Notes on Reformation Political Theory

1. Luther—*To the Christian Nobility* (1520)
    a. Luther writes to the German nobles to convince them not just to rally against the supposed temporal overreach of the Papacy, but also to form a general council that can act as a theological counterweight to papal authority. He frames the current context in kairological terms: it is a "time of grace" (38) in which good Christians can act to seize the theo-political reins.
    b. On the basis of his undeniable theological principles, Luther insights that any political action to be taken must be grounded in the will of God, not the will, power, or reason of humankind. The faltering of the past emperors against the 'meddling' popes was, in fact, due to an imperial overreliance on personal power, when a turn to divine sanction was what was needed. (38)
    c. The "Romanists" or "princes of Hell" have erected three walls of defense against the Germanic uprising:
        i. Spiritual Authority is higher than Temporal Power.
        ii. Only the Pope can interpret Scripture.
            1. Therefore, any interpretation of Scripture in favour of temporal power is corrupt.
        iii. Only the Pope can summon a Council.
            1. Therefore, any call for a general council to overrule the Pope on these matters is illegitimate.
    d. Luther then attempts to systematically explode those three defensive walls:
        i. The spiritual authority is not higher than temporal power because there is no such distinction between spiritual and temporal authorities. Christian universality demands that all be regarded as "priests" of God. The entire ecclesiastical hierarchy is a shame, intended to confuse the simplicity of political power by introducing a parallel power-structure founded on a corrupt reading of scripture. The Holy Roman Emperor can be just as much a Christian as any self-professed member of the 'spiritual' clergy. Only a "forerunner" of the "Antichrist" would say otherwise. (40-43)
        ii. The authority of the Pope to interpret Scripture is itself founded on an un-Scriptural claim. To Luther, the Scriptures clearly suggest that any member of the Christian community can interpret the Word of God. It is not a job for specialists. After all, we're all priests, right? (44-46)
        iii. Likewise, the claim that only a Pope can convene a council is baseless. Did not the Emperor Constantine convoke the first Council of Nicaea? To Luther, there is in fact a moral imperative for any secular leader to call a council if he suspects that the Pope is in dire need of correction—and perhaps even excommunication! (46-48)
    e. Much of Luther's argument here rests on the idea that, properly understood, the church has not "authority" as that term is usually meant. The church, the true community of the faithful (not the ecclesiastical hierarchy), has only the 'authority' to do good. It is not in competition with the temporal powers that be. (48)

f. The text is also extremely apocalyptic in tone. Luther wants to build in defenses against papal claims that God is actively and miraculously striking back against the anti-Romanist leaders. Intriguingly, Luther concedes that there may indeed be numerous visible 'miracles' that affect anti-Romanist rulers for the worse. Even plagues may strike nobles who defy the Pope. But all of these signs come not from Christ, but from the anti-Christ, and perhaps ultimately from the devil himself. So: miracles are real; miracles may stand against us; but those miracles that stand against us are anti-miracles, diabolical signs… (48)
g. The only thing standing against this army of the devil, then, is the good Christian noblemen of the Holy Roman Empire. Only they can dismantle the ecclesiastical hierarchy, popularize access to Scripture, and convene an anti-papal council. In doing so, they are doing God's will not only in the political sphere, but in the apocalyptic realm of Armageddon itself. (49)

1. Luther—*Temporal Authority* (1523)
    a. In this treatise, Luther adopts a more conciliatory, non-polemical tone. He still wants to build up a Christian doctrine of temporal authority, but he must do so in the wake of his censure by the Holy Roman Emperor himself. How can one honour the temporal sword even as one defies it? Here Luther tries to thread the needle.
    b. He begins by pointing out that Scripture seems to both license and forbid the forceful authority of the temporal sword. Properly understood, Scripture will of course lead to a coherent doctrine. But the specifics demand careful exegesis if they are to be worked out.
    c. Such careful exegesis requires, first of all, the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this World. The true members of the Kingdom of God have no need for the temporal sword. (54) If everyone were a perfect Christian, in other words, there would be no need for laws and rulers and the temporal sword. Righteousness would simply be inscribed on the hearts of all.
    d. It is the lawless, of course, who require law for their instruction and correction. And, given the fact that no one is righteous by nature (due to original sin), we are never lacking for the lawless. That is why God has handed the world over to the temporal sword: so that inherently wicked human beings can be restrained by the wild animals they are. (55)
    e. To abolish in antinomian fashion the laws of the temporal sword because 'all are Christians' would simply be to loose the wild animals upon each other. (56) The work of Christianizing the world has only just begun. And what's more, most of those who claim to be Christians are deceiving themselves, which means that granting them 'Christian freedom' would only allow them to convert their self-deception into harm of others. Restraint must come first, since the Gospel has not yet overtaken the hearts of all.
    f. Therefore, temporal authority is both necessary and distinct from ecclesiastical authority. (Luther obviously wants to avoid a universalizing synthesis of temporal and spiritual authority in Christendom.) But what is the proper extent of such authority? (61)

g. The temporal sword holds no sway over the soul. That is God's jurisdiction. (61) This means that the status of anyone as proper believer or unbeliever is up to their own personal conscience—and ultimately up to God—but lies outside the realm of temporal authority. (This would stand against the HRE's demand that Luther recant his heterodox suppositions.)
h. Suspicions of heresy should be handled only by bishops, not by princes. The temporal sword must give way to the teacherly role of the ecclesiastical leaders (whose authority might ultimately come into question, however). (62-63) The government practiced by the priests and bishops is not, however, real political authority. It is mere pedagogical advice. The ecclesiastical powers can legislate nothing and enforce no laws. (64)
    i. Question: To what degree is Luther's Two Kingdoms theory deviating from Augustine's Two Cities? At times, Luther makes it sound like membership in each kingdom is decided by one's ultimate faith, which could be construed as Augustinian. But he also makes it sound like the faithless are 'more so' subjects of temporal government, as if we could adjudicate eschatological citizenship questions at this very moment. And that makes his political theory seem less Augustinian.
i. Speculum Principis (65) – The Prince must:
    i. Attend to his subjects.
    ii. Not be taken in by errant counselors.
    iii. Not rush to war over minor matters.
    iv. Govern in a pro-Christian way.
j. And what about the subjects of the prince? Must they always obey him? If he is truly and clearly in the wrong, the subjects are in fact no longer obligated to obey him. God licenses such non-obligation under those conditions, although it may be difficult to arrive at certainty regarding said conditions. Nevertheless, there are situations so wrong that they would license disobedience to one's prince (e.g., if he asked you to turn your books over to the Pope!). (66)
k. Christianity must also intrude into politics when it comes to debt and restitution. (67-68) While the occurrence of debt may be unavoidable, it should not be handled too harshly. The rule of love should be preeminent here. If the debt can be forgiven, it should be.
l. Luther ends his treatise by subtly undermining the solidity of written constitutions. Since the mind—or perhaps better the heart—is the root of our sense of justice, we should not live always according to the letter of the law. To do so would be to enslave one's mind to the dead letter. Instead, the mind—'free' and 'rational' in Luther's special sense of both terms—must maintain its sovereignty over the letter, keeping open the possibility of fresh judgments in the future. (69)

2. Luther—*Admonition to Peace* (1525)
    a. Luther was forced to embroil himself in the very real political violence that took hold of certain areas during the early years of the Reformation. Once the Gospels had been cracked open, the potential for chiliastic revolution was palpable. The peasants who led the charge thought they might have an ally in Luther; they were wrong. He endeavoured to show them that they were wrong in dulcet tones here; later he would become less forgiving in his tone.
    b. Accordingly, Luther begins by positioning himself as if he were against the nobility. He blames them for bringing the peasants' wrath upon themselves by way of un-evangelical vices and oppressive policies. (72-73) He recommends a path of kindness and indulgence, so that the peasants can be pacified rather than slaughtered.
    c. Turning to the peasants (74), Luther then cautions them as well. Sure, they might be able to kill all of the princes if they get lucky; but in exchange they'll receive eternal hellfire. And so conscience must restrain their revolutionary potential.
    d. As Luther's argument progresses, the space for revolutionary action begins to shrink. He accuses the peasants of taking the Lord's name in vain by calling themselves a Christian organization. He also reminds them that they, even if they are indeed good Christians, are not exempt from loyalty to the powers that be. Obedience to the temporal sword is advised of all Christians (see above). The peasants are not in any position to decry the temporal rulers and replace them from below. (No appeal to heaven, it would seem?) It is, in fact, only the rulers who have been given the authority to check evil. It is not a popular right. (75)
    e. The greater theft comes from below. Yes, the princes take your property through taxation both legitimate and illegitimate. But if you, the peasants, were to take both their property and their authority (which is normatively positive and the root of their claim to property), then you would be taking far more than they took from you. (76)
    f. Luther positions the above claim as one of natural law. Every people and every society lives by this deference to the rulers. It doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what it would mean to live in society in a Christian manner. (77)
    g. The Christian attitude on all this is even less amenable to peasant revolution. The Gospel, Luther here emphasizes, tells us not to resists injustice at all. Let suffering wash over you in waves, knowing that your trust can only be placed in God. "Suffering! Suffering! Cross! Cross!" Those are the Christian rallying cries; they are not political slogans. (78)
    h. By adopting the title "Christian," the peasant revolutionaries are actually doing more to harm the gospel than the emperor or even (!) the pope. They speak of Scripture, but actually all they care about is preserving their property rights. They want to amass power and wealth so that they can rival the nobles who oppress them. This is their plan for escaping injustice. Sadly for them, however, Christianity is not about escaping injustice, but bearing it by faith in the Cross. (79-80)
    i. All of Luther's responses to the peasants' articles are predicated on the above concerns. For example: the peasants may sometimes choose their own pastor, but not if the prince is responsible for founding and funding much of the

congregation. If he is (as many were), then for the people to seek their own pastor would be to steal authority from the prince. (81) The peasant demand that much of the tithes should go to support the poor and needy is also branded as "theft," since the tithes are supposed to go to the lords. Even claims against serfdom and slavery are rebranded as theft, because they steal the bodies of the labourers from their lords, who rightfully possess them! (82) Luther's anti-revolutionary arguments are getting more extreme here. Almost every form of re-appropriation of the products of labour is rebranded as "theft."

i. This is extreme: "You [peasants] assert that no one is to be the serf of anyone else, because Christ has made us all free. That is making Christian freedom a completely physical matter. Did not Abraham and other patriarchs and prophets have slaves? ... This article [against serfdom and slavery], therefore, absolutely contradicts the gospel. It proposes robbery, for it suggests that every man should take his body away from his lord, even though his body is the lord's property. ... This article would make all men equal, and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom; and that is impossible." (82)

j. On both sides, Luther concludes, the word "Christian" is being used in vain. There is nothing "Christian" at stake between the princes and the peasants. It is solely an issue of natural law and the distribution of resources. Any common heathen could be engaged in debates such as these. The fact that it is happening among Christians is a mark of shame. (83)

k. Luther ends with a fairly bold claim: those who die in this peasants' war, on either side, are probably going to suffer eternal hellfire. (84) Both sides are fighting for injustice; and those who perish while fighting for injustice are strong candidates for damnation. For his part, Luther simultaneously washes his hands of the whole affair (but did he not let the cat out of the bag?) and prays for peace. Still, he notes that his prayers might not be answered, since certain 'signs' portend that the wrath of God waxes stronger and stronger with each passing month.

1. Erasmus—*Sileni of Alcibiades* (1515)

a. Erasmus wanted the "Sileni of Alcibiades" to catch on as a phrase for something that was unattractive on the outside but edifying on the inside. This is how Alcibiades described the notoriously ugly Socrates back in the *Symposium*.

b. He then goes on to list every possible Silenus he could think of and fit into this text, ranging from Socrates to Diogenes to Epictetus to Christ Himself. He links this Silenus-character of inspiring figures to the Christian inversion of all apparent worldly values. Christ is the humblest, yet only His philosophy leads to happiness. The Apostles are nothing, and yet their wisdom puts Aristotle to shame.

c. Conversely, all the high powers of this world are reverse-Sileni. They look enticing and admirable on the outside, but once you look within you find that they are disturbed and disturbing. Those who pay the most attention to etiquette, for example, tend to care the least about what matters most.

d. Thus we arrive at a general rule: "the more significant something is, the deeper it is hidden." (175) This is true of the cosmos, the most decisive aspects of which

are concealed from us. It is true of God Himself, the greatest invisible reality. It is true of the sacraments and the Scriptures, whose humble appearance belies their profound efficacy. Spiritual exegesis allows us to pull back the veil of even the most scurrilous Old Testament passage to find the truth lurking beneath…

e. The difference between a Christian and a worldly person lies in this: the worldly person is satisfied with Silenus' outward appearance; while as the Christian seeks to know Silenus within. The Christian seeks out what is least apparent and treats it as most significant. (176)
f. Political life, generally speaking, is lived in accordance with superficial and outward appearances. Advisors to rulers look mainly to the outward appearance of the king as a Silenus. But power should be tempered with goodness and wisdom. That's what separates the Christian ruler from the tyrant.
g. Part of tempering power with goodness and wisdom consists in the ruler's acknowledgment that his rule is bestowed upon him by the people—and the people can take back their consent to be ruled again. (178) Almost as an aside, then, Erasmus invokes notions of popular sovereignty and the reliance of the ruler upon the very community he professes to rule.
h. Similarly, the Church is not the visible ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather the community of all true Christians, however unapparent they may be at the moment. (179)
i. In short, Erasmus is disgusted by the fact that so many Christian rulers boldly seek the very things Christ condemned: wealth, power, glory, arms. (180)
    i. Compare this simple moralizing with Luther's rhetorical gymnastics, which allow him to both condemn worldly things and reinforce the social-hierarchical status quo…
j. So: is Erasmus calling for mass theft? (182) Does he want the rulers to be robbed of their possessions? No—he wants to give them new and better possessions, the religious and spiritual possessions of Christianity. The king should be to the state as the soul is to the body and as God is to the Universe. To live that way would not be to lose the freedom of the tyrant, but to gain the freedom of the Christian.
k. The same goes for the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The bishops and the Pope should focus on preaching and teaching, not politicking or hosting wild triumphs.
l. Augustine had two cities. Luther had two kingdoms. Erasmus had even two worlds! One is low and base and "physical." (185) The other is high and airy and celestial. His rhetoric here runs the risk of anti-corporeal dualism, of course. But can expect precision in a case such as this?
m. Why 'mix' the earthly and the heavenly, the low and the high? Surely it would be simpler to keep the two separate? (187) (Easier said than done!)
n. The worst-case scenario is, of course, when the prince and the priest are the same person. (188-189) Not even Hercules can defeat two monsters at once! Theocracy should be right out. Even the common subjects hate being governed by the clergy. Clerical rule is both theologically suspect and politically inefficacious. Many of those who support papal pomp are actually denigrating the dignity of the papacy from within, despite themselves.
o. Erasmus ends his airy political screed with a rhetorician's faux-humility. He set out to remind us of a proverb, that of the Sileni of Alicibiades. He has done so. To

what effect? He is unsure. But he hopes that the art of living will become ever so slightly easier for us, now that we know our task is to disentangle the earthly from the heavenly, the political from the ethereal.

2. More—*Utopia* (1516-18)
    a. As the wonky narrative goes, More is delighted to make the acquaintance of the perhaps-too-foolish Raphael Hythloday, voyager extraordinaire. More suspects that the well-traveled Hythloday might have some special knowledge about political theory, given that he's observed so many governments around the world. But Raphael protests that he knows not the ways of princes, since princes care most for war, rather than for governing well under conditions of peace.
    b. Do princes have time for philosophy? Yes and no—they have no time for 'ivory-tower theorizing,' which takes place in a vacuum without time or place. They do have time for context-specific political philosophy, which reacts to its contexts like a character in a grand drama. (83-84)
    c. Utopia, like Plato's Republic, is essentially communistic. There is no private property. (84) To what degree are its lessons appropriate for private-property-loving early modern Britain, then? Raphael is a fairly convinced communist. He thinks that there can be no just and fair distribution of goods unless private property is utterly abolished. (86-87)
    d. More believes the opposite. (87) People need profit-driven incentives in order to put their labour to work! Pure egalitarianism, meanwhile, will destroy the respect for one's superiors which keeps society functioning via obedience. Here More draws on Aristotle's classical complaints about Platonic 'communism.'
    e. Other policies: laws are good but few; use of geography is balanced and wise; much emphasis placed on agriculture; disputes ended swiftly, but decisions made slowly (in a well-considered fashion); idlers expelled; labour loads spread across the population in moderate fashion (even the managers work!); slavery remains in place; priests and the elderly are held in high regard; no pubs, sadly; tendency to avoid war through strong fortifications (deterrence) and even bribery or cunning (anything to avoid bloodshed—this is not a sentiment shared by all political theorists throughout history!); astronomy but not astrology; their goal is to seek the highest good, which they define as happiness, which they in turn define in terms of pleasure (cf. Epicurus & Valla); but they also, unlike the Epicureans, hold to the immortality of the soul, so that virtue can be rewarded with everlasting pleasure in the afterlife; in Stoic fashion, they also teach that to live rationally in accordance with nature is what it means to live in accordance with the divine; they hold to something of a 'just war' theory—never glorifying war, they drill for it and engage in it when necessary (therefore they remain mostly peace-seeking; 135-139); they will engage in any activity to avoid bloodshed for their own people, including even bribery and hiring mercenaries (contra Machiavelli!); their religion is like idealized Christianity, with contemplatives who contemplate and others who live an ethically active life; even their priests are admirable! But there are also some heterodox teachings on divorce, euthanasia, & women priests…

f. More's Raphael anticipates Rousseau in his belief that most societies are really just conspiracies of the rich. The rich come up with rules that extract labour from the poor for the least possible compensation, then misname those rules "laws." The contrast with Utopian communism makes clear this social swindle. (157)
g. So if utopian communism is clearly better for people than private property and social inequality, why do the latter proliferate all across the globe? Raphael's answer is but one word: pride. Pride turns people in on themselves and keeps them from striving for the truly common good as aimed at in Utopia. (158-9)
h. The character of More himself concludes that he finds most Utopian practices absurd. This is especially true of its communism, which would rob society of all of its nobility and splendor. But how seriously are we to take his reaction here? And how seriously are we to take the 'nonsense-spewing' Raphael? (159-160)