 3:17ff). Here again, the proper perspective must be emphatically stressed, lest we lose sight of it. The intention of the Church in warning the world of sin is not to improve the world, but to 'summon it to belief in Jesus Christ and to bear witness to the reconciliation which has been accomplished through him and to his dominion'.³⁹ This means that the Church has no Christian *agenda* in the world of politics: she only proclaims her *hope* for the world. Yet, this hope inadvertently 'includes a number of causes for which we are bound to contend in the world of politics, because of what we believe we know about man through the revelation of God in Christ'.⁴⁰ This dialectic brings out clearly the Church's connection with and separation from the world (and the State) and the resulting tension.⁴¹ How can the Church engage in the public sphere without compromising the purity of her office and her mission in the *polis*? We have already discussed the first approach: the Church's witness and proclamation. In her proclamation, the Church is simply asking the world to consider the

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 350.

⁴⁰ Wiegel, *Soul of the World*, p. 43.

⁴¹ It was Helmut Thielicke who explicated clearly this tension by describing the paradoxical nature of the Church as both 'above time' and 'in time'. The Church is said to be 'above time' because it is not and can never be an organisation that is established by man. Theologically, we must say with Thielicke that 'the Church lives, as it were, in the thoughts of God even when there was no world, and certainly no man. And if the Church is older than the world, it must also live when the world perishes and comes to an end' (624). This implies that the Church, because of its 'extra-earthly' and 'extra-human' origin (to use Thielicke's terms), is 'above time'. She will always be a 'foreign body'. But the Church that is 'above' time is also the Church that is 'in time', that is, it 'bears on its countenance the marks and traces of the impelling forces of its time' (625). The polarising of the two has produced unhappy results. To emphasise the first is to allow for a kind of false conservatism in which the Church merely accepts the status quo while it awaits for the heavenly Jerusalem. To emphasise the latter would result in a false revolutionism, where the Church assumes the political role of the State if circumstances allow, or asserts herself by wielding the sword. *Theological Ethics*, 622ff.

possibility of its redemption. The Church must continue to do this, even though the world does not always respond positively to her proposal, and even though the world may sometimes be hostile towards her, as is evident in the martyrologies of the Christian tradition.⁴² The second task is intercession. Karl Barth is surely right to see intercession as an important task of the Church in her relation to the State. The exhortation to intercede for the government is clearly enunciated in 1 Timothy 2. The all-inclusive nature of this exhortation is seen in the fact that Christians are called to offer ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving’ for *all* men, but especially for ‘kings and all those in authority’. This service of intercession is necessary because it is by God’s grace alone that rulers receive their power and the wisdom to exercise it. It is by the proper exercise of such power that the Church is allowed the freedom to be a witness of the divine love and to proclaim the Gospel. But the fact that the State needs the Church to intercede for it shows that the State cannot be divinised or absolutised. The Church must render this service to the State regardless of whether there is reciprocal action on the part of the State.⁴³ It is only when the Church remains true to her identity as God’s people and seeks to fulfil her God-given mission in the world that she can contribute responsibly to the State and to civil community.

The Subordination of the Church to the State

The question concerning the subordination of the Church to the State must now be discussed. Romans 13 is the *locus classicus* of the teaching of the New Testament on this matter. Although the statements in the opening verses of the chapter are fairly clear, it is still important to exegete them carefully so as not to allow grounds for misinterpretation. The history of interpretation of this passage has witnessed some such misinterpretation, not least in Luther’s translation, which speaks of Christians ‘being subject’ to the higher powers. This passage does not command Christians to blind submission to the powers of the State. Rather, as Barth has so carefully explicated it, ‘What is meant is (Rom 13:6f) that Christians should carry out what is required of them for the establishment, preservation and maintenance of civil community and for

⁴² Wiegel, *Soul of the World*, p. 39.

⁴³ Barth, *Community, Church and State*, p. 136.

the execution of the task ...⁴⁴ The subordination that is referred to here in this passage therefore has to do with the task of serving the community which is the joint responsibility of the Church and the State. The Church does this by subordinating herself to the State, according to this passage. The civil cause is the joint responsibility of the Church and the State because it is also the cause of the one God. That is why Romans 13:5 emphatically stresses that such subordination is not optional but 'necessary', and not just because of fear of punishment, but also for the sake of conscience. In this way, the Christian's subordination to the State is an expression of her obedience to God in the civil sphere. Such obedience, although for a different purpose, cannot be differentiated in kind from the Christian's obedience to God in the sphere of the Church.

Again, in doing this the Church does not elevate the State to a status that it does not deserve. The Church honours the State because she sees it as an instrument through which God's justice and grace is made manifest. But the Church cannot take the Kingdom of God into the political arena by either hoping to become State or by expecting that the State will become the Kingdom of God. The latter is the fundamental weakness of the pre-millennial vision of Christ's rule on earth. Church history as well as the history of theology sounds a clear warning against such approaches. The pre-millenarian vision is prevalent among the theologians and Christian writers of the pre-Constantinian Church, with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus as its most eloquent proponents. The reasons for the predominance of this form of eschatology are not difficult to deduce, given the sporadic and sometimes severe persecutions that the Church during that period underwent. But with Constantine, a new era had dawned upon the once persecuted Church, and the Roman Empire itself was transformed from the 'beast from the abyss' into the *imperium Christianum*.⁴⁵ Pre-millenarianism gave way to *presentative millenarianism*, and the *Imperium Sacrum* was seen as the 'Thousand Years' empire of Christ that is heralded in Revelation 20. The theological objection to this view is that it presents the eschatological kingdom of God in such a provisional way that it contradicts the larger body of scriptural statements regarding the kingdom and its consummation. But such absolutising of the State is called to question by the fact that Romans 13 presents the Church's subordination

⁴⁴ Barth, *Against the Stream*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 154.

as always conditional, and always with the reservation of the ‘nevertheless’. The Church’s subordination to the State has the dignity of the ‘penultimate’ because of the pre-eminence of this ‘nevertheless’. The command to be subject to the State (Rom 13:1) is therefore not an absolute imperative, and this is already brought out clearly in our discussion of Caesar’s coin. Not everything is Caesar’s, and what is given to him or denied him is directly related to and profoundly based on what we owe to God.⁴⁶ It is this ‘nevertheless’ that brings us to the tension between Romans 13 and Revelation 13, between subordination to the benevolent State and the opposition to the demonic State. Both, it must be categorically stated, are the duty of the Church.

Critical Patriotism and Civil Disobedience

The subordination of the Church to the State, therefore, does not imply that the Church must always approve of the power of the State. Barth maintains that such subordination ‘cannot possibly consist of an attitude of abstract and absolute elasticity towards the intentions and undertakings of the State, simply because, according not only to the Apocalypse but also to Paul, the possibility may arise that the power of the State, on its side, may be guilty of opposition to the Lord of lords, to the divine ordinance to which it owes its power’.⁴⁷ This stance finds clear echoes in the history of theology. Writing in the thirteenth century, and in the context of medieval Europe, Thomas Aquinas could assert that the command for the Church to be subject to the State is not absolute, and the Church should not obey the State in everything. ‘Therefore’, Aquinas maintains, ‘if the emperor order one thing and God another, it is God who is to be obeyed’.⁴⁸ In the next sub-section of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas provides the circumstances in which civil disobedience is allowed: ‘when a regime holds its power not by right but by usurpation, or commands what is wrong, subjects have no duty to obey, except for such extraneous reasons as avoidance of scandal or risk’.⁴⁹ In similar vein, John Calvin maintains that there are certain circumstances in which the Christian can resort to civil disobedience.

⁴⁶ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, p. 322.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Community, State and Church*, p. 138.

⁴⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2e., p. 104, 5.

⁴⁹ *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2e., p. 104, 6.

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow. And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offence of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates – a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God.⁵⁰

What this means is that the Church's subordination to the State must never be passive and uncritical. The teaching of the New Testament clearly opposes any passive acquiescence on the part of the Church to the power of the State. The Church, to put it differently, should not simply *endure* the State but *will* it. And the Church can never will a 'Pilate' State; she can only will a just one.⁵¹ This means that the Church will only obey Caesar when his laws fit into the moral order that is willed by God. The Church is called to responsible obedience, and this concept not only demands that the Church should obey the State, but it also sets limits to that obedience. The Church, it must be emphasised, has the duty to serve the State. But this service can take on different forms – it can be rendered through responsible obedience as well as civil disobedience. The Catholic moral theologian, Bernard Häring explains: 'By obeying Caesar only where his laws fit into the moral order willed by God, the citizens gives God what is due to God and to Caesar what is due to him. Thus, loyal citizens who, on given occasions protest against unjust laws and manifest civil disobedience in a non-violent manner, render an indispensable service to the political

⁵⁰ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xx, 32.

⁵¹ Barth, *Community, State and Church*, p. 146.

community and to those in authority'.⁵² Yoder defends such an approach from the standpoint of the incarnation of the Word. The incarnation of the Word demonstrates that God did not embrace everything in the world and in human society – the incarnated Word judges as well as redeems. 'When we then speak of the Incarnation', Yoder explains, 'it must not mean God sanctifying our society and our vocation as they are, but rather God's reaching into human reality to say what we must do and what we must leave behind'. Yoder therefore asserts that 'God's pattern of the Incarnation is that of Abraham and not of Constantine'.⁵³

Richard Neuhaus, in his highly acclaimed *The Naked Public Square* rightly argues that patriotism is a species of piety. The Christian, Neuhaus argues, should know that patriotism is not the highest virtue, and that her responsibility is with the Christian community which is the bearer of the universal promise for all mankind. The loyalty of the Christian is therefore to God, 'who is the God of all or else he is God not at all'.⁵⁴ But, since the infinite does not destroy the finite, devotion to the universal does not destroy devotion to the particular – rather, it shapes it. The proper posture for the Christian and indeed the Church to adopt in relationship to the State and patriotism is expressed in the concept *critical patriotism*. Such an approach cannot countenance the totalitarian vision of the State that is, even in democratic States, expressed in the slogan 'My country right or wrong'. Critical patriotism asserts that right and wrong cannot be determined by the country or the State, but has a higher reference. Critical patriotism also asserts that membership in the *civitas* cannot be given the highest priority, and that civility cannot be reduced to a form that is devoid of substance. Critical patriotism insists that 'the piety of patriotism must be ordered by a more encompassing piety'.⁵⁵ All this means that the attitude of the Christian to the State must reflect the nature of the State itself and the loyalties of the Christian. The State has two faces in that it is an instrument of grace on the one hand, and on the other it is capable of the demonic. The Christian belongs not only to the State but also to the Kingdom of God. Consequently, the attitude of the Christian is a dual one and cannot be that of an unqualified justification for the State. This is

⁵² Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*. Volume 3: Light to the World; Salt for the Earth (Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1981), p. 374.

⁵³ Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, p. 172.

⁵⁴ Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 74.

⁵⁵ Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, p. 75.

because the Christian is commanded to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). As Brunner has rightly stated it, 'There is an inmost sanctuary where the State has neither might nor right, and that is the place where its relative character is perceived'.⁵⁶ The 'martyr-confessors' of the early Church provides evidence of the fact that the Church has always understood it to be her responsibility to resist evil political systems in order to be faithful to their Lord, even if this means that they sacrifice their lives. 'Martyrdom' cannot be confined to the Christian past. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have perished under the Communist persecution in central and eastern Europe, and in China. Civil disobedience and resistance is also seen in the tens of thousands of Christians whose involvement with the human rights movements in central and eastern Europe in the 1980s resulted in the overthrow of European Communism in the non-violent Revolution of 1989.⁵⁷ It is the eschatological consciousness of the Church that enables her to fulfil her role in the world. Hans Urs von Balthasar therefore could say that Christians are the ones who amidst the flux and acceleration of the world 'can confront [that development] with a divine plan of salvation that is coextensive with it, indeed that always runs ahead of it because it is eschatological'.⁵⁸ Making the same point differently, the author of the *Letter to Diognetus* maintains that Christians continue to bear witness to the truth because they know that in the end God and his Christ will be vindicated. But it is precisely this epistemological privilege that enables Christians to understand their place and role in the world. While 'Christians are detained in the world as if in a prison, they in fact hold the world together'.⁵⁹

Conclusion

In the symbol of the New Jerusalem, Revelation makes clear that the State or City that Christians seek after does not belong to this present age but in the age to come. Revelation 21 describes the glorious City with its walls, streets, gates and foundations as one which will descend from heaven, and

⁵⁶ Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 460.

⁵⁷ Wiegel, *The Soul of the World*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 98.

⁵⁹ *Letter to Diognetus* 6.7.

presented as a bride to her husband: 'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Rev 21:2). In this City, there shall be no temple because the presence of the Lord will be pervasive – the City will be a dwelling place of God. All temptations to idealise this future City, however, must be resisted because Christians are now already citizens of this State. In fact, theologically speaking, this State *alone* is the real State, and Christians have their citizenship in this State alone. That is why the New Testament describes Christians as 'strangers and sojourners' in the earthly State, and that, in contradistinction to non-Christians, they have no 'abiding city' in this present age (Hebrews 13:14). Because of this, the deification of the State is impossible for the Christian, 'not because there is no divinity of the State, but because it is the divinity of the *heavenly* Jerusalem, and as such cannot belong to the *earthly* State'.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Christians see this heavenly State as infinitely better, and understand it to be the true and real source and norm of all human law, even those which pertain to 'this present age'. This recalls our discussion of the relationship between the Church and time. But eschatological hope for the heavenly State does not imply that the Church which exists between the times, so to speak, is passive. Rather the Church must occupy herself with her all-important ministry, i.e., the proclamation of the Gospel, the preaching of the justification of man. For it is only in this preaching that this 'foreign community' affirms its hope in the City which is to come, where God will be all in all.

Dr Roland Chia is lecturer in historical and systematic theology, Dean of the School of Postgraduate Studies, Director of the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry and editor of *Church and Society* at Trinity Theological College.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Community, State and the Church*, p. 125.