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Politics and Political Service

Photo by Bob Shea

Oliver O'Donovan

Oliver O'Donovan, born 1945, held chairs in Oxford and Edinburgh, and is now an Honorary Professor at St Andrews. An Anglican priest, he is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. His books include: Resurrection and Moral Order (1986), The Desire of the Nations (1996), The Ways of Judgment (2005), and Self, World and Time and Finding and Seeking (2013-4).

Political Authority and Law: A *Breaking Ground* Symposium

What is politics? What is justice? What is government for? And what do these things have to do with God's own judgment, and his kingdom? These are the questions that we'll be considering over the next few weeks on *Breaking Ground*. This essay, by eminent political theologian Oliver O'Donovan, is the cornerstone piece for this symposium. It will be followed by six other pieces discussing aspects of these questions, by writers including Anthony Barr, Brad Littlejohn, Adrian Pabst, and Marc Barnes, applied to the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves.

Let us begin with a commonplace thought: "politics" is the name of a *discussion*, an exchange of speech, and in that discussion we all participate, as of right. There may and must be many privileged, restricted, and technical discussions in the practice of politics, to which most of us should not expect to be involved; yet the political realm "belongs" in some sense to everyone in the political community, and not to any group in particular.

That is the legacy of Roman republicanism, which discovered the concept of "the public," and identified the political community as the "public possession" (*res publica*).

But what kind of "possession" is it that we all have a part in? It is from the Christianization of the Roman tradition that we have come to think of it as a discursive, rather than a material possession. Western civilization learned from the Christian gospel of community in the Word, a common life held together by a common truth, out of the infinite resources of which every member could speak. It learned to think of its secular institutions, as well as its sacred, in that light.

Of course, there are public lands, public buildings, public roads, public institutions, and public revenue; but they depend on something more fundamental, a public *society* created by a public *discussion*. Someone who has no part in our discussion is not a member of our political society; someone who has no part in *any* such discussion has no membership in any political society, and lacks one dimension of human freedom, the freedom to participate actively in a society.

But the political is a practical discussion, a deliberation on how we shall act and on the conditions that determine the possibilities of our acting. It seeks to answer the universal practical question, What is to be done? But it seeks to answer it in a distinctive form, different from the way we answer it in natural communities or in the deliberations of our own heads: it asks, What is to be done by us *together*? For in politics we conceive of an action as "ours." To act together, of course, we must act through dedicated institutional structures and agencies, through representative officials and leaders. But the logic of what they can do will always trace back, even if circuitously, to the deliberations of the political society as a whole. That is the source of all *public* authority and defines its scope.

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Something similar, of course, is true of all organizations, of cities, corporations, universities, business enterprises; indeed, of any association of those who do not form a natural community in some common project. Institutions and offices are created and filled by publicly accepted processes; they are governed by laws arising from public deliberation. But political society, not associated by any particular project other than that of living together, is especially dependent on its offices and institutions. They make it visible, give concrete form to the indeterminate "We" that composes it. They form a bulwark against having to begin the political discussion again from scratch, reinventing it every moment; they are what allow it to extend across time and develop a persisting identity. Only with their help can common deliberation acquire a recognizable self-coherence over time.

For the fabric of common speech that binds us together is vulnerable. It is vulnerable to the here-and-now immediacy of its object, which exposes it to the dangers of acting in ignorance or forgetfulness, and to consequent passions and recriminations. It is vulnerable to distrust, especially in the larger and more complex institutions that give structure to deliberations and produce the leaders and officeholders to frame and enact the policies that emerge. It is vulnerable to the sheer complexity of the private interests within a political society and the differing views of public need that they encourage. It is vulnerable to losing sight of major factors that affect the well-being of participants.

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The reason that any sector or interest in a society may come to think itself as systematically neglected or ignored is that in the course of discussion so much is constantly neglected and ignored. And the frustration generated by a failure to be heard or understood, a failure to gather the necessary insights or to have agreed concerns effectively acted on, can undermine the will to participate in the political discourse, and therefore undermine the political community as such.

What recourse do we have when we face a breakdown in political discussion, when everyone speaks to themselves and nobody listens? Faith in God has something distinctive and important to say to this: we speak to one another *because we have first been spoken to*. We make laws and regulations because a law has first been given us. We

form institutions to enact decisions because we have been entrusted with a task, that of judging the right from the wrong within our common affairs. Behind the political discourse and the public forms it generates there stands the command of God. And this is what distinguishes political society in the strict sense from the many quasi-political social organizations we may construct to serve various ends. It is on this that it founds its claim to "eminent domain," its right to override, for public necessity's sake, the decisions of all other associations.

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Mere size or scale could not confer such a right, but only the specific tasks of justice. Subordinate societies pursue utilities and interests of various kinds, and they may very well serve the common good by doing so. But political society, which pursues no particular interest and no particular utility, has the burden of judging among all utilities and interests. Political discourse, in the fullest sense, then, is not simply a discourse about "What are we to do together?" It is a discourse about "What *should* we do, in order to practice justice in our life together?"

With the failure of political discourse comes violence, which is the breakdown of common discourse par excellence. But here we must be very careful of the language we use, and jealous for the traditional distinction between "force" and "violence," a distinction that it became fashionable to ignore in religious circles in the last generation. Why should we favor the "force" of the police over the "violence" of the gangland bosses? The distinction hangs on one point alone, but it is of supreme importance. "Force" is institutionally bound into the structure of political discourse by a responsibility to law and to representative government. "Take away justice," Augustine wrote famously, "and what are kingdoms but large criminal syndicates?" That remark points in two directions. On the one hand, the state apparatus may perhaps come to be distinguished from the criminal syndicate only by its size, which is not a sufficient ground for any moral distinction between the two. On the other hand, the two become indistinguishable only when we "take away justice." It is the structural ordering of the state to enact the judgments that God has commanded that makes us view its conduct, even when it may

be materially indistinguishable from that of its adversaries, in a different moral light from that of a criminal group.

Force exercised by institutions of government may sometimes be exercised deplorably. When it is, we know that it still belongs to the authoritative structure of government precisely when political discussion takes the matter up, seeks to redress its wrongs and to improve the standard of public practices. Concealing the wrongs of governmental institutions is, in the plainest sense, to treat them like criminal syndicates. We have to preserve the distinction between wrong committed *in the inadequate pursuit* of practices of lawful judgment and wrong committed *in defiance of* practices of lawful judgment. The latter includes, of course, wrong committed by public officials who consciously ignore the law they are given to administer.

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The distinction may often be difficult to make in a given case: did the police behave badly because they forgot what they were commissioned to do, or because they were ill-trained, ill-equipped, and ill-supported? We may not know, but we must know that we *need* to know, because the difference is all-important. If the problem is one of "bad apples," it needs criminal prosecution. If it is one of political and organizational structure, it needs political and organizational reforms. We had better seek some clarity about which of these we really need.

Political societies are plural, and each of us is a member of only one among many. All political societies are called by God to the practice of justice, but all start from different places and operate in different conditions in responding to that call. One of the most curious results of the communications that now govern our news and our imaginations is that we very easily forget those differing places and conditions. We imagine ourselves as belonging to a single world society in which certain central places count for much more in our thinking. An ugly piece of police abuse in Minneapolis created a worldwide reaction that still goes on. A much larger and more cold-blooded police massacre of civilians in Lagos, Nigeria, will certainly not arouse anything like the same notice. We ought to ask why that is the case, and what is wrong with our imaginations of the world

that encourage it to be the case. Those of us who live outside the United States but feel ourselves part of the same wider economic and civilizational world sometimes give the impression of having forgotten where we live. Growing up as a British Christian I was taught to pray each Sunday for Queen Elizabeth and the government under her. Today, I notice, British clergy commonly fail to pray for the government of Britain, and like to pray in tones of benevolent impartiality for "all governments everywhere," which fosters the illusion that we are all citizens of the world with no need to be citizens of any place in particular. But we have a responsibility to the justice of our place, the place, whose institutions make our daily existence possible. We have a responsibility for political neighbors sitting at our gate, who have first call on our engaged attention.

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And this sense of focused, located responsibility is what is properly meant by "patriotism," perennially an unpopular virtue. It is the virtue of recognizing our special duty to the health and justice of the discourse that constitutes our own political identity. It is not patriotic to think of our political community as somehow "better" than others—that is just stupid. True patriotism is the virtue of those who know where in particular their time on earth is spent, and are conscious of what they owe to the discourse of that place. It is a virtue of concreteness. Politics becomes the more fantastic the more it is divorced from the ordinary contexts of our lives. The political neighbors at our gate may ask a great deal that we do not feel able to give, but there is one thing that we must be able to give them, which is attention and discourse, a hearing and an answer. We may not confuse them with other people a thousand miles away, nor make them disappear from our imaginations and arguments because they do not fit in with ideal projects of reform or construction that are dear to our heart, but not to theirs.

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