

INTRODUCTION

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Can the Church in the Philippines get involved in electoral politics? In the last presidential elections (May 9, 2022), not only did church and religious groups claim they could participate; they actually DID. But what is new about that? Were there precedents? There were, historically and biblically, at least. Were they justified? The articles included here might provide clues.

A precedent in Philippine history is provided to us by Ms. Isabel Buenaobra in an article (not included here). Here is her introduction that encapsulates it.

“Historically, organized churches have been involved in electoral politics in the Philippines, including in the selection of candidates and church members who have run in elections themselves. The notion of a “politics of religion” refers to the increasing role that religion plays in the politics of the contemporary world and the consequences that a politics of religion has on inclusive nation-building, democracy, and human rights. The involvement of religious groups in Philippine politics is not new. During the Spanish colonial era, the “indio priests” advocated for the “secularization” of the Catholic church to allow “native priests” to head parishes.... The 1872 mutiny which resulted in the death of the three priests, Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora, became the “seed” of the Philippine Revolution, inspiring the Filipino heroes Rizal and Bonifacio to “imagine a Filipino nation” and lead a revolution against Spain to achieve it.”

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¹ Ma. Isabel Buenaobra, February 24, 2016. “The Politics of Religion in the Philippines.” <https://asiafoundation.org/2016/02/24/the-politics-of-religion-in-the-philippines/>

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Thus, historically, there is a precedent on the issue. The political government itself has made heroes of the three priests who in their liberating actions did not make a casuistic differentiation between Church and State, between religion and politics. Thus there is a precedent in history. How about precedent or precedents in the Bible? If we go to the Bible, we can find so many passages in which a prophet or religious leader express their sentiments and wisdom in the governance of the public. Here are two representative quotes:

Put no trust in princes, in children of Adam powerless to save. Who breathing his last, returns to the earth; that day all his planning comes to nothing. Blessed the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD, his God (Psalm 146: 3-5)

Obey your leaders and submit to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account—so that they may do this with joy, not groaning; for this would be unhelpful for you (Heb 13:17).

These two scriptural quotations, among others, from the *Psalms* and from the *Letter to Hebrews* in which religious leaders make statements that touch on socio-political life demonstrate for us such involvement which today some would term as “interference.” Be that as it may, the never-ending discussion on the tension between Church and State especially in election times simply manifests the conundrums concerning human leadership. There is no question about God’s reign, if God Himself concretely and historically do the governing. Or, if Christ has not ascended to the Father in Heaven, and has chosen to remain with us in flesh, and running his Father’s Kingdom on earth, then surely he would never do anything that would be tantamount to corruption; after all, he is without sin (Cf. Heb 4:15). It is understandable for the Psalmist to call on us to distrust human authority in the face of human fickleness and frailty. Of course, the Psalmist, in making such statement, is actually emphasizing more the role of God’s will in political life, that is, that believers

should never compromise divine principles or for Christians, specifically, there is no watering down of the gospel in making decisions in behalf of the people governed.

And yet, in spite of the Psalmist's advise on mistrusting leaders, the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* exhorts us to align our will to that of our leaders. It reminds us of Jesus' advice on listening to teachers but without us following their bad examples (cf. Mt 23:2-3). In other words, the author of the *Letter* accepts the legitimacy of leaders whose questionable personal life would not necessarily nullify their official capacity to reprimand their subjects on instances of misconduct. There is the recognition of our earthly leaders to perform their obligation of telling people under them to do what they are supposed to do, even if these are not easy.

The ambivalence in the Scriptures concerning earthly rulers, supposedly with heaven's blessing, has resulted in a way in the ambivalence found in Church-State relations. Partly responsible of this, is our failure to note that religion is not the same as the Church, although they are related. The former is more of a faith sentiment, whereas the latter is in the eyes of the public is an organization, even if it is faith-based. In the same manner, the state and the people are not totally identifiable either. We can imagine the mess that often results when people simply take one for the other, especially in political exercises like an election. In this sea of confusion, Fr. Danny Pilario's article would make very useful clarification as to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding that may lead to unnecessary hostility between Church and State and, specifically between the clergy and the state officials. Pilario's work can serve as a helpful guide for the faithful on the ground especially in discerning problematic with criteria drawn from Scriptures, Church teachings and pastoral practices.

Inevitable is the use of liberation theology as a heuristic tool on the issue of Theology and Politics. The focus of this theology, especially the Latin or Western one, is on the conditions of social injustice and oppression that beg for praxes of deliverance. Here, solidarity with the poor is another name of grace or charity under the aegis of the God of history,

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emancipating and vindicating the victims. In this situation, the memory of Jesus and the gospel constitute a “subversive memory”. Recalling the biblical axiom of “preferential option for the poor” is an important element of this theology, together with the “See-Judge-Act” method.

This work on “Agential Realism” offers a new perspective on the use of liberation theology on political issues. We suppose the traditional terminologies and methodology of liberation theology have been so predictable that they seem not to produce anymore new approaches to the issue of theology and politics.

The author uses a philosophy that emphasizes the ontology of relationality that in a complex world offers a “solution” to often simplistic analysis of the social environment. This reminds us of an evolutionary development in which cooperation in many ways replaces competition as an option for a better flourishing of all. Unnecessary polarizations in the historical life of the people are often the result of the oversimplified solution to the binaries like, peace-justice, equality-oppression, rich-poor, etc. As the author asserts: “Binary oppositions are resolved by differentiations that distinguish but do not exclude.” Applying this approach to pastoral life and activities of the Church in society is a valuable contribution of this article to this issue’s motif. Upon deeper analysis, any ontology of relationship is really no stranger to Christian theology, considering that this has to be eventually be Trinitarian. After all, God is Trinitarian and, therefore, relational.

Akhere’s article, although it deals with just war theory and non-violence, points to us, for our purpose, to the issue of justice and peace in theology and politics. The challenge here is to assert one without compromising the other, and vice versa. We cannot have true peace without justice but, at times, the search for justice points to various options that ultimately would even call for a measure of “violence.” Praxes called for in the context of Latin American liberation theology cannot still be ignored. Again, what we have to look for is a fresh discussion on this, like in Agential Realism.

Akhere’s work reminds us that any problem today cannot just naively apply a doctrine without first looking into the

historical precedents which were adopted options in view of their contemporary situations. For example, pacifism might be applicable to one period in history but not necessarily in another. Similarly, what calls for non-involvement in the political life of one period might not be applicable in another. Thus, there is a need for discernment as called for, for example, in Pilario's article.

What should Akere's reader be interested in is in how does the author input the latest Church pronouncements and theologians' insights on war. We make special references to Pope Francis' statements on the kind of modern warfare in which nobody wins, for even the so-called winners are ultimately losers, too. But we have to give credit to the article's author for presenting the historical development of the just-war theory, including its conditions for its "justification." But more credit should be given to him for presenting the theory in a more positive way like "peace-building" or "conflict prevention". Here, he reflects the approaches of recent papal encyclicals, especially *Pacem in Terris* (1963).

The operations of religion and politics are obviously related to culture. On this is the article of Becker. This author reminds us of the importance of context and condition in the issue of theology and politics. For example, most of our considerations in church-state relationship in the Philippine situation are actually based on the American model. Again, there is need to come up with our own story rather than hard core dogmas that highlight differences unnecessary in uniting for common social causes. Thus, there is also the need for discernment that takes into account history, context, situation, and unique story.

Self-criticism is a highlight in a new approach to seeking a "culture-sensitive theology" in Europe. Perhaps, in the past, there was no need for this since, Europe was Christianity and Christianity was Europe. Even if national identities have been made with Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy, respectively, yet they found common identity in a Christian-inspired culture and thought system. It is not so anymore, the author argues, not in the presence of immigrants from non-Christian countries. The context in this new demographic terrain

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is no longer about perennial philosophies but of immediate and pressing social concerns that call for “sharing, compassion, struggling together.”

Related to “contextuality” and “culture-sensitivity” is the article’s content. Such relatedness is due, according to the author, to postmodernity which is known for its “rejection of metanarratives” or “foundational theories.” This approach is more open to “pluralist positions”. As it appears, this is an approach that is viable with the dynamics of politics, politics being the “art of the possible.” This indeed is possible because in a postmodern mentality there is no digging in the trenches of one’s own confessional or personal beliefs.

In this context, spirituality does not mean pure contemplation and withdrawal from the world or society. Its title is clear about an active commitment to the context of social transformation in the urgency of the Philippine situation where practically half of the population is “longing for wellbeing in the here and now.” In its title is a key word, “transformation”, that is, there is no connotation here of “business as usual” or “we have always done it this way.”

There is here the air of liberation theology, such as, among others, the use of the structure of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). As shown in this article, this structure is the “link” between biblical tradition of “prophetism” and the postmodern image of a decentralized cellular community. This structure is devoid of dogmatism and authoritarianism but it cannot be accused either of relativism and arbitrariness since its fidelity to the gospel message is one of its hallmarks.

Its focus on spirituality-based transformation and biblically-inspired community point to the seriousness of this approach. This somehow eliminates the often cynical attitudes of social groups towards both macro- and micropolitics. In Philippine politics, this cynicism is often sensed through expressions like: “they are all the same” (referring negatively to politicians), “those crocodiles in Congress”, “*pera pera lang yan*” (referring to vote buying), etc., etc..

In his article (not included here), “The Importance of Political Theology”,² Matthew Arbo talks about the two polarities in the issue of religion-politics relationship: cynicism and naivete. He describes cynicism as a politics of “dark suspicion” and naivete as the “tendency to oversimplify and dismiss.” These polarities actually complement each other. It would not need a sophisticated analysis to see the potential and critical harm these two polarities, in a highly polarized state, can do to religion and politics.

All the articles in this issue present the balancing of the polarities (in taking into account Arbo’s warning), like peace-justice, prayer-activism, common good-individual rights, grace-freedom, and so forth and so on. Obviously, these are not perfectly integrated to one another and their relationships have not ceased to be paradoxical. But that is how paradoxes influence the readers. Paradox always remains in the apparently irreconcilable polarities; but, here is the mysterious but effective power of paradoxes. But, as we have shown above, there is nothing mysterious or puzzling about the Church’s involvement (non-partisan may it be) in politics and culture, if it is a given that in the Philippines, predominantly Christian (Catholic), religion still plays a central role in society. Thus, without excluding possible extremism going either way and not always in similar modes, the Church is most likely to be involved in politics; yes, even in the electoral processes.

It is, perhaps, a tall order for St. Vincent School of Theology (the publisher of this journal) to integrate all of the above data, conclusions, and recommendations in its theological and pastoral programs for the proper formation of its students and future pastoral workers. According to Fr. Jimmy Belita in his article, the SVST community is hopeful because founding, programming, and staffing a theological school at the start inspired by the Gospel, the Social Teachings of the Church, and the Vincentian charism, was a step in the right direction.

² <https://mereorthodoxy.com/importance-political-theology> (2020)

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