CHAPTER TWO

‘THE GODLY PRINCE’: THE UNION OF CIVIL
AND ECCLESIASTICAL JURISDICTION

In various scholia respecting the office and authority of the civil magistrate scattered through several of his biblical commentaries, Peter Martyr Vermigli mounts a sustained Augustinian critique of medieval scholastic as well as Tridentine assumptions concerning the relation between civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Vermigli affirms in particular the need for uniting civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the person of the supreme magistrate. The argument of this Protestant scholastic is remarkable for its simultaneous adherence to an Aristotelian conception of the unifying, architectonic function of the sovereign authority, and to a thoroughly Augustinian understanding of the clear distinction between the realms of operation of coercive and spiritual power. In his Commentary on the Two Books of Samuel, Peter Martyr Vermigli stakes out his claim with the confident assertion that “the charge of Religion belongeth unto Princes.”¹ He appeals initially to the authority of Aristotle for whom political association (koinonia politike) is the highest form of community (teleia koinonia) on the ground that it aims at the highest happiness and the highest good; the ultimate goal (telos) of the polis is “to provide that the people may live well and vertuously.” Vermigli concludes, “no greater vertue there is, than Religion.” Vermigli gives no precise reference, but very likely is referring to the opening discussion in the Politics where Aristotle argues that the polis is the perfect form of community (teleia koinonia) on the ground that it aims to realise happiness (eudaimonia) in the highest degree through the practice of virtue. “If all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims

¹ This is the title given to his scholium on I Samuel 28.3. See In Duos Libros Samuelis Prophetæ … Commentarii (Zurich: C. Froschauer, 1564); for an English translation see The common places of the most famous and renowned divine Doctor Peter Martyr: diuided into foure principall parts: with a large addition of manie theologall and necessarie discourses, some neuer extant before, Bk. 4.14.2. Translated and partlie gathered by Anthonie Marten (London: Henrie Denham, Thomas Chard, William Broome, and Andrew Maunsell, 1583), 246; cited hereafter as CP.
at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good."2 Through this identification of the Christian commonwealth with Aristotle’s community of virtue, Vermigli attributes the care of religion to the sovereign power (to kurion) which directs the life of the state towards its appointed end. He appeals moreover to Aristotle’s claim that government, that is the exercise of sovereign power, is the principal and architectonic art of all practical activity.3 There is indeed a hierarchy of practical “Arts” where the art of government stands pre-eminent:

Wherefore seeing the office of a Magistrate is the chief and principal science, he ought to rule all the partes of a commonweale. In deed he himself exerciseth not those [particular] Arts, but yet ought he to see that none doe corrupt and counterfeit them. If a Phisitian cure not according to the prescript of Galen or Hypocrates, or if an Apothecarie sell naughtie and corrupt drugges, the Magistrate ought to correct them both. And if he may doe this in other artes, I see no cause why he may not doe it in Religion.4

Vermigli follows up this Aristotelian analysis of the magistrate’s office with a list of Old Testament kings and Roman emperors who “shewed verie well that religion belonged unto their charge.”5 In a letter to Queen Elizabeth on her accession to the throne of England in 1558 Vermigli urges her to take command in the reform of the Church since it is the duty of a godly Prince to defend both tables of the “law divine.”6 He interprets the two tables of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy as representing the ordering respectively of religion and matters of civil

---

2 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1 (1252a3–6) See also *Politics* 3.6 (1278b15–24) where “well-being” (eu zên) is defined as the “chief end both of individuals and the state.”
3 Aristotle, *Ethics* I.2 (1094a17–1094b10) According to Aristotle, the art (techne) which aims at the highest good “is most truly the architectonic art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them ... now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man ... though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is fine and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for commonwealths (poleis).”