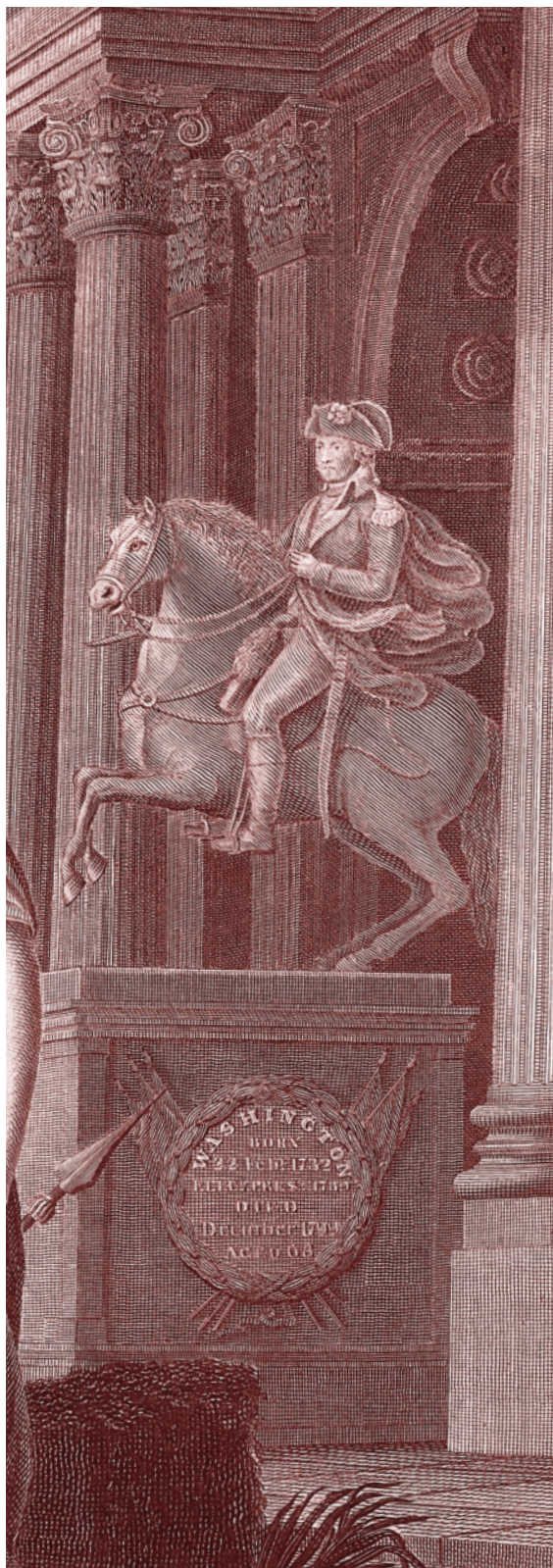


CHRISTIAN ETHICS & THE REALM OF STATECRAFT: DIVISIONS, CROSS-CURRENTS, & THE SEARCH FOR CONNECTIONS

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Providence seeks engagement between Christianity and American foreign policy, an effort that necessarily must proceed not upon a smooth playing-field but rather on a landscape strewn with numerous obstacles. In the United States, religious engagement on matters of public policy is as old as American society itself, and its possibility is in no way vitiated by the doctrine of separation of church and state. Such engagement does not have to do with replacing religious judgments and decisions with those of the political process; rather it proceeds as a form of citizen engagement in that process, seeking to inform it and to help it better operate - my own aim throughout my work is on how to understand the ethical traditions of just war and *jihad* of the sword. The task of such engagement is well worthwhile, but to be effectively carried out the obstacles must be recognized, understood, and negotiated. In what follows I will first lay out some of the most important obstacles, the challenges they pose, their respective weaknesses, and some thoughts on opportunities they offer; then I will offer some thoughts on how best to bring Christianity into engagement with American foreign policy.



Peace through Strength: This equestrian statue of George Washington set before a triumphal arch is a celebration both of Washington's military victories as well as of the liberal arts. The message: Strength secures the nation's sovereignty and makes the pursuits of commerce, industry, and the arts possible

An especially difficult obstacle to such engagement is that political realism as it exists today seeks to deny any place whatever for ethical or other value concerns, religious or not, in the policy arena, reserving that arena for considerations of interests alone. On this conception ethical values and arguments are expressions of idealism and assimilated to utopianism, as in Robert Osgood's benchmark study, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*. The realist, Osgood wrote,

is skeptical of attempts to mitigate international conflict with appeals to sentiment or principle or with written pledges and institutional devices unless they express the existing configuration of national interests or register the relative power among nations. He believes that if power conflicts can be mitigated at all, they can be mitigated only by balancing power against power and by cultivating a circumspect diplomacy that knows the use of force and the threat of force as indispensable elements of national policy. (9)

This position is not without its own serious problems. The acknowledged founders of realism, Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, had conceived it somewhat differently, leaving room for the working of ethical values and arguments, and the conception of realism as summarized by Osgood does not acknowledge its own dependence on ideals and values at the core of the conception of what counts as "American national interests" and the priorities among them. Nonetheless, realism in its current form wants nothing to do with ethical values or arguments based on them when they are presented as bearing on policy, unless they are transformed into the language of interests. This resistance is a formidable obstacle to efforts to engage Christianity with the formulation and administration of foreign policy, but it is best met by a robust challenge to the assumptions of realism itself, making way for an embrace of ideals and values as essential elements in conceiving national interests and policies.

At the same time, the challenge posed by realism is a reminder that Christian and other religious efforts—indeed, any efforts motivated by deep ethical concerns—to enter policy debates must take with utmost seriousness the complexities of the empirical landscape and the possibilities offered there. This was ultimately what Reinhold Niebuhr’s conception of Christian realism sought to do (see, for example, his early books, *Christ and Culture* (1932) and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), where he was first working out this position). Niebuhr avoided the attractions of believing that Christian ethical effort could transform American society into the Kingdom of God on earth but nonetheless championed such an effort in a chastened spirit of recognition of human sinfulness and finitude. Such a position is not utopian; it is realistic on its own terms.

A second and very different kind of obstacle to Christian ethical engagement in the sphere of public policy is that the United States today has become more religiously pluralistic, with the changing contours of American Christianity itself and these various forms of Christianity coexisting alongside varieties of the other major world religions as well as various forms of indigenous religious expression, including some radically individual. But such change is not inherently negative, and indeed the respect for religious freedom that makes it possible is a core American value. The American religious landscape has never been static, and the diversity of religion in America has historically fed a constant renewal that has been a major contributor to the strength of religion in America and its contribution to the national character. So the current multivalent religious landscape in the United States presents a challenge best met with new focus on how to understand and live out the basic meaning of Christianity and how to engage creatively and with nuance debates over public policy, including foreign policy.

There is also another way that the challenge of religious diversity in American society may prove a benefit rather than an

obstacle. Encountering diverse religions opens doors to better cross-cultural understanding, and this carries obvious positive implications for engagement in the sphere of foreign affairs. I will return to this below with specific reference to my own work on the Islamic tradition of *jihad* of the sword.

A third kind of obstacle is that religiously-based ethical values and arguments coexist with, and compete with, other sorts of conceptions of ethics and support for policies in accord with such conceptions. Domestic examples abound, many of them having to do with sexuality and sexual behavior, but in the arena of foreign policy this competition is illustrated by the rise of a revisionist version of just war theory within the frame of analytic philosophy. So far as its ethics is concerned, this revision is utilitarian, and while some revisionist just war thinkers appeal to a basis in human rights, the conception of rights is an abstract one divorced from its historical and thematic Christian connections.

Now, the tradition of just war that the revisionists seek to replace incorporates important Christian influences, but these are not acknowledged in the revisionist accounts. When such different positions as represented by the revisionists arise, it is important to be able to recognize them for what they are, that is, positions that have only some terminology in common with the historical tradition of just war; a Christian conception of the morality of the use of armed force does not distill into a utilitarian argument, even one based in an abstracted philosophical conception of human rights. This is just one example, but whenever the same issues arise across the whole arena of debates over policy, the same argument applies.

Finally, I would mention the obstacle posed by the fact that there is no single Christian position on the sphere of political life and the relationship between it on the one hand and the sphere of Christian life on the other. We can describe the differences in various ways, but what is by now

a classic catalogue of them was provided by H. Richard Niebuhr in his *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr identified five major approaches, analyzing each one and connecting it to the thought of particular theologians.

In his first approach, Christ against culture, he identified with the first-century church as well as later approaches like Tolstoy's; his second, the Christ of culture, he described as the position of liberal Protestantism, connected historically with the "culture-Protestantism" of the nineteenth-century German theologian Albrecht Ritschl among others; his third, Christ above culture, he developed as the approach historically associated with Catholic theology and especially Thomas Aquinas, with his conception of the theological and natural virtues and their interrelation; his fourth, Christ and culture in paradox, he associated with the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and others; while the last approach he treated, Christ transforming culture, he connected particularly to the thought of Augustine and described as exemplified in the twentieth century in the theology of F.D. Maurice. Niebuhr did his best to treat these various positions evenhandedly, but the ideal of "freedom in dependence" he developed in his concluding chapter seems particularly close to his positive characterization of the "Christ transforming culture" or "conversionist" position he characterized as "the present encounter with God in Christ" and as an "awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself" (195).

This inventory remains useful, not least because of the theological connections Niebuhr made and the fact that every one of these positions can be found in present-day American Christianity. The first and fourth of these positions separate Christian life from life in political community, while the second effectively collapses the two, seriously diminishing or even removing the possibility of a critical engagement based on a difference between them. These positions thus do

not offer a fruitful frame for engagement between Christianity and foreign affairs. The two remaining positions, by contrast, provide different frames for such engagement, both connected to important theological positions and also expressed in historical manifestations. Examining these in more detail thus takes us into constructive possibilities for the kind of engagement being sought in the present and future contexts.

In considering these two possible frames, I would note the need to go beyond Niebuhr's analysis in *Christ and Culture*, for he missed some important things and, I think, did not rightly understand others.

An important example of both limitations is that, like his older brother Reinhold, he did not have an appreciation for the distinct and independent authority of the idea of natural law in medieval thought apart from Aquinas's theological synthesis. This affected his understanding of the position he associated with Aquinas's theology, which for him epitomized the "Christ above culture" perspective.

Medieval thought recognized a distinction between what it called the realms of the "spiritual" and the "temporal." A fuller and more accurate account of how these were understood in the medieval frame would require closer and more appreciative understanding than provided in *Christ and Culture* of the canonical thought that preceded Aquinas, for it was the canonists of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries who recovered the idea of natural law from Roman law and political thought and placed their understanding of it within their thinking on just war and political order. In their understanding of this concept and its application to human moral choice, natural law was by no means a fixed framework, as both Niebuhrs and much of Protestant thought more generally have treated it, defined finally by the authority of the revealed law of God as interpreted by and through the authority of the church. Rather, on the medieval conception, this law was built into nature itself and served to give temporal

life its own autonomous place. The idea of natural law thus heightened the importance of human moral judgments and decisions in the operation of the temporal order. Natural law referred to a rationally accessible reference-point for guiding moral decision-making, but the final judgment as to the meaning of this law in a given case was a matter for moral choice.

How this understanding worked was epitomized in the canonists' conception of temporal sovereignty. This conception was based in the Gelasian principle (named after the late sixth-century Pope Gelasius) of a distinction between spiritual and temporal authority. On this distinction, while the former kind of authority belongs to the Church, it does not extend to temporal rule, and authority and responsibility for temporal affairs belongs to temporal rulers, with those having no temporal superiors—sovereign rulers—exercising supreme authority in their own political communities. While individual judgments as to the natural law might differ and lead to conflicts, resolving such conflicts was the power and responsibility of temporal sovereigns in their function of judges of last resort as to right and wrong within their domains, in their making and enforcing their own judgments as to the requirements of natural law in the specific contexts at hand.

A ruler's judgments might be self-serving or otherwise flawed, and thus the ultimate test of their rightness or wrongness in terms of their conformity to the natural law was whether these judgments contributed to the common good of the community ruled—its overall order, justice, and peace. A ruler might be a tyrant, and this could be measured both by that ruler's own people and by neighboring sovereigns, using their own judgments as to the requirement of the natural law that the common good is to be served. Of course, that good can be served in various ways, and responsible efforts to act according to the natural law might thus take many forms. On this conception the temporal sovereign, and in no way the spiritual authorities, was responsible for judging what the natural law required so as best to

serve the community governed. Nor did this conception of sovereignty mean that might makes right, for the sovereign's judgments were themselves subject to judgment by others within the temporal sphere. The point is the moral autonomy of temporal judgments. Temporal authority, on this conception, has its own autonomy relative to the spiritual authority of the Church, but it is bound by fundamental responsibility for the good of the society governed, and by extension for the good of neighboring societies.

There is, of course, a good deal more to say about this than these brief sentences provide, and further discussion can be found in the first chapter of my *Sovereignty: Moral and Historical Perspectives*. Sufficient for now is to sum up by noting that on this conception more generally the idea of natural law functioned as a guide to practical moral reasoning by persons operating within the context of worldly life. Moral decision-making, on this model, had to do with making a responsible effort to understand and apply the natural law. It took the form of practical moral reasoning in the context of life in community within the temporal order. In laying on each individual the obligation to take this responsibility seriously, this notion also laid a special responsibility on those individuals with sovereign political authority, those charged with exercising this responsibility for the good of the entire community.

I suggest this way of thinking about political decision-making as itself a moral enterprise aimed at the common good of the political community—and of the interactions among such communities worldwide—can be a fruitful element in an engagement between Christianity and foreign affairs. It entails respect for the political order and the persons involved in its working, but it also serves as a reminder that this order must be oriented to the common good, both of our own political community specifically and of the larger interconnected reality of all political communities more generally, and that those responsible for the working of political order and relationships can be held to



account for their judgments and decisions. That the political sphere itself, including the justified use of force in the service of the goods of political community, exists for the purpose of human flourishing is deeply rooted in Christian doctrine and should not be forgotten (Consider the pithy statement provided in Romans 13:1-4; Romans 13:4 was frequently cited in connection with the classic idea of just war). An important reason for Christian engagement with the public sphere is to remind those involved in the making of policy and in political decision-making that such human flourishing should always be their goal.

In the historical context I have been describing, natural law referred to a widespread consensus as to the nature of the common good and the ends of politics. Pursuing this method in the effort to relate Christianity to foreign affairs today requires identifying and pursuing agreements on core values that transcend the borders of states and cultures. This returns me to a point I raised earlier in relation to the encounter of diverse religious beliefs in the context of American society. In my own work on moral traditions on war, I have sought to identify agreement across differing religions and cultural frames by bringing just war tradition into comparative

dialogue with the *jihad* tradition and, more recently, with the varied moral traditions on war found in Chinese history. I have also argued that international law and international agreements short of formal law show where such agreement across cultures exists and what are the limits of such agreement. Thus, of particular relevance to my work on the contemporary implications of just war thinking, I have taken pains to treat the law of armed conflict, today widely called international humanitarian law, as expressing shared moral consensus. The language of natural law was appropriate to the context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Whether or not the term is used today, the functions it referred to remain, if under different names, and therefore finding the best contemporary language for natural law is critical to religious ethical engagement with the sphere of foreign affairs. This is not in any way to compromise Christian ethical values and concerns in the process of seeking such engagement, but rather a way to frame such values and concerns so that they respect the different role and responsibility of government from those of the religious sphere and can be recognized as relevant in the political sphere.

Let me turn now in a different direction, to Richard Niebuhr's reading of Augustine

and the idea of Christ transforming culture. The transformationist or (Richard Niebuhr's preferred term) conversionist understanding of the Christ-culture relationship fitted well the assumptions of mainline American Protestantism that had taken shape earlier in the twentieth century - defined first by Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement, then chastened and redefined by Richard's older brother Reinhold in his thinking on Christian love as related to natural justice, and Richard Niebuhr's own theology belonged to this distinctively American theological tradition. The influence of his thinking in this way about the relation of Christianity to political life shows up in the work of Paul Ramsey, who did his doctoral work under Richard Niebuhr at Yale and who adopted and developed a version of this way of thinking as a way of describing the working of divine love within history progressively to shape politics toward its own ideal end.

This conception, in Ramsey's work, depended centrally on a particular way of reading Augustine's understanding of divine love or *caritas*, charity, as a theology describing how this love is operating within history to transform the world toward the City of God. For "bookends" to this way of thinking, see the second chapter of Ramsey's *War and the Christian Conscience* (1961) and his essay "A Political Ethics Context for Strategic Thinking" in the edited volume, *Strategic Thinking and Its Moral Implications* (1973). Augustine's thought thus described provided a powerful basis for a Christian politics aimed at Christian participation in this transformation. Even when its possibilities were limited, as in Reinhold Niebuhr's characterization of love as an "impossible possibility" for human striving marked by sin and finitude, the ideal variously called the "City" or "Kingdom" of God still provided the ultimate pattern for the kind of world Christians ought to seek to create.

But Augustine's theology was in fact a good deal more complex than this reading on its own allows, and taking this into account, I suggest, leads to a different but still positive mandate for engagement between

Christianity and the sphere of political life. As the medieval historian R.A. Markus observed in his essay in *The Church and War*, Augustine went through three periods in his thinking about the relation of Christianity to politics, including war, and only in the second of these, marked by the rule of a Christian emperor and Christian officials open to advice from Church leaders, did he seem to have an idea that the City of Earth might itself, through identification with the Church, be capable of reform towards the City of God. In the third period of Augustine's life, Markus notes, which included imperial and other efforts to suppress the influence of Christianity and restore that of the old Roman religion and was also marked by the rising strength of Arian Christianity in the form of the power of the Germanic societies that were increasingly carving the Empire up into distinct kingdoms, Augustine moved away from whatever optimism he may have had about the possibility of transforming earthly society and focused on the City of God as referring to the life of the saints in heaven with God and the angels.

Within this latter conception, Christians were pilgrims in an alien land, but they nonetheless had an obligation to act so as to maintain the best of the Roman order so as to provide a basis for the life of the Church as it moved towards its own realization as the City of God. To argue for maintaining a society for the goods it offers despite its flaws is far from arguing that divine love, *caritas*, can in history remake earthly society so as to diminish and ultimately remove those flaws, but the former still provides a mandate for Christian engagement with the affairs of the political order. Acting so as to contribute to the goods society offers is itself morally good.

The transformationist conception of Christian possibility was also found in another important place: the idea of America's destiny as the Kingdom of God on Earth, a topic to which Richard Niebuhr had devoted his earlier book *The Kingdom of God in America*. Niebuhr there criticized how this idea had developed, at one point referring

caustically to the coming together of missionary and commercial activity in foreign lands during the nineteenth century as “bring[ing] light to the gentiles by means of lamps manufactured in America” (179), but he never rejected the idea in itself or the ideal it set for American society in history. This, one might say, is the transformationist theme in a nutshell. I think Reinhold Niebuhr was right to point out that, because of human sin and finitude, our best attempts toward a love-informed justice nonetheless carry with them seeds of future injustice, so that the Kingdom of God can only be an ideal to aim at, not one ever to be achieved by human efforts in history. But even if the ideal cannot be realized in history, the existence of that ideal constitutes a moral charge, so that the good life is one that seeks to strive toward it. This way of thinking corresponds well with Augustine’s insight that preservation of the best that political community can produce also presents a moral charge. This, in the end, is the value of the transformationist understanding of Christianity’s proper relationship to the world.

What I have been describing, beginning with two of the perspectives Richard Niebuhr described in *Christ and Culture* but building on this to take account of elements in Christian thought Niebuhr did not treat, is effectively how I think about my own work in the sphere of the ethics of war. I think of the idea of just war tradition, the focal core of my work, as itself the result of a process of engagement among different sources of influence: Christian

thought and ethics, to be sure, but also the theory and practice of politics, the theory and practice of military life, and other influences. When the classic conception of just war came together in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it manifested a broad cultural consensus on the place the use of armed force should have in the effort to serve the ends of political life. Though it was principally, in the first place, a product of canonical reasoning, debate, and decision, and though the particular summary account of this consensus given by Aquinas in the frame of his theology provided the standard statement of the just war idea that endured well into the modern age, this was by no means a narrowly Christian idea imposed on Western society by the Church. Rather its force and endurance came from its being a product of dialogue between the spiritual and the temporal in which both were respected and the conclusions reached respected the goods of temporal life in political community. How to replicate such dialogue and to produce such a fruitful and enduring end should be the aim of any effort at engaging Christianity with American foreign affairs. ■

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