STATE, CHURCH AND CIVIL SOCIETY.
AN ANALYSIS OF TWO RECENT ECCLESIAL DOCUMENTS

Eduardus Van der Borght

In a recent monography on *Church, State and Civil Society*, David Fergusson, professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, demands renewed attention for the rich tradition of Christian political theology.¹ His central argument is that the past relationship between church and state as a configuration of two dominant institutions that exist in a close and exclusive relationship might be over, but that a more differentiated approach positioning the church in positive relation to other institutions within civil society offers a new perspective for an effective public significance of the church.² An historical overview reveals different approaches of the Christian understanding of the state. Within the early church, both church and state were subordinated to a theological vision of the divine rule in history and its eschatological outcome. When persecutions and hostility diminished, a shift from the concept of ‘alien citizenship’ to ‘subordinated citizenship’ became apparent. In the second half of the Middle Ages, the emergent *bonum commune* concept reveals the awareness of the rule of God that surpasses ecclesial forms. Our neighbors are not merely within the church. Furthermore, the idea of the common good is not limited to a narrow political understanding of the church’s relation to the state, as becomes apparent in the Reformed version of the common good concept. Every relationship within the household, the church, and the parish can be sanctified by obedience, individual and collective, to the Word of God. But the gradual breakdown of the organic unity of church and society at the end of the Middle Ages and during the era of the Reformation pressed churches to rethink their relation to the state and their political theology.³ Fergusson acknowledges the contribution of liberalism to arrangements that are indispensable in our current situation such

² Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, 1.
³ Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, 45–46.
as freedom of worship, association and political action, and—more recently—a commitment to the equality of the sexes. But he refrains from attributing the merits for this to a philosophy of political liberalism, which attaches a primary significance to the autonomous individual. Distinctive theological arguments for religious tolerance rather than philosophies of the Enlightenment form the basis for the commitment to some of the features of liberal society.\(^4\) He refers to the themes of peaceful coexistence, the irrationality of state coercion, the freedom of the act of faith, and the prospect of civil conversation with others unlike ourselves from whom we have a good deal to learn. In his opinion, these motives offer a better guarantee for tolerance within pluralist societies than the approach to tolerance of political liberalism, which tends to result in indifference and scepticism.\(^5\) Fergusson analyzes two important texts of twentieth century Christianity—the Barmen Declaration and Gaudium et Spes—to prove that the church can make a public contribution to the common good of society on the basis of its own insights and standards.\(^6\)

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the demise of Christendom and the concept of the national church, but, according to Fergusson, the calling ‘to seek the welfare of the city’ has remained. At the same time, the twentieth century’s terrible experiences with authoritarian states has revealed the need for the recognition of institutions that mediate between domestic households and the machinery of the state, such as trade unions, political parties, community groups, and religious and cultural organizations. So churches will continue to contribute to the common good as groups within civil society in partnership with other institutions in society—no longer assuming a triumphalistic ‘the church knows best’ attitude and recognizing divine wisdom in other places.

Although Fergusson offers many issues that ask for further discussion, in this contribution I want to limit myself to the question of whether his central thesis—the continuation of the public role of the church no longer in privileged partnership with the state but as contributing institution of civil society—is reflected in the way ecclesial bodies present themselves in their statements. For the churches, free-

\(^4\) Fergusson, Church, State and Civil Society, 69–71.
\(^5\) Fergusson, Church, State and Civil Society, 92–93.
\(^6\) Fergusson, Church, State and Civil Society, 139.