Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms

A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism

William J. Wright
Contents

Series Preface  7
Acknowledgments  9
Abbreviations  10
Introduction  11

1. Interpretations of Luther’s Idea of the Two Kingdoms during the Last Two Centuries  17
   Mid-Nineteenth-Century Uses of Luther’s Concept of Two Kingdoms
   Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Developments
   National Socialist Perversions and the Responses
   Relevant Recent Treatments of the Two-Kingdoms Idea

2. The Skeptical Challenge of the Early Italian Renaissance  45
   Early Italian Humanism and Skepticism
   Lorenzo Valla and Rhetorical Humanism
   Italian Humanism and Neoplatonism
   Critics of Neoplatonism

3. Northern Humanism: The Context of Luther’s Two Kingdoms  79
   The Rhetorical Path and Valla’s Influence
   The Neoplatonic Path and the Influence of Ficino and Pico
   Luther and Humanism
   Earlier Twofold Conceptions

4. The Two-Kingdoms Worldview: How Luther Used the Concept in Diverse Contexts  113
   The Early Use of the Two-Kingdoms Concept
   Further Refinement of the Two-Kingdoms Distinction in Biblical Commentaries
Contents

The Creation Law and the Three Divine Orders of Human Institutions
Theological Certainty versus Skepticism in the Worldly Kingdom
5. The Reformer Applies the Two Kingdoms to Christian Life 147
   Luther’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes
   Christian Life as a Struggle for Faith
   Pitfalls and Patience
   Luther’s Social Ethos

Bibliography 173
Index 205
The heritage of the Reformation is of profound importance to our society, our culture, and the church in the present day. Yet there remain many significant gaps in our knowledge of the intellectual development of Protestantism both during and after the Reformation, and there are not a few myths about the theology of the orthodox or scholastic Protestant writers of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These gaps and myths—frequently caused by ignorance of the scope of a particular thinker’s work, by negative theological judgments passed by later generations on the theology of the Reformers and their successors, or by an intellectual imperialism of the present that singles out some thinkers and ignores others regardless of their relative significance to their own times—stand in the way of a substantive encounter with this important period in our history. Understanding, assessment, and appropriation of that heritage can only occur through the publication of significant works (monographs, essays, and sound, scholarly translations) that present the breadth and detail of the thought of the Reformers and their successors.

Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought makes available (1) translations of important documents like Caspar Olevian’s *A Firm Foundation* and John Calvin’s *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, (2) significant monographs on individual thinkers or on aspects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant thought, and (3) multiauthored symposia that bring together groups of scholars in an effort to present the state of scholarship on a particular issue, all under the guidance of an editorial board of recognized scholars in the field.

The series, moreover, is intended to address two groups: an academic and a confessional or churchly audience. The series recognizes the need for careful, scholarly treatment of the Reformation and of the era of Protestant orthodoxy, given the continuing presence of misunderstandings, particularly of the latter era, in both the scholarly and the popular literature and also given the rise of a...
more recent scholarship devoted to reappraising both the Reformation and the era of orthodoxy. The series highlights revised understandings regarding the relationship of the Reformation and orthodoxy to their medieval background and of the thought of both eras to their historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. Such scholarship will not only advance the academic discussion, it will also provide a churchly audience with a clearer and broader access to its own traditions. In sum, the series intends to present the varied and current approaches to the rich heritage of Protestantism and to stimulate interest in the roots of the Protestant tradition.

Richard A. Muller
Introduction

For Martin Luther, God’s two kingdoms were a fundamental premise based upon the diligent study of the Scriptures. They were the reality in which the Christian lived during his or her lifetime. As a basic assumption, Luther presented all of his teachings within the context of these two kingdoms. The present study will describe his use of the two kingdoms in depth and their implications for the individual Christian. It will examine the influence of Renaissance humanism and show how it both stimulated and facilitated Luther’s development of this view of reality.

By the early sixteenth century, Renaissance humanism had forcefully challenged the dominance of Scholasticism and obtained a foothold in many universities, including Erfurt, where Luther obtained his education. Humanism brought with it a rhetoric based upon skeptical assumptions, a desire to uncover the original sources and philological methods for examining sources. Hence, Luther’s conception of man’s relationship with God and his place in the world matured in a skeptical milieu. (In this study, the term “skeptical” will not refer to the modern understanding of doubt directed specifically at religion.) This book will show that Luther was influenced mostly by the earlier Italian humanists, especially Lorenzo Valla. In addition to providing a model of humanist uses of philology and rhetoric, Valla showed an epistemological way out of Renaissance skepticism toward God’s Word and religious matters. Valla had revealed a rhetoric of faith as opposed to the rhetoric of proofs, facts, definitions, and philosophy. It was a rhetoric that appealed to the heart rather than the intellect.

Luther searched for certainty regarding God, who He was, how He acted, how He was disposed to people, and how people related to Him. He turned to the Scriptures in his search for certainty, *ad fontem* as the humanists put

1. See chapter 2 for the definition used in this study.
it. But as a student equipped with the skeptical humanist tools of philology, Luther found a God in Scripture who was incomprehensible, and he found teachings that were inexplicable by the logic he had learned at the university. Many of the characteristics ascribed to God in Scripture and the events described therein seemed impossible or illogical and were, therefore, subject to doubt. An example of this was the ubiquity of God, which Luther could not understand or grasp with reason. Another example was the Genesis account of creation, which simply defied human reasoning and the best pagan science since antiquity. Luther located the cause of this experience in the late medieval penchant for explaining religious matters philosophically. As he put it, “For all other branches of knowledge are taught on the basis of syllogisms, induction, and experiments” but only theology concerned “what is nothing, . . . unseen, impossible, absurd, and foolish.”

Doubt and skepticism compelled Luther to articulate and clearly explicate the biblical reality of God; that is, the Jahweh of the Old Testament and the Word and Christ of the New Testament. It was because Luther saw the need for establishing the certain reality of God’s actions that, in his early writings, he talked about this spiritual reality in terms of a place or locus. Religious matters concerned a “soteriological object” rather than just an “epistemological” one. Faith was the method through which Christ worked or acted on purely religious or spiritual objects.

Certainly, a distinguishing characteristic of Luther’s conception of the two kingdoms was that they had radically different objects as well as methods. They represented different worlds. Indeed, they were totally alien to one another and opposite in nature. Moreover, if one were to accept with certainty (and not doubt) that the active God described by Scriptures worked in people’s lives and kept His promises, then one must think differently about causal

2. Jared Wicks, Man Yearning for Grace (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968), 38–39, 300. This comment was with reference to the very early Sentences commentary.
4. Steven Ozment, Homo Spiritualis, A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson, and Martin Luther (1509–16) in the Context of Their Theological Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 103–11, 131; WA 3:419 (LW 10:355); see also WA 3:145, 332, 421 (LW 10:276, 356). See the wonderful work of Steven Ozment on the use of the term “locus,” the feet of faith, faith as a foothold, and the substaculum vitae to demonstrate the objective reality of God and His promise. See also the sources in Luther’s writings that he used. One can find many later references to a certain place, which have reference to faith in an objective reality. For example, regarding Isaiah 37:16 (LW 16:318) and in the 1532 commentary on Psalm 132, where he indicated what a magnificent promise it was from Scriptures “to know a certain place, person, where God is found” (WA 40, 3:443).
relationships. Luther came to see that the causes of things and events in the two kingdoms were also very different.⁶

Helmar Junghans, in his path-breaking book, *Junge Luther und die Humanisten*, which revealed Luther’s debts to humanism, sensed this same skeptical dilemma in Luther’s mind very early. Junghans emphasized how, from the very start, Luther desired to grasp the “Word content” of Holy Scriptures, to distinguish the spirit from the letter. This concern with a critical search for the meaning of Scriptures represented a humanist trait and resulted in his understanding of the Word as a power of God to humankind. In this connection, Junghans then asked whether this most basic assumption was not the beginning point for Luther’s Reformation theology. In other words, Junghans suggested that the doctrine of justification by faith probably flowed from the Reformer’s previous assumption about the power of the Word. Junghans also saw the two-kingdoms idea flowing from this previous theology of the Word.⁷

Early in his career as a theologian, Luther found the certainty that he was seeking in the biblical teachings about reality. The hard struggle for the proper understanding of the Psalter as the real, living Word of God may be found in his first lectures on Psalms.⁸ It has also been noted that Luther’s scholia on Romans (1517–18) represented a successful search for the reality of Christ.⁹ Thus, Luther already understood that, although different, God and all things spiritual were as real as physical things. Theology had different terms and methods from other disciplines because it concerned a different reality from that of the tangible, sensible, and temporal world. Spiritual things could only be understood, Luther indicated, with “faith, which takes hold of the promise, fixes the heart on what is altogether absurd, impossible, and contained in the Word and God’s promise.”¹⁰

This view of the two kingdoms was very different from Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas about reality,¹¹ as we shall have occasion to note in various contexts throughout the book. Luther accused Plato of writing nonsense and ridiculed Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.¹² From the start, he counted everything that concerned body and mind as the concern of the letter or law,

---

6. See WA 42:23–24 (*LW* 1:30). Luther stated this most clearly in the Genesis commentary.
8. Ibid. Ozment and Junghans both showed that his epistemological ideas were basic assumptions, which could be found in his earliest work.
11. See Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis*, 87, 89, 92–93; Junghans, *Junge Luther*, 280; Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 39–40, 44–45. Prenter spoke of “a different type of reality,” which he explained with reference to the Lord’s Supper. He indicated that Luther’s *Rationis Latomianas* (1521) was the best source on this point.
while the gospel concerned heavenly and spiritual things. Also expressed as the external versus the internal Word, this represented the subject matter of the two very different kingdoms that Luther found in Scripture. One should also emphasize, from the start, that Luther’s view of the two kingdoms was distinguished from all Platonic or Neoplatonic systems of thought by the fact that he understood the mind or intellect (that is the reasoning power of people) to belong to the flesh, that is, the kingdom of the world. The Neoplatonic dichotomy was that of things or copies versus ideas or forms and the ideas were, simultaneously, an objective reality outside the material world and an innate reality within the human mind. In contrast to the Neoplatonists, Luther understood God’s two kingdoms as two separate, alien realities, which shared only the fact that God governed them.

There can be little doubt that Luther was skeptical about human knowledge, as well, but not revealed knowledge. He clearly expressed doubts about human knowledge based on either the intellect (reasoning) or the senses. In so doing he echoed the ancient views of the skeptics, which held that neither the reasoning power nor the senses could be trusted for certain truth. He doubted the certainty of contemporary scientific views about astronomy for these reasons, just as he rejected the pagan views about the origins of the physical world.

Luther’s two-kingdoms approach substantially altered the medieval Catholic views of the two kingdoms or realms, in which emperor and pope were competing lieutenants of God on earth. Our contention contradicts the claim of the church historian John Dillenberger, who, many years ago, in his Protestant Thought and Natural Science, stated that Luther “did not bother to suggest even the minimal lines for a new philosophical view of the world.” Both he and John Calvin, according to Dillenberger, failed to supply their own worldview: “Understandably, they had not spelled out the implication of their newly won theological understanding for other areas of thought.” It is most certainly true that Luther did not develop a formal or professional philosophy or metaphysics, for he did not think that the methods of philosophy applied to theology or matters of faith. Furthermore, it was not his office or calling as a theologian and pastor to do philosophy. However, it is clear that Luther gave a great deal of attention to how Christians should conceive of reality.

15. See chapter 3.
We will show that the basic two-kingdoms idea was already present in Luther's earliest writing. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to become involved in a chronological explanation of his development of the idea. Our working principle in this regard is that established by several scholars before us in this matter; namely, that as time went on, Luther better explicated and refined ideas that were already present in his earliest writing. Gustaf Wingren, in his study of the idea of vocation, showed that Luther's views from different periods should be seen as a whole, not taken apart chronologically, for that is "untrue to the materials themselves."

Hence, as he faced various challenges, Luther refined his idea of the two kingdoms. Steven Ozment also remarked that in Luther's early writings one can find a "heretofore unrecognized systematic cohesion" with his reformation theology. The same point was made by Peter Meinhold regarding the use of the later Genesis commentary. One must be careful in using it because it was reworked by others. Nevertheless, so long as one can show that an idea or assertion found there may also be found elsewhere in Luther's works, one need not doubt that it was Luther's idea.

Luther was very consistent in his use of the two-kingdoms concept in his commentaries and lectures. From his explanation of the Lord's Prayer to the subject of freedom of the will, on the creation in the Old Testament as on the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, the two kingdoms represented a basic assumption of the Reformer from which he understood and explained his subject.

In essence, it is my contention that the existence of God’s two kingdoms was a Christian reality for Luther. The concept represented Luther’s Reformation worldview or *Weltanschauung*. When it is understood as such, it proves to be essential for clarifying all of Luther’s views. Although other scholars before us have argued that the Reformer’s views of reason versus faith, double truth, inner versus outer man, flesh versus spirit, sacraments, and nature (the creation) are as much constrained by the two-kingdoms idea as his political advice, no one has devoted a study to Luther’s concept of the two kingdoms per se in the context of Renaissance humanist skepticism.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms has become stereotyped as a political doctrine, and the vast scholarly literature on the subject has approached the idea from a political standpoint. It will be my purpose to establish that this modern “two-kingdoms doctrine”
represented a perversion of Luther’s teaching. Hence, in chapter 1, we will look at the alteration of Luther’s idea since the mid-nineteenth century and locate this study in the literature that has attempted to correct that modern political view.

Chapters 2 and 3 will locate the need for and the means to a clearer articulation of Christian reality in the increasingly skeptical milieu resulting from late medieval and Renaissance developments in philology, rhetoric, philosophy, and literature. Renaissance humanism was a major source of this skepticism. But there were two humanist paths that led from the Italian Renaissance to the Reformation. One of those provided part of the solution to the problem of doubt and anxiety that characterized the age. Chapter 2 will focus on the contribution of the early Italian Renaissance to Luther’s intellectual preparation. Chapter 3 will reveal Luther’s immediate intellectual context in a period of Renaissance Platonism promoted by late Italian humanists and their Northern counterparts.

Chapter 4 will attempt to define and explain Luther’s versatile concept of the two kingdoms in his own words and in the context of his many-sided work. At the same time, it will show that Luther displayed his understanding of the two kingdoms very early and continued to further articulate or explicate it throughout his career. Chapter 5 will present Luther’s use of the concept to clarify Christian life in a practical and quotidian way.
1

Interpretations of Luther’s Idea of the Two Kingdoms during the Last Two Centuries

There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world. I have written this so often that I am surprised that there is anyone who does not know it or remember it.¹

At the start, one must take cognizance of how both the general public and the scholarly community have interpreted Luther’s use of the term “two kingdoms.” As the epigraph shows, Luther already expressed amazement that people did not understand it in his own time. The term “two-kingdoms doctrine” has been a heavily politicized concept for a long time. When the general public shows awareness of Luther’s two-kingdoms teaching, it refers strictly to the separation of church and state. But as Gerhard Ebeling noted some time ago, “anything like the modern separation of church and state” fails to capture the whole meaning and significance of these terms for Luther.² This political interpretation has also had its proponents in the scholarly world. In the Anglo-American environment over the last century, for example, published monographs have been devoted solely to presenting Luther’s political teaching.³

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Luther’s ideas about two kingdoms came to be seen as a political teaching or a political and social ethics. Indeed, many recent (since World War II) treatments of Luther’s two kingdoms were conducted under the label of the doctrine of two kingdoms and two regiments (Zwei-Reiche- und Zwei-Regimente-Lehre). The use of this phrase seems to link the two kingdoms with the idea that Luther must have been providing some sort of unique political teaching or, even in the strictest sense, dogma. Even those writers who explicitly disavowed the idea that Luther intended to pronounce a political doctrine used this terminology. The literature on the history of political theories has used the politically laden phrase “two-kingdoms doctrine,” while very recently, Joshua Mitchell attempted to present Luther as the first of a select group of progenitors of our modern political views. The fact is that the term “two kingdoms” itself has been politicized and one can scarcely treat Luther’s work without using it.

In locating the present study within the context of the modern literature on the subject, there are three points to keep in mind. First, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century political doctrine, falsely ascribed to Luther, constitutes a misappropriation of Luther’s original teachings. This modern “doctrine” represents a spurious version of Luther’s understanding of God’s two kingdoms. Created in the context of the last century and a half, it obscures the meaning that Luther actually gave to the two kingdoms in the sixteenth century. Second, the large number of studies on the subject in recent treatments (roughly, since World War II), which represents a vast array of approaches and emphases,
Interpretations of Luther’s Idea of the Two Kingdoms during the Last Two Centuries

presents us with a very complex subject. Third, in spite of all of the literature on the subject, there continues to be a lack of a consensus on the meaning of Luther’s idea of the two kingdoms. This situation makes it difficult if not impossible to understand any of Luther’s teachings, because he understood and explained all of them in the context of God’s two kingdoms.¹⁰

Since many historians have located the origins of the spurious two-kingdoms doctrine in the mid-nineteenth century, this chapter will start there.¹¹ Next, it will examine the turn-of-the-twentieth-century milieu, in which a much larger step toward the false modern idea was taken. The chapter will then examine the extreme use made of this modern interpretation in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, it will be necessary to identify some of the misguided attempts to correct the Nazi and German Christian perversions of Luther’s teaching and, connected therewith, the attack on Luther’s whole idea of two kingdoms. This discussion will involve not only anti-Nazi work during the 1930s and 1940s, but the flurry of scholarly activity concerned with the idea of two kingdoms during the period from 1950s through the 1970s. The chapter will conclude with an appraisal of the most important recent works touching the subject.

The history of the use of Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries is largely the history of the politicization of the great Reformer’s teaching, so that it became known as a political teaching.¹² It is the story of the creation of the spurious two kingdoms and two regiments doctrine. The essence of this perverted doctrine was the idea that the world, human institutions, politicians, and everyday

¹⁰ Gerhard Gloege, “Politia divina, Die Überwindung des mittelalterlichen Sozialdenkens durch Luthers Lehre von der Oberkeit,” Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena 6 (1956/57): 452. Gloege noted this specifically with regard to the connection between two kinds of righteousness and law versus gospel.


¹² For an example of just how politicized it may be taken to be, see John Witte Jr. (“Between Sanctity and Depravity: Law and Human Nature in Martin Luther’s Two Kingdoms,” Villanova Law Review 48 [2003], 728–29), who compared Luther’s view of two kingdoms to Oliver Wendell Holmes’s view of American law. That is, he showed how Ernst Troeltsch’s view of Luther’s two kingdoms may be compared to a recent American legal scholar’s (Grant Gilmore) view of Holmes’s understanding of American law.
people were free from the power and the laws of God, because the world had its own rules and ethical norms, which were produced by processes internal to the world.\textsuperscript{13} This idea is often labeled with the term \textit{Eigengesetzlichkeit}, but it is sometimes put under the rubric of “dualisms” that distinguishes and divorces an inner from an outer life.\textsuperscript{14} The reactions and responses to the extreme perversion of Luther’s idea of the two kingdoms by the Nazis and their sympathizers have often only perpetuated the spurious doctrine, rather than clarifying how Luther’s original teaching differed from the false one. Since World War II, some have labeled the spurious doctrine the “Luther to Hitler legend.” It has been noted before that such attempts to place blame on the past are generally attempts to “exculpate the present, or at least to justify some present policy or action which could otherwise not stand scrutiny.”\textsuperscript{15}

**Mid-Nineteenth-Century Uses of Luther’s Concept of Two Kingdoms**

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Luther’s ideas on the two kingdoms had not been greatly politicized, even though the concept had been absorbed into the state-church constitutions of the German territorial and dynastic states.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, several recent writers have traced the beginnings of the deviating modern “two kingdoms and two regiments doctrine” to mid-nineteenth-century scholars connected with Erlangen.\textsuperscript{17} Some have pointed particularly to

\begin{itemize}
  \item See below, pp. 25 and 25n44.
  \item On the state-church constitutions see Frostin, \textit{Luther’s Two Kingdoms}, 3, 9; Wolfgang Huber, \textit{Kirche und Öffentlichkeit}, #28 of Forschungen und Berichte der evangelischen Studien-gemeinschaft (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1973), 56–58; Ulrich Duchrow, Wolfgang Huber, and Louis Reith, eds., \textit{Umdeutung der Zweireichelehre Luthers im 19. Jahrhundert}, #21 of Texte zur Kirche- und Theologiegeschichte (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1975), 13–14. According to Frostin, Luther’s three \textit{Stände} or statuses (often, hierarchies) scheme more clearly describes the statuses as “given by God” and “emphasizes . . . the unity of God’s actions” (9). Huber treats the issue from a legal-institutional perspective. Like Frostin, he sees the three \textit{Stände} or hierarchies as emphasizing the Christian’s whole life to God’s demands (58). Beginning with Melanchthon, Huber delineates the change to the \textit{Landeskirchen} concept (59–62). For an opposing point of view, see Duchrow, \textit{Lutheran Churches}, 311–12, where he clearly states that the statuses scheme also caused the Christian to not be concerned with social and political justice.
  \item See Helmut Edelmann and Niels Hasselmann, eds., \textit{Nation im Widerspruch. Aspekte und Perspektiven aus lutherischer Sicht Heute} (Gütersloh: Gersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 25–27, 46–48. They argued that a different kind of nationalism from that issuing from France and the US developed first at Erlangen, as these conservatives attempted to fulfill their agenda. Ultimately, the movement “ontologized” the state.
\end{itemize}
the work of Christoph Ernst Luthardt,\textsuperscript{18} a product of Erlangen (but he also studied at Berlin from 1842–1843), who, from 1856 on, held professorships first at Leipzig and then at Berlin. Luthardt was known as a Christian apologist, and especially a Lutheran one, defending the church and faith against contemporary intellectual trends, particularly the classical Liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{19}

One can readily see in Luthardt’s influential book \textit{Die Ethik Luthers in ihren Grundzügen} how he was involved in changing Luther’s use of the phrase two kingdoms and why we should not make him the primary agent of perverting or de-Christianizing it.

Both the other great community circles of human society, domestic economy and state (\textit{Haus und Staat}), in which the Christian stands belong to the territory of the natural life. Over these the Gospel does not have to make arrangements. For the Gospel has to do with the spiritual life. Reason underlies the natural life, as the source of all natural law and has its own authority and order, to which the Gospel does not have the call to alter.\textsuperscript{20}

At face value, one may find in these words a major objectionable aspect of the modern two-kingdoms doctrine; namely, the idea that in the institutions of the natural world, reason is the source of natural law, which governs the natural world. The natural world, in this case, would be autonomous or free of God’s law, so that people could make their own rules as they go about their lives and work. Moreover, this talk of spiritual life and Luthardt’s general emphasis on morality seem to demonstrate charges that Luthardt reduced Christianity to a matter of mentality or \textit{Gesinnung}, to the interior of the Christian.\textsuperscript{21} This would clearly be contrary to Luther’s teaching.

However, we should note that in this very quotation, Luthardt continued to frame the discussion within Luther’s institutional parameters of church, state, and daily life (\textit{oeconomia}, a sixteenth-century term that conveyed the idea of managing daily life through the institutions of marriage, family, and


\textsuperscript{20} Christoph Ernst Luthardt, \textit{Die Ethik Luthers in ihren Grundzügen} (Leipzig: Dörfling und Franke, 1867), 94.

\textsuperscript{21} Frostin (\textit{Luther’s Two Kingdoms}, 3–4) and William H. Lazareth (\textit{Christians in Society: God, the Bible and Society} [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001], 5, 19) both claim this.
livelihood). Those who identify Luthardt as the beginning point for the spurious two-kingdoms doctrine assert that Luthardt replaced the three institutional orders or Stände with a two-spheres idea (private, inner versus public, outer) and made these two spheres the basis for his focus of Christian ethics. But actually, Luthardt did no such thing. Moreover, he did not make human institutions autonomous of divine power. Luthardt declared that even though these institutions were under reason, they “are not really profane, but God’s endowment, order, and will, and God is present in the same.” This was so, according to Luthardt, because God “uses his creatures like ‘larva’ or ‘masks.’”

Luthardt was explicit about the point: God does everything, under the “cover and curtain” of such masks. Moreover, Luthardt stated that these three institutions were “the three moral communities” in which vocation or calling operated.

In another place in the *Ethik Luthers*, Luthardt explained how God’s law and rule applied to worldly institutions, even though they were under reason. Both the domestic economy and the state had two sides—a human and a divine one. The human side is placed under reason. The state undertakes making (positive) law with reason. But on the divine side, the state and the household were under God’s authority. Moreover, as if to make our point for us, Luthardt cited Luther: “The task of the governing authority was ‘to maintain discipline and honesty, peace and law.’” The intent was clear: worldly institutions were not morally independent of the rule of God. The state, which had both a human and divine side, was God’s institution. In so far as it was worldly, it used reason, but was always bound to God’s law and rules. Moreover, Luthardt spoke of the duty of the state to remain within the confines of justice and law and to keep its oath. The natural law, which humankind knows through reason, was God-ordained too.

Similarly, when Luthardt spoke of the individual Christian, he was mindful of the fact that the Christian was always under God’s commands. While the individual related to God in prayer, which was the real work of faith, it was necessary for him or her to step down to good works of love toward other people (i.e., in the worldly sphere). The reason he gave for this was that “God

24. Ibid., 84–85, 87. Here, Luthardt saw Luther restoring morality to the world through vocation or calling, which every person has, and this over and against the teaching of the late medieval Scholastics. In addition to that, he noted that “the common order of Christendom” goes beyond the three divine orders (Stände), for these “particular callings” are superceded by a “universal moral calling and relationship”; love of neighbor is above all else (111).
25. Ibid., 100–101. When Luthardt spoke of the worldly institutions being subordinated to reason, he meant that people had the power of reason at their disposal to know the natural law and make positive law, as he indicated here. He did not mean that reason was autonomous.
27. Ibid., 107–8.
had promised and commanded [it] in the Ten Commandments.” 28 The Ten Commandments always applied. Hence, a careful reading of Luthardt will not permit one to ascribe to him the idea of the complete autonomy of the natural world from the rule and laws of God. Luthardt did not teach that human reason could create regimes and laws that were at variance with or opposed to those of God.

Luthardt was impressed by the fact that Luther often emphasized the idea that with God the person comes first and the good works follow. This, for Luthardt, was the basis for what he called the Lutheran disposition, or power and freedom to act (Disposition), consisting of three steps: (1) the person of the Christian (corresponding to the freedom of the Christian); (2) the attitude (Gesinnung) of the Christian (corresponding to the Christian’s love out of faith); and (3) the works of the Christian (corresponding to the Christian’s service to neighbor out of love). 29 Luthardt emphasized the importance of this disposition in his thought with the following comment: “I believe this disposition corresponds also to the content and the task of theological ethics generally.”

Uwe Rieske-Braun, a historian of the nineteenth-century German church, maintained that the idea of proper attitude, or sentiment (Gesinnung), is the heart of the spurious idea. 30 Modern social scientists, politicians, and theologians connected this innerliness and Christian attitude with their politicized “two-kingsdoms doctrine,” locating Christianity only in the interior attitudes or sentiments of the Christian person. Such a connection, however, is not necessarily found in Luthardt, for the freedom of the Christian (step one) comes from faith and, as we have noted, Luthardt always carefully placed the Christian, even in worldly offices and institutions, under the law and rule of God. In a very fine recent book on vocation, Andreas Pawlus caught this fact in commenting that Luthardt incorporated social ethics in the sixteenth-century idea of three hierarchies and saw the dynamic of the work ethic before the Luther Renaissance of the early twentieth century. 31

Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Developments

The period from roughly 1890 to the First World War was one in which the great changes that had been wrought by the successful forces of capitalistic Liberalism (as promoted by Adam Smith), industrialization, and nationalism seemed to many intellectuals to demand some theological reorientations. In

28. Ibid., 65.
29. Ibid., 29–30.
addition, the seeming success of the Newtonian epistemology in unlocking the scientific laws that governed and explained the natural world (including biology, as well as astronomy, physics, and chemistry) presented a challenge. Because this epistemology applied to the hard sciences, it was tempting to assume that it would also apply to the social sciences or even philosophy and theology. But the determinism of hard, objective laws, which was the dominant trend of period, presented particular problems to the Christian church and its theology. Perhaps individual freedom of choice could only be maintained in the inner person, while the exterior or outer world of institutions had their own predetermined laws. Hence, one can see the reasoning behind the concept of autonomy in turn-of-the-century Liberalism. Such reasoning may also be seen behind the split between the natural sciences and the other intellectual disciplines.32

The term “Eigengesetzlichkeit,” which came to refer to the concept of autonomous laws of each sphere of worldly life, was probably first used by R. Seeberg in 1917. In the *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, he spoke of the “Eigengesetzlichkeit des weltlichen Lebens und der staatlichen Kulturerziehung.”33 It should be noted, though, that Seeberg limited this autonomy by repeatedly noting that there must be a solidarity or unity (Zusammengehörigkeit) of the gospel and natural life.34 It has been asserted that Ernst Troeltsch and Hermann Jordan both came close to using the term with the phrase, eigene Gesetze.35 According to Ulrich Duchrow, a major figure attempting to clarify Luther’s concept of two kingdoms after World War II, Jordan appeared to have been “the first to speak of the independence of political and social life from faith as ‘autonomy.’”36

Hermann Jordan was an Erlangen church historian. His book, *Luthers Staatsauffassung*, spoke of Lutheranism as supporting the idea that “religion and politics each have to process through their own laws (eigene Gesetze).”37 Indeed, Jordan used the phrase “Eigengesetzlichkeit of the stately sphere.” However, in the latter case, he immediately limited this autonomy in two significant ways. First, Jordan specifically spoke of “a certain degree of au-

34. Ibid.
35. See the Introduction in Duchrow, *Umdeutung*, 6n3, 8n4. Wolfgang Huber made this claim.
tonomy”; in other words, this autonomy was always limited. Second, Jordan was speaking with reference to Luther’s view of the relationship of the church and state necessary in the sixteenth-century context. Similarly, in the former case, Jordan made it clear that the state must be moral, that it has a divine mission of ethical order. Moreover, this and similar points are found throughout the book. Jordan pointed out that Luther had demanded that princes rule for the benefit of their subjects and, though this was during World War I, he noted that Luther had praised “Emperor” Octavian for indicating that war was more likely to lose valuable things than to gain them. Indeed, Jordan noted that Luther had sanctioned resistance against any government that broke the Ten Commandments. He bluntly asserted that the world “is indeed created by God and it is ruled by Him.” Finally, Jordan specifically stated that the state could not be amoral because its very purpose was to resist evil. The kingdom of the world was a kingdom “in which one resists the moral order of the devil.” Hence, in Jordan, one still does not find a Machiavellian or unlimited moral autonomy granted to the state.

Several recent historians treating the origins of the autonomy concept have accorded the major roles to the theologian Ernst Troeltsch and the sociologist Max Weber. Those who accorded a pioneering role to Luthardt saw Troeltsch and Weber as merely building on him. Troeltsch and Weber were part of a small group of very influential scholars, which included the jurist Rudolf Sohm, the sociologist Friedrich Naumann, and the theologian Wilhelm Hermann. It seems important to note that these Liberals maintained direct contact with one another after 1890, due to their participation in the meet-

38. Ibid., 28–29.
39. Ibid., 194, 196.
40. Ibid., 30–31. Actually, Octavian never took the imperial title, although he is usually credited with a primary role in laying the foundation for the monarchy.
41. Ibid., 19, 97–98.
42. Ibid., 35.
43. Ibid., 111–12, 122–23.
45. See, for example, Frostin, Luther’s Two Kingdoms, 3–4.
nings of the Evangelical-Social Congress. Hence, cross-disciplinary influence was fostered. Sohm, with his great study on church law in 1892, promoted the idea that there could be no talk of a Christian law or a Christian state, for the law and state were “born heathens.” Influenced by this, Naumann abandoned theological studies for sociology.

In his *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch argued that, with his teaching about the two kingdoms, Luther had promoted a dual morality for Christians; that is, one Christian moral law over against a worldly moral code under autonomous reason. According to Troeltsch, in Luther’s teaching, the Decalogue and the natural law were opposed to one another. Troeltsch, who favored bourgeois structures of government over the paternalistic, hierarchical monarchies treasured by Luthardt, though critical of Luther’s dualism, nevertheless promoted the concepts of spheres of life and “innerliness” that he ascribed to Luthardt and the mid-nineteenth century interpreters. He wrote:

> For fallen humanity the Christian ethic is a dualism: on the one hand, it is a pure and radical Christian ethic, a personal ethic which is mainly concerned with the Christian spirit and temper; on the other hand, it is “natural”—governed by reason and therefore only relatively Christian, that is, it is an official morality appointed and permitted by God.

With these and similar words, Troeltsch may be identified as a founding source of the concept of *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, even though he did not actually use the term itself. Troeltsch spoke of the “autonomy of the various zones of value” (*Wertgebiete*). Hence, many scholars believe that he was responsible for promoting the idea that ethical values develop out of unique historical experiences; that is, they are autonomously determined in their own spheres (the economic sphere, for example). Of course, this was most certainly not a view presented by Luther in the sixteenth century.

On the other hand, the concept was certainly nothing new but dated back to the sixteenth century with the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli and the idea of reason of state. We must not let it escape our attention that Troeltsch identi-
fied Luther’s teaching with Machiavellianism. At the same time, he connected Lutheranism with the conservatives of his era. But Troeltsch erred in this claim. Luther was neither a proponent of reason of state nor of Machiavellianism for he did not assert that the state must preserve itself and promote its welfare above all other things. Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms represented a way to avoid the extremes of monastic withdrawal from the world as well as Machiavellian worldly autonomy from God’s rule and law [Eigengesetzlichkeit]. In addition, it has been noted that Eigengesetzlichkeit, or the moral autonomy of institutional life, may also be found in the works of Jean Bodin, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, the Social Darwinists and most classical Liberals. The idea of determining laws in nature, which are independent of Divine control, was an essential ingredient of Darwinism and the physical sciences generally.

Moreover, Troeltsch claimed that

Luther was thinking mainly of external Christendom, of the Christian as a citizen and a member of the state, of the corpus christianum or the Christian Society, within which, however, the only real and spiritual Christianity is the Christianity of the individual and of the spirit.

Hence, Troeltsch did three things. First, he connected Luther’s distinctions between the law and gospel with Luthardt’s and modern ideas about spheres of life and inner private autonomy. Second, he promoted the erroneous idea that with these distinctions Luther was only teaching about the state. Third, he incorrectly connected Luther’s distinctions to the medieval idea of the corpus Christianum. It should also be noted that, like Luthardt, Troeltsch did claim to discern a Lutheran ethic that required the state to operate according to reason and “the Divine Law of Nature.” Here, he wrote that the state was a product of reason, whose province was “the preservation of external discipline

52. Troeltsch, Social Teaching, 2:532–33, 858n247.
55. Hakamies, Eigengesetzlichkeit, 15n9; Duchrow, Umdeutung, 40. It is telling, as Duchrow (Lutheran Churches, 11) notes, that Jean Bodin did not mention Machiavelli but cited Luther and John Calvin as his authorities.
56. Troeltsch, Social Teaching, 2:500.
57. See Huber, Kirche und Öffentlichkeit, 56–57, and Gloege, “Politia divina,” 453, 458. Huber noted this false interpretation. Luther was attempting to facilitate the interaction of people in their various offices and statuses as God’s servants. He was not continuing the hierarchical church state of the past. He also questioned whether the concept of the corpus Christianum still persisted at the time of Luther. Gloege answered this question by noting that Luther replaced the institutional concept of the corpus Christianum with the spiritual concept of the corpus Christi.
and order, and the securing of human well-being." Thus, one should not fail to note that even though Troeltsch had talked of a Lutheran dual morality, he still recognized that reason for Luther issued from Divine Reason. Troeltsch indicated that the state existed to secure human well-being in Luther’s thinking, not to promote the good of a particular race or ideology. Moreover, he did not say that Luther sanctioned an amoral or immoral state, for the state has a divine task of securing human well-being. Still, Troeltsch had opened a door that would be difficult to close.

Troeltsch had much influence on the Anglo-American linguistic world. This was particularly the result of the work of the influential writer Helmut Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr is well known for spreading Troeltsch’s idea that Luther taught a dual moral code and strictly separated a private from a public ethic. While Niebuhr portrayed Luther correctly on some points, his hesitant use of the word “dualism” to describe the distinct ways the Christian related to God and neighbor was misleading. Niebuhr’s very popular book, Christ and Culture, spread the notion and gave credit to Troeltsch for its inspiration. Christ and Culture presented Luther as a dualistic “type” (as opposed to those who set Christ against culture and those who placed him over culture) influencing the modern world. According to Niebuhr, Luther had so “compartmentalized” life that “the Christian right hand should not know what a man’s worldly left hand was doing.” Moreover, Niebuhr certainly painted Luther as reducing Christianity to an attitude with such statements as this:

The second step in Luther’s moral and religious development came, then, when he thoroughly understood that the gospel as law and as promise was not directly concerned with the overt actions of men but with the springs of conduct.

As one might expect, Niebuhr associated such dualism with “conservatism,” which condoned slavery and social stratification. Niebuhr’s significance was that he helped to further open the door to misinterpreting Luther. What he promoted differed little if at all from Troeltsch.

Some writers have held that the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (brother of H. Richard Niebuhr) played an important role in spreading the erroneous ideas

59. Ibid., 2:548.
63. Ibid., 170–76.
64. Ibid., 171.
65. Ibid., 173.
66. Ibid., 188.
of Troeltsch. Reinhold Niebuhr influenced Americans and Europeans with his important book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and through his lectures at Edinburgh in 1939. 67 He spread the idea of Luther as an archconservative with an overwhelming fear of anarchy and a pessimistic view of life who prepared the way for German tyranny. 68

The great sociologist, Max Weber, was certainly equally as important as Troeltsch in transforming the two kingdoms of Luther into the spurious two-kingdoms doctrine. The respected Scandinavian scholar Per Frostin has argued that Weber “shaped Luther research” by introducing the concept of moral autonomy or *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, as he used this concept to define his idea of the “Western process of rationalization.” Especially important in this regard, according to Frostin, was the fact that, for Weber, moral autonomy characterized modern capitalist rationality. 69 In Weber’s interpretation of modernization, Luther may be considered an early proponent of modern rationality. Weber adapted Luther’s two-kingdoms concept and his distinctions between the inner and the outer man to the distinctly modern idea of public political life versus private religious life. 70

Other recent scholars have expressed similar views. Duchrow credited Weber with using Troeltsch’s autonomous laws to separate the idea of an internal conviction or attitude (i.e., Christian) from an ethic of responsibility. 71 The Liberal theologians, then, used this development “to banish faith and love” to the “interior of the private citizen.” 72 They also allowed the legitimizing of the idea that the social, economic, and political struggles of their era fell under autonomous laws intrinsic to the processes of the worldly sphere. Liberal theologians did all of this in the name of defending Christendom from determinism. In a very similar vein, the postwar writer Wolfgang Huber affirmed that the theologians did not invent autonomy—Weber did. Very significantly, he revealed how this whole idea of autonomous (natural) laws or moral autonomy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) must also be credited to Emile Durkheim, the father of modern sociology, with his concept of *normes objectives*. 73

An examination of Weber’s work discloses a firm commitment to the developing ideas of spheres of life and of *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, both in the sense of the moral autonomy attached to each and the autonomous (natural) rules
according to which they operated. Weber spoke not only of inner versus outer spheres, but also of economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual ones. All of these spheres, he noted, had the “inner Eigengesetzlichkeiten of their particular spheres.” The concept in both senses is caught in a passage of Weber in which he compared world religions.

That suggestion of mystical religiosity, which is inherent to Luther’s personal Christianity, drew half consequences here. For the real mystical or pneumatic, religious charismatic search for salvation of the religious virtuosos was naturally everywhere apolitical or anti-political. It [the search for salvation] has acknowledged the autonomy [Selbstständigkeit] of the earthly order, indeed eagerly, but only in order to lock out consequently its radical diabolical character or at least, to assume that absolute standpoint of indifference, whose expression was the principle: “Give to the Kaiser what is the Kaiser’s” (for: what does this have to do with salvation?).

One should carefully note that, in this passage, Weber is, like Luthardt before him, talking about social ethics. However, his approach to social ethics was very different from Luthardt’s, for as an early twentieth-century sociologist, Weber sought to validate hypothesized types or classifications of religious stances, which was alien to the mid-nineteenth-century theologian.

While in this particular passage Weber used the less ambiguous German word, Selbstständigkeit, a couple of pages later, still talking about his types of religious stances, he used the term Eigengesetzlichkeit. In this latter case, he connected it with the idea that the religious principle of brotherhood was bound or restricted by the autonomous natural or inherent laws at work in the world. Weber insisted that the result was tension between two distinct ethics. Huber cited a similar statement from another place in Weber’s works:

> As economic and rational political actions follow laws of their own, so every other rational action within the world remains inescapably bound to worldly conditions. These conditions are remote from brotherliness and must serve as a means or as ends of rational action. Hence, all rational action somehow comes to stand in tension with the ethic of brotherliness.77

75. Ibid., 550.
76. Ibid. “Economic and political rational action follows its inherent laws (Eigengesetzlichkeit), so each rational action inside the world remains inescapably bound to the anti-brotherhood conditions of the world, which its means and goals must be” (552).
Interpretations of Luther’s Idea of the Two Kingdoms during the Last Two Centuries

In this passage we find the idea of moral and inherent (natural) autonomy, with a strong statement of determinism inherent to the sphere. Hence, we can see that Weber’s well-known thesis that a Protestant ethic evolved into a worldly ascetic and rational capitalist spirit represented the application of the concept of an independent ethics inherent to the economic sphere. As Pawlus recently noted, there is something “almost laughable” in Weber’s attempt to claim a Lutheran origin for the modern Adam Smithian ethic based on self-interest. The latter was “an almost grotesque antithesis” to Luther’s ethic based on serving God and neighbor.  

National Socialist Perversions and the Responses

Whatever alterations of Luther’s original teaching about the two kingdoms were made up to the time of the First World War, the widespread attacks on the idea and on Lutheranism itself for holding it began in the 1930s. The rise of National Socialism in Germany provided the context for the ultimate application of the concept of the double autonomy of the worldly spheres of life. The perverted use of it by the Nazis and their collaborating German Christians caused the great questioning of the value of Luther’s teaching about the two kingdoms by Lutherans themselves, and it caused the attack by others on not just this concept, but on Lutheranism in general. There should be little doubt about this fact. Whether they trace the roots of the amoral or anti-moral autonomous spheres back to Troeltsch and Weber, or Luthardt and the Erlangen Lutherans, the focal point of their criticism is the Nazi use of the teaching.

The historian Duchrow, who attempted to explain how the original idea developed into the perverted, modern two-kingdoms doctrine, stated it best. “It is indicative,” he wrote, “that the real crisis in the tradition then described by the phrase ‘doctrine of the two kingdoms,’ occurred in connection with the accommodation of neo-Lutheranism to Facism.” It was under the National Socialists that the influences of German-Romantic ideas of "völkischen and racist distinctions" as "timeless" natural orders in the worldly sphere were adapted to the teaching. It was the National Socialists and their supporters who made idols of the state, war, nation, and race. This was why Duchrow had to say that the real crisis came with the accommodation to fascism. Even Jürgen Moltmann, who preferred to abandon the two-kingdoms idea altogether, noted that, “The negative consequences of this misuse of the two-kingdoms doctrine...”

78. Pawlus, Luthers Berufs- und Wirtschaftsethik, 64–65, 266. Pawlus suggested that Schuld was the key word for Luther’s social ethic, not self-interest.