WARS OF NATIONAL LIBERATION: THE METHODOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Given the name and nature of the professional society for which those papers on which I offer comment were written, and given the nature of the designated political problem, one would expect these methodological applications to develop at least the following points: (1) a theological determination of Christian responsibility for political involvement in general and for the use of national power in international politics in particular; (2) criteria for testing the justifiability of political and military intervention in "wars of national liberation"; and (3) criteria for deciding the moral problems of means peculiar to counter-insurgency warfare. Our analysis of the papers will be ordered in terms of these three points. Inasmuch as the first point is the fundamental one for a Christian political ethic, it will be used to delineate the typology.

Throughout the history of the Church, when Christian thinkers have sought to define the normative Christian relationship to politics, they have relied most often on three New Testament motifs. The three are: eschatological tension between the new being in Jesus Christ and the institutions of the old aeon; responsible service, grounded in love, to the needs of the neighbor; obedience to divinely ordained political authority. The problem which they pose for the political ethicist is that, although all of them are authoritative for Christian behavior, they conflict with each other at certain points, and therefore they cannot be synthesized neatly into a systematic ethic. Closer inspection reveals why this is so.

Eschatological commitment is the moment in which a person enters a new existence as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Existence is new because life has a new center from which it is organized and in relation to which all significant decisions are made. This moment is a moment of the giving and receiving of identity. The person knows who he is in relation to the One who has called him to the new life. It is therefore a moment also of conflict, for it requires a breaking with the old commitments that heretofore have been the primary givers of identity. Unless the Christian separates himself physically from human society, he must participate in some way in the institutions of society. And however wholesome his relationship with these institutions may be, they nevertheless threaten his Christian identity, for they try to draw and exact his full allegiance. Perhaps the threat is greatest from the institutional church, for it can persuade a man that he is close to the Kingdom of God when indeed he is very far from it. Yet historically Christians have seen the greatest threat to Christian identity in the political institutions—partly because they monopolize force, require total obedience, and possess the power to dispose of life, and partly because the political society seems to be the completest matrix for the fulfillment of human existence. Those Christians who have tended to be most radical in their eschatological stance have tended also to deny the possibility of and responsibility for political involvement.

On the other hand, it is widely recognized in our time that responsible service to human need ultimately—if not sooner—must take some political form. The range and complexity of needs, and the number of persons involved, are far too great to be handled adequately on a person-to-person basis. But this political instrumentality requires that one promote the strength, the viability, the continuity of precisely those institutions that pose the most critical threat to his Christian identity. It seems that one must risk...
his Christian identity in order to serve responsibly, or else forfeit the most effective forms of service in order to preserve the sharpness of identity. Of course, there is another conflict within love itself: love forbids us to take the life of the neighbor—the brother for whom Christ died—yet love requires us to use the instruments of politics for which the ultimate guarantee is the sword. The two conflicts always are intertwined, but the antagonism between politically dependent service and anti-political eschatology can occur without raising the question of the morality of killing.

Romans 13:1 ("Be subject to the governing authorities for they are ordained of God") was interpreted in near-absolute fashion for more than fifteen centuries of Christian history, and in some Christian circles it has remained in vogue as a conservative support for established power up to the present time. Qualifications on its absoluteness have been provided by the other two motifs which we have mentioned. Eschatological tension—the possibility of having to say "no" to the state's demands for obedience—always has been represented by the classic companion of the Romans text, i.e., Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." Love for the neighbor has provided support for political authority as a necessary condition of human social existence, but it also has contained the possibility that one might have to express his love by working against an oppressive government. And yet no one has been able to develop a Christian political ethic that would give precise guidance as to when, to what extent, and in what manner the state must be disobeyed.

The writers whose papers are under study here generally agree that love requires responsible service to human need, and that this responsibility has something to do with politics. They seem to have little in common in their understanding of eschatological tension with political involvement. Curiously and unfortunately, only one of them deals with the problem of political obedience, and this issue therefore cannot be an object of investigation. Our comparison will assume the community of interest in service, and will spread the differences in terms of how each one handles the issue of eschatological tension.

a) The paper by Paul Peachey is the most definitely "eschatological" of the group. The question which his presentation raises for the methodology of Christian ethics is whether an ethic that is radically and existentially dependent on response in faith can help to order the decisions and actions of the political community, and whether it can direct the Christian to other than a negative reaction to foreign policy decisions. It would seem that the answer must be "no" on both counts.

It is evident that his ethical method offers no moral foundations for corporate action in the secular political community. "Western morality," which (I assert) alone can be the common positive morality of the political community under reference, is not to be equated with the ethic of "Judaic-Christian" faith, and therefore it is not authoritative for the person who derives his ethic from that faith. "Ethical decision in the biblical context," he writes, "is structured in terms of divine confrontation and human response." The effects of this ethic provide additional assurance that it cannot guide the action of the community as a whole, for the response is "socially schismatic"—it divides the political community into those who respond in faith and those who do not.

Dr. Peachey insists, however, that the ethic is a political ethic—but, we ask, for which polis? Apparently not the polis defined by the Constitution, the boundaries, and the people of the United States, but the politeuma—the kingdom that is coming into being, and whose first fruits are to be seen in the covenanted community of the faithful. He writes, "Yet that response, lodged as it is in the covenant community, is corporate, and hence political. It derives both character and structure from the political reality par excellence, namely, the Kingdom of God." One can hardly misread the meaning of these words: the ethic is an ethic for the community of faith and not for the civil community.

And yet there may be possibilities here. Peachey's language is very similar to that of Karl Barth (no accident for a man with a doctorate from Basel), and one wonders if he will move in Barthian fashion to prescribe normatively for the civil community by means of analogies of relationships in the Kingdom of God. Also, he begins the paper with a perceptive analysis of the political situation designed to inform foreign policy and not simply personal decision. And he refers with qualified assent to "the assumption that on our country rests the global responsibility to lead out in a deterrence of the Communist exploitation of the 'wars of national liberation.'" Yet he never ties his theological contextual ethic to policy determination and execution by means of analogy, natural law, or any other transitional ethical device.

The main inference from this methodology is that when the Christian acts responsibly in regard to politics his action is one of dissent and disengagement. He sets himself apart from the course that the political community is taking. If he fails to do this, he risks the loss of his Christian identity.
Working with this inference, and with the fact that Dr. Peachey is a Mennonite, we are inclined to interpret his position as an expression of the traditional Anabaptist view of the religious-civil relationship with its sharp discontinuity between the true believers and the order of worldly power. Indeed, this is the direction in which his ethic is going, but it never achieves the clarity of the traditional distinction. Whereas the latter view recognized frankly that the state as a different order of existence—a sinful order to be administered by sinners for the control of sinners—needed an ethic which legitimated power while limiting it, Peachey apparently makes no such concession. The explanation seems to be that his understanding both of love and of eschatology is sufficiently different from the traditional view to give him a commitment to political involvement and influence, yet not so different that he is willing to accept the terms of involvement and influence. Love is not only a method of relationship which forbids violence but also a deep concern for the need of the neighbor in his political context. And this concern is expressed against an eschatology that for Peachey has a temporal expectation different from that of the original Anabaptists. The latter expected the imminent end of the age. Hence, they could leave the results of worldly conflicts to God. But Peachey, if I interpret him rightly, is less sure that the “age” will end very soon—at least by divine intervention—and therefore he is more concerned with results. But he cannot find the key to political effectiveness without defining an ethic for the guidance of the whole civil community (not simply for the community of Christian faith), and he cannot define such an ethic without making it an ethic for the use of power.

b) Although the paper by Paul Deats is only marginally a theological inquiry into Christian political vocation, I have placed it next to Paul Peachey’s on the spectrum because of two aspects of his approach or stance which recognize the tension between commitment in faith and political responsibility. First, he calls attention to several “levels of responsibility”—personal, religious, universal—which interact with and qualify one’s political responsibility, one’s “rootedness in the nation.” Second, he declares himself to be a pacifist, and one infers therefore that he means to renounce reliance on force as an instrument of national policy.

By contrast with Peachey, however, Deats admits that personal religious commitment may have to be qualified in order to allow participation in the formulation of public policy. This is an important methodological step, if it can be carried through. Deats states two ways in which his pacifism has been qualified. First, he recognizes the necessity of police power (although he is critical of particular usages). Presumably he would agree with Roland Bainton’s argument to the effect that domestic and international police forces are acceptable to the pacifist because they are impartial instruments of order and justice within a community, whereas force used in the national interest is unacceptable because it cannot be impartial and is not the instrument of any transcendent structure of justice. (Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace, Abingdon, 1960.) Second, he accepts qualifications of his pacifism as he seeks “to express his concerns for justice and change as well as peace.”

The second qualification is the more interesting one in relation to the political problem before us. How much of a qualification in his rejection of the use of force is he willing to accept in order to promote justice and change? Or does he believe that one can promote justice and change in international relations generally and “wars of national liberation” specifically more successfully without resort to force? Unfortunately, there is no investigation of these questions. The methodological development stops at this point.

Or perhaps it does not stop but rather moves into contradiction. As we shall show, in the next major section of the paper Deats uses the just-war doctrine as a device for evaluating the justice of insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare. If this is what he means by “qualifications,” we must argue that this kind of qualification amounts rather to a change of fundamental stance, for historically the just-war doctrine has been a moral alternative to pacifism rather than a mode of pacifist political involvement. It may be that Deats agrees with this judgment.

c) The title of Paul Ramsey’s paper for the Evans-ton meeting was “Can Counter Insurgency War Be Conducted Justly?” This title makes it clear that he has long since resolved the conflict between eschatological disengagement and responsible service, and that he has resolved it in favor of the latter. His question is not whether the Christian may use political and military power but how he may use it. When the Christian lives and serves in the world he takes up offices in the structures of the world and uses instruments appropriate to their worldly condition and function. But he does not thereby surrender responsibility for moral decision. What he does in worldly offices and with worldly instruments is done.
under governance of love—love declares the purposes of and sets the limits to this “worldly” activity. The service which the moralist (and the Church) performs for the Christian acting politically is not that of telling him what he must decide to do, but that of showing him the relevance of moral doctrine to political-military doctrine for the ordering of his office and the deciding among concrete alternatives.

Ramsey’s position is known well enough so that only a brief statement is necessary here. It is the function of the state to produce and sustain the terminal political values of peace, order, law and justice, and to discharge this function it must call upon means which often are forcible means, and which may require the killing of other men. This is to say that the political ends justify the means, for the means can be justified only by the ends. But the ends do not justify all means, nor do they always justify even those means which are not inherently objectionable. To interpret and guide the means-ends relationship Ramsey draws on two traditional moral principles, those of discrimination and proportion. “Discrimination” refers to the identification of acts which are inherently immoral and ought never to be performed, regardless of the consequences. “Proportion” refers to a decision among alternative concrete courses of action in terms of a “lesser evil” or “greater good” reckoning of probable consequences. Calculation of consequences in moral determination of action is permissible only as an instrument of the principle of proportion.

Ramsey offers no catalog of forbidden acts to be included under the principle of discrimination. The one specific principle which he uses—and which he treats as equivalent to discrimination—is the principle of noncombatant immunity from direct, intentional attack. This principle does not insist that no noncombatants be killed; it insists, rather, that none be killed directly (as opposed to accidentally, unavoidably, unintentionally) as a means to military and political objectives. The killing of noncombatants incidental to direct attack on military objectives is to be decided morally under the principle of proportion, not discrimination.

As guides for Christian action, the principles have their source in love, not in natural law. They are the principles internal to love which guide the work of love seeking justice in a sinful world. The motif of eschatological tension may be found at this point: the application of the two principles show where it is that love enters into self-contradiction. But if their source and authority are evangelical, how do they find their way into secular politics? I believe Ramsey would answer that, although for the Christian the principles derive from love, they nevertheless are identical to natural law principles which any statesman thinking rationally would recognize as necessary aspects of his office. Apparently the statesman acquires them in two ways: (1) from the ethos of the society, which, in the case of the United States, was formed in part by the Christian heritage that produced the definitive form of the principles; (2) by way of recovery through dialogue with the moralist.

Without wanting to deny the importance of the work of identifying and refining these principles, I would suggest that the order of value that controls the use of the principles is more important to moral and political decision than the principles themselves. Moreover, I believe that a wider investigation of Ramsey’s theory would show that his theory sustains the suggestion. Ramsey’s theory of the state as presented in War and the Christian Conscience (Duke University Press, 1961. See Chapter Two, “The Just War According to St. Augustine.”) is built on the Augustinian doctrine that justice is the order of love, that love is understood neither as agape nor as caritas but as amor, and that the amor which produces the concrete political order of justice is the love of the civitas terrae rather than the civitas dei. That being so, one cannot see these principles as being finally authoritative over concrete political action unless they are confirmed by a particular focus of amor that wills their finality. In fact, the amor controls not only the authority of the principles but also the content of the principle of discrimination. In the order of justice among thieves, for example, the principle of discrimination is the principle that thieves ought not steal from one another!

However, one cannot operate in this intellectual framework for long without reintroducing the eschatological tension between faith and service. Where the principle of noncombatant immunity denies the means for protecting the most basic values of the state, it can be sustained in political practice only by the evangelical gift of amor dei. Without this gift, the principle will be useful for “ordering the office” only so long as the basic conflict does not arise to force a decision—a decision which determines both identity and destiny. The assumption that it can be otherwise—i.e., that the principle can have permanent binding force in the process of making and executing policy—is fostered by the illusion that in the last analysis the ethos of the society can control the idolatrous tendencies of the state.

The work of defining the principles of Christian political activity is an indispensable work, but as an
office of the Church it must be accompanied by a
prophetic injunction to the faithful to say "no" to
political institutions that depart radically from the
source whence the principles spring.

d) The ethical method which Quentin Quade of-
fers is one of open political contextualism guided
by what he calls "Christ-informed prudence." He
maintains that no possible policy can be rejected a priori. This does not mean that "anything goes," or
that no a priori evaluations of types of policies can
be made. It means, rather, that any political-moral
decision is one of prudential judgment among avail-
able alternatives in a live and complex situation.
Prudential decision is made by calculating "lesser
evil" or "greater good."

However, prudence as a moral principle does not
stand on its own feet. It is a relational principle
which depends for its instrumentality on prior
commitments or notions of value. What is the mean-
ing of "evil" and "good" in the calculation? Here
we would expect some help from the claim that this
operating prudence is "Christ-informed." He writes,
"My perception of human goods and evils will be
significantly determined by my Christian commit-
ment." Now, I cannot say that there is no significant
determination by Christian commitment in Dr.
Quade's approach to policy-making, but I can say
that the nature and content of that determination
are not set forth in his paper. Prudential judgment
in the context seems to be controlled rather by no-
tions of a "good for international society and na-
tional security," and this good is threatened most
directly by aggressive Communist expansion through
"wars of national liberation." Perhaps the determi-
nation of this "good," as well as the negative eval-
uation of communism, are influenced heavily by his
Christian commitment. But they need not be, and
in any case the presumed connection is not made
explicit.

The function of the will to be "Christ-informed"
seems to be expressed in his use of the words "in-
tegralness" and "integrity." That is, he wants to pre-
vent the separation of faith and politics that would
allow political activity to develop autonomous laws
and notions of value that might conflict seriously
with Christian responsibility. If that is what he
means, I support him in advocating it. My present
complaint, however, is that "prudence" does not
seem to be "informed" in any identifiable way by
"Christ." What Quade has offered by way of policy
recommendation can be derived more readily from
a concept of national interest in its responsible and
interdependent relation to the international system.

As a concluding observation we should note that,
by contrast with Ramsey, Quade covers all moral
decision with the principle of proportion. His assert-
ion that no policy can be ruled out a priori implies
logically that the principle of discrimination is not
in force.

e) At the opposite end of the spectrum from Paul
Peachey we place Robert Gessert. In his case the
eschatological tension disappears almost altogether,
for he attempts to define his ethic within the frame-
work of the nation-state and its responsibilities, and
without significant dependence on transcendent
orms or sources of norms. He accepts the necessity
of using force to discharge some of the responsibil-
ities of statecraft, and he identifies four types of con-
siderations which ought to determine policy for the
use of military force.

In the first place, national political purposes
must guide the use of force in detail as well as
provide its initial justification. Secondly, the use
of military force must be shaped and controlled
by militarily prudent considerations such as gen-
eral strategic and tactical principles born of his-
toric battlefield experience. Thirdly, the finiteness
or scarcity of resources must be taken into ac-
count in providing the instruments of military
power. Finally, "other considerations," not reduci-
table to these three and constituting a residual cate-
gory, must be taken into account. I have in mind
special values, inhibitions, mores, prejudices re-
sulting from tradition or experience which inevi-
tably play a part in decision-making. I would
place "religious ethics" generally within this cate-
gory.

In what sense these "other considerations" are to
be "taken into account" is not clear. Perhaps Ges-
sert would concede them a minor constructive role
in the policy process, but it is more likely that he
regards them as irrational factors which cannot be
ignored and yet should not be allowed to influence
policy in any significant way. "The primary respon-
sibilities of office-holders," he writes, "are to con-
siderations of the first three kinds enumerated." He
fears "that much of the domestic protest to U.S. in-
volve in South Vietnam is of the fourth kind
and least appropriate to the issues at stake in that
country."

Yet one must not suppose that Gessert is advo-
cating politics without moral restraint or responsi-
bility. To the contrary, he is saying that if one gov-
ers his political office with the first three considera-
tions he is behaving morally, and that one cannot
be "moral" in politics on any basis other than these
three considerations. One does not substitute ethics
for politics, nor does one encounter "ethical questions" or "moral issues" in the course of "doing politics." The whole conduct of the office is an exercise in moral responsibility, and this responsibility is discharged by the prudent administration of the power of the state and allocation of the resources of the state in support of the national political purposes. Given the purposes, the power, the experience, the resources, one frames policy that is "fitting" for the situation. This is prudent politics and it is ethical politics.

I support Gessert in his understanding of the integral relationship of moral to political responsibility in the conduct of political office, but I must be critical of what appears to be a unidimensional interpretation of political ethics. What we experience as ethical conflict in politics is not a clash between morality (universal obligations) and immorality (national interest), nor between ethical politics (read "prudent" politics) and irrelevant appeals to non-prudential ethics, nor between conflicting assessments of what prudence entails in given situations. Rather, it is a clash between two orders of moral responsibility which derive from our relatedness to a particular political community and to the wider human community which always is coming into being but never fully is. When the two orders coincide, as they sometimes do, there are no moral problems. When they conflict, which they often must because of the original sin which produces divisiveness and self-preference, they beget dual moral obligations which are irreconcilable. To yield to the claims of either community appears to the other to be a rejection of moral responsibility.

The paper which Robert Gessert has written does not escape this duality. However much he may attempt to equate ethics with prudence, he does not avoid using expressions which suggest an order of value or commitment transcending both prudence and the national purposes to which it is subservient. Ethics is "the search for wise political purposes, militarily prudent operations, and just allocations of resources." Yet the search for purposes is an exercise in value interpretation and judgment which is guided ultimately by religious commitment or some functional equivalent, and the prudential worth of military operations is determined fundamentally by the outcome of the search. Certainly the "just allocation of resources," involving as it does a conflict not only between domestic and foreign commitments but also among domestic interests and responsibilities, requires a point of reference that can be found only among the "other considerations" of item four.

One can break out of the problem of the duality only by denying either the particular or the more inclusive set of claims. One does the former by renouncing politics and the latter by reintegrating and reculturalizing the political community into self-contained, self-validating tribal unity. Gessert would accept neither solution, but his position is shielded from the logic of the latter alternative only because he uses some elements from the "other considerations" more generously than he seems willing to admit.

The two ends of the spectrum illustrate the necessity of keeping the two motifs of eschatological commitment and love-motivated political service in a mutually contributory and corrective relationship. Paul Peachey struggles to maintain Christian identity through full and existential dependence on the divine confrontation, and this struggle seems to preclude his framing an ethic of power to guide the political community in its foreign policy decisions. Robert Gessert, the only one of the five writers who does not attempt a definition of specifically Christian political responsibility, prepares a political ethic which well may move towards theological anchorage in the primacy of the state if it does not incorporate theological-political inquiry into its method.

Of course, no one achieves a perfect correlation of the two motifs, and no one can. Their relationship is one of dialectic, not combination and integration. Each motif must attempt concretely to satisfy the claims of the other, and where one of them tends to fill up the definition of Christian political vocation the recovery of the truth and immediacy of the other becomes the primary ethical task.

correspondence

"WARS OF NATIONAL LIBERATION"

Chattanooga, Tenn.

Dear Sir: The article by Mr. Quentin Quade in the February 1966 worldview, makes one stand back and view with awe. Were Mr. Quade simply to state that to him communism is evil, and that in order to defeat its adoption by people anywhere he is willing to kill as many such people—and, incidentally, of our own youth—as may be necessary to make those remaining give up their project, this would appear to be his prerogative. But when he repeatedly asserts that his is a Christian stand, and thus seeks to bring the Prince of Peace into a partnership with him in his plans for killing, this to me is blasphemy on a scale difficult of comprehension.

Were Mr. Quade to reflect, he would realize the choice of communism is always one of alternatives,