

## Introduction

Emil Brunner insists that “the Church, the community of believers, cannot understand itself and its task in the world without having its own view of the meaning and the function of the State.”<sup>1</sup> Given the importance of the state in our lives, I believe Brunner is right. Thus, I seek here to advance a theological interpretation and assessment of the state, especially the contemporary nation-state.

### POLITICAL THEOLOGY

This book is an exercise in analytic Christian moral theology – specifically the theology of politics.<sup>2</sup> With occasional exceptions, it focuses on ideas rather than explicit dialogues with particular figures, although I hope it is clear throughout how much I have learned from multiple thoughtful people and how much their ideas serve as touchstones for my arguments.

“Politics” can be used in multiple senses. When I refer to “politics in the narrow sense,” or politics<sub>f</sub>, I have in mind the domain of the systemic and putatively publicly justified use of force. Politics<sub>f</sub> is the

<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Fortress 1947) 441.

<sup>2</sup> I understand theology as critical reflection on the content, adequacy, and implications of Christian convictions. I learned this way of characterizing the discipline from Fritz Guy and Jim McClendon; see Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP 1999); James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf 2002). On analytic theology, see, e.g., James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner, Jr., eds., *Te/T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology* (London: Clark-Bloomsbury 2021); Thomas H. McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP 2015).

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realm of *power*. When I speak of “politics in the broad sense,” or politics<sub>i</sub>, I have in mind deliberate, often shared, attempts to shape the operations and dynamics of institutions and the lives of organized groups. Politics<sub>f</sub> is the realm of *influence*. (When I talk about “politics” without qualification, I ordinarily have both in mind.)

Force is special. There are excellent reasons for cabining it very substantially; thus the importance of the distinction between politics<sub>f</sub> and politics<sub>i</sub>. If what makes politics<sub>f</sub> distinctive is precisely that it involves the systemic and putatively publicly justified use of force, then politics<sub>f</sub> is special, too. And because force is inherently destructive, even when its use is warranted, politics<sub>f</sub> is unavoidably tragic.

Beyond the realm of the political is the more inclusive realm of *the public*, of *public life*, in which we seek to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of strangers quite apart from their participation in particular institutions. We do not need to be able to *compel* others to behave in particular ways to seek to alter their behavior, potentially quite dramatically. Politics<sub>f</sub> is not central to public life. It can be modest and unobtrusive, and its role can be simple: to maintain the common good – the framework of guarantees and institutions that serves as the largely invisible backdrop to peaceful, voluntary social cooperation.

Human beings are social animals, and not only personal relationships but also social and institutional connections are both constitutive of and contributory to their flourishing. Politics<sub>i</sub> is thus an aspect of humanity’s created nature, of the realization and pursuit of the kind of wellbeing appropriate to creatures like us. On the other hand, politics<sub>f</sub> is a response to human sin; and the strand of politics<sub>f</sub> that is the domain of the nation-state is, generally speaking, an *aspect* of sin.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2019) 26–34 seeks to situate his own project in relation to creation and sin in a way that is in some respects similar to the way I frame mine here.

## STATES AND NATIONS

Roughly speaking, a *state* is an entity that exercises a monopoly – or, at any rate, substantial control and jurisdiction (often while pursuing a monopoly) – over the specification and enforcement of law in a geographic area.<sup>4</sup> While many people take the state’s role as the source of social order and adjudication for granted, critical questions about state authority and capacity are increasingly posed, even as new technologies and social forms raise the possibility of alternatives.<sup>5</sup> The romantic idea of the *nation*, of people united in a political unit by culture and, especially, ancestry, by ideology, or by all of these factors, and deserving special loyalty as a result, has been advanced with enthusiasm especially since the nineteenth century. The notions of state and nation are frequently fused in the notion of the *nation-state*.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of the state as a monopolist or would-be monopolist is central to Max Weber’s influential definition. I use the term “state” loosely here to refer to various kinds of political units that exercise geographically extended nonconsensual rule. Because of feudal and ecclesial loyalties and the availability of alternative sources of law, the domains of medieval rulers weren’t states in the modern sense, either *de jure* or *de facto*; at the same time, these rulers exercised enough nonconsensual power over particular territories that the observations I make about states largely apply to them. Ancient political entities, from the Roman empire to the Greek *polis*, were, again, sufficiently state-like as regards the extent of their control over claimed geographic areas, their exclusion of alternatives, and the nonconsensual character of their rule for my critique of the state to be rightly leveled against them, too.

An anonymous reader calls attention to Douglass North’s characterization of a state as “an organization with a comparative advantage in violence, extending over a geographic area whose boundaries are determined by its power to tax constituents” (Douglass C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* [New York: Norton 1981] 21). North’s functional definition doesn’t capture the idea of claimed or perceived legitimacy, which seems to distinguish states from, say, Mafia families. But it does implicitly underscore what I take to be the key point here: that state rule is nonconsensual.

<sup>5</sup> In technical discussions of political philosophy, it is not uncommon to distinguish between the entitlement to *create obligations* for a state’s subjects and the entitlement to *use force* to compel compliance with state directives. It might be that subjects owe no obligations to states but that states may still impose their demands on subjects. For simplicity’s sake, I use “authority” here to refer to both kinds of putative moral entitlement.

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I am concerned throughout this book with the mischief made by states, whether or not they are thought of as nations. But I refer in the title specifically to the *nation*-state both because it is the most common sort of state in today's world and because it rests in part on a particularly problematic justification. Overtly multiethnic, multi-cultural empires are on the wane, while the contemporary state is characteristically understood as national, as marked by a certain kind of social cohesion, a subjective unity, reflective of a collective identity. States of all sorts deserve to be sharply critiqued. But the nationalist project that provides the rationale for the nation-state, in particular, deserves special attention.

Provocative Christian theological challenges to the state have been articulated by a range of thinkers. But many Christians have resisted embracing these challenges, I suspect for several reasons. Many of the state's critics can be understood as pacifists. For those Christians doubtful about pacifism, the thought that the critiques advanced by these thinkers should be understood as inextricably linked with pacifism might render those critiques unappealing. In addition, pacifist critics may treat the obligations of Christians and political decision-makers as quite different and may thus decline to treat Christian ethics as intended to guide political decision-makers. Christians committed to political engagement and to a view of the world as God's creation may be unsure how to think about approaches which maintain that "Christian ethics is for Christians" rather than for the whole world. In addition, Christians serious about political involvement may find it natural to suppose that the state is one of God's agents in the world.

I hope that, in this book, I can effectively encourage Christians to resist adopting or retaining positive attitudes toward the state in general and the nation-state in particular. While I respect pacifist critics of the state and believe there is a great deal to be learned from them, I seek to articulate challenges to the state that don't depend on pacifist assumptions.

## GROUNDWORK

A number of background issues are important for efforts to see the nation-state through theological lenses. An understanding of divine action matters because of the significance of claims that historical developments, such as the rise and decline of states, can be reliably interpreted as reflecting God's intentions and that, despite the finitude and fallibility of human media, those intentions are consistently conveyed and grasped clearly. Voluntarist accounts of value and obligation, in accordance with which the good and right are in effect created by God, are often used to insulate affirmations of state authority in general and the claims of specific states to divine favor in particular against critical scrutiny. Understanding the universality of the presence and operation of the *Logos* helps to undermine the claims of self-designated authorities to special status. Appeals to social conceptions of God's Trinity are often used to bolster challenges to top-down authority, such as that exercised by states; although I welcome these challenges, I suspect that trinitarian theology doesn't provide them with a secure grounding. The best way to understand the moral dimension of human life, including the moral dimension of political action, is not by, say, extrapolation from trinitarian theology but with reference to what's involved in the flourishing of the kind of world God has created. A focus on flourishing leads us to a clearer understanding of what love looks like in practice and of how we should understand people's claims to particular physical possessions.

*Providence*

To believe that God is love is to suppose that God is constantly active throughout all aspects of the world to foster creation's flourishing. To put matters only in this way may be to leave the impression of an ordered, responsive reality in the vicinity of which God arrives after the fact. But God is always already present and active. There is no

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natural world – and so no human world, since humanity is part of nature – from which God’s gracious presence and activity are or could be absent.<sup>6</sup>

But this conviction does not entail that providence is meticulously efficacious, that God’s will is reliably done in the world, so that we can somehow read God’s intentions off of the facts of history. Creaturely finitude, fallibility, and sin rule out any simple characterization of, say, state structures as reflecting God’s intentions. The point is, I hope, a relatively straightforward one. “[I]t is impossible for the infinite God of love directly or positively to *will* evil (physical or moral), even in a provisional or transitory way.”<sup>7</sup> God does not will evil for its own sake or as a means to any end. However, evil occurs – in the form of choices inconsistent with the demands of practical wisdom, in virtue of which creatures injure themselves or other creatures, and in the form of physical events that injure creatures while not resulting from culpable creaturely choices, or from creaturely

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Peacocke, “God’s Interaction with the World,” *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Fortress 2007) 45–7; Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming, Natural and Divine* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990) 159–63; Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Edinburgh: Clark 1967) 60–7; Austin Farrer, *Saving Belief: A Discussion of Essentials* (London: Hodder 1964) 37–83; Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: Clark 1990); Brian Hebblethwaite, “Providence and Divine Action,” *Religious Studies* 14 (1978): 223–36; David Ray Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Lanham, MD: UP of America 1990) 206–16; Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/Knox 1989) 165–81; John B. Cobb, Jr., “Natural Causality and Divine Action,” *God’s Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas, AAR Studies in Religion 31 (Chico, CA: Scholars 1983) 101–16; John R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK 1976); Keith Ward, *Divine Action* (London: Collins 1989) 119–69; Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Crossroad-Seabury 1976) 303–6; Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 1997) 188–269; Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP 1994); Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can’t: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage 2019); Timothy Gorringer, *God’s Theatre: A Theology of Providence* (London: SCM 1991).

<sup>7</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005) 70.

choices at all. So God does not will everything that occurs. Evil occurs, indeed, *contrary* to God's will. If God's action were unconstrained, there would be no reason for God to bring about evil as a *byproduct* of the process leading to some good; God could simply bring about the relevant good. Since evil does occur, it follows that God's action *is* constrained.

So "the Christian doctrine of providence" *cannot* amount to the view "that God can so order all conditions, circumstances, and contingencies among created things as to bring about everything he wills for his creatures."<sup>8</sup> For, in fact, "everything [God] wills" does *not* come about. To suppose otherwise, to suppose that everything that actually occurs *is* what God wills for creatures, is an obscenity. This sort of view of providence is bizarre insofar as it seems to involve the supposition *both* that God needs to take circuitous paths to goals which divine omnipotence could achieve directly *and* that the paths God takes are ones purposefully replete with destruction and loss.

Suppose God is perfect in love and so actively at work to foster the flourishing of each sentient creature and to keep each such creature from undergoing loss. Suppose God is also perfect in power. If so, we are left, it seems, with two possible ways of understanding the perfection of divine power in light of the undeniable facts that not all sentients flourish and that all sentients undergo loss. *Either* the capacity to prevent all instances of moral evil and destructive physical accident forms no part of the perfection of divine power, so that the occurrence of evil reflects a metaphysical constraint of one sort or another on the exercise of this power. *Or* there is a *normative* constraint of one kind or another on divine power, so that it would be inconsistent with divine goodness for God to prevent every instance of moral evil and destructive physical accident. Which of these options is ultimately preferable (assuming they can be clearly distinguished) is a question of considerable philosophical interest;

<sup>8</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2019) 183.

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*theologically*, all that matters, I think, is to acknowledge that there *are* constraints, in virtue of which – while God always seeks the good – God’s will, all things considered, is often not done in the world.

If, then, we cannot simply assume that what occurs in the world reflects God’s intentions, then we cannot assume, in particular, that the existence of any given social institution or structure is what God wills. While a given set of social arrangements might, indeed, reflect God’s intentions, there is no basis for concluding that they do so simply on the basis of belief in God’s providential activity and love for creation.

In addition, suppose I had good reason to view a given set of arrangements as reflective of God’s intentions. It wouldn’t follow that I had good reason to think of these arrangements as enjoying any kind of permanent superiority over alternatives. The existing arrangements might, indeed, have embodied God’s will very well indeed. But this will might have been thoroughly situation-specific.

Consider a parallel case. Perhaps, in a given society, medical knowledge is very limited; most commonly embraced therapies for a given ailment are likely to do little or no good for the ailment while posing serious health risks for patients, although it may be difficult for the members of the society to detect these features of the therapies. One or two available remedies, however, aren’t likely to cause injury. And perhaps occasionally they might do limited good for patients. Divine providence might encourage the adoption of these remedies as the standard therapies for the relevant illness – not because they are highly efficacious but because there are good reasons to prefer them to any of the currently existing alternatives. But providence might well facilitate the displacement of these remedies over time by more medically worthwhile ones as it becomes realistically possible for members of the society to discover, evaluate, produce, and distribute these superior remedies. In the same way, even if we could know with some confidence that providence had brought about the existence and operation of a given state, it wouldn’t follow that the state aptly embodied God’s intentions.



Given the constrained character of divine providence, we cannot assume that God ensures that divine revelation is perfectly understood or conveyed. We must rather understand revelation as conveyed to us through a range of finite and sinful, and therefore fallible, media. The apprehension and transmission of revelation are superintended and guided by divine providence, but the constraints that impact the effectiveness of providence in general are also applicable here, in particular.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, aware of God's accommodation of our limitations in understanding, we must expect that what God seeks to convey in a particular context will be a reflection of what we are ready to apprehend in that context.

### *Voluntarism*

Voluntarism – from *voluntas*, will – sees the divine will as lying at the root of moral requirements. On the voluntarist view, God *chooses* what's right and wrong, and so, ordinarily, what's good or bad. There's a great deal to be said about voluntarism, and I have tried to say some of it elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Here, I want to make some relevant points with what is doubtless extreme brevity and generality.<sup>11</sup>

In Genesis 1, God sees that creation is good. Unless this claim simply means that creation had the feature God intended, the passage seems to suggest that God *recognizes* the quality of what exists rather

<sup>9</sup> See David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defense," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55.3 (1983): 177–80; David Basinger, "Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts," *Evangelical Quarterly* 58.4 (1985): 351–4; Austin Farrer, "Infallibility and Historical Revelation," *Interpretation and Belief*, ed. Charles Conti (London: SPCK 1976) 151–64; Edward W. H. Vick, *From Inspiration to Understanding: Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Gary Chartier, *The Analogy of Love: Divine and Human Love at the Center of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Griffin 2017, 2020) 156–216.

<sup>11</sup> Some Christian critiques of voluntarism: Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus 1: Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald 1983) 101–2; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon-OUP 1980) 342–3; Carlton D. Fisher, "Because God Says So," *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael D. Beatty, *Library of Religious Philosophy* 5 (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P 1990) 355–77. Cp. Gary Chartier, *Loving Creation: The Task of the Moral Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2022) 60–7; Chartier, *Analogy* 189–204.

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than somehow *choosing* that it qualify as good. Whether or not Genesis 1 does embody this point, an understanding in virtue of which what's good is a function of the way things are, of the way they've been created, is an attractive one. To say otherwise would be to offer a bizarre account of divine love, insofar as loving another involves regard for the other's good. For, if God *chose* the good, then God could choose just anything as some creature's good, and so loving that creature could in principle mean treating it in any conceivable way. In order for the idea that God is love to be credible, a given creature's good must be objective. If, in turn, we suppose, as I think we should, that your acting rightly is itself an aspect of (among other things) what's *good* for you, then if whether something's part of your good is objective, it follows that whether it's right for you to choose in a given way in a particular case is also objective.

Voluntarism not only undermines the intelligibility of divine love but also creates an image of God as disturbingly arbitrary. Since, on the voluntarist view, there will be no objective reasons for the moral requirements God is supposed to create – or, indeed, for God to do anything at all – God will apparently choose in many cases for no reason in particular. God is ultimately responsible for the content of morality in virtue of having created a particular kind of world. Moral requirements flow from the character of what God has created, not from divine injunctions separate from or independent of creation.

*The Logos and Dispersed Knowledge*

The *Logos* is “[t]he true light, which enlightens everyone.”<sup>12</sup> Divine insight is not mediated to ordinary people, brutish and ripe for kingly rule, by authority figures with special pathways to God. Everyone can receive what Quakers have termed “the inner light.” So the state is in no sense a special channel of divine wisdom, state actors in no way specially empowered or inspired. At the same time, while the *Logos* underlies all creaturely events and enlightens all creatures, it is still

<sup>12</sup> John 1:9.