

# THE IDEA OF A POLITICAL THEOLOGY, II.

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Given the nature of the decision-making process in modern institutions, those concerned with normative questions must sharpen these questions. And they must learn to express them in terms which will be meaningful to those concerned with the technical aspects of the policy and planning process and also to the experienced concerns of the polity. This translation of ethical questions into political form requires that ethics take its place in the dialogue which already is going on in the disciplines of the social sciences. The task for ethics in this conversation is to be able to maintain its own integrity—its own agenda—without falling victim to the illusion that integrity means autonomy.

There is no purely ethical response to the questions which are raised by a political theology. The normative guidelines of ethics and theology need to grow out of the shape of the political problem, without becoming simply a ratification of the empirical data. The position espoused here is that the structure and texture of the Natural-Law tradition is both strong enough to maintain its integrity and sensitive enough to structural questions so that it can remain open to the dialogue of ethics and empirical data without being dominated by or isolated from the latter. What is needed is a process and a procedure within which this dialogue can take place. This is the first part of the task of shaping a political ethic.

The second part of the task concerns the style of the Church's teaching. Metz, as I have said, argues that the Church should restrict its teaching to a form of negative criticism: pointing out inadequate structures and violations of the eschatological norms. His reason for imposing this restriction is to avoid transforming the Church's critical message into a positive ideology. This fear has an historical basis, but Metz' proposal seems excessively timid. As a response to Metz and others associated with that view, I would argue here for a twofold application of the teaching ministry: a prophetic or negative critique and a

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pedagogical or positive critique. Both are necessary if the Church is to fulfill her role as an instrument and agent of the Kingdom in history.

The prophetic-evangelical tradition of proclaiming the Kingdom functions not only to pronounce judgment on unjust social structures but also to propose positive goals for human existence. A dialectical form of teaching ministry is needed which corresponds to these two dimensions of the biblical tradition. Part of this task is the prophetic message which relativizes totalitarian or monolithic claims of power; another part, however, is the pedagogical function of proposing policies and programs to be cast into the debate of a free society and either accepted or rejected on their merits.

To fulfill this second function demands a distinctive style of Church teaching. In spite of his fear of theology becoming an ideology, Metz makes a suggestion which points in the direction of a new style of Church teaching. He argues that what we need today from the Church is not social doctrine (statements confined to general principles) but social policy (statements assuming a concrete position on issues). Responding again to Metz, I would agree, but with a caution. The caution is that one should not underestimate the role played by a universal institution like Catholicism in reiterating the basic principles upon which "special ethics" must build. Having said this, it can also be said with Metz that "social doctrine" alone is not sufficient in a world that changes as rapidly as ours. It must be supplemented with social policy statements characterized by empirical specificity and a policy orientation; the encyclicals of Popes Paul and John had much more of this character than the statements of their predecessors.

Social policy statements introduce a new characteristic into Church teaching—an element of provisionality. The provisional character is due, first of all, to chronology; the value of such statements will reside not in highlighting the general and continuing aspects of a situation but in identifying the new and changing aspects of a problem which require action. Such statements are quickly dated by events; their contingent character needs to be recognized by the Church itself lest it be left proclaiming anachronisms and irrelevancies. Complementing the chronological

limits of policy statements is the provisional character imposed by their content, comprised by a mix of ethical and empirical factors. The value, effectiveness, and creativity of Church teaching in the social order will increasingly be affected by the quality of socio-political analysis which frames the context of such statements. These statements will necessarily be provisional, even if their norms are drawn from revelation; an irreducible margin of historical contingency is introduced by the socio-political factors. Policy statements yield some of the certitude of principles in favor of the concreteness required by action.

The implementation of policy through action requires strategy. This is the theme which James Gustafson elaborates in his discussion of the use of institutional power in the Church, but the Catholic agenda on this topic offers a different set of questions than he considers.

The proposal offered here is that a strategy for a political theology involves two elements: conscious recognition that the Church stands in the position of a transnational actor in international affairs, and use of the concept of collegiality as an organizing principle in the international arena. Professor Ivan Vallier elaborates the idea of the Church as a transnational actor in an article due to appear in *International Organization*. Using the idea in a somewhat different manner here, we can look at the following characteristics of the Church as defining her transnational status: universal presence, centralized decision-making process and communication system, global constituency, and a significant number of trained personnel. These features provide the raw material for a significant degree of participation in the international system.

The requisite element is an articulated strategy for coordinating the transnational presence of the Church in the system. Here the principle of collegiality offers possibilities. The discussion of collegiality initiated at Vatican II has thus far been confined to internal issues of Catholic polity. The focus of concern is coordination of papal action with national episcopal conferences in the governance of the Church. The same idea, however, could be applied to the role of the Church in international politics.

The Papacy, with its position of high visibility and an international constituency, has a capacity for some actions (e.g., the U.N. visit of Paul VI) which no other bishop or even national conference can duplicate. Conversely, the role of national episcopal conferences offers an opportunity for participation in the international arena from within the basic unit of international politics, the nation state. The papal

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position determines that the statements and actions of the Pope will express a general policy direction or initiative; it does not provide the means for reducing these directives to the role of input in a specific policy or planning framework of an individual state. A national episcopal conference, however, acts as part of the constituency of a given state; its proposals or criticisms cannot be looked upon as coming from outside the nation. This position offers a different basis for exertion of influence on policy questions.

A political theology in the international arena requires a consciously coordinated, flexible approach to unifying the approach of the universal Church and the local church. The objection could be raised that this proposal implies a return to a pre-collegial mode of decision-making in the Church. This is not the case; to call for a strategy of action does not require that every decision be made at the top or that all initiatives come from the top. On the contrary, if this strategy is to function effectively, a dialectical relationship must prevail between the universal Church and the local church.

Two examples, illustrating different foci of initiative and response, can be cited without elaboration. The first involves Vietnam, especially the American bombing policy in the North. In this case, the initiative of speaking out against both major belligerents (as well as offering offices of mediation) and speaking out in a specific way against the bombing was taken by the Papacy. A long delay ensued before these initiatives were complemented by statements from the American hierarchy. The result was that every papal statement was acknowledged by our Government, but it could be neutralized by such an acknowledgement. There was no way in which the Pope could move beyond general criticisms and exhortations. A more rapid response from the Ameri-

can hierarchy as a body might have given the papal initiatives more impact and certainly would have provided a more direct form of influence on the American policy-making process.

On the other hand, events taking place in Brazil during the past year illustrate how a local hierarchy can move the universal Church to action. Members of the Brazilian hierarchy as well as independent groups of Catholics in Brazil, Europe and the United States have been calling attention to and seeking the condemnation of the use of political repression and torture in Brazil. Entreaties seeking support from the Pope were sent to Rome describing incidents of torture, often carried out against Church personnel. A recent papal statement condemning the use of political torture was quite obviously directed at the situation in Brazil.

The impact of these actions in both cases is difficult to calculate. A sustained analysis of a series of cases would have to be carried out to make specific judgments about *which* forms of cooperation are

*most* productive under *which* circumstances. The implementation of a strategy such as I have proposed here depends upon the nature of the issue at stake, the countries involved, proper timing and follow-through. A rigid set of rules would yield only irrelevant action in the long run. Yet the point can be made that the Church has at her disposal a unique mode of influence at the systemic and national levels of the international order. Failure to coordinate these foci of influence results in papal initiatives left hanging in the air and national initiatives left without visibility or force.

Political theology seeks to describe how the understanding of faith has socio-political implications. If this message is to have an impact, the shaping of these implications in the language of political ethics and their implementation in a coordinated strategy must be considered as part of the task of a political theology. This article does not pretend to execute these tasks but only to sketch their dimensions and to cite their importance.

## THE BETRAYAL OF LANGUAGE

Category-Mistakes in Political Discourse

*Paul Ramsey*

The main issue I wish to raise here is not that the rhetoric of recent discussion of foreign policy (which was petulant from the first teach-in) became outrageously reckless and uncivil. It is, rather, that emotion-laden speech too often contains a *category-mistake* or wrongly uses a term. The first betrayal in moral and political discourse is always a betrayal of the language through which men seek understanding. It is not the fury of disagreement, though no doubt the former fuels the latter.

The term "mercenary," for example, is one that contains a descriptive analysis and might state a conclusion as well. On occasion it may be the wrong word to use, even if the speaker cannot be accused of speak-

ing recklessly or of attempting to gain an undue advantage. But we *can* say "mercenary" in a calm voice, and perhaps we should do so. Mercenary forces are, after all, one way of responding to the relationship between domestic needs and military posture. The cost of relying on a volunteer army might be so great that there would be a considerable "peace dividend" for our decaying cities and for the poor at home if we were to take the further step of hiring foreign mercenaries (thereby also aiding a fraction of the poor abroad). That might be a bad thing to do, but no mistake in *language*, no rhetorical error.

In the same way, concepts that suggest racial or collective guilt are simply wrong; no one can properly be said to *become guilty* in that way. This is a wrong use of language in moral discourse. Such notions should be rejected, not because we feel that some, all, or only a few of us are not guilty in that way *but because they are profound conceptual errors*. This category-mistake may arise from the fact that we *are* emotion-laden. It may betray a level of inci-

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