



Lukas Vischer: Church and State – Opening a new ecumenical discussion Introduction

1. Place and Date of Publication

World Council of Churches (ed.): Faith and Order Paper No. 85, Geneva 1978, Introduction 7-15.

2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer served the World Council of Churches as director of the Commission on Faith and Order until 1979. In August 1976, representatives of various church traditions and contexts met together for a study conference on Church and state at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey near Geneva.

3. Summary

The problem of the Church-state relationship is arising anew in the ecumenical movement. What a church thinks about the nature of the Gospel, the Church and the world, has a marked influence on the form it gives to that relationship. Some understanding of the differences between the churches must be arrived at if the churches are to achieve greater unity among themselves. - It was emphasized at the conference that the Church's first question should not be about its due rights in the political system. It should primarily be concerned with the way it can best serve the wider community. That service is not limited to relief work among the victims of society. Wherever possible, and in a spirit of critical solidarity, the Church must share in political decisions which determine the future of the society. An open question is: How has the relationship Church-state to be moulded so that the Church can bear witness effectively, nationally and internationally?

Three reflections: In the teaching of the Church over a long period, the Church owed obedience to the state, on the basis of the state's divine institution (Rom.13:1-7). – In view of the more complex structures of modern society, however, its political task is not only directed to the state but to the whole community of employers, trade unions, political parties, etc.. If need be, the Church must be able to identify itself also with an opposition. - The more the society is understood as a "project", the more natural it becomes to think that, in a situation of conflict, paralysis or oppression, a just order can or must be introduced by revolutionary measures. If the Church admits the possibility of a legitimate revolution, it must so strive to establish and maintain justice that no revolutionary uprising needs to take place. If it does decide to support a revolutionary movement, it must do its utmost to ensure that the destructive element inherent in any revolutionary process is kept within bounds. Its witness might be described as a contribution to the "transfiguration of revolution".

If the Church is to fulfil its responsibilities to the international community, it needs certain freedoms: a) to decide freely about doctrine and ethical standards, b) to have its own resources and to determine their use, c) to have contacts with other churches and to participate in international activities. – In reflecting on the relation of Church and state, it is easy to lose sight of the enormous variety of situations. But that relation is ultimately a question of authoritative witness. Even when the doors are open, the Church can still live as a prisoner. It can on the other hand demonstrate its freedom in unexpected ways even when outward rules seem to militate against the freedom. Reflections on the proper relationship between Church and state are, therefore, in the last analysis, only of secondary importance. They can help to describe the ideal conditions for the witness of the Church. But the witness itself stems from another source.



CHURCH

and

STATE



OPENING A NEW



ECUMENICAL DISCUSSION



Church and State

*Opening a new
ecumenical discussion*

Faith and Order Paper No. 85

World Council of Churches, Geneva

ISBN: 2-8254-0574-4

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150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland

Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel
Cover design: Nel Witte-Brooymans

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Introduction

Today the problem of the relationship between Church and state is arising anew in the ecumenical movement. Following the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi, it has also become a live issue in the World Council of Churches. In August 1976, representatives of various church traditions and, even more important, of different political, social and cultural contexts, met together for a study conference at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, near Geneva. The papers read at this colloquium are made accessible to a wider circle of readers in this volume, together with the conference report.

The last previous major discussion of Church and state in the ecumenical movement dates back to 1938 in the context of the Oxford conference on "Church, Community and State".¹ Since then, the theme had dropped out of sight. The focus of attention was not so much the state as the society in which the Church has to bear witness. The time has come, therefore, to take a fresh look at this theme. The relationship of Church and state requires fresh clarification precisely for the sake of the Church's witness in society.

The Bossey colloquium was no more than a beginning. The study will need to be continued in the coming years. This volume is published with that understanding. Far from claiming to offer a definitive judgment, it is rather an invitation to the churches to enter into the ecumenical discussion of this theme. The conference report was a joint formulation by the participants. But the reader will notice at once that it is primarily an attempt to describe the problems with a view to preparing the ground for further discussions within and among the churches.

Why an ecumenical theme?

What makes it so important for the churches to study the question of the proper relationship of Church and state *together*? Why is it so important for the future development of the ecumenical movement that common insights and answers be discovered and stated?

The first point to be made is that the relationship between Church and state is differently conceived by the various confessional tradi-

¹ J. H. OLDHAM (Ed.): *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference on Church, Community and State (Oxford, July 1937)*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937.

tions. What a church thinks about the nature of the Gospel, the Church and the world, has a marked influence on the form it gives to its relationship to the state. Some understanding of these differences must be arrived at, therefore, if the churches are to achieve greater unity among themselves. This need becomes particularly obvious when churches seek to achieve a real union. Divergent conceptions of the church-state relationship can prove a serious obstacle. For this reason, ecumenical discussion can perform a valuable service by bringing these differences into the open and showing how they might be overcome. Up to the present, they have not really been faced, let alone surmounted.

Joint discussion is necessary even more, however, because the question of the relationship between Church and state presents itself today, in many respects, in a new way. The assumptions which seemed valid even twenty or thirty years ago have changed. The traditional ideas and answers prove inadequate and require revision in many countries today. Above all, the picture has become much more complex. The problem today is not only how churches in traditionally Christian countries are to order their relationships with the state in now secularized societies, but also how the churches in Asia and Africa are to see their role in the new nations. The attention of the Oxford conference was still focused mainly on the western world. Its interest in the question of Church and state arose from the confrontation with the totalitarian claims of the Nazi Third Reich. But, in many parts of the world today, the churches are confronted with this question in a great variety of ways. They have good reason for studying this question together. The problems it raises are so new that they also require new answers and solutions. The churches can learn from one another and support one another in the struggle for a true relationship to the state.

Joint discussion of this theme is also essential in the interests of the fellowship which the churches already experience and have already established in the ecumenical movement. They have drawn closer together. They are beginning to bear common witness and learning to cooperate more closely with each other in many fields. How is this new fellowship as a whole related to the state? No church today can define its relation to the state without taking the other churches into account. Still more important, however, is the fact that this new fellowship transcends national frontiers. It binds together the churches of the entire *oikoumene*. What does this inclusive fellowship imply for the relation of the churches to the respective states in which they live? What form should their relationship to the state take if they are to be able to participate actively in the life of the wider ecumenical

fellowship? There is no escaping these questions today. They can be effectively dealt with only through a common effort.

Church, people and state

At the conference in the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, it was repeatedly emphasized that attention should not concentrate too exclusively on the two concepts: "Church" and "State". This could easily lead to too narrow a discussion. Attention could tend to be restricted to legal problems instead of concentrating primarily on the witness and service of the Church in society. The suggestion was made that it would be much better to formulate the theme differently from the outset and to discuss "Church, Society and State" or "Church, People and State". The reasoning behind this proposal is clear. The Church's first question should not be about its due rights in the political system. It should primarily be concerned with the question of how, as a Christian community, it can best serve the wider community. In the nature of the case, its relation to the state cannot be divorced from its service in society or even considered in isolation from that service.

This proposal gives us some idea of the change which has taken place. Church and state are no longer regarded primarily as two realms which must be differentiated from each other but rather as two partners dynamically related to each other. The roles of both Church and state in society are no longer what they were when most of the traditional models of the church-state relationship originated. The churches have come to realize to a much greater degree than before that the commandment of loving thy neighbour directs them to an active witness in society. They must do whatever is within their power to ensure that justice is established and maintained. Their responsibility is not limited to relief work among the victims of society. Love of neighbour also requires a political witness. Wherever possible they must share actively in political decisions which determine the future of society.

This new awareness is closely related to the growing realization that human society is a "project". We have come to see that justice is not so much conformity to an order of things already established in creation but rather a claim which has to be implemented in history. Human society is in constant process of development. The state, therefore, is regarded primarily not as the authority which has to uphold order but, rather, as the agent on which the responsibility for carrying out the "project" chiefly rests. It is an instrument serving a historical goal, and the test of its quality is whether and to what degree it fulfils this role.

The Church, for its part, also has to contribute to this process of development. It shares responsibility for ensuring that a constant effort is made to achieve an order of society in which human fellowship can develop. The form of its relationship to the state must be determined by this consideration. It is not simply a matter of defining the differences between the two entities in such a way that each can fulfil its task without interference from the other. Rather is it a matter of making it possible for the Church to accompany and assist the state in a spirit of critical solidarity. While its proclamation and service are directed to man's salvation, they also embrace the welfare of human society, and the Church knows its solidarity with the state in this respect. Therefore, the question for us today is: How is the church-state relationship to be organized and moulded so that the Church can bear witness effectively, both nationally and internationally?

The change which this new approach to the problem has introduced may be further clarified by three reflections:

a) The role to be fulfilled by the state in society almost axiomatically implies a new understanding of its authority. It is no longer possible to regard the state as a preestablished authority to which people owe unquestioning respect. Rather is its authority derived from the degree to which it represents the community and the will of the community. If it is to fulfil its role, it needs the assent, the participation and the cooperation of the community. It must unite and deploy the resources at work in society. On their behalf, it must share creatively in the fashioning of historical processes.

That an increasing number of nations find themselves under dictatorial regimes is not an argument against this conclusion. Dictatorships do not regard themselves as preestablished authorities. On the contrary, they realize that their power is something they have seized for themselves, claiming in justification that the real needs of the people can only be met by concentrating power in the hands of a few. They too, they more than others perhaps, realize that the state is a constantly renewed act of human creation.

This shift of emphasis has profoundly affected the Church's view of the state. In the teaching of the Church over a long period, the divine institution of the state was regarded as the basis of its authority. On the basis of this divine institution, the Church owed obedience to the state, at least as long as the latter did not encroach on the Church's freedom to perform its own task. The difficulty about this view, however, was that it could not do justice to the new dynamic role of the state. The view taken of the authority of the state was too static. In holding to this view, the Church was in constant danger of

regarding the precise form taken by power at any given time as instituted by God. Even today, of course, the Church will still affirm the divine institution of the state; but by this it will understand the task set the state by God in history which it can either fulfil or fail to fulfil. The difference becomes clear if, for example, we compare older and more recent exegesis of the well-known passage in the Epistle to the Romans (Rom. 13:1-7).²

b) Structures of society have become more and more complex in the course of recent history. Developments in science and technology have continued to open up new fields to us. A variety of new structures have come into being. All these represent factors which help to condition the future of society. They have multiplied the tasks of the state to an unprecedented degree. The state has to take steps to ensure that these new resources and powers interact in a fruitful way. It may exercise wide powers of control. Its power then comes into constant conflict with the inherent power of the structures of society. Scientific research, industry, and so on, will in any case play a determining role.

The question this raises for the Church is how it can establish a creative relationship with the whole range of different "powers" in society. It is not simply a matter of organizing its relation to the state but also of finding a position in which it can bear witness in the total structure of society. Its political task is not directed solely to the state but to the whole community. It must be in a position to address itself to employers, trade unions, political parties, and so on. If need be, it must also be able to identify itself with an opposition. Its relationship to the state must be so ordered that this comprehensive witness remains possible.

c) The more society is understood as a "project", the more natural it becomes to think that a just order can or must be introduced by revolutionary measures. The state can fail in its task. Changes in society are not brought under control. A situation of conflict, paralysis and oppression can arise. The movement towards a more just order can then, in certain cases, only be set in motion once more by a revolutionary process. To be sure, account must also be taken of the conflict, the paralysis and the oppression which every revolutionary step can bring in its wake. But if it be true that the state has to demonstrate its authority by effectively controlling changes, then it is impossible to exclude the possible justification of revolutionary movements.

In recent years, churches in increasing number have been led to

² At the Bossey conference, Erich Fuchs provided an example of contemporary exegesis of this passage. See pp. 143-147.

reckon with this possibility. While views continue to differ widely as before, especially when it comes to assessing some specific revolutionary movement, a growing number of people in the churches are nevertheless ready to support revolutionary movements in certain circumstances.

This readiness has implications for the relation between Church and state. If the Church admits the possibility of a legitimate revolution, it must, in its witness to society, so strive to establish and maintain justice that revolutionary uprising need not take place. To do so, it needs a certain measure of critical freedom in relation to the state. It will use this freedom to try to influence the state to fulfil its task in society. If it does decide to support a revolutionary movement, it must do its utmost to ensure that the destructive element inherent in any revolutionary process is kept within bounds. The witness of the Church could be described as a contribution to the "transfiguration of revolution".³

The developing universal fellowship of the churches

The fact that the growing fellowship of the churches across the national boundaries poses new questions about the church-state relationship has already been pointed out. Special attention was given to this aspect at the Bossey conference.

One of the fruits of the ecumenical movement has been the rediscovery of the universal dimension of the Church. As the churches grappled with the tasks presented by the development of modern society, they realized the extent to which the universal nature and mission of the Church had become obscured in most traditions. This realization was undoubtedly one of the most important motives of the ecumenical movement. The churches could only witness effectively if they became visibly *one* people across national boundaries.

This new awakening in the churches was a result, in large measure, of the social changes of recent times. The international dimension has acquired increasing importance for the life and future of the individual nations. Technological and economic development have led to a much more intensive international interaction which no state can ignore or escape. National sovereignty is more and more limited by the interplay of forces which affect all peoples. In political and social matters of great importance, vital decisions are made without it being possible for individual states, especially the smaller ones, to exercise

³ PAUL LEHMANN: *The Transfiguration of Politics - Jesus Christ and the Question of Revolution*. London: SCM Press, 1975.

any real influence over them. In order to be able to deal with problems at the international level, joint supranational structures are necessary and individual states are forced increasingly to accept cooperation in such structures.

What is the effect of this new situation on the church-state relationship? If the Church wishes to cooperate in the establishment of a viable international order, it undoubtedly needs to reexamine its relationship to the state. It must find ways and means of taking equally seriously its obligations both to the international community and to the particular state in which it lives and bears witness. If it is to fulfil its responsibilities to the international community, it needs certain freedoms and must therefore, for the sake of its universal mission, seek to secure this area of freedom for itself.

Can we say what these freedoms are? Although detailed discussion will be needed if we are to answer this question, three preliminary reflections may already be mentioned here:

i) Each church must be in a position to decide freely about doctrine and ethical standards. It needs to be able to make independent decisions. It needs authority to undertake reforms within its own ranks. But it must also be in a position to adopt positions *vis-à-vis* events and developments in its own country in the light of the Gospel.

ii) Each church needs to have its own resources and the freedom to determine their use. Its obligations to the international community can only be fulfilled if the necessary resources for this are available and can be used without conditions. In this respect, the Church should be free from the state.

iii) Each church must be free to have contacts with other churches. It must be able to choose freely its representatives in international activities. It must be able to participate in international meetings and to do so not primarily as a representative of its own country but in order to contribute to the discussions in its own right as a member of the universal fellowship.

“Typology” in different situations

In reflecting on the relation of Church and state, it is easy to end up in vague generalizations and lose sight of the enormous variety of situations. This is a special danger for ecumenical discussions. But if real progress is to be made in these discussions, it is vital to keep this variety clearly in mind. While it may be generally true that fresh emphasis is needed today on the freedom to bear witness, the fact is that in each individual situation the actual conditions call for quite different steps. To offer general recipes for all churches would be extremely dangerous. The conference in the Ecumenical Institute,

Bossey, made a special effort, therefore, to produce a survey of the various types of relationship between Church and state.

The heritage of the confessional traditions certainly plays an important part. In its relationship to the state, each church is guided by ideas which have developed over a long period of time and which still exercise a more or less conscious influence today. Many churches explicitly adopt a particular doctrinal view of the state. They insist, therefore, on a particular conception of the church-state relationship. Other churches are influenced by concepts which, while denied the status of explicit doctrine, continue to operate simply because of the weight of history and tradition. Churches will tackle the new problems confronting them in different ways in accordance with their different historical presuppositions.

A classification based exclusively on confessional criteria would be misleading, however. Other factors affect the relationship to the state at least as strongly. What is needed, therefore, is a classification based on the different situations in which a church may find itself.

For example, it is one thing for a church to exist in a country where the Christian tradition is dominant; another for it to live in a country where the large majority of the people are non-Christian. It is one thing for a church to have been so closely associated with the state in a country over a long period of time that "Christian values" are also reflected in state legislation; another for it to have only entered a country a few decades ago and not yet really put down roots. For the Church of Denmark in its situation, for example, high priority may be assigned to the task of achieving a greater selfhood. Only as it achieves a greater distance from the state will it be able to play an effective part in the universal fellowship. This could be contrasted with the situation in Zaïre, for example, where the Church entered the country in the shape of various denominations and missions. The prior problem here is whether the Church can find its proper place. It needs to acquire weight in the national context. It needs to detach itself from the churches and countries which were responsible for the missions and, in order to be able to proclaim its message, the Church needs to play its part in the creation of national unity. Finally, it makes all the difference whether the state expects the Church to bear an active witness in the political sphere or considers such action as exceeding the competence of the Church.

Ultimately, the church-state relationship is a question of authoritative witness. Does the power to proclaim the Gospel in society arise from within the Church itself? Has it been given the insights it needs? Does it have available witnesses who are able to represent it effective-

ly? The finest formal arrangement of the church-state relationship cannot guarantee answers to these questions. The answer lies with the Church itself. Even when the doors are open, it can still live as a prisoner. And it can demonstrate its freedom in unexpected ways even when outward rules seem to militate against it. Reflections on the proper relationship between Church and state are, therefore, in the last analysis, only of secondary importance. They can help us to describe the ideal conditions for the witness of the Church. But the witness itself stems from another source.

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