



The Politics of the Eucharist: A Critic of Duterte's Violent Illiberalism

ABSTRACT

This essay views the Eucharist as an alternative model of political enactment to Duterte's violent politics. It presents a critical reading of the vicious character of Duterte's manner of governance while taking the War on Drugs as the case in point.¹ Drawing from the theopolitics of William T. Cavanaugh, an American theologian, I argue that the church, as a political body in itself, has a critical political role to play that stems from its Eucharist viewed as an alternative political imaginary and enactment to Duterte's violent illiberalism. The argument is premised on the idea that both the church and the state have contesting imaginaries of the

¹ There is no exact figure per the number of human casualties of Duterte's war on drugs. During the early stages of his presidency, there were already seven thousand casualties. See Mark R. Thompson, "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35.3 (2016): 39-40. During Duterte's term as president, the estimates of different agencies range from ten thousand to more than thirty thousand deaths related to the government's anti-drug campaign. I take these figures, along with the former government's support for killings, as a clear indicator of the violent character of Duterte's governance. I am singling out the issue of violence as a crucial and decisive factor of his manner of governance as maintained by several political scientists, observers, and church leaders. See Patricia Lourdes Viray, "Duterte admits to 'bloody' presidency if he wins," in *Duterte admits to 'bloody' presidency if he wins | Philstar.com* [accessed 01 August 2022]. In this news article, Viray reiterates Duterte's warning that if he wins his presidency would be bloody and violent, particularly the anti-drug campaign. Danilo Andres Reyes, in "The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte's "War on Drugs"," argues that Duterte's anti-drug campaign is an exercise of state power "through the body in a spectacle of humiliation and violence." See Danilo Andres Reyes, "The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte's "War on Drugs"," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35.3 (2016): 111.



political, contrasting narratives of redemption, and different attitudes toward politics. Theologically speaking, the Eucharist, as a political enactment, offers a critical hermeneutical lens in assessing Duterte's violent governance.

INTRODUCTION

It is not unbeknownst among Filipinos that the Philippine Catholic church—hereafter, I will refer to as ‘church’—enjoys a privileged place in Philippine society as an institution that gives them identity, forms and informs their culture, and promotes their values and morals.² The church has a de facto socio-political position and role in society on the basis of the values it upholds and promotes. Yet the public and political relevance of the church often materializes indirectly, in the most case through the participation of the laity in politics.³ Typically, the church functions in the background of society that teaches moral doctrines even in the political sphere.⁴ Nonetheless, when the common good, social justice, and human dignity are in jeopardy, the church's direct involvement in the socio-political affairs of the state becomes necessary—according to the church's view.⁵ This attitude was apparent during Marcos' martial regime in the early 70s until the mid-80s. The People Power Revolution in 1986 led to the restoration of Filipino democracy through which the church had a significant influence.⁶

²Ranilo Hermida, “The Catholic Church in the Philippine Public Sphere,” in *Kritika Kultura* 4 (2015): 122–139. See also Steven Shirley, *Guided by God: The Legacy of the Catholic Church in the Philippines* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 5.

³Theodoro C. Bacani, *Church in Politics* (Sampaloc, Manila: Bacani's Press, 1992), 2.

⁴Bacani, *Church in Politics*, 2.

⁵Arnel Lagarejos, *Separation of Church and State: A Catholic Standpoint* (Manila: Reyes Publishing, Inc., 2015), 17–22.

⁶See David T. Buckley, “Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma. Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines,” in *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62.3–4 (September–December 2014): 314. Here Buckley notes that the Catholic church played a public role in resisting authoritarianism and advocating democratic elections. In Samuel Huntington's 1991 book, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, a reference to the church's support for a more democratic society in the Philippines is mentioned. Several other political scientists, e.g., Antonio Moreno; Daniel Philpott; and Steven Shirley shares the idea that the church has been an advocate for democracy in the Philippines since Martial Law in the 1970s.

While the church is still seen as a moral and political authority in the postauthoritarian society, this position received a new challenge when Rodrigo Duterte took office as the 16th president of the republic in 2016. Duterte's administration receives high popularity among the Filipino masses due to the economic developments and the order and unity that it promises. However, the reported human rights violations and the bypassing of democratic and legal processes in political decisions solicited criticisms from several scholars and church leaders, locally and abroad.⁷ Since the church is one of the critical voices against the violent politics of the administration, it has become one of the targets of the President's condemnation. What is critical to note here is that the analyses of the criticisms against the administration, the antagonistic response of the government against its critics, and the political sentiments of the people make apparent pressing questions concerning the nature of the church-state relationship, the credibility of the church to interfere with the politics of the former, and the underlying tension between democracy and autocracy. This essay is a modest attempt to read Duterte's violent politics through the lens of theology. This essay argues that the church, a political body in itself, has a critical political role to play in society that stems from its Eucharist that is viewed as an alternative political imaginary and enactment to Duterte's violent illiberalism.

I will elaborate on the argument mentioned above in the light of the political theology of the American Catholic Theologian, William Cavanaugh. This paper develops in three stages. The first section explains Cavanaugh's assertion that the *political* and the *religious* are analogous enterprise. Building upon the first argument, the second section elaborates on the view that the church and state have contrasting political narrative and political vision for society. In the Philippine context, I contend that these contradicting

⁷Alexis Itao, "The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency," in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* Special Issue (December 2018): 121-160.

views became more ostensible during the Duterte administration. The third section expands on the argument that the Eucharist is an alternative political enactment to Duterte's violent politics.

LOOKING AT THE DUTERTE'S POLITICS IN THE LIGHT OF CAVANAUGH'S THEOPOLITICS

Cavanaugh's political theology are articulated in *Torture and the Eucharist* (1998), *Theopolitical Imagination* (2002), *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009), and *Migrations of the Holy* (2011). What weaves his works together are the following essential features. First, the *religious* (which I also interchangeably refer as the 'theological') and the *political for Cavanaugh* are both products of imagination and thus analogous enterprises. Second, the church and the state have contesting imaginations of the political. Third, the Eucharist serves as a privileged site for the Christian spatio-temporal imagination of the political.⁸ As follows, I will elaborate on these features and employ them to analyze the Philippine political situation under Duterte's administration.

THE 'RELIGIOUS' AND THE 'POLITICAL' IMAGINATIONS AS ANALOGOUS ENTERPRISES

For Cavanaugh, the political is inherently theological and the theological implies the political. To clarify this statement, I refer to the introductory section of the book, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (2004). Herein, Cavanaugh and Peter Scott identified three types of political theology. The first position sees politics and theology as distinct and autonomous enterprises. Theology, here, functions as a resource for "relating religious belief to larger societal issues" while particularly concerned with the upkeep of a strict separation between politics and religion.⁹ On this basis the central task of political theology is to trace the migration of theological concepts, e.g., salvation and devotion to God, to a

⁸William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 2.

⁹Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 5-6.

secular conception of the political—even if this means that the political enjoys its secular autonomy.¹⁰ The second view considers theology as a superstructure to socio-politico-economic material base. In this view, theology can either signify or bolster just or unfair political arrangements. In contradistinction to the first two views, Cavanaugh and Scott see theology and politics as fundamentally similar and intertwining imaginations.¹¹ This third view suggests that the political and the religious correlate as products of imagination.¹²

Cavanaugh's insistence that the political and religious are analogous enterprise demands further explanation. As a product of imagination, the political, on the one hand, is a term that refers to the idea of how society should be organized.¹³ As such it is not simply given nor discovered but imagined. On the other hand, the religious, as a discourse about God, is also an enterprise that offers a vision of a political order but that is distinctively rooted in a particular tradition and conviction. However, for Cavanaugh, it is mistaken to separate the two as disparate enterprises. This serves as a critique of a fragmented and differentiated conception of society. As a product of imagination, the political and theological vision of how society is to be organized is contingent and fractional in greater respects given the constricted character of the human imaginary. This would mean that any political imagination is open to criticism and refiguration. There are two important points to note based on this third view of political theology. First, since the *political* is an idea, it is inevitable that there would inevitably be

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, "How (not) to be a Political Theologian," Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine, eds., George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 255.

¹¹ Kirwan, *Political Theology: An Introduction*, 5.

¹² From a secular view, imagination means the view of the possibilities; in the religious sense this would mean a vision of what is "not yet." There is a contrasting register here: one is *temporal* and the other is concerned with the *eschatological*.

¹³ William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 2. See also William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, "Introduction," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1. Herein, Cavanaugh and Scott see the political in its broad sense "as the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people."

contesting views of how society is to be organized. For instance, views on social and political organization held by the state and the church can be contrasting. Second, the idea that the political and the religious are analogous enterprises can pave the contours upon which the church would be able to discern and reconsider various ways of Christian participation in the political arena via the theological repository of its tradition.¹⁴ Following Cavanaugh's view, the insistence of the secularist project to sanitize the public sphere from any religious taint and for the state to monopolize politics is rendered obsolete.

I suggest viewing the current Philippine political situation in the light of the third type with the interest of addressing the lingering question concerning the political nature and relevance of the church in Philippine society. Rhoderick Abellanos, a Filipino scholar of political philosophy, argues that Duterte's politics is founded on the intent to further the secularization and differentiation of Philippine civil society. A hermeneutic of Duterte's rhetoric is telling of his intent to silence the dissidents and those who disagree with him, including the church. While secularization does not mean antagonism to religion, Duterte is resolved in its contempt of the church. Abellanos observes that in trying to establish a political territory without the interference of the church, the latter becomes all the more politically involved.

Post-secularist theologians and thinkers agree on the fact that marginalizing religion from the public sphere is a futile task. This is so not only because religion has deeply rooted itself in societies but because religion has always been part of the societal composition, even in the political sphere. If Abellanos's analysis is correct, the church, as a political body in itself with a particular vision of how society is to be organized, has to contest the subtle form of its exclusions behind Duterte's secular rhetoric. From a theological perspective, the church is intrinsically political, and its social and political engagements serve as channels of religious

¹⁴Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 4.

experience.¹⁵ As earlier mentioned, Cavanaugh’s proposal that the political and religious as analogous enterprises suggests that there are contesting imaginaries of the political, especially that of the church and the state. These contesting imaginations reflect in many ways on the narratives of the church and state concerning politics.

CHURCH AND STATE AS CONTESTING NARRATIVES

Cavanaugh highlights that the church and state are opposing imaginations with competing narratives about human nature, source of conflict, and soteriology.¹⁶ As such, both are social bodies that seek to unite the people through a canonical story that serves (1) as a political vision for society, (2) socio-political performances guided by this vision that intends the flourishing of the community, and (3) a promise of redemption from that which that causes division and enmity among individuals and groups. The narrative of the church highlights revelation and tradition as the resources for its theological reflection of the political, whereas the narrative of the state rest on its antagonistic view of the church. Of its lack of reference to its identity formation, the state builds upon its image by depreciating the church. In the following, I elaborate on these two contesting narratives and contextualize them in the Philippine political context.

The narrative of the church is part of the larger Christian story. In the Christian narrative, the biblical and theological roots of the Christian story of anthropology, sin, and redemption are suggestive of the political nature and constitution of the church, as the body of Christ. Its political vision is subsumed within the story of grace, fall, and redemption. The church’s vision of and for the political thus has a transcendental anchor and *telos*—the “political ordering of the world towards the Kingdom,” borrowing from the

¹⁵ Charles Davis, *Religion and The Making of Society: Essays in Social Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 58.

¹⁶ Lisa Stephenson, “Prophetically Political, Politically Prophetic: William Cavanaugh’s “Theopolitical Imagination” as an Example of Walter Brueggemann’s “Prophetic Imagination,” in *Journal of Church and State* 53.4 (2011): 575.

words of the Dutch political theologian, Stephan van Erp.¹⁷ The church's account of the primal state, i.e., the body of Christ—a state of grace where communion with God and one another abounds, differs from and contests a pessimistic account of the contractarian thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—these thinkers' conception of the primal state is that of the state of nature—a situation where no law and order unites every free and equal individual.¹⁸ In the church's narrative, lawlessness ensues after the disruption of the primal state during the Fall. But the Christian story does not end in hostility and ignominy. Its story is broad. It accentuates the story of redemption in Christ. The church, as the body of Christ, participates in this story in the sacramental sense. The church becomes the sacrament of Christ in the history of God's political ordering of the world.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the historical and contingent character of the church indicates that it cannot fully take the unique and exclusive role of Christ in the story of redemption. The visible signs of sinfulness that plague the church and even those within its hierarchy indicate that the church is imperfect and thus needs ongoing repentance to become a true visible sign of Christ's redeeming love.²⁰ As a pilgrim, the church's promise of communion in the here and now only serves as a partial restoration as its fullness in the eschatological times.²¹ The pilgrim character of the church that serves as corrective to an overly triumphalist and narcissistic form of messianism that plagues itself and those in its ranks. It corrects the view of the church as a perfect society. Within this broader Christian narrative, the Philippine church situates its political engagements. I acknowledge that this is rather ideal to say, and thus is not always the case. The struggles and failures of the

¹⁷Stephan van Erp, "World and Sacrament: Foundations of the Political Theology of the Church," in *Louvain Studies* 39.2 (Summer 2015-16): 102.

¹⁸Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xviii-xix.

¹⁹Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 10-13.

²⁰Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 141-143.

²¹Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 13-14.

Philippine church to live up to its ideals and political vision are not unobservable and remote. Nevertheless, what I am trying to arrive at here is that the church's political involvement in Philippine society is deeply rooted in its larger Christian political vision for society. Its struggle to uphold human dignity and life; its preferential option for the poor; its message of liberation, etc., are all configured by its vision of the Kingdom.

On the contrary, the narrative that operates in the background of Duterte's government is quite vague and confusing. But situating it to the larger narrative of the inception and identity formation of the nation-state sheds light on its inherent flaws and struggles. In a broader sense, the state's narrative differs from that of the church for the following reasons. From its inception sometime between the 16th and 17th centuries, the capability of the state to bring about unity and resolve conflict by providing a seemingly neutral ground is its flagship. It celebrates its identity as a neutral space devoid of any interests aside from representing itself as a savior from the individualistic and violent state of nature. Its anthropology is based on the idea that human nature is violent and selfish, as reflected in the works of modern liberals, e.g., Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. In imitation of the church, the state sees itself too as the *new Adam* that brings unity among the members of society under a social contract.²²

Viewed critically, the narrative of the state is problematic for several reasons. Aside from negative anthropology, the state offers no shared ends that provide a vision for the future of the political body. The social contract upon which individuals commit themselves is only provisional and thus serves only as a means. The state provides no vision of the real political body. Likewise, the contractarian aspect of the unity of the political body implies that there is no inherent unity among individuals. All forms of unity are mediated through the institutional body of the state. Seen this way, the political body that the state promotes can turn out to be

²²Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 17.

perverse and unsustainable.²³ The lack of a solid basis of human solidarity, makes the state's offer of unity untenable. Because the state promotes a false political body founded on defective anthropology, the promise of peace that it heralds is rather suspicious. It shows a schizophrenic self that manifests a tension between its promise of peace and its act of violence. Furthermore, the narrative of the state not only contests that of the church but also aims at the domestication of the latter in the private domain. How the state has attempted to weaken the political credibility of the church is by faulting religion as a source of discord and violence and in this process legitimizes itself tacitly as the sole source of unification and redemption and takes for itself the political sphere as its sole property.²⁴

Much of what is being said in the analyses of the narrative of the state resonates with the hostile and unfriendly disposition of Duterte's administration towards its critics, especially the church. If one closely looks at the Philippine situation one can right away identify the subtle source and reason for the ills of Duterte's statecraft. Duterte's government at the very start presents itself as a savior which promises peace and order and material prosperity. It legitimizes itself and its violent political machinery by identifying and demonizing its critics, particularly the church. Undeniably, the promise of prosperity and order always appeals especially to many Filipinos who are struggling economically—to alleviate their impoverished state. The same can be said true about the administration's drive for peace and order. But while the intentions and goals of the administration are noble, the aggressive and violent manner in which it hopes to achieve this promise is detestable. Its effort for prosperity falls short of what it intends primarily because it prioritizes economic and political gain over and above the well-being and dignity of the people—which it

²³Stephenson, "Prophetically Political, Politically Prophetic: William Cavanaugh's "Theopolitical Imagination" as an Example of Walter Brueggemann's "Prophetic Imagination," 575-577.

²⁴William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 9.

supposedly has to serve. If one also looks at the task of nation-building, the administration fails to a large degree. Duterte's statecraft has a mistaken vision of progress and unity. Its call for prosperity and unity rests on its way of establishing enemies of the state and offering quick purgative solutions to political problems with less regard for human life and dignity. Duterte's administration legitimizes its use of violence with its call for peace, unity, and security, something that is contradictory in itself. That is because, its soteriology is misguided, violent, and divisive.

THE EUCHARIST AS A SPACE OF IMAGINING THE POLITICAL BODY

Following Cavanaugh, I see the Eucharist as a model of political enactment that resists, criticizes, and corrects a contrived, unstable, and unsustainable kind of politics. The Eucharist, which shapes the church into a political body, enacts a counter-politics of a violent and disruptive state in a way such that it gathers the people to freely and peacefully participate in the church's liturgico-political performances guided by the narrative of grace and redemption.²⁵ Seen this way, the Eucharist politically orders the world towards the eschatological promise of the Kingdom.²⁶ Simply put, through the Eucharist the people participate in God's political ordering of the world towards the Kingdom.

Looking at the Philippine political situation through the lens of the Eucharist exposes the false claim that sees Duterte's administration is a savior. The Eucharist challenges its bogus body politic in three respects. First, the Eucharist is a counter-politics to the state's rendering of itself as a place of reverence and its performances as salvific.²⁷ The Eucharist is a liturgico-political performance that brings people into communion with God and

²⁵Randall S. Rosenberg, "The Catholic Imagination and Modernity: William Cavanaugh's Theopolitical Imagination and Charles Taylor's Modern Social Imagination," in *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), 912.

²⁶Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 4-5.

²⁷Paul S. Rowe, "Render Unto Caesar... What? Reflections on the Work of William Cavanaugh," in *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009), 583-605.

one another by making them members of the body of Christ. This performance restores the *imago Dei* of the participants and enables them to participate in the salvific activity of God. Duterte's statecraft cannot mimic this performance since its political maneuverings are violent, oppressive, and divisive; more so, because its promise of unity is contractual and drifting. The unity that the Eucharist makes present is a gift, which makes it a critical and an alternative to the contractual kind of social relations that the state in general promotes.²⁸ In contrast, Duterte's state follows that general view of statecraft that makes people passive, if not submissive, to its political machinery, even if it is violent. Although the government gained much support from the majority, the people are not directly involved in its political performances.²⁹ As a result, it further aggravates fragmentation and anonymity in society. Contrariwise, the Eucharistic liturgico-political performance makes apparent the primal connectedness of one another to God and allows individuals to celebrate it with the whole community.³⁰

Second, the Eucharist has a restorative and generative function in such a way that it restores human communion and builds communities. The Eucharist as a political enactment builds the body of Christ, the church—the people of God. St. Paul's metaphor of the body describes the nature of the church as a political body that affirms Christ as the head of that body.³¹ As a liturgico-political performance, the church and its power resides in its participants—particularly the marginalized in their fair share of the suffering of the wounded body of Christ. This affirms the democratic character of Eucharistic political performance and its privileging of the least and disenfranchised in the building of its

²⁸ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 46–49. See also Stephenson, "Prophetically Political, Politically Prophetic: William Cavanaugh's 'Theopolitical Imagination' as an Example of Walter Brueggemann's 'Prophetic Imagination,'" 580.

²⁹ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 46–49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*

body. Although Christ is the head of this body, participants in the Eucharistic liturgy experience Christ, especially at the margins of the body, radically identified with the least recognized and the most suffering in society. In its broadest sense, the Eucharist is a political performance done by Christ—the giver, gift, and recipient. When participants join the Eucharist, they are assimilated and transformed into this political body. Coming from this understanding, one can suspect what kind of political body the Duterte government builds when its ways are illiberal and violent.

Third, the Eucharistic performance unites the people of God in the body of Christ and is a call for peace and reconciliation without homogenizing the differences. The Eucharist demands reconciliation, and participation removes all kinds of division. It transcends the political divide and geographical boundaries that any state constructs to determine its territory and members. This is a practical implication of being in communion with Christ in the Eucharist, i.e., to live in peace and reconcile with one another as fellow citizens in one body of Christ. Peace and reconciliation are actual fruits of the Eucharistic performance. The Eucharist serves as a barometer that measures whether the community lacks peace and reconciliation (1 Cor 11:17-32).³² Participants in the Eucharist join Christ's reconciliatory actions that know no bounds, whether based on politics, identity, geography, or religion where everyone enjoys being members of God's kingdom. The Eucharist is a way of doing a political performance that brings genuine reconciliation and communion among its participants in contradistinction to Duterte's violent statecraft that is socially and politically disruptive by nature. Duterte's promise of unity flows from its injection of fear among the people and not from a genuine vision of solidarity.

³²Stephenson, "Prophetically Political, Politically Prophetic: William Cavanaugh's "Theopolitical Imagination" as an Example of Walter Brueggemann's "Prophetic Imagination," 580.

CONCLUSION

The church, as a political body itself, offers an alternative political vision and political enactment to Duterte's violent politics. The argument is premised on the idea that the political and the religious are analogous enterprises. That is, the theological and the political interact and refract each other in contrast to a fragmented and differentiated view of society. Seen this way, both the church and the state present contesting imaginations of the political. In the Philippine context, the contrasting political narrative and political vision for society between the church and the state become more apparent during the Duterte administration. Given the violent politics of Duterte's government, the church, through the politics of the Eucharist, could be seen as an alternative political enactment. Anchored on its vision of the Kingdom, the Eucharist, as a political enactment is by nature protective of human dignity and life, attentive to human solidarity and peace, and generative of a community of individuals. This alternative political performance functions as a critic of any form of illiberal and violent statecraft. It serves as a theological resource and performance of dissent, especially in the context where human dignity becomes removed and subordinate to economic and political gain. For further studies, the critical and constructive potential of the Eucharist as an alternative vision of politics can find significant importance in addressing the lingering crisis in Filipino polity—a crisis of representation, structure of governance, and justice.

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