

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Donatisten! - Part 2

by Leonard Verduin

The Constantinian change had a profound impact on the Church, leading to the adoption of the sword of steel and the use of secular power to enforce Christian doctrine, which was protested by the Stepchildren.

Scripture: Matthew 5:44, Luke 22:23, John 18:36, Acts 5:29, Romans 12:19, 1 Corinthians 12:21, 2 Corinthians 10:4, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 6:12, Revelation 13:10

Topics: "Church And State", "Christian Persecution"

Description

Leonard Verduin preaches about the historical impact of the Constantinian change on the Church, highlighting the dangerous fusion of secular power with religious authority, leading to the distortion of the Church's mission and the persecution of dissenters. He emphasizes the need to recognize and reject the remnants of 'Christian sacralism' in modern Christianity, advocating for a clear separation of Church and State to uphold freedom of conscience and prevent religious tyranny. Verduin praises the efforts of the Stepchildren who resisted the Constantinian influence, seeking to restore the Church to its pre-Constantinian purity and rejecting the use of the sword in matters of faith.

Transcript

When Constantine came into the Church he did not check his imperial equipment at the door. No indeed, he came in with all the accoutrements that pertain to the secular regime. He was not just a Roman who had learned to bow to the Christ; he had been pontifex maximus hitherto, the High Priest of the Roman State religion, and he entered the Church with the understanding that he would be pontifex maximus there too. And just as his sword had flashed in defence of the old religion so would it now flash in defence of the new. This put a new and novel weapon in the hand of the Bride of Christ, the sword of steel. Now her battles would be fought in the fashion to which the Roman legions were accustomed. The implication was that He who had come "meek and lowly and riding upon a colt, the foal of an ass" would now come on a prancing war horse. Almost incredible though it is, men do not seem to have noticed how grotesque this was. Had it not been for the Roman precedent the change would have been unthinkable.

It is true, the grotesqueness of the new situation did, it seems, register to a degree with those who promoted the change, and it registered enough to make them try to file down the rough edges somewhat. They invented the ridiculous fiction that the Church did not really sacrifice her dignity when the emperor's sword flashed in her behalf, for it was the magistrate's man that actually drew the blood -- even though it

was at her behest!

Out of the words of Peter recorded in Luke 22:23, "Lord, here are two swords," the Church distilled the ridiculous doctrine that Jesus intended His Church to have two swords, the "sword of the Spirit" which the clergy wields, and "the sword of steel" which the soldier swings. By the year 1150 this formula of the two swords was already old, so old as to be unquestioned: "Two swords belong to Peter; one is in his hand, the other is at his command whenever it is needful to draw it . . . Both the spiritual and the material sword belong to the Church; the latter sword is drawn for the Church, the former by the Church. One belongs to the priest and the other to the soldiery; but this one is drawn at the orders of the priest." By this colossal piece of sophistry the Church made herself believe that she could order the life-blood of men to be let, all the while getting none of it on her skirt!

This monstrous doctrine was put forth in dead earnest all through medieval times. It is set forth in the Bull *Unam Sanctam* issued by Boniface in 1302. It remains the unrepudiated doctrine of the Catholic Church to this day. As Thomas Aquinas has it: "The State, through which earthly objectives are reached, must be subordinated to the Church; Church and State are two swords which God has given to Christendom for protection; both these swords however are by Him given to the pope and the temporal sword is then by the pope entrusted to the rulers of State."

The Constantinian change made short work of Jesus' words: "My kingdom is not of this world ... else would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered." It put Peter in the right for drawing the sword to promote the Cause and it put Jesus in the wrong for rebuking Peter for it. The "fallen" Church conveniently forgot that Jesus had been deeply displeased at the first suggestion of a second sword; it forgot that He had been so disturbed by Peter's rash act that He had stooped down to repair the damage Peter's sword had inflicted; it overlooked the fact that He had performed a miracle of healing, His last, to erase from the record the act so out of keeping with the work He came to do. The medieval Church boasted of being in the signature of this Peter -- well, it was more like him than it knew!

Nor was this doctrine of the two swords merely a piece of scholastic subtlety. It was said and meant in dead earnest, and practiced, too. All through medieval times the heads of "heretics" rolled in all directions and the earth was dampened with the blood of men, the air abused with the smell of the roasting flesh of men -- all in the signature of the Constantinian change. And at all times the priest stood by, to see to it that the secular power performed the gruesome assignment. In order to be able to live with herself, the Church regularly begged the executioner to "stop short of life and limb" -- a request that neither she nor he ever took seriously. The Church would have been wholly embarrassed if anyone had taken this bit of window-dressing seriously.

[I. The brutality and cruelty that accompanied the executions performed under the supervision of the "fallen" Church were too frightful for words. We shall give, but leave untranslated, the public announcement that went with the execution of a certain Stepchild named Michel: "Das Michel uf den mark gefiirt werdenn, im die zange abgehewenn unnd demnach 6 grif mit glÄ¼ginen zangen zu im grifenn und mit lebendigem lib in ein fÄ¼r geworfen und zu pulfor prent werdenn." It was considered one of the lesser punishments to have the tongue pierced, a stick of wood thrust through it, and so to stand in the public square for an hour or so. It is understandable that men who knew the Christ of the New Testament should begin to speak of the Church as "fallen."]

To the credit of the "heretics" it may be said that they never fell for this pious double talk, never let the Church proclaim with impunity the idea that because she did not actually draw the blood she was not guilty of murder. The Waldensians said caustically: "The priests actuate the secular arm and then think to be free from murder and they wish to be known as benefactors. Yes, just as did Annas and Caiaphas and the rest of the Pharisees in the time of Christ so does Innocent do in our times; they refrained from going into the house of Pilate lest they be defiled and in the meantime delivered Jesus up to the secular arm."

The horrible idea that the Church of Christ may move the wrist of the hand that holds the sword was, of course, carefully stated in the jurisprudence of the Middle Ages. None put it more succinctly than did a jurist of the early sixteenth century, Philips Wieland, who taught that "Heresy is punished by fire; the spiritual judge tries the case and the secular judge performs the execution." Centuries earlier the famous expert at Law, Philippe de Beaumanoir, had put it this way, a bit more lengthily:

If a lay person believes incorrectly he is to be returned to the true faith by instruction. If he refuses to believe but adheres instead to his wicked error then he shall be condemned as a heretic and burned. But in that event lay justice must come to the aid of the Holy Church; for when anyone is condemned as a heretic by the examinations conducted by the Holy Church then the Holy Church must leave him to lay justice and the lay justice must then burn him, seeing that the spiritual justice ought not to put anyone to death.

[m. The custom of executing heretics by fire rather than by some other means seems to have come up in connection with John 15:6: "If a man abide not in me [which was identified with not staying in the Church], he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."]

[n. In the original this passage (to which we shall return) runs as follows: "S' il a aucun lai qui mescroie en la foy, il soit radrecies a le vraie foi par enseignement; et s' il ne las veut croire, ancois se veut tenir en se malvese erreur, il soit justicies comme bougre et ars. Mais en tel cas doit aider le laie iustice a sainte Eglise, car quant aucun est condamnes comme bougre par l'examination de sainte Eglise, sainte Eglise le doit abandonner a le laie iustice et le laie iustice le doit ardoir, parce que le iustice espirituel ne doit nului metre a mort."17]

Such then was "Christendom." The "fall" of the Church had so changed the visage of the Bride of Christ as to make her unrecognizable. She who had been sent on a mission of healing and helping had taken on the features of the modern police State. We make this comparison deliberately and seriously. The modern totalitarian State has added nothing new, not even that which we now call "brainwashing." The medieval world was a world in which minorities were unwanted. It was a world in which the rights of speech and of assembly were, as we shall have occasion to see in a later chapter, rigidly curtailed. Medieval society was optionless society, as optionless as any totalitarianism of our times. A small number of "party members" ran the entire show; the common man was completely and effectively disfranchised. The parallel is frightening, as is the thought that in areas where the medieval monolithic society has not been successfully challenged the one totalitarianism readily makes way for the other.

The one encouraging fact is that there was at all times, all through the Middle Ages, a sustained protest against the distortions that had come with the Constantinian change -- and that this sustained protest finally and ultimately was able to blow apart the Constantinian colossus. In and with this protest the New Testament and its delineation of the Christian Church remained a part of the heritage of man.

To this the Stepchildren fell heir. Among them we find the ambition of the medieval "heretic" re-stated, to recover the Church of pre-Constantinian times. Among the Stepchildren we find therefore, from the very beginning, a studied attempt to expel the sword of steel from the affairs of the Church, an attempt to return the sword of the magistrate to its proper place. Among them we hear such cries as these: "All they have eternal punishment awaiting them who seek to sustain the Kingdom of God with recourse to the secular arm." Also: "In my opinion the rulers and their clergymen assign more to the magistrate than they should, for it is not the prerogative of any magistrate to sustain the Word of God by force, seeing that it is free."

Such then was the ideology to which the Stepchildren rallied.

We shall have occasion to see that the attempt to recover Paradise Lost lay at the heart of the program that made the Second Front necessary, and that every feature of the vision of the Stepchildren was but a working out of this central thrust. It was the Stepchildren's evaluation of the Constantinian change that stood between them and the Reformers, this in essence, this particularly.

For the Reformers were not minded to repudiate the Constantinian change. Their ambition was not to get rid of "Christian sacralism"; rather was it their ambition to overlay the "Christian sacralism" that was partial to Catholicism with a "Christian sacralism" that was partial to Protestantism. The record is entirely plain in this matter, as we shall discover in some detail in the course of these pages. Suffice it to say at this juncture that a Reformed minister was deposed in sixteenth-century Strasbourg for adhering to "a new and Anabaptist error" which consisted in this: "that the magistrate must leave every man to his own devices in regard to religion, no matter what he believes or teaches, so long as he does not disturb the outward civil quiet."o

[o. In a Ratspredigt preached by the Reformer Hedio for the benefit of the civil powers "tiber die Pflichten ' der Obrigkeit" he stated the "error" of the Stepchildren to be that "die weltlich oberheit solle mit jrem ampt sich christlichs thuns unnd der religion nit annemen. . . , es stand jnen nit zu; wan sie eusserlichen friden halten und gute policey, das man bey einander leben mage, so haben sie inen gnug gethon"]

The record shows very plainly that a frightful failure to understand the Stepchildren developed. We must by all means point this out; for unless we see through this misunderstanding, this failure to understand each other, we cannot hope to understand the Reformers' treatment of their Stepchildren. Unless we see through this misunderstanding we will be looking in the wrong place for the cause of the dissension; and this in turn will lead us to offer another, an erroneous, explanation. We must therefore look closely at the record touching this matter.

In the interrogations to which the Stepchildren were exposed, usually in prison, we constantly encounter the question: "Should there be a magistrate and should he sustain the Word of God?" It is plain that for the questioner this is one question; but for the one questioned this was two questions. For the questioner a simple yes and a plain no were the alternatives; for the answerer it was a matter of yes and no, yes to the question whether there should be such a thing as a civil ruler and no to the question whether it is his assignment to sustain the Word of God. For the questioner a negative answer to the question whether the magistrate has the duty to sustain the Word of God with his sword was tantamount to a statement that there should be no magistrate.

We who have lived for so long in a climate in which Church and State are separate institutions will have difficulty understanding how this misunderstanding could come about and persist so. But it did come about, and this is one of the darkest features of a dismal story. Let us explore the matter further.

For the man who stands in the Constantinian tradition, the things we call "Church" and "State" are essentially a single entity, the warp and the woof of a single fabric. The "parish" is in the tradition of Constantinianism at one and the same time a religious and a political unit. (Something of this usage survives in some of the southern States, where what we call counties are still referred to as parishes, the word having sloughed off its ecclesiastical connotation). The gemeente is, in the Dutch tradition of Constantinianism, at one and the same time a religious or ecclesiastical entity and a socio-political one. (This usage survives in the Netherlands to this day, where one never knows whether gemeente stands for the one or for the other.)

This fact will go far to explain the otherwise astounding fact that when the Stepchildren said that the sword had to quit the Church their opponents thought they heard them say that the sword has no proper place in human society. When the Stepchildren said that the idea of a sword in the affairs of the Church is an anomaly the Reformers thought they had heard them say that the sword has no rightful place in the community. As far as we have been able to make out no one in the Second Front ever advocated the elimination of the civil power from the society of men (they did in some cases tend to say that capital punishment was wrong -- a matter in which many would in our day concur -- but that is not the same as to deny the sword function). However, as far as we have been able to discern every last man among the Stepchildren stood for the expulsion of the sword function from the affairs of religion. It was because their foes were unable in their thinking to combine these two positions that the legend was born that the Stepchildren advocated the overthrow of the civil rule, a legend that finds its classic expression in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, to the unending embarrassment of those Churches that adhere to this Confession.

One can understand this failure to communicate if he will for the moment divest himself of the terminology of "Church" and "State," and then attempt to, discuss the matter. Without these terms, or others of like value, it is indeed difficult to distinguish between a clamor for the cessation of the sword function in things of the faith and a clamor for its cessation überhaupt.

Luther fell into the misunderstanding of which we are speaking. Mindful of the fact that the ancient Donatists had resisted the invasion of the civil power into the affairs of the Church, he ascribed to them the same nihilism that men thought to detect in the Stepchildren. He wrote, "The Donatists condemned the secular rule which we must allow to remain." In this Luther was, of course, in error historically, for there is no evidence that the original Donatists condemned the secular rule; there is no hint of anti-imperial ambition among them, no nihilism. How then came Luther to blunder so in the matter of history? The answer is that for twelve centuries the story had been around that he who challenges "Christian sacralism" challenges government as such; the Donatists had challenged emerging "Christian sacralism," hence the Donatists had been political nihilists! This was spurious logic on Luther's part, as spurious as was the logic that laid the same charge at the doorstep of the Stepchildren. The charge was, and is, false. When the Reformers asserted that the people of the Second Front "seek to overthrow government" they did them a gross injustice.

Perhaps the following is enough, for the space of this chapter, to prove that the Stepchildren were not nihilists. A Protestant minister, named Tilemann Noll, stole away one night to visit a conventicle of the Stepchildren, primarily, so he said, to have first-hand knowledge as to what went on there. (He was subsequently taken in hand by a Church court and made to confess in public his grave sin. At that, it almost cost him his cloth. What displeased his superiors especially was that on the Sunday after his visit to the nocturnal gathering of the "heretics" he had told his own parishioners that he had discovered that he

had thus far preached nothing but the cold letter of the Scripture, den toten buchstaben. Part of his sentence was -- and this throws an interesting light upon a matter that will engage us in a subsequent chapter, the latitudinarianism concerning conduct that marked the camp of the Reform -- that he "shall keep himself apart from all gay parties and drinking sprees, for a whole year, upon pain of losing his ministerial status.") Upon pastor Noll's return from the conventicle he testified that of all that had transpired at the conventicle "the prayer pleased me the most, for they prayed for the needs of all Christendom, also for the emperor, the king, the nobles and princes, that God might give them wisdom " It would appear that people who pray in that vein are not addicted to anything resembling an ambition "to overthrow the government." To charge them with this nevertheless was a gross injustice. It was an accusation born not out of observation but out of the thought-habits of an ancient sacralism.

The Reformers, we have said, were not ready to dismiss the sword of the magistrate from the affairs of religion. They justified, to the hilt, the idea that the sword of the civil ruler must throw the "heretic" in line and keep him there. We need only to quote from the writings of Urbanus Rhegius, Luther's trusted associate, in support of this. He said, "When heresy breaks forth . . . then the magistrate must punish not with less but with greater vigor than is employed against other evil-doers, robbers, murderers, thieves, and the like."¹⁸

The stance of the Reformers is plain enough from the following quotation, also from the pen of Rhegius:

God raises up the magistracy against heretics, faction-makers, and schismatics in the Christian Church in order that Hagar may be flogged by Sarah [this allegory Rhegius had borrowed from the writings of Augustine -- to which we shall return in a later chapter]. The Donatists murder men's souls, make them go to eternal death; and then they complain when men punish them with temporal death. Therefore a Christian magistrate must make it his first concern to keep the Christian religion pure All who know history will know what has been done in this matter by such men as Constantine, Marianus, Theodosius, Charlemagne and others.¹⁹

We dare say that no Protestant, at least no Protestant 'in the New World, will be able to be at peace with the position set forth in these quotations. And yet are they typical of the Reformers, who one and all refused to endorse the Stepchildren's contention that the sword is out of bounds when it invades the area of religious faith.

Since this study is published under the auspices of a Foundation that calls itself by the name of one of the major Reformers, John Calvin, it will be in place to take a close look at his thinking in regard to the matter in hand. We shall test him at two points, the Servetus episode and his reaction to the Stepchildren's first doctrinal manifesto, promulgated at Schlatten am -Rande (also known as Schleithem) in the year 1527.

Although Servetus was not typical of the Stepchildren as such, his case does throw a great deal of light upon the mind of John Calvin in regard to the matter we are discussing. For that reason this material deserves a place in this study, the more so since the thinking that led to the burning of Servetus was of a piece with the thinking that made the life of the Stepchildren so hard.

The burning of Servetus -- let it be said with utmost clarity -- was a deed for which Calvin must be held largely responsible, It was not done in spite of Calvin, as some over-ardent admirers of his are wont to say. He planned it beforehand and maneuvered it from start to finish. It occurred because of him and not in spite of him. After it had taken place Calvin defended it, with every possible and impossible argument. There is every reason to believe that if it had not been for the fact that public opinion was beginning to run

against this kind of thing there would have been many more such burnings. The event was the direct result of the sacralism to which Calvin remained committed, a sacralism which he never discarded.

In Calvin's defence it might be said, and not without some justification, that since he arrived on the scene somewhat late, after the first decade, after the neo-Constantinianism into which the Reformation drifted had developed, he really didn't have much choice in the matter. The die was already cast when he appeared on the scene; the Second Front had already been opened. Calvin never was in the position in which Luther and Zwingli had been, in those early days when the heirs of medieval Restitutionism were still looking on hopefully. When Calvin entered upon his life's task the Reformation had already lost those who had been conditioned by the medieval rebellion against "Christian sacralism." If it was too radical for Luther to go the way of Restitutionism it was much too radical for Calvin, who came a bit later. If it was too much to expect Luther to pry himself loose from twelve centuries of history, it was much too much for Calvin to come clear of twelve centuries plus a very important decade.

Be that as it may, the Servetus execution took place in a sacralist setting and was the result of sacralist thinking. It was medieval to the core. It reveals a Constantinian determination. Here was a man who posed no threat to civil serenity in Geneva -- unless of course it be granted that anyone who deviates from the orthodoxy expoused by the State is ipso facto a threat to that civil serenity. Servetus started no parades, made no speeches, carried no placards, had no political ambitions. He did have some erratic ideas touching the doctrine of the Trinity; and he entertained some deviating notions concerning baptism, especially infant baptism. No doubt there was something of the spiritual iconoclast in him, as there is in all men of genius (Servetus was something of a scientific genius in that he anticipated the idea of the circulatory course of the blood). But he was not a revolutionary in the political sense. He was indeed "off the beam" in matters of religious doctrine, but he did not deserve to be arrested or executed -- a judgment in which the man of sacralist convictions cannot of course concur. Only in a sacralist climate would men deal in such a way with such a man.

[p. In the sacral pattern heresy is automatically sedition. The Codes of Justinian decreed that "Heresy shall be construed to be an offence against the civil order" (XVI, 5: 40). It was this dogmatism that led to the burning of Servetus. It has been said that Calvin sought, late in the trial, to have sentence commuted to the effect that some mode of execution other than by fire would be Servetus' lot. The reason for this suggestion was that Calvin wanted Servetus eliminated as an offender against the civil order. Death by fire was for offenders in the area of religion. Hence Calvin's concern in the matter. It was this same sensitivity that made Margaret of Parma, in 1567, specify death by hanging for Guido de Bres. It would look better to have de Bres destroyed as a seditionist than as a heretic; hence death by the noose rather than by the flame. So also in the case of Servetus.]

If the very burning of the unhappy Spaniard proves that Calvin's Geneva was a sacral State and Geneva's Calvin a sacralist thinker, the literature that sprang up in defence of the awful deed makes it doubly clear.

When the news was out that Servetus had died in the fire, a cry of outrage resounded over most of Europe. It is true that many of the leaders of the Reform applauded the burning (Melanchthon, for example, wrote that "the Church owes and always will owe a debt of gratitude to you for having put the heretic to death"); although it is also true that some, even in Geneva itself, refused to put their names to a document supporting the execution. But there was a chorus of protest that issued at once from those circles that had been deeply influenced by the humanizing tendencies of the times. Contrary to the legend that is kept alive by over-ardent admirers of Calvin, the spirit of the age was already relegating such

inhumanity to the limbo of the past. The Renaissance had not been without its fruitage of toleration.

There is reason to believe that Calvin and those about him who had engineered the Servetus killing had a vague foreboding that the news of the awful incident would cost them plenty. They seem to have been on the defensive from the moment the ashes of the fire had cooled. They began to work furiously on a book which was supposed to calm the spirits and prevent a too great exodus. Early in 1554, a matter of months after Servetus had expired (he had died on October 27, 1553), a Defence (the full title was *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra Trinitate*) rolled from the presses of Oliva Roberti Stephani. If Calvin and his colleagues had expected this publication to serve as oil on the troubled waters they were in for an unpleasant surprise, for its impact was more like oil on a fire. Almost at once (it was in early March) a scathing denunciation of the burning, as well as of the whole line of reasoning that had produced it, came from an unnamed press (it was published anonymously, moreover -- such were the times that it was not safe to put one's name to a publication of that import) with the title *De Haereticis an sint persequendi* (whether heretics are to be liquidated). The Genevans were of course unwilling to let this be the last word; and so in early August they came out with a second publication, bearing the title *De Haereticis a civili Magistratu puniendis adversus Martini Bellii* (whether heretics should be punished by the civil ruler, against Martin Bellius, who, they suspected, was the author of the anonymous publication against which they were reacting).

[q. From Calvin's correspondence of the time we sense a feeling of insecurity, arising over the reception given to the news of the Servetus liquidation. In a letter dated October 5, 1554 he cried on the shoulder of a friend: "If you knew but the tenth part of how I have been hurt by these shameful calumnies you would, kind as you are, groan beneath the burden of grief by which I am being tried. Dogs bark at me from every Side; whatever of slander they can invent is being hurled at me. Actually the unfriendly ones and the critical in our own camp attack me even more fiercely than the acknowledged foes in the papal company. Surely I have not deserved this at the hands of the Church!" It seems that the dissatisfaction even in Geneva itself was great enough to occasion the postponement of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was postponed at least once, and perhaps as much as three times, in that season.]

Although Calvin and Beza complained bitterly about the tone of the anonymous criticism of what had happened, anyone who reads it will have to agree that although it does not mince matters it is written with a poise that was quite unusual in those times and keeps itself from railing and invective in a surprising way. One must agree with a recent Dutch scholar as he says that "It is likely that future generations as they judge of the matter, will ascribe the violent tone of Calvin and Beza's reply to it to a conscious or unconscious sense of weakness rather than a well-grounded conviction that their position was right."

In the reply to the anonymous critic the burning of Servetus was defended, to the hilt, as well as the whole sacralist line of thought that had spawned the awful deed. Naturally there were proof-texts; and, again naturally, they were derived primarily from the Old Testament.

As the Genevan sacralists (Beza seems to have been the principal author) searched the New Testament for support, they (and again very naturally) were unable to come up with much. One is certainly not impressed with Beza's "proof-text" drawn from the Book of Acts: "With what power, pray, did Peter put to death Ananias and Sapphira? And with what power did Paul smite Elymas blind? Was it with the power that is vested in the Church? Of course not. Well then, it must have been with the power that is vested in the magistrate, there being no third kind of power." One gets the impression that this is a matter of a drowning man clutching at straws. This is atrocious hermeneutics and is far from responsible interpretation

of Scripture. We shall not dignify this specious argument with more than the reminder that the part which Peter played in the matter of Ananias and Sapphira finds no parallel at all in the part which the Genevans had played in the death of Servetus. Moreover, it is news indeed that "Paul blinded Elymas," and that this episode had been paralleled in the Servetus burning!

[r. Calvin tried hard to keep up his spirits in the matter, writing to his friend Sulzer at Basel that "This book filled with slander against me has been patched together in order that a sudden opposition to me might occur. The Senate has decided to put it in my hands for study. It was not hard for me to cut short its slander: I was even able to turn it to my own profit"]

The plain fact is that Beza cum suis reeled before the onslaughts of "Bellius." What is there to say to a passage like the following?

Who would not mistake the Christ for a moloch or some such god if indeed he delights in human sacrifice . . . ? Imagine him to be present, in the capacity of constable, to announce the sentence and light the fire . . . ! "Oh Christ, thou creator and king of all the earth, dost thou not see these things? Art thou so changed completely, become thus cruel and contrary to thine own proper self . . . ? Dost thou command that those who do not understand thy commandments and institutions as yet, are to be choked in water, struck until the bowels gush forth, these then strewn with salt, to be struck with the sword or made to roast over small fire, with every torment martyred in as drawn out a manner as possible? Ah Christ, dost thou indeed command such things and dost thou approve of them when they are done? Are they indeed thy lieutenants who officiate at such burned sacrifice? Dost thou allow thyself to be seen at the scene of such butchery? Dost thou then verily eat human flesh, Oh Christ? If thou doest such things forsooth, or orderest them done, then what, pray what, hast thou left for the devil to do?"

What did Beza have to say to this sharp but not uninspired voice? Nothing more than this: "Of all the blasphemous and impudent gabs!" (The text from which we quote, a Dutch translation, of which we shall speak presently, made by a man whose knowledge of the Latin was superb, whose translation can therefore be trusted, has: "O des lasterigen ende onbeschaemden becx!") This rejoinder, needless to say, is not in the idiom of good theological discussion; it is a classic of ad hominem, and bespeaks only weakness and frustration.

[s. In the sentences whereby heretics were sent to the stake it was usually specified that the execution was to be by "small fire." It seems that in the case of Servetus green wood was used, so that it took three hours before he was pronounced dead.]

The tract which we are discussing gains in Significance for our present purpose when it is known that early in the seventeenth century a spiritual son and heir of Genevan sacralism, one Johannes Bogerman (assisted by a ministerial colleague), the man who was destined two decades later to chair the Great Synod of Dordt, republished it, in the Dutch translation to which we have already referred, at Franeker and on the presses of Gillis Van den Rade, printer for the Staten Generaal.^t Evidently Bogerman thought that Beza's book was still good reading, good enough to be reprinted and recirculated. That already speaks volumes; for it indicates that the sacralism that had precipitated the burning of Servetus, as well as the literature that came forth in support thereof, was still regnant in Dutch Reformed circles.

[t. The public University of Amsterdam has a copy of this Dutch translation, which we were permitted to have and to use in the United States, through the facilities of the University of Michigan's Inter-library Loan service. It is from this volume that we quote.]

The plot thickens when it is known what it was that made Bogerman put Beza in a new suit. From the lengthy introduction prefixed to the translation we learn that this was the occasion. Bogerman and his ministerial associates at Groningen were just then starting a crusade against a group of Anabaptists who were holding worship services in the quiet of their own houses. The translation was made to get the magistrates to "Do your duty to the God who has put the sword into your hands Strike down valiantly these monsters in the guise of men!" From the lengthy introduction we learn that some years earlier, while Bogerman was stationed at Sneek, he had been instrumental in getting the magistrates to do their "duty" by driving apart a similar nest of "heretics." On that occasion he had come, uninvited and arm in arm with the constable, into the meeting, had, likewise uninvited, offered a lengthy prayer for the benefit of these "heretics" and had, once more without being asked, given them the benefit of a long "sermon," in which all their "errors" were neatly dissected. The most pathetic thing in the whole sorry account is that Bogerman wrote all this in the full confidence that his readers would applaud him for these feats of faithfulness. So sacralist was the thinking!

Beza had written, and Bogerman revived it, that the freedom of conscience for which the critics of the Servetus affair were clamoring was "worse than the tyranny of the pope, as much worse as anarchy is worse than tyranny."

The medieval doctrine of the "two swords" was roundly endorsed by Beza and Bogerman. We read that "just as the members of the body have, in spite of their several functions, one single assignment in one body, so also in regard to the Church, to the support of which both the civil power and the ecclesiastical have been divinely commissioned Let this then be the conclusion of this argument: those who would bar the Christian magistracy from the care of religion and especially from the punishment of heretics, condemn the plain Word of God, reject the authority of the ages [a not very Protestant argument, be it noted, coming too close for comfort to the Catholic idea of "tradition"], and as a consequence seek the total destruction and extermination of the Church."

There is a great temptation (but no need) to dwell longer on the Servetus matter and the literature produced in support of it. Enough has been said to make it quite apparent that the final strains of the Reformation were played in the register of "Christian sacralism." If more is needed we have only to point to the fact that the Belgic Confession lays upon the magistrate the "duties" which had led to the burning. It was not until the acids of time had bitten deep into the sacralist pattern that Article 36 began to embarrass Reformed people, and that did not take place until comparatively recent times. It did not take place in the Netherlands until the establishment status of the Hervormde Kerk had been made fictitious by the Secessions.

Calvin's essentially sacral conception becomes apparent further in his reaction to the Anabaptists' manifesto promulgated at Schlatten am Rande in the year 1527. We pause for a brief examination of it and of Calvin's response to it.²⁰

One of the points made in the Schlatten am Rande statement has to do with the sword function, in connection with the Church. It reads as follows:

The sword is an ordinance of God outside the perfection of Christ; the Princes and Rulers of the world are ordained for the punishment of evil-doers and for putting them to death. But within the perfection of Christ excommunication is the ultimate in the way of punishment, physical death being not included.

We would submit that for any man who no longer thinks in terms of "Christian sacralism" this formulation is right and proper. The sword is said to be a divine institution, with power to coerce, if need be to inflict the death penalty. But this sword, so it is said, has no coercive assignment inside the Church; emphatically not, for in this area the highest sentence is excommunication. One would expect all right-thinking men to go along with this. It is true, the expression "the perfection of Christ" is a bit strange; but it must be kept in mind that those who were gathered at Schlatten am Rande were pioneering and had to create a vocabulary. The terminology that comes at once to our minds was not yet current; the terms "Church" and "State" were as yet undifferentiated. If for "the perfection of Christ" we substitute "the Church of Christ" (as we may) then this delineation of the functions of the two entities is altogether acceptable.

But not in the ears of a man of sacralist thought-habits. Calvin not only thrust Schlatten am Rande to one side but volunteered to refute it in print, saying: "The principal task, of the magistrates is not the business of keeping their subjects ' in peace as to the body; rather is it to bring about that God is served and honored in their domains." For: "As the magistrates have the duty of purging the Church of offences by bodily punishments and coercions so do the ministers have the duty of assisting the magistrates by reducing the number of those who offend." Calvin rebuked Schlatten am Rande, saying, "The hand cannot say to the foot, I have no need of thee."u Knowing full well that the authors of the manifesto had a way of going back to pre-Constantinian times, Calvin seeks to make them realize that they have no right to do so. For him the Constantinian change was a big improvement upon those earlier times, "those earlier days when the dignity of the Church still lay hidden," an idea which Calvin, as we shall see, owed to Augustine, that prime apologete for "Christian sacralism."

[u. In so applying the words of 1 Corinthians 12:21, Calvin reveals his sacralist attitude; for him Church and State are but two aspects of one and the same thing. He will not hear of any separation. And in this Calvin was like all the rest of the Reformers. One must agree with Karl Rieker as he says, in his *Die Rechtliche Stellung der Evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands . . .* : "Es handelt sich also fÃ¼r die Reformatoren nicht urn das Verhaltnis zweier Gemeinwesen 7.U einander; sie kennen Ã¼berhaupt nur eine Gemeinwesen, eine umfassende Verbandseinheit und das ist die Christenheit . . . In diesem Stuck sind also die Reformatoren nicht modern, sondern gut mittelalterlich" (pp. 53f., italics are Rieker's). One must agree also with Georges de Lagarde, who in his *Recherches sur l'esprit politique de la Reforme* declares that "L' Eglise calviniste n'est pas une societe independent; . . . l'Eglise et l'Etat ne devaient former qu'un seul et meme etre."]

In fine, Calvin's reply to Schlatten am Rande was: "We ought not to shut out from among us the institution of civil justice nor drive it out of the Church" ("ny le chasser hors de l'Eglise"). In passing the reader will note that at this point Calvin falls into the fallacy of which we spoke earlier, namely of thinking that, when the Stepchildren clamored for the expulsion of the civil power from the Church, they were at the same time asking that it be terminated in the civil area. Calvin's sacralist thinking made it impossible for him to distinguish between terminating the civil rule and expelling it from the affairs of the faith.

From the monism that is reflected here Calvin never escaped. In his way of thinking, what we now call the Church and what we now call the State are woven into a single fabric; together they constitute a single entity. It was this monism that made it impossible for Calvin to understand what the Stepchildren were driving at. It was this monism that found expression in the creeds that grew up under his influence.

One can always learn where a man stands in regard to the tensions that came to expression between the Reformers and their Stepchildren if we ask him what he thinks of the Constantinian change as such.

Exponents of "Christian sacralism" look upon the events of Constantine's day as the beginning of the golden age; Restitutionists look upon them as the end of the golden age.

That Augustine was of the former category we have intimated, and we shall have occasion to feel his pulse again. That Calvin was of the same school has been shown, and will be shown in greater detail in later chapters of this volume. That Bogerman was of a similar mind we already know; the following passage from his hand will make the matter clearer still:

The service of the magistrate in the matter of the care of religion began in the New Testament times with Constantine the Great . . . , seeing that the preceeding rulers were heathen and hostile to the Church and that Constantine put forth proper zeal to procure for the Church outward peace and the true doctrine together with opposition for the teachings which he considered heretical.

(In passing it may be of interest to know that such lavish praise for the man to whom the Stepchildren referred as "that dragon" was too much for them. They shot back that Constantine had been an adulterer -- to which Bogerman replied "So was David, and a murderer moreover.")

This assessment of the Constantinian change was ingrained in the Reformed tradition. How they felt about it at the Synod of Dordt may be gathered from the lavish praise bestowed upon the civil power, which had convened the Great Synod, for "walking in the footsteps of your illustrious forbears, Constantine, Theodosius, etc."

Not only were the leaders of the Reform committed to Constantinianism, they also welcomed every invasion of the sword into the affairs of the faith (provided of course that the magistrate supported the right religion). They constantly urged the magistrate to draw the blood of the opposition. When Edward the Sixth came to the throne in England, Henry Bullinger, successor to Zwingli in the Swiss Reformation, jubilated (we are able to quote him in an ancient English translation):

Blessed be that bontuous lorde, which hath not suffered the prynces, whome by his divine providence he hath made and ordoned to be the supreme gouvernors of hys church, immediately under hym . . . to erre and bee deceved any longer, but dyd most mercyfull open their eyes to loke upon that comfortable sonne of rightuousness and lyght of the truth who shall with all prudence shed the blade of them that dyd shed the innocent bloode 21

(In passing be it noted that if this spirit had been allowed to continue unabated, if this theology had not eroded away, there would have been no end to the religious wars of extermination.)

We spoke of erosion. Erosion is a slow process, and remnants of the Constantinian heritage were carried to the shores of the New World. Some of the colonies on the Atlantic seaboard excluded by law "all Ranters and Quakers and other notorious heretics." But there was also the leaven of the Stepchildren brought to these shores. The citizens of Providence refused to go along with the illiberal policy, saying that freedom of conscience was their "most prized possession." Thereupon the Massachusetts Commissioners retorted that these sectaries "tend to the very absolute cutting down and overturn of all civil government among you."

But erosion is also persistent. The colossus of Constantinianism fell, and as far as the New World is concerned, "great was the fall thereof." The First Amendment of the Federal Constitution, which provided that "Congress shall make no law establishing religion nor prohibit the free exercise thereof" was the death

sentence of "Christian sacralism." This Amendment is a Monroe Doctrine in which the soil of the New World is closed to sacralist plantings from the Old World.

No doubt the very experience of carving out a new civilization in the wilderness hastened the day of the demise of Constantinianism in the New World. At any rate it lingered on much longer in Europe, where it has been said only lately that "The end of the Constantinian Age has come." Within very recent times, however, an exponent of the Reformation tradition in the Netherlands gave clear evidence that in his mind Constantinianism was still very right and proper. We find this evidenced in his assessment of the Constantinian change. Wrote Dr. Abraham Kuyper:

When the first contest eventuated in this that the emperor bowed to Jesus, then . . . the kingship of Christ began to be triumphant in society The kingship of Christ from this time on stood as a direction-giving power above the imperial power, which, in order to strengthen its influence, tried for an ever-increasingly close integration with the kingship of Jesus When in the fourth century persecution ceased and the imperial power showed a readiness to accommodate itself to Jesus, then the basic victory became apparent This principal victory continued on during the entire course of the long long period known as the Middle Ages.v

Wherever there are remnants of Constantinianism there one detects a sort of nostalgia for what for these people were "the good old times," the days of "Christian sacralism"; wherever the Constantinian formula has been effectively repudiated there this nostalgia does not occur; in its place one finds a nostalgia for the world depicted in the New Testament. Among the so-called Younger Churches, where there is no Constantinian tradition, separation of Church and State is taken for granted. It seems safe to conclude that if the cause of Christ still has a future (and we have His word for it that it has) it will be in the climate of the composite society. This is but to say that it will be in the kind of world for which the Stepchildren agonized, an activity that earned them the hateful name of "Neo-Donatists."

[v. A curious monism comes to expression here. The confluence of Church and State in the days of Constantine (which Kuyper celebrates as a great triumph) required the rule-right that comes to expression in the State to coalesce with the rule-right that comes to expression in the Church. This monism, if allowed to go its way, will cause men to slide imperceptibly from the common grace of God (which has given us the State) to the special grace of God (which gives us the Church). It will cause men to slide imperceptibly from the sonship that results from the Creator-creature relationship to the sonship that results from the Redeemer-redeemed relationship. This monism bites as a caustic into the distinction of General Revelation and Special Revelation. It tends to erase the distinction between Volk and Volk Gottes. It is not surprising that the Stepchildren, who opposed this insidious monism consistently, were spitefully called dualists by those who continued to adhere to it!22]

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/leonard-verduin/reformers-and-their-stepchildren-donatisten-part-2/>

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