

Theology and Public Policy: An Interview with Rev. J. Bryan Hehir

In previous issues QQ has examined several aspects of the enterprise of combining philosophy and public policy. (See "Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy," Spring 1982; "Polymaking Philosophers," Winter 1983; and "The Public Life of the Humanities," Spring 1983.) In this issue we look at the parallel project of combining theology and public policy, in an interview with one of its most successful practitioners.

Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, a Jesuit priest who holds a Th.D. in Applied Theology from Harvard Divinity School, is the Director of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Catholic Conference, where he is actively involved

in helping to formulate the church's stance on such current policy issues as human rights in U.S. foreign policy, world hunger, and the nuclear arms race. Recently he was instrumental in drafting the U.S. Catholic Bishops' controversial and influential Pastoral Letter on U.S. policies of nuclear deterrence. Father Hehir also teaches a weekly seminar at St. John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts, in addition to serving as an assistant priest in St. Anthony's Parish in Falls Church, Virginia. In what follows, Father Hehir talks to QQ about his work synthesizing theology and public policy, its intellectual challenges, and its personal satisfactions.

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QQ: Throughout your career you've combined what might seem to be the two very different fields of theology and public policy. What are some of the challenges you've found in bringing those two different arenas together in your work?

BH: Well, our first task is to understand the moral thrust of the Catholic tradition and so we have to make sure that we have a handle on both what the tradition has been and what its developing trends are today. Secondly, doing this as part of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops we take a framework that belongs to the Universal Church and then have to make it applicable to the situation in the United States. So that on the one hand you're looking at the tradition and on the second hand you are trying to make that tradition live theologically and philosophically, and then, thirdly, you relate it to the public policy debate in the United States. It's an ongoing task of taking major themes from the philosophical and theological tradition and looking at how those themes intersect with given issues in the American public policy debate and then trying to bring those themes to bear upon the shape of the public debate in order, hopefully, to illuminate moral dimensions of public policy choices. That's the kind of thing we do.

QQ: Do you find that studying the particular policy issues also sheds light back on the tradition?

BH: It's a dialectical kind of process. We think the moral tradition, as it is developed, has a way of illuminating the public discussion; it is also true that

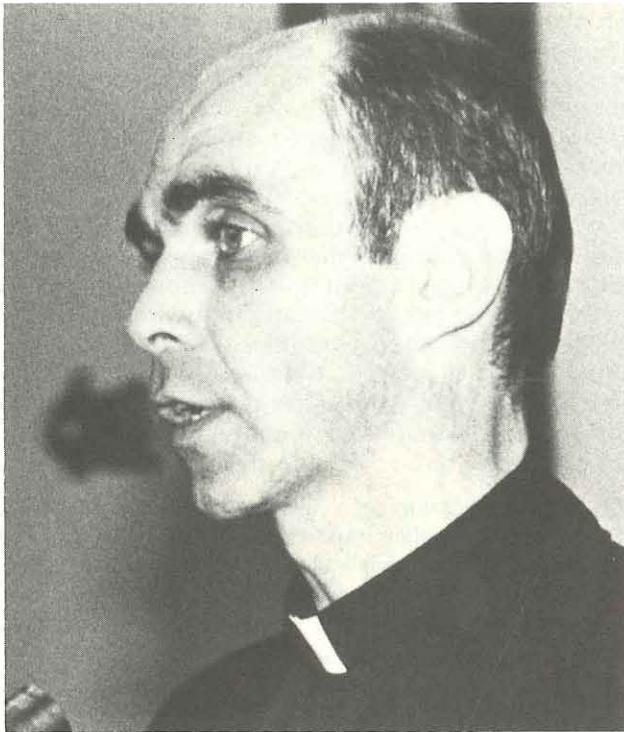
there will always be new questions or at least new forms of questions coming up and they in turn stretch the tradition.

There is no better example of that than deterrence. The deterrence question doesn't fit easily within anybody's moral framework. The deterrence argument in a sense breaks open what has been the classical linkage between strategy and politics. The argument has always been that strategy and the actual use of force is an extension of politics; well, that presumed that force could be used within a reasonable, rational, and moral framework. The nuclear age questioned in a radical way the continuum between war and politics, in the sense that you are faced with a weapon or weapons whose very nature threatened the rational structure of politics. So rather than war being an extension of politics, war became a threat to the whole set of political values that you are trying to defend. Bernard Brody said in 1946, "Until now it has been the fashion of nations to raise armies so that they can be used. In the nuclear age we will raise armies so that they will never be used." That's like a transvaluation of values.

Well, then, what do you do with the weapons? We have them, we threaten to use them, and we don't want to use them. What kind of moral problem is that?—particularly when what you're threatening to use may, in fact, be unusable within a moral framework. That's a case that really tests the principle.

QQ: Do you feel that some of these paradoxes of deterrence also raise some doubts about just war doc-

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Rev. J. Bryan Hehir

trine? For example, the cornerstone of Catholic just war theory is that one should not harm the innocent. But if you have a deterrence strategy that rules out the targeting of missiles against civilian populations you are left with a counterforce strategy that some people feel actually makes fighting a nuclear war more likely. By holding fast to the principle of not harming the innocent you may end up with a more deadly kind of strategy than you would have had otherwise.

BH: I think what happens is that there is really no good answer to deterrence. I mean, no good answer in the sense that it's totally coherent, it solves all the relevant questions, and is still an effective theory of deterrence. Everybody's theory in a sense breaks down at some point and so the political paradox becomes a moral paradox also, and that's always the way we've talked about it here. And indeed still do in the Pastoral Letter. The Letter's judgment on deterrence is what it calls strictly conditioned moral acceptance, and so it is acceptance rather than condemnation, but the "strictly conditioned" means two things: one, that part of the idea of the legitimization of deterrence is tied to the idea that it gives you a framework which you are to work out of. And, second, if the real moral function of deterrence is that it prevents the use of these weapons, then in fact one ought to shape the character of the deterrent in such a way that it makes use less likely. Strictly conditioned moral acceptance does not mean that any deterrence theory is acceptable. Specifically, the deterrence theory that is aimed at cities as its primary focus is not acceptable.

QQ: Even if it seems more successful?

BH: Even if it seems more successful doesn't mean it's right. The principle that governs our position that you can never directly attack civilian centers is exactly the same principle that we use on abortion—in both instances, it says direct attack on innocent life is always wrong.

QQ: How would you respond to the claim that in targeting the weapons at civilians we don't really intend to harm them at all; we're threatening to harm them only to reduce the chance of having to do the thing we're threatening?

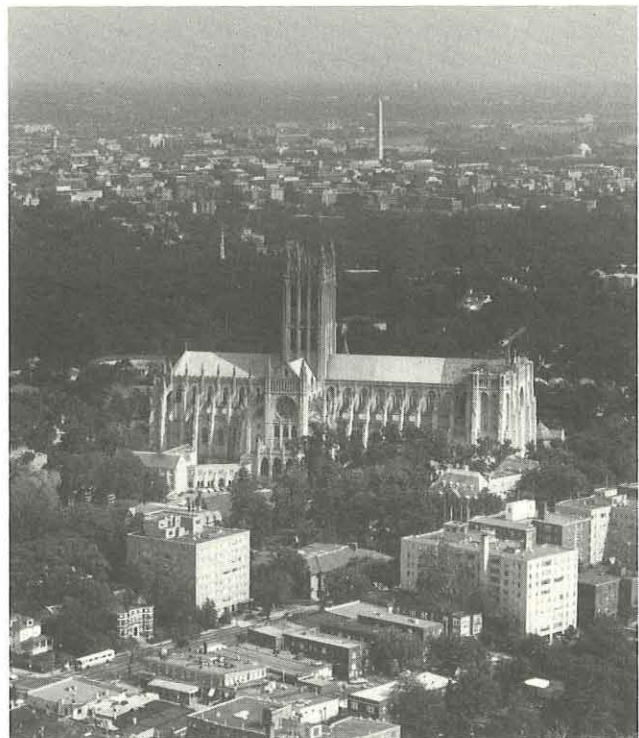
BH: Well, you find out what you do intend by finding out what your targeting doctrine is. Your intention has something to do with how you are structured for action.

QQ: The Pastoral Letter generated a good deal of controversy when it came out last year, both about American deterrence policy and about what role the church should play in influencing public policy in a secular society. Could you say something more about this?

BH: I think essentially the way you answer that question is on two levels. The one is the "in principle," what I would call the constitutional, answer; the other is the question of the style in which one participates in the public debate.

At the level of what in principle is the legitimate role for the churches or for religious bodies in the United

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Washington National Cathedral

States, I think it's pretty straightforward. The political meaning of the doctrine of the separation of church and state which is embodied in the first amendment is that religious organizations as religious should expect neither favoritism nor discrimination in the exercise of their civic responsibilities. I think that's an entirely acceptable principle and we ought to build on it.

The second thing to say is that it is central to our political tradition to distinguish the role of the state from the larger reality of the society, so to say that the church should be separate from the state should not be translated into saying that the church should be separate from the society. That's something I don't think any church can accept because it reduces the role of religion to a purely privatized function. So I agree with the separation of church and state; I don't agree with the separation of the church from the society.

The proper role of the churches in the American public policy process is that we are to participate in the public discussions just as any other voluntary association is, expecting neither favoritism nor discrimination, and presumably bring to bear upon the public discussion our religious and moral insights.

The third point is the legitimate role of the religious organizations in a society. And once again I would draw upon our own political tradition: central to a democratic political tradition is the idea of voluntary associations. In the American constitutional framework, religious organizations are precisely voluntary associations. And so the proper role of the churches in the American public policy process is that we are to participate in the public discussions just as any other voluntary association is, expecting neither favoritism nor discrimination, and presumably bring to bear upon the public discussion our religious and moral insights.

Now, to come to the second question, which is the style of our presence in fulfilling that role, my argument would be that the churches ought to be tested by standards of competence, rationality, and reasonableness. My difficulty with some of the things that are done from what you might call the Christian right is not that they're speaking on the issues; I think they entirely have the right to speak and ought to speak. But sometimes I think they make direct transpositions from Biblical text into very complicated problems and they don't make clear why and how they find the Biblical text providing a definitive answer to a public policy problem. So it's a question of how you do it, but there really is no question of your right to do it.

QQ: Do you find a particular challenge in constructing philosophical arguments and analyses within the framework of the Catholic tradition?

BH: Well, I think obviously there is both a benefit and a burden in working in a structured tradition. The benefit of it is that usually you find a fair amount of coherence over a long period of time in a tradition. Ideas get refined and developed and used in many different ways, and, indeed, as you know, some of the insights that are today used by philosophers in the ethic of war were really situated first of all in a religious tradition. The burden is that obviously you do work within a structured tradition that is not only a normative tradition but, particularly in the Catholic context, also an authoritative tradition, and therefore you cannot simply dispell the tradition. Now, it's much more flexible, I think, than most people think from the outside; there is more than one philosophical insight that can find a home within a Catholic ambit.

QQ: A final question on a different note: in your own life you work on policy issues here at the Catholic Conference, but you're also a parish priest working with individual parishioners and their problems. How have you struck the balance that you have between these two tasks?

BH: Again, it's like working within a tradition. I hit on it partly because I was assigned here; I am assigned here on the Bishops' Conference, so that means I can't have anything like a full-time parish assignment at all. I have a well-defined narrow set of functions that I fulfill in the parish, which are structured precisely to make it possible for me to have the time necessary to do the other work I have to do. But the schedule is tight, there's no question about that.

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I find the interaction very positive in many different ways. I find that I tend to get renewed by doing different things; I've always worked in the area of moral theology and ethics, teaching and policy work. I find them complementary rather than contradictory.

The confessional in the Catholic tradition, for example, is where people come with their personal problems to talk about them and to be absolved and to seek moral guidance. I've always found the confessional a kind of laboratory for viewing wider issues—you tend to find out how an issue becomes crystallized in a person's life. You get certain kinds of cases that force you to use your moral principles in a way to help other people.

QQ: Thank you.