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Eschatology and Ethics: Luther and the Radical Reformers

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It has been a common prejudice in late modernity to assume that Christian doctrines of eschatology, resurrection, and immortality are world-denying and escapist, rooted in the desire for otherworldly consolation or, even worse, divine vengeance upon non-Christian enemies. That is, Christian eschatology, especially in its apocalyptic forms, is questionable not only on scientific grounds but on moral and indeed theological grounds. Two prominent nineteenth century philosophers bear powerful and influential witness to this view – Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Feuerbach. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche identified beliefs in God and immortality as the creations of human beings who could not tolerate a world in which there is suffering, who out of weakness invented a fictitious invisible reality corresponding to their desires for peace, comfort, and the elimination of suffering (attributed to “evil” causes).¹ The “*impertinent*” doctrine of personal immortality, says Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*,² is the most egregious form of egoistic wish-fulfilment in Christianity. It is symptomatic of the anti-natural “hatred of reality” in a theology that lacks contact with reality and caters to personal vanity and *ressentiment* at the same time.

Ludwig Feuerbach, though more subtle than Nietzsche in his treatment of theology, was no less critical of religious doctrines that are believed uncritically in order to serve the human need for consolation. Feuerbach’s primary example of doctrine in the service of egocentric anthropology is the belief in immortality held by Christians, which he believes is rooted “in the undoubting certainty that their personal, self-

flattering wishes will be fulfilled.”³ Belief in personal immortality thus represents an infinite cosmic egoism even though it pretends to bow down before God in humble self-surrender. It is therefore not only a religious but a moral delusion, and it alienates human beings from nature. The more Christians invest in the other world, the less value is given to life in this world, and Feuerbach suggests that doctrines of immortality and heavenly bliss are closely connected to the ascetic, monastic disparagement of sex.⁴ We do not have the space to consider in detail the very similar judgments concerning Christian eschatology offered by Nietzsche and Feuerbach. I suggest, however, that these interpretations have come to represent the “common sense” of late-modern, educated westerners for whom such beliefs have become not only an intellectual but a moral embarrassment. Interestingly, the belief in immortality which was traditionally so closely allied with moral judgment (not only for Christians and Jews but also the Platonic tradition of moral theory), has now become suspect precisely on moral grounds.⁵

In this essay I want to examine Luther’s understanding of the connections between ethics and eschatology in relation to certain approaches identified with the “radical Reformation,” with a view to testing the claims of Nietzsche and Feuerbach. Are these forms of Christian eschatology world-denying and escapist, a form of vengeance upon enemies, an egoistic wish-fulfilment rooted in an alienated and self-inclosed disparagement of bodily nature? Perhaps the best way to get at Luther’s understanding of eschatology and ethics is to pay attention to his “apocalyptic” religious vision. Apocalyptic is, of course, a term with many meanings. It comes from the Greek word that means “revelation” or “unveiling” or “disclosure” and forms part of the title of the famous final book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse of John – a text often associated with the aforementioned prejudices about Christian eschatology, and one that Luther himself found ambiguous. In his first preface to the Book of Revelation in his *Deutsche Bibel* of 1522, he said frankly, “*meyn geyst kan sich ynn das buch nicht schicken*” (or, in current informal speech, “my spirit cannot get into this book”).⁶ And yet that same edition of Luther’s Bible carried the notorious woodcuts by Lucas Cranach depicting the papacy as the Antichrist and the Whore of Babylon in John’s Apocalypse.⁷ Of course, Luther’s identification of the Roman papacy with the Antichrist was neither unique nor innovative. As Bernard McGinn shows, Luther was here following an earlier medieval tradition of Antichrist interpretation that identified the Antichrist’s evil as hypocrisy and

corruption in the church, and especially the papacy.⁸ That is to say, despite Luther's initial reservations about the genre of Christian apocalyptic (a judgment he revised in his 1530 preface to the Book of Revelation), and despite his rejection of the chiliastic prophets such as Thomas Müntzer (as we shall see), Luther's vision of reality was most certainly apocalyptic in outlook. This is nicely captured in Heiko Oberman's title to his fine study: *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*.⁹

How is it that the form of rule depicted in John's Apocalypse as the evil parody of Christ's authority in the kingdom of God, the Antichrist, is identified in Luther's writings with the Roman papacy? We get our first clues in that famous early polemical address, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (1520). Here Luther calls for the reform of the "Christian estate" by tearing down each of three walls of the Romanists, the first of which is the unwarranted papal arrogation of secular power, a power that is also used to buttress unwarranted religious authority (the second wall is that the pope alone can properly interpret Scripture, the third that the pope alone can summon and sanction a council). Thus have the Romanists effectively hedged the church (and Christendom) against the reforming work of the Holy Spirit. This is the devil's work, says Luther – a religious authority that appeals to the sword and the dazzling corruptions of economic splendour in order to establish and defend a false gospel. Like the Antichrist in the Revelation of John, this is a form of authority that claims spiritual power but is really only interested in the temporal control of wealth and empire through violence and external display:

The pope is not a vicar of Christ in heaven, but only of Christ as he walked the earth. Christ in heaven, in the form of a ruler, needs no vicar, but sits on his throne and sees everything, does everything, knows everything, and has all power. But Christ needs a vicar in the form of a servant, the form in which he went about on earth, working, preaching, suffering, and dying. Now the Romanists turn all that upside down. They take the heavenly and kingly form from Christ and give it to the pope, and leave the form of the servant to perish completely. He might almost be the Counter-Christ, whom the Scriptures call Antichrist, for all his nature, work, and pretensions run counter to Christ and only blot out Christ's nature and destroy his work.¹⁰

Such a confusion of spiritual and temporal authority, the kingdom of God and mere earthly kingdoms, the form of God and the form of the servant, are precisely characteristic of the perverse logic of the Antichrist,

in Luther's view. As he had put it earlier in the "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518, the "theology of glory" calls the bad good and the good bad (thesis 21), for it lacks insight into the invisible things of God. Only a "theology of the cross" founded, one might say, upon the divine authority of the slain Lamb will be able to see and thus bear witness to the truth about God in the world. It will see God's presence in the world "by beholding the sufferings and the cross" (thesis 20), not in ostentatious displays of human works (thesis 22). Therefore, while a puffed-up theology of glory presumptuously abuses the highest gifts of God to the world in order to aggrandize itself, a humble theology of the cross bears witness to the invisible God through a penitent faith active in the worldly form of a servant.¹¹

Ethics thus entails an understanding of this eschatological vision, this apocalyptic unveiling of the true nature of worldly and spiritual reality *coram Deo*. Luther's ethics is essentially rooted in a penitential vision, even as the Book of Revelation is written as a letter to the churches calling them to awaken, to remember what they have received from God, and to repent. This is truly a matter of life and death – not in some other world, a heavenly future of the sort depicted by Feuerbach as a "mausoleum" in which the Christian enshrines his own beloved soul.¹² It is a life and death struggle lived out in the common social and bodily world in which Christians and non-Christians dwell. The struggle between God and the devil, Christ and the Antichrist, is not for Luther some fictitious consoling abstraction. Quite the contrary, it is the battle of the incarnate Lord to restore a corrupted, death-destined creation to the life-giving rule of the kingdom of God. In order to participate discerningly in this apocalyptic conflict – that is, in a manner that bears faithful witness to God's hidden but very real rule – it was necessary to sort out the confusion between the kingdoms represented in the logic of the Antichrist, largely with reference to Augustine's model of the two cities (itself taken from the Book of Revelation¹³).

Like Augustine, Luther divided human beings ("all the children of Adam"¹⁴) into two kingdoms – the kingdom of God (Augustine's *civitas Dei*) and the kingdom of the world (Augustine's *civitas terrena*). Christ's reign pertains to the first kingdom and is guided by the Word and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, not the secular sword or law. Were all the world composed of "true Christians, that is, true believers," Luther says, "no prince, king, lord, sword, or law would be needed." However,

the “unrighteous” need the law and external rule to instruct, constrain, and compel them to do what is good. The worldly kingdom therefore has need of an established political order backed by the power of the sword. As does Augustine, Luther believes this kingdom of the world will pass away to be replaced in the end by the kingdom of God. In the meantime, however, the external order of secular law and sword are required to avert chaos.

There should, therefore, be a clear distinction between the external peace and order of worldly politics and the perfect peace of Christ’s spiritual rule taught and represented by the church. However, and here too Luther resembles Augustine, this does not mean that Luther’s theory of secular politics (if one may indeed call it a “theory”¹⁵) is “modern.” Luther certainly opposed any attempt by the church to seek political domination or temporal power, as in the case of the papal Antichrist. And yet the following comment by Heiko Oberman is potentially misleading: “For us Luther is ‘modern’ insofar as he promoted an ecumenical pluralism and warned against resolving spiritual questions by government pressure, let alone by armed force.”¹⁶ Luther did not consider the ordering of the earthly kingdom to imply a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil society. After all, it is God, says Luther, who has ordained two governments (*Regimente*) that order life in the world – the church, which presides over the spiritual, inner life of Christians (the order of redemption), and the secular political order which presides over the material, outer realm (the orders of creation). The kingdom of Christ, therefore, which has no place for sword and law, rules in the hearts of true Christians. No human political government can do so, for it cannot see into the human heart; it sees only the outer and establishes a social order to regulate external matters of justice. Christians in their personal relations will follow the example of Christ in the non-resistant practice of loving service, adhering literally to the words of the Sermon on the Mount in turning the other cheek and not resisting evil (Matthew 5:39). Luther avers, “a Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every evil and injustice, not avenge himself nor bring suit in court, and in nothing make use of secular power and law for himself. For others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection and help...”¹⁷ That is, in the sphere of political society that governs the external relations of people and states to one another, it is necessary to apply a different standard. This standard, however, is also related to the rule of God – it is not religiously neutral. When a governing authority declares a war, for example, certain criteria for a

just war must be met. If they are, then “it is a Christian act and an act of love confidently to kill, rob, and pillage the enemy, and to do everything that can injure him until one has conquered him according to the methods of war.”¹⁸

In combining Augustine’s doctrine of the two kingdoms (*Reiche*) or cities with this added distinction between two governments (*Regimente*), some will say that Augustine has not clarified Christian social ethics but further confused them. It is not my purpose here to argue this point, for to do so properly would be a large undertaking.¹⁹ Perhaps it is more accurate to say that for Luther there is no alleviation of the eschatological tension between the “already” of God’s rule in the believer’s heart and the “not yet” of Christ’s rule in historical society. It is precisely when this tension is collapsed – either through the temporal political aspirations of the church (the Romanists) or through the attempt to set up an external order of spiritual perfection (the Anabaptists) – that Luther believes devilish confusion will arise, in both forms of government. Luther, furthermore, rejects the Augustinian division of morality into two classes of Christians – the religious (who adhere to the eschatological counsels of perfection found in the Sermon on the Mount, and thus seek to escape the vocational tensions of worldly existence) and the lay (who take up the burdens of secular vocation, but cannot be guided by Gospel ethics):

For perfection and imperfection consist not in works and do not establish a distinct external order among Christians; but they exist in the heart, in faith and love, so that they who believe and love the most are the perfect ones, whether outwardly they be male or female, prince or peasant, monk or layman. For love and faith produce no sects or outward differences.²⁰

There is no escape therefore from the tension of the struggle between God and the devil which rages both in the church and in society, and indeed in the conscience of every human being who of necessity lives in both governments. The difficult task of moral discernment cannot be evaded either through false double standards or the attempted escape from worldly responsibility. The eschatological vision of the Sermon on the Mount is equally binding upon all Christians, but Christians may not retreat from their worldly responsibilities and duties so as to follow Jesus’ commands literally. Rather there must be a frank recognition that human relationships differ and therefore the external duties (though not the inner dispositions) of love differ as well. To confuse these is to per-

vert the truth of the relations in which one stands. To treat one's children and family according to a literal application of the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount would bring murder and chaos no less than were one to attempt to run a state that way.

On this point, of course, Luther's more radically apocalyptic fellow reformers begged to differ. And, as Gerhard Ebeling points out, "Luther did not work out his real doctrine of the two kingdoms in direct confrontation with medieval Catholic social doctrine, but only when he was challenged by the radicalism of the enthusiastic sects"²¹ – both pacifist and militant. If the Romanists failed to understand the difference between the eschatological kingdom of God (which appears on the earth in the form of a suffering servant) and temporal power, substituting the latter for the former, the apocalyptic radicals were too eager to realize the former in an external manner. Of course, the radicals, for their part, considered Luther's eschatological understanding of God's redemptive intention for the world expressed in the rule of Christ to be too detached from his conception for political life. Pannenberg puts this well when he suggests that for Luther "political order does not belong to human destiny as such, to that which will find its fulfilment in the future Kingdom of God. Instead, that order is only an emergency measure which God has provided against sin, a divine interim that will disappear in the eschatological future, and of which the Christian in himself has now no need."²²

To sort out the complexities of Luther's eschatological view of the two kingdoms in relation to the radical reformers is no less impossible here than to attempt to do so in relation to Augustine's two cities. I wish here simply to point out some of the implications for ethics of these differing sixteenth century forms of apocalyptic vision. The apocalyptic visions of the radical reformers – both non-violent and violent forms – understood the rule of Christ and the kingdom of God in the world even now through the church in more overtly political terms. Some of the same tensions embedded in Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms reappear in remarkably different normative form in the writings of Thomas Müntzer, especially his "Sermon before the Princes"²³ (1524, just prior to the armed peasant revolt he helped organize), and the Anabaptists, as expressed in "The Schleithem Confession"²⁴ of 1527.

Müntzer's "Sermon" was a revolutionary spiritualist rebuttal to Luther's understanding of the secular authority of princes, rejecting the sharp distinction between the outer realm ruled by law and sword, and the

inner spiritual realm ruled by Christ and the Word. Luther applied a strict limiting principle on the authority of each – the Gospel of Christ rules only in the inner life and may not be imposed externally by force, and the secular ruler governs only in external, not spiritual, matters (though the Christian secular ruler's inner dispositions, of course, should be ordered no less than the priest or Christian housewife by Christ's form of the servant). Müntzer considered this division to be heretical, a public betrayal of "pure Christianity"²⁵ which is founded not only upon the Word of God in Christ, but upon the continuing revelation of the Inner Word of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Müntzer says of the learned Lutheran divines, "without any experience of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the overcomer of the fear of God, they fail to separate (in their disdain for divine wisdom) the good from the bad which is camouflaged under the appearance of good."²⁷ Consequently Luther and his followers are themselves confused, calling the good bad and the bad good due to a lack of spiritual experience.²⁸

Müntzer's sermon is "an exposition of the second chapter of Daniel"²⁹ and Daniel is the apocalyptic exemplar of the prophetic experience of the Inner Word of the divine Spirit. The Book of Daniel is a visionary depiction of the eschatological transformation of the world, and its meaning is revealed, claims Müntzer, to the elect of God such as himself – a meaning in the form of "a decisive, inevitable, imminent reformation [accompanied] by great anguish, and it must be carried out to completion."³⁰ The final kingdom in Daniel's vision is the present, the apostate Christendom of Romanists and Lutherans, and Müntzer appeals to the princes to take on the fight of God against the Antichrist. At this point the apocalyptic spiritualist's message takes a somewhat surprising outer turn. Though he appeals to the Book of Revelation, he does not understand its sword to be the Word of Christ, but a literal physical weapon. The inner spiritual order of pure Christianity must be externally established, according to Müntzer's interpretation:

Now if you want to be true governors, you must begin government at the roots, and, as Christ commanded, drive his enemies from the elect. For you are the means to this end. Beloved, don't give us any old jokes about how the power of God should do it without your application of the sword. Otherwise it may rust away for you in its scabbard!...If you do away with the mask of the world, you will soon recognise it with a righteous judgment (John 7:24). Perform a righteous judgment at God's command!...For the godless person has no right to live when he is in the way of the pious.³¹

The only way to give visible expression to divine rule is to eliminate the evil opposition to it in the world (those who reduce politics to mere civil unity) and thus defeat the devil. Müntzer, despite his spiritualist hermeneutic, offers a highly literal interpretation of apocalyptic symbolism. His end was a literal enactment of Jesus' words, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." After the defeat of the Peasant revolt of 1525, Müntzer was arrested and executed. He is not considered a martyr of the radical Reformation, but he did become a martyr for the Communist movement of the past century.³²

In stark contrast to this apocalyptic attempt to establish politically the inner rule of God via the sword of Christian princes was the Anabaptist attempt to establish the Reformation through the visible community of believers. The Anabaptists also broke with Luther and the "mainstream" reformers over the question of how to interpret in worldly ethics the eschatological conflict between the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom of the devil. However, they clearly rejected Müntzer's advocacy of violence, accepting Luther's view that the kingdom of God cannot be externally established via the sword or by the authority of secular princes. Unlike Luther, however, they did not interpret the teachings and example of Christ in purely spiritual terms. The apocalyptic tension between the reign of Christ in the community of believers and the reign of human power via the sword (allied with the Antichrist) is a visible and socio-political, not merely an invisible and spiritual struggle. The form of the suffering servant is addressed not only to the personal and dispositional aspects of Christian existence; it pertains equally to social and political life in the world. "The Schleitheim Confession" was drafted at a meeting of Anabaptist leaders in 1527 in order to establish a unifying statement on the Christian way of life, in the face of serious threats to the continued existence of the rather scattered and persecuted movement.

The cover letter of the Confession emphasizes that the "obedient children of God" should stand united (*vereinigt*, a key word in the document), separated from the world characterised by the works of darkness by those who follow the devil, and follow Christ in the way of peace.³³ In contrast to Luther's two kingdoms' doctrine, in which the "Christian-in-relation" lives in the secular realm according to the laws of external peace backed by the sword and the "Christian-qua-Christian" lives according to the self-denying rule of the Gospel, the Anabaptists viewed conversion as the transference of allegiance from the worldly kingdom of darkness

and its sinful means to the kingdom of Christ. The baptism of repentance (article I) entails a complete transformation of life through following Jesus as a literal example. In effect this requires the establishment of a new social and political order, the voluntary community of believers committed to the *Nachfolge Christi*. The language of union and separation therefore is explicitly tied to the sharp distinction between the two kingdoms: the kingdom of God ordered by the “perfection of Christ” and a literal following of Christ’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (the “rule of Christ”), and the kingdom of the devil ordered by idolatry, abomination, and “the diabolical weapons of violence – such as sword, armor, and the like, and all of their use to protect friends or against enemies.”³⁴ Union with Christ requires separation from the world (those not *vereinigt* with God in Christ) in a community that replaces the secular courts and the sword with the practice of binding and loosing (the ban) and non-violent resistance to evil through spiritual weapons. Article VI of the Schleithem Confession most clearly displays the literal interpretation of the rule of Christ:

VI. The sword is an ordering outside the perfection of Christ....But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more....Lastly...it does not befit a Christian to be a magistrate: the rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the Spirit. Their houses and dwellings remain in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven. Their citizenship is in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven. The weapons of their battle and warfare are carnal and only against the flesh, but the weapons of the Christian are spiritual, against the fornication of the devil....In sum: as Christ our Head is minded, so also must be minded the members of the body of Christ through Him, so that there be no division in the body, through which it would be destroyed. Since then Christ is as is written of Him, so must His members also be the same, so that His body may remain whole and unified for its own advancement and upbuilding.³⁵

The teaching and example of Christ in these matters is the authority in all things – inner and outer, personal and political – and the community that follows Christ must do so in complete obedience.

Clearly, then, the Anabaptists would reject the apocalyptic politics of Müntzer no less than the two kingdoms ethic of Luther. Müntzer’s spiritualized interpretation of Christ’s teaching is a betrayal of its incar-

nate authority for Christian faith and life. In this sense Müntzer no less than Luther has spiritualized away the apocalyptic form of the servant embodied in Christ, replacing it in temporal matters with the third temptation of the devil, the domineering power of the sword. On the other hand (and here the Anabaptists would agree with Luther), Müntzer has literally misread the apocalyptic language of divine judgment and divine rule in a grossly externalized way as vengeance upon the enemies of “the elect.” While the Anabaptists took literally the servant form of Christ, they interpreted the apocalyptic language of judgment, sword, and power in Daniel and Revelation as referring to divine, not human action, and therefore to be interpreted spiritually, not externally.³⁶ The Lamb of Revelation who conquers the world remains the slain Lamb and rules by the sword of the Word dangling from the mouth, to which the church is called to bear witness – even as martyrdom – in the world.

The Schleithem Confession was drafted largely by the pen of Michael Sattler, a former Benedictine who became an important Anabaptist leader. Immediately upon his return from the Schleithem conference, Sattler was arrested, along with his wife and several other fellow Anabaptists, interrogated, and tortured. Various accounts of his subsequent “Trial and Martyrdom” were preserved by the Anabaptist community (the only South German martyrdom story taken into the Dutch Mennonite martyrologies and Hutterian *Chronicles*).³⁷ When given the opportunity to hire a lawyer to defend him, Sattler declined saying this was not an issue for legal process but a matter of faith: “I have not been sent to defend the Word of God in court. We are sent to testify thereto.”³⁸ Among the charges for which Sattler was executed were his rejection of infant baptism, refusing to swear to the government, refusing to wage war against the Turks, the “greatest enemy of our holy faith,” and marrying a wife. These last two charges are of particular interest for this essay. In his reply to the charge of pacifism, Sattler replied:

If the Turk comes, he should not be resisted, for it stands written: thou shalt not kill. We should not defend ourselves against the Turks or our other persecutors, but with fervent prayer should implore God that He might be our defense and our resistance. As to me saying that if waging war were proper I would rather take the field against the so-called Christians who persecute, take captive, and kill true Christians, than against the Turks, this was for the following reason: the Turk is a genuine Turk and knows nothing of the Christian faith. He is a Turk according to the flesh. But you claim to be Christians, boast of Christ, and still

persecute the faithful witnesses of Christ. Thus you are Turks according to the Spirit.³⁹

With regard to his abandonment of the Benedictine order and marrying a wife, Sattler appealed to an eschatological text (I Timothy 4:3): "In the last days it shall come to pass that they will forbid marriage and food, which God has created that they might be enjoyed with thanksgiving."⁴⁰ Here, it should be noted, an eschatological appeal is made precisely contrary to Feuerbach's portrayal of ascetic monasticism and the "anti-natural" roots of Christian eschatology. On this last point the Anabaptists agreed with Luther's high view of marriage and of the good material gifts of creation (despite Luther's labelling of the Anabaptists as "the new monks"⁴¹). The commands of Christ concerning divorce, for example, are in no way a disparagement of natural sexuality. To the contrary, they imbue it with God-given spiritual significance.⁴² As Oberman points out, Luther uses language of God and the devil so often in his discussion of marriage because of his apocalyptic vision of the crucial connection of the Word of God with corporeality. A purely other-worldly conception of spirituality thus plays into the hands of the disincarnate devil, who indeed hates God's life-giving power in all its healthy forms.⁴³

It would seem clear, upon examination, that some of the prejudicial assumptions concerning Christian eschatology in the modern world do not apply to the views of Luther and the radical Reformation. There is nothing ethereal, egoistic, or escapist in their use of apocalyptic language to engage in moral discernment and action in the social and political context of their time. Yet we have also seen that questions of interpretation and moral discernment are not straightforward. Unlike Nietzsche and Feuerbach, the Reformers we have considered did not view the eschatological symbols themselves as mere human inventions, but as the revelation of God's active presence in the world – action in which Christians are invited to participate in the process of ethical discernment. Yet this does not in itself settle the question of how exactly the spiritual and material, church and world, the divine (and the demonic) and the human, are related. The use that is made of apocalyptic language can take many different theological, ethical, and political forms. Furthermore, there is no position that can escape the difficult eschatological tensions that Luther recognised in the ethical demands of Christian existence. To label one as more or less worldly or sectarian or faithful, however, does not get us very far without specifying more clearly the

criteria by which one is making such judgments. If this essay has contributed any insight into how these fascinating examples of Christian ethics have done so in relation to apocalyptic eschatology, then its modest purpose is served.

Notes

- ¹ See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), Essay I, 14f. In I, 16 he calls the Apocalypse of John (the Book of Revelation) "the most wanton of all literary outbursts that vengeance has on its conscience," a book motivated by extreme *ressentiment* against the powerful Roman empire.
- ² Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, sections 41 & 43, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. & trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1968).
- ³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 136.
- ⁴ Feuerbach's opening words in his chapter on "The Christian Heaven, or Personal Immortality," are: "The unwedded and ascetic life is the direct way to the heavenly, immortal life, for heaven is nothing else than life liberated from the conditions of the species, supernatural, sexless, absolutely subjective life. The belief in personal immortality has at its foundation the belief that difference of sex is only an external adjunct of individuality, that in himself the individual is a sexless, independently complete, absolute being." *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁵ This is true not only for non-Christians; it is also increasingly common in Christian theology. James Gustafson, for example, has recently developed a theological ethics "from a theocentric perspective" in which God, not human being, is the measure of all things. For Gustafson this theocentrism warrants a strong theological and moral critique of belief in immortality or eternal life, precisely because he concurs with thinkers such as Nietzsche and Feuerbach that such doctrines are rooted in the inordinate human desire for self-fulfillment and egoistic consolation. Theocentric Christian theology is therefore prepared to jettison traditional eschatology not only on scientific grounds but on theological and moral grounds. See Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, volume 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- ⁶ Quoted in Hans-Ulrich Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1982) 253. See the discussion by Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford University Press, 1988) 36-53.

- ⁷ For a discussion of these illustrations see Peter Martin, *Martin Luther und die Bilder zur Apokalypse* (Hamburg, 1983).
- ⁸ See Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), chapters 7 & 8.
- ⁹ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- ¹⁰ "To the Christian Nobility," *Luther's Works*, volume 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 165.
- ¹¹ See Luther's appeal to Philippians 2:1-4 in "The Freedom of a Christian" (also published in 1520), in *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961) 74-75. Luther interprets the words of Paul concerning the "form of God" and "form of a servant" and "human form" not as referring to Christ's human and divine natures, but as a statement of the form God takes in the world, the exercise of divine power as service. For Luther this has implications for ethics.
- ¹² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 179.
- ¹³ For a good discussion of the roots of Augustine's eschatological "two cities" doctrine in Tyconius' *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, see Paula Fredriksen, "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. Emmerson & B. McGinn (Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter 2.
- ¹⁴ Luther, "Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed," in *Martin Luther*, ed. J. Dillenberger, 368.
- ¹⁵ David Steinmetz makes the following helpful observation: "A historian reading Luther's discussion of the two kingdoms for the first time might be tempted to remark that it all sounds more like pastoral advice than like political philosophy. And, of course, pastoral advice is exactly what it is. By linking the two kingdoms tightly together, Luther is advising Christians on the nature and character of Christian existence. Only incidentally is he interested in advising statesmen on the discharge of their public office." Steinmetz, "Luther and the Two Kingdoms," in *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 124.
- ¹⁶ Obermann, *Luther*, 49. Here it is relevant to point out a similar problem in the excellent study of Augustine's eschatological politics by Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1970). Markus says, "Christian hope, just because it is eschatological, resists the investing of immediate projects, policies and even social ideals, with any absolute character....Augustine's attack on the 'sacral' conception of the Empire liberated the Roman state,

and by implication, all politics, from the direct hegemony of the sacred. Society became intrinsically 'secular' in the sense that it is not as such committed to any particular ultimate loyalty....His 'secularisation' of the realm of politics implies a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil community" (173). For an excellent critique of Markus on this point, see Oliver O'Donovan, "Augustine's *City of God* XIX and Western Political Thought," *Dionysius* II (1987) 89-110.

¹⁷ Luther, "Secular Authority," 379.

¹⁸ Luther, "Secular Authority," 398. In his commentary, "The Sermon on the Mount," (5:38-42) Luther elaborates the proper distinctions between the two kingdoms, secular and spiritual, kingdom of Christ and kingdom of the world. On a personal level, the Christian serves neighbour and enemy in a completely non-resistant love, but outwardly as "Christian-in-relation" in the secular sphere "it would be a mistake to teach: 'Turn the other cheek, and throw your cloak away with your coat.'" *Luther's Works*, volume 21, 109-110.

¹⁹ For helpful discussions of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms, I recommend Ebeling, *Luther*, chapters 11 & 12; Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. R. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), chapter 4; Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, volume 1, ed. W. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), chapter 18; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Ethics*, trans. K. Crim (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), chapter 6. Thielicke helpfully identifies three related dangers in Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms: 1) The danger of the bifurcation of morality into personal (or private) versus official (or public) ethics – a dualism attributed to Luther by Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. O. Wyon (University of Chicago Press, 1931) 506-511. This dualism can lead to an ethic of political quietism, precisely when sight is lost of the eschatological tension in Luther's vision. 2) The danger of secularization, in which religion is separated from public life, allowing the latter to become autonomous and overly dichotomizing the orders of creation (social and public) and redemption (individual and private). 3) The danger of harmonization, in which the New Testament language of two "aeons" and the eschatological dynamism of the coming kingdom of God is replaced by a static or timeless harmony of God's twofold rule in the temporal and spiritual orders. Clearly for Thielicke (and also for Ebeling and Pannenberg), there is a need to maintain the eschatological dynamism underlying Luther's view, which Luther himself did not always emphasize – perhaps in reaction to apocalypticism of the radical reformers.

²⁰ Luther, "Secular Authority," 368.

²¹ Ebeling, *Luther*, 181.

- ²² Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 126. Pannenberg attributes this (in his view, too limited and negative) view of politics to the influence of Augustine upon Luther. While Luther's view offered a corrective against empire politics and the excesses of "fanatical enthusiasm," Pannenberg laments, "nowhere in Luther can we find any inspiration to transform political conditions by the powerful vision of the eschatological Lordship of God which already illumines the present world. This inspiration made its breakthrough elsewhere, in the so-called left wing of the seventeenth century" (130-131).
- ²³ Thomas Müntzer, "Sermon before the Princes," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. G. Williams (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 49-70.
- ²⁴ *The Schleithem Confession*, trans. J. Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973).
- ²⁵ Müntzer, "Sermon," 50.
- ²⁶ Müntzer, "Sermon," 54, 56f.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ²⁸ Müntzer (*ibid.*, 58) states, "He [who has not the Spirit] does not know how to say anything deeply about God, even if he had eaten through a hundred Bibles!" Of course, Luther for his part said he wouldn't trust Müntzer even if he swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all.
- ²⁹ The full title of Müntzer's sermon is "Exposition of the Second Chapter of Daniel the Prophet Preached at the Castle of Allstedt before the Active and Amiable Dukes and Administrators of Saxony by Thomas Müntzer, Minister of the Word of God." The sermon was delivered in the presence of Duke John, brother of Frederick the Wise who was the protector of Luther, and in it he was calling for the princes to launch a militant political counterreformation against Luther. For good accounts of Müntzer and his movement, see Eric W. Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, A Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth-century Religious Revolutionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- ³⁰ Müntzer, "Sermon," 62.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ³² I have in my possession a fünf Mark bill of the Staatsbank of the now defunct DDR, on which is displayed the face of Thomas Müntzer.
- ³³ *Schleithem Confession*, 8-9.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16. Article VII on the oath also takes literally Christ's prohibition of swearing in the Sermon on the Mount, as expressing the "perfection of the

law" (that is, the perfection of the new law of Christ). The oath is outside the perfect ordering of Christ, who rejected it as a usurpation of God's authority and implying a double standard of truth.

³⁶ I am here making some rather large and perhaps unwarranted generalizations. The Anabaptist movement did not, of course, have only one interpretation of what I am here calling "apocalyptic." For a good discussion of the range, see Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992).

³⁷ See *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. & ed. John H. Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), chapter IV.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 72-73

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ See, for example, Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount," 257-259.

⁴² As Luther's interesting treatise on "The Estate of Marriage" indicates, this goes not only for the experience of sexual desire (which could be corrupted into an egoistic lust, at the root of so much fornication, also among the so-called "religious") but precisely in its creative, shared, and faithful expression in marriage and family. This extends to such humble tasks as rocking babies and changing their dirty diapers. See "The Estate of Marriage," *Luther's Works*, volume 45, 17-49. In case there is any doubt here about "roles," Luther adds: "Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool – though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith – my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling.... Those who sneer at him and see only the task but not the faith are ridiculing God with all his creatures, as the biggest fool on earth. Indeed, they are only ridiculing themselves; with all their cleverness they are nothing but devil's fools." *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴³ See Oberman, *Luther*, chapter X.