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A critical assessment of the views of John Howard Yoder on the nature of the State

ABSTRACT

An in-depth study of the nature of the State is done by Yoder in his various publications and unpublished works and it concentrates on the biblical justification of the State that lends credence to the legitimacy of the institution. He probes the New Testament concept of powers that dwell on earth and rule human beings and the State is regarded as one of those powers that keep law and order. He points out that the State as an institution ordained by God has norms to adhere to and values by which to exercise its authority. Although Christians are citizens of their respective countries, they have nonetheless a set of rules that are embodied by the law of love. This argument is encapsulated in the exposition of Romans 13.

1. INTRODUCTION

The State as an institution has always been a subject of debate by particularly philosophers and religious thinkers. As the debate is being pursued within the Christian domain, the biblical understanding of the institution is being treated employing the perspective and insights of one of the leading Mennonite scholars namely John Howard Yoder. He has studied Karl Barth's attitude to war and violence and the whole issue of pacifism/nonpacifism.

2. BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STATE

Yoder's (1972) exposition of Romans 13:1-7 forms the bedrock on which his theology about the nature of the State is built. There are quite a number of misconceptions he raises and he addresses them fairly adequately.

Yoder (1972:193) points out at the outset that before National Socialism (Nazism), Romans 13 had been used by Protestant theological scholarship as a blueprint for the foundation of a Christian doctrine of the State. In concentrating on this text exclusively, Yoder argues that other voices in the New Testament have been neglected.

For example, Yoder says that the chief reason for the existence of the State according to the New Testament is that it exists for the sake of the Church and not vice-versa. For him the State is temporal and must, therefore, serve the Church, because the Church will survive the end of history through its saints. One would like to differ. One believes that these two institutions are interdependent. The State is ordained to stamp out lawlessness and thuggery with justice and it may employ forceful means where and when necessary. The Church is ordained to stamp out lawlessness and thuggery by redemptive persuasive means and with love. Should the State do its job faithfully, a conducive situation would be created in which the Gospel would be propagated. In the same way, if the Church does its job properly, the State would find it easier to govern with a minimum disruption and opposition to its decisions and policies.

Regarding those Christians who concentrate only on social criticism and do not call for personal commitment to Christ, Yoder charge them with treason. But one thinks it is an exaggeration to say that other Christian communities neglect calling people to repentance. What could be said without fear of contradiction is that Christian groups and denominations tend to stress and emphasise one aspect of our mission without necessarily neglecting the other (cf also 1961:286-296).

A hungry soul is just as important as a hungry stomach. By calling upon people to forsake their evil ways without taking care of their physical needs would be tantamount to giving a distorted picture of the Gospel.

Another biblical requirement put forward by Yoder is that the State may not claim religious sanctions for itself. The practice of governments requiring citizens to worship rulers is very ancient. For example, in Babylon Israelites were forced to worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar. The early Christians were also forced to worship the Emperors. But as Yoder contends, some governments do not claim this idolisation explicitly. They may absolutise their policies in pursuit of an ideal society. This means that these policies cannot be questioned. They are holy and divine and such dictates were taken to be valid and legitimate. There is also no allowance for conscientious objection and therefore anyone who questions such policies would have his sanity doubted. In short, such policies are non-negotiable. You either implement them or you fall by the wayside. The call by the State to carry a sword is part of idolatry that stems from nationalism in its crude and exclusive form, according to Yoder. As one sees it, the function of carrying a sword is in itself not idolatry. It is a function that has to be carried out because human beings are not angels. The problem arises only when the State becomes a police State. Even different types of nationalism in different countries, if well directed, may contribute towards a development of a common world that would make all people brothers and sisters irrespective of race, creed or geographic location.

3. THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy, according to Yoder (1972), could be determined by succession as it is in monarchic dynasties, or by free elections as we find in Western Europe. But the only one that is reliable, according to Yoder, is that of direct juridical or personal succession from an earlier leader.

The State must not be bound to Christian ethics, for Christian ethics is for Christians. The State belongs to another realm. This authority known broadly as the realm of the natural theology is not necessarily rooted in revelation. This realm is characterised by justice. This concept is knowable apart from Jesus Christ, and it is not immediately reconcilable with his teaching and his person. This realm includes moral philosophy and what is referred to as orders of creation. This lower level is morally binding on the statesperson. He may impose it even by force when necessity arises (1962; 1979).

According to Yoder (1972) there are two main theoretical understandings of the State. There is the "positivistic" understanding that believes that any government, because it is ordained by God, has the right to require from its citizens absolute loyalty, such as it was expected of the German Christians under Hitler; and then there is the "legitimistic" view as held by the Reformed tradition. This view says that the State must adhere to certain given prescriptions so as to become legitimate, failing which it could be overthrown. In response to these views, Yoder (1977:75) says in Romans 13 that Paul

... was simply arguing that the Christians in Rome should not rebel even against a government which threatened to mistreat them. They could be confident that God was

using the powers in and behind the state within His providential purpose. The State is not instituted, i.e. established, but rather accepted in its empirical reality, as something that God can overrule toward His ends. Paul therefore does not mean that in the divine acceptance of the State there is implied any ratification of its moral standards or political purpose, or any theory of the proper State.

In this context Christians are not required to obey the State, but only to be subject to it (cf 1 Tim 2:1-4). By obedience, Yoder refers particularly to blind obedience where the State can even claim things belonging to God alone. Subjection becomes a critical form of obedience where a Christian may say “No” to certain demands made upon him or her because he or she considers that they are un-Christian.

4. THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF “POWERS”

The Bible sees the world as ruled by invisible super-human power – thrones, principalities, powers, archangels, dominions, known collectively as angelic or demonic powers. In modern language these powers are known as structures. They are largely sociological and psychological, contributing according to Yoder (1977:8) to the

... cohesiveness and purposefulness which hold together human affairs beyond the strictly personal level, especially in such realms as that of the State or certain areas of culture.

According to the New Testament (quoting Ps 110), Jesus Christ exercises dominion over the world at his Father’s right hand side, so contends Yoder. Christ has already subjugated these powers, but for their final defeat we must await the Parousia (cf 1 Cor 15:25).

Yoder (1972:141) observes that scholars considered this language of Paul as irrelevant because it was regarded as

... a dispensable remainder of an antique world view needing not even to be interpreted or translated but simply to be dropped without discussion.

But the two World Wars that shook the world made theologians and clergy to study Paul’s language of demonic powers earnestly. Yoder credits and congratulates Hendrik Berkhof for having instilled this interest in many people’s lives, more so when it became clear that the State was to be regarded as part of these powers. It was these powers manifested in the authority of the State for example that had crucified Jesus.

The relation of these powers to the lordship of Christ is as follows:

Firstly, they are mediate. Between God and the world there exist powers, either demonic or angelic. But the Church has an immediate relation to God in Christ.

Secondly, these powers are fallen. Although their resistance to the lordship of Christ is not completely broken, in their fallen state they have lost their constructive role in the good creation of God. Their submission to the lordship of Christ is relative.

Lastly, the lordship of Christ is not redemptive, but conservative. It ensures that the created order does not completely collapse. This conservative function of the State makes matters easier for the Church to proclaim the Gospel. That is why, for example, the Church prays for governments and kings.

These powers that were initially supposed to be mediators of the saving creative purpose of God, now persistently seek to separate us from God (cf Rom 8:38; Gal 4:3; Eph 2:2; Col 2:20). Instead of being our servants, they have become our masters. Nevertheless, these powers are still, to a large extent, useful in an ordering function of our lives. Even a tyrannical government mentioned in Revelation 13 is better than total chaos. Yoder puts it very clearly when he says that although we must not live with these powers, we cannot live without them.

5. NORMS FOR THE STATE

Accepting the necessity of the State we are faced with the question of norms applicable within its structures. Yoder (1971a; 1971b; 1977; 1979) suggests the following norms:

The State as a fallen power cannot be expected to live in accordance with the requirements of *agape* “for Christian ethics are for Christians” (1977:28). The State is fixed midway between outright sinfulness of humans and the will of God as revealed in Christ.

In search of an ethic of the State, Yoder analyses the following classical options, namely the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Reformed, the Liberal Pacifist and the Anabaptist positions:

(a) The Roman Catholics applied a double standard morality. In the higher rungs of the ladder we find the saints who have a special vocation and are therefore able to live according to the law of the redemptive love. At the bottom of the ladder we find the ordinary Christians and civil rulers who live in accordance with the law of creation (1962; 1970; 1971b; 1977) that is justice. In this category the standard of morality is not set by Jesus Christ, but by the dictates of the natural law.

(b) The Lutheran view is almost the same as Catholicism, the difference being that the Lutherans espoused a doctrine of “orders of creation”. According to this view, creation is not chaotic. By looking at creation, one sees that everything fits into the whole. Two kinds of morality have been derived from this concept. A Christian as an individual can live according to *agape* and practice non-resistant love, whilst when acting within a group or in his vocation, he or she can practise justice. In a way, a Christian is caught up in a tension between these two levels.

(c) The Reformed tradition does away with all dualism. All aspects of life, including nature and reason, are subject to Divine Sovereignty. Calvinism still believes that a theocracy, in the fashion and form of that of the Old Testament before the institution of the monarchy, is possible (cf 1973; 1966; 1961). Nature and reason insofar as they are useful as concepts can never differ from revelation.

(d) Liberal Pacifism is also against dualism although Yoder has difficulty in understanding where it actually draws its lines. Sometimes in one extreme the level is that of non-resistant love, while in the other it is the level of minimal force. At another time, the line is above that of *agape* in believing that suffering in itself may have a redemptive value (1968; 1976).

(e) According to Yoder, the Anabaptists have developed a better alternative (1967). He favours this approach because its model is based on the New Testament understanding. They speak of “duality without dualism”. God did not create two realms, but this situation came about because of sin. The “sword” for example, is regarded as part of the world “outside the perfection of Christ”, while non-resistance is regarded as being “inside the perfection of Christ”. Yoder (1977:32) sums up this in the following words:

The difference between Christian ethics for Christians and a Christian ethic for the State is therefore due to duality not of realms or levels, but of responses. Where God speaks to the reconciled and committed believer, the command to “be minded as it befits someone who is in Christ” (Phil 2:5) takes into consideration all the possibilities of the Holy Spirit and the Church. When God’s will is communicated to man or men in their rebellion, neither God nor His ultimate will change, but His current demands take into account the nonbelief of the addressee and therefore stay within other limits of possibility.

In other words, God will not demand from an unbeliever standards of Christian ethics. But a Christian, according to Yoder, has no excuse for living according to the standards and dictates of the natural law. Christians have only the law of Christ by which to live.

Yoder’s vivid implication that the options discussed above, with the exception of the Anabaptist position, are not rooted in the New Testament but rather in the natural law is not correct. Therefore, by making use of other sources of insight, the other positions do not necessarily relegate the Bible to an inferior status.

The issue of “levels” or “realms” seems also to be problematic. Yoder believes that the Anabaptists have satisfactorily avoided it by speaking of “duality without dualism”. In essence, these terms mean one and the same thing. Whether one speaks of realm, level, duality or dualism makes no difference – this is mere quibbling. Yoder suggests we should rather speak of responses. In one’s opinion, one must respond from a certain vantage point or on a certain level. Thus, Christians will have to respond to God’s call on the Christian level and the non-Christians on the unbelievers’ level. Therefore, the issue of levels must be brought back into the debate. Yet, what Yoder refers to, one believes, is much more complex than it first appears. In private life a Christian practises *agape* and in public life he or she follows the dictates of the natural law. According to Yoder, a Christian is indivisible as far as his or her actions and behaviour are concerned. A Christian must practice *agape* ethics throughout and therefore live according to the dictates of the Sermon on the Mount. To a certain extent, Yoder is attacking the Roman Catholic view of distinguishing between ordinary Christians and saints, and to a great extent, Luther’s “Two Kingdoms Doctrine”.

Jesus Christ has set an ideal and perfect standard to which all those who profess to be his followers, must live up to. We know that no one will ever be able to reach this standard due to human nature. It was only Jesus Himself who lived according to this standard. The Roman Catholic view that some people are set aside to live according to the demands of Christ was not meant to discourage other Christians to strive for the life of perfection. The saintly minority group is there as an example and encouragement to the whole Church. When Lutherans advocate different “responses” due to the difference in levels between the Church and the State, they do not necessarily follow sinful norms and values when acting in government leaders or officials. It is only that in State affairs, people who are mostly unbelievers would respond positively to the requirements of justice than to *agape*. Non-Christians in the government may take *agape* as a form of political weakness and therefore would exploit such an attitude to their own advantage. They therefore have to be coerced into conformity. In other words, a Christian individual can be loving and forgiving in private life, but where his or her neighbour’s welfare is at stake he or she must, in his or her official secular role, even use force to oppose, punish or prevent evil.

The Church and the State are both ordained to tame and to control human nature. Both have their own methods that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is true that it cannot be expected from the State, a behaviour equivalent to that of the Church. But in the same vein, taking into consideration that the Church consists of human beings who are still plagued by sin, one may ask

whether the Church is approximating the ideal ethics laid down for her by Jesus Christ or not. That is, in principle, the Church is expected to strive for Christ's standards, whilst the State is not. The Church may in practice fall short but that does not mean she can abandon Christian ideals.

For example, the Gospel writers refer to the secular government as the domain of Satan, while Paul regards the State as one of the powers and principalities brought within the saving and victorious work of Christ. But Yoder's observation is not entirely correct. Jesus' attitude towards the State was also conservative. Yoder continues by pointing out that some scholars have even found it difficult to reconcile the two images of the State portrayed in the New Testament, namely, Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Romans 13 is regarded as the government that has a legitimate right to exist and, therefore, has the right to demand subjection from its subjects, whilst Revelation 13 represents the type of government that the Church must fight at all costs. Yoder has a different interpretation. He says all governments at one time or another, fit the description of either Revelation 13 or Romans 13. A government may, on the one hand, claim religious sanction for itself after the manner of Revelation 13. On the other hand, it may also wield the "sword": to keep law and order in the proper way according to the type of government indicated in Romans 13.

Yoder believes that the seeming contradiction of these views must be enough warning against taking Romans 13 as a blueprint for the Christian doctrine on the State.

He contends that chapters 12 and 13 of Romans in their entirety form one literary unit. Chapter 12:1 starts with the mercy of God and a call on Christians to the life of nonconformity, by refusing to return evil with evil, but to return evil with good. Vengeance and wrath belong to God. Yet chapter 13:4 tells us that the government has the right to do what God does, namely the function of vengeance and wrath. Christians are explicitly forbidden to do this aspect of God's mission – Christians are to suffer and to serve with love, leaving retaliation, self-defence and war to the State.

The subordination that is called for in this text does not affirm a divine act of institution of a particular government. It encourages Roman Christians to be obedient to whatever power exists. Yoder clings tenaciously to his conviction that Romans 13 does not justify a rebellion. He says on the contrary, the text seems to be dispelling ideas prevalent among the Jewish Christians who still entertained the ideology of Zealotism and Zionism. Zealots were all out to restore Zion to the Jews by setting them free from the Roman yoke. Christians were called to the life of subordination, according to Yoder.

Roman Christians were urged to be subject to a State in whose administration they "had no voice". This text cannot, therefore, be interpreted as calling on Christians to do either military or police service. Police service was either hereditary or simply a privilege reserved for bona fide citizens. Moreover, military service was not obligatory. Early Christians, most of whom were slaves and Jews, did not qualify to execute such functions. The payment of taxes and levies, mentioned in Romans 13:6 and 7, which are due to the State, have nothing to do with any kind of participation or service in the government or its army.

The bearing of the "sword", the function reserved exclusively for the State, refers to the judicial and police function. According to Yoder, this does not empower the State to institute death penalty or to wage war.

Yoder believes that the government's authority over Christians is not self-justified, that is, it cannot require everything from its Christian citizens. He is critical of most translations when they say, "The authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing," referring to the function of rewarding good and evil mentioned in Romans 13:6. He suggests this translation, "they are ministers of God 'only to the extent to which' they carry out their function". The emphasis falls on the rewarding of good and punishing of evil according to the principles of justice.

He says “ministers of God” can also refer to Christians, and if this were the case, it would fit neatly into the context. He (1972:210) paraphrases the verse thus:

The Christian is subject for the sake of conscience, it is for this reason that Christians pay taxes because Christians also as ministers of God, devote themselves to the end that the good be approved and evil reprimanded.

Christians are again commanded to discriminate. They have to give Caesar what belongs to him, and to God, what is duly God’s. Taxes, revenue and honour belong to Caesar, but fear is due to God (cf 1 Pet 2:17). He believes that that is why Romans 13:1 does not command “obedience” but subordination to the State.

6. CONCLUSION

Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ in particular have been tempted throughout the ages to adopt one of the two extreme positions, namely to regard the State as an instrument of the devil and therefore to be resisted and shunned (Rev 13) or to accept it as God-ordained (Rom 13) and therefore to be offered a blind and uncritical loyalty and obedience. Yoder’s contribution has been that the State – whether the governments in power are democratic or dictatorial or even tyrannical – is an indispensable institution that not only citizens need to make human life liveable but also the Church to propagate the Gospel and thereby contribute towards forming the moral fibre of the whole society. This the Church could do by respecting those in civil authority, that is by giving Caesar what rightly belongs to him and by fearing God, that is by giving God what is due to God.

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