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A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF SECURITY?

A REPLY TO GORDON DUNSTAN

PHILIP WEST

> The holy teaching while remaining single nevertheless embraces things belonging to the different philosophical sciences because of the one formal meaning which is its interest in all manner of things, namely the truth they bear in the light of God. [Aquinas, *S.T.*, 1a.1,4]

There are broadly two conceptions of the appropriate scope of theology on the market today. On the one hand there are those who would equate it with what Gordon Kaufman calls the scientific study of religion, which at most "purports to interpret the meaning, significance, and value of a particular segment of human culture, the religious sector".[1] Theology here is to do with God, and that portion of individual and corporate human life labelled religious. The other, following the tradition of Aquinas, refuses this narrowing of horizons. In this tradition, it is not the subject matter (God, religious behaviour) but the perspective from which the world is viewed that gives to theology its distinctive nature and unity. Here theology is concerned with all the matters dealt with also by other fields of human study and endeavour, but in the persective of "the truth they bear in the light of God".

To name only Aquinas and Barth, surely among the most impressive and influential systematicians of this millenium, is to indicate the strength of this second tradition. Both of these theologians, albeit in different ways, reject firmly the suggestion that there are areas of human social life about which there is nothing of interest to say theologically. They resist the forcing of theology back into a circumscribed religious dimension that leaves the political, economic, and even ethical dimensions autonomous. Thus Gordon Dunstan is far from obviously correct when he states, in a recent article entitled "Theological Method and the Deterrence Debate",[2] that "there are some human activities which cannot be discussed in Christian terms at all", (p. 40) including the activity of warfare and the concerns of security generally. If by this he means that there are some areas of human practice that are autonomous, about which there cannot be any distinctively theological position, upon which the central Christian symbols of the cross and resurrection cannot be brought to bear, then he is outlining a position that is at best a contentious one.[3]

In what follows I shall briefly set out Dunstan's argument in this short but dense and important article (I), argue that his theological method is flawed at various points (II), and suggest an alternative substantive conclusion in the area of the ethics of deterrence to the one he defends (III).

I

Dunstan's key contention is that

> if the language and meaning of Christianity are taken seriously, there are some human activities which cannot be discussed in Christian terms at all. There is no specifically "Christian" way of waging war, or of amputating limbs, or of fixing oil prices, or of deciding for or against the nuclear generation of energy. (Dunstan, p. 40)

In particular, the problem of whether to hold or use a nuclear deterrent

> is one of those tragic necessities which . . . cannot be categorized at all in Christian terms. There is no *Christian* solution to it. There is only a choice among evils; and there is the Everlasting Mercy for those who, in good faith, are driven to choose. (p. 50)

In such areas theology has no *direct* bearing at all. In fact it is true, as Lambeth has repeatedly affirmed, that "war as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the teaching and example of Our Lord Jesus", and there is no "Christian" way of prosecuting "an inherently unchristian pursuit". (p.40) The Christian gospel is effective here only indirectly "in the character which it imprints upon Christian men in the relevant exercise of judgement and use of power", above all in the production of the (Aristotelian) virtue of prudence. (p. 51)

Dunstan's views on the nature of theology, and on the social relevance of the Old and New Testament witness, are assembled into a coherent picture that backs up this basic contention. "Theology" he defines as "an intellectual discipline . . . possess(ing) an integrity and autonomy of its own in that it handles a corpus or body of material of its own in a disciplined way . . . in its nature, an application of reason to the things of God, primarily the self-revelation of God". (p.46) Especially in talk of "a corpus or body of material of its own", this sounds as if Dunstan is opting for my first (restricted) definition of the scope of theology; and this suspicion is confirmed by his treatment of the Old and New Testament traditions. Particularly striking here is his ability to distinguish neatly between the "political" and "religious" experience and action of the Israelites. On the one hand "their *religious* experience was of the God who revealed himself to them . . . and in this experience of God they came to a responsive judgement upon themselves, upon good and evil, right and wrong, blessing and curse in man", (p. 41) while on the other "their *political* experience", although "related to their religious experience", was distinct from it. (p. 41, my stress) "Prescriptions for security", such as "invade this territory . . . go out to battle . . . ally yourself with this nation; do not become entangled with another" etc, although "given also out of religious conviction", were clearly "*political* prescriptions". (pp. 41f) Indeed, Dunstan is able to distinguish (and condemn) possible religious solutions in the political arena as those involving "a passive 'faith' in God which would leave the issue to him . . . without human political or military activity at all". (p. 42) Such a confusion of categories is the type for the modern confusion of theology and politics.

In turning from the Old to the New Testament, Dunstan detects one striking and relevant difference. Whereas "the Old Testament is the literature of a political community preoccupied, in every century, with its own security", (p. 41) the New, although also "the product of a community", arose from a community that "never saw itself as a political community nor acted as one". (p. 42)

"Universalistic" by its very nature, "the politics of national survival were irrelevant to it". (p. 42) Not only did Jesus "carefully dissociate himself and his mission from that of a political messiah" (p. 42) but, and this is perhaps the most telling assertion of all:

> there is *no evidence at all* that the earliest Christian communities took political action to implement their theological transcendence of imposed distinctions, as between bond and free. In all the interpretations which they left us of the death of Jesus on the Cross, there is *not one hint* of a promise attached to it of political success, or of its use, actual or potential, as a political weapon; they thought *entirely within the purely religious idiom* of the various traditions of sacrifice . . . (p. 43 my stress)

Politically, in Dunstan's view, the earliest Christian communities were quietist, looking for the ultimate promise of the Kingdom of God at the end, but with no attempt to change the structures meanwhile. In the face of sufferings,

> such as could be relieved by Christian charity were to be relieved – that is evident everywhere. But of political action to relieve them there is no hint. (p. 43)

In the meantime they had a positive appreciation of the value of (secular) political government, as witnessed by Romans 13, I Timothy 2 and I Peter 2, appreciating the benefits of the *Pax Romana,* and refusing legal and military service only because of the "idolatrous" (i.e. religious) oaths involved. (pp. 43f)

Given this neat split between the political and religious realms, and the accompanying restriction of the legitimate scope of theology to the latter, Dunstan is naturally suspicious about claims to "a specific 'Christian approach' . . . to the problems of security", (p. 40) because this usually amounts to "the uncritical extrapolation of words and acts from the theological context of the mission of Jesus . . . to the political context of our own day". (p. 51) Usually such allegedly Christian approaches amount to a mere veneer of biblical language covering a solution reached on other grounds; this is the case in particular with "some of the products of the World Council of Churches" and "some 'liberation theology'". (pp. 40f) Theology and politics must remain clearly separate. Certainly, "Christian idealism, founded in faith" may give us "goals", but it is "Christian realism" that must dictate political action in the area of security in today's world, and this dictates "the duty to deploy and control effective power", (p. 51) including, regrettably, the nuclear deterrent. (pp. 49f) It is crucial that we appreciate "the nature of Scripture, ethics and politics" (p. 44) and do not confuse them, for such category mistakes would lead us seriously and perhaps catastrophically astray.

II

It is clear to me, however, that in this clear, confident and wide-ranging picture, Dunstan has made some category mistakes of his own. Perhaps the most glaring is the projection back into the society of ancient Israel of the contemporary distinction between "politics" and "religion". Of course these modern categories may, and perhaps must, be used in our analysis of the Old Testament and the community that produced it; indeed one of the most fundamental gains in the discipline of hermeneutics in recent years is the realization that the interpretation of an ancient text inevitably involves the bringing of our own categories and prejudices to it, that a "neutral" understanding of *any* text is impossible.[4] But it is a mistake to think, as Dunstan clearly does, that the distinction between religion and politics is really "there" in the Old or New Testament communities in essentially the same way as in modern Western societies; that therefore we may divide Old and New Testament verses, motifs, actions and principles neatly into political and religious groups, and "apply" only the political ones to our current security problems.

That the separation out of relatively autonomous political and economic spheres is a comparatively recent development in Western social history, rendering modern Western societies structurally quite different from all earlier ones, is a commonplace of modern social theory that such an analysis neglects.[5] But even a historically imaginative study of the Old and New Testaments on their own reveals plainly the differences between ancient Israelite society and our own. Mention need only be made of the terms temple and kingship to appreciate that in those societies what we would now call politics and religion overlapped to an alarming extent. It is simply not true that, for the ancient Israelites, cult was a matter of religion while warfare was a matter of politics, as Dunstan implies. War was holy war too, the defence of the temple at once a religious and a political duty, cult also a political sphere of action. The temple-kingship complex was the power-centre of the symbolic order of what we would artifically divide into the religious and political spheres of ancient Israel.[6]

Neither is it true, as Dunstan claims, that the crucifixion of Jesus, that central feature of the Christian religious drama, can be neatly separated from what we would call political overtones. Several major recent studies, notably those of Sanders[7] and Rowland,[8] have stressed the opposite, and in particular that the immediate cause of Jesus' execution was the challenging of the religio-political order of the temple, and its dominant place in maintaining the *status quo* in Israelite society. As Sanders, for example, comments: in discussing "the principal cause of Jesus' death, it is incorrect to make a rigid distinction between 'religious' and 'political' reasons". (Sanders, p. 296) No doubt Jesus rejected the idea that the Kingdom of God was to be established by force of arms (Sanders, p. 326), but talk of the Kingdom, and the provocative symbolic acts of the triumphal entry and the temple cleansing, by no means betoken a Jesus who "carefully dissociated himself and his mission from that of a political messiah". (Dunstan, p. 42)[9] Neither can it be maintained that the crucifixion was interpreted "entirely within the purely religious idiom of the various traditions of sacrifice" (Dunstan, p. 43) in the earliest church. Not only was the crucifixion interpreted in a wide variety of frameworks by the earliest Christians, with the use of legal and political as well as sacrificial metaphors, but also sacrifice was itself not a purely religious category in our terms – witness, for example, the martyrdom theology of the Maccabees.

Moving from these general considerations to examine

specifically the political half of Dunstan's religion/politics divide, it is clear that here too his analysis is lacking. Firstly, in making a case that the earliest church had a uniformly positive assessment of the autonomous political sphere of the *Pax Romana* (from which he derives the appropriateness of such an attitude for the contemporary Christian) Dunstan operates with his own particular canon within the canon (Romans 13, I Timothy 2, I Peter 2). Largely absent are the synoptic gospels and, perhaps most significantly in this context, the book of Revelation.[10] It is only by ignoring the existence of the latter, and a superficial treatment of the former ("Put up thy sword into its sheath" does not imply Christian pacifism (p. 44) etc.) for an exclusive stress on his chosen texts that Dunstan is able to assume the uniformly positive reception of the political *status quo* that is essential to his case. No one reading Mark or Revelation would readily imagine that their authors were as positive about the world powers as Dunstan suggests, or indeed that they subscribed to his view of the autonomy of the political realm.

Secondly, Dunstan's actual treatment of these texts, and of the non-activist stance of many of the earliest Christian communities, fails to take into account the restricted scope for action available to them in their actual setting as compared to ours. Thus Ernst Bammel argues[11] that the positive appreciation of the state in Romans 13:1-7 is to be accounted for by the precarious position of the Christian communities in Rome at the time of writing, and the questionable nature of Paul's *bona fides*. He argues persuasively that the authentic Pauline position is to be found rather in I Thess. 5:3, which is severely critical of the official Roman ideology of the state in the light of the Pauline apocalyptic framework.[12]

And thirdly, it is clear from Dunstan's treatment not only of the New Testament, but also of Western history and the current situation, that he holds an altogether too naively positive view of the state. Dunstan's state is the benevolent upholder of the *Pax Romana* within which citizens are freed to pursue their legitimate activities (including their religion) in security. It can be assumed to represent the best interests of all those it rules. But such a view of the state, traceable to Hegel and Durkheim in terms of the major sociological traditions, lacks perception of the criticisms that have been offered of it in the other major traditions that go back to Weber and Marx. It lacks the Marxist recognition that the state to some extent reflects and defends the class interests of the society that it rules; that it thus upholds the concrete injustices built into any present political order – an insight arguably implicit in the concept of the Kingdom of God that at the end will replace all earthly rule with one of divine justice. And it lacks the Weberian realization of the importance of power, and of the automony of the state from the interests of the rest of society – insights again arguably implicit in the New Testament concept of the heavenly "powers". Both traditions cast doubt on the advisability of cutting politics free from the critical edge of the theological tradition as Dunstan proposes. Both cast doubt also on the advisability of trusting the instinct for self-preservation exhibited by the modern nuclear state as being in the best interests of the whole of its citizenry.[13]

Finally to return to hermeneutical matters, and in this I lead on to my positive proposals to be made in the last section, it is misleading to imply that the appropriate categories for the hermeneutical task are "application" and "extrapolation". (Dunstan, p. 51) "Creative reinterpretation" might be a more adequate term for the appropriate use of the tradition. Something of this nature can be seen happening to the tradition within the Old Testament itself (consider, for example, the repeatedly complex and creative reapplication of the tradition that has occurred within what we now call the book of Isaiah), between the testaments (for instance the uses of the terms of Christ/Messiah and Son of Man), and within the New Testament also. Tellingly, within the canon we can see the tradition, caught up in this hermeneutical process, crossing and recrossing the boundaries of Dunstan's religious and political spheres. And so it should. It is only an anachronistic division of these two realms that could deny authenticity *a priori* to this process.

III

It is time to present very briefly a positive case. If, as I have argued at length, the biblical traditions are not to be isolated artifically from our modern political concerns, if the contemporary problems of security need also to be seen "in the light of God", where does that leave us with respect to the deterrence issue? How might Dunstan's legitimation of the use of ultimate power in the interests of our own security look in the light of the foundation story of our religion; or rather, how might someone informed by the story of Jesus of Nazareth react to this position?

The crucial point to be made, surely, is that in the story of Jesus the concepts of power and security undergo a paradoxical transformation, a creative reapplication.[14] Thus the "security" that Jesus talked of in the Sermon on the Mount did not exclude the taking up of the cross to follow him (no doubt a literal allusion to martyrdom in its original application). And the "power" of God was manifested in Jesus being delivered up – and acted upon – not in the action of the legion of angels that he declined to invoke. It is a paradoxical power made perfect in weakness (Paul), a glory exhibited in humiliation (John), a lack of anxiety amidst tribulation (Matthew) with which we have to do here. And it is all – if we can trust the synoptic stress on the content of Jesus' preaching, and the symbolic implications of his final acts – in order that the Kingdom of God might be established: in pursuit of a *non*-quietist and indeed (non-violent) revolutionary transformation of society, necessitating the criticism of, challenging of, and change of the structures of society in the here and now.

The Christian religion has as its basis a crucified King, whom we believe to be the ultimate revelation of the character of God. It is difficult to see, therefore, "in the light of God", how prudence can be accepted as the primary virtue, or security as an unquestionable good, or ultimate power as a legitimate means – at least as long as these words retain their usual meanings. If it is true, as Dunstan asserts, that warfare is an inherently unchristian pursuit, there *is* an alternative to forcing theology back into a circumscribed religious dimension, such that we may prepare for warfare in our defence unhindered by its prescriptions. And that is to renounce the use of warfare – *at least* warfare of as indiscriminate a kind as that necessitated by the use of nuclear weapons – and suffer the consequences.

This alternative may not appear to be palatable, and it would certainly involve the putting of our security on the line. It may, in fact, involve the way of the cross. But it *could* claim to be a Christian approach to the problem of security, and in my view it is not to be dismissed lightly.

In today's world there is, indeed, "only a choice among evils", as of course there always has been in every age. The story of Jesus, however, places a large question mark against the pursuit of our own security at the cost of choosing great evil for others. It tells of a man vindicated by God because of his consistent life and death of self-abandonment in the cause of the Kingdom; of a man who lost his life for the sake of the gospel, and found it.

It is reported that he expected his followers to do likewise.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem*, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1972, p. 18 Kaufman D. (p. 17) subscribes to the second view of the scope of theology outlined here.
2. In Geoffrey Goodwin (ed.), *Ethics and Nuclear Deterrence*, London, 1982, pp. 40-52.
3. It clearly has connections with the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, that is also implicitly under attack in this article.
4. See classically Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, 1975.
5. For a model of the relationships between the economic, political and other subsystems in late capitalist societies, see Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, London, 1976. For an account of the distinctive nature of these societies in historical perspective, see Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, Cambridge, 1985.
6. See further, George V. Pixley, *God's Kingdom*, London 1981.
7. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, London, 1985.
8. Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins*, London, 1985.
9. This is not to accept the case that Jesus was a Zealot. On the Zealot hypothesis, see several essays in Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (eds.), *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*, Cambridge, 1984.
10. On the political relevance of Revelation, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, 1972, chapter 12.
11. Ernst Bammel, "Romans 13", in Bammel and Moule (*op. cit.*), pp. 265-383.
12. He argues further that Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13ff are traceable to similar Jewish and pagan sources: Paul is here adapting or quoting traditional materials, not giving his own position *de novo*. For an appreciation of the contingent nature of the Pauline arguments in general, see J. C. Baker, *Paul the Apostle*, Edinburgh, 1980.
13. On various views of the state, see Giddens (*op. cit.*), pp. 17-31 and *passim*.
14. See, for example, Luke 22:24-27.

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