

The Church as Field Hospital: Ecclesiology and Peacebuilding

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THE RECENT ENTHUSIASM for the utility of “religion” for peacebuilding efforts around the world comes on the heels of a widely proclaimed global “resurgence of religion” that has overturned the secularization thesis so generally accepted only a few decades ago. Daniel Philpott, a Catholic political scientist at the University of Notre Dame, has been at the center of both movements. Philpott’s 2011 book, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*,¹ coauthored with Monica Toft and Timothy Shah, was followed in 2012 by his acclaimed book, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*.² *Just and Unjust Peace* makes the argument that efforts at peacebuilding following armed struggle should be understood not only through the lens of justice, but also through the lens of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, Philpott defines justice as reconciliation, and argues that there is no reason to discount religion from providing grounds for an ethic of political reconciliation. Against liberal critics who would exclude religion for being divisive and not based on publicly accessible reasons, Philpott contends that an overlapping consensus emerges from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and secularism that provides an ethic of political reconciliation to sustain peacebuilding practices.

¹ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*.

² Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*.

As a Catholic theologian who has written on matters of politics, I welcome Philpott's work. I have written against what I call the "myth of religious violence," and Philpott argues too against the idea that the instability produced by religion is what modern liberal democracy protects us against. Liberal democracy, he writes, is not only a reaction against religious violence, but is also rooted in Christian thought and practice. Philpott further argues that the liberal commitment to respect ought to allow religious voices to enter into public discourse without leaving their religious convictions behind.³ I am grateful that Philpott has opened spaces for Christian voices to be heard in peacebuilding work, and I find his vision of justice as reconciliation a compelling one that accords with what I, as a Catholic, think that God is doing in the world.

Nevertheless, Philpott in *Just and Unjust Peace* names me, along with Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder, as a potential skeptic about his project. According to Philpott, skeptics like me will worry that "when the church involves itself in modern secular society, it all too easily contracts out its soul and marginalizes its message."⁴ Such skeptics regard the church as "a pilgrim who preaches a message from the outside"⁵ of the political order. Philpott raises a number of questions for me as follows, writing in his own voice:

I envision an ethic of reconciliation practiced in the context of political orders based on human rights, democracy, and constitutional government. Is this too compromised? I advocate that religious actors, without silencing their distinctive rationales or language, also pursue an overlapping consensus by forming alliances with actors from other traditions and sometimes adopting secular language to do so. Does this marginalize their message? I envision the church as a civil society actor that is separate from the state but active in influencing it. Does this overly confine the church?

³ Ibid., 105–8.

⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁵ Ibid.

In places, I endorse natural law as a foundation for portions of the ethic. Is this too much of a departure from distinct theological sources? These questions I leave open, an invitation to conversation.⁶

In this chapter, I would like to take up Philpott's invitation, not simply to defend myself and clarify my own position, but as a way of articulating a broader vision for the church's role in processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation. I do, indeed, have concerns about Philpott's approach, but they are not the concerns he assigns to me. I am not interested in maintaining some impossible pure and uncontaminated church that stands outside of involvement in modern society. I do, however, want to take the church seriously as an actor in the political process of reconciliation, one that does not simply fashion an ethic that is then handed over to the state. I want to examine the role that ecclesiology can play in peacebuilding, a role that I think Philpott and others neglect. To do so, I will draw on Pope Francis's image of the church as a field hospital. It is not just Christians as individuals who make peace in the world, but Christians as the body of Christ that helps to pick up the pieces and offer a vision of healing after the all-too-frequent battles that rip open our world.

Potent Medicine

Philpott's book is an attempt to provide an ethic and guidelines for practice for the kind of post-trauma truth and reconciliation efforts undertaken in Chile, South Africa, and many other countries since the 1990s. As Philpott points out, Western law has little to say about reconciliation; most such language comes from religious traditions. Writing primarily to his colleagues in the secular discipline of political science, Philpott argues that religious traditions can be mined for the building blocks of an ethic of political reconciliation acceptable to religious and secular people alike. "Most of all, religious

⁶ Ibid., 150.

traditions are ‘carriers’ of an ethic that has much to offer political orders addressing legacies of injustice, whether their citizens are religious or secular.”⁷ A “ground for the ethic” of political reconciliation can be found in the Abrahamic traditions’ concepts of justice, peace, mercy, and reconciliation. “Adapted to modern politics, these concepts yield a potent medicine for societies who are dealing with troubled pasts and pursuing stable, legitimate political orders.”⁸ Religions, then, provide conceptual resources for the political process. They can also, like other organs of civil society, “foster transformation in emotions and judgments that are far wider and deeper than what the state can or ought to effect. Like secondary restorations, these transformations can yield legitimacy, trust, and national loyalty on behalf of the political order. But the state remains indispensable.”⁹

While the church provides some ingredients for the “potent medicine,” then, the state is the hospital in which the medicine is applied; the state can draw on the resources of religious traditions, but the church as such is not a significant part of the process of political reconciliation. Religious people act as individual citizens, not as church. “To be clear, religious actors are not the primary actors who carry out the ethic as I envision it. While the religious contribute to political reconciliation in some instances and civil society actors in general contribute in many instances, the state and its citizens are still the main enactors of the ethic. What religion contributes is conceptual material, a notion of justice.”¹⁰ “Identification with the nation”¹¹ and “national loyalty”¹² are desirable end products of the process of political reconciliation, but Philpott wants to limit the role of the state to political reconciliation. He stresses that redressing unjust conduct in the political realm is the government’s job, for three reasons. First, it was agents “acting in the name of the political

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

order”—meaning governments or opposition movements—that committed the injustices in the first place, so government carries a moral liability. Second, restoring the dignity of the wounded in the eyes of the political order can only be accomplished by an agent of the state, who speaks authoritatively on behalf of the political order. Third, the state’s obligation to uphold human rights gives it an interest in encouraging the popular recognition of such rights.¹³

Key to Philpott’s distinction of roles for the church and the state is his distinction between religion and politics. Philpott makes clear that the focus of his ethic is political reconciliation, not reconciliation more broadly understood. “The norms that govern right relationship in the political realm are independent of those that govern other spheres of life, such as family, religious organizations, and businesses.”¹⁴ Government must limit itself to politics if it is to remain limited government, which is crucial to liberal democracy. At the same time, however, Philpott wants to expand the range of politics beyond that of what he calls the “liberal peace,” which limits itself to the promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and accountability. Reconciliation, he writes, is wider than the liberal peace, “wider in the range of wounds that it redresses, wider in the practices through which it redresses these wounds, and wider in the participants that it involves.”¹⁵ Most remarkably, political reconciliation involves what Philpott calls “soulcraft,” which leads liberal critics to complain that reconciliation transgresses the public/private and religious/secular divides.¹⁶ Philpott argues that Desmond Tutu’s “soulcraft” in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings—which included explicitly Christian prayers, hymns, language, symbols, and ritual gestures—advanced the cause of liberal democracy by promoting trust and national loyalty.¹⁷

On the one hand, then, Philpott seems to be expanding the ambit of what is called “politics” significantly beyond the liberal model

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55; also 5–6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

to include soulcraft, which is generally assigned to “religion.” Philpott seems to intuit how flexible and contingent the religion/politics distinction really is; for example, he argues that religious arguments in the public realm are no more laden with theory and belief than other kinds of political arguments brought to bear on global warming, economic growth, war and peace, and so on.¹⁸ On the other hand, however, though the category of politics—and therefore the ambit and ambition of the state—is thereby inflated, the religion/politics, religion/secular, and church/state distinctions remain strictly in force. Politics is incomplete without reconciliation, forgiveness, and soulcraft; but politics remains identified with statecraft, for which religion provides some conceptual material.

Philpott contends that there is no reason to exclude religious language from public discourse. His book contains a chapter each on the concept of reconciliation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the chapter on Christianity, Philpott gives a competent survey of Christian approaches to atonement, and shows that, for Paul, Jesus Christ himself *is* the justice of God (I Cor. 1:30).¹⁹ For Islam, according to Philpott, Christ’s atoning sacrifice is unnecessary;²⁰ but this makes no difference for the overlapping consensus on the meaning of justice and reconciliation that Philpott constructs for his ethic. The conceptual material that Philpott mines from the various religious traditions is an identical meaning of the terms “justice,” “reconciliation,” “peace,” and “mercy.” This meaning can and should be expressed in secular terms, though it does not always need to be. Secular language is much more likely to garner consensus, especially in countries that are mixed between secular and religious citizens, and because the law and human rights organizations tend to operate in secular language.²¹ Philpott does not think that religious people should abandon theological rationales for supporting the ethic of political reconciliation, nor does he think that nothing is lost in translation from theological

¹⁸ Ibid., 109–10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 157.

²¹ Ibid., 9, 113–16.

to secular language. “The claim is only that the propositions of the ethic are capable of being expressed in secular language without losing their compatibility with theological justifications.”²² Secular language appears to be neutral language; there is no discussion of translating secular language into religious language.

Field Hospital

I am deeply appreciative of Dan Philpott’s work, and deeply sympathetic with his attempt to bring the Gospel to bear on the urgent task of reconciling the violence and pain of the contemporary world. What I find missing from Philpott’s account, however, is ecclesiology, that is, any sense that the church is anything more than a semi-private association of civil society whose task is to generate meanings that individual Christians take with them when entering the world of politics. For political purposes, the Christian approach to reconciliation is reduced to a kind of *gnosis*, a meaning or set of principles detachable from the actual community of Christians. It is, furthermore, a set of principles identical to that found in other religions, such that it matters not, for the purposes of political reconciliation, if Christ died for us.

Philpott’s account of reconciliation in Christianity lacks body; he fails to recognize that Christianity is a movement, not a philosophy or a set of principles. Reconciliation in the Pauline corpus is reconciliation in the Body of Christ. In Ephesians, for example, the reconciliation of the Jews and the Gentiles is accomplished in Christ’s Body: “For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in his own person the hostility... His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single New Man out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body” (Eph. 2:14–16). Reconciliation is not a principle but an ontological reality of incorporation into Christ’s Body—which Paul

²² Ibid., 115.

identifies with the church—principally through the sacramental bond of the Eucharist. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “As there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf” (I Cor. 10:17). The Body of Christ is not a peripheral metaphor for Paul or for the patristic writers, for whom reconciliation simply meant incorporation, along with one’s fellows, into God.²³ This is the *theosis* to which Athanasius refers when he writes, “He, indeed, assumed humanity so that we might become God.”²⁴ Philpott cites this saying,²⁵ but misses the ecclesiological implications; for him, the transaction seems to remain between God and individuals.

Philpott might protest that his account of reconciliation in Christianity does mention the Eucharist, and that he fully accepts my brief summary of Pauline and patristic theology as valid *in the realm of religion*; but he is trying to extract meanings that can be of use in the realm of politics, which is the realm of the state. He cites favorably what he calls Karl Barth’s belief that “the Christian gospel was a source of analogous principles for politics.”²⁶ When one crosses the border from religion into politics, one is only allowed to take principles from the former to the latter. I am unconvinced, however, that the supposed border is as well guarded as Philpott seems to assume it is. In my book *The Myth of Religious Violence*, I provide an extensive genealogy showing that the religion/politics and religious/secular distinctions are contingent, modern Western creations, and not simply a part of the way things are.²⁷ Paul obeys no such distinction; indeed his word for the church—*ekklesia*—is borrowed from Greek political terminology, and his image of the church as the Body of Christ is borrowed from the Greek image of the body politic, dating back at least to Aristotle.²⁸ There is now a burgeoning field of scholarship

²³ For a summary and analysis of biblical and patristic thought on incorporation into Christ, see Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*.

²⁴ Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, translated by A Religious of C.S.M.V., 93 [§54].

²⁵ Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 135. Philpott cites the saying as, “God became man so that we might become God.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁷ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, especially chapter 2.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders, 60 [1253a18].

on Paul and politics which recognizes that the early Christian movement was not a “purely religious” society, but was seen by the Roman Empire as politically subversive; not because they were trying to govern the Empire, but because their communities were outposts of a different kind of empire, the Kingdom of God, a phrase that helpfully blurs the distinction between “religion” and “politics.”²⁹ Philpott, on the other hand, reads Jesus’ (Mt. 5:38–42) and Paul’s (Rom. 12:17) admonitions not to repay evil with evil as advice to the government on how to replace retribution with restorative practices in the judicial system.³⁰

I agree that witnessing to the state is important, and by no means do I advocate Christian withdrawal from matters of political order. I am concerned, however, that the limiting of Christian political witness to participation in the state minimizes the mission of the church as church to create alternative spaces of reconciliation in a broken world, a world often broken by the state that Philpott wants to fix. I agree that politics is incomplete without reconciliation and forgiveness. I just don’t think that what we mean by “politics” should be limited to statecraft. When it is, the state’s ambitions grow, and the possibility of alternative spaces becomes truncated. There are some things that the state does not do well. One of them, according to Howard Zehr, is restorative justice. The state is abstract and impersonal. It has a tendency to treat crime not as harm done to persons, but as a violation of the law, with the state itself as the victim.³¹

Philpott thinks that political reconciliation is the state’s job because the state represents the political community as a whole.³² It is the state’s job also because the state is often implicated in the wrongs to begin with. One reason, however, that the state is often implicated

²⁹ See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*; Douglas Harink, *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Zizek, and Others*; Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*.

³⁰ Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 222.

³¹ Howard Zehr, “Restorative Justice, The Concept: Movement Sweeping Criminal Justice Field Focuses on Harm and Responsibility,” *Corrections Today* 59: 68–70.

³² Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 24.

in the wrongdoing is the actual empirical fact that most states do not represent the entire political community, but rather a narrow elite. Asking the state to reconcile the wrongs can be like asking the fox to guard the henhouse. Philpott himself cites examples where the work of a truth commission was nullified almost immediately by government action, as in El Salvador with the issuing of a law of self-amnesty.³³ The law should evoke little surprise; the Salvadoran government has *always* represented the interests of the elite of that country, which is what motivated the state-sponsored massacres of peasants and laborers to begin with. Philpott cites Guatemala's REMHI commission (Recuperacion de la Memoria Historia) as one of the best practitioners of personalism in the process of political reconciliation.³⁴ The commission, formed in 1995 by the Catholic Church and entirely independent of state sponsorship, sent 800 agents of reconciliation to record the testimonies of the survivors of the decades-long state-sponsored campaign of terror, torture, and murder. The example of REMHI is, in fact, a counterexample to Philpott's own argument. Sometimes the truth needs to be told by an entity that does *not* represent all sectors of society, one that is biased toward the poor and suffering, one that can tell the real truth without worrying about offending all the different groups that the government is supposed to represent.³⁵ The price for such truth-telling is often high: the author of the report, Bishop Juan Gerardi, was bludgeoned to death by government agents two days after the report's release.

The work of theologian Emmanuel Katongole is a window into a fuller vision of the church as agent of reconciliation. Katongole was co-director of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke University, and is now at the Kroc Institute for Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. According to Katongole, Christian social ethics has

³³ Ibid., 190.

³⁴ Ibid., 186.

³⁵ The REMHI report includes an interesting history of Guatemala in which it is pointed out that the state has always been in the control of the ruling class. The liberal governments of the 1870s, for example, imposed forced labor upon the indigenous populations as part of their project of turning Guatemala's agriculture into commodity crops for export; see the English-language condensed version of the full REMHI report, *Guatemala: Never Again!* 181.

assumed that peace, democracy, and development are political matters that are the responsibility of the state. The church belongs to the realm of religion. Its job is to make the nation-state work better, particularly in places like Africa where there is the phenomenon of “failed states.” Katongole argues, however, following Patrick Chabal and Jean Daloz, that the nation-state in Africa has not failed; chaos, war, and corruption are instruments of the nation-state to serve elite interests.³⁶ Rwanda was not a failed state; as Bill Berkeley writes, the Rwandan state was “all too successful” in hierarchically organizing the slaughter of 800,000 people in a mere three months.³⁷

It is common in Western discourse about Africa to attribute such violence to supposedly ancient tribal hostilities. Following Basil Davidson, Katongole argues that Africa was broken not by ancient hostilities, but by the very modern process of colonization by Europeans, who brutally plundered Africa for its natural resources. Nation-state politics continues to be what politics was under colonization: a dogfight amongst elites for material spoils.³⁸ The African nation-state is what Davidson calls the “successor institution” to the colonial project.³⁹ The national struggle has trumped the social struggle; nationalism has been used to recruit the poor masses into clientelistic relationships with the elites. “Tribalism” is a myth used to justify national unity; the nation presents itself as the only bulwark against chaos. But clientelism, not tribalism, is the core problem.⁴⁰ The nation-state was supposed to rationalize Africa, to bring it out of its superstitious and

³⁶ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 1–2; Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*.

³⁷ Bill Berkeley, *The Graves are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe, and Power in the Heart of Africa*, 15, quoted in Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁰ Tribes are not simply natural, static entities engraved in social reality since time immemorial that are naturally inclined to view those with different languages and cultures as enemies. Tribalism is created when linguistic and cultural differences are used by the political process as determinants of privilege and exclusion. The rivalry between Hutus and Tutsis was neither ancient nor inevitable, but was the result of the privileging of Tutsis by the Belgian colonial authorities as part of their strategy of rule. Indeed, the very definitions of “Tutsis” and “Hutus” undergo significant shifts as part of the colonial political process; Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 75–76.

myth-based past. But the destruction of myth has left only the politics of mere survival. As Katongole writes, “nationalist politics in Africa does not promote the realization of any transcendental goal—a common good, for instance... Instead, it shrinks people’s vision and expectations and encourages them to think small, to not expect success, to grab whatever they can and shut up.”⁴¹

Christian social ethics, Katongole writes, needs to move “from a preoccupation with fixing a broken institution to imagining new experiments in social life in Africa.”⁴² Christians failed to make a positive difference under European colonization because Christianity was seen as a religion, attending to spiritual needs while not questioning the violence.⁴³ Christians are more proactive now, argues Katongole, but continue to see Christianity as internal formation and ethical principles that prepare individuals to influence the supposed “real world” of nation-state politics. “The practical implication of this observation is that even though the church appears to be one of the most viable and active institutions—especially in the rural areas, where nation-state influence seems minimal—the churches live with a posture of uncertainty, as if waiting for the real power to show up to provide the determinative frame of references for social and material realities... It is perhaps not surprising that many have referred to the church in Africa as a sleeping giant that is yet to wake up to the full potential of the Gospel as a social vision of reimagination.”⁴⁴

What Katongole suggests, then, is that the church not simply extract generic principles for the sake of state projects of peacebuilding; but that the church also itself help create spaces where there can flourish a different kind of politics, one based on an eschatological vision of how God is reconciling the world. Such spaces Katongole calls “wild spaces,” a term he borrows from Sallie McFague. Wild spaces complicate the grid imposed by the imagination of the nation-state, such that the boundaries between religious and political imaginations become fluid. Another image that Katongole uses is

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Ibid., 61.

⁴³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

“demonstration plots,” where a vision of a new social reality is incarnated in a particular place. Katongole devotes a chapter each to three examples of such demonstration plots. One is Bishop Paride Taban’s Holy Trinity Peace Village in South Sudan, where people of different faiths—Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists—and people of different tribes live, farm, work, and learn together. Taban says, “We want to stop tribalism, but in a small way.”⁴⁵ Taban’s ambitions are not small, but he believes that trying to overcome tribalism all at once and from above only produces violence. As Katongole says, “behind Taban’s experiment is an ecclesiological vision;”⁴⁶ Christians are called upon not just to float ideas, but to *incarnate* a reconciling vision in actual space and time.

Katongole makes clear that the church itself, in all its sinfulness and division, is not the demonstration plot; it is called to create such spaces in collaboration with others, as Taban’s Peace Village makes clear. The church does not wall itself off, but “somehow loses itself—that is, points less and less at itself—so that the full reality of God’s new creation, which exists beyond the church, might blossom.”⁴⁷ The church also does not simply turn its back on the nation-state; depending on local circumstances, the relationship might be one of affirmation, interruption, or resistance.⁴⁸ But the church is called to create what Rowan Williams calls “communities of resurrection,”⁴⁹ not simply disincarnated principles for reconciliation. The church is not simply the purveyor of “potent medicine,” as in Philpott’s image. The church is better understood in Pope Francis’s image as “a field hospital after battle.”⁵⁰ In the face of massive violence and injustice, the church is called to enact spaces of healing. In the pope’s image, however, the church is not simply a hospital, occupying a permanent, institutional, bureaucratic space. It is a field hospital, mobile, willing to go outside of itself to bind wounds and sow seeds of hope.

⁴⁵ Bishop Paride Taban, quoted in Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁹ Rowan Williams, quoted in Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing*, 99.

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” September 30, 2013.

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