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GOD AS SOVEREIGN OR KING?
Revisiting Luther's Political Theology in the Context of Southeast Asian Public Theology

ALLAH: PENGUASA ATAU RAJA?
Menata Ulang Teologi Politik Martin Luther dalam Konteks Teologi Publik di Asia Tenggara

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits Martin Luther's doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms" (Zwei-Reiche-Lehre) through both theological and political lenses. Building on foundations laid by Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, it traces how Luther's thinking on political and spiritual authority evolved during the Reformation and has been misread over time, most dangerously during the Nazi era. Rather than a blueprint for authoritarianism or church withdrawal, Luther's theology presents a dynamic tension between divine law and human governance. This study employs a hermeneutic framework to clarify key theological categories such as usus elenchticus legis (the accusatory use of the law) and usus politicus legis (the political use of the law), highlighting how these shape our understanding of power, justice, and the church's role. Special attention is given to the Southeast Asian context, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, where political power often cloaks itself in religious legitimacy. The argument is that a rediscovered reading of Luther enables churches not only to speak prophetically to unjust regimes but also to shape faithful civic engagement in plural societies. The paper ultimately proposes a constructive Southeast Asia public theology rooted in

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the Lutheran tradition that avoids both quietism and triumphalism, and affirms the church's responsibility to witness, serve, and resist in the public sphere.

Keywords: Two Kingdoms; Political Theology; Martin Luther; Augustine; Civil Religion; Southeast Asia

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji ulang doktrin "Dua Kerajaan" (Zwei-Reiche-Lehre) Martin Luther melalui lensa teologis dan politis. Berangkat dari fondasi yang diletakkan oleh Civitas Dei karya Agustinus, tulisan ini menelusuri bagaimana pemikiran Luther tentang otoritas politik dan spiritual berkembang selama Reformasi dan bagaimana doktrin ini telah disalahpahami sepanjang sejarah dan secara paling berbahaya pada era Nazi. Alih-alih menjadi cetak biru bagi otoritarianisme atau penarikan diri gereja dari ruang publik, teologi Luther justru menawarkan ketegangan dinamis antara hukum ilahi dan pemerintahan manusia. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutik untuk menjelaskan kategori teologis penting seperti *usus elenchticus legis* (penggunaan hukum untuk menuduh) dan *usus politicus legis* (penggunaan hukum untuk mengatur masyarakat), serta bagaimana kategori ini membentuk pemahaman kita tentang kekuasaan, keadilan, dan peran gereja. Perhatian khusus diberikan pada konteks Asia Tenggara—khususnya Indonesia dan Malaysia—di mana kekuasaan politik sering dibungkus dengan legitimasi religius. Argumen utama artikel ini adalah bahwa pembacaan ulang terhadap Luther memungkinkan gereja untuk tidak hanya berbicara secara profetik terhadap rezim yang tidak adil, tetapi juga membentuk partisipasi warga negara yang setia dalam masyarakat plural. Pada akhirnya, tulisan ini menawarkan sebuah teologi publik konstruktif Asia Tenggara yang berakar dalam tradisi Lutheran, yang menghindari baik sikap pasif maupun sikap menang sendiri, serta menegaskan tanggung jawab gereja untuk bersaksi, melayani, dan melawan di ruang publik.

Kata-kata Kunci: Dua Kerajaan; Teologi Politik; Martin Luther; Agustinus, Agama Sipil, Asia Tenggara

INTRODUCTION

The question of sovereignty, divine or human, sits at the crux of political theology. In contexts where religion and politics intertwine, the perception of God as either a transcendent spiritual ruler (Tuhan) or an immanent worldly king (Raja) fundamentally shapes the structure of power, legitimacy, and resistance. This question is neither rhetorical nor speculative. It manifests concretely in law, governance, ecclesial organization, and the ethical choices of citizens and leaders alike. Across history, from Constantine's Rome to contemporary nation-states, rulers and clerics alike have appealed to divine legitimacy to sanctify authority. The church, for its part, has oscillated between prophetic resistance and institutional compromise. It is in this tension that Martin Luther's theology of the "Two Kingdoms" finds both its enduring relevance and frequent misappropriation. This article arises from a critical dissatisfaction with the shallow deployment of Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*, often invoked as a theological license for state autonomy from ecclesial critique, or worse, as a moral justification for tyrannical governance under the guise of divine ordination. This has occurred not only in early modern Europe but also in colonial regimes, apartheid South Africa, and current Southeast Asian polities, where religious majoritarianism and political power have merged in troubling ways. In particular, the use of religion to justify political violence or exclusion—whether under Islamic, Christian, or other banners—demands theological

interrogation. The Indonesian and Malaysian contexts provide particularly rich ground for this examination, where postcolonial identities, religious nationalism, and democratic aspirations collide.

Historically, the church has contributed both to the preservation of oppressive regimes and to their downfall. The dual character of its engagement—both complicity and critique—reveals the inadequacy of simplistic binaries such as secular vs. religious or church vs. state. What is required is a more nuanced theological framework that accounts for the legitimate place of political authority without sacralizing it, and affirms the church's spiritual mission without depoliticizing it. Luther's doctrine, rightly understood, offers such a framework. Far from proposing the segregation of sacred and secular spheres, Luther articulates a complex interaction between God's governance through law (the political kingdom) and the gospel (the spiritual kingdom). Each has its divine mandate, distinct yet interrelated, and both are subject to critique when they overstep their divinely ordained limits.

The challenge, of course, lies in interpretation and implementation. While Luther's intention was to liberate conscience from ecclesiastical tyranny and to affirm the necessity of civil order, his writings have also been read (and also misread) as supporting authoritarian state power. This misreading is not innocent. It reflects deeper hermeneutical failures within both theology and political philosophy to grasp the dialectical nature of Luther's vision. The Two Kingdoms are not two "spaces" or institutions but two modes of divine action in the world—law and gospel—that operate simultaneously within the same human reality. Their separation is not spatial but theological and functional. The spiritual kingdom does not govern by coercion; it persuades and redeems. The political kingdom, while authorized to wield coercion for the sake of justice and peace, remains accountable to divine law and cannot claim salvific authority.

In many Southeast Asian nations, however, this delicate balance has been lost or was never present. Religion is often embedded in state identity, leading to the marginalization of minorities and the suppression of dissent. Laws are enacted in the name of God or morality, but functionally serve the interests of political elites. Conversely, religious institutions may refrain from speaking truth to power, retreating into pietism or aligning themselves with dominant political forces to secure institutional advantages. In such contexts, Luther's theology calls for critical retrieval, not in slavish repetition of 16th-century categories, but as a resource for political discernment and ecclesial integrity.

This study builds on a theological tradition stretching from Augustine to Luther, revisiting foundational texts to recover their critical edge. Augustine's *Civitas Dei* framed history as the struggle between the city of God and the earthly city, marked not by institutional separation but by competing loves, love of God vs. love of self. Luther inherits and radicalizes this Augustinian vision, reorienting it around law and gospel, and embedding it within a theology of the cross. For both thinkers, political structures are not autonomous but theological realities. They mediate divine justice and judgment, and thus must be engaged not only politically but theologically.

This article employs a qualitative, hermeneutic-theological methodology. It draws primarily on textual analysis of foundational theological works, particularly Augustine's *Civitas Dei* and Martin Luther's corpus, with a focus on his political writings, sermons, and treatises relevant to governance and law. These primary sources are examined through a critical-linguistic and historical-theological lens to understand their original intent and subsequent interpretations. This methodology is constructive as well as interpretive. Rather than aiming merely to describe or historicize doctrine, it seeks to engage these texts as normative theological sources, capable of

informing and critiquing present-day political-theological issues. The approach integrates systematic theology, church history, and political philosophy to create a multi-dimensional reading of Luther's political theology.

The research particular attention is paid to literature on Lutheran political thought, Southeast Asian religious politics, and the role of religion in civil society. The study's regional focus necessitates contextual sensitivity; therefore, Southeast Asian cases are analyzed not only for illustrative value but as loci theologici, the sites that theology is both tested and redefined.

The hermeneutic employed resists positivist assumptions and instead foregrounds the dialectical relationship between text and context, normativity and critique. It presupposes that theology is inherently public and political, not merely confessional or private. Thus, the methodology privileges voices that embody this public vocation—whether through critique of state power, engagement with religious pluralism, or advocacy for justice. Through this framework, the article seeks to reclaim Luther's Two Kingdoms doctrine as a tool for discerning the theological boundaries of civil authority and the ethical imperatives of ecclesial resistance in pluralistic and politically volatile societies like those in Southeast Asia.

DISCUSSION

Reframing Political Power: Luther Beyond Authoritarian Misreadings

Martin Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms has historically lent itself to dualistic misinterpretations: either as a theological blueprint for authoritarian governance or as a strict compartmentalization of the sacred and secular. Both views are reductive. The former ignores Luther's critical posture toward political power; the latter overlooks the spiritual dimensions of civic responsibility. To grasp Luther's vision correctly, one must reframe it as a dialectic, an ongoing tension between divine sovereignty expressed through law (political kingdom) and through grace (spiritual kingdom).

Luther's political writings, including his *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), reveal a theological realism rather than political idealism. He acknowledged the necessity of coercive state power due to the presence of sin in the world, a necessity rooted in the usus politicus legis. However, this necessity is not an endorsement of tyranny. Luther explicitly warns against rulers who act unjustly, emphasizing that all human authority is accountable to God's law. The office may be divinely instituted, but the person occupying it remains fallible, and their power is legitimate only insofar as it serves justice and order.

This tension is epitomized in Luther's distinction between the person and the office. A Christian ruler is simultaneously a private individual (under the gospel) and a public servant (under the law). The Two Kingdoms are not parallel domains but overlapping modes of divine governance acting upon the same reality. In this way, Luther resists both clerical theocracy and unchecked secular absolutism. This nuanced account of political power challenges contemporary authoritarian regimes that co-opt religious language to legitimize coercive control. It also critiques ecclesial bodies that retreat into spiritual quietism, refusing to engage in public ethical critique. Instead, Luther's vision urges critical participation, one that understands the provisional nature of state authority and the eschatological priority of God's kingdom of grace.

The Prophetic Function of the Church in Civil Society

Central to Luther's political theology is the prophetic role of the church. While the church does not wield the sword of the state, it proclaims God's justice and mercy without fear of reprisal. The church's authority lies not in legislation or enforcement, but in truth-telling rooted in Scripture and informed conscience. The *usus elenchticus legis* plays a vital role here: it confronts both rulers and subjects with their sin, reminding them that human justice always falls short of divine righteousness. This prophetic witness is inherently political. It speaks to policies, systems, and laws—not merely personal morality. It refuses to allow religion to become the handmaiden of the state or the servant of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Instead, it positions the church as an interlocutor, sometimes confrontational, always accountable to public power.

In contexts like Indonesia and Malaysia, where state ideology often intertwines with religious orthodoxy, this prophetic stance is indispensable. The temptation to conflate religious loyalty with political allegiance must be resisted. Churches that remain silent on religious persecution, economic injustice, or ethnic violence fail not only their civic duty but their theological vocation. Luther's doctrine provides a theological rationale for ecclesial resistance, grounded not in rebellion, but in accountability to God's justice.

Beyond Resistance: Civil Society, Citizenship, and Ambiguous Loyalties

If Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms demands a church that speaks prophetically to power, it equally demands a citizenry that operates responsibly within the structures of civil society. Christians, while belonging to the civitas Dei, must simultaneously inhabit the civitas terrena. This dual habitation is not merely ontological but ethical and political. Luther's simul iustus et peccator applies not only to personal morality but also to political participation: the Christian is simultaneously a citizen of heaven and an agent within worldly institutions (Kolb & Arand, 2008).

The Southeast Asian context reveals the tension of this duality in stark terms. For instance, Indonesian Christians live under a Pancasila state where belief in a supreme being is required, but freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, at least nominally. In practice, minority religious communities face systemic disadvantages, legal constraints, and episodic violence. The Lutheran framework demands a clear distinction between external conformity to civil expectations and internal fidelity to divine authority. But it also insists that such fidelity must manifest socially, in service, advocacy, and public truth-telling (Schäfer, 2019).

Luther rejects any withdrawal from the public sphere. While the gospel cannot be legislated, justice can and must be pursued by those under the law. Public order is not a neutral good—it is a theologically charged responsibility. Consequently, Christians are not to seek dominance over others by religious coercion, but they must oppose structures that institutionalize injustice, even when these are masked in religious or cultural legitimacy (Paulson, 2011; Nürnberger, 2017).

This has significant implications for political engagement in Malaysia. In a society structured by Malay-Muslim political hegemony, non-Muslim citizens—Christians included—must navigate the civic terrain without recourse to power-sharing on equal terms. Here, Luther's theology legitimizes dissent that is both theological and democratic. Churches are not called to undermine the state, but to hold it accountable to its vocation under the usus politicus legis—to protect the vulnerable, secure justice, and maintain peace (Witte, 2007).

Religious Pluralism, Theological Realism

One of the most compelling aspects of Luther's political theology for our time is its refusal to romanticize either the church or the state. Both are fallen institutions, susceptible to corruption and sin. This realism provides a critical resource for navigating religious pluralism without retreating into relativism. It enables a theologically grounded pluralism, not one based on indifferentism, but on mutual accountability before God's justice. In Indonesia, religious pluralism is inscribed in national ideology but regularly undermined by local ordinances, vigilante religious groups, and weak judicial enforcement. Luther's doctrine resists both utopian expectations and defeatist cynicism. Christians are called to work within imperfect systems without endorsing their injustices. Faith does not require withdrawal but calls for discernment: where can we partner for the common good, and where must we resist conformity?

This discernment includes language. Luther was acutely aware of how theological terms could be co-opted by political powers. Today, phrases such as "divine mandate," "religious harmony," or "moral governance" can serve both genuine public goods and authoritarian repression, depending on their usage. Churches must develop theological literacy not only to articulate their convictions but to unmask the ideological distortions of theological language in political rhetoric (Lohse, 1987; De Gruchy, 2004).

The Church and the Problem of Institutional Complicity

Perhaps the most sobering challenge Luther's theology raises is directed not to the state, but to the church itself. The spiritual kingdom is not immune to institutional compromise. History is replete with examples of churches aligning themselves with oppressive powers for protection, prestige, or political gain. From the German church's complicity with Nazism to the instrumentalization of Christian rhetoric in nationalist regimes across the Global South, the temptation persists to trade prophecy for influence. Luther himself was not innocent of institutional naivety. His support for the princes during the Peasants' War and his reliance on the Elector of Saxony reveal the risks of embedding reform within existing political structures. Nevertheless, his insistence on the gospel's non-coercive power remains a theological firewall against ecclesiastical authoritarianism. Churches today must ask whether their alliances are driven by gospel integrity or institutional security (Brecht, 1996).

This question is especially urgent in Southeast Asia, where many churches operate within political patronage networks. Whether through state-registered church status, government funding, or ideological alignment, the risk of becoming a spiritual apparatus of the state is real. A truly Lutheran ecclesiology must recover the distinction between the visible and invisible church, not as dual entities, but as a critique of institutional arrogance. The invisible church, the communion of saints under grace, relativizes every earthly hierarchy. It calls into question any ecclesial claim to final authority apart from the Word (Kolb & Arand, 2008).

Ecclesial Praxis: From Theology to Actionable Resistance

Luther's doctrine, if faithfully appropriated, mandates not only theological clarity but also ecclesial action. The church's prophetic voice must not remain confined to pulpit rhetoric or academic critique; it must translate into institutional decisions, public witness, and solidarity with marginalized communities. In this regard, Southeast Asian churches are positioned at a theological crossroads. Do they uphold a radical gospel witness that challenges state-sanctioned injustice, or do they retreat into cultural conservatism masked as faithfulness?

To enact this theology meaningfully, ecclesial praxis must be rooted in concrete expressions of the church's dual citizenship. This includes, for example, rejecting state funding when it compromises prophetic speech, standing with victims of religious persecution regardless of creed, and advocating for legal reforms that protect minority rights. Luther's framework authorizes this not as political activism divorced from theology but as theology incarnated in the public sphere (Forster, 2019).

Moreover, liturgy and preaching must reflect this dual vocation. The pulpit is not a political soapbox, but neither is it a sanctuary for escapism. Sermons must name injustice, offer hope grounded in Christ, and call believers to live as engaged citizens of both kingdoms. The liturgy itself becomes a form of resistance when it centers divine justice, eschews triumphalism, and empowers communal discernment. Sacraments, rightly administered, remind the faithful that their true allegiance is to a crucified king, not an earthly regime (Paulson, 2011). This active ecclesiology must be undergirded by a commitment to theological education. Seminaries and lay training programs must equip leaders with the tools to interpret Luther's thought critically, navigate interreligious dynamics with integrity, and speak prophetically in hostile environments. This is particularly urgent in regions where Christian leaders are tempted to mimic authoritarian patterns of leadership, often under the guise of "biblical authority."

Legal Theology and Constitutional Critique

A further implication of Luther's doctrine is its potential contribution to constitutional theology in plural societies. His distinction between temporal and spiritual authority resists any fusion of church and state but also affirms the theological significance of legal structures. The state does not derive its authority from religious texts, but it remains under divine scrutiny. This position provides a theological warrant for Christians to engage with constitutional law not as theocrats, but as moral interlocutors (Witte, 2007).

In Southeast Asia, where legal frameworks often privilege one religion over others, this approach enables churches to critique systemic bias without seeking Christian hegemony. The church can argue, on theological grounds, for legal pluralism, protection of conscience, and the demystification of sacralized authority. This aligns with Lutheran commitments to freedom of conscience and the rule of law as mechanisms that restrain human sin and promote public order (Elshtain, 1995). Legal theology in this context means forming alliances with non-Christian actors around common concerns (corruption, environmental degradation, labor exploitation, etc.) without surrendering theological distinctiveness. Luther's doctrine allows for such cooperation while maintaining confessional integrity. The aim is not to baptize civil law but to engage it as a realm where divine justice may still be glimpsed, distorted though it often is.

Postcolonial Impulses and the Question of Contextual Adaptation

Any appropriation of Luther in Southeast Asia must grapple with the colonial legacy of European theology. Lutheran missions were entangled with imperial expansion, and their doctrines were often imposed without sensitivity to indigenous worldviews. Reclaiming Luther for Southeast Asia thus requires a postcolonial lens, one that discerns between theological substance and cultural baggage. The Two Kingdoms doctrine, when stripped of its Eurocentric assumptions, offers tools for theological liberation rather than domination. It affirms the presence of God in cultural plurality and rejects both syncretism and cultural imperialism. In Indonesia and Malaysia, where indigenous Christianity coexists with deeply rooted local traditions, Luther's dialectic invites

contextual expressions of faith that remain faithful to the gospel without becoming culturally alienating.

The postcolonial task, then, is not to abandon Luther but to engage him critically, retrieving his theology while resisting its historical misuse. This includes reimagining ecclesial structures that are less hierarchical, more participatory, and attuned to local realities. It also means developing a theology of suffering that speaks to communities traumatized by state violence, displacement, and interreligious conflict.

The Two Kingdoms and the Ethics of Hope

A final dimension of Luther's political theology relevant to the Southeast Asian context is the eschatological tension between the now and the not yet, the ethical life of hope lived in a fallen world. The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms embodies this tension. While the political kingdom addresses the realities of sin, violence, and disorder through law, the spiritual kingdom gestures toward the ultimate reign of God's peace through grace. This tension fosters an ethic not of resignation but of resilient engagement. In contexts marked by violence, corruption, and interreligious tensions, such as the ongoing persecution of religious minorities in Myanmar or the marginalization of indigenous communities in West Papua, the temptation is either to withdraw into sectarian defensiveness or capitulate to pragmatic alliances with power. Luther's theology allows neither. It insists that Christians engage injustice not because they can establish utopia, but because they are called to witness to a greater reality breaking into the present (Trueman, 2004; Kolb & Arand, 2008).

This ethic of hope is incarnated in concrete practices: peacemaking between communities in conflict, defending freedom of worship without demanding religious supremacy, and building coalitions that transcend confessional and ethnic lines. These acts are not attempts to bring about the kingdom of God by human effort, but responses to it already having broken in through the death and resurrection of Christ. In this sense, the political is always penultimate—but never irrelevant (Paulson, 2011). This hopeful realism shapes how the church confronts crisis. Whether dealing with political upheaval, ecological destruction, or economic injustice, the church does not act from fear of cultural loss or moral decline. It acts because God reigns—and has called the church to participate in that reign through service, truth, and suffering. Hope becomes resistance, not naive optimism, but theological defiance in the face of despair.

Theological Education as Resistance Formation

To sustain this vision, theological education must become a locus of resistance formation. This includes not only formal seminary curricula but also catechesis, lay leadership training, and public theological discourse. Theological institutions in Southeast Asia must become laboratories for contextual interpretation and ecclesial formation rooted in Lutheran distinctives—yet open to ecumenical and interfaith engagement. This requires a reorientation from doctrine-as-dogma to doctrine-as-discernment. Teaching the Two Kingdoms doctrine must move beyond abstract exposition to critical interrogation: How does this doctrine speak to minority marginalization in Aceh? What does it say about the role of Christian schools in multifaith environments? How might it inform Christian responses to Islamic populism, military repression, or neoliberal consumerism?

Education must also confront the temptations of clericalism, nationalism, and triumphalism within the church itself. This means teaching future leaders not only how to preach but how to protest; not only how to administer sacraments but how to read legal texts, analyze

economic policies, and collaborate with civil society. In this way, theology becomes a form of discipleship for the polis, shaping public Christians for faithful presence and principled resistance.

CONCLUSION

Toward a Southeast Asian Public Theology

This analysis has argued that Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*, when retrieved critically and contextualized attentively, offers a potent framework for engaging the political-religious dynamics of Southeast Asia. Far from endorsing political quietism or authoritarian complicity, the doctrine affirms a dialectical relationship between grace and law, gospel and governance, conscience and coercion. It equips the church to navigate pluralistic societies with theological integrity, prophetic courage, and institutional humility.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, and beyond, where religious identity remains politically volatile and state power is often sacralized, Luther's vision calls churches to resist becoming instruments of the state or enclaves of irrelevance. Instead, they are called to embody a public theology of suffering, solidarity, and hope. This entails speaking truth to power, standing with the marginalized, educating for critical engagement, and resisting theological distortion wherever it emerges. The Two Kingdoms doctrine is not a political blueprint but a theological grammar, a way of articulating the church's complex, contested, and crucial role in the public square. In a time of resurgent authoritarianism, religious nationalism, and social fragmentation, its recovery is not merely academic. It is ecclesial, ethical, and existential.

Ultimately, Luther's Two Kingdoms doctrine, rightly understood, provides the scaffolding for a public theology that is both critical and constructive. It legitimizes political engagement while guarding against ecclesial overreach. It empowers churches to act without presuming moral superiority. It centers divine grace without forfeiting human responsibility. A Southeast Asian public theology grounded in this tradition would speak from the margins, not as a strategy but as a vocation. It would prioritize the lived experience of the poor, the persecuted, and the politically voiceless. It would challenge both state repression and ecclesial complicity. And it would do so not in the name of power, but in witness to the crucified Christ, who reigns from the cross and calls his church to suffer with and for the world.

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