

HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD THINK ABOUT POLITICS. REFLECTIONS IN A TIME OF WAR

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“The real reality, the ‘natural’ form, of politics
reflects the figure of Christ.”

There is a phrase in Holy Scripture that I think we should always bear in mind. The phrase says that Jerusalem was built “*in angustia temporum*.” We must labor our whole lives “*in angustia temporum*.” Difficulties are not a passing phase. We can’t wait for them to end as we would wait for a thunderstorm to calm down before getting to work. No, difficulties are the norm. We have to realize that we will spend our whole lives “*in angustia temporum*” in order to bring about the good we hope to accomplish.¹

In angustia temporum: with these words, Charles de Foucauld attempts to express the difficulties that the Christian inevitably encounters in his apostolic work. But they also express, on a spiritual level, the core intuition of the present article. It is an intuition that is borne out by even the most cursory glance at the newspapers: whether we consider the domestic or the international scene, it is obvious that difficulties are not a passing phenomenon in the history of nations and

¹Charles de Foucauld, *Der letzte Platz* (Einsiedeln, 1957), 42.

of the world. Rather, they represent a state of affairs that we could call “historical” *tout court*, a state of affairs, in other words, that characterizes *historical* existence as such.²

The travails of historical existence—which include the wickedness and violence of human beings—place us before a question that I propose to address in the present article. The question is this: granted that we must reckon with historical existence without ideological foreshortening, taking into account all of its dimensions, which, to repeat, include violence—what is *political realism*?

Although violence has always been part of historical existence, the threat of terrorism has increasingly “globalized” the issue in our own time—even though the post-war nuclear arms race already prefigured and inaugurated this “globalization.”³ Our reflection on the meaning of political realism will seek to avoid two extremes that have manifested themselves in the current debate about how the West should respond to Islamist terrorism: pacifism, on the one hand, and the cynical “realism” of a so-called *Realpolitik*, on the other. In the context of current events, what is at stake in this reflection is not just the question of political realism, but, in connection with that, the question of what understanding of reality—including political reality—can be presented as a Christian alternative to Islamism (which, after all, makes much of the hypocrisy of the so-called Christian West in its propaganda).⁴

²For the category of “historical existence,” see Ernst Nolte, *Historische Existenz. Zwischen Anfang und Ende der Geschichte?* (Munich/Zurich, 1998). Needless to say, space constraints prevent me from discussing Nolte’s work in all its complexity. To do so would require discussing the distinction between history and pre-history, the concept of the end of history, the definition of Nazism as the enemy of historical existence in Europe, and the categories Nolte uses to express the unity of history: religion, power, the Left, etc. I cite the book only as a source for the idea of historical existence, the core idea that I try to articulate in the present article.

³See Robert Spaemann, “Zur philosophisch-theologischen Diskussion um die Atombombe,” in *Grenzen. Zur ethischen Dimension des Handelns* (Stuttgart, 2001).

⁴I follow the convention of distinguishing between Islam and Islamism, inasmuch as there is indeed an important difference between them, the latter expressing a certain reaction to a long-standing identity-crisis in Islam, especially in the Arab world. I leave open the question of the extent to which classical Islam has the inner resources to overcome this identity crisis adequately.

I should note that my reflections offer a sort of hybrid between ontology and theology, on the one hand, and reflection on current events, on the other. This hybrid reflects my aim in the present essay, which is not to prescribe policies for responding to terrorism, but rather to sketch an ontological framework in which to think fruitfully about the deepest meaning of such policies, which, after all, *always* take shape within some ontological-theological framework. Underlying this enterprise is the conviction that ontology and theology are relevant to constituting and understanding the reality that “realistic” policies are supposed to reflect.

As Christians, we wish to affirm that the goodness of creation, indeed, the love of Christ, are the heart of reality, even of political reality. But isn’t such an affirmation an unrealistic dream? In responding to this objection, which often clouds our gaze and prevents us from thinking about politics *as Christians*, I would like to propose the following double thesis. First, the goodness of being, the victory of the Lamb Who was Slain, the victim who does not create victims, is the framework for thinking about politics. Second, this claim is not only not unrealistic, but, rightly understood, indicates the only way in which we can live realistically the original form of politics as service of the common good—without attempting to circumvent the logic of historical existence, either in the direction of an ideological utopianism or in the direction of an absolutization of the facticity of the “*status quo*.”

The intrinsic form of politics is service of the common good, and this service manifests, not only the goodness of being as gift, but also, in the end, the Eucharistic attitude of Christ. It does this, however, not by virtue of some ideological system, but by reason of a humble obedience to the logic of love inscribed in the finitude of historical existence. For it is in just that finitude that being as gift is given, that the body of Christ is handed over as Eucharist. To see this is to recognize the true sense of historical existence: history is not absolute—we reject the fantasy of a “post-historical breakthrough” in which history supposedly finds its true meaning—even as historical existence is open to fecundation by the Kingdom.

1. Historical existence

The fact that holiness can occur within historical existence, and as the fulfillment of its inner structure, has implications for politics. Politics can neither limit itself to recording the facts of the *status quo*—merely restating, for example, what the dominant mentality allows us to count as “real”—nor dream of some future in which every problem has been solved. Rather, politics has to be an engagement for the realization of the good within historical existence. It follows from this, moreover, that the specific form of the good, namely, the public good, that is meant to be the ultimate *raison d’être* of political action, can be achieved only within what Charles de Foucauld (with the Bible) calls *angustia* and what we, in a more philosophical language, have called “historical existence,” with its characteristics of limitation, poverty, wretchedness, meanness, anguish, and toil.

The category of historical existence, then, is the unifying background of the present essay on the *historical* level. Our first task, then, is to clarify its meaning. The essential properties of historical existence are *contingency*, *multiplicity*, and, finally, an ultimate *tension between immanence and transcendence*. I will come to these features in a moment. First, however, a word about method.

According to Ernst Nolte, “the definition of historicity as ‘fragility’ or finitude is too philosophical. All things are fragile and finite, from worms to the Milky Way, maybe even the universe itself. So long as we don’t give to man’s finitude a specific meaning, this definition is too general. It is part of ontology, and not of anthropology.”⁵ My own account of historical existence has an ontological dimension, and necessarily so. Nevertheless, it attempts to offer, not just a vague, “philosophical” (in Nolte’s sense) definition of historical existence, but a definition at once specific and multiple. *Specific* because ontology comes to completion in anthropology. *Multiple*, because, “if man is to be able to exist historically,” he must do so within historical structures, and not just general ones. In fact, “every analysis of historical existence enables us to recognize the features of a particular historical epoch.”⁶ My aim in what follows, then, is to identify the challenges we face in the present time—a time of war—with full respect for the multiplicity of historical existence.

The lack of a sense of *contingency* means that man’s historical action becomes “essentialized,” that is, “rigid.” When this hap-

⁵Nolte, *Historische Existenz*, 30.

⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

pens—either in the form of utopianism (true history has not yet begun; true history ended with the end of the earthly paradise)⁷ or of a reduction of reality to brute facticity (reality is the facts that *dominate* our existence)—there can be only one result: man is led to destroy his fellow man, precisely in his historical existence. To understand the contingency of historical existence, by contrast, means to engage oneself for a certain task, with the hope that it will succeed, but also with the clear awareness of the fragility and limitedness of every earthly project. With a clear awareness, in other words, that every earthly project is achieved “*in angustia temporum*.”

Historical existence is realized in a certain *multiplicity*. Peoples, languages, nations, religions, systems of governments, customs, and so forth all belong to the multiplicity of historical existence. It does not follow from this, of course, that one thing is as good as another, as pluralism affirms. The point is simply that our political action in history has to reckon with multiplicity as an element of historical existence that, in and of itself, is something positive.

The *tension between immanence and transcendence* grounds the noblest possibility of historical existence: the desire to endure through time and beyond it. Without this tension, we would not have the pharaonic pyramids, the Romanesque or Gothic churches of Europe, the Code of Hammurabi,⁸ the miracle of fifth-century Athens,⁹ the *pax romana*, or the works of Mozart, Goethe, or Dante.

The tension between immanence and transcendence does not simply reflect the contingency and multiplicity of historical existence, but is rather an aspiration to represent something absolute or transcendent *within* historical existence. This aspiration needs to be carefully distinguished from any attempt to overcome the limits of historical existence by human effort alone.

If this is true, then tension between immanence and transcendence makes the phenomenon of sanctity possible within historical existence, as John Paul II affirms when he says that God is at work renewing and transforming the world through the Church, and that

⁷See Robert Spaemann, *Zur Kritik der politischen Utopie. Zehn Kapitel politischer Philosophie* (Stuttgart, 1977).

⁸See Nolte, *Historische Existenz*, 116: “Hammurabi: der Schöpfer der ersten Rechtskodifikation.”

⁹See Christian Meier, *Athen. Ein Neubeginn der Weltgeschichte* (Berlin, 1993).

“every form of human community animated by the Gospel”¹⁰ reflects this divine action. Indeed, in what follows, I will argue that this tension between immanence and transcendence is actually a sort of “natural” opening to the event of Christ, who reveals the ultimate form of reality—including the reality of the world and of politics as such.

2. Philosophy and politics

The foregoing remarks on the tension between immanence and transcendence have suggested that the goodness of being and, *a fortiori*, of Christ, is relevant to historical existence and, by extension, to politics. Our first step will be to approach the problem on the level of philosophical thinking.

I begin with a preliminary remark on the relationship between the philosopher and the politician.

The philosopher’s primary task is to understand finite being, not only in its “ideality,” but also in its “reality.”¹¹ The politician, on the other hand, seeks to serve the common good, which requires vigilance lest he lose himself in the pure facticity of the *status quo*. The two can meet fruitfully only if the philosopher resists the temptation to remain in an ideality incapable of understanding reality in the complexity of its manifold factors and the politician resists the contrary temptation of confusing reality with whatever happens to be the case empirically. This can happen, however, only if both philosopher and politician attend, each in his own way, to the “goodness” of being that fulfills being’s “ideality” *in its* “reality.”¹² (Something analogous can be said about the encounter between the politician and the saint.)

On a theoretical level, then, the opposition between politician and philosopher has a secondary character: in order to refuse to reduce reality to socio-empirical facticity or to “overcome” it through some form of ideological utopianism, in order, then, to fulfill his native mission, the politician must have something like a philosophical attitude. But historically speaking, the advent of Marxism—and in this respect liberalism, which ultimately reduces reality to the market, is

¹⁰*Ecclesia in Europa*, 107.

¹¹See Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus* (Einsiedeln, 1961), 153ff.

¹²See *ibid.*

indistinguishable from Marxism—has made a certain opposition between the politician and philosopher decisively important, on account of Marxism's (and liberalism's) methodological suspicion of the "uselessness" of understanding the world purely for its own sake.

Philosophy is born in the West under the sign of wonder. This wonder springs up within historical existence, but it does so only in the tension between immanence and transcendence that characterizes historical existence in the first place. Indeed, wonder keeps historical existence true to itself, that is, it keeps it from turning in on itself. Historical existence, as a tension between immanence and transcendence, comes to fruition in the wonder [*Verwunderung*] that there is anything at all rather than nothing. Conversely, when wonder gives way to a mere admiration [*Bewunderung*] that loses sight of the miracle of being, the tension between immanence and transcendence slackens, and historical existence collapses in on itself.¹³

Wonder, then, reveals the true sense of historical existence as a tension between immanence and transcendence. In order to flesh out this claim, I would like to cite and comment on a passage from Ferdinand Ulrich, to whom I will be referring frequently throughout the rest of this article:

Being, says Thomas Aquinas, *constituitur per principia essentiae* [is constituted through the principles of the essence]. As such, it is always already positive reality. In the same way, man's spirit— given man's capacity for being—is always already "spirit in the world." Precisely by virtue of the historicity of his being-in-the-world man bears witness to his opening to being in its "super-essentiality."¹⁴

The "super-essentiality" of being, which appears *in* being's instantiation in finite essences, names the metaphysical grounding of what a philosophy of history uncovers as the tension between

¹³For the distinction between wonder and admiration, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 613–614.

¹⁴Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 366. On the relevance of Ulrich's work as a whole, see Martin Bieler's introduction to the new edition of *Homo Abyssus* (Einsiedeln/Freiburg, 1998). Ulrich has dealt directly and at length with the question of politics in "Potere politico, filosofia e grazia," in *Il problema del potere politico. 18esimo Convegno del Centro di Studi filosofici tra professori universitari, Gallarate 1963* (Brescia, 1964).

immanence and transcendence within historical existence. Historical existence is contingent, just as being can be grasped only by what Ulrich calls its “finitization” (*Verendlichungs-bewegung*). And yet, historical contingency carries an imperative to go beyond it and to ground it in truth, just as the super-essential dimension of being is revealed in its radical finitization and because of it.

Man first perceives being when, as a child, he is awakened to consciousness “through the love, the smile of his mother. As a philosopher, he will learn to distinguish finite being from infinite being, and to read finite being, even on the level of reason, as a ‘*similitudo divinae bonitatis*.’”¹⁵ He will learn, in other words, to understand that the ultimate act that is finite being is permeated by a breath of the unity, goodness, truth, and beauty of God himself. What Ulrich calls the *exinanitio* of being reveals a love that we cannot understand merely by recording the facts of historical existence, but only by submitting ourselves to the tension between immanence and transcendence that, as we have seen, is central to historical existence in the first place.

The presence of violence in historical existence, however, forces us to grapple with the question of the relationship between the ideal and the real. Must we say that the transcendentals—unity, goodness, truth, and beauty—are “ideals,” whereas in “reality” we have to content ourselves with the irreconcilable divisions, the wickedness, the lies (the lies of politicians, for example), the horror and squalor that seem to meet us at every turn?

The same question arises in a more specific form in relation to politics: does the common good, does justice belong only to the realm of the “ideal,” whereas “realism” is about the pursuit of self-interest? Is “reality” an arena where only the logic of the stronger counts, as Thrasymachus claims in the *Republic*: “justice is just what is useful for the stronger” (I, 338)?

The philosophical contemplation of being plays a decisive role in answering this question. On the one hand, philosophy arises within historical existence, and so is a sworn enemy of ideological utopianism—whether in the form of Marxism, of a liberalism that fancies itself the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama), or of the Islamist reaction to liberalism. On the other hand, philosophy helps us overcome the temptation to reduce the real to some *de facto* state of affairs. In a word,

¹⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, cited in Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 14.

philosophy attempts to save unity, goodness, truth, and beauty as dimensions that are both immanent in, and transcendent of, being itself—by affirming, for example, that justice is not just what is useful for the stronger, and that goodness, truth, and beauty are not alien to historical existence.

The foregoing remarks contrast sharply with a widely held opinion that every action that claims to be true or good is actually a mask for some unconfessed lie or private interest. Political actions presented as just, or even as humanitarian—for example, the 2003 invasion of Iraq—are suspected *a priori* of concealing raw self-interest. Now, it is beyond the scope of the present article to offer a political analysis of the recent war against Saddam Hussein, about which a diversity of judgments is certainly possible and legitimate; my task is simply to challenge the thesis that every use of power *inevitably* masks selfishness—a thesis that, one cannot help thinking, inspired at least some of the negative reaction to the war, at least in Europe.

The idea that politics, and politicians, are inevitably and totally corrupt arises from a worldview that can only be called one of “*a priori* protest.” The assumption seems to be that there are a few people (usually academics or professional protesters) who, by reason of the purity of their thought and intention, are immune to any contamination by the—diabolical—sphere of politics and, therefore, are able infallibly to unmask its perversity in every case. One cannot help being struck by the naivete with which intellectuals like Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas,¹⁶ and Gianni Vattimo¹⁷ (to take just three examples) have attacked the American administration’s claim to justice, offering in its place a “European” model of justice that is supposed to be purer for the simple fact that its proponents have “anti-war” *sentiments*.

The trouble with this view of things is that, if justice—or, better, pseudo-justice—really is nothing but what the powerful deem useful, then this must apply to *every* conception of justice, including the one that inspires the critique of the reigning justice, say, of the United States, often the target of this kind of *a priori* suspicion. This kind of approach is indeed the fruit of a “weak thought.” The truth is that the European avant-garde of Germany and France, countries that, by the

¹⁶Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, “Unsere Erneuerung. Nach dem Krieg: die Wiedergeburt Europas” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 31 May 2003).

¹⁷Gianni Vattimo, *La Stampa*, 31 May 2003.

way, are allied with political powers like Russia and China,¹⁸ ought to lay its cards on the table: what, ontologically speaking, are the criteria in terms of which it defines justice? If it refuses to come clean, then the suspicion it voices about America will turn back on it: perhaps the European avant-garde itself is merely playing a power game under the mask of “perpetual peace.”

There is no denying that political power has often been used to dominate and not to serve, that it has not always followed the logic of finitization, of *exinanitio*, that characterizes created being as love. It does not follow from this, however, that political power cannot but be abused. To say this is to say that man, whom Ulrich (following Thomas) defines as a *totum potestativum*, precisely because the “theme” that defines him as man is the finitization of being,¹⁹ cannot but use the “power” that he himself is for anything but self-interested gain.

Following Thomas, Ulrich speaks of finite being as “*completum et simplex, sed non subsistens*”: complete and simple, but not subsistent.²⁰ This formula gives us a key to a comprehensive view of the question of reality and ideality in the political sphere.

I begin with the second part of the phrase: “but not subsistent.” This talk of “non-subsistence” responds to the post-modern insistence on a “weak” notion of being as the key to avoiding every form of violence. Christian ontology, too, does not regard being as “something to be grasped at,” to be used to lord it over men, animals, plants, and the inanimate creation, or to force them to be other than they truly are. Being, in fact, is not a “something” at all, but a gift given away—into man, indeed, into the whole of reality. From now on, being can be perceived only in that reality. And yet, the radical donation of being into finitude implies and reveals a logic of love that judges the ultimate attitude of post-modern philosophy. This logic entails a decisive No to post-modernity’s interpretation of the non-subsistence of being as a nihilistic gratuity, rather than as a gratuity that reflects the gift-character of being as love. The non-subsistence of

¹⁸Unlike China, which wants only an economic, as opposed to political, integration (although this term might be too weak in the case of China, which undermines Western markets with cheap labor that prevents Western economies from competing with Chinese products) twenty-first-century Russia has shown itself more eager to accommodate to the political wishes of the Western powers.

¹⁹Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 235ff.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 26ff.

being discloses a plenitude *in* emptiness that enables us to recover the ontological affirmation of the classical tradition without falling prey to a substantializing reification of being. We can affirm substance *because* being is not a substance, but rather the gift that enables substances to be—and so to participate in the logic of gift in their turn.

The first part of the formula, which speaks of being as something “complete and simple,” brings us face to face with the real deficit of modern and post-modern philosophies in comparison with Christian ontology. This deficit has dogged the attempts to construct an ontology of the not-yet that some theologians adopted in the 1960s and 1970s (Moltmann, Metz) as the basis of a theology of liberation, or that, more recently, have appeared in the form of the “weak ontology” proposed by a whole school of French and Italian thinkers. What we see in these currents is the inability to think of being as gift. Both the philosophy of Ernst Bloch and the “weak ontology” of Gianni Vattimo, to take just two examples, end up giving the *homo faber* responsibility for making finite being be, whether in the form of a utopian revolution (Bloch) or in the more sober form of defending the rights of the “marginalized,” e.g., homosexuals (Vattimo).²¹

Christian ontology brings home the ultimate link between thought and wonderment over the very being of being, hence, between thinking (*Denken*) being and thanking (*Danken*) for the gift of being,²² a being that is best understood as expressing love and as love. This philosophical contemplation of being as love is relevant to politics because it makes it clear that truly real action, action that corresponds to the intimate movement of being, necessarily partakes in this movement by taking the form of service. Christian ontology thus makes available to our reflections in time of war an account of being that can be concretized in the political sphere in terms of “service of the common good.” Just as being foregoes pure ideality in order to

²¹To say that being is “complete and simple, but not subsistent” is to express philosophically the claim that love is the ultimate law of reality, a love that embraces all, including homosexuals, but without for all that offering homosexuality (or homosexual “marriage”) an ontological or legal justification.

²²Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 116.

serve the *res* by letting them really *be*, so, too, political action fulfills its inner *telos* precisely as service of the common good.²³

If we understand politics as service of the common good, I have been arguing, this can only mean that its intrinsic form is gratitude for the gift of being, a gratitude in which the gratuity of the gift is represented in its unity of power and humble service. Let me stress that this is, in the first instance, a claim about what politics is, in its “natural” reality, and not just wishful thinking or otiose idealism. Politics *is* a service of the public good, a service offered to the many, as thanksgiving for the fact of “having been loved first.” But this very formulation suggests that, out of the “natural” form of politics there emerges something like a “Eucharistic attitude,” which presupposes, in its turn, an “attitude of confession.”²⁴ True, many, if not most, politicians, fail in just this respect, because they are more bent on selling an image of themselves than on serving the truth. And yet, the reality of politics is not this failure or unwillingness to serve. The real reality, the “natural” form, of politics reflects the figure of Christ.

3. *Theology and politics*

“What then should a Christian be? He should be one who offers up his life in the service of his fellow man because he owes his life to Christ crucified.”²⁵ These incisive words of Balthasar serve as a

²³“I am convinced that it’s absolutely urgent for us to relearn and recover with all clarity the concept and the reality of the common good as the highest task of politics” (Christoph Schönborn, *Sulla vita felice*, talk presented in Rimini [2003]; *pro manuscripto*).

²⁴For a general theology of confession, see Adrienne von Speyr, *Confession* trans. Douglas W. Stott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985). On the attitude of confession in particular, see the chapter of the same book entitled “Confession and Daily Life,” 201ff. For a philosophical reflection on the self-criticism of philosophy, which I understand to be a form of the confessional attitude, see Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 354ff. In this confessional self-criticism, the temptations of thought are judged in light of the logic of the finitization of being. The finitization of being is a sort of obedience to what Ulrich calls the “necessary sense of being.” As such, it shows up where and how thought becomes disobedient (to that same sense).

²⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969), 133.

bridge to the specifically theological dimension of our reflection. The question that concerns us now is whether and to what extent “Christ crucified” is relevant to politics.

The thought of Ferdinand Ulrich offered us an entryway to the goodness of being from within the situatedness of historical existence. It is from within historical existence, Ulrich suggests, that we can open ourselves—or close ourselves, as the case may be—to being, as it gives itself, or, better, is given to us in its finitization. Now, Ulrich also suggests that being, in its finitization, is transparent to Christ. There is an objective link between the metaphysical mystery of being in its movement of finitization, on the one hand, and the “ultimate mystery of the kenosis of God in Christ.”²⁶ The foregoing philosophical reflection thus already enables us to glimpse the answer to our question about the political relevance of the Slain Lamb, the victim who does not victimize, and of his method of fighting evil within the history of the world.²⁷

We have already alluded to the anthropological pertinence of the Eucharistic, confessional attitude. This attitude, we have said, structures the inner form of politics as service of the common good. Every true politician, insofar as he understands himself to be a servant, grasps something of this Eucharistic and confessional form of politics, even though he may not know explicitly that this attitude has anything to do with the Eucharist and Confession.

Ultimately, it is only the coming of Christ, the revelation of the triune God in the person of the incarnate Son, that enables us to see this connection for what it is. I do not mean to suggest some form of the Rahnerian thesis of the “anonymous question.” My point is simply that the coming of Christ fully reveals the inner form of politics; once Christ appears—and only then—we can (finally) give a full account of what the inner form of politics looks like. Only when Christ actually appears, in fact, can we see that it looks like . . . Christ.²⁸

²⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 4: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 38.

²⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Battle of the Logos,” in *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4: *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 427f.

²⁸To be sure, there is no absolute identity between philosophy, theology, and politics. Otherwise, God himself would be necessarily entangled in the process of the world, and the space of analogy in which a philosophy of being as gift can flourish would be closed. As a result, we would have no other compass to guide

God gives himself away as food for the world in a radical finitization and fragmentation—the Eucharistic fragments that, even as fragments, contain the whole divinity are scattered throughout the world—without losing any of his divine glory.²⁹ God himself, in the person of his incarnate Son, confesses the sin of the world on the Cross.³⁰ The Christian owes his life to the Crucified, who gives himself away to the uttermost *exinanitio*: death on the Cross and descent into hell. In response, there awaken in the Christian both gratitude for the gift he has received and a disponibility to offer himself Eucharistically for his and others' good and to confess his sin, which hinders the expansion of God's triune love in historical existence. "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

In giving himself away in this fashion, God gives the Christian (who is in—but not of—the world) an ultimate criterion. The Christian's action takes shape in accord with God's self-giving from within his obedient contemplation of the Trinitarian Christ. This applies to all of the Christian's worldly action, including his action as a politician. In revealing God's triune self-gift, then, Christ fully unveils the form of politics as Eucharistic service. And in doing that, he brings to final concreteness the inner tendency of politics as service of the common good. The Eucharist thus embodies the ultimate meaning of politics, even in its "natural" and "worldly" form, as service of the common good.

To be sure, we must avoid the temptation of an intra-historical reduction of the eschaton. Historical existence remains, and remains as what it is: imperfect, but relatively perfectible, where the "relatively" excludes any form of political utopia to be reached at the end of a process of universal "progress." The form of the Lamb Who is Slain is

ourselves through historical existence than the *de facto* outcome of historical existence itself.

²⁹See Jan-Heiner Tück, "Memoria Passionis: Annäherungen an die Eucharistie. Vortrag zum 15. Jahresgedächtnis H. U. von Balthasar, Basel 28 June 2003" (*pro manuscripto*).

³⁰See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theologie des Abstiegs zur Hölle," in *Adrienne von Speyr und ihre kirchliche Sendung. Akten des römischen Symposiums* (Einsiedeln, 1986), 138ff. See also Marc Ouellet, "Adrienne von Speyr et le Samedi Saint de la théologie," in Hans Urs von Balthasar-Stiftung, *Adrienne von Speyr und ihre spirituelle Theologie. Symposium zu ihrem 100. Geburtstag* (Einsiedeln/Freiburg, 2002), 31ff.

not just one more political project among many that, so to say, competes with or replaces the “legitimate autonomy” of political activity. On the contrary. On the other hand, we must avoid the opposite temptation of assuming that the specificity of Christian revelation is of concern only to a “spiritual” realm that is at best tangential to the specificity of politics, but does not touch its intrinsic form as such.³¹ Clearly, our task will be to maintain the right balance between these two extremes. In my opinion, the best guide to this equilibrium on the theological level is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, more than anyone else, attempts to discern the presence of the trinitarian drama *in* the world and, on that basis, to sketch the outlines of a “Christology of history” that fully respects both the reality of history and the pertinence of Christ to discerning its intrinsic shape.³²

4. The situation today

So far, we have developed both philosophical and theological criteria for understanding the nature of political action. Needless to say, these criteria have a “global” scope, because they have to do with finite being as a whole, and not just with its manifestations in America, Europe, or Australia. At the same time, the historical method I have followed in these reflections on world events forbids me to leap over the logic of proximity and distance that characterizes political action. This logic makes it impossible for those of us who are part of Western civilization to regard September 11th as somehow less significant because, after all, there is so much suffering elsewhere in the world.

I write as a European, as an Italian living and working in Germany. Given my previous remarks, however, it should be clear that I reject the notion, recently proposed by Habermas, that Europe, having overcome the ideological temptations of the twentieth century,

³¹John the Baptist’s recommendations to the crowds, to the publicans and the soldiers (Lk 3:10ff) overcome both temptations at once: the utopian temptation—once the world has reached its intra-historical perfection, there will be no more need for soldiers—and the temptation of an unworldly spirituality that has nothing to do with historical existence—the soldier is one person on the battlefield and another person in church. “Mistreat no one,” John tells them, “and be content with your pay.”

³²See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Battle of the Logos,” 427f.

should now take its place on the world stage in opposition to American unilateralism as a promoter of “perpetual peace.”³³ The world is a single community, after all, and our attempt to deal with the world’s difficulties has to reflect this. Moreover, the concept of “perpetual peace,” despite Kant’s efforts to make a case for its feasibility as a practical political program, is one of those forms of millenarism that deny Charles de Foucauld’s intuition that there will never be an intra-historical “perpetual peace.” The coming of perpetual peace will be the end of historical existence in the final inbreaking of the Kingdom. This does not mean, of course, that the pursuit of peace on the political level is fruitless. It simply means that such peace is always a foretaste of the kingdom, not its final advent. Only by keeping open the difference between the present age and the next can we be open to the self-transcendence of historical existence, to manifold surprises, attunement to which makes political imagination and creativity possible.

My critique of Habermas’ Europeanism should not be taken as implying any uncritical endorsement of the policies of the present American government, however. I want to leave to my readers the judgment of the soundness and justice of those policies. What I am suggesting is simply that the present times demand of both America and Europe a search for a common transatlantic identity. Of course, mere expediency is an insufficient basis for such an identity. So, too, is a shared desire to survive. What is needed is precisely a coherent alternative to Islamism. Such an alternative, from a Christian perspective, cannot take the form of a mere reaffirmation of liberal democracy. Rather, it must penetrate to the very roots of being in order to retrieve something like the Eucharistic understanding of politics as service of the common good that I have sketched here.

I take it for granted that such a retrieval would require a significant conversion on the part of nations and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. At the same time, the notion of a Eucharistic foundation of politics should help remove *a priori* suspicion that every political claim to pursue justice simply masks the advantage of the stronger—without for all that permitting us to believe naively that such masking never in fact occurs. Only if we realize, on the basis of a Eucharistic ontology, that power is intrinsically a matter of service can

³³In the above-cited article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Habermas explicitly cites Kant’s eponymous writing, *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*.

we effectively unmask and denounce its deformations without therefore abandoning politics as a whole to the devil.

Perhaps a brief word about the morality of warfare is appropriate in this context. Here I orient myself by the Pope, who, as I read him, is not a pacifist, but defends the primacy of a certain non-violence. In other words, the Pope does not simply repeal the Church's venerable just war tradition, but so to say filters it through an understanding of Christ as the Lamb Who is Slain but does not slay. This translates at the very least into a greater commitment to find peaceful solutions to political problems. Whether this commitment is equivalent to today's much-discussed "presumption against violence" is another question. One problem with such talk is that it works with an unclear concept of "violence." Another is that it risks "logicizing" the concreteness of our criterion of action, which is nothing less than the crucified Christ himself. The importance of prudence—informed by love—in historical existence cannot be overestimated. Much more could be said on the subject, but I will leave the matter for another occasion.³⁴

5. Conclusion: towards a theological and philosophical politics

I have been arguing that, in order for Christians to be able to think fruitfully about politics, they need to realize that thinking about politics is a way of thinking about being, about the fundamental nature of the real, as it is manifested in what I have been calling "historical existence." This metaphysical thinking in turn opens to theology, reflection on the Event—the event of Jesus Christ—that is the defining event of historical existence, and of being's manifestation in it.

Reflection on the manifestation of being within historical existence is all the more urgent in a time like ours, in which the threat of terroristic violence raises the question of what the most "realistic" response to such violence is. But how can we answer this question properly unless we know what "reality" is, reality as it shows up within historical existence?

³⁴For a more detailed account of the Pope's position, see the decisively important text of his *Udienza al corpo diplomatico accreditato presso la Santa Sede* (13 January 2003), which sums up in exemplary fashion the position John Paul II has repeatedly staked out in the last few years.

Our question, then, has been this: how should we negotiate between the Scylla of pacifism and the Charybdis of a cynical “realism” that banishes the event of Christ to the margins of politics and history?

The key to responding to this question, we have seen, is to keep open the tension between immanence and transcendence within historical existence by following Christ’s radicalization of the “finitization” of being (in which being shows forth its “super-essentiality”).

Before offering a summary reflection on this question, however, I would like to repeat that the foregoing account of being as “complete and simple, but not subsistent,” which hinges on being in its movement of finitization, should not be taken as the key to some system to end all systems that would enable us to englobe all of reality in our interpretive schemes. To pretend to such a system is to turn “love into absolute reflection.”³⁵ But such an absolute reflection can only end up denying historical existence and the ways in which historical existence is capable of assent to the absolute love that becomes flesh in Jesus (Jn 1:14).³⁶ The Lamb Who Was Slain is not the “principle” of any system.

It follows from this that we can never develop a philosophical and/or theological recipe for resolving every historical or political problem. Liberation theology succumbed to precisely this naivete. The error of liberation theology was not its insistence on the preferential option for the poor, but its unconfessed “logicization” of love. If we wish to avoid the same mistake, we have to remain in the “little way,” as Ulrich insists with a nod to Thérèse of Lisieux.³⁷ We must learn to perceive the whole in the fragment.

The poverty of being in its fullness, its obedience to the “necessary sense” of being (the necessity, that is, that being, being gift, be nothing but gift): these are the methodological criteria that must guide our attempt to “judge the world,” without, of course, laying any fanciful claim to being more astute than “the children of this world.” Once again, we must refuse to believe in the universality of camou-

³⁵Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 102.

³⁶On this point, both Ernst Nolte and C.J. Burckhardt (*Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* [Kröner, 1969]) present man situated within the flow of time and, therefore, point up the incompatibility between any absolute system and the reality of historical existence.

³⁷See Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 334ff.

flaged self-interest, all the while raising our voice wherever the truth seems to be trod down by the diabolical perversion of power.³⁸

Christ did not claim to be a “systematic principle of history,” but rather the “event” that becomes “way, truth, and life,” a concrete method of Christian existence. With our eyes fixed on him, then, let us return to our initial question: how are we to think about politics as Christians in this time of war?

The burden of my argument has been that we can do so only in the “metaphysical space” whose safeguarding is the “Christian’s task and heritage.”³⁹ We need to be philosophers, because the freedom of philosophy is obedience to the “necessary sense” of being as gift. But we also need to be theologians, because theological contemplation places us before the figure of the Lamb Who Was Slain, who reveals God’s triune love. And, last but not least, we need to practice this philosophy and theology in the Church, which points to the way to the truth of being and the truth of Jesus—not because it possesses this truth, but because it is possessed by it.

To think about politics as Christians, then, means to enter into the logic of being as gift. And to do that is to enter into historical existence. Not with a system, but with the logic of Christ, which alone enables us to keep open to the very end the tension between immanence and transcendence that characterizes historical existence as such. To think about politics as Christians, then, means to exercise custodianship over the original form of politics, which is the form of service within historical existence. We do so, not just by talking about this form, but by incarnating it in our own persons.

I hasten to add that obedience to the “necessary sense” of being does not mean that being is identical with the “necessity of its being.”⁴⁰ The necessary sense of being flows from an ultimate non-necessity. God is not obliged to create. He gives himself freely, totally, and radically in a self-emptying that does not end in the world, but in the Son’s return to the Father with the world. The “necessary sense” of being is rooted in the radicality of the Son’s going forth from, and

³⁸A good example of the right balance is Bernhard Lichtenberg (1875–1943), whom Pope John Paul II beatified in 1996. Lichtenberg opposed the diabolical perversion of Nazism, not on the basis of an *a priori* suspicion of political authority, but on the basis of a greater obedience.

³⁹Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5, 611.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 613.

return to, the Father in the gratuitous, but non-arbitrary freedom of love.⁴¹ This same radicality gives us an orientation that enables us to take historical existence seriously as a locus for experiencing the “necessary sense” of being. Absent this dimension, man would be lost in an utter arbitrariness where one action is as good as another. At the same time, the radical nature of the gift points beyond the limits of historical existence. It constitutes the kernel of transcendence that belongs to the very core of historical existence itself.

Our hearts are restless. This is because they are attuned to the “heartbeat” of historical existence, which vibrates with wonder. Wonder, for its part, transcends (and so grounds) the order of necessity, because it responds to a gift—the gift of being—that testifies to a goodness, a beauty, a truth, and a unity that we could never find in the chaos of the world if it were not given as a free gift.

Readers looking for an easily applied recipe for thinking about politics in this time of war are likely to be disappointed by the foregoing reflections. Unfortunately, political reality is too complex to justify any hopes of working out such a recipe. At the same time, I would like to conclude by stressing that the Lamb Who Was Slain, the victim who does not victimize, does offer a concrete and realistic criterion for action in the political sphere. The point is simply that the only way to apply this criterion is not to attempt to turn it into a formula, but *to receive it in contemplation and to follow it*. It may turn out that, when we do so, we will find ourselves committed, not to pacifism, but, as John Paul II has stressed, to a certain *primacy* of non-violence. In any case, one thing needs no argument: to think about politics as Christians in this most concrete way will require what Ignatius of Loyola called “*grande animo y liberalidad*.”⁴²— *Translated by Adrian J. Walker.*

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⁴¹This is one of the most important themes of Adrienne von Speyr’s theology. See *Johannes*, vol. 4 (Einsiedeln, 1949): “Mary Magdalene has to be able to understand the necessity of the Son’s contact with the Father. She has to understand the essence of mission: everything comes from the Father, and everything goes back to him.”

⁴²Dedicated, in friendship and gratitude, to Adrian Walker. But for the intense debate on the subject I was able to have with him, this essay would never have been written.