The Distinction of Régimes and Institutional Spheres in the Latin American Context

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Terminological queries

We need to begin by clarifying some concepts. The so-called “Two kingdoms Doctrine” (Zwei-Reiche-Lehre) is a twentieth-century creation. As it is used in contemporary discussions, it goes back to an essay by Franz Lau published in 1933, not exactly by coincidence the same year of Hitler’s ascension to power. The focus of the argument is the distinction between the spiritual reality or spiritualia and the earthly institutions, as the carnalia are defined. The carnalia for Lau are an expression of the lex naturae, but conditioned to change according to the jus positum, the positive law that adjusts itself to changing circumstances: tempora mutant leges et mores.

What was it that made this “doctrine” to be regarded as a central piece in Lutheran theology, when it has such a remarkably short history as a “doctrine”? Arguably, because of the way the relationship between grace and social existence was framed. Most of the discussion on justification and justice has been charted within relatively recent, i.e., twentieth-century, paradigms that demarcate the contours of a possible discussion. And these have been defined by systems and institutions that control and regulate public life, and thus confined to a distinctive characteristic of modern institutions, its legitimacy crisis.

To acknowledge the church as an earthly institution, and yet working itself in counter-institutional practices was the genius of the ecclesiology the Reformation.

Luther’s very inconsistency in the use of language to describe the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realities makes things significantly more complicated. In German, he uses Reich (Kingdom), but also Regiment (governance). In Latin, he uses only Regnum. Speculation about a hidden system in this varied terminology yields little results. Gustav Törnvall has listed some thirty-eight different terminological uses Luther employs that point to the same distinction of régimes.

This picture becomes even more complicated if we compound it to another distinction Luther adopted from the traditional medieval doctrine of the hierarchies, or estates (Stände): ecclesia, politia, and oeconomia (which before the industrial revolution included labor, market, and—where the term comes from—the household). They were categories of social orders that Luther inherited from medieval theology as a matter of course: “First, the Bible speaks and teaches about the works of God; no doubt about that. But these works are divided in three hierarchies: economy, politics, and church.” Around 1530, Luther’s more general references to the worldly régime (weltliche Regiment) became nuanced with the underscoring of the “orders.” He was already familiar and had used the popular medieval division of society into three “estates,” “hierarchies,” or publics’ distinguishing civil governance from the household (oeconomia) quite early on. The first time the three
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some pastors and lay leaders... made a decision to represent in the political realm what their faith stood for.

régimes and the discrimination of the different spheres pointing to discrete dimensions of the same problem would have helped to carry the discussion along. The discrimination or separation of the three publics is of importance here. This distinction was decisive for Luther as well, as he saw each of the spheres in a functional way as the display of human fundamental faculties that inform the establishment of each of the publics (theoria, poiesis, and praxis). Each of these faculties is share by humanity, and we are thus all involved in each of these public spheres. But the point here is to show that the critical issues appear most prominently in one of the publics that each of the discrete faculties constitutes.

Three cases in Latin America that had issues pertaining to the distinction of régimes will be discussed here. First among these is the Chilean case in which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile lost most of its members and another church was formed, the Lutheran Church in Chile. The largest Lutheran church in Latin America, the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (ECLCB) provides the second example. And finally, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of El Salvador offers a third case study. These three examples were chosen because each revealed a crisis in the relationship between the church’s identity and social responsibility. And, it was the place where Luther’s distinction of régimes was at play.

Stepping by faith into the politia.

The case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile seems exemplary for the way in which the distinction of régimes works when in interface with the political sphere. In the now symbolic 9/11, but of 1973 (!), the military took over the democratically elected government of Chile headed by President Salvador Allende. Much has been said and written about the brutal coup-d’état. Also known is the way the churches have reacted to it. But the point here is the reaction of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chile (ELCC). The ELCC was a small church providing religious services for a significant number of German descendants in Chile. Services were held in the mother-tongue. Most of the pastors serving the congregations were missionaries sent by Germany or later also by the United States. After the coup, most of the pastors entered...
Reformation movement. Biblical prophetism was used to explain that it was the theology of the cross that also animated the dictatorship. But the references were biblical, with only a side reference to Luther. Bishop Frenz made use of the cross motif to account for the predicament of those who were persecuted by the Pinochet regime. But the reference to Luther’s distinction of régimes and their interface appears only, and for the first time, in the analyses and theological reflections done after the dramatic events to explain the situation and denounce it. Helmut Frenz compares the Chilean situation of the mid-1970s to Nazi Germany, designating both case of the ecclesia and oeconomia as a problem of interpreting the régimes, but the way in which the spheres of the oeconomia and ecclesia were not discriminated. The institutional church was being used to justify and support the German-Chilean “household.” Instead of having the church as a space for the Shabbat to happen, away from idols and demons, the Lutheran “household” took the church along. If the pastors and some members became politically engaged in the moment of crisis it is because the politia, as the sphere that establishes social accountability, was the one to be called upon to preserve the vocation of the church distinct from the one of the household. What was considered an inappropriate political activity of the pastors, did not start by participation in any resistance to the military coup and the help offered to refugees. It started in the late-60s with the creation of the first Spanish-speaking congregations, made a decision to represent in the political realm what their faith stood for. Yet some pastors and lay leaders, mostly from the newly formed Spanish-speaking congregations, made a decision to represent in the political realm what their faith stood for.

By this time the situation was somehow irreversible. The military régime had already established its hegemony. The church, as an organization, was in shambles. About 93 percent of its members left the ELCC while 85 percent formed a new church named Lutheran Church of Chile (LCC). Most of the pastors stayed or had to leave the country. Bishop Frenz had his visa revoked and had to return to Germany. In the case of Chile there was no use of Lutheran theology either to support, or to denounce the situation. Bishop Frenz made use of the cross motif to account for the predicament of those who were persecuted by the Pinochet dictatorship. But the references were biblical, with only a side reference to Luther’s theology of the cross that also animated the Reformation movement. Biblical prophetism was used to explain the risky acts of denunciation and protest that pastors mostly were engaged in. The pro-Pinochet party of the majority of Lutherans did not appeal to Luther either, with the exception of an indirect reference in the Declaration of Principles of the newly formed denomination saying the church should be of and for the laity. This could be construed as a veiled reference to Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, but was not used in this explicit way. The reference to Luther’s distinction of régimes and their interface appears only, and for the first time, in the analyses and theological reflections done after the dramatic events to explain the situation and denounce it. Helmut Frenz compares the Chilean situation of the mid-1970s to Nazi Germany, designating both case of the ecclesia and oeconomia as the sphere that establishes social accountability, was the one to be called upon to preserve the vocation of the church distinct from the one of the household.

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distinction of régimes could offer was lifted up to examine the practice and often to denounce abuses. But there is no indication that the distinction of regimes in Luther was ever used to justify the stance of the church vis-à-vis the political government. The analyses of what was happening might have been furthered assisted by Luther’s transactional analysis of the institutional spheres operating in the earthly régime. The Chilean example is an exemplary case of the oeconomia taking over the ecclesia. Hence was not only a problem of interpreting the régimes, but the way in which the spheres of the oeconomia and ecclesia were not discriminated. The institutional church was being used to justify and support the German-Chilean “household.” Instead of having the church as a space for the Shabbat to happen, away from idols and demons, most Chilean Lutherans caved into the idol of the “household” of the Germanic identity and took the church along. If the pastors and some members became politically engaged in the moment of crisis it is because the politia, as the sphere that establishes social accountability, was the one to be called upon to preserve the vocation of the church distinct from the one of the household.

What was considered an inappropriate political activity of the pastors, did not start by participation in any resistance to the military coup and the help offered to refugees. It started in the late-60s with the creation of the first Spanish-speaking congregations and the modest but significant influx of non-Germanic descendants into the ranks of the church, and Spanish began to be used in worship. This was essentially a political act of stepping into the public square. The support of many pastors for the Allende government was initially both an opening of the church to the Chilean political reality as well as ethical support for the policies implemented to meliorate the condition of poor Chileans. Among them was mainly the agrarian reform that directly affected the German-Chileans among whom were many of the largest land-owners in the country. It can be said that politics came as

21. See his biographical account in Helmut Frenz, Mi Vida Chilena (Santiago: LOM, 2006).
22. Frenz, Mi Vida, 228.
24. Frenz, Mi vida, 245.
25. This reduction of the church to the “German household” was such that when the church was first formed by the merger of synods it was called the German-Evangelical Church of Chile that in 1937 pledged allegiance to the Reich. Many of its pastors were members abroad of the National-Socialist Party of Hitler. See Fritz Mybes, Die Geschichte der deutschen Einwanderung entstandenen lutherischen Kirchen in Chile: Von Anfängen bis zum Jahre 1975 (Düsseldorf: Müller, 1993), 190f; and Daniel Lenski, La División de la Iglesia Evangélica Luterana en Chile 1974/75 (Köln: Roland Reischl, 2012), 20.
the unavoidable result of the attempt to differentiate between the ecclesia and the oeconomia, between the freedom to preach the Gospel and Deutschtum, “Teutonism.”

Stepping by faith into the oeconomia

The case of the Brazilian church, the ECLCB, shows some similarities with the Chilean church. The church’s self-understanding and politics had a similar profile, but a crucial difference is that in the Chilean case the political option adopted by most of the members of the church in support of the military dictatorship was to preserve intact the pact between oeconomia and ecclesia, between the Germanic household and its investments and the church. If, in the case of Brazil, Deutschtum had become almost nota ecclesiae,26 in the case of Chile Deutschtum was not only a nota, but the articulus standis aut cadentis,27 the justification of its own existence, solus germanicus. So, the incursion (mostly by pastors) into the political sphere triggered the crisis that revealed the collapse of the church into the Teutonic household.

The case of Brazil was different in this regard. In Brazil, the German household was itself broken up, fragmented. The social stratification among German immigrants was significant and growing. With the military coup of 1964 and the new agrarian policy that privileged large farm (latifìndio) monoculture “extractivism” for export directly affected a significant part of the members of the church who were little farmers who sustained themselves by a small and diversified agriculture. Many of them, driven into debt, lost their land or became so impoverished that their option was to sell their small portion of land to a large farmer and migrate to the city in search of a low paying job or become seasonal workers on large farms.28 With the downward mobility, the ethnic identity could no longer be sustained and the economic struggle triggered the awareness of the confusion of spheres. The household no longer had a single construction of its identity. To use Luther’s metaphor of the mask, the façade of who the German Lutherans produced themselves to be was cracked. It was the economy that raised the awareness that no possible harmonious relation between the oeconomia and the ecclesia could be sustained. As the architect of the formation of the Brazilian church and its first national leader, Pastor Hermann Dohms (1887–1956) gave expression to this conviction that the household provided the identity of the people as Christian household. Although it is normally regarded as a political call, but the oeconomia, but not the ecclesia, the institutional form, that was the instrument through which God’s will was made manifest. But later when the household was found in disarray, that is where the crisis manifested itself.

Awareness of this was activated not directly (as in Chile) by the political coup (which in Brazil had taken place a decade before the Chilean coup, in 1964), but by an ecclesial event that brought to the fore the fact that the Brazilian Lutheran church no longer had the household it thought it had in Deutschtum, in the presumed oeconomia. The household was in disarray. The Fifth Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was set to take place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1970. This was to be the first assembly of the worldwide organization to take place outside the north–Atlantic axis. The venue was changed, with short notice to Evian, France, due to protests concerning the violation of human rights in Brazil.31 This cancellation was the proverbial last straw, a wake–up call in the waiting. The idol of a Germanic church on Brazilian soil fell to the ground. The identity of the church presumed to be glued together by the household no longer held.

In the same year, 1970, a group of pastors and theologians produced a manifesto (since then known as The Curitiba Manifesto, named after the city where the drafting group met), which later that year was adopted by the General Council of the Church. The language of the manifesto called for the church to take a stance on public issues that pertained to people beyond the Germanic household. Although it is normally regarded as a political call, it was primarily something more elemental. The language of that manifesto was shaped around the question of church and politics, recognizing them as different spheres in life. But what it was implicitly acknowledging was that the problem lay in the other distinct sphere, the oeconomia. The Curitiba Manifesto was

Significantly it was not the ecclesia but the oeconomia, the institutional form, that was the instrument through which God’s will was made manifest. is the necessary and inevitable intermediary between the divine will and the national history” that is the political state.29 “Orders of creation” (Schöpfungsordnungen) was the term used to describe this ensemble of language, ethnicity, and nation. This “order” was seen as being ordained by God and enjoyed a certain autonomous character “as God’s order for our salvation.”30 Significantly it was not the ecclesia but the oeconomia, the institutional form, that was the instrument through which God’s will was made manifest. But later when the household was found in disarray, that is where the crisis manifested itself.

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31. For an account of these events and the controversy, see From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation, Jens Holger Schjørring, Prassana Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 59–61, 382–396.

27. As traditionally quoted the sentence might have been based in other expressions of Luther as in:...quia isto articulo stande stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia ("Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.") WA 40/3,532,3.
28. In addition to that the construction of immense hydroelectric dams, particularly the one of Itaipú in the west of the state of Paraná expelled many farmers whose land was close to the river, many among them were Lutherans of German descent.
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a call for the church to follow its own flock into the social spaces of its people, the changed character in the profile of the household. This is why it has been described as a move from ghetto to participation,32 from the illusion of a single household to many different and stratified economic spaces. With some irony, the church was in fact living out and putting into effect the theme of the planned Assembly: “Sent into the World.” The church was no longer being conceived of as a guesthouse where even strangers could come in and be tolerated, but as a pilgrim church in search of a household that it could claim as home, for the old home was no more—at least not for the majority of Lutherans facing the gruesome economic realities of the new times.

As has been already documented,33 internal tensions and unrest in the self-identity of the household of Lutherans in the country could be registered from the time of WWII when Brazil joined the Allied Nations and sent troops to fight in Europe (in the case of Brazil, Italy). Then with the coup of 1964 and the imposed wave of nationalism (“Brazil, love it or leave it” a slogan later used in the United States in connection with the Vietnam War), the unease and discomfort started to send premonitory signs of what was to come. The change of venue of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF only opened a sore wound of a household that no longer was, as in an old photograph whose pictures time had taken care to fade out the definitions and blend them into the background.

The affirmation of a former president of the Synod Riograndense (the afore mentioned Dohm)—that the more German on ecclesiastical affairs the more Brazilian in political matters one must be—reflected the actual situation although it was meant with the supposition that German was a self-explanatory identity. In this it precisely missed the point; it harmonized and acknowledged the distinction of politia and ecclesia, but missed altogether the oeconomia. The situation thus became tumultuous, disaggregated. It was observed that much earlier, starting in the 1930s “the for-}


35. The comic remark made in the United States to whoever tries a complex explanation for the cause of a certain problem—“it is the Economy, stupid”—applies in this case as a glove.

36. For the argument that the evil in the politia results in demonry and in the oeconomia creates idols see Vítor Westhelle, _The Church Event: Call and Challenge of Church Protestant_ (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 84–105.

of the priesthood of all believers as the cornerstone on which the conception of this church was built. The intentional use of Luther’s argument for the priesthood of all baptized allowed voices to utter words of proclamation that could neither be curbed by politics, nor controlled by economic interests. With that claiming of a space in which another word could be uttered, a third space, as it were, the Lutheran Church of El Salvador gave life to an institution that recreated Luther’s own figure for the church, the Shabbat. This is the image of the church that Luther championed as the church of Adam and Eve and their descendants; this was truly a universal church that encompassed all religions.

Medardo Gómez, the bishop of the Lutheran Church in El Salvador, and himself a victim of torture and exile, has been the catalyst of an emerging church even without explicit reference to Luther’s thought. On the sphere of life to which the church belongs, or on the teachings regarding the distinction of régimes, this church was faithful to the ideas of the Reformer. Medardo Gómez has been viewed by many as the emblematic successor of his compatriot, the martyred Roman Catholic bishop Oscar Romero (assassinated in 1980). Obviously, the comparison is quantitatively out of proportion since the Lutheran Church in El Salvador is less than 0.3 percent of the population and at most 0.6 percent of the population that professes themselves as Roman Catholics (over 55 percent of the population). But quantities only detect; they do not define theological issues at the heart. Core theological issues define that which matters. And this is possibly the great contribution of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, that is, to explain to us all what Luther referred to as the manifestation of Christian love that surpasses domestic vocation and political duties and even the ecclesial sphere, encompassing them all. But what is so important and illustrative in the El Salvadorian church was the unique gesture of bringing the church’s role to prominence, a church that was an absolute minority, yet it came to be the church catholic; it vindicated a sabbatical space for the whole—kata-holos.

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