

# The totalitarian state then and now

## A theological analysis

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### Abstract

To understand and criticize the state with regard to totalitarianism and religious freedom, one must have a standard by which to evaluate the current situation. The Lutheran Reformation, by providing a theological rationale for the limits of the state in relation to religion and the family, gives us a tool for such an evaluation. By showing how this theological understanding of the state was used in the resistance to Nazism in Germany and Norway, the article argues that the same theology is useful today in critiquing the totalitarian features of the modern welfare state, such as in Finland.

### Keywords

Totalitarian state, welfare state, religious freedom, three estates, Luther on the state, Bethel Confession, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hermann Sasse, Eivind Berggrav, Päivi Räsänen.

### 1. Introduction

To evaluate and assess the contemporary situation in a particular country, one must have an idea of what a state essentially is and what the ideal state looks like. Of all the analyses that can be made of a state – e.g., historical, political, philosophical – from a Christian perspective, theological analysis is the most fundamental. In this article, I analyze the issue of totalitarian state and religious freedom from a biblical and confessional understanding of what a state is. A theological understanding of the state and its legitimate tasks enables totalitarian tendencies to become apparent.

My focus is not on situations where totalitarianism is obvious, as in Communist and Islamic states, but where totalitarian traits can emerge more unexpected-

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edly. From a theological perspective, as we will see, democracy can be totalitarian while forms of autocracy do not necessarily have to be.<sup>2</sup>

The heading “The Totalitarian State *then*” refers to the totalitarian states that emerged in the 20th century in Europe. I will examine National Socialism in Germany, which forced Christians to think through issues concerning the proper limits of state intervention. Applying this reflection should help us to address contemporary situations. In the cases we will look at, from Germany and Norway, the theologians were inspired not only directly by Scripture but also by the theological heritage of the Reformation.

I believe a continuity exists between the totalitarian state in its Nazi form and the totalitarian features that appear in the modern welfare state. In both cases, a theological understanding of the state provides a solid basis for critiquing the state’s actions, and the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation can be a particularly helpful tool. I will therefore begin by looking at the Reformers’ understanding of the state, and then we will consider how it was fruitfully used in the critique of Nazism and how it can be applied to the current situation.

## 2. The Reformation and the state

The Lutheran reformers understood human life in terms of three different “estates” or orders: *politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*. They took this division and terminology from the Middle Ages but changed the meaning of the terms according to their understanding of Scripture. Central theological features of the Reformation, such as the doctrine of the universal priesthood and the doctrine of vocation, played an important role in this transformation of estates. The Reformers’ understanding of these matters found its way into confessional documents. The three estates are treated in the two most fundamental documents in the Book of Concord, namely the Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*, 1530) and Luther’s Small Catechism (1529).<sup>3</sup>

Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession deals with life in society. Philip Melancthon writes that the gospel does not overthrow government or family (*non dissipat politiam aut oeconomiam*), but that both are to be regarded as God’s orders (*ordinationes Dei*).<sup>4</sup> He criticizes the Roman Catholic theologians’ claim that

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance against the totalitarian state was combined with his doubts concerning democracy. From Bonhoeffer’s perspective, democracy was the way by which Hitler and the Nazi party gained power in Germany. See Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologians for a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 227.

3 In some major Lutheran churches, including the Norwegian and the Danish churches, the entire Book of Concord has not been accepted but only these two writings, together with three ancient creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian).

4 *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 47–51.

Christian perfection would require leaving house and home (an implicit Catholic endorsement of monasticism). Furthermore, Anabaptist groups are criticized for refusing to participate in secular government, such as by taking oaths. Instead, Melancthon affirms the *politia* and the *oeconomia* and writes that the gospel “completely (*maxime*) requires both their preservation as ordinances of God and the exercise of love within these ordinances.” A Christian citizen is obliged to obey the magistrates, unless the magistrates command sinful action.<sup>5</sup> Melancthon here refers to what has been called *clausula Petri*, referring to Peter’s words in Acts 5:29 that a Christian must obey God more than men.

Melancthon uses the three concepts *politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia* in describing human life in society and church. Every Christian is called into all three estates, and all three are all subject to God and his commandments. Obedience to the state is limited only by Christians’ obligation not to follow a sinful command – as occurred later in the 16th century when princes, through various decrees, tried to force the church to adopt ceremonies and teachings that were contrary to the Bible.

Another important article in the Augsburg Confession regarding the authority of the state is article 28, “Concerning the Church’s Power.” This article is primarily about the relationship between spiritual and secular power and deals with bishops who also have secular power. The spiritual power is exercised by the word of God; the secular power, ultimately, by the sword. These two authorities, the state and the church, are both from God. They are to be appreciated “as the two highest gifts of God on earth.”<sup>6</sup> However, the separation between them is crucial, and they must not interfere in each other’s spheres. Article 28 deals sharply with cases when these two are confused: “For secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence.”<sup>7</sup> As stated in article 16, the two authorities come from God as gifts. They concern different parts of reality (the soul and body), and they use different means to achieve their goals.<sup>8</sup>

In Luther’s Small Catechism, the same basic theological idea is encountered as in the *Confessio Augustana*, namely that the Christian life should be lived out in existing orders in the world. The catechism ends with the so-called Household Chart (*Haustafel*), which is Luther’s name for the New Testament passages with exhortations to various groups in the church. Luther writes that these are “for all

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<sup>5</sup> *Book of Concord*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Concord*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Book of Concord*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Concord*, 92f.

kinds of holy orders and walks of life.” By the term “holy orders,” Luther alludes to the various monastic orders. He argues, in contrast, that the true holy orders are those established by God: *politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*.<sup>9</sup>

Luther elaborates on this idea in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, written in 1528, one year before the Small Catechism. Here too, he refers to “holy orders,” which are instituted by God and include the priesthood, marriage, and secular authority. They can be called holy because they are commanded by God. That is how he has commanded the saints to live, and therefore these orders are holy. “For God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it.”<sup>10</sup>

In these central confessional texts, we can see that the Reformers place great value on life in the *politia* and *oeconomia*. Life in state and family does not represent a lower degree of perfection but, on the contrary, is the good life that God has ordained in his word. Luther could claim that since the days of the apostles, no one has so exalted the magistrates as he had done.<sup>11</sup> However, as we have seen, Christian submission to the state is not blind obedience. If the state does not observe God's commandments, it must be denied obedience.

A more detailed distinction between *oeconomia* and *politia* appears in Luther's exposition of the fourth commandment in his Large Catechism.<sup>12</sup> Here, he describes how all authority in society ultimately goes back to the authority of the parents. As an example, Luther mentions a father who is unable to educate his child and therefore enlists a schoolmaster. “Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and must derive from them their power and authority to govern.”<sup>13</sup> The relationship between parental responsibility and schools is a clear area of potential conflict between a totalitarian state and the church and family, as we will see below.

We have looked at central texts that belong to the Lutheran confessional tradition. The lines that have been drawn are relatively clear and simple, with a distinct demarcation between spiritual and secular power. However, when this is applied and translated into concrete policy, difficult considerations can arise, which Luther and Melancthon themselves had to handle. The problem became clear when Thomas Müntzer emerged with a theology quite different from Luther's.<sup>14</sup> According to Müntzer, a kingdom of God would be established on earth.

9 *Book of Concord*, 365. Cf. 365, footnote 111.

10 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 37, ed. by Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 365.

11 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 46, ed. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 95.

12 *Book of Concord*, 400-410.

13 *Book of Concord*, 406.

14 For Müntzer's position, see *Der Theologe Thomas Müntzer. Untersuchungen zu seiner Entwicklung und Lehre*, herausgegeben von Siegfried Bräuer und Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rubrecht, 1989).

The means of this kingdom would be violence and the sword, as in the Old Testament. In various ways, Müntzer collaborated with the peasant uprisings that were taking place and eventually managed to gather an army. When Luther advised the authorities to intervene against Müntzer, it may at first glance appear that Luther was asking the authorities to transgress the boundary between the secular and the spiritual. But for Luther, Müntzer was not only a false teacher; he was also a revolutionary. And the prince's task was to safeguard peace and justice in the kingdom, so he had the right to intervene with force.<sup>15</sup>

The Müntzer case highlights the difficulty of drawing the demarcation between spheres, because the religious dimension or sphere sometimes includes a political, secular dimension, which influences how the authorities act. "They are not heretics only but rebels."<sup>16</sup> The political, secular dimension may justify the state authority's intervention in what is primarily a matter of faith and theology and thus outside the authority's mandate. As we shall see below, this means it is not enough to look at state and religion as merely formal concepts in a structure; from a Christian perspective, the question of state action also becomes a question of content. Are the actions and values that the authorities want to promote in accordance with God's commandments? We will return to this question at the end of the article.

Luther's struggle against Müntzer can also help us understand how the Lutheran church developed *das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment*, or the idea that the prince also was the leader of the church in his territory. As discussed above, according to Luther there are legitimate cases in which a prince can intervene against a heresy precisely because he is a prince. Moreover, the prince was not only a ruler but also a member of the church, and as such he could be part of the leadership of the church, especially in case of emergency. Strictly speaking, it was not as a prince but as a Christian brother in the congregation that he acted in ecclesiastical matters.<sup>17</sup> Initially, the justification for this system was the lack

15 Luther formulated his position in general terms – maybe with Thomas Müntzer in mind – in a commentary on Psalm 82 (1530). See *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 13, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 61.

16 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 13, 61.

17 James M. Estes, who argues that Luther changed his position regarding the role of the magistrates under influence from Melancthon, calls it a "cumbersome distinction." Estes, "The Role of Godly Magistrates in the Church: Melancthon as Luther's Interpreter and Collaborator," *Church History* 67:3 (1998): 473: "Similarly, the cumbersome distinction between the prince acting sometimes as prince, sometimes as Christian brother, and sometimes as both, was difficult to take seriously." But obviously Luther took it seriously, as is shown by his elaborated defense of it in his early works, see Karl Holl's classic study, "Luther und das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte I: Luther*, dritte vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 326–380. Estes' thesis that Luther changed his position during his career, has been criticized by David M. Whitford, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis," *Church History* 73:1 (2004): 41–62. Recently Estes' interpretation has been defended by Peter Olsen, "Augustine and Luther on Toleration and Coercion," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 17:1 (2024): 79–91.

of functioning church structures, but then the system became permanent. There are differing opinions about the roles played by Melanchthon and Luther during the 1530s, but we will not go into this question here. However, the accepted confessional writings should have a special status. Although the question of how Melanchthon and Luther dealt with the issues that arose is interesting, their other writings are still to be regarded as private expressions that can provide guidance, not as binding confessional documents.<sup>18</sup>

We have now looked at the main features of the Lutheran Reformation understanding of life in church and state. It is, of course, shaped by the conditions of the time, but in its basic features it is an interpretation of the Bible that can be adapted and applied to other historical situations. We will now see how this was done in the totalitarian situation in Germany and Norway under the pressure of Nazism, and then how it can be adapted and applied to situations today.

### 3. German resistance: The Bethel Confession (1933)

The totalitarian state as a concept is associated with political developments of the 20th century. There are, of course, many aspects of the question of how to define “totalitarian,” and the literature on the phenomenon is extensive.<sup>19</sup> Defining the term is itself part of the analysis and critique of the phenomenon. As mentioned in the introduction, the critique of the totalitarian state is based on the understanding of an ideal state. One strength of the theological concept of the state outlined above is that it operates with clear boundaries as to the task of the state. As we will see below in the German resistance to the National Socialist state, this was the crucial point of the critique and thus part of the definition of “totalitarian,” as describing a state that no longer respects the boundaries set by the Creator.

In Germany, the National Socialist Party came to power through democratic elections, which it then abolished. However, it was not the abolition of democracy that caused some theologians to sound the alarm early on, but something else. Rather, their theological understanding of the state caused them to perceive the deeper change that was beginning. Like a seismograph, they perceived a movement that only later became apparent to others.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hermann Sasse, “Church Government and Secular Authority According to Lutheran Doctrine” (1935), in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2002), 179: “Our doctrine must be taken first of all from the church’s confessions. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church has certainly not adapted every individual thought of the Reformer as its doctrine and placed each under ‘we believe, teach, and confess’ of its confession.”

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the questions, see Emilio Gentile, “Total and Totalitarian Ideologies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 56–72.

Theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse were among the co-authors of the so-called Bethel Confession written in 1933, after Hitler came to power.<sup>20</sup> Both were among Hitler's first opponents, but while others cited political reasons, these two men had theological reasons for their opposition. Specifically, the totalitarian state that they saw emerging no longer respected the boundaries within which it should operate. Instead, it wanted to encompass the whole of human life and to intervene in all its different spheres – family, child-rearing, faith, values – as if it were above them all.

The Bethel Confession was written after it became clear that the National Socialists' church-political party, "German Christians", had won in the church election. The opposition tried to rally around a common confession. However, they did not succeed in making the Bethel Confession such a unifying confession, and instead the Barmen Declaration of 1934 would take on this function. But the Bethel Confession has nevertheless been called "a shining, sharp and impressive witness to what theological work could still be accomplished in the summer of 1933."<sup>21</sup>

In the Bethel Confession, the article "Church and State" deals with controversial issues.<sup>22</sup> Notable is the frequency of words such as "border" and "limit." The article emphasizes that both church and state come from God, yet they are separated by "insurmountable borders." The task of the state is to protect human life, to preserve discipline and honor (with reference to *Confessio Augustana* article 28). The church, on the other hand, has the message of Christ and salvation in him as its mission. The danger that the confessors have in mind is then explicitly stated when the confession warns against "worshipping an *unlimited* authority as life-giver and life-bringer" (emphasis added). In summary, the question about limits is crucial in order to reach a correct understanding of state authority. When the state transgresses its God-given boundaries, it embarks on a collision course with the Christian church.

In a manner reminiscent of the Augsburg Confession, the Bethel Confession warns against various forms of confusion between spiritual and secular power. It states that the church misunderstands its task if it seeks to be a political power by demanding that baptism should be a requirement for citizenship in the state. Its true service to the state is instead to offer "a scriptural proclamation and confession." The opposite abuse occurs when the state wants to use the church as an instrument for its own goals. The false state cannot bear to hear of Christ's power to rule the world. This sharp criticism of various forms of confusion between the

20 For their cooperation and the text of the Confession in English translation, see Torbjörn Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny: An Examination of the Bethel Confession Proposed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse in August 1933*, trans. Bror Erickson (Irvine, CA:1517 Publishing, 2023).

21 Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich*, vol. 1 (Munich: Propyläen Taschenbuch, 2000), 647.

22 See Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 48-49.

two powers means that all forms of a “Christian state” are rejected. The task of the authorities, whether dealing with pagans or Christians, is to carry the sword rightly, remaining within their boundaries.<sup>23</sup>

The article on church and state makes a clear distinction between the earthly and the heavenly realms. The secular state’s task is to protect and sustain earthly life by using the sword as a defense against evil. The church cannot protect earthly life. At the same time, this earthly life is the home of decay and belongs to the “realm of death.” Salvation is something different and comes only through Christ. The task of the church is to preach and confess and thus to bring man into the “realm of salvation.”

Sasse and Bonhoeffer, the main authors of the Bethel Confession, were among those who first discerned the evil in National Socialism and sounded the alarm. Why were they not deceived like so many others of their contemporaries?

Sasse, then a Lutheran pastor in Berlin and later a professor of church history in Erlangen, held a clear conviction of what a state should be, and he combined his view with insight into the political realities that arose as National Socialism grew stronger. In summer 1932, half a year before Hitler came to power in January 1933, Sasse published an article strongly criticizing the program of the National Socialist Party.<sup>24</sup>

Sasse argued that it was impossible for Christians to accept the National Socialist party program. He particularly criticized its article 24, which stated as follows: “We demand freedom for all religious confessions within the state, so far as they do not threaten its existence or counteract the morality or moral sense of the Germanic race.”<sup>25</sup> The description of the church’s freedom as conditional and placed below other values caused Sasse to react strongly. “One may perhaps forgive National Socialism all its theological sins, but this article 24 excludes every possibility of dialogue with the Church, whether Protestant or Catholic.”<sup>26</sup> According to Sasse, the issue was thus ultimately about religious freedom, and in particular the freedom to preach the gospel without hindrance. On this point, Klaus Scholder writes that theological considerations, not political ones, guided Sasse.<sup>27</sup>

The American theologian Ronald Feuerhahn emphasizes that Sasse’s critique of National Socialism was an example of spiritual discernment.<sup>28</sup> Since Sasse took Scripture’s words about supernatural forces seriously, he could clearly see

23 Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 49.

24 Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 20.

25 For the program, see <https://tinyurl.com/ydathced>.

26 In the official yearbook of the Protestant churches, *Kirchliches Jahrbuch*, here after Ronald Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel,” in *The Beauty and the Bands*, ed. John R. Fehrmann, Daniel Preus, and Bruce Lukas (Crestwood, MO: Luther Academy, 1995), 159-172, 161.

27 Cf. Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel,” 162.

28 Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel,” 162-165.



the evil of early National Socialism. In a 1936 letter, he wrote to a friend in the United States that he had seen people go to mass meetings and be completely transformed: “You must understand National Socialism, Fascism and Bolshevism just as embodiment of great superhuman spiritual powers in the sense of Eph. 6:12 which subject whole peoples to themselves.”<sup>29</sup> Sasse described the National Socialism movement as “infinitely hard to understand.” He explained how it had gained a foothold in the hearts of the Christian people because it began as a political movement that held many Christian values and was perceived as a counterforce to the prevailing decay. But behind this, something else was secretly developing, and over time its “demonic and antichrist powers” became visible. Feuerhahn underscores the importance of the spiritual perspective: “For Sasse, it was because this ideology was seen in a theological perspective, not merely political or human, that its real nature was clear. He saw it frankly in terms of ‘forces,’ of ‘spirits,’ of cosmic powers.” This, Feuerhahn continues, set Sasse apart from many other theologians of his time who preferred to speak of “ideas” rather than of “spirits.”<sup>30</sup> This spiritual dimension was thus combined with his understanding of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine.

Much has been written about Bonhoeffer, the other main author of the Bethel Confession, but what is particularly important here is his theological analysis of the state. Already in 1933, Bonhoeffer had a clear idea of the limits within which the state must operate. In his *Ethics* manuscript (written between 1940 and 1943 and published posthumously), he developed his understanding of society and state, particularly in his thoughts about the various “mandates.” Instead of *Amt*, “office,” a term commonly used in contemporary theology and that he himself had used in the past, Bonhoeffer now uses the term “mandate”: “By ‘mandate’ we understand the concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture.”<sup>31</sup> He argues that the term “office” has become secularized and so connected with a bureaucratic system that it is no longer workable. The word “mandate” is his way to try to recapture what was previously meant by “order,” “estate” or “office.”<sup>32</sup> By “mandate,” Bonhoeffer means that a person is endowed with divine authority: “The bearer of the mandate acts as a vicarious representative, as a stand-in for the one who issued the commission.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel,” 164.

<sup>30</sup> Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel,” 163f.

<sup>31</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 389.

<sup>32</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 389f.

<sup>33</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 389. Cf. Martin Luther’s exposition of the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism, where the parents are said to be “God’s representatives.” See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 401.

Bonhoeffer finds four divine mandates: marriage, work, government, and church. He sees his elaboration of them as an interpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the three estates.<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer believes that the enduring value of the three-estates doctrine is that the estates are placed side by side, not hierarchically as superior and subordinate. This means that the authorities must not enter into the order of the church, nor may the church encroach on the order of the authorities, which would lead to imposed ecclesial control (*kirchliche Fremdherrschaft*).<sup>35</sup>

Bonhoeffer's use of the mandates is his response to contemporary Lutheran theology's understanding of "orders of creation." Among the contemporary Lutheran theologians, people, race, class, and nation could also be counted among the given orders. But Bonhoeffer does not want to include them among the mandates. Why? As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer argues in his *Ethics* that the mandates are grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup> He justifies the number of mandates by the fact that the Bible ascribes precisely these tasks to man and makes promises attached to them. Here we see how Bonhoeffer activates one of the basic principles of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*. In his analysis and understanding of the state, he is bound to what Scripture has to say about man's life in state, society, and church. This concept of biblical revelation thus guides him to assess the situation in a different way from many of his contemporary theologians.

In summary, their theologically motivated understanding of the state enabled Sasse and Bonhoeffer to see what was happening in National Socialist Germany.

#### 4. Norwegian resistance: *Kirkens Grunn*

The Bethel Confession was written in 1933, but the Barmen Declaration attracted support from a larger collection of German pastors in 1934. In the Nordic countries, a similar confessional document with a broad impact appeared in 1942, when *Kirkens Grunn* (*The Foundation of the Church*) was published in Norway.<sup>37</sup> One of the leaders behind this confession was Bishop Eivind Berg-

34 Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 16, ed. Mark S. Brocker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 549.

35 Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 16, 549.

36 Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6, 389.

37 See Torleiv Austad, *Kirkens Grunn: Analyse av en kirkelig bekjennelse fra okkupasjonstiden 1940-45*, Oslo: Luther forlag, 1974, 27-32, for the text of the confession. For English translation, see Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration", *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28:2 (2015), 294-299. Austad has treated the Norwegian position during the war in a larger context in "Attitudes Toward the State in Western Theological Thinking," *Themelios* 16:1 (1990), 18-22. In Denmark, a similar document to "The Foundation of the Church" was published in March 1944: "Kirken og Retten i den aktuelle Situation" (Church and Justice in the Current Situation), but it never played a similar role to the document in Norway. The author was Regin Prenter, later professor in Aarhus, and it was supported by Knud E. Løgstrup, professor at Aarhus University. See Jørgen Glenthøj, *Kirkelige dokumenter fra besættelsestiden. Officielle og uofficielle hyrdebrev, bekendelser og erklæringer fra den danske kirke – samt et tillæg fra den norske kirke og den tyske Bekendelseskirke, udgivet i anledning af 40 års dagen for Danmarks befrielse 5. maj 1945*, 19-24.

grav, who was imprisoned during part of the occupation.<sup>38</sup> Gathering around *Kirkens Grunn*, the pastors of the Norwegian state church resigned their offices in protest against the pro-German party *Nasjonal samling* (National Rally), led by Vidkun Quisling. In essence, *Kirkens Grunn* was about the church's freedom from the state. This confession, too, contains a specific understanding of the state and its mission.

The fifth article is entitled "On the Proper Relation of Christians and the Church to the Authorities."<sup>39</sup> In line with the Confessio Augustana, it emphasizes that both state and church come from God and must not be confused with each other. They are called two "orders" or "regiments." Obedience to the state is inculcated, but this obedience has a limit. God is confessed as the Lord over all orders and above all authority on earth. If the state does not maintain justice and righteousness, it becomes a demonic power. In a manner similar to Bonhoeffer's description of the mandate, the parallel positions of these two orders are emphasized. Toward the end of the article, it warns against the "totalitarian demands" to rule consciences.

Article 4 is entitled "On the Right and Duty of Parents and the Church in the Upbringing of Children." Here, the area of conflict between different understandings of the scope of the state is concretized. The document draws a clear line on behalf of parents' right and duty to raise their children in a Christian way. In line with this claim, the right to Christian schools (article 3) is also asserted.

Without going deeper into the confession, we can state that it draws similar theological conclusions as the Bethel Confession, with references to Confessio Augustana article 28. In this way, Bishop Berggrav used the Lutheran idea of two kingdoms or regiments as a criticism of the German occupying power and its attempts to force the Norwegian church and people to come under it. This is an obvious example of a theologically motivated struggle against totalitarian claims.

So far, the lines are as expected, but it may be surprising that the same Bishop Berggrav, a few years after the end of the war, warned against the totalitarian state in a new form, namely the modern welfare state.

## 5. The modern welfare state

The period after the end of the Second World War was characterized politically by the emergence of the modern welfare state. In a lecture to the Lutheran World Federation's conference in Hanover 1952, Berggrav delivered a speech entitled

38 Gunnar Heiene, *Eivind Berggrav: En biografi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1992), 353-362.

39 See Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration," 294-299, for the text of the confession and an analysis. For an English translation, see Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28:2 (2015), 294-299.

“State and Church Today: The Lutheran View”<sup>40</sup> One of the questions he raised was “Can the modern welfare state be reconciled with the Lutheran doctrine of two regiments?” Based on a Lutheran two-regiment doctrine, he analyzed the postwar situation. “The problem arises whether the Lutheran doctrine of the two regimes maybe maintained under these changed conditions or whether the new state enters so deeply into the spiritual regime that there is no longer any room for the church.”<sup>41</sup> The new welfare state stresses unity within it, he observed, and therefore it is important for it that all citizens have the right convictions.

Berggrav here draws a straight line from the Nazis’ stress on right view of life (*Lebensanschauung*) to the welfare state’s “democratic conviction,” with the implication that young people must be brought up in a way that will be beneficial to the state.<sup>42</sup> What Christianity says is pushed into the private sphere and must not be allowed to clash with the views of the state. Practically, this question is related to the entire education sector, but also to the extensive diaconal work that the church did at this time and that gradually passed into state management.

As for the area of upbringing and education, Berggrav refers to parental rights on a fundamental level, emphasizing that all influence must be in line with God’s commandments. If the state pursues a view contrary to God’s clear commandments, it makes itself the ultimate judge of good and evil. In this, Berggrav sees the danger that the state is in a certain way “deified.” In this way, it wants to take God’s place as an omnipotent “kind of All-Father.” The state wants to be enough.<sup>43</sup> Berggrav sees this kind of state in the process of developing. The modern state, he says, has learned from the totalitarian state to hide its true motives. It does not propose anything directly against God’s commandments and thus tries to cover up its real intention.<sup>44</sup> Berggrav calls this desire to become everything to man “presumptuous pride,” predicting that a “gigantic struggle” will be required to oppose it.<sup>45</sup>

Berggrav presented his speech in a politically tense situation as Communism was strengthening its grip on Eastern Europe. When the Lutheran World Federation gathered in Hanover, a Hungarian bishop had been placed under house arrest because of his criticism of the regime. Other representatives, loyal to the Communist authorities, were sent to participate in his place. Berggrav’s speech

40 Eivind Berggrav, “State and Church Today: The Lutheran View,” *Proceedings of the Second Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Hannover, Germany, July 25-August 3, 1952*, ed. Carl E. Lund-Quist (Lutheran World Federation, 1952), 76-85. In Norwegian: “Stat og kirke idag,” in *Kirke og kultur* 57 (1952), 449-462.

41 Berggrav, “State and Church Today,” 81.

42 Berggrav, “State and Church Today,” 82.

43 Berggrav, “State and Church Today,” 83.

44 Berggrav, “State and Church Today,” 84.

45 Berggrav, “State and Church Today,” 83.

was interpreted as support for the suspended bishop and a sharp criticism of the Communist idea of the state.<sup>46</sup> The speech sparked a debate in Germany but did not provoke any major reaction in Norwegian politics.<sup>47</sup> The cool reception was related to the fact that the welfare state in the 1950s was a high-priority political project, especially for the Norwegian Social Democrats but also for the other parties.<sup>48</sup>

Several debates over the last decades have involved the same issues that Berggrav addressed in his speech. “Welfare state” is a concept that needs to be differentiated. Such a state can look different in different countries, depending on their history and political development. We must also take confessional aspects into account to understand the different appearances of the welfare state in different parts of Europe.<sup>49</sup> Among the questions discussed have been how the origin of the welfare state is related to the Evangelical Lutheran context and how the welfare state’s social responsibility relates to other initiatives such as the church’s diaconal work. I will not go into these questions, but instead I will focus on the most relevant aspect in this context: the welfare state’s power over questions of values and of conscience. After describing some of the features of the current situation, I will finally evaluate them over against the theological guidelines described above.

## 6. Totalitarian features today

The Nordic democracies are examples of how the secular welfare state has been implemented on a large scale. These are obviously not totalitarian states, but a number of conflicts within them show that the threat of totalitarian thinking did not disappear with the end of National Socialism. Since World War II, there have been numerous ideological tensions and debates within the Nordic welfare states that can be analyzed on the basis of the two-regiment doctrine described above.

One relevant factor is that the state has grown enormously large compared to when Berggrav was writing about the welfare state in the 1950s. Its authority today is in many ways so different in its structure and size that it is difficult to make comparisons to previous eras. For many people today, state and society have merged, and this means that the values rewarded and promoted by the state permeate large parts of society and various spheres of life. The question

46 Aud V. Tønnesen, “Velferdsstaten og den lutherske torelementlaeren,” *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 112 (2011), footnote 5.

47 Tønnesen, “Velferdsstaten og den lutherske torelementlaeren,” 204.

48 Aud V. Tønnesen, “Eivind Berggrav og velferdsstaten,” *Arv og utfordring: Menneske og samfunn I den kritiske moraltradisjon*, ed. Sein Aage Christoffersen and Trygve Wyller (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995), 176f.

49 Aud V. Tønnesen, “Kirken og velferdsstaten,” *Theofilos* 12 (2020), 390-393.

becomes, as Berggrav perceived, how to apply the categories of the two-regiment doctrine in this new situation. Amidst the new difficulties posed by contemporary states, I would argue that the two-regiment doctrine is even more important as an aid to orientation.

One conflict that remains relevant in modern welfare states is between the church and the political parties. In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, the dominant party in the 20th century, has had a stated strategy not to extinguish the church, as Communism tried to do in the Soviet Union, but instead to take it over and use it for its own purposes. Up to this day, the Social Democratic Party and other political parties are part of church politics.<sup>50</sup> Other obvious conflicts have involved the family, children, and the education sector. Sweden has had a battle for decades over whether confessional schools should be allowed to operate. Furthermore, the state aggressively pursues issues related to the redefinition of marriage and gender, issues that deeply interfere with many Christians' conscience and beliefs.

We could say much about these questions, but here I want to keep the focus on the root of all of them, namely the authorities' desire to control ideas and values. This tendency is difficult to measure in a society and can generate different subjective perceptions.<sup>51</sup> The *Zeitgeist* can exert strong pressure without being directly visible and is experienced differently depending on one's personality and where one participates in society. The term "political correctness" is used to describe what constitutes a permissible way of thinking in the society.<sup>52</sup> However, some events clearly demonstrate the pressure exerted with regard to thinking and speaking correctly. One such event is the series of trials faced by Päivi Räsänen, formerly Minister of the Interior and currently a parliamentarian in Finland. Räsänen was prosecuted because of the manner in which she expressed support for the traditional Christian view of marriage as between a man and a woman, a position grounded in her Christian faith and confession.

This case deserves attention, not least because it reveals something that might otherwise exist in a hidden and unspoken way. The atmosphere of secular intol-

50 Recently, a doctoral dissertation has been published describing this process; see Per Evert, *Landet som glömdes Gud: Hur Sverige under 1900-talet formades till världens mest sekulärindividualistiska land* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma Bokförlag, 2022).

51 On the question of secular intolerance and the problem of how to assess its intensity, see Dennis P. Petri and Ronald R. Boyd-MacMillan, "Death by a Thousand Cuts: Perception of the Nature and Intensity of Secular Intolerance in Western Europe," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13:1/2 (2020): 37-53. Through interviews with representatives of faith-based advocacy organizations, they discuss and systematize experiences in the current situation.

52 Bernd Wannenwetsch discusses the phenomenon of political correctness in relation to the boundaries of the two-regiment doctrine in "The Simultaneity of Two Citizenships: A Theological Reappraisal of Luther's Account of the 'Two Regiments' for our Times," in *Simul. Inquiries into Luther's Experience of the Christian Life*, ed. Robert Kolb, Torbjörn Johansson, and Daniel Johansson (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 177-194.

erance revealed in the trial understandably has caused other Christians to engage in self-censorship.<sup>53</sup> The executive director of Alliance Defending Freedom International, Paul Coleman, commented on this aspect of the case: “The state’s insistence on continuing almost five long years, despite such clear and unanimous rulings in favor of Mrs. Räsänen from the lower courts is alarming. The process is the punishment in such instances, resulting in a chill on free speech for all citizens observing.”<sup>54</sup>

Finland’s Prosecutor General brought charges of “agitation against a minority group” against Räsänen. She has been acquitted in the first two instances (District Court, 2022, and Court of Appeal, 2023) but the prosecutor has taken the case to the Supreme Court.<sup>55</sup> Räsänen commented that she was “ready to continue to defend free speech and freedom of religion before the Supreme Court, and if need be, also before the European Court of Human Rights.”<sup>56</sup>

Our analysis of the case can be divided into two parts. The first part concerns a state passing laws contrary to God’s description of marriage in the Bible. In doing this, the authorities commit a sin, since they are subject to God and his commandments. The second part is about how the authorities treat those who, due to their faith and conscience, are critical of the state’s decisions. This second part is of particular interest relative to the totalitarian features of the modern state. In the Finnish case, the state is transgressing its boundaries in relation to both *ecclesia* and *oeconomia*. According to the Lutheran perspective, teaching matters of faith and values is both a right and a duty for the family and the church. If the state does not allow this, a totalitarian trait is emerging. As the modern state tries to embrace everything and does not stop at the limit of infringing on the individual conscience, Bishop Berggrav’s words seem to have come true.

## 7. Conclusion

The freedom to practice the Christian faith is threatened not only by obviously totalitarian states, but in addition, totalitarian traits can be seen in modern welfare states. These states are of course not defined as totalitarian, but they nevertheless contain problematic aspects. They adopt totalitarian features in the course of trying to force everyone to conform to their values. Common to all different totalitarian threats is that the demarcation line described above between the spiritual and secular spheres is not respected. This border is not only about protecting the

53 See Dennis P. Petri and Boyd-MacMillan, “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” 43.

54 See ADF International, Press Release, “Bible-tweet case to be heard at Finnish Supreme Court,” 19 April 2024. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4rrc6yhe>.

55 For a description of the case, see ADF International, “Bible-tweet case to be heard at Finnish Supreme Court.” Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y4fcp5xe>.

56 ADF International, Press Release, “Bible-tweet case.”

Christian faith from interference from the secular power, but also vice versa, to prevent the church from interfering in areas of secular authority.

Lutheran theology, which often has been accused (and rightly so) of being too compliant with and obedient to state authority, also has important theological tools for analyzing and criticizing the state and its relationship to religion. Central to the resistance in Germany and Norway was the great emphasis placed on various boundaries. While all three estates – or four mandates in Bonhoeffer's articulation, or two kingdoms – are under God, they have been given different tasks and different means to fulfill their tasks. When these different spheres of life and different means are mixed together, destructive situations arise, for both the state and the church.

Christians have at times been the primary force in shaping cultures; at other times, they have been one of several voices in shaping culture and society, or they have been marginalized, persecuted, and forced to go underground. In all different situations, it is helpful to know what the political authority is, including its tasks and limits. It is a matter of discerning when the authority is a good servant of God (Romans 13) and then a co-player of the church – as when the Roman authorities save Paul from religiously motivated violence (Acts 21:32) – and when it is an enemy, as it appears in Revelation 13. As with forces in the spiritual realm, so it is with forces in the earthly kingdom; spiritual discernment is required to know with whom one is dealing.