



Abstract from Article

THE TWO GOVERNMENTS AND THE TWO KINGDOMS IN LUTHER'S THOUGHT

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Abstract

The facet of his thought commonly referred to as the doctrine of the two kingdoms has provoked some of the most intractable confusion and bitter controversy in post-war continental Luther scholarship, and the ripples of this debate which reached these shores have all too often amounted to a litany of sweeping statements which have done nothing to enhance the Reformer's reputation in England. Yet even before Hitler's war, Luther had endured a century of disfavour among the leading academic and ecclesiastical circles on this side of the Channel. So marked was British – more particularly, English – distaste for Luther in the opening years of this century that the American church historian Preserved Smith devoted an article to the subject in 1917, listing Anglo-Catholicism, rationalism, socialism and – since 1914 – visceral hostility to all things German as four factors which had conspired to tarnish the Reformer's image in the minds of the English of that time. Fifteen years later the celebrated Modernist H. D. A. Major was to lament that, "Today Martin Luther, the greatest protagonist of the Reformation, is viewed as a vulgar, violent and mistaken man as hostile to humanist culture as he was to social democracy." The European conflict of the next decade provided the cue for the most damaging slur of all on the Reformer's memory, so that when in 1945 a third-rate pamphleteer denigrated Luther as "Hitler's spiritual ancestor" his thesis had already been expressed by Archbishop William Temple, who had died the previous year. The smouldering dislike of the Reformer having been thus fanned into a blaze of contempt, it is to be feared that – despite the post-war Luther studies of Professors Rupp, Atkinson and Watson – Major's words are as true today as when he wrote them half a century ago. And there is no dimension of Luther's thought which has aroused such antipathy as his doctrine of the two kingdoms. It need only be recalled that a recent writer of humanist persuasion has, in the context of the outworking of this doctrine in the Peasants' War, seen fit to compare the Reformer with none other than Robespierre! Before such charges can be countered, the structure and content of the two kingdoms doctrine must be outlined.

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