

A Hermeneutical Approach to Political Responsibility: The Case of the Early History of Reception of the Apostle Paul's Paraenesis to the Romans

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Abstract

Understanding happens within the course of history and is made concrete within particular discourses. This insight into the structure of understanding is largely indebted to Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy and was methodologically worked out by Jauss' aesthetics of reception. Concepts such as *Wirkungsgeschichte* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, account for the way in which understanding is embedded in texts, contexts, traditions which are appropriated in the life-world of historically conditioned readers and users. Any discussion on the meaning of responsibility must consider its history as portrayed in the texts where it features as subject-matter. The concept of responsibility will be discussed here within the particular case of the issue of political responsibility as featured in the early reception of Paul's paraenesis to the Romans.

Keywords: understanding, meaning, political responsibility, civil obedience, history of reception, The Apostle Paul, Romans, paraenesis

The historical and communicative dimensions of understanding responsibility

Understanding is an *event*. More specifically, understanding what the meaning of a text is, comprises an interplay with its readers. Here meaning is always dependent on a given *perspective* in the sense that something has a meaning in relation to someone within a horizon or life-world, rather than being self-contained. Within this interaction, meaning experiences *historical*

growth. Likewise, the diachronic dialogue between readers takes place by means of other texts facilitating acts of communication and courses of action. This interaction also points out the social dimension within the historical unfolding of the meaning of a text. Meaning will be then what the text has meant in the various historically significant acts of communication and courses of action between the text and its readers through a constant fusion of horizons. All these acts of communication are stored, as it were, in the cumulative history of reception of the text, that is, the historically significant questions and responses generated during the act of reading become part and parcel of the meaning of the text. Within the framework of the concept of history of reception, responsibility can be described as *communicative courses of action* since *historical responses* can only be worked out on the grounds of an on-going dialogue between a *normative* text or an institution, whose *authority* is recognised, and those held accountable to it.¹ Questioning and answering lie at the very core of acting responsibly, that is acting communicatively, whereby the possibility for critical responses and courses of action is not excluded, but expected. As regards the ontic status of norms and principles, Strauss argues: “Human beings, in their actions and societal institutions, are therefore guided by *norms* and humans constantly give shape to basic *principles*. This at once also explains why human functioning in diverse societal relations do not *cease* to be *norm-oriented* – for in these instances they have to observe *collective norms*” (Strauss 2009, 42).

In the light of the history of reception of Paul’s paraenesis, what is at stake is the relationship between a particular civil authority to a given order of justice. Here political responsibility is linked to civil obedience which, at the same time, requires a *recognition* of an order of justice. In this regard, Strauss says: “When a *just state* acts in the pursuit of *public justice*, it has to observe collective norms. Furthermore, when a just state strives to observe *basic rights*, it assumes a task that could be performed in a *better* or *worse* manner” (Strauss 2009, 42).

1. The Apostle Paul's paraenesis to the Roman Church: Romans 13.1-7

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour. (*Holy Bible: New International Version* 1992)

The history of reception of the Apostle Paul's paraenesis² represents one example of what political responsibility as a historical event means through the dialogical relationship between Paul's exhortation and its historical audiences. Both text and readers are rooted in a life-world and traditions, which furnish them with a pre-understanding of the *Sache*, in this case, civil obedience. Its history of reception shows that reading the Scriptures involves thinking hard its implications – not being content with simplistic formulas. Certainly, this was never the case for the early Church. Reading the Scriptures always entailed a question of life and death for the majority of Christians. The Apostle Paul's paraenesis singles out civil obedience as an integral part of political responsibility. Nevertheless, the issue of civil obedience has always been a problematic one, particularly in the case of totalitarian regimes, where the political state of affairs can be compared to that of the Roman Empire. For that reason Paul's instruction has remained problematic for the Church throughout history. With regard to the early Church, Käsemann says: "In the New Testament times political responsibility was only a live option for the Christian in rare and exceptional cases and in areas of

subordinate jurisdiction. If Paul limits his scope to the requirement of obedience, this corresponds with reality; there was normally no other means of political expression for the stratum of society out of which early Christianity arose” (Käsemann 1969, 205).

Furthermore, there have been terrible examples of abuse of power theologically justified on this single text. Totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Apartheid in South Africa remind us of the necessity to reassess the interpretation of the Scriptures in the light of their whole council as well as in a continuous dialogue with philosophy and the sciences. Concerning totalitarian states and biblical interpretation, Käsemann argues: “For this reason it is impossible simply to transpose our passage into our modern situation. The fact that this has nevertheless been done in Protestantism for at least a century contributed to the phenomenon of ‘passive obedience’ and the catastrophes it conjured up. It is a dangerous factor in biblicism, which guards the letter and neglects prophecy, the actualization of the message” (Käsemann 1969, 205, 206).

The Scriptures open up to us in various ways as we read it. Paul’s paraenesis points out the relevance of political responsibility in the life of the churches in the capital of the Empire. Civil obedience appears as part of the general instructions he gives on his call to offer themselves as a living sacrifice and the renewal of their minds. Various reasons have been offered to explain Paul’s reasons for his exhortation. One of them could have been an absolute misunderstanding of Christian freedom in the light of their hope of an imminent end. Paul had to correct their attitudes to their civil obligations to which they were still bound in spite of their heavenly citizenship. The other reason has been the need to avoid drawing the attention of the Roman authorities to themselves unnecessarily. Roman authorities were not able to distinguish between Jews and Jewish Christians at that time when many Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius in 49 A.D. Exiles were allowed to return under Nero’s reign. However, escalating discontent among the less privileged Roman citizens because of tax reforms posed a threat to feeble household churches.

Paul's paraenesis to the Roman churches represent one side of what the Bible teaches regarding politics, and more, specifically on civil obedience. The flipside of this is obviously the Book of Revelation 13, where John renders a rather gloomy image of a blood-thirsty State rebelling against God while persecuting His church. These two positions are difficult to reconcile at first. But it is rather telling that early interpretations of Romans 13.1-7 never seemed to have heightened the inner tension in the New Testament. On the contrary, the earliest interpretations played off Paul's paraenesis against The Book of Acts 5.29, "Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

The origin of the churches in Rome is shrouded in mystery. It is uncertain who their founder was. The starting point for the discussion of the political life-world of the Roman church lies in the recognition of their precarious political condition as a minority. The purpose of Paul's paraenesis is to curb any rebellion among the Christian communities. It is quite clear that Paul was determined to dissuade the Roman Christian Jewish and Gentile from supporting any rebellious cause, and to persuade them to remain loyal to the Roman Empire. In order to grasp the importance of Apostle Paul's exhortation to the Christian communities in Rome it is important to consider the Hellenistic Jewish tradition, as well as his reinterpretation of the Graeco-Roman current world view at his time. The most significant idea in the Hellenistic Jewish political tradition was the absolute belief that Yahwe was King. God as a King chose and appointed people as instruments to rule on earth. Every nation gets a ruler from God. These rulers remain dependent on the authority of Yahwe. The king was designated as representative of God, his anointed and high priest. Jewish political thought also held that God appoints pagan rulers to carry out his judgements. This particular belief was very influential on the early Church. The belief that civil authority derives from Yahwe as well as the restricted loyalty to foreign oppressors conditioned by their non-interference in Israel's worship of Yahwe are two significant elements of the Hellenistic Jewish political tradition for the earliest reception of Paul's paraenesis.

However, on closer inspection, The Apostle Paul's paraenesis turns out to be subversive, if we consider that Roman emperors were elevated to a divine rank. Imperial ideology based on the worship of the emperor was highly advantageous for the interests of the Roman Empire. Cultural activity during the reign of Augustus was motivated by the self-grandeur and divine status of the emperor. Symbols were wrought to secure the continuous indoctrination of the populace. Roman authorities capitalised on the popular belief in the divinity of rulers as part of the world order. The illiterate masses were ready to accept their rulers since it was a matter of divine choice. Obedience meant to participate harmoniously in this world order. Paul, however, placed the emperor and the magistrates under the authority of God. Their authority was relativised as they were held accountable to a higher order. In this regard Wright suggest: "[...] if Paul has framed this great letter with an introduction and a theological conclusion which seem so clearly to echo, and thus to challenge, the rule of Caesar with the rule of Jesus Christ, is the rest of the letter in some sense about this as well, and if so, how? And what does this do to all our traditional readings of Paul, in both old and new perspectives?" (Wright 2002, 176, 177). In other words, Paul's paraenesis constitutes a true "parody of the imperial cult" and his whole theology entails a subversive political programme.

2. The early history of interpretation of Paul's paraenesis

After this brief introduction on the political traditions and the historical context of Paul's paraenesis, its early history of reception can now be discussed. It is, however, limited to some towering figures whose reception of the text turned out to be particularly influential to its subsequent readings. Anyone reading the works of the Church Fathers should not be hasty to dismiss them, because of their strange standpoints, but should recognise them as instances of the struggles of believers who took God's word seriously in the face of adversity. Their world is not our world and yet, the outcome of their battles has enabled

later generations of believers to formulate an answer rooted in the faith in the Risen Lord. When reading their works, we should not expect them to be, in most cases, textbooks on political theories, but we are more likely to find their ideas to be given in various genres: letters, prayers, apologies, homilies, commentaries, and treatises. Understanding what the Bible teaches had never happened in a vacuum, but by interacting with the world we all live in.

The first possible reception of Paul's paraenesis is found within the New Testament itself.

a) 1 Peter 2.13-17

This letter attributed to Peter witnesses to how widely spread Paul's teachings were at the end of the first century. Despite the striking parallels with Paul's paraenesis, there are also differences which widen the scope of civil obedience.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. 16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. 17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king. (*Holy Bible: New International Version* 1992)

Whereas Paul claims civil authorities have been directly instituted by God, the author of Peter makes a further distinction locating its origin not in God's direct action, but as part of other human institutions. Obedience to the civil authorities is part of the witness Christians offer to the pagans. There is always a latent danger of misunderstanding Christian freedom which can turn into holy anarchy. Behaving otherwise could justify pagans' gossip threatening the frail existence of the Christian community. The author of Peter also specifies that fear is due to God, whereas honour is due to the king. Civil authorities have a two-fold duty: to punish wrongdoers but to praise good citizens.

b) Clement of Rome and the *Epistle to the Corinthians* (ca. 97 A.D.)

After Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the Epistle to the Corinthians represents the earliest document witnessing to the extant Christian communities in Rome. The church in Corinth was experiencing strife as one party in the church set out to depose their church leaders. Clement of Rome as a prominent leader of the Church undertook the responsibility to restore peace within the frail community and bring them to repentance. It is within this context that Paul's exhortation is echoed in the final prayer in the Epistle to the Corinthians.

Thou, Master, hast given the power of sovereignty to them through thy excellent and inexpressible might, that we may know the glory and honour given to them by thee, and be subject to them, in nothing resisting thy will. And to them, Lord, grant health, peace, concord, firmness that they may administer the government which thou hast given them without offence. (Clement 1919, LXI, 115)

Clement's prayer reflects one of the basic teachings of the Scripture regarding political life. Obedience to the authorities is the will of God. The Church is called to recognise this fact. Clement expands the scope of Paul's paraenesis by adding that besides power, glory and honour are granted to them by God. Clement reads Paul's paraenesis within the framework of the prayers for the authorities as taught in the Pauline pastoral epistles. Clement includes health, harmony, peace and stability as prayer requests and as the basis for social justice. He also equates obedience to the civil authorities as submitting to God himself. The prayer had a two-fold purpose: to assert loyalty to the governing authorities, and to stop internal quarrels which might draw the attention of the civil authorities. In that way, the existence of the church was guaranteed amid dangerous times of persecution.

c) Martyrdom of Polycarp (ca. 156 A.D.)

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna and was tried by the Roman authorities. Literature on martyrdoms was popular in the second century. These instructive stories have been collected in the Acts of the Martyrs. It is important to underline

that Polycarp did meet the Apostles and first believers. Hence his teaching is in direct line with what the Apostles taught.

And Polycarp said: “you, I should have held worthy of discussion, for we have been taught to render honour, as is meet, if it hurt us not, to princes and authorities appointed by God. But as for those, I do not count them worthy that a defence should be made to them” (Lake 1917, X, 327).

On the brink of his execution, Polycarp was asked to swear by the genius of the emperor so that his life might be spared. However, he refused to yield to the demands of his executors and opposed them uttering the Christian teaching of respecting the authorities which have been appointed by God. Obedience here is synonymous with respect. Obviously, his own example speaks volumes of what he really meant. Blind obedience would have meant to go against the very grain of his faith in the Risen Lord which is non-negotiable. However, he made it plain to them that obedience to God as the origin of political power takes precedence over any civil authority. Here is where their limits lie. This is the first time this important issue is raised.

d) Irenaeus (late second century)

Both Irenaeus and Origen set out to counterattack the threats posed by Christian Gnosticism. This heretic movement along with Marcion’s heretic views constitute a huge challenge to orthodoxy and the stability of the churches in the second and third centuries. Irenaeus and Origen are towering figures in the Greek East.

For by the law of the same Being as calls men into existence are kings also appointed, adapted for those men who are at the time placed under their government. Some of these [rulers] are given for the correction and the benefit of their subjects, and for the preservation of justice; but others, for the purposes of fear and punishment and rebuke: others, as [the subjects] deserve it, are for deception, disgrace, and pride; while the just judgment of God, as I have observed already, passes equally upon all. (Irenaeus 1885, V, 24, 3, 552)

Irenaeus held that civil authorities were instituted by God as a remedy to sin. Both civil authorities and civil laws were established once the fear of God had vanished altogether

among human beings. He made an important distinction between the person of the ruler and his office. However he did not develop it fully as Aquinas did later on. Irenaeus believed that the course of action of civil authorities was determined by the kind of people they ruled. Irenaeus distinguishes between three different kinds of people. First, we encounter those authorities who are established to keep justice and to better the lives of those who rule. Other rulers are instituted to punish the wrongdoers; and yet oppressors are allowed to act because their subjects deserve no less than that treatment. Irenaeus held that civil authorities were basically instituted for the pagans' sake, since Christians were not supposed to endorse unjust practices. Civil fear replaces the fear of God preventing people from swallowing each other up like fish.

Ireneaus was faced with the bizarre Gnostic reception of Paul's paraenesis which was taken to actually indicate obedience to angelic or demonic powers. Irenaeus rejected it as a flight of fantasy arguing that Paul clearly refers to earthly powers to whom every Christian is under the obligation to pay taxes.³

e) Origen (ca. 185 - ca. 254 A.D.)

Origen's exegetical work represents the first attempt to present the Christian community with a commentary on the Scriptures. His commentary is drafted by the extensive use of allegory as his main exegetical strategy. Origen was bold enough to express his doubts about Paul's instruction on civil obedience in the light of the persecution the Church had been experiencing since the first-century.

Perhaps someone will say: When then? Is even that authority that persecutes God's servants, attacks the faith, and subverts religion, from God? To this we shall briefly respond. There is no one who does not know that even sight is a gift from God to us, as well as hearing and the ability to think. Well then, though we have these things from God, it nevertheless is within our authority to make use of our vision either for good things or evil things. In a similar way we use our hearing, the movement of our hands, and the reflection of thought; and in this the judgment of God is just, because we misuse these things that he has given for good use, for impious and wicked service (Origen 2002, 9, 26).

Origen offered a solution to this cul-de-sac by drawing a comparison between our senses and the purpose of civil authorities. Our senses are not evil in themselves, but the use of them determines their moral character. In the same way, civil authorities belong to the created order as well. Hence, they are also subject to distortion and misdirection. In the light of this reality, Origen was the first one to endorse civil resistance whenever civil authorities fail to abide by God's laws or natural order, which comprise civil laws to which rulers are also held accountable. Origen made an important observation when he asserted that the Church should not consider her task to curtail crime, since that is precisely the responsibility of the magistrates. They are responsible for passing all those laws which are not revealed in Scripture.

f) Chrysostom (349-407 A.D.)

Chrysostom was renowned as an extraordinary preacher. He was appointed as bishop of Constantinople where he was confronted by the excesses of the luxurious way of life of the imperial court and the clergy. Chrysostom became suddenly the bishop of the capital of the Byzantine Empire. His commitment to ethical reforms according to his understanding of the Gospel led him to a direct confrontation with the Empress Eudoxia. His initial friendly relation to her gradually deteriorated to the point when Chrysostom was condemned to exile where he died.

And he does not say merely "obey," but "be subject"...the reasoning that suiteth the faithful, is, that all this is of God's appointment...What say you? it may be said; is every ruler then elected by God? This I do not say, he answers. Nor am I now speaking about individual rulers, but about the thing in itself; [...] this, I say is the work of God's wisdom. (John Chrysostom 1975, 511, 615)

In this homily, Chrysostom affirmed that God instituted secular authorities to restrain evil within ourselves and among ourselves. Irenaeus and Chrysostom used the image of the fish eating other in order to explain how civil authorities are called to prevent anarchy and chaos. Chrysostom's interpretation is based upon the idea of a natural order from which law is

derived. He also believed that sin was the actual reason why civil authorities were instituted. They in turn are held accountable to God by means of the law.

g) Ambrosiaster (ca. 370 A.D.)

There is very little known about this Latin Church Father. His work was attributed at one time to Augustine and later to Ambrose. Erasmus rejected these attributions and named the anonymous “little Ambrose” or Ambrosiaster. However, his exegetical work represents a significant step in biblical scholarship. He wrote concise commentaries on Paul’s letters avoiding allegorical interpretations.

For if the earthly law is not kept, the heavenly law will not be kept either. The earthly law is a kind of tutor, who helps little children along so that they can tackle a higher level of righteousness. [...] Therefore, in order to back up the authority and fear of the natural law, Paul bears witness to the fact that God is the author of both and that the ministers of the earthly law have his permission to act. That is why he added: Those that exist have been instituted by God. So that no one should despise it as a merely human construction, they see the divine law as being delegated to human authorities. [...] Paul says that to pay tribute, or what are called taxes, is to show subjection. By doing this, people know that they are not free, but act under authority, which is from God. They are subject to their ruler, who acts as God’s deputy, just as they are subject to God. (Ambrosiaster 2009, 100-1)

For Ambrosiaster, law plays a crucial role in the way that God deals with human beings. It is worthwhile to notice the more elaborate distinctions offered in his reception. First, Ambrosiaster sustained that there is a correspondence between divine law and natural law based on the fact that human being was made into the image of God. For Ambrosiaster, the fact that we have been made into God’s image allows kings to administer God’s law on earth. Kings take over from Adam the duty he once had of representing God on earth before the Fall. Afterwards, the natural law was forgotten. God had to remind human beings of it and revealed it to Moses. However, because pagans and Jews were not able to keep it, God had to send Jesus Christ his Son to restore it. That is to his mind the essence of the Gospel. If we fulfil the demands of the Gospel, we

will live according to God's law. God instituted kings to administer his law. Obedience to the king is tantamount to submitting to God himself. Paying taxes is one way to show submission and obedience. Kings are entitled to receive their dues as they carry out their duties to administer justice. Ambrosiaster's political thought was extremely popular during the Middle Ages supporting the ideology of the divine right of kings.

h) Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 A.D.)

Aquinas wrought his answer to the questions posed by the text relying on his reception of Aristotle's ideas. Hence, the emphasis lay on the common good as the first basic principle for his political thought. The purpose of civil authorities is protect it. The second basic principle are the various manifestations of the law as divine, natural and human. Divine law leads everything to its fullness and is only partially disclosed to human reason and revealed in God's word. Natural law is the result of the appropriation of divine law shown in our innate ability to judge. Last, human laws are the outcome of the appropriation of the natural law. These laws are by necessity applied by means of coercion. Aquinas wrote various scholarly pieces regarding civil obedience. There are various references to Paul's paraenesis in texts such as Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, his treatise on Kingship, in his *Summa Theologiae*, and in his commentary on *Romans*.

Therefore, if God recompenses wicked kings who fight against the enemies of God, though not with the intention of serving Him but to execute their own hatred and cupidity, by giving them such great rewards as to yield them victory over their foes, subject kingdoms to their sway and grant them spoils to rifle, what will He do for kings who rule the people of God and assail His enemies from a holy motive? He promises them not an earthly reward indeed but an everlasting one and in none other than Himself. (Aquinas 1949, I, 8, 62)

Rather do we call them happy if they rule justly, and if they prefer to rule their passions rather than nations, and if they do all things not for love of vainglory but for the love of eternal happiness. (Aquinas 1949, I, 8, 64)

Aquinas is wrestling here with the problematic issue of bad kings. He is concerned with this difficult question in a way

that nobody else did before him. He recognised openly that there are bad rulers who do not act according to the law of justice but are moved by his own greed and personal interest. Aquinas admits, however, here that these self-declared enemies of God and his order can still be blessed by God in their wicked actions. Why? Because their actions do not rule out their office as kings. He also embraces the distinction between the office of the ruler and the person of the ruler already suggested by Ireneaus, Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster. This insight into the office of the ruler as different from his person legitimises the need for civil authorities vis-à-vis anarchical threats.

In his commentary on *the sentences of Peter Lombard*, which is one of his early writings, Aquinas even endorsed tyrannicide in the case when rulers usurped power which was already an illegitimate means of obtaining it. Such an action goes against the very order of justice. In his *Summa Theologiae*, a later writing, he seems to offset his view on the matter pointing to examples from both Testaments where God deals with them directly. However, he still supported the possibility of civil disobedience as a legitimate response to illegitimate means of acquiring power. He affirms that nobody is under the obligation to submit to unjust commands. To overthrow a tyrant does not constitute an act of rebellion since a tyrant had long rejected to submit to the order of justice. For Aquinas, the ways by which rulers come into power determine the legitimacy of their position. Aquinas rendered civil obedience relative by placing obedience within hierarchical relations where everyone is somehow inferior and superior at the same time depending on where one is situated within that hierarchy. At the top of it is God.

Conclusion

The history of reception of this text shows the importance given to civil obedience in the way that the early Church understood her political role. Political responsibility here is based on the recognition of a given order of justice to which civil authorities are called to administer. The history of reception of this normative text for the Church entails an array

of responses to the way civil authorities and citizens are to relate to each other, on the one hand, and to a given order of justice, on the other, without which there could be no political responsibility. It remains a permanent task to work out what civil obedience means within various political contexts. It has been made plain here that drawing the limits of civil obedience is also part and parcel of political responsibility.

It also becomes apparent that no answer as to *how* civil obedience should be carried out is definite. Paul never intended to offer us a full-fledged political theory about the body politic. However, his exhortation addresses several still relevant issues such as the origin of the civil authorities, their basic duties, civil obedience as a basic political attitude, and a practical piece of advice: to pay taxes. His paraenesis is two-fold: it was a particular solution to a specific historical situation, on the one hand, and, on the other, it can be worked out in new contexts as pressing questions arise. This brief discussion on the early history of reception reveals the dynamic relation between readers and texts. Civil obedience, as stated in this paraenesis, was always offset by The Book of Acts 5.29.

The created nature of civil authorities, affirmed throughout its early history of reception, sharply contrasts with historicist views. Paul, however, kept silence over a good number of issues. He never gave a hint whether they were instituted before or after the Fall. The Church Fathers felt the need to specify their origin. They also felt they had to explain the nature of their duty by reference to the idea of a natural order where the concept of law plays a key role. Paul's paraenesis inspired them to unpack its implications. Their discussions and answers to pressing issues were determined by their own personal circumstances, such as persecutions or by the threats of heretic groups. Graeco-Roman philosophy had naturally a significant input in the elaboration of their answers. However, they were not doing something entirely different to what Paul did himself: Paul had reworked extant traditions from his own world and appropriated them.

Today's political scenario is infinitely more complex than that of the first century. Nevertheless, basic questions such as civil obedience cannot be brushed aside. Paul never described

an ideal political form. He never expressed any preference for monarchy over republic, or republic over aristocracy. However, Paul did affirm the idea of a given (created) order or structure even within the political sphere whose ultimate purpose is to guarantee that wrongdoing is punished and good is rewarded. In other words, for both civil authorities and citizens, political responsibility is not an option, but an integral part of our social action, which is always norm-oriented.

NOTES

¹ Concerning recognition of authority, Gadamer opposes it to blind obedience. (Gadamer 1976, 33).

² *Paraenesis* is a Greek term meaning exhortation or advice.

³ Although the Gnostic reception might be considered as far-fetched, celebrated twentieth-century theologians resorted to it by proposing a similar view portraying evil spirits as standing behind political powers. These powers experience a sort of temporary release until they are fully overcome by Christ. Among the proponents of this theory are Oscar Cullman and early Karl Barth.

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