

## **The problem of dirty hands and Christian participation in politics**

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### **Abstract**

Today, politics, in all its forms and kinds, has been negatively construed by many as a “dirty game,” so that anyone involved in it must at one point or the other soil his/her hands with evil deeds (immorality). Consequently, it is usual to find numerous individuals in the society especially Christians, refusing to participate or get involved in politics. Recognising the manifold fatal implications of Christians’ refusal to participate in politics, this paper, adopting the expository, analytic and critical methodologies of research, argues that the inescapable moral dilemmas in politics should not deter Christians from participating in politics. Besides, it is also argued in this paper that the task of political leadership is one that Christians should and must embrace as a way of fulfilling their vocation as “salt of the earth and light of the world.” Fundamentally, this paper, using the four approaches to Christian participation in politics identified by Leslie Griffin as basis, argues that it is possible for a Christian politician to refrain from immorality (doing evil). By so doing, this paper refutes the negative standpoints of Niccolo Machiavelli, Max Weber and Michael Walzer with regards to the possibility of a Christian politician keeping his/her hands clean.

**Key words:** Christian, dirty, participation, politics, morality

### **Introduction**

Politics is commonly construed by several individuals as a “dirty game.” This, perhaps, is owing to the supposition that “dirty actions are part and parcel of ordinary political life.”<sup>1</sup> The underlying idea in this assertion is that politics is intrinsically fraught with multiple moral dilemmas, so that those who venture into it must be ready to ‘get their hands dirty;’ that is, contravene even their strongest moral convictions for political expediency. In this regard, thinkers like Niccolo di Bernardo Machiavelli, Max Weber and more recently, Michael Walzer, have questioned the possibility of having political leaders who will not at some point violate their moral principles for political/social gains. Consequently, it has become commonplace to find many individuals in society, especially Christians, embracing attitudes of suspicion, outright detest, indifference or apathy towards politics.

Following from the above, this paper attempts to answer the following pertinent questions: (1) Should a Christian avoid or be indifferent towards politics? (2) Can a Christian govern innocently? (3) Is politics and a clear conscience incompatible? (4) How are Christians to respond to situations that call into question their moral beliefs? (5) Should Christians be involved in politics amidst the quicksand of politics? Basically, this paper argues that the moral dilemmas in politics should not deter Christians from participating in politics.

### **Politics: a general overview**

The word “politics” has in recent times become a platitude; for it is often used in a broad sense, so that it covers virtually every sphere of human interaction, whether social, cultural or religious. This being the case, Aristotle’s statement that “man is by nature a political animal”<sup>2</sup> is perennially validated. This means effectively that humans have a natural impulse towards partnership with others. It

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Levy, “Punishing the Dirty,” in *Politics and Morality*, ed. Igor Primoratz, (New York: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2007), 38-53.

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<sup>2</sup> David Easton, *A Systematic Analysis of Political Life*, (New York: Wiley, 1965): 4

is such partnership that forms the basis for any political considerations.

The word “politics” has its root in the Greek word *polis*, which translates in English as “city” or “state.” From Greek antiquity, the *polis* or city-states were political forms or administrative centres that were distinct. *Politikos*, from which politics is directly derived, generally describes anything concerning the state or affairs of the state.<sup>3</sup> While the etymological analysis offers us some insight into the meaning of the term, it seems quite insufficient to address the current usage which the term politics now enjoys.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, politics refers to activities that relate to influencing the actions and policies of a government or getting and keeping power in government. The operative words in this definition are “influence” and “power.” Both words represent the key ideas that run through the gamut of politics and political life. In other words, politics is essentially about activities tied to determining who gets power and how that power is exercised. Simply put, power is at the centre of all political acts. This line of thought is well anticipated in Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics as “who gets what, when and how.”<sup>4</sup> What we can deduce from Lasswell’s conception of politics is that politics is as much about decision making as it is about power. As such, when we have to decide, for instance, who to rule, or what policy to adopt, or some other concerns, we are in that sense involved in politics.

For J.M. Shafritz, politics is “the art and science of governance; the means

by which the will of the community is arrived at and implemented, the activities of a government, politician or political party.” He further adds that politics is “the pursuit and exercise of political power necessary to make binding policy decision for all the community and to distribute patronage and other government benefits.”<sup>5</sup> Shafritz highlights the fact that political actions are actions carried out for the good of the community and he equally underlines one of the purposes of power, which is, to distribute government benefits.

What is evident from the foregoing analysis of the concept of “politics” is that from its earliest usage, it was not thought of as something “dirty” or “ignoble.” How then are we to account for the “dirty” description of the concept in more recent times? On this point one can make a distinction between politics in principle and politics in practice. In principle, politics is concerned with the noble task of governing, within the present context, the state. However, in practice, the process of acquiring the power to govern the state is sometimes marred with vices like bribery and corruption, debauchery and defamation, amongst others. Even in exercising power, one can notice that there are practices which raise moral concerns that have coloured the overall perception of the concept of politics. As the popular aphorism goes, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This aphorism, in a sense, has been a self-fulfilling prophecy for political leaders especially in their exercise of power. It is within this context that greater scrutiny is placed on Christian involvement in politics.

However, beyond the idea that power tends to corrupt, Coady adds that the “values which politicians find themselves driven to promote, and others find themselves driven to endorse, may be

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<sup>3</sup> B. A. C. Obiefuna and Kanu Ikechukwu, “Church and Politics in Nigeria: Towards a Philosophy of Collaboration” in *Religious Faith and Public Service in Nigeria: Ambiguities and Paradoxes*, eds. Luke Ijezie, Stephen Audu and Agnes Acha (Port Harcourt: Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria, 2014), 368 – 379.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who gets What, When, How*, (New York: Whittessy, 1934): 3.

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<sup>5</sup> J.M Shafritz, *The Dorsey Dictionary of American Government and Politics*, (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1988): 41.

the product of degraded social circumstances and arrangements.” This means effectively that though power corrupts, the politician may also be faced with situations that would corrupt his/her cherished values.

### **Christian involvement in politics**

Over the years, myriad of divergent views have been expressed in relation to the question as to whether it is proper for Christians to participate or get involved in politics. A particular school of thought prioritizes the non-involvement of Christians in politics as it was considered inimical to Christian piety. The early Church, for instance, identified flight from politics as a component of holiness.<sup>6</sup> As ancient as this view may seem, it is still held by some people today. Augustine Ehigie lucidly expressed this fact in his analysis of the attitude of some Catholic faithful towards politics. He opines that due to the perception of politics as a dirty game, some Catholics think that the more they stay away from it (politics), the better Catholic they are.<sup>7</sup> This view further buttresses the argument by proponents of what I term the “non-involvement thesis” that politics is antithetical to Christian integrity.

However, with growth in understanding of the Christian mission and vocation in the world, there has been a significant shift in attitude towards politics in recent times. To this end, several Christian authors have put forward sustained arguments to justify Christians’ involvement in politics. According to W. H. Elder, “a person who takes his Christian citizenship seriously is the one who applies the gospel to his world through

responsible involvement in the political process.”<sup>8</sup> For William Pinson Jr., “nobody in the entire world is more qualified for political action than the child of God.”<sup>9</sup> These authors, however, caution that Christians who participate in politics must be guided by Christian values and duties.

Following the wake of the Catholic Church’s post Vatican II tradition, there has been a greater appreciation of the role Catholics (Christians) have to play in politics. For instance, though Catholic priests are not expected to take public offices, they can and should be concerned about politics. Nonetheless, greater encouragement is given to Catholic faithfuls who wish to venture into public and political life. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach that Christians must be mindful of their dual citizenship, that is, they are both citizens of heaven and of earth.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, it would be mistaken to think that shirking one’s earthly responsibility is the best path to take with regards to the question of Christian involvement in politics.

Christians cannot stand aloof when it comes to issues that concern the governance of the state because as the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, opines “if you do not take an interest in the affairs of your government, then you are doomed to live under the rule of fools.”<sup>11</sup> The task of political leadership is one that Christians should and must embrace as a means to fulfilling their vocation as “salt of the earth and light of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Obiefuna and Ikechukwu, “Church and Politics in Nigeria, 370.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine Ehigie, “The role of the Clergy in Nigerian Politics: A Reflection on Can 287 Par 2” in *Church and Politics: Pastoral Implications, Proceeding of Annual Conference of the Canon Law Society of Nigeria*, eds. Hillary Ben Ezenwa and Jonas Benson Okoye (Awka: FAB Anieh, 2013), 20.

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<sup>8</sup> W. H. Elder, “Politics and Christian Discipleship,” in *Understanding Christian Ethics*, ed. Tillman W.M. Jr. (Nashville Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1988), 14

<sup>9</sup> William Pinson Jr., “Why all Christians are Called into Politics, in *Politics*, ed. J. Dunn (Dallas: Christ Life Convention of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1970), 18.

<sup>10</sup>Gaudium et Spes, no. 43

<sup>11</sup> “Plato” <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/plato> (accessed 4/11/21)

<sup>12</sup> Matt 5: 13-16 (Revised Standard Version).

In further exhorting Catholic faithful and Christians at large, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council note that “the Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burdens of public office.” They further maintain that:

Christians must be conscious of their specific and proper role in the political community: they should be a shining example by their sense of responsibility and their dedication to the common good; they should show and practice how authority can be reconciled with freedom, personal initiative and with the solidarity and the needs of the whole social framework, and the advantages of unity with profitable diversity. They should recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view about the organization of worldly affairs and show respect for their fellow citizens, who even in association defend their opinions by legitimate means.<sup>13</sup>

The above set the “rules of engagement” for Christian participation in politics. The Christian politician ought to be open-minded, non-vindictive, accountable and responsible in the pursuit of the common good of the society. But this profile seems to differ greatly from what can be observed in many Christians who are in the political arena today. Here again the distinction between politics in principle and politics in practice comes into sharp focus. The questions necessitated here are: why do some Christians who are in politics

find it difficult to uphold Christian values? How exactly does participation in politics endanger one’s moral convictions? These concerns are best captured in what has become known as the problem of dirty hands, which we shall now consider.

### **The problem of dirty hands: murky waters of political leadership**

The term “dirty hands” appears in a play by Jean-Paul Sartre of the same title. In the play, two prominent characters, Hoederer and Hugo are engaged in an intense and illuminating discussion concerning political life and political morality. Speaking to Hugo who had reservations about Hoederer’s political plans, Hoederer queries:

How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?<sup>14</sup>

Hoederer’s question, “Do you think you can govern innocently?” has remained the focus of heated discussions among philosophers, theologians, sociologists and politicians. Among this circle of scholars, there is no consensus as to whether political leaders can uphold the tenets of

<sup>13</sup>Gaudium et Spes, no. 75

<sup>14</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Lionel Abel (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), Act V, 222 - 225

morality. Within philosophical parlance, this problem is known as the problem of dirty hands. It raises the question as to whether it is possible for a political leader to be moral all the time and in all situations.

According to Gordon Graham, “The problem of dirty hands arises because it seems that there are occasions when politics requires what morality forbids, and effective engagement in politics in these circumstances makes it impossible to keep one’s hands morally clean.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the problem of dirty hands poses a moral dilemma for political leaders. It is a scenario where political expediency is pitted against moral probity. In line with this, C. A. J. Coady argues that “the vocation of politics somehow rightly requires its practitioners to violate important moral standards which prevail outside politics”<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Graham who restricts the problem of “dirty hands” to some occasions and actions, Coady implicitly suggests that “dirty hands” is coterminous with the very existence of politics. The question is: must the political leader necessarily get his/her hand dirty? The foregoing reveals that the problem arises at the confluence of moral principles, particularly ethical absolutism, and concrete political needs.

The idea of moral culpability of political leaders dates back to Niccolo Machiavelli who maintains that political leaders are to imbibe “necessary immorality” if they are to effectively carry out their duties. For Machiavelli, it is impracticable for a leader to profess goodness at all time, since the state which he controls is made up of many who are not so good. Hence, Machiavelli maintains that a political leader (whom he calls the *prince*) who wishes to maintain his

position should learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity.<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli conveniently demarcates the world of politics and the world of morality such that the intermingling of both in a political leader would lead to nothing short of a disaster. This view enjoys the support of other scholars like Max Weber and more recently, Michael Walzer.

Walzer is of the view that “dirty hands” is a *conditio sine qua non* for political leaders, and this is so because decision making is more complex than is ordinarily thought. In his seminal paper titled *Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands*, Walzer argues that political actions differ from private behaviour. Walzer premised his conclusion on the tripartite ground that: (a) politicians act on behalf of others; (b) politicians prefer to rule than be ruled, and (c) in protecting the interest of the state, politicians employ every means available to them, including violence.<sup>18</sup> If this is the case, how can one seek or hold on to political power and still maintain a clear conscience?

To illustrate his point, Walzer cites the example of a moral man who is a politician and must make a deal with a dishonest ward boss, which involves awarding to the latter contracts for school construction over the period of his tenure in office, when elected. In such an instance, knowing full well that making the deal would mean that he has to violate some of his long standing moral beliefs, should he make the deal?<sup>19</sup>

Another instance Walzer cites is the case of a politician committed to establishing peace and order but has a situation where he needs to use torture [on a captured member of a terrorist group] to find out the location of bombs planted by a

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Graham, *Ethics and international relations*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 130

<sup>16</sup>C. A. J. Coady, “Politics and the Problem of Dirty Hands,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Singer, Peter (Oxford:Blackwell, 1991), 373

<sup>17</sup>Niccolo Machiavelli, 1513, *The Prince*, ed. P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 52

<sup>18</sup>Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2. (Winter, 1973): 160-180

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, 165-167

rebel leader. Should he use torture which would be a crime against humanity or should he hold on to his moral principles and let innocent people die from the bomb? Walzer argues that the use of torture would be the right option. It is a case of choosing between two evils. In the above scenario, the politician has prized efficacy over moral conviction by adopting a utilitarian disposition. Walzer asserts that when the politician “ordered the prisoner tortured, he committed a moral crime and he accepted a moral burden. Now he is a guilty man [but the guilt shows that] he is not too good for politics but that he is good enough.”<sup>20</sup> Following from this, Walzer concludes that dirty hands is an inescapable reality in political life, and the moral politician is the one who is able to get his hands dirty but pretend that they are clean.<sup>21</sup>

### **The problem of dirty hands: The Nigerian experience**

Essentially, Walzer’s examples or instances cited above can be summed as the moral dilemma involved in the struggle for power and the moral dilemma associated with the exercise of power. The following two instances are cited to illustrate the veracity of the problem of dirty hands in the Nigerian political space. Firstly, let us consider the process of electioneering in Nigeria, which is fraught with the problem of bribery and corruption. In such a clime, can a Christian vie for leadership position without tainting his/her moral integrity? A politician who enters into the political arena under the aforementioned circumstance must be prepared to get his/her hands dirty. Otherwise, he/she should not be involved in the first place. This, briefly, marks the popular image of the Nigerian political arena.

The second instance, which is more illuminating, is the Odi Massacre of 1999,

which was borne out of the government’s desire to wipe out unscrupulous elements in the then Odi community. Amidst this, there were equally innocent citizens that the government never intended to harm. But the approach of the Obasanjo led administration was to send soldiers to wipe out the miscreants constituting nuisance to the state, and in so doing, many innocent citizens were killed along the line.<sup>22</sup> The moral dilemma in this situation is whether the president, who is a Christian, should have committed such a moral crime of sanctioning the killing of innocent citizens in the name of eradicating a group that was becoming a menace in the state?

### **Between compromise and moral probity: framing the christian approach to the problem of dirty hands**

From the foregoing, we can deduce that at issue in the problem of dirty hands is the tension between compromising for political expediency and upholding moral probity. Simply put, it is a tension between *deontologism* and *consequentialism*. To frame it in this way: should a Christian be committed to achieving desired consequences which are immoral but for the greater good at the expense of his/her Christian values? What should be a Christian’s response to concrete cases of moral dilemma? Should a Christian adopt the *consequentialist* submission that the “end justifies the means” in the political arena?

Lesie Griffin identifies four approaches to the morality of politicians in Christian tradition relative to the problem of dirty hands. According to her, from Christian antiquity, politicians, especially Christian politicians, adopt one of the following approaches, namely: moral purity, moral anguish, dual morality and common morality, when faced with

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 165-167

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 168

<sup>22</sup> “The Destruction of Odi and Rape in Choba: December 22, 1999” <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/press/1999/dec/nibg1299.htm> (accessed 7/11/21)

situations of moral dilemma.<sup>23</sup> Christian politicians who adopt the moral purity approach usually insist on keeping their 'hands clean' at all time and in all situations, since there is no one moral norm for all Christians, regardless of the position they occupy, and it is duty rather than efficacy or end result that should be the canon for evaluating the decisions to be made in situations of moral dilemma. This line of thought draws its inspiration from the Christian philosopher, Augustine, who held, in his work *On Lying*, that lying is always wrong no matter the circumstances surrounding it.<sup>24</sup> Generally, the moral purity approach rests on deontological foundations.

In contrast with the moral purity approach, the moral anguish approach makes a distinction between morality for the private individual and morality for the politician.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the politician has two moralities one that governs his/her private life and another which shapes his/her political decisions. As such, when faced with moral dilemma in a political position, the course of action to take would be one that is consistent with his/her political morality, even though such actions may be immoral. Since such immoral actions violate the politician's private moral convictions, he/she must be willing to bear the guilt and pay the price "whether through internal guilt (hence, moral anguish) or external punishment."<sup>26</sup> This approach is basically *consequentialist*.

The third approach which is also *consequentialist* is the view that the political sphere and the moral universe are two autonomous spheres, and both are undergirded by two independent moralities. Griffin calls this approach the dual morality approach/model. The dual

morality model makes the dichotomy between political morality and private morality very sharp unlike the moral anguish approach. This is so because the political morality that operates in the public space is ordered towards effective consequences, while private morality is basically stricter. In the dual morality approach, though the politician gets his hands dirty, he is not moved by guilt.<sup>27</sup>

Common morality, which is the fourth model or approach, has a deontological aspect but it also gives room for some compromise in situations of moral dilemma. It argues that the moral norms of the private individual are no different from the morality that operates in the political arena. While this view acknowledges the moral duty that the Christian politician has to uphold and the consequences that he has to achieve, it also prohibits some actions, which it tags intrinsically evil.

According to Griffin, to adopt the common moral model is to commit oneself to the belief that "can be both moral and effective, but that there are limits to the goal of efficacy."<sup>28</sup> This means effectively that a politician who subscribes to the common morality model may react to a moral dilemma situation by choosing an action that may contain some evil but is geared towards a greater good. In this regard, Griffin notes that "Clean hands are possible in the fourth category, therefore, for guilt does not attach to persons who undertake actions with proportionate reason, which permit some evil but which are not evil in themselves."<sup>29</sup> This fourth model is akin to the doctrine of double effect.

Essentially, the doctrine of double effect is the view that if doing something morally good has a morally bad side-effect; it is morally permissible to do that, in so far as the bad side-effect was not intended. The strengths of the common

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<sup>23</sup>Leslie C. Griffin, "The Problem of Dirty Hands" *Scholarly Works*. (1989): 1132. <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/1132>

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid*

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>29</sup>Griffin, "The Problem of Dirty Hands" 51.

morality model are that it is not oblivious of the inherent complexity of political choices and ethical decisions, and it also gives room for the politician to be flexible without necessarily compromising his/her moral convictions for political expediency.

### Conclusion

What emerges from the foregoing discussion is that moral dilemmas are inevitable in politics. Thus, a Christian politician is bound to face moral dilemmas that would shake and wave even the strongest of his/her moral convictions. At some point in the struggle for power or the exercise of power, the politician may have to choose between moral integrity and political expediency. How a Christian politician responds to such a situation without compromising his/her status as the “Light of the World and Salt of the Earth” is the issue. But from the analysis of Leslie Griffin’s postulations about the approaches to Christian participation in politics, it is possible for a Christian politician to keep his/her hands clean in governing the state by applying the model of both moral purity and common morality. One important thing is to build an unquestionable integrity. Once people know what you stand for they will deal with you as such. Thus, a Christian politician must not play a double standard politics or compromise morality for material gains. Where it becomes difficult to uphold one’s moral principles as a Christian in a political sphere, it becomes reasonable to step aside for the moment. The philosophy of “if you cannot beat them, you join them” should have no place in the issue of morality. If every Christian politician adopts this principle, they will be politicians with clean hands and the society will be better for it.

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