



# The theological significance of the state in the thought of Paul Tillich and Arnold van Ruler<sup>1</sup>

G. Hodnett  
SUSTEN<sup>2</sup>  
University of Stellenbosch  
STELLENBOSCH  
E-mail: ghodnett@anazi.co.za

## Abstract

The theological significance of the state in the thought of Paul Tillich and Arnold van Ruler

*This article looks at the importance of the state in the theologies of Paul Tillich and Arnold van Ruler. The state is the community in which both the individual and the community are actualised. It is also the institution that organises the life of the nation. The orientation of the state has a direct impact on the direction of human life. The state is the centre of power and justice in reality; it is the political core of history. The state also has the power to actualise itself according to the justice that it posits and in this process love is embedded as the ultimate criterion of justice. Love, power and justice are intimately related to the kingdom of God. The state, even the pagan state, thus performs the reuniting and saving work of God on earth.*

## Opsomming

Die teologiese belangrikheid van die staat in die denke van Paul Tillich en Arnold van Ruler

*Hierdie artikel behandel die belangrikheid van die staat in die teologie van Paul Tillich en Arnold van Ruler. Die staat is die gemeenskap waarin die individu en die gemeenskap verwerklik word; dit is ook die instelling wat die lewe van die volk*

---

1 This article is based on a thesis supervised by Prof. P.F. Theron (University of Stellenbosch); see Hodnett (2002).

2 Stellenbosch Universiteit Sistematiese Teologie- en Etiek Navorsingsgenootskap.

*organiseer. Die visie van die staat het 'n direkte uitwerking op die rigting van menslike lewe. Die staat is die kern van gesag en geregtigheid in die gemeenskap; dit is die politieke kern van geskiedenis. Die staat het ook die mag om himself te aktualiseer in ooreenstemming met sy geregtigheid. Liefde is die grondbeginsel van geregtigheid wat die staat moet beoefen. Daar is 'n intieme verhouding tussen die koninkryk van God en liefde, mag en geregtigheid. Die staat, ook die heidenstaat, doen dus die heilswerk van God op aarde.*

## 1. Introduction

The significance of the state should be traced back to the Bible itself. Contrary to widespread popular belief, the Bible is not a book that concerns itself only with the fate of mankind in an afterlife and with conditions set to human life and behaviour that may ensure that this fate will be one of eternal bliss and not one of eternal torture. The main objective of the Bible is a completely earthly, this-worldly one and the social ideal stands at its centre (Engelbrecht, 1984:1). Van Ruler (1956:19;) writes: “Dies ist das einzige, um das es in der Bibel geht: die Einrichtung der menschlichen Gesellschaft nach den Grundlinien der Gerechtigkeit und der Liebe.” This point of view implies that the state should be valued as positive and good. Certainly, the Christian tradition has not been unambiguous on this point. The state has been given many different valuations – as the kingdom of Satan, as a negative good that merely restrains sin, as a natural good that is to be distinguished from the supernatural, and as a positive good. Also the Reformed-Calvinistic tradition has always been intensely interested in the state. Ford Lewis Battles (1986:xxv) stresses: “At the heart of Calvin’s thought was the relation between the King and the King of Kings, between the providential rule of our Heavenly Father and the sometimes capricious and cruel rule of him who should be the father of his country.” Two modern Reformed theologians that have followed, and built on, Calvin’s emphasis on the importance of the state and his emphasis on the essential relationship between God and the state, are Paul Tillich and Arnold van Ruler. Both of them unambiguously say that the state is a positive good because it is called to actualise the kingdom of God on earth. Van Ruler (1973:81) asks: “What is the kingdom of God, in Christian terms, other than the social ideal?” Tillich also defines the kingdom of God in terms of political and social justice, and writes: “If the prophetic message is true, there is nothing ‘beyond religious socialism’” (Tillich, 1982:13; cf. 1976:358).

Van Ruler is well known for his ideas concerning theocracy and Tillich for his “theology of culture” or theonomy. The state plays an important role in both Van Ruler’s *theocracy* and Tillich’s *theonomy*. It is my opinion that there is a material identity between the theology of these two thinkers in their understanding of the state. This identity, or at least, similarity has been briefly indicated by Engelbrecht (1978:37-38; 1986:125-131; cf. 1989:39). It is especially enlightening to consider the meaning of the state in the light of the theology of these two thinkers: not only because there is a material identity between their thought, but also because there is a very significant formal difference.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The significance of the state

Tillich (1971:99) defines the state as “the power of a community that realizes itself in the positing of justice” and Van Ruler (1945:184) writes that [t]he national community only exists in so far as it is structured around a central power of government authority<sup>4</sup>. These brief definitions will provide the starting point for the discussion of the theological significance of the state.

### 2.1 The state as community and institution

The above-mentioned definitions imply that on the one hand, the state is the community in which both the personality and the community are actualised. Certainly the term *state* is much younger than the state-like organizations of large families, clans, tribes, cities and nations, in which man actualises himself, but the communal element remains central. Man actualises himself as a person in the encounter with other persons within a community. The process of self-integration under the dimension of spirit actualises both the personality and the community (Tillich, 1976:308-309). “The self-integration of the person as person occurs in a community, within which the continuous mutual encounter of centred self with centred self is possible and actual” (Tillich, 1976:40; cf. 27, 38-41; 1966:168-171). Van Ruler (1956:21-22; cf. 1972b:211) expresses this by

---

3 See Hodnett (2002) for a discussion of the material identity and formal differences between their theologies. The formal difference is the mode of expression used: Van Ruler relies on traditional theological language, while Tillich utilises language derived from existential philosophy. This article concentrates on the similarities and not on the differences.

4 “Volk is daar, waar overheidsgezag word uitgeoefend ... [De kern van het volk] word beter getroffen door het heele begrip van volk zich te laten kristalliseeren rondom de gezagskern. Volk is dan geordend leven” (Van Ruler, 1945:184).

saying: “Der einzelne Mensch hat sein Menschsein außerhalb seiner selbst, in der Gemeinschaft.” He also previously stated: “De mensch is mensch – in gemeenschap” (Van Ruler, 1945:171).

Thus we need to look at the structure of the community in the thought of Tillich and Van Ruler. The individual only exists in the context of community. Community, however, cannot simply be understood as a collection of individuals. There are institutional aspects. Certainly, communities are communities of individuals. They are not entities alongside or above the individuals of whom they are constituted; they are products of the social functions of these individuals. The social function produces a structure which gains a partial independence from the individuals, but this independence does not produce a new reality, with a centre of willing and acting. It is not “the community” that wills and acts; it is individuals in their social quality and through their representatives who make communal actions possible by making centredness possible. Tillich (1971:117) formulates it thus: “Neither a nation nor any other social group has a personal centre. Therefore both this power of being and this moral responsibility have another character than that of an individual person. There is a combination of natural and personal elements.” In a community there are not only human beings but also other realities. In any community there are particular institutions and organisations in which and by which human life is lived, e.g. in marriage, Sunday as a day of rest and worship, the school, the trade union, the press and the law. These concrete realities or institutions play every bit as significant a role as people in a community (Van Ruler, 1969:23; 1945:184-185). “One could also say that it is concrete things that create community. This is always the case. What unites individuals? Always a concrete reality (“ding”): a goal to be attained, a meal, a flag, a national anthem or the song of a particular association, a football, etc.” (Van Ruler, s.a (2):146).<sup>5</sup>

These institutional aspects are a form of organisation that direct social being, and they include blood relations, language, memories, customs, history, heritage, tradition, and precedent (Tillich, 1976: 309; Van Ruler, 1945:184-185; 1969:23). These all claim authority and structure community. But the state is the final collection of these

---

5 He also uses the example of the church community to explain the category of community. The church is not simply a collection of individuals, it is a communion with Christ (or, with God) and this communion is given form by the sacramental elements and sacramental practices. These elements and practices are “things”, “institutions” and are essential in the church community (Van Ruler, 1969:23; cf. 1945:25).

institutional realities in human existence. The state is the institution that organises the life of the nation. The orientation of the state has a direct impact on the direction of human life. This view does not imply that the state has some kind of comprehensive sovereignty over all life, but only that all issues concerning culture and community inevitably lead us to issues about the state, and the state occupies the final and central position on these matters (Van Ruler, 1969:24). The community informed by the power of justice needs a real and concrete concentration of power in order to manifest itself as such. Although the state is not identical with this concentration of power it becomes a reality only through it. This concentration is identical to the powers that support the structure of the community (Tillich, 1971:108-109). This point of departure allows Tillich and Van Ruler to understand the state as the central institute of power, although it is not the only structure of power. It implies that the state has a centredness in a political sense – that is, the possibility of acting with *one* will, even if this will is forced by the ruling powers upon the majority of the members of the nation against their own will (Tillich, 1971:117-118). “The political realm is always predominant because it is constitutive of historical existence. Within this frame, social, economic, cultural, and religious developments have an equal right to consideration” (Tillich, 1976:311). Reality is organised structurally, it is not egalitarian and structureless. Even in the most extreme democracies, the state is borne by special groups. Their power is concentrated in special offices. States are “characterized by their ability to act in a centred way. They must have a centred power which is able to keep the individuals who belong to it united and which is able to preserve its power in the encounter with similar power groups” (Tillich, 1971:109; cf. 1976:308). Van Ruler (1947a:9; cf. 1956:24) notes: “Culture finds its kernel in the political structuring of life.” This does not mean that all culture and the entire life of the community is political. Even when the greatest possible space is allowed for the arts, the social-economical and the moral-spiritual life, it becomes apparent that the final decisions regarding these areas are made in the constitution, in the manner in which the community (state as organism) is structured, ordered and formed.

The state is essentially a community. Community essentially includes individuals and institutions. The state is the central institute that structures the community. There are therefore two aspects of the state: community and central institute. Tillich speaks of the “concrete concentration of power” (institute) and the “community” that is structured by this concrete concentration, which together form the state. Van Ruler refers to the central institute as government

(*overheid*)<sup>6</sup> or as state – this is “de harde kern van de politiek” (1947a:165) and he refers to the community as “nation” (*volk*) or as the “state as organism”.

Thus the state is both the central institute and the community (of individuals and other institutes), and the unity of both. These two aspects cannot be separated. This viewpoint leads us to our next topic: the essential relation between the state as institute (*overheid*) and the state as community (*volk*).

## 2.2 The vocational consciousness of the state

According to Tillich and Van Ruler the state is the centre of power and justice in reality. It is the political core of history. Tillich (1971:99; cf. 1976:308) stresses that a state must have a centred power that is able to structure the community. Where there is no intrinsic power there is no state. Where there is no power to posit and to enforce justice there is no state. “In the development of the state, the power of a community obtains form, and thereby existence. The state is the power of a community that realizes itself in the positing of justice” (Tillich, 1971:99).<sup>7</sup> Thus the state is essentially characterised by power (Van Ruler, 1945:181). This characteristic should be understood in the context of the unity of power and love.

The power of the state is the power it uses to actualise itself. It is being, actualising itself over against the threat of non-being. Therefore power is love. This nuance in the understanding of the state can be understood if we follow this line of argument: The power of being is its possibility to affirm itself against the non-being within it and against it. It is the power to conquer separation and to establish itself as a higher and more powerful unity. It is the power of reuniting the separated. The power of being is the greater the more non-being is taken into its self-affirmation. But this process in which the separated is reunited is love. The more reuniting love there is, the more conquered non-being there is, the more power of being there is. Therefore, we can say that love is the foundation, not the negation of power (Tillich, 1960:47-49; 1976:309; Van Ruler, 1945:181; 1978:180). Love is the urge for the reunion of the separated.

---

6 In this context the connotation of *overheid* is ‘the central power of authority’. In modern political philosophy *government* usually refers to the (technical) structures and procedures of the administrative bodies.

7 For the formal definition of this concept it is of no importance whether the bearer of justice is the patriarchal family, the tribe or a nation inhabiting a portion of the earth (Tillich, 1971:99; 1976:309).

---

And wherever power supports such reunion, power performs the work of love. But how do Tillich and Van Ruler see this love as effective in the state?

Love is seen as the directing and uniting force of a state. In every power structure *eros* relations underlie the organizational form. This is the love that forms the basis of the power of the state. It is the experience of belonging, a form of continual *eros* which does not exclude struggles for power within the supporting group but which unites it against other groups. Love implies the experience of community within the group. Every social group is a community, potentially and actually; and the ruling minority not only expresses the power and justice of being of the group, it also expresses the communal spirit of the group, its ideals and valuations. Every organism, natural as well as social, is a power of being and a bearer of an intrinsic claim for justice because it is based on some form of reuniting love. It removes as organism the separateness of some parts of the world. The cell of a living body, the members of a family, the citizens of a nation, are examples. This communal self-affirmation, on the human level, is called the spirit of a group. The spirit of a group is expressed in all its utterances, in its laws and institutions, in its symbols and myths, in its ethical and cultural forms. It is normally represented by the ruling classes.

And this very fact is perhaps the most solid foundation of their power. Every member of the group sees in the members of the ruling minority the incarnation of these ideals which he affirms when he affirms the group to which he belongs ... In this way, the power and justice of being in a social group is dependent on the spirit of the community, and this means on the uniting love which creates and sustains the community (Tillich, 1976:309; cf. 1960:98-99).

This “spirit of the community” is its vocational consciousness and is to be understood not only as the power of a group in terms of enforcing internal unity and external security but also as the aim toward which it strives which makes it a history-bearing group. “History runs in a horizontal direction and the groups which give it this direction are determined by an aim toward which they strive and a destiny they try to fulfil” (Tillich, 1976:310). Van Ruler (1972a:159; cf. 157) notes: “Every political party that is worth the name is based on a holy vision.” This is the vocational consciousness of the state or group. It may differ from group to group in character and degree of consciousness and in motivating power but it has been present from the earliest times. A very powerful expression of this is the call to

Abraham in which the vocational consciousness of Israel finds its symbolic expression.

Vocational consciousness provides the essential structure of a state. This structuring power of the state is referred to by Van Ruler (1947a:45, 52-53) as the sacral centre of politics: "Politics always has a sacral centre ... And this controls the entire organism of the state and its influence is felt in the entire social and culturally structured community."

It must be noted that the nation (state as organism) only exists in so far as it structures itself around a central authority (*overheid*; state as institute). The nation is like a living organism. The idea of a national boundary is not particularly important in this definition. There is not first a basic substrate of unstructured, diffuse, amorphous national life that is later formed into a state. "Rather, there is only truly life if there is structure ... Thus the national community is ordered life ... [And] government power is the power to give structure"<sup>8</sup> (Van Ruler, 1945:180, 185 – see footnote 5).<sup>9</sup> Thus individuals do not surrender their power for the sake of the protection of the state. Rather, the individual only exists, as such, where there is already some power structuring the community. Therefore the state cannot be derived anthropologically or historically (e.g. as it is expressed in the political philosophy of Hobbes and Rousseau).

Justice is the structural form of power (Tillich, 1971:99). Creation or life unites dynamics with form. Everything real has a form, be it an atom, be it the human mind. That which has no form has no being. Justice is a material category. It is not a social category that exists next to other social categories (eg. prosperity, culture, public worship, etc.), or a merely formal category far removed from ontological inquiries, but rather a category without which no ontology is possible (Van Ruler, 1947a:172, 173). It is the form of being, without which there would be no being. This is what Van Ruler (1947a:173) means when he says: "... in het recht is het leven" and what Tillich (1990:78) means when he says: "... life without justice is chaos".

---

8 "Het is zoo, dat er pas waarlijk leven is, als er ordening is ... Volk is dan geordend leven ... Overheid is gestelde werkelijkheid."

9 This essential determination of the entire structure of all things in the state does not imply a comprehensive determination of all things in the state.



In the state, the central power (*overheid*) structures the nation around its sacral centre. This means that the vocational consciousness, as the political centre of the state, determines the entire structure and life of the state.<sup>10</sup> The love present in the state thus determines the structure or justice of the state. In order to understand this viewpoint we must discuss the way in which Tillich and Van Ruler relate the ontological nature of justice to the vocational consciousness of the state.

“Justice is the structure of power without which power would be destructive, and it is the backbone of love without which love would be sentimental self surrender. In both of them it is the principle of form and measure” (Tillich, 1971:118). There is no contradiction between justice and love. Justice gives form to being, to the dynamic of power. It is not that love does more than justice demands, but rather that love is the ultimate principle of justice. Love reunites; justice preserves what is to be united by giving it form. It is the form in which and through which love performs its work. “If life as the actuality of being is essentially the drive toward the reunion of the separated, it follows that the justice of being is the form which is adequate to this movement” (Tillich, 1960:57; cf. 71; 1976:134-138). Love does not add something strange to justice. Rather it is the ground, the power and the aim of justice (Tillich, 1959:144; Van Ruler, 1972a:42). Van Ruler (1947a:177) formulates it thus “in my opinion justice is the real substance of love and love is the structure that is built around the justice of God” (also cf. Tillich, 1957:174)<sup>11</sup>; the love or vocational consciousness of the nation is thus the basis of the justice or structure of the nation.

Justice cannot be separated from power; the power of the state includes justice, that is, the power of the state is its power to structure the community on the basis of its decisions. Furthermore, the state cannot abstain from determining society on the basis of justice. Even in taxation policies, for example, and in the administration of justice, the state encounters innumerable and profound problems relating to the structuring of the country. These problems cannot be resolved without some decision regarding the purpose or vocational consciousness of the state.

---

10 This essential determination of the entire structure of all things in the state does not imply a comprehensive determination of all things in the state.

11 The relationship of justice and power to love will be further discussed in the section on the state as a structure of grace.

Theoretically and practically the state organises society out of one or another understanding of purpose (Van Ruler, 1973:133; 1947a:176; 1978:132-133; Tillich, 1971:100). The point is that the power and justice of the state is to be understood on the basis of love (as the reunion of the separated) and the vocational consciousness of the state is the essential form of this love.

The vocational consciousness of the state is expressed by the central authority (*overheid*) and it is this consciousness that unites the community (*volk*). The state as organism is structured around the state as institute. The vocational consciousness is the centre of power, justice and love in the nation and, as such, structures the nation.

### 2.3 The power of the state and the kingdom of God

We have seen that according to Tillich and Van Ruler the vocational consciousness of a state is its sacral centre. But as such, the state is not purely a piece of human culture. It partakes of the third dimension of the relation of man to God (Van Ruler, 1947a:164). There is no objective existence that is indifferent with respect to divine dominion. (Tillich, 1935:144; Van Ruler, 1947a:30). The vocational consciousness is the power of a state that gives structure and life to a group. This communal self-affirmation removes the separateness of some parts of the world. Power in its essential nature is the eternal possibility of resisting non-being. God and the kingdom of God “exercise” this power eternally. It is significant that the symbol in which the Bible expresses the meaning of history is political: “Kingdom of God” and not “Life of the Spirit” or “economic abundance”. “The element of centredness which characterizes the political realm makes it an adequate symbol for the ultimate aim of history” (Tillich, 1976:311, 385). Thus we can see how Tillich and Van Ruler understand the relationship between the centredness or vocational consciousness of the state and the “power” of the kingdom of God.

Every victory over the disintegrating consequences of sin and guilt is a victory of the kingdom of God within historical existence. The ambiguities of power in historical existence, compulsion, force, objectification, etc., caused by sin and guilt are based on the existential split between subject and object, and this implies that its conquest involves a fragmentary reunion of subject and object:

For the internal power structure of a history-bearing group, this means that the struggle of the Kingdom of God in history is

---

actually victorious in institutions and attitudes and conquers, even if only fragmentarily, that compulsion which usually goes with power and transforms the objects of centred control into mere objects (Tillich, 1976:385).

This overcoming of the subject-object split is the manifestation of the kingdom of God in existence. It is the reunion of the separated, the reunion of essence and existence, of the kingdom of God and creation. Van Ruler (1947a:45) expresses this idea thus: “True community is only possible on the basis of the holy community that binds mankind together. If there is not an essentially unity, then there can never be a unity [in community].”

Politics and the state are manifestations of the kingdom of God because they serve the self-integration of life. In this sense we can say that “political activity is the most religious activity of man” (Van Ruler, 1947a:45).

The vocational self-interpretation of the group is responsible for the building of an empire; and this should be understood as an integrating, creative and sublimating process – as a victory of the kingdom of God. This emphasis can be clarified by stating that power as power-of-being is identical with love. Divine love is the urge for the reunion of the separated. It is a universal love for everything that exists:

And whenever power supports such reunion, power performs the work of love. It does so in all small or large communities: in a flock of birds, in a family, in a town, in a tribe, in a nation, in the unity for which we are hoping – the unity of mankind and, above this, the universal reunion of everything that is, in its divine ‘Ground and Aim’, called in Christianity the kingdom of God (Tillich, 1971:118).

The state manifests the kingdom of God on earth and “therefore it participates in the holiness of that which it helps into existence” (Tillich, 1971:104). Thus it is clear what it means when it is said of the authorities: “you are gods!” (John 10:34 ff.; Ps. 82:6). Van Ruler also notes that the majesty of God shines from the state, even though this majesty is wholly and completely concealed. We must speak of the divine character of the authority of the state. “The power of the state is not a human institution” (Van Ruler, 1945:181). Power is divine in its essential nature (Tillich, 1976:385; cf. 1936:182).

In the theology of Tillich and Van Ruler the basic formula of power and the basic formula of love are identical: Separation and reunion or being taking non-being into itself (Tillich, 1960:48-49). Although power necessarily has a compulsory element in it, this is not contrary to love. Luther called this the strange work of love. The strange work of love is to destroy what is against love. But this presupposes the unity of love and power. Love, in order to exercise its proper works of charity and forgiveness, must provide for a place on which this can be done, through its strange work of judging and punishing. In order to destroy what is against love, love must be united with power, and not only with power but with compulsory power (Tillich, 1960:49-50; 1971:119-124). Following this line of thought Van Ruler (1945:181; cf. 1978:180) notes: "Just as there is no contradiction between justice and love, so there is no contradiction between power, authority and force, in a word: between violence and love."<sup>12</sup>

The above-expressed thought implies that the state cannot be understood from the perspective of creation. It is not "the actualisation of a potential contained in creation" (Van Ruler, 1945:180). God is a living God that enters history with his revelation and his Word. He struggles in history and sets up his kingdom. He acts, thus He creates history. He fulfils history. He is not the unity of the eternal essences. He is not the highest ideal or the deepest emotion. The living God is will, power and act that enters this visible and tangible reality and elects structures therein that He calls and sanctifies to his service, community and salvation. "The Kingdom of God is the dynamic fulfilment of the ultimate meaning of existence against the contradictions of existence" (Tillich, 1938:117; cf. Van Ruler, 1947a:26). However, one simply needs to look at history to see the disintegrating, destructive and profanising side of this process of empire-building (Tillich, 1976:340).

These two facts must always be seen together: on the one hand that the political ordering of reality is the precondition for any other activity of a humanity that is fallen and lost in sin. All life depends on the fact that there is a partial actualisation of God's justice (structure) in the chaos of sin. But, this actualisation of structure in man's political activity does not overcome the chaos of sin, "it only creates an order that just manages to balance between chaos and

---

12 Of course there is a limit to this union of compulsion and love. Although there is no essential contradiction, compulsion can conflict with love if it purposely tries to prevent the aim of love, that is, the reunion of the separated. In this case force would then be destructive (Tillich, 1960:46, 50).

cosmos, as a continual narrow escape, in which humanity and salvation are preserved for each other” (Van Ruler, 1947a:46). A tension thus exists between the kingdom of God realised in history, and the kingdom as eschatological expectation. This is the difference between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of God. If this difference is not respected, the fragmentary fulfilment of the aim of history within history is absolutised leading to demonic consequences (Tillich, 1976:390-391).

The political ordering of a state is a fragmentary and anticipatory victory of the kingdom of God in historical existence. These two elements must be emphasised and kept together: it is a victory, but it is fragmentary and anticipatory. It is a manifestation of the kingdom of Christ; and Christ rules *in medio inimicorum*.

## 2.4 The justice of the state and the grace of God

The power of the vocational consciousness of the state is essentially related to the kingdom of God. In order to properly understand this relation we must, however, look at why Tillich and Van Ruler see the justice of the state as a structure of grace.

Noetically the cross of Christ comes first. This emphasis implies, in the first place, that God’s love is the reunion of the separated, not an ideal or a norm, but an historical reality that has been posited in reality by God himself in the messianic act of his self-revelation. “Jesus as the Christ is love, the love of God, in the sense of the love with which God loves us and in the sense of the love with which we love God” (Van Ruler, 1947a:177; cf. 1972c:51, 126). Love is the moving power and “the Cross of Christ is the symbol of the divine love, participating in the destruction into which it throws him who acts against love. This is the meaning of atonement” (Tillich, 1960: 115).

In the second place, the central aspect of this reality of God’s love in history is the setting up of the justice and the law of God in the reconciliation of the guilt of sin (Van Ruler, 1947a:177). The essence of our salvation lies in reconciliation and justification. Reconciliation is to be understood in terms of *expiatio*. Sin is reconciled by the satisfaction of the law of God. Justification is not a process in which the sinner is made just, but a forensic declaration, that is, a juridical act of God in which the sinner is accepted as justified (Van Ruler, 1945:162; 1972a:44; Tillich, 1960:66).

The atoning sacrifice of Christ is a satisfaction of God's justice, that is, the meaning of atonement is to be found – not in the removal of guilt – but in God's justice (Van Ruler, 1956:12). According to Tillich (1959:144) "justification by grace is the highest form of divine justice". The symbol of justification is the final expression of the unity of love and justice in God. It points to the unconditional validity of the structures of justice but at the same time to the divine act in which love conquers the immanent consequences of the violation of justice. The ontological unity of love and justice is manifest in Jesus as the justification of the sinner, and in relation to the sinner is called grace (Tillich, 1966:284-285). Therefore justice is a creative or transforming reality. At this point we cannot get anywhere with the Aristotelian idea of proportional justice. What proportion does the sinner deserve, other than eternal destruction? (Tillich, 1959:144; 1960:66; Van Ruler, 1972a:44). Because of sin, justice can only be understood on the basis of love as grace. The justice of God is a redeeming justice (Van Ruler, 1972a:43; Tillich, 1957:174). Love does not add something strange to justice. Rather it is the ground, the power and the aim of justice (Tillich, 1959:144; Van Ruler, 1972a:42).

Thus the state, as a manifestation of the kingdom of God, is to be understood on the basis of salvation and reconciliation. Van Ruler (1945:179-180) states it thus: "I would understand the state exclusively from the perspective of the *regnum Christi*, from the kingdom and reign of Christ." This means that the state partakes in the mysteries of the Cross. The messianic category is that of reconciliation, and the actualization of God's justice is the application of this reconciliation to the world. Therefore the power and justice of the state can only be understood on the basis of the cross of Christ (Van Ruler, 1978:153).

The state is the bearer of justice, it brings order to chaos. The state unites and removes the separateness of some parts of the world. It reunites that which has been separated from God by sin and guilt. In this sense

...Gemeinschaft (community) is a messianic category. [It is] the living unity of a group which has a common spiritual basis and a genuine 'I-Thou' relation between its members ... [it] acts in the direction of the messianic fulfilment; it is a messianic activity to which everybody is called ... [and] without ... a state, a community cannot exist (Tillich, 1959:198-199; cf. 1976:385).

Thus the state must be understood on the basis of the cross of Christ, on the basis of salvation and reconciliation. This requirement applies to the state as such. Even the pagan state partakes in the mysteries of the cross of Christ (Van Ruler, 1945:180; cf. p. 157; 1947b:111-114; 1972b:124; 1978:105, 150). Life needs structure and the state provides this structure. Even the worst tyranny needs a certain amount of justice, that makes life possible (Tillich, 1990:91). The state is the servant of God. In this sense the great conquerors are, as Luther visualised them, the demonic “masks” of God through whose drive towards universal centredness he performs his providential work (Tillich, 1976:340). The state partakes in the messiahship of Christ. Thus Cyrus, the pagan ruler, can also be called the anointed of the Lord (Is. 45:1). The Messiah, the anointed is anointed to office bearer and the office bearer is he who is elected and sanctified to do the work of God on earth. The work of God is always saving work, in which sin is undone and life is reunited with God (Van Ruler, 1945:180-181; 1978:153).

The state must be understood on the basis of Jesus as the Christ. Tillich (1960:86; cf. 1976:225-228) explains that everything boils down to the justification by grace: “Nothing less than this is what has been called the good news in Christian preaching. And nothing less than this is the fulfilment of justice. For it is the only way of reuniting those who are estranged by guilt”. Van Ruler (1947b:535) in turn points out that “the last word is: *love*”. This emphasis implies that “all salvation and all true life on earth, the entire church and all history and culture, depend on that great burning truth of the justification of the sinner” (Van Ruler, 1947a:175). The power and justice of the state is essentially a manifestation of the love of God.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The orientation of the state and the necessity of the church

Tillich and Van Ruler see no possibility of neutrality in the state’s application of justice to the nation. The orientation of the state (neutral, nihilist, materialist, racist, pagan or Christian) has a direct

---

13 This understanding is based on the description of the triune God as love, as the living God and the dialectic of separation and reunion, as the trinitarian interpretation of God as power of being (Father, power), structure of being (Son, *Logos*, justice, structure) and union of power and structure (Spirit, love).

The fact that the power and justice of the state is essentially a manifestation of the love of God prompts Cullman (1957:90) to write that “it is precisely the Christian who can ascribe a higher dignity to the State – even the heathen State – than the non-Christian citizen can do.”

impact on the direction of human life (Tillich, 1976:79; cf. 1976:309-310; Van Ruler, 1945:185; 1956:24).

Ultimately the state is faced with a choice “between either the myth of the blood and the spirit of humanity, or the mystery of the Blood and the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Van Ruler, 1947a:57-58). Either one finds the spiritual foundations for the state in the Bible or one finds it in the individual and communal life of man himself. Nazi Germany found the meaning in “the blood”. Western countries, as far as they seek meaning, look for meaning in the spirit. But this is not different in principle. The spirit (with a small s) is a variation of the “blood”. The norms, values, ideals, tendencies and standards are variations of the myths of blood, race, soil, kingdom and history (Van Ruler, 1947a:50-51). These nuances apply to any form of human ideology, including the deification of the greatest number or of the general interest (Van Ruler, 1947a:49, 62, 63; 1945:174-175; 1978:157). Tillich (1955:35) speaks of newspapers, radios and public opinion polls as the tyrants of modern democracy.

If anything from the spirit of man establishes itself as ultimate, it becomes demonic, an idol. All things have the power of pointing to the ultimate, but when they are considered holy in themselves they are anti-divine. A nation that looks upon itself as holy is correct in so far as everything can become a vehicle of man’s ultimate concern, but the nation is incorrect in so far as it considers itself to be inherently holy (Tillich, 1966:216; Van Ruler, 1947a:50). This ultimate is not truly ultimate because it does not transcend relative interests and concerns. It tries to invest a particular loyalty with unconditional validity (Tillich, 1990:150). Van Ruler (1945:174) thus states: “The demonisation of the state consists of it understanding itself as part and parcel of the devine.” This is a description of a pagan state, as well as a description of the danger facing a christianised state.

What is the solution to this problem? How can the demonisation of the state be avoided? Tillich (1938:133; cf. Van Ruler, 1945:174) answers:

The Church ... is under obligation to bear formal witness against the destructive consequences of the ‘demonic’ forces of the present day and their heretical foundations [... ] the state comes to its true essence by means of the church. Revelation de-demonises the state.



#### 4. The significance of this understanding of the state

- **The state as central institute and as community**

The state may be defined as both the central institute that represents the power and justice of the community, and the community that is structured around this central institute. The state is characterised by power, justice and love, centrally expressed in its vocational consciousness. The vocational consciousness is intimately related to the kingdom of God. Therefore the state is essentially the servant of God. Even the most pagan and anti-Christian state performs the reconciling work of God on earth.

The state is, however, also *called* to be the servant of God. The reality and power of sin is taken seriously in this understanding. The state is good in its essential nature, but easily falls prey to sin by deifying itself or something in itself. Thus the need for the church. The church knows the criterion of all power and justice, i.e. Jesus as the Christ. The church is called to criticise the state whenever it sees the state exercise power that denies this criterion of love. The state should not dance to the tune piped by the church, but the church is under an obligation to witness to the truth.

The definition offered above introduces a value judgement: the state exists where justice is posited. This does not mean that it is an idealistic definition. Sin is taken seriously (cf. Tillich, 1966:74; 1971:63; 1976:355; Van Ruler, 1947a:129; 1947b:521). The state is not the “earthly God” in the Hegelian sense. Where the state exists, there is some form of justice. It is not correct to say that without justice the state would be a “gang of thieves” (Augustine). A “gang” implies some structure (cf. R. Niebuhr, 1954:121). It would be more correct to say that without justice there would only be the chaotic *bellum omnium contra omnes*, i.e. there would be no life at all. The realism of the definition above is not the neutral realism of Augustine’s definition (*The City of God*, 2.21; 29.24) of the state as “the association of a multitude of rational beings united by common agreement on the objects of their love.” Rather, it is a positive realism,<sup>14</sup> a realism that includes a value judgement: the state is an expression of the will of God; it is essentially the servant of God, and wherever there is a state there is some form of justice. Furthermore,

---

14 “Realism” denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation which offer resistance to established norms into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power (R. Niebuhr, 1954:114). But there is no reason why realism should amount to a purely negative valuation of the state and not take the positive factors into account (cf. Engelbrecht, 1984:6).

it is a dialectical realism, a realism that sees justice in the state but demands and expects more justice – justice in accord with love.

- **The community actualised around the state is the realisation of salvation in this world**

The community actualised, in accordance with the demands of love, around the state (as institute) is the realisation of salvation in this world. The concern is with the community, certainly also with the individual, but only in so far as the individual exists within the community. Brunner (1949:117) quotes K. Barth with approval: “The State, the most impersonal because the most comprehensive of institutions, knows nothing of love.” This goes hand in hand with the idea that justice is rational, impersonal and objective. This essentially means that the justice contained in the vocational consciousness of the state is unrelated to the kingdom of God. Brunner (1949:120) draws the inevitable conclusion:

Hence the primary datum is the individual human being. That is the view of things entailed by the Christian belief in creation. The call of God goes to the individual. Only the individual can hear it, only the individual has a conscience, only he is, in the true sense of the word, a responsible person.

This leaving of the state to itself is in fact a forwarding of demonic interests, because then the church has no obligation to witness to the state.

- **The state as viewed by Augustine and Kuyper**

Whenever the state, even the pagan state, is not understood from the perspective of the cross of Christ, an intolerable dualism is introduced into our understanding of reality. This can be clearly seen in the thought of Augustine and A. Kuyper.

**Augustine** sees a fundamental duality between the church and the state – this is his famous doctrine of the two cities (*The City of God*, 15.1; see Augustine, 1984). He certainly begins with a neutral definition of the state,<sup>15</sup> but he also makes injustice the characteristic of a state (19.21; 4.4). Augustine’s view of the state is predominantly negative (4.4; 15.1). The state can only be saved in so far as it is also the church (12.16; cf. Sabine, 1968:192). Engelbrecht (1984:5; cf. 1986:44-45) writes: “In spite of Augustine’s intention not to yield to the temptation of introducing a fundamental dualism in his approach to reality, he failed to resist this temptation

---

15 See above.

as far as his views on the state were concerned.” H. Richard Niebuhr (1951:216-217; cf. R. Niebuhr, 1954:121) characterises Augustine’s thought on this point as an eternal parallelism of two eternally separate cities composed of different individuals. It may be possible to work out Augustine’s thought in a more positive manner when applied to a christianised state, but there is, in my opinion, no way that the dualism between the church and the pagan state can be overcome.

**Abraham Kuyper** has attempted to work out a more positive doctrine of the state – particularly of the christianised state. But he also does not escape the dualism that has plagued Christian theology through the ages. He has two foundational principles: saving grace which is special and limited to the elect, and common grace which is a temporal restraining grace, which can be explained from the original creation and which has no link with salvation in Christ and therefore has nothing to do with eternal life (Kuyper, 1998:168, 174, 193, 196). Special grace does have a purifying and sanctifying effect on the common grace effective in the state but this effect is indirect and the terrain of common grace that is effective in the state must be absolutely distinguished from the terrain that is completely governed by special grace. It is only in the church as organism that salvation in the sense of eternal salvation in Christ is effective (Kuyper, 1998:190, 195, 199-200). Thus special grace – and the church – stand outside and are effectively dualistically opposed to the state (Van Ruler, s.a. (1):18; cf. Engelbrecht, 1963: 105-106).

There is no dualism of salvation and creation, where Christians are saved from existence in the world and in the state. Rather there is a duality of salvation and existence, where salvation, which finds its root in Christ, comes to existence from the outside and finds expression in the heart of the believer and in the life of the state. God justifies the state, not because it expresses perfect justice, but in spite of its injustice. This is the core of the biblical gospel of the justification of the sinner (Engelbrecht, 1984:15). Much is demanded of the state and the church must bear witness to this: If the vocational consciousness of the state is not rooted in love, individuals are depersonalised and turned into standardised humans conditioned by radio, TV, movies, newspapers and educational adjustment in order to fit into the ideological process. The loss of personality is interdependent with the loss of community. Only personalities can have community, depersonalised beings have social relations (Tillich, 1990:65). If the vocational consciousness is not rooted in love the community is somehow warped, twisted,

deformed and misdirected. Even if the vocational consciousness is rooted in love the state may misuse its representative power for personal gain. In doing so, it destroys the justice it originally embodied and the basis of its own power.

## 5. Conclusion

The state is the institution that organises the life of the nation. This does not imply a comprehensive sovereignty over all life, but only the fact that all issues concerning culture and community inevitably lead to issues about the state, which occupies the final and central positions in these matters.

The state is the political core of history and structures the historical and cultural life of the community according to the justice that it posits. This justice is ultimately to be understood on the basis of a love that reunites the separated. This love is also to be understood on the basis of the creative power of God.

The power of the state ultimately comes from God and finds expression in the vocational consciousness of the state. This vocational consciousness determines how the state structures the community and therefore the state can never be neutral with regard to the kingdom of God. In so far as the state reunites and orders life, it is serving God. This also applies to a pagan state. The state thus performs God's saving work on earth. However, because of sin, the state is separated from God and inevitably deifies itself. Thus the state continually needs the church to proclaim the Word of God to it and call it back to its proper function, as the servant of God.

## Bibliography

- AUGUSTINE. 1984. *The City of God*. London : Penguin.
- BATTLES, F.L. 1986. Introduction in *Calvin's Institutes*, 1536 edition. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Michigan : Eerdmans.
- BRUNNER, E. 1949. *Justice and the social order*. London : Lutterworth.
- CULLMAN, O. 1957. *The state in the New Testament*. London : SCM.
- ENGELBRECHT, B. 1963. *Agtergronde en grondlyne van die teokratiese visioen*. Pretoria : Unisa. (Ph.D.-proefskrif.)
- ENGELBRECHT, B. 1978. *God en die politiek*. Durban : Butterworth.
- ENGELBRECHT, B. 1984. *The justification of the state: Contra Augustine*. Goodwood : National Book Printers.
- ENGELBRECHT, B. 1986. *Die tweeheid van kerk en staat*. Johannesburg : Perskor.

- ENGELBRECHT, B. 1989. Die fragmentariese en teenstrydige karakter van die inwoning en werk van die Gees – fragmente uit die pneumatologiese denke van Paul Tillich en A.A. van Ruler. (*In Koninkryk, kerk en kosmos.* Bloemfontein : Pro-Christo Publications. pp. 33-47.)
- HODNETT, G. 2002. *Ontology and the New Being: the relationship between creation and redemption in the theology of Paul Tillich and A.A. van Ruler.* Stellenbosch : University of Stellenbosch. (Thesis.)
- KUYPER, A. 1998. Common grace. (*In Pratt, J.D., ed. Abraham Kuyper: A centennial reader.* Michigan : Eerdmans. pp. 165-201.)
- NIEBUHR, H. 1951. *Christ and culture.* New York : Harper & Row.
- NIEBUHR, R. 1954. *Christian realism and political problems.* London : Faber & Faber.
- SABINE, G.H. 1968. *A history of political theory.* London : Lowe & Brydone.
- TILLICH, P. 1935. What is wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology? *The Journal of Religion*, 15(2):127-145, April.
- TILLICH, P. 1936. *The interpretation of history.* New York : Charles Scribner's Sons.
- TILLICH, P. 1938. The kingdom of God and history. (*In Wood, H.G. et al., ed. The kingdom of God and history.* London : Allen & Unwin. pp. 105-142.)
- TILLICH, P. 1955. *The new being.* New York : Charles Scribner's Sons.
- TILLICH, P. 1957. *Systematic theology, II.* Chicago. : University of Chicago Press.
- TILLICH, P. 1959. *Theology of culture.* New York : Oxford University Press.
- TILLICH, P. 1960. *Love, power, and justice.* New York : Oxford University Press.
- TILLICH, P. 1966. *Systematic theology, I.* Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
- TILLICH, P. 1971. *Political expectation.* London : Harper & Row.
- TILLICH, P. 1976. *Systematic theology, III.* Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
- TILLICH, P. 1982. Autobiographical details. (*In Kegley, C., ed. The theology of Paul Tillich.* New York : Pilgrim Press. pp. 3-21.)
- TILLICH, P. 1990. *Theology of peace.* Westminster : John Knox.
- VAN RULER, A.A. s.a.(1). *Kuypers idee eener christelike kultuur.* Nijkerk : Callenbach
- VAN RULER, A.A. s.a.(2). *Ik geloof.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1945. *Religie en politiek.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1947a. *Droom en gestalte.* Holland : Uitgeversmaatschappij te Amsterdam.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1947b. *De vervulling van de wet.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1956. *Gestaltwerdung Christi in der Welt.* Neukirchen : Brendow.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1972a. *Theologisch werk, IV.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1972b. *Theologisch werk, V.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1972c. *Het leven een feest.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1973. *Theologisch werk, VI.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.
- VAN RULER, A.A. 1978. *Verwachting en voltooiing.* Nijkerk : Callenbach.

**Key concepts:**

church and state: relationship between  
state and the grace of God: relationship between  
state and the kingdom of God: relationship between  
Tillich, Paul: concept of the state in his theology  
Van Ruler, Arnold: concept of the state in his theology

**Kernbegrippe:**

kerk en staat: verhouding tussen  
staat en die genade van God: verhouding tussen  
staat en die koninkryk van God: verhouding tussen  
Tillich, Paul: konsep van die staat in sy teologie  
Van Ruler, Arnold: konsep van die staat in sy teologie