

# Religious freedom and the twofold work of God in the world

Thomas K Johnson<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In light of the high level of documentation of the contribution of freedom of religion to societal well-being, and in view of the extraordinary levels of religiously motivated violence and oppression, it would be worthwhile for evangelicals to reformulate the Reformation “Two Kingdoms” theory of social ethics in a manner that can be appropriated throughout the Body of Christ and perhaps be contributed from the Christian community into the broader global political culture. As a small step in this direction, we can begin to talk about the “Twofold Work of God in the World” and make this theme a standard part of Christian ethics.

**Keywords** Religious freedom, theology.

## 1. Truths about society, religion, and culture

There are two overarching truths about our world that should, I think, influence many of our discussions about religion and public life. The first truth is that religious persecution does not only hurt or kill individuals, disrupt families, and decimate religious communities; the lack of religious freedom is closely associated with and contributes to a wide range of social maladies, whereas practiced freedom of religion is associated with and contributes to many aspects of a healthy society and to the entirety of the well-being of a society.<sup>2</sup> This is well-documented social science. The second overarching truth is that the repression of religious freedom, including religiously motivated violence, is extremely high today, perhaps higher than in most previous millennia, even if such historical generalizations are hard to document. And the problem is almost certainly rising.<sup>3</sup> But from the middle of

<sup>1</sup> Thomas K. Johnson, PhD (\*1954) is Doctoral Professor of Theology and Interdisciplinary Studies (Olivet University) and a member of the editorial board of URF. He lives in Prague and is the author of *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (2008), available as a free download at [www.bucer.eu/international](http://www.bucer.eu/international). This paper is an edited version of a speech given at the International Consultation on Religious Freedom Research held by the International Institute for Religious Freedom in Istanbul, Turkey, March 16-18, 2013. Article received: 14 May 2013; Accepted: 13 Aug. 2013. American spelling used. Contact: [Johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com](mailto:Johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> See Brian J. Grim, Religious freedom and social well-being: A critical appraisal, *IJRF* 2:1, 2009, 37-46; see also Timothy Samuel Shah et al, *Religious freedom: Why now? Defending an embattled human right* (Princeton, NJ, USA: The Witherspoon Institute, 2012), 86 p.

<sup>3</sup> See Brian J. Grim, Rising restrictions on religion: Context, statistics, and implications, *IJRF* 5:1, 2012,

these two truths arises an important question: why is it that there are pockets in the world that have enjoyed significant levels of freedom of religion for decades if not centuries? My great grandparents, grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren have had the distinct, really extraordinary privilege of living in one of those relatively small pockets in the world which enjoy the wide-ranging benefits of freedom of religion. Why do those pockets exist? And what can be done to expand them to include more people?

Of course one commonly hears that freedom of religion in the West arose out of a social compromise or even a vague social contract among religions and the western Enlightenment or between religions and secularism, such that secularism or a secular Enlightenment becomes the guarantor of religious freedom.<sup>4</sup> But this description assumes that most or all religions have an inherent drive toward a type of theocracy that would rob adherents of other religions of the right to freely practice their convictions and ignores many crucial facts of religious history. One only has to mention that a man like Roger Williams was moved by deep religious zeal to write freedom of religion into the constitution of his state, Rhode Island, to see the essential flaw in the commonly painted big picture.<sup>5</sup> And if freedom of religion is dependent on secularism, then most of the human race is doomed to never experience fundamental freedoms, for secularism never has and probably never will extend itself to more than a small minority of the human race. The world today is extremely religious. We need a different narrative and sociological paradigm to describe the origins of life-giving freedom of religion, a paradigm we will be able to promote today.

To understand one of the ways in which freedom of religion became a supposedly secular conviction one must notice the way in which deep convictions with religious roots, but which do not directly have to do with our relation with God or the divine, often migrate from the realm of religion to become ongoing moral themes in a broader culture which then give an orientation and direction to both economic and political behavior.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon which Max Weber described in

---

17-33.

<sup>4</sup> One of the recent examples of this narrative coming from the pen of a prominent thinker is found in an interview with the important Austrian social philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann, "Religionen sind ja keine Anleitung zum guten Leben," January 26, 2013, [www.derStandard.at](http://www.derStandard.at).

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Schirrmacher, Christianity and democracy, IJRF 2:2, 2009, 73-85, for documentation.

<sup>6</sup> I am using a distinction between ultimate and penultimate themes in religions and worldviews, recognizing that this distinction is not always 100% clear and that the relation between the ultimate and penultimate in most religions and worldviews is dynamic. For the background for this type of analysis see Thomas K. Johnson, *Dialogue with Kierkegaard in Protestant theology: Donald Bloesch, Francis Schaeffer, and Helmut Thielicke*, MBS Text 175, available at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu). In addition to responding to generally secular interpretations of the origins of religious freedom, the perspective I am arguing here is a response to the theory clearly articulated by Karl Marx and echoing through much of secular-

*The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* that moral themes arising in the Protestant Reformation shaped northern European thinking and feeling about work ethics and the economy, is far from the only time this has occurred.<sup>7</sup> The contribution of a package of ideas, values, and perceptions of moral duty to a culture is one of the several relations that religions have to cultures, and this is one of the several relations of Christianity to culture which I advocate as a Christian theologian.<sup>8</sup> *This is one of the crucial roots of religious freedom in those pockets of the world's population which not only enjoy freedom of religion but also the wide-ranging social, moral, political, and economic benefits flowing from freedom of religion.*

## 2. Directly perceived moral duties

There are certain ear-catching lines in the New Testament that are so poignant that they have made defining moral contributions in the history of cultures, even among people who might not accept specifically Christian claims such as the incarnation or the resurrection. For example, many perceive a direct, inherent moral authority when they hear Jesus say, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21)<sup>9</sup> Pontius Pilate seems to have had this experience of

---

ism, that economic relations determine our moral, cultural, and religious convictions. For example, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx claimed that class identity, which arises from economic relations, controls the convictions of a social class in such important realms as ethics, jurisprudence, family, and education. Ironically, it is the history of Communism which provides some of the best evidence that economic and political behavior (including religious freedom or persecution) is heavily shaped or even controlled by the sort of convictions Marx thought were controlled by economic factors. Globally, cultural values and convictions shape and or even direct political, legal, and economic decisions.

<sup>7</sup> The Protestant work ethic was often summarized under the three values of "diligence, honesty, and thrift," with the background assumption that work is a calling of God, which together form a stark contrast with modern consumerism. Max Weber's study was originally published as an essay entitled "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus" in 1904 and 1905 in volumes XX and XXI of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. It was republished in 1920 in German as the first part of Weber's series *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. It was published in English as *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, (New York, Scribner, 1958; reprint New York, Dover, 2003). My application of themes from Weber to our time appeared as *The spirit of the Protestant work ethic and the world economic crisis*, MBS Text 137, 2009. There have been many criticisms of Weber's thesis, and of the version of it promoted by R. H. Tawney. I think the most important criticism is that Weber seriously misunderstood classical Protestant theology and especially the doctrine of election.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas K. Johnson, Christ and culture, *ERT*, 35:1, Jan., 2011. I have repeatedly described four dimensions of the way the biblical message relates to cultures, including correlation, critique, construction, and contribution. Cultural renewal comes by means of the combination of all four relations of the biblical message to cultures.

<sup>9</sup> Of course Jesus' question about "whose image" was on the coin has always led reflective hearers to consider that even Caesar was a normal mortal, created in the image of God, simultaneously undermining the cult of Caesar worship while also affirming Caesar's real but delegated authority. The biblical quotations in this paragraph undermine totalitarianism.

direct moral authority when Jesus said to him, “You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.” (John 19:11) The apostle Paul later codified these direct moral experiences into a capsule political theory when he wrote, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Romans 13:1) Suddenly government authorities are perceived as having both authority from God and accountability to God, while there are also realms of human life which belong directly to God over which government has no authority, all communicated in such compact phrases that almost anyone can remember them, allowing many to meditate on their meaning. This is from Jesus, but Jesus did not ask these hearers to first believe something about him before accepting these particular moral principles. These words have a direct and inherent moral authority.<sup>10</sup>

This is, I think, one of the crucial cultural origins of freedom of religion. On the one hand, this moral/political package obviously has religious roots, the teaching of Jesus, but on the other hand, these moral perceptions and political convictions are not tightly tied to specific beliefs about Jesus or God, nor are they tightly tied to belonging to a particular religious community. They are the kind of convictions that are ideally suited to be transferred from the specific realm of faith into the broad stream of a moral/cultural inheritance that leads people both to write declarations and laws protecting freedom of religion and then to perceive those declarations and laws as legitimate and worthy of enforcement. This is one of the important means of God’s common grace with a result today that some two billion people enjoy significant religious freedom, even though this work of God’s grace has not yet been extended to the majority of the world’s population.

### **3. Formulating a paradigm**

If this generalized account of the historical/cultural origins of religious freedom is even ten percent accurate, it would be extraordinarily worthwhile to ponder how we might more consciously engage in this process that has already been going on for two millennia. Perhaps, in a generation or two, a higher percentage of our neighbors might benefit from this crucial freedom. To this end, we should glance at how these moral perceptions have been thematized historically in Christian ethics and even at how we might do so in the future.

---

<sup>10</sup> In this case the properly basic moral authority of these biblical statements arises from the way in which they activate moral principles which were already potentially present (but perhaps suppressed) in human consciousness because of the general revelation of God’s moral law.

To avoid misunderstanding, we should say that the question we are addressing is different from the “Two Ways” doctrine that has been common in Christian ethics since the *Didache*; it is also different from the “Two Cities” doctrine that Augustine articulated in Christian ethics.<sup>11</sup> What I have in mind builds on the doctrine of Pope Gelasius I, which he articulated clearly but with a poor choice of terminology with his “Two Swords” doctrine in the 490s. Against the Roman Empire of his time, which though in sharp decline, still had totalitarian instincts, he argued that the two authorities, church and empire, had distinct dignities with distinct functions which must be distinguished, so that the state deals with public order, mundane matters, and temporal affairs while the church addresses divine matters and eternal mysteries. The term “Two Swords” should no longer be used because it sounds too much as though we think the church should carry a sword other than the sword of the Holy Spirit, which is the Word of God; we need to emphasize today that the state has a monopoly on the use of force which was symbolized traditionally by a physical sword. But the biblical themes which Gelasius articulated grew out of the New Testament texts we noted and argued that civil and church authorities have their own distinct dignities and God-given responsibilities such that neither should encroach on the work of the other. The realm of faith and the realm of civic order are clearly distinguished. This is a large conceptual step toward a theory of religious freedom coming from an early pope, which helped lay the groundwork for the development of civil society in the West.<sup>12</sup>

For me as a Protestant it is very interesting the way themes articulated by Gelasius were developed into slightly different “Two Kingdoms” doctrines at the time of the Reformation. We can glimpse the doctrinal development from Gelasius to Luther by saying that whereas Gelasius talked about two swords, Martin Luther talked about two kingdoms, one ruled by the sword and one ruled by Christ through his Word and Spirit. For Luther, both kingdoms are really God’s kingdoms, but in God’s left-hand or secular kingdom, God can remain hidden or anonymous and still accomplish his purposes for that kingdom. The left-hand kingdom is much more than government; it includes all those things that contribute to maintaining and developing earthly life, such as a marriage, family, business, stations, and property.

<sup>11</sup> The *Didache* (in Greek Διδαχή) was a catechetical document from the late first or early second century which taught that there are two ways, a way of life and a way of death, emphasizing the difference between faith and unbelief. In his *City of God* (in Latin, *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*) Augustine explained that humanity is comprised of two cities, one shaped by love of God and one shaped by love of self. These valuable Christian doctrines are addressing different questions than we are addressing here.

<sup>12</sup> Some of this history is told effectively by David VanDrunen, *Natural law and the Two Kingdoms: A study in the development of Reformed social thought* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 21-42.

(The inclusion of these themes other than the state distinguishes Luther's doctrine from late medieval versions of "Two Swords" theory such as that articulated by Boniface VIII in the 1300s, which both placed business under the "Sword" of the church and claimed that the church had a type of authority over the state.) To avoid misunderstanding Luther, one must note that the kingdom rooted in creation and the kingdom rooted in redemption need each other and contribute to each other, so that the health of one is always tied to the health of the other.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps more strongly than Martin Luther, John Calvin assumed a religiously unified "Christendom," a cultural situation which has long passed. Nevertheless he contributed to two kingdoms doctrine by clarifying characteristics of each. Key attributes of the kingdom of Christ are its redemptive character, its spiritual identity, and its institutional expression in the church. Key attributes of the civil kingdom are its non-redemptive character, its earthly or external identity, and its institutional association with civil government, though it is also associated with other civic institutions. As with Luther, both kingdoms are really God's kingdoms which must be clearly distinguished in our ethics, so that the civil kingdom is especially to be guided by God's natural moral law while the church is the place to apply *sola scriptura*.<sup>14</sup>

We have to face the problem that "Two Swords" and "Two Kingdoms" doctrines have repeatedly been misunderstood both among Christians and in the rest of society, even though the underlying properly basic moral apprehensions related to our New Testament quotations have been so extraordinarily constructive.<sup>15</sup> We commonly hear that these Christian moral doctrines mean that public life is left to secularism or to secular political ideologies because Christian theology has become dualistic. And possibly some have used mistaken versions of these doctrines to claim that public officials are not directly accountable to God for their actions, the opposite of what Jesus told Pilate. However, I do not think the standard criticisms of two kingdoms doctrine are accurate. More important, I am convinced that the moral perceptions contained in two kingdoms doctrine have been crucial to the development of freedom of religion and the whole of civil society.<sup>16</sup> Jesus himself

<sup>13</sup> My description of Luther's views is dependent on Paul Althaus, *The ethics of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 43-82.

<sup>14</sup> See VanDrunen, 67-115.

<sup>15</sup> By this terminology I am suggesting we can distinguish between direct or properly basic moral and spiritual perceptions from our theoretical reflection on these perceptions. This principle of the "New Reformed Epistemology" is important for freedom of religion efforts. A good introduction to this philosophy of knowledge is Kelly James Clark, *Return to reason: A critique of Enlightenment evidentialism and a defense of reason and belief in God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> The central philosophical question is if we can honestly distinguish a direct moral truth, such as Jesus' words to Pilate, from a theological truth claim, for example, that God was in Christ reconciling the

distinguished between what must be given to Caesar and what must be given to God, thereby contributing a fundamental moral distinction to many cultures which has led to freedom of religion for many of us. However, we may need to update our terminology so we can communicate this distinction more effectively in Christian theology and ethics, both inside the church and also in our several cultures. For this purpose I propose we substitute the term “Twofold work of God in the world” in place of “Two kingdoms doctrine.”

Under the heading of “Twofold work of God in the world” I have suggested that we talk about six related themes in our theology and ethics.<sup>17</sup> These six are: 1. God’s two revelations, general revelation and special revelation; 2. The two forms in which God gives us his moral law, God’s natural moral law and the biblical revelation of God’s law;<sup>18</sup> 3. The two types of God’s grace, his common grace that makes human life possible and special grace, meaning redemption by faith in Jesus; 4. The two types of righteousness, active civil righteousness, which is also civic responsibility, and passive spiritual righteousness, which is justification by faith in Christ; 5. Two types of wisdom, including God-given practical wisdom about how to live humane lives and spiritual wisdom of knowing God; and finally 6. God’s two kingdoms, meaning the two ways in which God reigns over our lives, including his sometimes hidden and anonymous reign over the affairs of peoples and nations through the structures of creation and his conscious redeeming reign over believers by his Word and Spirit.

An articulation of these six dualities of God’s activity, rather than being dualist or secularizing, is a way to overcome many of the different dualisms that have plagued believers throughout the centuries.<sup>19</sup> It is very important for freedom of religion efforts: it gives us a clearly theological way of talking about life in society that is obviously *neither secular nor theocratic*. It is a theological doctrine that corresponds with what social critics such as Os Guinness are calling a “Civil public square,”

---

world to himself. This question can also be phrased in theological terms: can we truly distinguish God’s moral law from the gospel? Obviously I think we both can and must make this distinction and should do so very clearly.

<sup>17</sup> A valuable study which shows the internal connections among human rights (including freedom of religion), the natural moral law, and God’s general revelation is Pavel Hošek, “The Christian claim for universal human rights in relation to natural law,” *IJRF* 5:2, 2012, 147-160.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent article which specifically shows the basis for freedom of religion in God’s natural moral law see David VanDrunen, “A natural law right to religious freedom,” *IJRF* Vol. 5:2, 2012, 135-146.

<sup>19</sup> In *The twofold work of God in the world*, MBS Text 102 (2008 at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu)) I argued that a good understanding of these proper dualities overcomes many of the common dualisms faced by Christians in the last 2000 years, including Zoroastrian, Hellenistic, nature/grace, public/private, and postmodern varieties of dualism. This argument was included in my book *What difference does the Trinity Make? A complete faith, life, and worldview*, Vol. 7, Global Issues Book Series of the World Evangelical Alliance, 2009, available as a free download at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu).

which contrasts with both a “Sacred public square” and a “Naked public square.” Imitating Jesus, it emphasizes that modern Pilates are directly accountable to God without saying state officials are accountable to a particular religious institution or tradition. We Christians have a way to talk about and promote freedom of religion that neither assumes secularism nor a religious establishment and which assumes that religious pluralism will continue in all the societies in which we live. We have both direct moral intuitions and an ethical theory to explain those moral intuitions, either or both of which can potentially migrate from the realm of our particular religious communities into our wider societies. This will never be complete or total, just as the northern European acceptance of the Protestant Work Ethic was never complete. Nevertheless, even a small and partial migration of this moral/cultural package into wider cultures would be valuable.

What to do? I think that Christian teachers from all our traditions need to directly take up the themes of Two Kingdoms or the Twofold Work of God, both in our teaching in the Christian churches and also in all our discussions with representatives of other religions. Some other religions resist freedom of religion because they feel, unnecessarily, that freedom of religion is associated with secularism. If people who are members of other religions or members of no religion regularly hear us talk about God’s twofold work and frequently hear us quote Jesus’ remarkable words to Pilate or about Caesar, we may be able to slowly contribute a moral package into more and wider political cultures. In this way we might extend the wide range of social benefits related to freedom of religion to a larger number of our neighbors, even if the problem of violence and repression is a problem almost as old as humanity which will certainly continue until our Lord’s return.



Send your opinion piece to  
[editor@iirf.eu](mailto:editor@iirf.eu)