

# Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on a Public Theology of Tragedy and the Problem of Dirty Hands

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## Abstract

Modern discussions of the problem of ‘dirty hands’ often draw upon a tradition of thinking in American public theology that wrestles with political conflicts between moral limitations and responsibilities. This article examines the problem of dirty hands through the way two significant figures in the field, Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr, employ concepts of tragedy in their public theological writings. The analysis suggests that Ramsey and Niebuhr provide several starting points for describing the ambiguous realities of the political context and establishing limits on morally permissible political behaviour. This offers a significant challenge to the idea that ‘tragedy’ can be used to describe the liberal failings of either scholar and asserts the potential helpfulness of their arguments as the church seeks to exchange reasons in a democratic culture.

## Keywords

tragedy, Ramsey, Niebuhr, political realism, dirty hands

## Introduction

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout introduces the problem of ‘dirty hands’ as a way of examining the habits of accountability that govern political judgements.<sup>1</sup> The term captures a persistent philosophical conflict codified in an important article by Michael Walzer in the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2:2 (1973), 160–80.

political leaders will face situations that require the violation of traditionally inviolable moral norms in an effort to preserve some higher political good. In Stout's language, it pits determinate political obligations (preservation of the state, protection of the innocent and so on) against limits on the legitimate use of means available to fulfil such obligations (just war principles of proportion and discrimination, the inexcusability of torture and so on). Stout rightly observes that the problem of dirty hands holds in focus one of our most deeply rooted anxieties about the political realm: the question of whether committing moral atrocities is an inescapable aspect of political office. He also notes that these anxieties reflect the deep connection between the moral life of a community and the accountability of those in political office.

Both Stout and Walzer draw upon a tradition of thinking in American public theology that wrestles with political conflicts between moral limitations and responsibilities. In a theological context the language of tragedy often describes such sticky political situations. Hence, we need to consider how representative figures from this tradition speak of tragedy as a political phenomenon, how this language informs a theological critique of the problem of dirty hands and whether the two should be connected. In this article we want to examine the problem of dirty hands through public theological descriptions of tragedy. More specifically, we want to examine the way two significant figures in the field, Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr, employ concepts of tragedy in their political writings. We hope this will not only offer a clearer perspective on how the language of tragedy informs and shapes public theology, but also provide a few conclusions for a theological perspective on the problem of dirty hands.

### **Right Political Action and the Inviolability of the Pauline Prohibition**

Several of Ramsey's most important writings on political realism and justified war wrestle with the public significance of theological claims and the problem of dirty hands. Although Ramsey does not use this term specifically, he refuses, from the start, any suggestion that the political realm can be interpreted morally through power politics (that is, the notion that might is right) or technical performance of the sort that demands never prudence, only calculation. As we will show, Ramsey also pledges allegiance to the political significance of the 'Pauline prohibition' never to do evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8).<sup>3</sup> Rather,

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<sup>3</sup> 'And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come?" Their condemnation is deserved!' (NRSV Rom. 3:8).

he pursues a genuinely theological account of the political realm that supplies a moral vision for faithful obedience and, at the same time, remains sensitive to the realities and limitations of political existence.

In both *War and the Christian Conscience* and *The Just War*, Ramsey navigates the problem of dirty hands with reference to three central commitments. The first is his belief in the possibility of faithful Christian obedience, even within the political realm. As Michael McKenzie notes, Ramsey ‘sees no *necessary* conflict between the demands of ‘*agape*’ on the individual Christian and the demands of politics in the public realm’.<sup>4</sup> This means that the central responsibility of those in political office is to ‘guide the thrust of political action into ways that are right’.<sup>5</sup> It also locates the just war tradition within ‘the interior of the ethics of Christian love’.<sup>6</sup> To deny these conclusions would be, for Ramsey, to deny the possibility of redemption (and sanctification) in the political realm. To step into the public realm cannot simply involve an intentional embrace of wrong-doing or an inevitable submission to evil practices. He fights to preserve an account of faithful obedience in the form of constructive and purposive political action.

Ramsey’s second commitment is to an understanding of the ‘structural difference between personal moral agency and political agency’.<sup>7</sup> He inherits the tendency to divide moral issues along this line from Niebuhr. While Ramsey does not embrace Niebuhr’s belief that ‘group relations can never be as ethical as those which characterize individual relations’, he does speak of the need for ethicists to attend to ‘that which specifically differentiates the political good from the good in general’.<sup>8</sup> As Stout notes, ‘Ramsey identified himself closely with the “realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr and consistently tried to make his writings acutely sensitive to the responsibilities and concerns of the powerful’.<sup>9</sup> These limitations and obligations formed the unique context that Ramsey calls ‘the main difference between private and public morality’.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Michael C. McKenzie, *Paul Ramsey’s Ethics: The Power of ‘Agape’ in a Postmodern World* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), p. 115 (original italics).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1983), p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), p. 83; Ramsey, *The Just War*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Stout, ‘Ramsey and Others on Nuclear Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 19:2 (1991), 209–37 at 213.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, p. 12.

Despite these influences from Niebuhr, Ramsey had a strong need to temper his understanding of a public/private distinction with a third commitment. He imposes onto the Niebuhrian distinction a strict allegiance to fixed moral concepts (for example, ‘murder . . . means the same whether this is done by individuals or states’).<sup>11</sup> As Stout notes, Ramsey was ‘deeply uneasy about Niebuhr’s writings on the use of force, precisely because of their scant attention to the morality of means’.<sup>12</sup> D. Stephen Long examines the relationship between Ramsey and Niebuhr at length in *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*. He notes, ‘Ramsey views the prudential ethics of Niebuhrian realists as leading reflection on the Christian moral life into the “wasteland of utility”’.<sup>13</sup> Ramsey attempts to repair this by upholding the inviolable status of moral norms, even in political emergencies.

Stout neatly captures the source of Ramsey’s allegiance to these fixed norms. He states:

Niebuhr was not a utilitarian, but he did seem to imply that any means might be justified in waging war against an especially dangerous and odious foe. From Ramsey’s point of view, this placed in jeopardy a central scriptural tenet, the Pauline prohibition of doing evil that good may come (Romans 3:8). Ramsey therefore set himself the task, in all of his writings on war and statecraft, to salvage the absolutist theme without sacrificing the prudent spirit and pastoral sensibility of Niebuhrian realism.<sup>14</sup>

The Pauline prohibition limits Ramsey’s willingness to identify politics as a realm hopelessly abandoned to conflicting pursuits of lesser evils. Thus he notes 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

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11. He also insists that ‘no case can be made for the view that what is wrong for a man may be right for a government’ (p. 12). In this quotation, as well as others from both Niebuhr and Ramsey that will follow in this essay, ‘man’ refers generally to humankind and is not intended to be gender exclusive. Both authors wrote in a period where the universality of the term was assumed. Where possible, we have altered the quotations to avoid exclusive language; where unavoidable, we have elected not to alter the original.

<sup>12</sup> Stout, ‘Ramsey and Others on Nuclear Ethics’, 213.

<sup>13</sup> D. S. Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Stout, ‘Ramsey and Others on Nuclear Ethics’, 213. For instance, Ramsey insists that ‘it can never be right to do wrong for the sake of some real or supposed good’ (Ramsey, *The Just War*, p. 142).

expected to follow'.<sup>15</sup> The corollary to his belief that right action is possible in the realm of politics is an adherence to the prohibition of doing evil that good may come.

While these three commitments characterize Ramsey's early work on the problem of dirty hands, there are two obstacles that can obscure their impact on this discussion of tragedy. The first is that Ramsey does not, until much later in his career, articulate these commitments through a functional theological definition of tragedy. Neither *War and the Christian Conscience* nor *The Just War* use tragedy in systematically descriptive ways, especially not in reference to Niebuhr. One of the great troubles of Long's aforementioned commentary is his repeated use of the phrase 'Ramsey's view of tragedy'.<sup>16</sup> At this point in Ramsey's writing, we simply do not have a clear articulation of any such view.<sup>17</sup> We will return to this point later.

The second obstacle is connected to the first, in that even when Ramsey touches on the issue of dirty hands, he does not execute the discussions with great clarity or ease. For instance, in *War and the Christian Conscience* he focuses his attention on the issue through the use of a difficult phrase, 'deferred repentance'.<sup>18</sup> Stout calls the troubled phrase 'the most visible sign of strain in Ramsey's attempt to remain faithful to Niebuhr's realism while affirming the Pauline prohibition'.<sup>19</sup> Out of the failures of this phrase, and other criticisms of *The Just War*, Ramsey seeks to reformulate his understanding of political conflicts and moral limitations with stronger adherence to the Pauline

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Politics as Science, Not Prophecy', *Worldview*, 11:1 (1968), 18–21 at 21 (original italics). He rejects the view that 'killing in war is intrinsically wrong, but this immorality may nevertheless be done if the acts of war are calculated to lead to a lesser available evil among the consequences' (ibid., 20).

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Long observes, 'In 1946, Ramsey did publish an essay based on his dissertation entitled, "Theory of Democracy: Idealistic or Christian?" In that essay, he demonstrated that Reinhold Niebuhr's "realism" did not represent an epistemological rupture from late 19th century thought, but that 19th century thought was as capable as Niebuhr to take into account "tragedy"' (Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, p. 40). This makes it appear as if Ramsey uses the term 'tragedy' in the article, which he does not. In the footnote, Long adds, 'I continue to use the term "tragedy" rather than "sin", because I am convinced that Niebuhr's theological realism was not indebted to Christian notions of sin, but to pagan notions of tragedy that effectively removed God from human history' (ibid., n. 40).

<sup>17</sup> In one place the term is used to reject any suggestion that murder can be excused (or justified) by the description 'tragedy' (Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, p. 213); see also Ramsey, *The Just War*, p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, pp. 11–14 and 311.

<sup>19</sup> Stout, 'Ramsey and Others on Nuclear Ethics', 215.

prohibition and a clearer definition of the concept of tragedy. While this leads to later (and clearer) developments in his thinking, those same writings often fail to acknowledge his debts to Niebuhr.

While scholars such as Stout and Long read Ramsey's realism through his debts to Niebuhr, his increasing attention to the Pauline prohibition supposedly draws him away from this influence; yet, if this is true, we have to wonder how we are to read Ramsey's later discussion of the concept of tragedy. Indeed, we have to question how Niebuhr understands tragedy, and in what sense Ramsey inherits this tradition of thought. More importantly, we need to consider the bearing that Niebuhr and Ramseyian accounts of tragedy might have on this inquiry into a publicly theological account. These considerations occupy the remaining sections of this article.

### **Niebuhr on Christian Realism and Moral Norms**

Niebuhr develops his most important work on Christian realism and politics in the prime of his career against a post-World War Two backdrop and the change of global politics associated with the Cold War. The writings from this period are generally continuations of earlier theological themes from *Nature and Destiny of Man* and *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, such as human nature, pride and the perennial problem of power in human relationships. However, once the conflicts of the mid-twentieth century erupt, Niebuhr's thought is pitted against a previously unfamiliar world order in which super-powers remained in constant tension with one another. Tragedy, then, (which Niebuhr sometimes refers to as irony), occupies a significant role in the development of his mature public theology. While Niebuhr's conception of tragedy is most fully developed in his later thought, elements of it are evident in all of his work.

The first point we want to make about Niebuhr's understanding of tragedy regards the possibility of fixed moral norms and their relation to moral judgement. Niebuhr is a 'realist' in the sense that he affirms the reality of fixed moral norms, which serve as a guide for moral discernment, and which exist objectively and independently of human conceptions about them. In other words, Niebuhr embraces the traditional stance of moral realists who affirm that goodness exists as a set of facts about the order of the universe.<sup>20</sup> What

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<sup>20</sup> See Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 11–18.

makes this way of thinking specifically Christian realism is that, for Niebuhr, the existence of moral goodness is irrevocably tied to the ‘law of love’ of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Niebuhr’s is both a moral and theological realism in the sense that the objective good which serves as the plumb line of moral agency originates with the law of love in God. In Niebuhr’s words, ‘in a theological realism which culminates in the divine nature as love, a moral resolution unifies all human aims and interests in a harmony of life with life which conforms to the unity and love of the divine nature itself’.<sup>22</sup>

Niebuhr and Ramsey differ on the use of objective moral norms, however, when it comes to the applicability of the norms to moral judgement. While Ramsey finds no *a priori* conflict between individual Christian moral obligation to act in accordance with the demands of the law of love (*agape*) and public political demands, Niebuhr does find conflict. For Niebuhr: ‘Although we affirm that any specific conflict between persons is susceptible to a resolution in accordance with the law of love, we cannot argue directly from the law of love to the requirements of love for that situation’.<sup>23</sup> The law of love in Niebuhrian realism is thus what Niebuhr frequently refers to as the ‘impossible ideal’; that toward which we strive, but that which remains beyond realization in human life. It is the problem of human sin, the ‘ideological taint’, that affects all areas of life, including politics, and prevents the simple application of the theology of the law of love to the complex circumstances of human moral judgement.<sup>24</sup> As Lovin notes: ‘In his [Niebuhr’s] thought, the theological concepts function more like virtues than like foundational propositions. They indicate habits of judgment and observation’.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the Niebuhrian realist understands public theology as the task of rendering judgements in the face of difficult moral situations that approximate the law of love, but that never fully embody it. This falls short of Ramsey’s call for magistrates to enact judgements in accordance with *agape*.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II: Human Destiny* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 241–4.

<sup>25</sup> Robin W. Lovin, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr: Does His Legacy Have a Future?’, *American Public Media* <<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/niebuhr-rediscovered/lovin-hauerwas.shtml>> [accessed 30 May 2010].

<sup>26</sup> This difference stems, in part, from Niebuhr’s tendency to refer to ‘nations’, as in ‘The selfishness of nations is proverbial’ (Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, p. 84), and Ramsey’s tendency to refer to ‘magistrates’. However, Ramsey is not without sensitivity to the finiteness of

This brings us to our second point concerning Niebuhr's understanding of the problem, presented above, of a politics of dirty hands. As with Ramsey, Niebuhr never actually uses the phrase 'dirty hands', but his thinking on the topic and its relation to public theology is prevalent throughout his writings. For Niebuhr, there are definite moments of political judgement in which an act of a greater evil may be done for the sake of some greater justice, because the acts of political judgement are themselves morally ambiguous. This does not mean, however, that Niebuhr replaces justice for love as the normative standard of judgement in public theology. Drawing on Augustine, Niebuhr argues that love is indeed the highest of all moral norms, especially when understood as self-sacrificial *agape* love. Yet it is facile sentimentalism to believe that the responsibilities found in the political sphere can be met by the demands of *agape* love.<sup>27</sup> The genius of Augustine, Niebuhr believes, is that 'he takes account of the power and persistence of egotism, both individual and collective, and seeks to establish the most tolerable form of peace and justice under conditions set by human sin'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Augustine embodies what Niebuhr believes is true realism: the recognition that sin persistently inhibits even the best moral judgements. As Niebuhr puts it: 'Men do have to make important decisions in history upon the basis of certain norms, even though they must recognize that all historic norms are touched with both finiteness and sin; and that their sinfulness consists precisely in the bogus claim of finality which is made for them'.<sup>29</sup>

What this means in terms of the dirty hands problem, then, is that Niebuhr believes all public theologies are marked by a sense of tragedy in which public officials sometimes inevitably choose undesirable moral options. Niebuhr takes note of this phenomenon at the beginning of *The Irony of American*

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political judgements. See Adam Edward Hollowell, 'Purposive Politics: Paul Ramsey, Repentance, and Political Judgment', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 30:1 (2010), 99–115.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, Niebuhr notes as early as 1937: 'No nation deserves the unconditioned devotion of man, because it is not the universal community or the absolute value. The fact that it is able to transmute such unconditioned devotion into a force of international anarchy reveals the tragic character of modern patriotism. It also suggests that the nation is as much the servant of the devil as the servant of God' (Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 84).

<sup>28</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I: Human Nature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 284; see also William R. Stevenson, Jr., *Christian Love and Just War: Moral Paradox and Political Life in St. Augustine and His Modern Interpreters* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 126–7.



*History* when he wonders if there could ‘be a clearer tragic dilemma’ than the one embroiling America at the height of the Cold War. This tragic dilemma is indicated by the notion that despite being ‘confident of its virtue, it [America] must yet hold atomic bombs ready for use so as to prevent a possible world conflagration’.<sup>30</sup> There is thus a moral ambiguity pervasive in the judgements of public theology, particularly with regard to decisions about violence and war. Niebuhr notes this moral ambiguity in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, claiming: ‘Not all wars are equally just and not all contestants are equally right... The very same war which fails to yield an absolutely clear case of ‘justice’ may yet concern itself with the very life and death of civilizations and cultures’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is the proclivity for sin that makes all moral judgements tragic in some sense.

The point is that sin is never necessary, but is always inevitable. Applied to the moral judgements of his public theology, this does not mean, for Niebuhr, that the realm of politics is one of necessary immorality separated from a pure Christian community. For Niebuhr, we are always, already sinful before ever entering into public moral judgements.<sup>32</sup> He insists: ‘We are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history, and probably no pure evil either’.<sup>33</sup> This fact is only an indication of the inevitability of sin in political judgements and the moral ambiguity associated with them.

For Niebuhr, the consequences of moral judgement should always reflect modicums of restraint and responsibility. Thus he was fond of suggesting that ‘The common currency of moral life is constituted by the ‘nicely calculated less and more’ of the relatively good and the relatively evil’.<sup>34</sup> That is, we live ambiguously between the poles of righteousness and depravity. We will return to this discussion of tragedy, sin and ambiguity later. First, however, we must establish Ramsey’s later theological definition of tragedy.

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<sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), p. 1. This is not only tragic for Niebuhr, but also ironic; for it highlights the absurd element that the threat of evil violence might secure a tentative peace between warring nations.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, pp. 283–4.

<sup>32</sup> See Niebuhr’s use of Kierkegaard where he notes that ‘Sin presupposes itself’ (ibid., pp. 250–51).

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 37.

### Defining Tragedy in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*

We mentioned above that Ramsey's adherence to the Pauline prohibition, and his increasing attentiveness to its impact on political ethics, shaped his later thought on a public theology of tragedy. In order to substantiate that claim we must turn to his description of tragedy in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*. Ramsey initiates the section with reference to a common topic of discussion among ethicists in the 1970s; namely, the idea that pacifists and just war theorists share a 'presumption against violence'. Simply stated, Ramsey remains unconvinced that the logic of that presumption is a helpful starting point for an ecumenical discussion aimed at transcending the 'two options for Christian conscience': just war and pacifism.<sup>35</sup>

Ramsey suggests that 'the one thing Christian pacifists and just warriors have in common is that if anything is shown to be *per se* a moral atrocity, or to have no 'just cause' *now*, it should be given Christian endorsement *no moment more*'.<sup>36</sup> He recognizes that no anticipation or calculation of justice or peace can justify the perpetration of moral atrocity; such calculation would patently violate the Pauline prohibition. Pacifists and just war thinkers are thus united under the prohibition by a 'presumption' against moral atrocity (rather than a presumption against violence *per se*).

The categorical limits set by the promise to consider immoral acts 'no moment more' generate his definition of tragedy. In *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* Ramsey expresses frustration with the idea that just war criteria can coolly be applied as 'a thoughtless, legalistic way of condemning all wars at one time, and any war test-by-test'.<sup>37</sup> This viewpoint is particularly susceptible to the 'most deplorable failure' of omitting 'any sense of tragedy or sorrow Christians have to endure, and should cultivate under the tutelage of these norms'.<sup>38</sup> Tragedy does not describe the performance of immoral acts with a heavy heart. Rather, it describes the situation where 'resort to violence in a palpably just cause cries to high heaven for us to rescue the perishing and *we cannot do so* because in the attempt greater evil would be caused than

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52 (original italics); see also p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

prevented or corrected'.<sup>39</sup> Tragedy is thus the pain of a conscience restrained by just war limitations in the face of moral atrocity.

Ramsey identifies 'the sense of tragedy inculcated by a proper use of just-war political wisdom'.<sup>40</sup> Such tragedy is productive of '*moral anguish* over inevitable clashes between *justice*-reasons for going to war and *disproportion*-reasons prohibiting it'.<sup>41</sup> What is remarkable about this claim is that he assumes that pain of conscience in the face of moral atrocity is something that the Christian magistrate 'should cultivate' while under the restraints of just war criteria.<sup>42</sup> Tragedy is the anguish of a conscience restrained by the Pauline prohibition, yet crying for wrongs to be put right.

This becomes evident in his claim that 'the sounder our understanding, the more the moral anguish over suffering we *ought* to let continue *unrelieved* because to topple the oppressor would bring on as great or greater suffering'.<sup>43</sup> Tragedy requires 'thoughtful reflection on the "just" and right thing to do' because of the 'tension among just-war teachings, by the fact that we are obliged to observe all the norms'.<sup>44</sup> The anguish of tragedy is evidence that the moral norms prescribed by covenant fidelity are weighing appropriately on the (justifiable) options for purposive political action. It is also evidence of faithful protection of the neighbour in a world of conflicting political relations. This tragic tension is characterized by a proper understanding of obligation, justification and limitation in the political realm.<sup>45</sup>

### Niebuhr and Ramsey on Tragedy, Sin and Indeterminacy

Ramsey's refusal to identify all acts of violence as moral atrocities in the above discussion may frustrate pacifists who would challenge the distinction.<sup>46</sup> He

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 72 (original italics); see also an early attempt to describe this in *War and the Christian Conscience*, pp. 151–2.

<sup>40</sup> Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (original italics).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. (original italics).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>45</sup> As Ramsey frequently reiterates, 'what justified also limited!' (Ramsey, *The Just War*, p. 143); see also Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, pp. xviii–xix.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Long claims: 'Yet for Ramsey, unlike Aquinas and Augustine, the presence of evil—force, coercion, violence—becomes the essence of politics' (Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Trans-formism*, p. 44. Ramsey would reject the claim that all force and violence are inherently evil.

maintains a category of violence that is morally ambiguous; that is, that ‘risks’ conceivable (unintended) evil in pursuit of more proportionate, probable and achievable (intended) good.<sup>47</sup> Where there is a choice between right and wrong *per se*, then, a Christian of any ethical persuasion is obligated to choose that which is right. Yet Ramsey believes that political choices are more frequently of an indeterminate sort.

We mentioned above that one of the obstacles to understanding Ramsey’s early work on the problems of political conflict and moral limitation is Long’s descriptive phrase ‘ontology of tragedy’. Long claims that ‘Just war is not merely an ethic about war for Ramsey, it is also a political practice necessary because of tragedy’.<sup>48</sup> However, the argument in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* is precisely that the ‘practice’ of fighting a just war is absent in tragic situations. Indeed, tragedy describes the state of affairs where a moral atrocity leads to cries for forceful intervention, but it remains morally impermissible. Tragedy, for Ramsey, is a description that can be employed only by a conscience appropriately bound by the moral limitations, obligations and justifications of the just war theory (as found in Long’s ‘ethic’), including the Pauline prohibition.

Ramsey’s establishment of the upper limit of ‘no moment more’ means that his Christian political realism is always restricted by inviolable norms. Under the limits of the prohibition of moral atrocity, tragedy in public Christian theology cannot describe a situation where inherently wrong actions serve some greater or preferred good (that would be a kind of sinister utilitarianism). Rather, the problem is that those who hold political offices trade in a number of currencies that are unavoidably ambiguous in their potential for moral good or evil; hence, they cannot be classified as immoral *per se* or unjust now. The most fundamental point of agreement between pacifists and just war thinkers is a promise to consider *per se* immoral acts no moment more. Beyond that promise is a realm of actions with intended (but not guaranteed) consequences, purposive (but not unassailable) decisions, and desired (but nonetheless contingent) outcomes. In Ramsey’s view these contextual ambiguities

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<sup>47</sup> Ramsey distinguishes between ‘the great *evil* of all out war and the *risk* of such a war, and between the *evil* of destroying mankind by human action and the *danger* that this may happen’ (Paul Ramsey, ‘The Politics of Fear’, *Worldview*, 3:3 (1960), 4–7 at 5). His point is that the ‘possible effects of modern war must not reduce us to inaction’ (ibid., 4), whereas definite and intended immoral effects must reduce us to inaction.

<sup>48</sup> Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, p. 143.

and uncertainties represent the true point of contention in the pacifist-just war debate.

We must not forget that both of these ideas, in their own way, stem from Ramsey's allegiance to Niebuhr. For Niebuhrian realists the admission that moral decisions are marked by sin is not a moral *carte blanche* to do as we please. For instance, in *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Niebuhr notes:

An adequate political morality must do justice to the insights of both moralists and political realists. It will recognise that human society will probably never escape social conflict, even though it extends the areas of social cooperation. It will try to save society from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict, not by an effort to abolish coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to a minimum, by counselling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society and by discriminating between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen above, Niebuhr does not hold consistently to the inviolability of this process of discrimination. Yet, roots of Ramsey's increased attentiveness to the morality of means lie in Niebuhrian claims such as these.

More importantly, however, is the way in which Ramsey's insistence on the ambiguity of political judgements draws upon Niebuhr. Here again we have to avoid the temptation of Long's reading. Long notes that Ramsey 'did not ontologize evil, but did ontologize tragedy! If evil should not be ontologized, neither should tragedy be written into the fabric of political being'.<sup>50</sup> If Ramsey 'ontologizes' anything in his description of tragedy, it must be the inescapable indeterminacy that plagues the public responsibilities of political office-holders. Ramsey concedes (even insists) that judgements within the political realm will often be ambiguous and uncertain, but this does not lead him to collapse the significance of agency or promote the purchasing of good with evil. Rather, Ramsey reinstalls agency as principally important through acts of right political judgement; hence, the magistrate should pursue a conscience plagued by anguish stemming from the inviolability of the Pauline prohibition. The magistrate acts with purpose within the bounds of a theory

<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, p. 234.

<sup>50</sup> Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, p. 47. This particular comment comes in a discussion of H. Richard Niebuhr, but Long's description of Ramsey's 'ontology of tragedy' runs throughout the book and is similarly attributed to influences from Reinhold Niebuhr.

of justified war and laments the tragic situations where intervention remains incompatible with faithful obedience.<sup>51</sup>

Here we see that Ramsey's refusal to describe violence as inherently morally atrocious inherits Niebuhr's argument that the use of force in and of itself cannot be singularly responsible for the ambiguity of political judgements.<sup>52</sup> Rather, that ambiguity stems from the 'bogus claim of finality', which we mentioned earlier. The difference between the two thinkers lies in how their sensitivity to this ambiguity defines their notion of tragedy. For Niebuhr, on the one hand, the 'bogus claim of finality' involved in political judgements undermines the rigidity of moral norms in human experience and allows for their tragic violation in certain pursuits of justice. For Ramsey, on the other hand, Niebuhr's 'bogus claim of finality' takes the shape not of tragedy, as Long suggests, but of indeterminacy. He reinstalls the significance of agency in political judgement by refusing to suspend moral norms, even in the face of indeterminate and ambiguous circumstances; elsewhere called 'the incalculable determinants' of moral judgements.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusions on Tragedy and Political Conflict Situations

We mentioned at the beginning of this article that Stout highlights the problem of dirty hands as a way of linking political judgements to the moral life of the community. This is most clear in his expression of anxieties about a 'supreme-emergency exception' to moral limitations which would weaken 'democratic culture by undermining its ability to sustain a genuinely democratic politics, here and now'.<sup>54</sup> By genuinely democratic politics, of course, Stout means the exchange of reasons in public. He is arguing that the moral norms governing emergency situations should be congruent with the moral

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<sup>51</sup> In other words, simply having clear and certain principles of justice does not ensure that the outcomes of all political judgments are clear and certain; neither do they allow for discriminations 'in universal terms'.

<sup>52</sup> 'It is wrong to assume, however, that the ambiguous ethical position of the state is due primarily to its use of physical force. The real cause of its questionable moral worth lies in the fact that the real power which it wields... is always in the hands of a particular oligarchy' (Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 86).

<sup>53</sup> Paul Ramsey, 'Indeterminacy and Incommensurability in Moral Choice', in Richard A. McCormick and Paul Ramsey, eds, *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978), pp. 69–144 at p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 200.

life of the democratic community and the reason-giving practices of that community. Thus, the determination of what kind of people we want to be influences how we locate the upper limits on the moral judgements of a democratic culture.

In response to this anxiety about the moral substance of the democratic community, public theology can supply a methodology in which an upper limit on such judgements is articulated by the community of the church. We believe that Ramsey and Niebuhr offer the language of tragedy as a helpful resource as the church seeks to articulate this methodology. The foregoing analysis provides several starting points for the way that an account of tragedy can describe realities of the political context and establish limits on morally permissible political behaviour. This offers a significant challenge to the idea that ‘tragedy’ can be used to describe the liberal failings of either scholar as political theologians. In contrast, the following conclusions assert the potential helpfulness of their arguments as the church seeks to exchange reasons in a democratic culture.

First, the language of tragedy can reflect firm moral limitations in a violent world under divine judgement. Long argues that tragedy ‘usurps God’s place over creation, and this constrains how Christians should act in the world’.<sup>55</sup> Rather, the language of tragedy acknowledges God’s place over creation, and this constrains how Christians should act in the world. It can describe a world governed by and under God’s judgement. Thus, when Niebuhr points to the tragic nature of human existence, he has in mind that life is tragic precisely because it has falsely attempted to usurp God’s sovereignty, but does not realize that such coups are figments of distorted imaginations. Hence, he suggests: ‘Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his “creatureliness” and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life. He pretends to be more than he is’.<sup>56</sup> For Ramsey’s part, his descriptions of just war as obligation, limitation and justification are borne out of a recognition of God’s sovereignty, not in defiance of it. Those actions which are to be considered ‘no moment more’ are dictated by the divine love, as are those in service to the neighbour, which are to be pursued in faithful obedience. Political authority is always subject to God’s greater judgement and therein governed by principles of justice. His use of tragedy does not ignore that reality, but helps describe it.

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<sup>55</sup> Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, p. 192.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I*, p. 16.

Secondly, if the language of tragedy appreciates the constant cloud of indeterminacy hanging over political judgements, this does not legitimate sin or waive the moral demands upon political judgements. We admit some difference between Ramsey and Niebuhr here, though the two share more in common than not. Neither thinker saw entry into the political realm as requiring any loss of human agency.<sup>57</sup> Both articulate a sense of sin as something inevitable in human endeavours. But it is never a unique feature of the political realm and it should not be excluded from any viable public theology. Inevitability functions as a descriptive term meant to convey the broken character of human agency. As Niebuhr suggests: ‘The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will. This evil cannot be regarded complacently as the inevitable consequence of his finiteness or the fruit of his involvement in the contingencies and necessities of nature’.<sup>58</sup> In other words, tragedy never functions as a prescriptive term that liberates the agent from moral restraint or responsibility. Such a position, strengthened by both Ramsey and Niebuhr, refuses to see the political realm as one where representative agents are relieved of the call for faithful obedience. Their emphasis on moral norms in an indeterminate world, and especially Ramsey’s insistence on the inviolable status of the Pauline prohibition, attempt to address the pervasive nature of evil in the world without making it a kind of necessary ally within a constructive political ethic.<sup>59</sup>

Lastly, one of the reasons why Stout’s account of politics in a democratic culture is so compelling for those interested in influential public theologies is that he captures the widespread anxiety that politicians can justify anything under the heading of a political emergency. He judges that ‘the necessity excuse almost always turns out to be false’.<sup>60</sup> In their attempt to ward off such excuse giving as moral justification, Ramsey and Niebuhr use the language of tragedy to similar ends. Both authors are concerned to provide a public language capable of simultaneously voicing lament over moral atrocity and rejecting political judgements discordant with moral norms; this similarity helps us to

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<sup>57</sup> Rather, political ambiguity stems from the fact that, as Niebuhr observes, ‘Power is always partial . . . Yet power would degenerate into naked force if it could not pretend that it is universal’ (Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 87).

<sup>58</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> Though criticized for having weak theological accounts of sin, both Ramsey and Niebuhr suggest that tragedy can be a theologically informed description of the fundamental realities of political and social existence.

<sup>60</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 187.



remember that both thinkers write theology for the public. In other words, they write to supply the community with a language of tragedy as a creative theological resource for describing faithful obedience in a violent world.

Stout's analysis of the problem of dirty hands renders into a secular language his concern with the pervasive nature of evil in the world and the need to address it. He supplies a narrative of responsibility for the moral life of the democratic community capable of appreciation by anyone, whether they assent to religious belief or not. Given that Ramsey and Niebuhr are so frequently criticized for their respective ecclesiologies, it is easy to miss that they, too, display a strong sense of connection between political judgements and the moral life of the community. Both insist that the moral community bears responsibility that is directly related to, though not equivalent to, the individual's responsibility for making judgements. They both believe that the community of the church stakes out important territory in helping discern the limits of permissibility in moral judgements.

For Stout's purposes, this theologically grounded limitation of moral atrocities may not represent a consensus of the entire democratic populous. However, the voice of public theology can contribute to the reason giving exercises inherent in a genuinely democratic politics. Moreover, theological descriptions of tragedy such as we encounter in Niebuhr and Ramsey can be helpful in this respect. Within a democratic society, the church can present political leaders with an inviolable moral standard against which moral judgements are measured. It provides resources to contextualize the problem of dirty hands by offering the moral ceiling of the Pauline prohibition in which no evil may be done in the name of some putative democratic good.

The challenge facing all liberal democracies is the need to balance a range of perspectives on public issues by which the moral character of a particular people is defined. Ramsey and Niebuhr provide similar ways of thinking publicly and theologically about the particular problems of violence and coercion facing a liberal democracy. It has been our purpose in this article, on the one hand, to identify and emphasize those elements in the thought of Ramsey and Niebuhr that we find most instructive to a coherent public theological stance with regard to the problem of violence and the attendant issue of tragedy. On the other hand, we have sought to single out interlocutors who have dealt directly with Niebuhr and Ramsey, and who have likewise addressed the issues about which reason giving occurs publicly. Our findings lead us to the conclusion that though the task of public theology is never complete, any contemporary account of public theology that begins with the thoughtful and sober

judgements of Ramsey and Niebuhr offers a method of lucid thinking about the problems facing democratic existences and continues a theological tradition that earned its merit during some of the greatest upheavals of the twentieth century. It is our hope that this article contributes precisely to the continuation of that tradition.