PAVOL Z TARZU
JEHO ODKAZ VO
FILOZOFII, SPIRITUALITE
A UMENÍ
SÚBOR ŠTÚDIÍ

KOŠICE
2009
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PAUL, CITIZEN OF TARSUS, POLITICAL ACTOR

I am not a scripture scholar, much less a specialist on St Paul. I am a political philosopher with an interest in the common good. That means that I am curious about social order, and about all the elements that contribute to creating and sustaining social order. Among those are institutions of various kinds, offices and roles within those institutions, but above all the shared meaning which allows people to cooperate and live together. Aristotle affirms that it is the sharing of a view on what is good and bad, just and unjust, lawful and unlawful, which constitutes political community.\(^1\) Hannah Arendt, very much in the tradition of Aristotle, relies on this same affirmation when she emphasises the significance of action as distinct from work or labour in the making of political reality.\(^2\) Labour is the continuous renewal and reproduction of life on both a daily and a generational basis. Work achieves a greater permanence in its products, which are the artefacts to be used (labour’s products are consumed) such as chairs and tables, houses and machines. In terms of her distinctions, action denotes the words and deeds which shape the horizons of meaning within which people live. All political communities commemorate those whose words and deeds created and formulated the values and norms, identity and purpose which make each community the distinctive one that it is. Who are the makers and shapers of shared meaning sustaining political communities?

This is the context for considering Paul as a political actor. There is no doubt that Paul has contributed considerably to creating the structures of the Christian Church. His own personal exercise of his mission as Apostle as he interpreted it has shaped the role and its understanding for all subsequent Christian ministers. His establishment of Churches included the appointment of functionaries, some of whose names we know, and this too has moulded the development of ministries in the Church. But above all, through his teaching as recorded in his letters and the letters attributed to him, he has shaped the meaning which has sustained the role and work of Christians and their leaders through two millennia. This is where my question is focused and I hope to learn from Paul’s case something which will be of use for

\(^1\) Aristotle, *The Politics* (T. A. Sinclair transl.) (Harmondsworth 1972) Bk 1, chap. 2.

Paul, or vice versa." He contributes a study of Paul’s Stoicism in the Letter to the Philippians, and his introduction to the volume provides an enlightening clarification of the possible ways of viewing the Hellenistic context. He distinguishes two usages of the term ‘Hellenistic’, one designating a period of political dominance, and the other naming a distinctive cultural mix. Using the first meaning it is appropriate to say that the Roman period followed on the Hellenistic period in the eastern Mediterranean area. And in the second meaning he wants to say that Hellenistic culture was pervasive in the Eastern Mediterranean area before, during and after the period of Hellenistic political dominance, and so also during the Roman period. As for the culture designated by this term he stresses that it was not uniform, but quite varied depending on the partner cultures. He provides a definition of the term, stressing its emptiness: Hellenistic culture “should be understood as a term for the culture that results from mixing originally Greek cultural elements with originally non-Greek cultural elements. It is the mixture (in a given time and place) that constitutes Hellenistic culture proper (in that place).” Accordingly, the content in any case will depend on the source of the culture which has mixed with the elements from the Greek source. ‘Hellenistic’ does not refer only to the elements which have an originally Greek source.

There are three aspects of Paul’s letters which warrant the attention of scholars interested in Paul’s Hellenistic context: first, the social setting of the texts; second, “their rhetorical structure, style, and argumentation;” and third, Paul’s use of characteristic elements of popular moral philosophy. In pursuing the quest for Paul as a political actor it is this third aspect in particular which seems relevant. However, attention to elements of his rhetorical style shows how closely it reflected that of contemporary popular philosophers. The social context in which such popular teachers played a public role is also relevant.

Engberg-Pedersen examines in detail the connection between Paul and the Stoics. His analysis of the argument of the Letter to the Philippians demonstrates the importance there of Stoic themes. Malherbe in turn illustrates Paul’s use of Cynic rhetorical forms. Bruno Blumenfeld documents the influence of two traditions of Hellenistic Py-

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5 Ibid., xx.
6 Ibid., xx.
7 Ibid., xvi.
8 T. Engberg-Pedersen, Paul and the Stoics (Edinburgh 2000).
by all those people who exhibit a certain mind-set
(\textit{phronein/gnosis} - through having been caught hold of by
Christ and modelling themselves on him).

(1.2) However, as an ideal community (which will in fact become
realized at some point in the future) it calls for being realized
by us here and now to the extent that this is possible. (Indeed,
God has called us to do so.)

(1.3) We therefore have the task of bringing into existence as far as
possible an actual \textit{koinonia} modelled on that \textit{politeuma} - while
also knowing that it cannot quite be done in the here and now.

(2.1) Now that task may be fulfilled if we come to have the mind-
set referred to above (the one modelled for us by Christ and
Paul).

(2.2) That mind-set is one that gives up any subjective claims based
on a perception of individual assets for the sake of benefiting
others.

(2.3) It is marked by \textit{chara} in the face of ordinary human adversity
and by \textit{autarkeia} in relation to ordinary human goods since
neither of these genuinely matters.

(2.4) Instead, it focuses entirely on the others (whether fellow hu-
mans or Christ) and derives its feeling of \textit{chara} and its sense of
\textit{autarkeia} precisely from belonging in a \textit{koinonia} with them.

(3.1) In fact, as Paul reminds us, we are already on our way to-
wards living in the ideal \textit{politeuma}.

(3.2) For by entering, on our first day, into the \textit{koinonia} of
Paul's gospel (as captured in the story of Christ's fate and as ex-
pressed in so many other ways throughout Paul's letter), we
already gave up all claims based on ourselves.

(3.3) Therefore, let us move further in the direction of making the
ideal \textit{politeuma} real here in Philippi.\footnote{Ibid., 277-78.}

The Stoic origins of the structure of Paul's thought is well docu-
mented and accepted by commentators.\footnote{R. Murray, "Philippians," \textit{The Oxford Bible Commentary} (John Barton and John Muddiman eds.) (Oxford 2001) 1180.} Equally well accepted and emphasised is how radically new and distinctive is the Christian fill-
ing of that structure, with the figure of Christ as setting the model, the
call to imitate His pattern of self-emptying, and the promised fulfil-
ment of community with Him on the Day of Christ. Engberg-Pedersen
insists that "Paul was not a philosopher, but an apostle of Christ. [...] But
where he does use Stoic ideas, there is no friction whatever. What
is more, I shall end by diagnosing a certain tension in Paul's thought.
summary suffices here to make the point. There is the courage and boldness required of the true philosopher/apostle to face the crowd, there is the denial of error and rejection of guile, neither greed nor desire for glory motivate him, the mission is God-given, and it is exercised for the benefit of his hearers. In a similar analysis of Paul’s farewell speech at Miletus recorded in The Acts of the Apostles, Malherbe argues that Luke deliberately casts the speech in such a way that the continuity of Paul’s ministry both with Judaism and with philosophical tradition is confirmed.

“When Paul affirms that he did not shrink from teaching his hearers what was profitable to them (Acts 20.20, 27), that he taught publicly and privately (Acts 20.20; cf. 18.28; 16.37), and that he gave them individual attention (Acts 20.31), he is detailing procedures that were followed by responsible moral philosophers and were widely discussed. His description of rival teachers as fierce wolves (Acts 20.29-30) is standard fare, as is the procedure for using them as a foil for sketching his practice as an example to be followed.”

The familiar rejection of false motives and affirmation of the true motives is repeated. Not only Paul’s account of himself but also the account given of him as a preacher and founder of Churches in Acts relies on the criteria and “language derived from discussions by and about moral philosophers of his day.”

Paul’s polemic against philosophy in 1 Corinthians might give the impression that he rejected all philosophy. Some have suggested that the rejection followed on his disappointing experience in Athens when his hearers cut him short after he spoke of resurrection. The situation seems to be a little more complicated than that. As Malherbe has shown in the case of Dio, the world of philosophy was not homogeneous. There were the professionals, like the Sophists of the Socratic Dialogues, who earned their living from teaching and practising the skills of debate. For the most part these seemed to represent different schools or traditions. On the other hand, there were popularising philosophers who wandered about and attracted audiences to their talks, for which they relied on collections of ideas from various classical authors, without needing to care for attribution or representation.

17 A. J. Malherbe, Paul and the Popular Philosophers, 47-8.
19 A. J. Malherbe, Paul and the Popular Philosophers, 163.
words are startling, and provoke the question as to their context. What were the comparable issues arising for Paul in his situation which led him to take this position?

A closer look at Paul's remarks reveals that there are marked differences to modern concerns. First of all, there is no conditionality about Paul's injunction: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom 13:1). In these remarks we find no element of a contingent legitimation as is typical of modern discourse, which spells out the conditions under which governmental power may be deemed legitimate (effectiveness, based on consent, protection of rights, common good). Unlike the Lockean argument which generated a justification for rebellion against an autocratic prince, Paul envisages no possible grounds for rejection of civil authority. His reasoning for this includes an extraordinary claim, especially as it is being applied to a pagan empire whose official public religion is idolatrous: "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1). Because the authority of the civil powers is God given, it may not be resisted, according to Paul: "Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed..." (Rom 13:2). This seems to leave no room for discussion, but Paul nevertheless proceeds to give a practical reason why authorities are to be obeyed. They are there for a purpose, to serve the good, at least in the sense of controlling wrong-doing: "... he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4).

Augustine later will have much to say about the role of political authorities in exercising coercive power to control the sources of social disruption and instability. He too will admit that the authority of civil powers is from God, but he will nuance this in terms of divine providence, which allows the harmfulness of sin to be constrained by what itself is sinful, the power which relies on coercion. This is quite other than Paul's seemingly unconditional approval of civil authority. Also for Augustine, the failure of the Roman republic and empire to give to God what was due to God, namely, worship, undermined its claim to be a source of justice. Again, the contrast with Paul's unconditional statements is marked.21

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of getting a favourable reception. Blumenfeld offers a different emphasis. He suggests that Paul found a plethora of communities of believers in Rome, which seemed to be vibrant and flourishing, much as we might imagine house churches. But they had no overarching structure and no common order. The task he undertakes in Romans, according to Blumenfeld, is to provide a sort of constitution which would enable the diverse communities to achieve the desirable common order.

The scenario he paints is plausible, given the centrality of the city of Rome in the world of that time. Many different ethnic and national groups found their place in the city, and converts to the way of Christ associated most spontaneously with their own people. Different and varied house churches could potentially develop away from one another, as much as they might grow into a unity. "In Romans, Paul is not initiating a community, as he has often done elsewhere. Instead, he means to bring together diverse existing groups and make them live in concord and harmony, to form a Christ-polis ruled by Paul’s evangeliion."24 In other words, Paul in Romans is not founding a community from scratch, but is seeking to unite many communities into a single overarching entity. The analogy Blumenfeld uses for this is the notion found in Aristotle’s politics of the creation of a polis out of villages, or the creation of a kingdom out of diverse tribes.

"Paul might have seen himself as Solon or Cleisthenes in Athens, Moses in Egypt or - why not? - even Alexander. He is taking the phulai, tribal communities kept together by topography, place of origin and local benefactors, and unites them in a single organization under a political platform stressing the eradication of factions. Disparate tribes become one state, with all the members sharing in the same polis, the ekklesia, and showing allegiance to the same constitution, the evangeliion of Paul. The ‘common ancestry’ of the ‘house’ is replaced by common citizenship in a Christ-polis."25

The folk philosophers had available to them collections of pieces of wisdom from various sources, among whom Plato and Aristotle remain significant. Blumenfeld investigates in particular two strands in the texts relied upon by the Hellenistic Pythagoreans, which he labels the polis texts and the basileia texts. The polis texts carry an echo of Aristotle’s account of the best city, in which free and equal citizens bonded by a friendship founded in a reciprocal care for wellbeing

24 Ibid., 407.
25 Ibid., 407.
ple’s political existence, even if the realisation of these ideals was now confined to the ethical and the personal. As the political form shifted from *polis*, the community of free and equal citizens, to *basileia*, kingship, the concepts and values associated with *polis* drifted to the *oikos*. Paul makes this explicit and gives it a new dimension by associating *ekklesia* with the *oikos*, household, rather than with the kingdom. *Ekklesia* was the traditional term for the convocation of the body of citizens of the *polis*, gathered to deliberate and decide. Paul now uses this term to designate the community of believers who gather for worship. This they do in their homes. So the rhetoric of freedom, citizenship, autonomy and self-rule formerly applied to the life of citizens of the *polis* is now applied to the members of the Christian communities gathered in their house churches. Commenting on Romans 16:5 Blumenfeld remarks:

“Paul associates *oikos* with *ekklesia*. He makes no technical distinction between household rule and political constitution. [...] It is taken as obvious that Paul is talking about house churches. What should be also observed, however, is Paul’s merging of two central Greek political organs, family and assembly. This is precisely the essence of Paul’s political thinking: the human political unit, at once household and state, is only a part of the larger picture that includes – and does not just imitate – the government of the cosmos.”

Paul’s emphasis on the equality of believers is clear from his passages in which he insists on the overcoming of all dichotomies between Hebrew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. All are one in Christ. “Paul gives a new twist to the Classical political tradition that identifies citizenship with freedom by wiping out social and legal distinctions in Christ.” The elements of citizenship are different in the Christian *ekklesia*, however, and those are citizens who possess the Spirit and who respond to Christ in faith. “Since Paul accords citizenship, the criterion of participation in the *ekklesia*, to all who have *pistis*, *ekklesia* and *polis* become practically indistinguishable. In a Greek *ekklesia*, it is freedom that is shared in common; in Paul’s society – where the distinctions of ethnicity, gender and intellectual status do not apply – *pneuma* is the common mark of citizenship.”

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29 Ibid., 406.
30 Ibid., 286.
31 Ibid., 303.
hero to sanction a political system. Christ’s method (as laid out by Paul) is unique. On the one hand, he gives a new constitution, the *evangelion*; on the other, he legitimizes the political organism that is already in place.” Blumenfeld credits Paul with wanting to exploit the opportunities provided by Rome for the carrying out of his mission, and so he is not simply negative in his attitude to the empire. On the contrary, he sees it in a positive light, doing so in precisely those terms in which his contemporaries spoke of their political ideals. At the same time Paul’s use of the adopted categories is subversive, because while he takes the terms and their relations with one another as he finds them in use, whether it is the *polis* or the *basileia* model, he fills them with new content. Old terminology is given a new interpretation. New idioms are introduced which carry attractive resonances, but which entail radical upheavals: that the citizens of the *ekklesia* are slaves, for instance, or that a crucified criminal is king.

Paul adapts both strands of Hellenistic political thought to communicate dimensions of his message. These strands are not easily brought into coherence with one another, and they are not necessarily compatible. However, at least to the point to which Paul has developed these ideas he has not had to confront the tensions between the different models and think through their implications. He can confidently assert that the divine kingship embraces everything including the political order of the empire. And at the same time he can affirm the freedom and equality which belong to the members of the Churches. It seems that he so monopolises the political rhetoric of his day and applies it to his purposes that he leaves no space within the world-view of believers for what today would be called the autonomy of the secular.

**Conclusion**

We live in worlds mediated by meaning. The relevant meanings occur on different levels. There is frequently tension if not contradiction between the levels of meaning. For instance, there can be a disjunction between operative meanings and espoused meanings, between personal meanings and shared social meanings. The meanings which sustain us can be complex and varied. They can also be paradoxical if not contradictory. Our images and words with which we interpret our experience are not always reflective of the reality which they help to construct. A good image is that of the car driver who fan-

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35 Ibid., 285-86.
36 Ibid., 290.