In Christian Ethics and the Sit-In and War and the Christian Conscience, Paul Ramsey describes politics as a realm of “deferred repentance.” Despite several troubling implications of this phrase, I believe the concept of repentance in his work provides an illuminating point of entry into a theological discussion of political judgment. I begin with the question of what Ramsey means by “deferred repentance” and proceed to a wider discussion of his theology of repentance and call for creative political reconstruction. This involves recognition of his debts to H. R. Niebuhr’s war articles from the 1930s and ’40s and his use of repentance as the determinative motif for a Christian response to war. I also examine the significance of the concept in Ramsey’s debates in the 1960s and ’70s over how the Vietnam War might be justified. He uses repentance in each of these engagements to demonstrate the reliance of all political judgments on a prior theological account of certain features of human interaction, namely, the contingency and temporality of created existence.

Introduction

The 1960s were Paul Ramsey’s most prolific years as a political theologian. In the second year of that decade he published both Christian Ethics and the Sit-In and War and the Christian Conscience.¹ These two volumes appropriated theological themes from Basic Christian Ethics and developed them in systematically political directions.² He used concepts of covenant and agape to explore the formal relationship among justice, law, and order as well as among more technical concepts such as proportion, discrimination, noncombatant immunity, and so on.

Buried among these most familiar of Ramseyian political themes is his obscure suggestion that politics is a realm of “deferred repentance.”³ The first of several troubling aspects of this claim is simply its face value. It sounds as
if political officials are being given license to do whatever they please, at least for a time. One can also hardly imagine John the Baptist of Matthew 3 adding any qualifiers to the command “Repent!,” much less one that suggests postponement of the commanded act. Perhaps most significantly, calling attention to his use of repentance as a theological category in his early writings fits awkwardly with the fact that the lasting memory for many of his colleagues from the 1960s and ’70s is his refusal to repent of his judgments on the justice of the Vietnam War.

Despite these limitations, I believe the concept of repentance in Ramsey’s work provides an illuminating point of entry into a theological discussion of political judgment. This inquiry begins with the question of what he means by “deferred repentance” and proceeds to a wider discussion of his theology of repentance and call for constructive political action. As I will argue, repentance marks his attempt to capture the essentially contingent and temporal nature of political judgments, as well as an effort to define the role of theological ethics in guiding and shaping such judgments. I will also examine the significance of this approach for his engagements over the issue of repentance in the context of the Vietnam conflict.

**Politics as Deferred Repentance**

The first step, then, in asking what Ramsey’s theology of repentance reveals about political judgment is to investigate what exactly he means when he speaks of politics as a realm of deferred repentance. In *War and the Christian Conscience* he searches for a way to defend against a rigid distinction between public and private morality by insisting that “no case can be made for the view that what is wrong for a man may be right for a government.”

One example that he gives of this undivided moral fabric is the suggestion that “murder . . . means the same whether this is done by individuals or states.” He refuses to mark off politics as an area of human interaction outside the domain of moral norms, rules, and judgments.

However, in spite of universal “judgmental criteria” governing all aspects of human life, Ramsey cannot entirely abandon the public/private distinction. He believes that “whatever is immoral an individual, in his private capacity, should cease doing at once.” By contrast, political morality may not be so immediately within reach. That is to say, political officials may not be able to set right all of the political wrongs before them with the expediency of an individual ceasing a personal action or habit. This constitutes “the main difference between private and public morality.” It is also the realm where “repentance may have to be deferred.”
Two examples will help clarify what he means by this description. The first has to do with the magistrate's inability to immediately rectify the moral evil of disproportionate weaponry. He writes: "There should be statesmen who themselves are quite clear as to the immorality of obliteration warfare (and as well as to the wrong of deterring evil by readiness to do the same thing) who are still willing to engage in negotiation directed to the end of limiting war to justifiable means and ends through a period of time in which they may have to defer their nation's repentance."

The catch, of course, is that the security that safeguards continued negotiations is to some degree assured by the deterrent effect of the immoral weapons. When he speaks of the distinctive context of political endeavors, he also speaks of the magistrate who "remains convinced that politics is his vocation."

To withdraw from office at each moment of deterrent-ensured freedom would be to abandon altogether the pursuit of right policy and proportionate weaponry. Yet the political official also cannot compromise the verdict that the deterrent effects of disproportionate weaponry are plainly and unavoidably immoral. Deferred repentance describes that period of time purchased by immoral weapons but harnessed for the removal those weapons.

The second example comes by way of his discussions of race relations in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. Speaking of the U.S. government's moral responsibilities to apartheid South Africa, he says,

[Politics] is an area of deferred repentance—but not forever. If there has been no propitious moment yet in recent history for the United States to take action . . . that moment may soon come when . . . our country can no longer defer making effective repentance for its complicity in injustice. Then we will face questions as to the use of strong and definite economic pressures with the purpose of radically assisting in the transformation of the whole structure of race relations in a country abroad. . . . The fact is that . . . we are inexorably involved in supporting economically the domestic policies of the present South African government.

In this case he roots the idea of deferred repentance in the search for the politically prudent moment for effective moral action. He knows that each passing moment is another instance of the government's ongoing complicity with actions of South African political leaders. Yet he also appreciates that such complicity will not be easily or quietly erased. Deferred repentance is an attempt to grant political officials the freedom to seek the most prudent and properly effective action rather than simply the most immediate.

These examples demonstrate that Ramsey's aim is to encourage purposive pursuit of moral gains in the limited context of the political realm. His account rests on the moral significance of just war principles to the extent that "even the politics of deferred repentance is made quite impossible, where there is nothing in violation of fundamental principle to repent of, and to negotiate out
of the realm of possibility.” Notice that negotiation itself does not constitute political repentance. That can only be found in the rectification of immoral policies and practices. But purposive negotiation is a hallmark of the rightly acting magistrate and deferred repentance describes the time granted to those in office for the proper work of political authority.

**Criticisms of Deferred Repentance**

As mentioned earlier, the troubling aspects of this account stem most obviously from the fact that the phrase sounds neither politically constructive nor morally steadfast. David Little is the only critic to seize upon this problem at any length in print. He writes in his contribution to *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey* that deferred repentance suspends the principle of discrimination in the means of warfare in order to ensure specific discriminate political ends. That is to say, it waives the moral criteria governing actions in war. Little says triumphantly, “we have here, from Ramsey’s own pen, an example of its being in some sense reasonable or tolerable for a magistrate to make a decision by disregarding, temporarily, the application of the principle of discrimination to the means of action in favor of considering its application to the ends of action!” He argues that Ramsey’s magistrate “should be fully conscious of the grave moral evil implicit in the course of action he permits” though he “ought not in any way to minimize the gravity of the matter, but . . . simply ought to postpone doing something to rectify it.”

Ramsey responds to Little’s criticisms two years later in an essay titled “Some Rejoinders.” He squarely rejects the suggestion that deferred repentance has to do with intending or licensing indiscriminate political means. It cannot mean “that statesmen ought simply to sin bravely and ever more bravely repent.” Instead of licensing magistrates to waive the principle of discrimination, deferred repentance involves the pursuit of discriminate means (and ends) in a political realm where the rectification of immoral policy may not be immediately available (or prudent). He describes this pursuit by speaking of a magistrate “negotiating [something] out of the realm of possibility . . . and living with unjust war policies while effecting the reformation of such policies.”

Ramsey also argues that Little’s reading obscures his description of the posture of the magistrate caught between an unbreakable principle of discrimination and a broken political order built upon and sustained by indiscriminate weaponry. He exaggerates this point, arguing that “a [just war] statesman is not likely to suppose that meantime he can be excused for engaging in a few tit-for-tat city exchanges.” Thus, he speaks of deferred repentance as “the use of the time granted by deterrence to ‘ransom the time’ by a creative political reconstruction of deterrence systems.” This marks the difference
between working to rectify immoral means in spite of those means and waiving the moral norms governing political action.

Shortly after the publication of *War and the Christian Conscience* in 1961, Ramsey received a letter protesting the idea of deferred repentance from John Hick, then of Princeton Theological Seminary. Their exchange is particularly useful for understanding the meaning of the term and Ramsey's approach to the significance of repentance as a political concept. Hick takes issue with what he calls "the sinister notion of deferred repentance," saying that it "sounds suspiciously as though it simply means not doing what one sees to be right, or doing what one sees to be wrong." Ramsey's response is illuminating. He says,

[Deferred repentance] is not sinister, but is rather of relating moral principles to political action acknowledged to be "the art of the possible" in such fashion as to prevent this "art of the possible" from becoming a realm of either technical performance or power politics wholly unrelated to morality. "Deferred repentance" means primarily, not doing what one sees to be wrong (though this may in some sense still be true) but doing from among the possible collective acts the one that is most right among the possibles and the one best calculated to make more of what is right a possibility for future political choice. It is, therefore, to do the politically right, the best possible good.

He calls attention to the belief that the political good cannot simply be one of resignation to evil. That would be to relinquish the possibility of Christian love and faithfulness at work even in the political realm. This is driven by a concern that the logic of choosing between "lesser evils" will erode into a kind of excuse-giving rather than moral justification. His insistence that deferred repentance involves the selection of the "most right among the possibles" indicates that even if the "least possible evil" and the "greatest possible good" could be used to describe the same political act, the interpretive difference is of great theological significance. He says this in another way in an interview late in his career: "The least unavoidable evil simply is the greatest possible good; no tears please."

Ramsey's response to these criticisms helps demonstrate that in deferred repentance he seeks an interpretation of political action that identifies and encourages a constructive sense of moral purpose even in the limited context of the political realm. But he also fails to articulate a wider theological account of repentance on which these claims rest. The troubled nature of the phrase stems in part from its obscure theological roots and lack of connection to a more traditional understanding of the role of repentance in the Christian life. To explore more fully how this theological perspective contributes to the constructive determination of right political action, I want to examine his inheritance of repentance as a central political theme from his teacher at Yale University, H. Richard Niebuhr.
H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles and Politics as Deferred Repentance

In the 1930s and '40s Niebuhr published a series of short and unsystematic essays voicing his dissatisfaction with theological interpretations of war and political conflict. He sought an alternative set of images and concepts such as judgment, repentance, and crucifixion to reorient Christian discourse on war. The most famous of these pieces, "The Grace of Doing Nothing" in The Christian Century, was part of his only published exchange with his brother, Reinhold.

His disappointment stems from what he sees as a false choice being forced upon Christians between two misconceptions in thinking on war. The first wrongly believes that Christianity "calls for specific sorts of domestic, economic, or political action." This justification of political action with religious sentiment he also calls the "moral theory" of war. His acute sensitivity to the hubris behind certain judgments of justice and injustice leads him to insist on the ambiguity of any attempt to prosecute war as retribution. For this reason he says that "no scheme of vindictive justice fits the experiences of war." He also frequently repeats the claim that "the greatest difficulty of all which the moral theory faces is the fact that, in war, the burden of suffering does not fall on the guilty, even when guilt is relatively determinable, but on the innocent." He recognizes the inescapability of undeserved suffering of the innocent even in wars prosecuted by those with claims to justice and calls for repentance.

The second misconception claims that Christianity turns away from demands for specific political action because faithful obedience takes shape "only in peculiarly religious actions, such as prayer and worship." The political realm becomes merely (and hopelessly) governed by self-assertion and power. Christians are wrongly encouraged to withdraw from politics altogether on the grounds that there is no place for the moral claims of religious faith. This is called "the amoral theory" because it interprets war as "a conflict of powers in which victory with its fruits belongs to the stronger and in which moral words or phrases are nothing but instruments of power by means of which emotions are aroused and men are unified."

What cuts across the hubris behind both misconceptions is a call for repentance. Richard Miller observes that "Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with Christian discourse about war ... led him to chart an alternative course, on which repentance to divine judgment, not moral action, is axiomatic." Those who superimpose theories of retribution on wars that unjustly harm the innocent are called "to repentance, to a total revolution of our minds and hearts." It is also the proper response of those who abandon concepts of morality by either advocating "unlimited participation in war" or by washing their hands of war because "it makes no moral difference which side wins in a conflict of pure power."
Ramsey’s early writings on war inherit this approach to the political significance of repentance. He, like Niebuhr, uses a theology of repentance both to emphasize the ambiguity of moral judgments and to undercut any effort to abandon their role in political endeavors. At the base of this claim is the congruence between Ramsey’s account of deferred repentance and Niebuhr’s belief that “it is impossible . . . to separate response to the judgment of God from politically necessary action . . . to make religious life an affair of repentance while political action remains essentially unrepentant, self-confident action in the defense of our values.” Ramsey inherits the refusal to exclude the judgment of God from any area of life and the corresponding concern to articulate a politically functional concept of repentance.

Notice that the description of political repentance for both thinkers relies on a prior account of the potential for right action. Niebuhr insists that “nothing is regarded as beyond the scope of redemption—not the political life of men, nor the economic, nor the spiritual.” He dismisses any attempt to bifurcate personal and political morality by rejecting as wholly unacceptable the construction of, in Miller’s words, “a twofold set of actions for the individual: repentance toward the infinite, and self-confidence in the realm of finite, concrete action.” Ramsey makes the same conceptual move by grounding deferred repentance in the claim that there is “not an essential difference between private morality and public morality.” He roots his call for “creative political reconstruction” precisely in the claim that “persons and states are subjected to the same fundamental code of justice.”

Both thinkers also emphasize the importance of political judgment without issuing specific moral directives. Niebuhr concludes “War as the Judgment of God” by saying “these are but general reflections which do not presume to say to anyone what his particular duty in response to God’s judgment must be. They seek however to describe in what spirit and context Christians in varying vocations . . . may meet the divine judgment and maintain fellowship with each other.” This abstention stems from an ecumenical impulse and attention to the significance of divine judgment. As Joseph Allen notes, Ramsey also understands his task as an advocate of political realism to be “primarily an effort to perceive those characteristics always and everywhere present in politics, including possibilities for good and for evil.” This attention to the universal features of political ethics is paired with a reticence to issue specific directives. This approach comes most clearly into view in his harsh critique of ecumenical pronouncements issued by the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society. He, like Niebuhr, discourages the church from usurping the proper office of political authority with moral instructions for specific action.

These similarities not only highlight the roots of Ramsey’s account of deferred repentance, they also reveal his attempt to redirect Niebuhr’s basic theological impulse toward a more constructive account political action. As Miller
notes, Niebuhr seeks “not to address directly the ethics of war, but to outflank prior approaches by providing an alternative image.” Yet the outflanking he seeks is stunted by the fact that his “insistence on contrition is not followed by a clear set of directives.” That is to say, repentance may be his determinative motif for a Christian response to war, but it lacks a description of a constructive political ethic beyond the revolution of heart and mind.

Ramsey tends to overcorrect this insufficient vision of political reconstruction by leaving behind any description of the pious or spiritual sides of repentance. For this reason William Werpehowski notes that “Niebuhr’s ‘permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart’ may also have a more critical edge than Ramsey’s position includes.” Ramsey is wary of overly emotional responses to sin for their ability to overwhelm careful moral distinctions. This results in his allocation of little space for the more affective side of political repentance. For instance, Ramsey’s soldier is not one who “blubbers over his gunpowder.”

The principal aim of War and the Christian Conscience is to explore the tradition of just war thinking and explicate the moral norms governing political policies and practices. Descriptions of politics as a realm of deferred repentance appear at the beginning and end of this work, serving as bookends for his technical discussions of nuclear deterrence, noncombatant immunity, and so on. Ramsey therein uses a distinctive interpretation of repentance as a kind of theological platform for articulating the shape of a constructive political ethic. This is most evident in his claim (in the initial discussion of deferred repentance) that “an ethics grounded in justification in Christ has no . . . urgent need to avoid making judgments of right and wrong in politics.” He appropriates Niebuhr’s central motif while simultaneously trying to avoid the insufficient movement from repentance to creative reconstruction in the war articles. The moral upshot of this is his identification of specific principles of justified war that guide and shape judgments of right and wrong in pursuit of the political good.

**Repentance as Political Action**

Having established this foundational connection between his early descriptions of the political realm and Niebuhr’s approach to Christian discourse on war, the remaining task is to proceed from Ramsey’s unique and limited account of deferred repentance to a set of wider observations about his theology of repentance and the significance of political judgment. This involves a closer examination of his understanding of the link between repentance and constructive action. It also involves consideration of his early theological reflections on repentance from the 1940s.

In 1943 Ramsey submitted an essay titled “Sin, Repentance, and History” to the editor of Christianity and Crisis, Reinhold Niebuhr. As D. Stephen Long
observes, Niebuhr supplied the final title of the piece, “The Manger, the Cross, and the Resurrection.”50 The significance of the essay for this discussion concerns Ramsey’s suggestion of an important distinction between two forms of repentance. He says “repentance in which we suffer remorse for an action the evil character of which has thrust itself or has somehow been hauled into our consciousness is clearly different from that repentance which is appropriate for our deeper, unconscious sin.”51 He calls the first of these “repentance for unrighteousness” and the second “repentance for righteousness.”52

Contrition is the appropriate character of repentance for unrighteousness because of the delayed nature of the act. He says “sorrow or remorseful repentance for things we have done in the past, the sinfulness of which we now see, is something which must always be subsequent to the sin itself.”53 He reintroduces this concept the following year in “Natural Law and the Nature of Man,” saying, “one becomes aware of having sinned against what he knew before the act and knows after the act to be the moral law; and remorseful repentance leading to self-improvement are then in order.”54 That is, repentance of this kind can only take shape when looking back on what we recognize as wrongdoing.

What he terms repentance for righteousness, however, is more elusive. He observes “repentance for our unconscious sin, make no mistake about it, is repentance for our righteousness. It is superfluous to say ‘for our supposed righteousness,’ because before God all human righteousness is ‘supposed’ until God has acted and judged.”55 The concept does not imply that we should repent of that righteousness which is imputed through the judgment and grace of God, but rather that we recognize even in our current pursuit of righteous action the broken character of human agency. He notes that “we also sin, not knowing what we do, whenever we act at all; even when, as by a metaphor we say, we do good.”56 That now unchanging aspect of fallen creation, even in the pursuit of good, requires repentance.

The question that emerges from this is how we are to self-consciously repent for unconscious sin. Ramsey lingers on the issue because of his anxiety over the crippling effect of perpetually “trying to be sickly sorrowful for what we are now doing.”57 I noted earlier that in his political writings he is wary of overly emotional responses to sin. The roots of this approach lie in his theological wrestle with the fact that “we cannot remorsefully repent and put away from us all our sins, because this would mean ceasing to do what we are now doing.”58 The unavoidable simultaneity of action and repentance (for righteousness, following his earlier distinction) renders contrition a secondary, crippling, and somewhat inappropriate response.

At this point his theological commentary moves in a distinctly political direction. The principal example of one who understands that contrition is not the only response to sin is the Christian soldier who “repentantly fights the just war” but “is not one who is always blubbering over his gunpowder!”59 Ramsey
describes this approach to sin and righteousness, saying, "more fundamental than sorrow for our past sins is a repentant faith which in acting nevertheless waits for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions, and which still trusts Him when in His Divine Judgment our action is thwarted and rejected." He italicizes "in acting" to highlight the importance of "judgment about what is good," however "infected by our sinful righteousness" that judgment may be.

In war, this means one principal form of repentance can be a decisive act of political judgment. That is not to say that human agents transcend their "infected" character. Rather, it recognizes that God's transcendence places our political judgments under a greater judgment and therein sustains them as moral acts. As I mentioned above, "an ethics grounded in justification in Christ has no . . . urgent need to avoid making judgments of right and wrong in politics." This makes clear the way in which his reflections on repentance provide a theological platform for a constructive ethic characterized by purposive judgments on what is good and right.

**Repentance and Political Judgment**

These wider theological observations help clarify the inquiry into what Ramsey means when he calls politics a realm of deferred repentance. It is not a release from responsibility for that which is morally right or an attempt to license evil as a means to some good end. It is his commentary on the purposive pursuit of right action within the systemic limitations of the political realm. However misleading the phrase may be, it is essentially a call for magistrates "to do the politically right, the best possible good." More important than rescuing this troubled phrase, however, is what these interpretive gains reveal about Ramsey's contributions to a theological understanding of repentance and political judgment. This is a particularly odd observation in light of the pressure he received during the Vietnam War both to repent of his own judgments on the war and to incorporate a more substantial place for contrition for the ills of war in his political theory. To clarify these contributions and understand how his approach to repentance takes shape in this context, I want to examine his letter to the editor of *Dialog* from May 1967.

His essay "How Shall the Vietnam War Be Justified?" was published in *Dialog* in early 1967 with the revised title, "Is Vietnam a Just War?" Not only did the editor's replacement of the original title upset Ramsey, the essay itself incensed several of his critics. Robert Hoyer and Gordon J. Dahl responded in the subsequent issue with strongly critical letters titled "Sad Self-Justification" and "Repentance Rather than Rationalization," respectively. Ramsey then wrote a letter on May 10 to Kent Knutson, editor of the journal, responding
to Hoyer and Dahl. It was published later that year under the heading “Two Extremes: Ramsey Replies to His Critics.”

Both essays criticize Ramsey’s refusal to condemn U.S. military action in Vietnam. Hoyer observes, “the sadness lies in the fact that [Ramsey has] left no room for Christian ambivalence and doubt, no room for repentance.” In response, Ramsey invokes a distinction between justificatory reasoning within the political sphere and justificatory reasoning within the relationship between creatures and their Creator. He writes: “I do not regard a line of ethical or political reasoning which justifies an action over its alternatives as thereby ‘justifying’ human agents or persons before God, rightwising their standing of making them righteous. For Hoyer, justification has the effect of leveling all distinctions between the just and the unjust, and the relatively more or less just; and this I do not think was the meaning of God’s causing his rain to fall upon them both, of His sun to shine upon each alike.” Ramsey claims here that while human political judgments may not justify an individual before God, neither does radical human depravity nor the universal need for forgiveness “level” all earthly distinctions of justice and injustice.

Hoyer also overlooks the fact that without moral distinctions there is no basis for choosing one action over another. Ramsey says, “One really cannot suck everything into ‘justification,’ ‘faith,’ ‘repentance’; or level everything before these grand moments in the Christian life. Not least of the telling arguments against this is that then there would be no reason why even Lutherans worry so much about what they should do. Even in luminous moments of faith, they are still concerned to know what to do.” Setting aside the jab at Lutherans, this response demonstrates his anxiety over the consequences of Hoyer’s logic. A theology of repentance of that sort threatens to eliminate any possibility of identifying and pursuing a constructive moral and political good.

His response to Dahl, though shorter, is essentially the same. He says “you could not call for ‘repentance rather than rationalization’ unless by some alternative form of rationalization you first established what it is we should politically repent of.” He insists on the fundamental priority of moral norms to any functional notion of political repentance. He also rejects any appeal to repentance as a way of avoiding difficult political determinations of right and wrong.

The following year, in “Politics as Science, Not Prophecy,” Ramsey observes that “theologically speaking, we grasp something of God’s overruling of man’s ruling and self-ruling. To use this notion in our analysis of present experience, however, to introduce it into our analysis of the prospective shape of things to come or (hopefully) to be given to experience ahead is always a category mistake.” The category mistake made by Hoyer and Dahl is one of “leveling” all moral judgments under the weight of the “grand moments” of the Christian life. Ramsey demonstrates his belief that a theology of repentance emphasizes not only the significance of political judgment but also the
fact that theological accounts of political morality must be careful not to elide that significance. Political repentance takes shape constructively and with purpose only when held in proper perspective with the unique political role for acts of judgment.

In light of Ramsey's later arguments, we are now in a position to integrate these various discussions of repentance and make several observations about his contributions to political theology on this theme. Note that his position draws upon the recurring interplay between that which is human (limited judgments, relative justice, knowledge of repentance for unrighteousness, etc.) and that which is divine (eternal judgment, objective justice, knowledge of repentance for righteousness, etc.). He repeatedly insists on the theological significance of the distinction between the two precisely because he wants both to avoid the presumption that human judgments effectively enact the divine perspective and to grant to limited judgments their due regard in created existence. That is to say, he attributes great moral import to particular judgments of justice and injustice while simultaneously contextualizing them in a theological account of divine transcendence.

He also uses repentance to emphasize the fact that the political realm is inescapably temporal. That is to say, it is characterized and governed by its movement through time. As noted above, one of his purposes for introducing the concept of deferred repentance is an attempt to account for matters of timing, patience, and expediency involved in prudential determinations of right political action. This builds upon his Niebuhrian sensitivity to the fact that repentance in the political realm may require patience or calculated inactivity. His distinction between repentance for righteousness and repentance for unrighteousness is also an attempt to understand what it means for the whole life of a Christian to be one of repentance.

Lastly, the concept serves as a theological entry point into a discussion of the way that all political judgments are necessarily contingent. That is to say, political endeavors are never entirely under (or out of) our control. This is evident in his description of politics as "the science of the possible" in War and the Christian Conscience as well as in his insistence to John Hick that magistrates pursue "the most right among the possibles." It also becomes clear in his demand to Hoyer and Dahl that the indispensability of contingent and relative judgments of justice and injustice must be held in proper theological perspective. This attention to contingency as a feature of all political endeavors produces, perhaps counterintuitively, a heightened sensitivity to the importance of political judgments.

While repentance plays a relatively minor role in Ramsey's more systematic political arguments, I assign to it a significant interpretive function with regard to the task of understanding his foundational theological commitments and the significance of purposive political judgments. He uses repentance to demonstrate
the reliance of all judgments on a prior theological account of certain features of human interaction, namely, the contingency and temporality of created existence. A political theology of repentance is marked by the identification of moral norms and judgments productive of policies and practices in accordance with those norms.

Notes


4. See, for instance, his response in Richard John Neuhaus, *Speaking to the World: Four Protestant Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1983). He says "I freely grant that in the fury and fog of the verbal wars I failed to keep my agenda for reasoning morally about insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare entirely distinct from my own conviction that we were in Vietnam honourably" (21).


7. Ibid., 309.

8. Ibid., 12.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. David Attwood aptly captures this tension in Ramsey's account by saying, "the morality of politics is not to be set apart from the morality of any other subject, but neither is the morality of politics identical to private morality." David Attwood, *Paul Ramsey's Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 52.


12. Ibid., 11. With the introduction of the language of vocation it is important to note that Ramsey sees a difference between this position and a Lutheran one, despite acknowledging debts to Luther. He notes elsewhere, "For Brunner as for Luther, love is the motive which impels a Christian citizen or soldier or magistrate to stay in his position in the secular order. Justifying faith and love tell him that his vocation is there, but what he should do in the vocational setting of existing social institutions is determined entirely by natural justice and by the necessities of the situation, and not at all by love." Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 196–97, emphasis in original. While deferred repentance is his attempt to be attentive to the "necessities of the situation," he believes that the moral norms governing political action are determined by agape.


16. Ibid., emphasis in original.

17. Ibid.

18. Paul Ramsey, “Some Rejoinders,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 4, no. 2 (1976): 210. Little’s suggestion that deferred repentance employs indiscriminate means in pursuit of discriminate ends cannot square with Ramsey’s belief that certain and determinate universal political ends (i.e., perpetual peace, the abolition of war) are impossible this side of the eschaton. One feature of our creaturely existence is that “the highest we can actually aim at is the limited use of limited force; and God knows that is Utopian enough.” Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 128, emphasis in original.


21. Ibid.


23. Paul Ramsey to John Hick, July 13, 1961, Box 11, Ramsey Papers, emphasis in original (hereafter Ramsey to Hick). Ramsey also adds, “Unless you are going to say that there is no difference between the morality of private and of responsible action (I say there is no difference in the principle that pertains), there is need for some equivalent concept of ‘deferred repentance.’”

24. He says that the phrase “I choose the lesser evil” is “more like an excuse than a justification.” Kenneth L. Vaux, Sara Vaux, and Mark Stenberg, eds., *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 165.

25. Ibid. Ramsey sustains this attention to the greatest possible political good throughout his writings on politics. For instance, he observes in “Politics as Science, Not Prophecy” that the just war theory “defines right doing that good may come of it, not wrong doing quixotically alleged to be warranted solely by consequences expected to follow.” Paul Ramsey, “Politics as Science, Not Prophecy,” *Worldview* 11, no. 1 (1968): 21, emphasis in original.

26. Miller recognizes that “Niebuhr’s overall purpose in the war articles is not to undermine ethical discourse about war and peace but to *repoliticize* war, to provide an alternative metaphor for interpreting and evaluating war.” Richard B. Miller, *Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 126–27, emphasis in original. While Miller limits his analysis of the war articles to those published in *The Christian Century*, I include selected articles on war and politics published elsewhere during the same period.

Margaret Frakes (New York: Association Press, 1962). Reinhold Niebuhr's response is titled "Must We Do Nothing?"


29. H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," The Christian Century 60 (1943): 513. Niebuhr observes that the "moral theory" of war "interprets it as an event in a universe in which the laws of retribution hold sway... According to this theory, war begins with a transgression of international, or natural, or divine law and continues in the effort of the law's upholders to bring the offenders to justice."


34. Miller, Interpretations of Conflict, 127.

35. Ibid. Niebuhr adds, elsewhere, "Christians know that the justice of God is not only a redemptive justice in which suffering is used in the service of remaking but is also vicarious in its method, so that the suffering of innocence is used for the remaking of the guilty." H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," The Christian Century 59 (1942): 631.


38. Ibid., 632.


41. Ramsey, "Some Rejoinders," 209; and Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience, 310. As cited above, Ramsey takes the latter of these two phrases from a quotation by James Dougherty.

42. Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment," 633.

43. Joseph L. Allen, "The Discriminating Realism of Paul Ramsey," Worldview 12, no. 12 (1969): 14. Recall that one of the pillars of deferred repentance is the attempt to "make clear and keep clear in the public conscience the moral context or political action that should surround every specific political decision and should be the aim of political practice." Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience, 12, emphasis in original.


45. Ibid., 127. As Niebuhr says, "radical repentance, though it is not designed to be socially relevant, may have social consequences." H. Richard Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," Christianity and Crisis 6, no. 12 (1946): 5.

46. Miller, Interpretations of Conflict, 139. His call for repentance "threatens to undermine any ethical approach to war, leaving Christians in the limbo of quietism" (127).


48. Ramsey, Basic Christian Ethics, 188.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., emphasis in original.


56. Ibid., emphasis in original.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., emphasis in original. Any attempt to emphasize contrition as the principal response to the continually broken character of all human endeavours, even those involving determinations of right, drives him to say of repentance for unrighteousness and repentance for righteousness, “ludicrous results and theoretical confusion always follow from any attempt to mix the two.”

59. Ibid., 4.

60. Ibid. He repeats this claim the following year with reference to Martin Luther. Ramsey says, “Such repentance is that to which Luther referred when he wrote, in the first of his ninety-five theses; ‘Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying, ‘Repent ye, etc.’ intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence.’ This repentance is the orientation of the self away from itself while acting, away from both its righteousness and its unrighteousness, from both its idolatries and its idolatrous correction of idolatry, from its goodness and its guilt.” Ramsey, “Natural Law,” 374, emphasis in original.


63. Ramsey to Hick, emphasis in original.

64. Ramsey was faulted by many at the time for his delayed recognition of unjust U.S. military action in the Vietnam conflict. He admits as much in a letter to Glen Stassen, saying, “I judged that war to be proportionate long after I should have changed my mind.” Paul Ramsey to Glen Stassen, February 14, 1978, Box 26, Ramsey Papers.


69. Ramsey to Knutson, emphasis in original. The kind of leveling Ramsey describes is evidenced in Hoyer’s article when he says, “all of the arguments based on Viet Cong evil can be and are used by the thief who steals from the heartless banker; the priests who crucified Jesus lest the whole nation perish. We all justify what we do. To argue justification on the basis of another man’s evil is far from the moral order. In this day of striving for understanding, it is not even honest.” Hoyer, “Sad Self-Justification,” 142.

71. Ramsey to Knutson.


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