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The Just War Revisited

Leading political theologian Oliver O'Donovan here takes a fresh look at some traditional moral arguments about war. Modern Christians differ widely on this issue. A few hold that absolute pacifism is the only viable Christian position, others subscribe in various ways to concepts of 'just war' developed out of a Western tradition that arose from the legacies of Augustine and Aquinas, while others again adopt more pragmatically realist postures. But what bearing does theology have on the issue, and is any kind of moral consensus possible?

Professor O'Donovan tackles the problem in a manner familiar from his earlier landmark volume *The Desire of the Nations*. He argues that since the Reformation the development of religious positions cannot be dissociated from the rise of legal theory and secular forms of justice. At the heart of the issue must lie a proper understanding of the relationship between politics and theology; and our sources are as likely to be Grotius or Locke as more overtly theological thinkers. In this light, O'Donovan re-examines questions of contemporary urgency including the use of biological and nuclear weapons, military intervention, economic sanctions, war-crimes trials, and the roles of the Geneva Convention, international conventions, and the UN. His enquiry opens with a challenging dedication to the new Archbishop of Canterbury and proceeds to shed new light on vital topics with which that Archbishop and others will be very directly engaged. It should be read by anyone concerned with the ethics of warfare.

OLIVER O'DONOVAN is Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology and Canon of Christ Church, University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine* (1980), *Begotten or Made* (1984), *The Desire of the Nations* (1996), *Peace and Certainty: A Theological Essay on Deterrence* (1989), *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (1993), *Resurrection and Moral Order* (1986), and *Common Objects of Love* (2002).

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Dedicatory preface

To the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury:
 Dear Rowan:

In your carefree professorial days, before you were summoned home to your pastoral responsibilities in Wales, you and I found ourselves pursuing a friendly disagreement over the Gulf War of 1991 in front of a politely detached audience of colleagues and students. That modest occasion was recalled by Kenneth W. Vaux, in the introduction to his own contribution to the same discussion, where he generously wrote that we ‘framed the debate with boldness and courage and stimulated a lively and respectful dialogue, not only in the university but in the wider church and society’.¹ Did we, indeed? I recognise our intention, well enough, but for two professors to have such an edifying effect on the wider church and society would have been something of a phenomenon. But now God has placed you in a position where, for better or worse, anything you say can be relied on to excite a lively, if not always respectful, response within the wider church and society. Those of us who still enjoy our professorial freedom are bound to offer you, and those who share with you the pastoral care of the church, such assistance as we can.

There are three elements in what follows, in somewhat contrasted styles. The title ‘Just War Revisited’ belongs to four lectures delivered in the University of Aberdeen in December 2001 under the auspices of that distinguished journal, *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, at

¹ Kenneth L. Vaux, *Ethics and the Gulf War: religion, rhetoric and righteousness*. Boulder etc., Westview Press, 1992, p. vii.

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the kind invitation of the Rev. Professor Iain Torrance, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Aberdeen and Editor of *SJT*. They aim to present, in a form which I believe to be more coherent than the bare lists of principles that usually substitute for an exposition, a longstanding tradition of thinking about war with deep roots in Christian theology. That this tradition is in fact neither a 'theory', nor about 'just wars', but *a proposal for doing justice in the theatre of war*, is a point that the reader is asked to reflect on. But pedantry will get us nowhere. As the 'just war theory' it is known to our contemporaries, and as 'just war theory' it is likely to go on being known.

Supplementing these lectures are four further short papers, one of which has seen the light of day elsewhere, the other three appearing now for the first time. These aim to address some special practical questions that have vexed the Western world in recent years, and to show how the resources of the tradition may be called on in approaching them. With these I run the risk that theologians always run in the face of complex practical questions, especially those with legal implications, that of being insufficiently versed in the details to satisfy the experts and of being too interested in them to satisfy a general readership. However, a bridge-builder can only sink half his foundations on either bank of the river. I think you will understand, with your own concerns for theology's bridge-building rôle, why I have thought this risk worth taking.

In conclusion I have added an Afterword about the international crisis we have been living through in the autumn of 2002. I did not wish to introduce this perspective into the earlier discussions, where the argument is the clearer from not being tied too closely to a particular occasion. On the other hand it seemed impossible to put a book on this subject in print at this time without some hint as to how its approach to the question might help us now. It is written, and entitled, 'without authority', to mark the difference between outlining a principled approach, on which I certainly claim *some* authority, and interpreting actual events, in which I am as open to misjudgments as anyone. The moralist knows, or ought to, that

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there is nothing more difficult and more perilous than reading the situation within which one actually stands.

In writing of just war 'revisited', I may arouse an expectation of something conservative, not politically but intellectually, an attempt to reinstate a tradition rather than push back its boundaries. Broadly speaking, and despite such attempts at boundary-pushing that the shorter essays undertake, this expectation is correct. No one can write on the morality of war at present without being aware of at least one frontier waiting to be opened up: a serious comparison between the Christian approach to the subject and the very different but equally careful approach of Islam. To those who have given us some preliminary guidance on the topic, I am grateful. But I have not pursued this line of enquiry here, because – well, to put it bluntly, I am not sure that a Western Christian public has *deserved* the indulgence of having two just-war theories put at its disposal, when it is clearly at a loss to know what to do with one. The attempt to understand where the West has come from must surely precede any fruitful thought of engagement.

The just-war theory of these pages is a twentieth-century recovery of an approach that had reached a considerable level of sophistication in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries before falling into a long disuse. Though respectable authorities have been misled on the point, it is not the 'traditional' belief of Christendom, if by 'traditional' is meant 'uninterrupted'; the dominant modes of thought both in the early patristic period and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were different, though in contrary ways. The stimulus to its recovery came from the Hague Conventions, and the moral urgency that accompanied it was provided by the agenda of the pseudo-heroic 'strategic air war' and its ugly, pouting grandchild, 'massive nuclear deterrence'. With the shift of geopolitical attention that accompanied the end of the cold war, the just war contention, together with the deterrence controversy, fell victim to a certain lapse of memory, and that is what provokes an attempt to 'revisit' it, not least because failure to recall the moral tradition is accompanied by

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failure to recall important events, even very recent ones. Not only 'theory' but 'experience', too, eludes us as we try to comprehend the highly threatening international landscape of our new century and to conceive ways of travelling safely and charitably across it.

Running through the discussion is a recurrent reflection: citizens of democracies do not know how to adopt a posture of *practical reasonableness* in the face of large challenges to peace. I have written below of the 'spirituality' of the just-war theory, by which is meant its capacity to make the reflecting subject conscious of his or her own responsible position before God in relation to other members of society who have their own differently responsible positions. The decisions are, on the one hand, *ours*, and not to be thrown off on to others' shoulders with a shudder of irritated editorialising; yet they are not ours *exclusively*, but only in relation to, and with respect for, politically responsible deciders, among whom we have to learn to deliberate sympathetically and collaboratively. If it is the case, as I suspect it is, that the reason the classic just-war theorists were good at inculcating this posture of responsibility was precisely that they believed in God's sovereignty and the world's redemption, one may expect to find it nourished especially in the discourse of the Christian churches.

There, however, one is too frequently disappointed. One of the considerations that moves me to commit these thoughts on armed conflict to print at this point is that those to whom it falls to guide Christian reflections in a time of war and rumours of war seem to have difficulty in taking the measure of their task. For this reason I address this little book to you, a friend on whom the heaviest of such burdens has come to rest. Not that you need me to supply you with ideas on the subject. But I dare to hope that in the reflections that follow, whether they persuade you or not, iron may sharpen iron, putting a suitable edge on your thoughts for the service of the church and the political community.

Advent 2002