



The Death of Christ and Political Theory

James V. Schall

The just man who is thought unjust will be scourged, racked, bound—will have his eyes burnt out; and, at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled.

—Glaucou, *The Republic*, No. 361

Quod scripsi, scripsi—What I have written, I have written.

—Pontius Pilate (John 19:22)

Political theory is by all accounts a discipline peculiar to Western civilization. It has its origin in the Greek city-state, particularly in Plato's account of the death of Socrates. In *The Republic* Plato went on to ask whether the just man could live in even the best state. Socrates, we know, fought in the Peloponnesian Wars and died by virtue of a public trial in 399 B.C. By his own testimony he died obedient to the laws of the civil community in which he chose to live his life, thereby condemning the unjust use of Athenian law and stigmatizing forever those 281 hapless jurists who voted for his guilt. Moreover, Socrates died calmly because he believed in the immortality of his own soul and because he was by no means sure that an already aging man would not be much better off in the Isles of the Blessed.

Political theory has continued to reflect on the questions posed by the death of Socrates, but it has paid

relatively little attention to the second great execution at the hands of the ancient state, that of the crucifixion of Jesus according to the procedure of Roman law, still one of our greatest political legacies. The Romans, whom Bertrand de Jouvenal called the most irreligious of people, required that the crime for which a man was executed be placed on the cross. In Jesus' case, the crime was a political one: the King of the Jews. Pilate, the local Roman procurator, tried his best to avoid being forced to this execution. He even tried to wash his hands of it all, as he himself claimed he did in one of the world's best-known symbolic acts. All the available evidence shows that the Roman politician was personally convinced that whatever this Jesus meant by his claim to kingship, it was not the political crime of inciting to rebellion against the Romans. The man was legally innocent, probably, in Pilate's mind, delivered up out of spite. The trial charges against Jesus were clearly fraudulent.

Nevertheless, the local situation was such that Pilate was boxed in against his will. His desperate ploy of attempting to exchange Jesus for Barabbas, who really was involved in an "insurrection," failed also. So the procurator allowed the crucifixion to take place under the command of a centurion in accordance with the demands of Jesus' betrayers and antagonists, who warned Pilate that to do otherwise would make him no friend of Caesar's. Pilate knew his personal position, never strong, would be further undermined if word got back to Rome that he failed to suppress a petty zealot preaching domestic rebellion in his territory. Thus the tragic event played itself out to its bitter end, until it was

JAMES V. SCHALL, S.J. is Professor of Political Science at the Gregorian University in Rome and a member of the Georgetown University Government Faculty.

“consummated,” as was indicated by the last words of the man on the cross.

The neglect of the execution of Jesus by subsequent and especially contemporary political theory has been curious. We can look almost in vain for any serious effort to probe its significance in modern political science journals. This is doubly strange, since under the aegis of political theory the issue is a lively one among biblical scholars prodded by certain theologians and ideologues who themselves write, often in blissful ignorance of the central tradition of political theory and its issues. Of course we could argue that the death of Jesus is irrelevant to theory and the reason for its neglect is obvious. Yet that is too facile an explanation. Is there a theoretical reason for this very neglect? What, in other words, would it take to account for the trial and death of Jesus within the evolution of political theory? Can there be something permanent in the circumstances of that death that defines how one is to react to politics in any age? And does a failure to come to terms with the death of Jesus by crucifixion reveal something fundamental about the way political philosophy has developed within our tradition? Probably we must answer Yes to these last two questions.

The problem Plato had with the death of Socrates was that the best man died by judgment of the *best* state. Now no one ever called the Roman *Empire* the best state, though it was better than most. (Cicero, however, did think the Roman *Republic* the best *theoretical* state, a most pertinent shift away from Greek thought.) But the *Empire*, despite what Virgil had to say, was an imposed, often ruthless order, a necessary “peace” into which Jesus was born in the time of Augustus. Jesus himself, as a member of a subject minority population, many of whom still wanted to recapture their fleeting independence, did not deny that even Caesar had things to be rendered unto him. Indeed, this granting to Caesar genuine authority may well have been Jesus’ most revolutionary political contribution. He payed the taxes everyone hated and even had a tax collector as a disciple.

Moreover, to Pontius Pilate he acknowledged the Roman’s authority. Indeed, he said it was from God. Already here we are aware of a classical Greek reflection about the naturalness of the *polis*. We sense too the tremendous future this question of the legitimacy of political authority is to have, largely as a direct result of Jesus’ acknowledgment that Caesar and Pilate had, precisely, “authority.”

So the conversation of Jesus and Pilate at the interrogation was of no mere passing significance. Jesus’ very response, “You would have no power over me were it not given to you from above” (John 19:11), suggests power and limits of power. What are we to do when legitimate power is transgressed? Peter had a sword, which he used, but he was told by Jesus to put it away. So Jesus did not deny a right to the Romans to execute revolutionaries against the Empire. Like Socrates, Jesus did not seek to escape his fate once he was condemned. Indeed, Peter was even called “Satan”—later, in the Apocalypse, the state that claims absolute allegiance is considered satanical—when he once tried to forbid Jesus from carrying out his judgment to die.

Thus, the death of Jesus is at the hands of the Romans, at the instigation of several prominent Jewish officials. Many in the mob even shouted to Pilate “We have no king but Caesar.” But Jesus himself on the cross whispered that even these—presumably Pilate, Caiphaz, Annas, the mob—did not really know what they were doing. The key word became “forgiveness.” Hannah Arendt contended in *The Human Condition* that this is Jesus’ real contribution to politics, since forgiveness alone can stop the cycle of vengeance connected with justice. We are, in any case, left with a feeling about the unjustness of an ancient trial, the trumped-up nature of this much-meditated event. At the same time, at a deeper level, we are told it was a *felix culpa*, that it somehow “needs be,” for our own well-being and destiny.

Political theory has always asked with Aristotle in the Third Book of *The Politics* about the good citizen and the best state. Aristotle’s vigorous mind was ever conscious that most men did not live under the best or even under good constitutions, each of which, good and bad, had to be classified. Yet Aristotle found some worth, some sense of “justice” in all states except, perhaps, the most corrupt tyrannies. (In retrospect these tyrannies sound like nothing so much as that awesome twentieth-century invention the totalitarian state, the state that, like the beast of the Apocalypse, demands our worship, our total being.) Aristotle too placed the whole ethical-political part of his theory under the pursuit of happiness, the search for the highest activity of the highest faculty on the highest object in a complete life. This led him to distinguish our mortal, political happiness, the kind that we can perhaps achieve in this life, from the speculative virtues that lead to a higher, more personal happiness. To this latter we should devote all our efforts if we can. Indeed, the very *polis* existed for the leisure to make this possible. Aristotle was the first to recognize in his theory of revolution and in his metaphysics that men who do not have a right order and thought about the structure of the cosmos will turn on it and destroy the kind of *polis*, even the kind of being, that men are capable of developing on this earth. “Men start revolutionary changes for reasons connected with their private lives,” is his cool, ominous observation.

Later Christian reflection on Genesis and certain strands of Stoic thought showed an awareness that something was wrong with man. Things ought to go right, yet they do not. Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle likewise never doubted this unsettling tendency. A complete political theory had to account, then, for the death of Socrates and of Christ, for the worst *and* the best, even for the best possible, in politics. Plato had to write *The Laws* to tell us of the second best state, since it was highly doubtful even to him that the best state could exist among us. Yet this perfect state—happiness—must exist somewhere; this was the very structure of the human mind reflecting on itself. In a sense political theory and practice seemed at times to tear themselves and the very world apart in the search for the best and most noble, for the remedy of this pristine flaw that killed a Socrates and crucified a Christ.

The account of the Fall in Genesis, furthermore, suggested to the theoretical mind that the present unhappy state of disorder was concentrated precisely on things such as the pain connected with childbirth, on physical labor and property, on coercive government. These things somehow were not "meant" to be, yet they were. Political thought from Plato's Guardians to some formulations of socialism and genetic engineering search for a method to remove these "consequences," lodged as they are in property, genes, state structure, work, and thereby to restore man's lost or future perfect state. Professor C.B. Macpherson has even tried in his *Democratic Theory* to combine Aristotelian theory of the potencies of the soul with Marx's parousial claim to full human development as a final political project. In any case, it seemed quite likely to a Paul as well as to an Augustine later that the state was a remedial institution, that it would indeed eventually disappear—but not as a result of a political process or revolution in this life. So for Paul, even a Nero had some sort of legitimate authority, as did the Tiberius under whose reign and authority Jesus was ultimately executed. Paul could, then, speak of the law punishing our transgressions, even as God's way of punishing us. He too saw all authority coming from God, even though it could be and was abused. Christians were to stay out of law courts, settle their own hassles. The state was not an ideal or a best kingdom, yet it was legitimate in certain areas, because men did violate one another.



So Christian thought had a place for the state, even the Empire, which persecuted. But it insisted on knowing what things belonged to God. No state could forbid Christians to preach what they were told. Over this the state had no competence. "We must obey God rather than men," Peter affirmed in Acts (5:27). So why could Christians do something that no previous or subsequent political thought succeeded in doing? Perhaps the key is provided by Paul in his address to the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia:

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him, though

they could charge him with nothing deserving of death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. But God raised him from the dead...[Acts 13:27-29].

From this it is clear that Jesus, the man unjustly condemned to death, was raised from the dead. This necessarily meant that the whole problematic of the unjustness of Pilate's act was transformed.

The previous passage cannot be understood, furthermore, in terms of political theory without a return to the last Book of *The Republic* of Plato, wherein Socrates astonishes his listeners (in one of the most remarkable passages in all philosophical literature) by stating his belief in the immortality of the soul precisely as a political question: the question of how perfect justice is to be achieved since it has not been realized in any existing state. In the *Phaedo* Socrates' discourse on immortality on his last day is to the same effect.

The point is that *political theory must account for individuals and not merely general happiness or common good*. This is the ultimate significance of the particular kind of death Jesus underwent on the cross. It is precisely this just man, Jesus, who reaches resurrection, the ultimate happiness to which the race has constantly felt itself called. The death of Jesus signifies that this happiness is not to be understood as political happiness nor a historical achievement, since the just man is killed. It is not something general or in a vague future, for in the Scriptures and Creeds it is this Jesus who is risen. Thus Christianity has believed, in contrast to Plato, not in the immortality of the soul as with Socrates, but precisely in the resurrection of Jesus. Because it is a moral enterprise and an act of God, this world does have a particular significance, connecting this human race with the project of ultimate happiness, as is sketched out in the First Book of *The Ethics*. However, this happiness is not created by man for himself; God is the measure of all things. As Plato affirmed in *The Laws*, the political consequences of this are that the parousia, happiness, and its attributes are not the result of a political process in time. Politics is thus free to be politics and not religion and metaphysics.

Is there any contemporary or abiding "consequence" to all of this? Anyone who keeps up with contemporary political philosophy must be aware that a new breeze is blowing across the previously barren plains of government departments, themselves disastrously aligned with the scientific and behavioral methods that left the field of precisely political thought empty of content. As Professor Kenneth Minogue has written: "It is a striking illustration of the ups-and-downs of intellectual fashion that political theorists are now cocks of the walk" (*Encounter*, August, 1977). Professor Michael Nelson found plenty with which to answer his question, "What's Wrong With Political Science?" in *The Washington Monthly* (September, 1977). Political science as "behavior," as how governments "work," seems to leave questions of justice unanswered. And we live in a time when justice, especially "distributive justice," is astonishingly in vogue, both in civil and development theory precisely as the answer to the neglected problems of political theory.

All of this, of course, leads to John Rawls and his *Theory of Justice*. I will make only a brief comment on his theory in the light of what I have been discussing about the meaning of the death of Jesus in political theory. In an excellent analysis Professor John Finnis has noted how Rawls seems to bypass the earlier classical discussions of distributive justice in the Christian tradition (*The Month*, September, 1976). On the surface and by title, Professor Rawls's book bears the same title as Plato's *Republic*—"On Justice." In Rawls's ideal state of perfect justice there is no room for a Christ or even a Socrates, and especially not for their deaths. Indeed, there is no real room for any real human beings at all, because Rawls's justice is even more abstract than the platonic forms. He wants to "create" a world as it ought to be so that we might know what a God ought to have done had he wanted perfect justice. We are dealing with pure thought. And this prospectus is not unlike original justice in Paradise before the Fall, a kind of "might have been" that was not.

Now such speculation may perhaps be useful, just as were Christian speculations on life before the Fall. The difficulty with this, however, as the multitude of studies spawned by Rawls-type proposals suggests, is that distributive justice easily lends itself to ideological theories coming out of the Left, itself strongly marked by a secularized this-worldly eschatology that proposes the just state as a positive goal at the end of a historical, revolutionary process effected by exclusively human endeavor. The execution of Jesus, the precise kind of salvation it offers to men, one not "political" in mode or achievement, needs to be understood in the context of Oscar Cullmann's remarks alluded to earlier on how the Apocalypse finally identified the state with satanism whenever the state claimed full divinity, however this might be described. Cullmann writes: "It remains a most noteworthy fact that according to the Jewish, as to the early Christian, outlook the totalitarian state is precisely the classic form of the Devil's manifestation on earth" (*The State in the New Testament*, 1956).

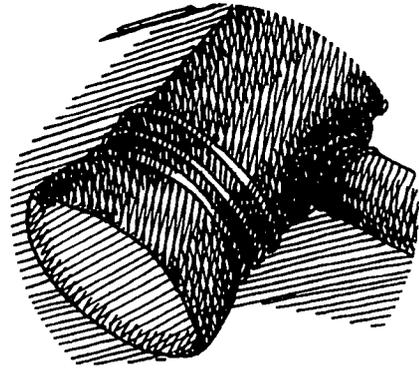
Laszek Kolakowski, in a remarkable essay called "Le diable peut-il être sauvé?" that appeared in the French publication *Contrepoint* in 1976, has indicated the importance for political theory of accounting for the abiding evil that we find among us and the political consequences of theories that propose its removal. Kolakowski emphasized the importance of the antipagan polemic in the early church to establish that evil is not absolutely inherent in the structure of the world, hence no god of evil. But evil is not something merely contingent that can ultimately be removed in Christian thought.

In Christian thought, the damnation of the devil and the concept of original sin are the most precise forms to cover the denial of the contingent character of evil. I think that denial is of extreme importance for our culture, but that we can also discern in the Christian world a strong temptation to abandon that position to rally about the optimist tradition of the Enlightenment which believes in the final reconciliation of all that is, in a harmonious, ultimate finality....

The two ideas that are at the very heart of Christian culture—namely, that humanity has been fundamentally saved by the coming of Christ and that, since man has been chased from paradise, every human being is fundamentally condemned if we consider him in his natural state, without the help of grace—ought to be considered together to avoid a careless optimism or the despair that can follow when we consider these two ideas separately.

...There is nothing in the teaching of the Church that formally excludes the possibility that hell be empty, but nothing that permits us to affirm that it does not exist. The existence of the devil confirms without ambiguity that evil constitutes a permanent element in the world, that it will never be able to be totally eradicated and that by consequence it is vain to hope for a universal reconciliation. One of the fundamental principles of the Catholic Church is that Christ has died not only for the elect but for all.

Thus, while it may seem presumptuous to speak of original sin and the devil in political theory, still, as Kolakowski intimated, it is precisely here that modern ideological historical projects are affirmed or rejected. And it is here that the execution of Jesus and the project of pure justice are pertinent.



I frankly, do not especially like justice and consider it in a way a "terrible" virtue in all its forms (cf. my "The Limits of Law," *Communio*, No. 2, 1975). This is why I think the death of Jesus to be at the heart of precisely *political* theory because the best man, the Son of God himself, was executed by the state. This means that human justice is not and cannot be enough. This, too, is why Jesus is said to have died for "all," the just and the unjust. For we cannot really begin to approach the problem of real human persons if we propose our justice as some project for installing justice in the future or if we conceive it as a pure idea. Until certain Christian Marxist-type movements came into vogue, those coming out of the Enlightenment project of which Kolakowski spoke, no Christian ever thought justice was enough. True, the medieval Joachim of Flora tradition, which in a basic sense was behind Enlightenment optimism, did make the "last things" the product of a this-world evolution. But this was heretical to the medieval mind, and rightly so.

The central point is, then, that the classical problem of the "common good"—that is, how is the general human good and happiness of the collectivity also our own personal, individual happiness, in our own uniqueness?—cannot be solved if the best man is executed by the best state or even by the average state of the Romans. The theoretical meaning of the execution of Christ, on the human side, is that ultimate happiness is achievable by any person, in any society, even in the most corrupt, but not as a result of political action. Just because Socrates saved and condemned the laws by obeying them, so Christ saved proper political life by freeing it from a claim to be able to restructure man in this life, to achieve a happiness made by him but not the one promised to him—the higher one of the Kingdom not of this world, of which Jesus spoke to Pilate. The negative side of this is, likewise, rejected. That is, the optimistic project to remove the consequences of original sin—property, family, government, work—will not remove real evil but only recast it in other forms.

Aristotle had said that politics does not make man to be man. Modern political theory since Machiavelli has, in a sense, been the effort to make a new kind of man, to give him his own "justice" and being. The execution of Jesus puts the various theories of justice in their place, back into mere politics, the practical science that deals with real persons, mortals, in their life, their complete life. Justice was always considered to be important, but

its very limits made the effort to universalize it implicitly an attack on the kind of being that man in fact was. Justice remains the most tempting virtue because, as Aristotle said, it is that moral virtue that requires others for its perfection. What the crucifixion of Jesus by the Roman state suggests is that something more than justice is required for us even to be mostly just.

It is at this point that metaphysics and grace meet political theory, even in its own order. The classical Christian discussion of this is precisely Aquinas' *Treatise on Law*, in which he asked why divine law was needed over natural law. Ironically, each of the reasons he gave argued a motive to make a better political state than would otherwise have been possible. The suggestion is that political theory cannot be itself, even in its own order, without the consequences of the crucifixion of Jesus. Anyone who has followed carefully the controversy over the very nature of classical political theory as it evolved around the works of men like Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin will realize that the thesis is at least tenable that political theory has not in fact been itself in modern times.

And so Glaucon was right about the fate of the just man.

Ultimately, Pontius Pilate was not wrong in leaving the inscription on the cross as it was. *Quod scripsi, scripsi*.

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