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Studies in Christian Ethics 2007 20: 5

DOI: 10.1177/0953946806075482

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‘POLITICAL ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER’: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO AN INTERNATIONAL ETHICAL DISCOURSE

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‘Political ethics and international order’ was the theme of the conference jointly held by the *Societas Ethica* and the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics in Oxford, August 2006. The range of contributions indicates the international scope of the discussion: Svend Andersen from Denmark, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Robin Lovin from the USA, Thomas Hoppe from Germany, Michael Northcott from England, Wolfgang Lienemann from Switzerland, Michael Haspel from Germany, Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński from Poland.¹

The choice of topic for the conference is a response to the acute question of whether there is a connection between ‘ethics’ in its specific meaning and the political task of working together and solving conflicts, which in many cases goes far beyond limited regions or states to affect the global or ‘international’ sphere. Discussion of the diverse phenomena of ‘globalisation’ makes it ever more urgent to think about our ‘world’ or ‘globe’ in terms of a political entity, whatever this entity should be or is hoped to be. This is of course not a new perspective. Any political theory or political ethics must approach the global world as a political unity to the extent that the global effects of any processes or actions are taken into account. This general understanding of unity is different, however, from

¹ These are some few selected contributions from the conference. A documentation of the whole conference will be available in the ‘Jahresbericht 2006’ of the *Societas Ethica*.

a prospect of an 'international world order' which focuses more narrowly on a structured political entity in connection with what still is or should be the assembly or network of nations and their specific political status. The function of nation states within the processes of our political existence in the domestic as well as in the global dimension is changing extensively, as is the description of it within theological discourses.² These new views go so far as to speak of 'the breaking of nations' (Robert Cooper)³ within the framework of a postmodern reality characterised by processes of de-structuring the political sphere.

A Hopeful View for Global Peace

Given the deep differences between traditions and narratives of political thinking and the history of political structures, no consensus exists that a search for the appropriate 'international world order' should be the place to begin an ethical-political discourse. It is by no means self-evident that the quest for something like an international world order, and even what political engagement might mean within such an order is the task of a political 'ethics' in a global perspective. Some suggest that the way forward is to agree to some form of universalism, perhaps a moral universalism, beyond political structures, while others enact a kind of universal scepticism against placing political actions and processes in the context of some supposed global ethical dimension.

The theme 'political ethics and international order' thus sets out in a specific direction within political discourse, in search of a space which must be precisely carved out in distinction to quite different objectives of different political theories. This direction aims at an explicitly ethical view of politics in a global dimension in distinction to a reflection on universal moral conceptions (e.g. a universal conception of cosmopolitanism)⁴ for our political coexistence beyond political practices and corresponding structures and institutions.

The ongoing debate about ethics in 'international' politics⁵ or even in the building of an international 'order' is not only demanded, negatively,

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985); Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

³ Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Grove Press, 2003). R. Cooper was one of the speakers of the conference.

⁴ Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).

⁵ Mervyn Frost, *Ethics in International Relations: A Constitutive Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Kimberly Hutchings, *International Political Theory: Rethinking Ethics in a Global Era* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999).

by the urgent issues and facts of trans-national, global processes and interconnections which unsettle given governmental structures. It is also demanded, in hope, by a promised peace which we, human beings, according to the Christian tradition are privileged to hope for and to fulfil, not restricted by a minimalist definition of a needed 'peace', which is arduously maintained. Within the Christian tradition hope is granted to us, human beings, in order to respond to God's present peaceful work (in his judgment and forgiveness) and his promise of a peaceful kingdom. This coincidence of an ethical 'ought' and a grounded hope is then the field of 'ethics' insofar as ethics has to show, how we, human beings, have to live together in peace and justice — *pax et justitia* — and the sense in which we are privileged and dignified to have grounded hope sufficient to the political task.

It is self-evident that politics is oriented to peace and a correspondingly peaceable world order.⁶ Any ethical reflection on politics is confronted then with the question of whether we should seek to develop specific political structures and/or — immediately and perhaps more modestly — political habits or practices such as the practices of diplomacy.⁷ As far as political practices are embedded in political institutions such as nation states, or at least international organisations, one must discuss the extent to which institutions are related to what we may properly call a 'world order'.

In thinking about institutional structures, a world order must not be taken as a utopian vantage point beyond our political reality. This does not exclude but includes the need for a critical discussion of any universal utopianism which evades the given reality of conflicts in the political sphere, as *Jean Bethke Elshtain* has suggested. She reminds us again of Augustine's theological distinction between our earthly political reality, which will at the end of time disappear, and the promised Kingdom of God, which is the frame of the church. This distinction points to a political ethics which asks after a political *topos*, a place where we may live together. Any *polis* has to be such a place, and will always be imperfect, from the perspective of expectations of a better world. From the perspective set up by the promise of the Kingdom of God, however, any *polis* can be expected to be a reasonable place for a living according to a hope grounded in that promise. In any case, there remains an urgent need to think about the relation of politics and granted hope within the Christian tradition and

⁶ Robert Cooper writes: 'A new world order might not be a reality, but is an important aspiration, especially for those living in a new European order. The wish to protect individuals, rather than to resolve the security problems of states, is part of the postmodern ethos' (*The Breaking of Nations*, p. 74).

⁷ See for a description: Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations*.

not to confuse this question with different issues, which may not lead to a political ethics but to a different conception of the political sphere.

Political Ethics and Realism

Political ethics must clarify what kind of 'realism' plays and should play a leading role in politics, insofar as 'realism' is especially connected with politics and politics has to deal with a specific reality: the conditions of our living together, their maintenance and improvement for the sake of the neighbour. This is its mandate, ethically reflected. Realism must not be put in opposition to a peaceful living together if it is not to be confounded with a fundamental scepticism about peaceful political coexistence. To be realistic in the political sphere means to discern the real conditions, which pertain to our living together. Here realism is understood as an exhaustion of any political action and political power entrusted to us in a grounded and practical following of the hope for peace. This makes it necessary to be aware at the same time of the weakness of all political power, which becomes obvious in the dynamics of military force and war. The awareness of the weakness of power — as *Michael Northcott* describes it — is part of a thoughtful realism, which opposes a concept of an only apparently strong power based on force. In this sense we have again to reflect the specific character of political power and of course the fallacies of any concepts of war or military force which may be embedded in political strategies.

Political realism, because of the nature of political power, depends then on the practice of judgment.⁸ Such judgment is based on the distinction between the grounded hope for the kingdom of God and this temporal world, which bears the promise for an already present politically peaceful and justly living together. This promise as it is explicitly articulated in the biblical Christian traditions sets judging within the political ethics of the earthly polis, and seeks space for human beings to endure in the state of peace and justice. Such judging does not face the imperative to eliminate violence from earth. There is no imperative to abolish 'the evil'⁹ from earth; there is no political task more fundamental than the mandate to protect our political neighbour against violence, preventing wrongdoing and breaking the law. Together with this limited but nevertheless very demanding political mandate goes a grounded hope for a politics of peace, for peace-making and the corresponding practices which come into view via the concept of an ethics of diplomacy and political praxis in this genuine meaning.

⁸ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures*, 2003 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁹ The biblical language uses mostly the Greek word 'κακόν' which is closer to 'wrong' than to 'evil'.

Realism as integrated into this political-theological perspective is connected with a distinction between political ethics, where people engage in practices of peacemaking and struggles for justice, on the one hand, and practices distinct from politics and its mandate, e.g. what we call 'religious' practices, on the other hand. There are of course various traditions of thinking on this topic, concerning the limits and contours of politics and other, quite different and controversial issues such as the distinction and separation of state, politics and religion. As *Svend Andersen* shows in his article here, we find at least one Protestant tradition with a specific distinction between the political and the ecclesial sphere, which at its best is a suitable framework for reflections on the limits of politics on one side and the mandate of Christian citizens on the other. There is still the search for a concept of realism not simply based on a sceptical or pessimistic view about the human condition; rather, on a hopeful insight into what we, human beings, are promised to be in terms of a political existence and coexistence in this temporal 'world' and at the same time rooted in what we receive from God by faith and hope.

There is furthermore the concept of a 'Christian realism' closely connected with a concept of ordering powers which is — as *Robin Lovin* in his article (referring to Reinhold Niebuhr) shows — essential for Christian ethics insofar it does not simply suppose a god-less or god-forsaken world distinct from that sphere of religious life, but is engaging in this world and its possible conditions for a peaceful, political structured human life with regard to the given necessary 'powers' (economic, political, religious) in their discernible functions, determining this world. This realism looks for a possible order which does not depend on the forceful power of nation states, but is rather grounded on a balanced fundamental order, the awareness of which we can reckon with as long as we do not bank on forms of power which destroy the very functions of the given specific powers of economy, politics and culture.

Can there be a 'Political Ethics of War'?

The precise subject of politics remains contested on the basis of very different paradigms — such as Max Weber's concept of political praxis and the politician. His argument is that political praxis has to be effective in regard to its goals, whatever those goals may be. This starting point necessarily generates a debate about the means to realise a given goal. It is precisely here that the connection between 'political power' (according to Weber) and war is called 'realistic' by Weber. However, if 'war' and military force is a means for achieving a certain goal, or if it has a regular function for politics or within the system of law, then we are — strangely enough — close to an 'ethics of war' instead of a strict limitation of war

and military force exclusively to protect people in an acute situation of danger and violence. The open question then is of course what 'protection' includes. The discussion about 'war', 'just war' and the connected topics such as 'humanitarian intervention' in the context of political ethics shows how difficult it is to distinguish the use of military force from actions for specific goals, e.g. the goal to establish human rights and to separate military force and war from politics.

Michael Haspel's description of an ethical reflected 'use' of military force in an international institutionalised system of rights and a corresponding 'cosmopolitanism' which has to be established supposes that this will be a new concept of 'just war', and thus the option of a 'just war' will be permanently embedded in political ethics and the political agenda, no longer an — unavoidable — exception.¹⁰ 'Just war' is thus redefined as a normal function of the new world order. 'Just war' means a 'justified war' according to a whole range of criteria related to human rights, which must be realised. So the question for the concept of political ethics is whether it has to keep the door open to a discursive ethics of the use of military force in a broad field of rights to be protected and enforced.

Wolfgang Lienemann takes a different line, and seeks a specific international institution of law, which has no less and no more than the mandate of all nations to protect an institutionalised order or rights. This doesn't lead to an 'ethics' of enforcing human rights but to ethical reflected practices and institutions for the protection of a political order based on an international law, i.e. legally controlled relations between nations, which bind all nations together. This proposal is close to what the United Nations is supposed to be or finally ought to be. This theory is enclosed in a thoroughly pacifist logic because the only mandate to use military force is constrained to the protection of an already globally established and acknowledged institution.¹¹

In a similar way *Thomas Hoppe* suggests that there is a need for a very thoughtful and complex practice of judgment which takes the necessity of military force into account when other people have to be protected against life-threatening violence. This very much chastened understanding of 'humanitarian intervention' is different from the logic of justification beyond an emergency and is bound to the very constraints of an ethically reflected 'use' of military force. That kind of ethical reflection has to be seen in opposition to a 'pacifism', which does even refuse the exceptional, emergency use of force for the protection of the other. Pacifism in the

¹⁰ Michael Haspel, *Friedensethik und humanitäre Intervention. Der Kosovo-Krieg als Herausforderung evangelischer Friedensethik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner-Verlag, 2002).

¹¹ See also Wolfgang Lienemann, *Frieden. Vom 'gerechten Krieg' zum 'gerechten Frieden'* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

context of an ethical reflection — as it appears in Thomas Hoppe's analysis — is not an abstract moral issue, but a subject of political ethics concerned with care for the life of the other.

Such conceptualisations differ from a Weberian model in the goals of political strategies and even the means to achieve its ends in cases of emergency and protection are not in principle limited. This question for the essential task of politics is — as these contributions may show — with good reason still on the agenda of political ethics and it remains — even on the basis of some consensus about an *ultima ratio* criterion — very controversial, obviously not because of different moral standpoints but because of different approaches to political ethics.

Looking for Political and Legal Structures and According Practices

Political ethics has to look for ways of governance in international affairs, for explicitly political forms and institutions of a world order and first of all for political practices, which bear such institutions and which are the core of any political ethics. There are good reasons to strengthen the latter — looking primarily for an ethics of good political practices instead of relying on somehow (after all, by force) guaranteed conditions like the balance of power of nation states, which are not in accordance with the new disposition of the political scenery.

In this respect the very concern of ethical reflection and discourse is the promise and the task of a political living together as a necessary and nevertheless promising form of human life. A political order then can be seen as part of the human condition with its very own promises, realistically related to an elaborated ethical form of our human existence and not suspected to be an illusionary and hopeless vision. In this context the question for democracy and a corresponding civil society arises anew — as *Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński* has emphasised — in its fundamental meaning, related to specific contexts of political engagement, which allow democratic habits and structures to develop. It is not possible to impose something like a civil society or a democracy and to think of it as a moral demand; rather it has to be considered what could be favourable, political and sociological conditions for this 'ought to be', for this normative concept of our human life, and what may be the ethical and religious traditions which are close to the basis of democracy and a civil society.

Looking for a World Order?

Looking for a binding and reliable world order has been always urgent because of all kinds of violence against people and institutions, and there are many reasons to judge that more and more various forms of violence

and counter-violence are increasingly threatening the world in which we have to live together. This is thus far a new situation different from a — ‘modern’ — political disposition, which is determined by nation states or other identifiable political entities and their coexistence or collaboration. In a ‘postmodern’ scenery, which seems to be now also characteristic for the political sphere and the narrative of its transformations, there is a multiple range of various and different kinds of ‘powers’, which have to be related to one another, controlled and domesticated.

The engagement in a world order is in this respect in many ways occupied by the increasing problems of preventing violence on any level and in any dimension. Because of that narrow focus the use of force and military actions get so much attention on the agenda of the ethical and moral discourse. Political ethics, however, has to widen and to change the perspective. It has to ask for the sources and places of political habits and practices, which should be incorporated into institutions. Political ethics has — in a Christian perspective — to remind us of the various traditions of a political human existence rooted in biblically-grounded theological traditions concerning the question ‘who reigns over the world?’, ‘who will judge in justice?’ and engrained in the promises of God’s reign and the present and coming kingdom of Christ. These traditions have in many ways activated the question for an explicitly institutionalised political order and corresponding political practices different and opposite to any kind of imperialism or abstract — perhaps moral or religious — universalism.

The very question for a world order, then, is still based on a political engagement of people who have not resigned from a citizenship rooted and shaped in the promises which are entrusted to us — a citizenship of doing justice and making peace, a citizenship of the kind of good works that fulfils a political mandate.¹² Any political ethics is based on an ethos, which has to be witnessed by such citizens, who are experienced in listening to God’s judgment and living together in peace and justice. Here follows, of course, a further essential chapter of political ethics, which has to describe this ethos as it is rooted in the Christian tradition.

That way the contributions selected here from the conference on ‘Political Ethics and International Order’ will remind us of some of the essential topics to be treated on the agenda of a political ethics and may initiate again the theological-ethical discourse which has to be dealing genuinely with political ethics as it is evoked by the Christian hope.

¹² See Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).