War & Statecraft
An Exchange

Rowan Williams

In October 2002, George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., delivered a lecture on “Moral Clarity in a Time of War” [see FT, January 2003]. The lecture was a response to various statements from religious leaders in the run-up to the conflict in Iraq, most of which, in Weigel’s judgment, exhibited a deplorable ignorance or misunderstanding of the just war tradition. Weigel sets out not only to dust off what he believes is the authentic heart of the tradition, but also to defend a reading of that tradition which would offer secure moral grounding for a preemptive U.S. action against Iraq, or any comparable “rogue state.”

It is a formidable and sophisticated essay, building upon the author’s earlier work on the theological definitions of peace and order and upon the extensive work over several decades of James Turner Johnson on just war in the modern age. With much of Weigel’s critique I am in sympathy. I believe, however, that his account of the tradition is in one respect seriously questionable, and that his defense of preemptive action cannot be accommodated as easily as he thinks within the terms of classical just war theory.

First, though, my points of agreement. Weigel refers to recent work in the U.S. on the need for a “warrior” ethos of a fundamentally pagan kind to sustain us through the trials of late modern international politics; we need—so this style of argument maintains—heroism, ruthlessness, patriotic fervor, and a profound suspicion of moralistic or idealistic rhetoric that clouds our sense of what is possible in tragically constrained circumstances. As Weigel notes, this is effectively to say that morality has no public voice, that what he calls “statecraft” is beyond the reach of moral, especially religiously moral, principle; and he rightly rejects this as an unsustainable view for any religious person. Just war theory is a form of statecraft (i.e., it is an aspect of political ethics, which concerns how to do right in the conduct of ordered community life); it is a way of saying that war is not some monstrous aberration in human life, for which all standing orders are suspended, but is a set of actions requiring the same virtues as political life in general. As Weigel writes, “The just war tradition is best understood as a sustained and disciplined intellectual attempt to relate the morally legitimate use of proportionate and discriminate military force to morally worthy political ends.” Interestingly, Weigel here echoes, without mentioning, the argument of Oliver O’Donovan in Peace and Certainty (1989) about certain justifications of nuclear deterrence—that the Cold War advocates of massive deterrence involving indiscriminate targeting were, like pacifists, refusing to see war as an activity among others with a possible ethical structure. The apologist for deterrence of this kind assumes a sort of Manichaean view that war is of its nature irrational and apocalyptic, avoidable only by threats of total annihilation.

Against this mythology, Weigel rightly claims that we must think about war in moral categories and treat it as essentially a public enterprise, as opposed to private violence. But here my doubts begin. Weigel accuses recent writers on the subject of presenting the tradition as having a “presumption against violence” and thus making it a “casuistry of means-tests,” a set of hoops to be jumped through; and he says that one result of this is to focus attention unduly on what are usually called the jus in bello issues of restraint on the methods to be used in conflict. He claims that, in fact, the tradition has no such presumption and must be understood as beginning from questions about just
The implication is that action which intends what is which case it is not exactly violence in the pure sense. There is, however, a recognition that external force is to be enough like states to present even more obviously legitimate targets for preemptive action. At the same time, such networks are unlike states (even very bad states) in being not a mixture of good and bad, but "unmitigated evils whose only purpose is wickedness—the slaughter of innocents for ignoble political ends."

So to my first caveat. Weigel denies any presumption against violence in the tradition. But this is an odd reading of, say, St. Thomas Aquinas’ discussion in the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.40). Formally, this is a consideration of those conditions under which what would otherwise be gravely sinful would not be so. It is true to say that there is no specific discussion here of violence (to which I shall return in a moment); the focus is on the scriptural warnings about warfare, the sinfulness of disturbing peace, and so on. But it would be quite fair to say that St. Thomas is granting that there is a prima facie case against war, which is only resolved by appeal to the duty of the ruler to preserve peace internally and externally by the literal use of the sword (something explicitly allowed in Scripture). Private use of violence is wrong because a private person always has the alternative of resorting to law to seek redress; but if (as we might say) law itself is threatened, and the public good undermined, there is no higher court to look to.

Some of this is illuminated if we turn to Aquinas’ discussions of violence (I-II.6.4; II-II.66.8 and 175.1). Violence is an external force compelling certain sorts of action; as such, it is bound to appear as against nature or against justice (since it takes from someone or some group what is theirs, intrudes on their territory, restricts the exercise of their freedom of choice, and so on). External acts may be subject to violence, though the freedom of the will can never be affected in itself. There is, however, a recognition that external force is sometimes used to accelerate a natural movement; in which case it is not exactly violence in the pure sense. The implication is that action which intends what is natural to human beings, even if formally coercive, is legitimate; so that action which employs violence of some sort for the restoration of a broken or threatened social order does not have the nature of sin. This is the basis on which a large part of Aquinas’ discussion of legal penalties rests (II-II.64-65).

Public good is what is natural to human beings, the context in which they may exercise their freedom to realize the image of God. Confronted with action that is inimical to order, action that is "inordinate" in respect of public goods, the restraint on the freedom of others, the intrusion into what is theirs, and the privation of their personal resources that we normally call violence is not sinful. But in the nature of the case, only those charged with preserving the public good are competent and legitimate judges of the public good. An act of private redress, private vengeance, vigilantism, or whatever, may purport to punish inordinate behavior but it only deals with the offense to the individual, not the offense to the social body; thus it fails to heal the social body and even makes the wound worse. The private person must never use the violence that the ruler can rightly use, as a private person has the right of redress by legal due process.

The point of this long excursion into somewhat technical matters is to establish that Weigel’s claim that there is no presumption against violence in classical just war theory needs a good deal of refining. The ruler who administers the law may use coercion for the sake of the common good in domestic policing and in international affairs. But such coercion will always need publicly available justification in terms of the common good, since otherwise it will appear as an arbitrary infringement of natural justice. The whole point is that there is precisely a presumption against violence, which can be overcome only by a very clear account of the needs of the common good and of what constitutes a “natural” life for human beings.

Now Weigel is clear about some of these wider considerations: he writes of “the long, hard, never-to-be-finally-accomplished ‘domestication’ of international public life.” Likewise, he states that “the quest for ordered liberty in an evolving structure of international public life capable of advancing the classic goals of politics—justice, freedom, order, the general welfare, and peace” must serve as the “inner dynamic” of any pursuit of the national interest by the U.S. in order for it to be described as “just.” My problem is that by denying that there is a presumption against violence in the tradition, Weigel denies himself the most significant touchstone in the tradition for discerning the rationale of using force: external constraint on human liberty is normally a bad thing, but it is not so when human liberty is exercised against the liberty of others or indeed against one’s own dignity as a social and moral being. The point is that coercion is simply not to be justified unless it is answerable to a clear account of common human good. Even the
security of a specific state has to be seen in the light of this broader framework. So to provide an account of coercion as a moral tool, we need to have a robust account of the balance of liberties in an ordered society, just as Weigel wants—but one, I suggest, in which it is understood that violence, as an external limit on the freedom of another, is essentially anomalous because the essence of healthy social life is the voluntary restriction of any one agent's liberty in the corporate act of social life. More specifically still, Christian doctrine, in describing the optimal human community as the Body of Christ, with all its biblical associations, considers the social unit as an exchange of free gift before it is a community ruled by coercion. If and when coercion is exercised, it is in response to situations in which certain citizens or subgroups are prevented from proper social action by the arbitrary violence of others. This is intrinsic to the exercise of law in our world, where voluntary self-gift is not exactly automatic.

This begins to suggest that the active reconstruction of justice in a society is not an optional extra to military engagement; but it also reinforces the point about which I agree most earnestly with Weigel, that war as a moral option is a tool for the promotion of specific social goods. As such, however, it is subject to the usual criteria by which means towards an end are to be judged—to considerations of “prudence.” In the language of scholastic ethics, we must judge the fitness of means to ends. Or, more plainly, military options have to be weighed against other ways of securing or restoring justice. Weigel seems to assume that we have already gotten to the point where such a discernment has happened; not only coercion in general but military coercion has emerged as the only possible course. In what he says about terrorism, Weigel makes this assumption explicit: there is no point in asking what responses are appropriate to terrorism. “In circumstances where there is plausible reason to believe that nonmilitary actions are unavailable or unavailing,” Weigel claims, “the ‘last’ in ‘last resort’ can mean ‘only.’”

This suggests, uncomfortably, that there are circumstances in which you will know almost automatically when it is a waste of time to consider nonmilitary options; and the implication of earlier comments is that where terrorism is concerned this can be taken for granted, since terrorists have no recognizable political aims, or are devoid of political rationality. The assumption that an enemy can be regarded as devoid of political rationality is briefly but effectively discussed by Oliver O'Donovan in the essay mentioned above. There he argues that the principle of “total” deterrence (the nuclear threat) is presented as the only realistic option by assuming “an enemy . . . who cannot be made susceptible to the codes of honor and rational political interest”; but this, he points out, is to locate original sin or radical evil outside oneself (corporate or individual)—to assume that it is unproblematic to identify political rationality with one's own agenda. But such a view is the opposite of “realism.”

Which brings us to an awkwardness in Weigel's position. The terrorist, he says, has no aims that can be taken seriously as political or moral. But this is a sweeping statement, instantly challengeable. The terrorist is objectively wicked, no dispute about that, in exercising the most appalling form of blackmail by menacing the lives of the innocent. Nothing should qualify this judgement. But this does not mean that the terrorist has no serious moral goals. It is possible to use unspeakably wicked means to pursue an aim that is shared by those who would not dream of acting in the same way, an aim that is intelligible or desirable. The risk in claiming so unproblematic a right to define what counts as politics and so to dismiss certain sorts of political calculation in combating terrorism is that the threatened state (the U.S. in this instance) loses the power of self-criticism and becomes trapped in a self-referential morality which creates even deeper difficulties in the application of just war theory.

I noted earlier the need for a ruler or government to be exposed to assessment by larger standards of the human good than national interest. Weigel is clear that the U.S. is de facto the only power capable of taking the lead in the struggle for world order, and he is skeptical of an international tribunal in which “the interests of the French foreign ministry and the strategic aims of the repressive Chinese government” dictate the determinations of the Security Council. The point is not without substance; but who is to adjudicate the interests of the U.S. government and its strategic aims, which cannot automatically be assumed to be identical with the detached promotion of “world order”?

This is by no means an anti-American argument, as the same could be said about any specific government assuming the identity of its interests with “world order.” Weigel is unconvinced that any kind of international consensus is imperative for just war theory to be applicable to a U.S. intervention against rogue states or terrorist networks. But, granting the weakness of international legal institutions and the practical difficulties entailed in activating them credibly, it is important to allow that no government can simply be a judge in its own case in this respect. Indeed, this issue takes us back to one of the absolute fundamentals of just war theory:
violence is not be undertaken by private persons. If a state or administration acts without due and visible attention to agreed international process, it acts in a way analogous to a private person.

The private person has redress in a higher court; do states? Aquinas and later just war theorists were writing in a context where what we understand as international legal structures did not exist (outside the Church, whose standing in such matters was a matter of complex dispute in the Middle Ages). There is a principle which allows the lower jurisdiction to act if the higher is absent or negligent. Does this apply in the modern context? I do not seek to settle these questions here, only to note that their significance for restating anything like a just war theory seems to be underrated by Weigel. Even if the international structures do not exist or lack credibility, the challenge remains as to how any one nation can express its accountability to the substantial concerns of international law.

As to the appropriate structures for this in the middle- to long-term, that too is a question I cannot seek to settle here. But if I may make a suggestion which I have outlined elsewhere, there is surely a case for a Standing Commission on Security within the UN structure, incorporating legal and other professionals, capable of taking expert evidence, which could advise on these questions and recommend UN intervention where necessary—instead of complete reliance on the present Security Council framework, which suffers from all the problems Weigel and others have identified. This is one way of recognizing that in the present world of global economic interdependence, colonial and postcolonial relationships, instant communications, and so forth, it is more essential than ever to have institutions that express and activate some commitment to a common good that is not nationally defined. A significant part of what I have been arguing is that the just war tradition in fact demands this kind of internationalism, in the sense that it makes a strong challenge to violence as the tool of private interest or private redress; and “privacy” of this kind is most definitely something that can be ascribed to states as well as individuals.

W eigel concludes his argument by appealing for a recognition of where just war theory should fit into the processes of democratic decision making. He rightly says that it represents an ethic designed to serve statesmen; but then he proposes a really startling theological novelty. He writes that “a charism of political discernment is unique to the vocation of public service,” and he claims that this is a gift denied to church leaders and other religious spokespersons, so that a measure of modesty is appropriate in such persons when they participate in public argument.

This is related to, though not identical with, the more prosaic point that religious leaders don’t know what governments know and therefore have no privileged extra information that would enable them to make more morally secure judgments than their rulers. But this requires further thought. First of all, there is no such thing in moral theology as a “charism of political discernment.” A charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed for the building up of the Body of Christ, and wisdom is undoubtedly a gift of the Holy Spirit. But there is no charism that goes automatically with political leadership. A political leader may or may not be open to the gifts of the Spirit; democracy itself assumes, though, that the professed wisdom of any leader or any party is challengeable.

What we can properly expect in political leaders is not charism but virtue—the virtue of political prudence, which involves, once again, understanding what means are appropriate to agreed ends. Like all virtues, this one requires good habits that are formed by appropriate teaching and learning and that do not simply reach a plateau of excellence but need daily renewal and exercise. Of course governments know things that citizens don’t (it would be a bit worrying if they didn’t); but it needs to be said, with appropriate modesty, that others know things that the government sometimes does not. Lawyers, NGOs, linguists, anthropologists, religious communities, journalists, strategists, military and diplomatic historians—all know some things that may not instantly appear on the radar screen of any government, and the democratic process is about making sure that government hears what it may not know. This is not a claim to superior expertise overall, but simply to a voice in the debate and a freedom to exercise discernment on the basis of what is publicly available for judgment. Any appeal to universally superior knowledge, let alone some sort of charism of office, risks preempting real political or, indeed, theological debate in this area.

In the end, my unease with Weigel’s otherwise welcome and excellent essay is that it encourages a weakening of the freedom of moral theology to sustain the self-critical habit in a nation and its political classes. By sidestepping the subtleties of the analysis of violence in the traditional theory it ends by leaving the solitary nation-state battling terror or aggression morally exposed to an uncomfortable degree; and it attempts to avoid this problem by appealing to a not-very-plausible theological innovation in the shape of the “charism of responsibility.” If the just war theory is to be properly reconsidered—not as a checklist of moral
requirements but as part of a wide-ranging theory of political good and political coercion—it needs to be replanted in a greater depth of soil. And it needs to see itself, as Weigel correctly says, as part of a protracted argument about statecraft. In that argument, many voices have a proper place, more at times than governments might find comfortable.

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George Weigel

Rowan Williams’ lecture makes abundantly clear that a formidable theological intelligence is now resident at Lambeth Palace. That is a development of prime importance in refining the public moral debate in this time of war, and I welcome it wholeheartedly. I am also grateful to the Archbishop for identifying the significant points of agreement between us—although, as I hope to demonstrate, I have a rather different reading of the implications of several of those agreements.

In order to foster the further clarification of thought for which Dr. Williams calls, let me begin with some context-setting. In writing “Moral Clarity in a Time of War,” my first intention was not to promote a reading of the just war tradition that would provide a secure moral rationale for preemptive U.S.-led military action against the regime of Saddam Hussein, similar outlaw states, or international terrorism; it was to propose a revitalization of the just war way of thinking as the basis of morally serious statecraft in the Western democracies in the circumstances of a post-September 11 world. To be sure, Iraq was an urgent test case for the just war tradition in this new and dangerous situation; and it is no secret that, in my judgment, a just war for which Dr. Williams calls, let me begin with some context-setting. In writing “Moral Clarity in a Time of War,” my first intention was not to promote a reading of the significant points of agreement between us—although, as I hope to demonstrate, I have a rather different reading of the implications of several of those agreements.

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For the essay’s first purpose was to address a grave theological and ecclesial problem: over more than a quarter century, religious intellectuals and pastoral leaders had distorted, and were continuing to distort, the just war tradition by disengaging it from its proper context within a theory of statecraft. And it seemed to me that the only way to bring the tools of moral reasoning to bear on the distinctive circumstances of this particular time of war, this post-September 11 world, was to restore just war thinking to its proper location within Christian moral reflection on the distinctive ends of public life. Thus I take it as a very good sign for the future of the discussion that Dr. Williams agrees with me on four crucial points: that the just war tradition is not a free-floating casuistry of means tests; that just war thinking must function within a normative understanding of the political task; that, in this very specific sense, “war” is a moral category—it is the use of proportionate and discriminate armed force for public ends by publicly accountable public authorities who have a moral obligation to defend those for whom they have assumed responsibility; and that “war” (bellum) must be rigorously distinguished from brigandage, piracy, terrorism, and other forms of duellum, the use of armed force by private persons for private ends.

These points of agreement bring us to the first significant disagreement—one that involves the starting point for just war reflection. Does the just war way of thinking begin with a “presumption against war,” or does it begin elsewhere?

This entire discussion has been confused by the tendency of “presumption against war” proponents to fudge the language, so that in some instances we are told that the tradition begins with a presumption against war, whereas on other occasions the tradition is said to begin with a presumption against violence. While I quoted both these formulations in “Moral Clarity,” the real issue is the so-called presumption against war, as the terminus a quo for just war thinking. Thus the Archbishop’s interesting observations on the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of “violence” do not quite get us to the heart of the argument.

In thinking about these matters, I rely on the historical research of James Turner Johnson, who insists that there is simply no warrant in the tradition—in its Augustinian, medieval, or early modern forms—for starting just war thinking with a presumption against war. Rather, as I wrote with emphasis in my essay, the tradition “begins somewhere else.” If the just war tradition is theologically and historically embedded within a more comprehensive theory of statecraft—a theory which stresses the prior obligation of public authority to advance and defend the peace of right order (tranquillitas ordinis), which is composed of freedom, justice, and security—then just war thinking “begins” not with presumptions for or against war but with a context-setting moral judgment about the obligation of public authority to pursue the peace of right order—which includes the obligation of providing for the security of one’s people against aggression. That, and nothing other than that, is the “starting point” for just war thinking. Questions of
how—can the peace of right order be defended and advanced through nonmilitary means, or must proportionate and discriminate armed force be deployed?—come into focus only when the what and the why of morally defensible political ends have been established. Dr. Williams’ reference to Aquinas’ discussion of just war in the *Summa* demonstrates this (even as it undermines his historically and theoretically questionable claim that Aquinas, too, shares the presumption against war). Why can a sovereign ruler override what Dr. Williams calls Aquinas’ “prima facie case against war”? Because, I suggest, the ruler is under a prior moral obligation, a responsibility to defend the peace of right order. That prior obligation is the beginning of all morally serious thinking about the use of armed force for morally serious ends.

Thus just war thinking, in Aquinas and elsewhere, has to be located within a given theologian’s more comprehensive understanding of the normative character of statecraft, its ends, and the means appropriate to securing those ends—a point I could have made clearer in my essay.

What does this have to do with today’s arguments? A lot, actually. For the net result of the presumption against war has not been to reinforce the obvious—namely, that public authority has to make a moral case that the use of armed force in defending the peace of right order is the only responsible option in this instance, because other nonmilitary means have failed or have been reasonably judged to be unavailing, given the threat and the aggressor. Rather, the presumption against war has smugled into the just war discussion a pacifist premise—armed force is wicked—that classic just war thinking rejects. As I suggested in “Moral Clarity,” the classic just war tradition does not regard armed force as inherently suspect morally; rather, classic just war thinking treats armed force as an instrument that can be used for good or for evil, depending on who is using it, for what ends, and how.

That smugged pacifist premise has made a hash of theological method, inverting the tradition by putting *ius in bello* questions ahead of the determinations that give those questions moral sense—the determinations of the *ius ad bellum*. It has also distorted the prudential judgments of many religious leaders as they have tried to read the signs of the times through the filter of the presumption against war. Time and again in recent years religious leaders have been proven wrong in their predictions about the likely consequences of various uses of armed force. There is certainly an ideological element to these failures of prognostication, as more and more of the world’s established Christian leadership has adopted, from the international left, a functional pacifism whose primary objection to the use of armed force has to do with who is using it—that is, the West, understood as an oppressor culture. But ideological predispositions don’t explain every facet of this global clerical lurch à gauche; something else is also going on here. And that something else is, I think, the presumption against war, which functions like a badly manufactured pair of eyeglasses, distorting the vision of the observer. To return, once again, to the most obvious example of this artificial myopia: in their 1983 pastoral letter, “The Challenge of Peace,” the Catholic bishops of the United States seriously misread the moral and political dynamics of the last decade of the Cold War (insisting that nuclear arms control was the key to peace, not regime change in the Soviet Union and its satellites), not because the (complex) facts of the case were not there to be seen and understood, but because the presumption against war blurred their perception of what they were seeing. The same, I suggest, holds true for the many warnings of catastrophe from religious leaders that preceded the Gulf War of 1991 and the most recent Iraq War.

Dr. Williams once jocularly referred to himself as a “hairy lefty,” and while his article here rises far above the standards of analysis and judgment typically found in religious activist circles, there are several points in his essay at which, I respectfully suggest, portside-tilting politics are getting the better of empirically informed theological analysis.

The first of these has to do with terrorism and outlaw states. The Archbishop’s claim that today’s terror networks are motivated by some form of political rationality is, at the very least, misleading, for it seems to ignore the powerful currents of nihilism at work in the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other contemporary terrorist organizations and networks. Anarchic nihilism has been a prominent feature of modern terrorism since its origins in nineteenth-century Russia. When that form of nihilism is married to a distorted conception of monotheism, it yields a goal that I am sure Dr. Williams rejects on moral grounds (i.e., the coercive imposition of politicized Islam on a national and international scale) and a method—mass murder—that he rightly deplores. As for outlaw states, it would strain credulity to suggest that Kim Jong Il’s aims for North Korea are either “intelligible” or “desirable,” so I cannot imagine that the Archbishop’s (entirely appropriate) counsel to be careful in defining “what counts as politics” applies here. Moreover, to deny that a rogue state or terrorist organization lacks morally defensible
goals is not to conclude, without further analytic ado, that military action is the most appropriate means for dealing with the threat posed by, say, North Korea. As classic just war thinking would affirm, there is no one-size-fits-all strategic prescription for dealing with the world’s madmen.

The Archbishop is right to caution against nations acting as judges in their own cases. But is it really what happened in the U.S. government’s decision making prior to the recent Iraq War? The U.S.-led action in Iraq was supported by allies, most notably the government of Dr. Williams’ own country. After strenuous efforts to secure Security Council approval for the use of armed force to vindicate Security Council resolutions, the Bush administration, its judgment confirmed by the governments involved in a coalition of the willing, did not decide to act as its own judge; it decided, again with allies, that some of the judges in this instance—in particular, France, Germany, and Russia—could not be taken seriously as moral or political arbiters of the case in question. The administration’s judgment, supported by Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Australia, and others, was not unilateralist; and that judgment was reached after vigorous public and governmental debate within the states involved in the U.S.-led coalition. For that reason (and many others), the suggestion that the United States government was acting, in the case of Saddam Hussein’s regime, as a “private person” strikes me as unpersuasive.

The Archbishop is quite right in arguing that the just war tradition demands a form of internationalism. The question for prudential judgment is whether the current UN system is in fact a form of internationalism that commands moral respect. Dr. Williams and I are quite agreed that the UN is in need of serious reform. The difference between us seems to involve a disagreement about whether the present UN is in fact a political and moral entity independent of states and a genuinely disinterested internationalist force in world politics. In my view, the recent debacle in the Security Council with respect to Iraq demonstrates that, in dealing with international security issues, today’s UN is entirely the tool of states, many of the most important of which—again, France, Germany, and Russia—are certainly not making their policy calculations on genuinely internationalist grounds, or on grounds of moral reason rightly understood. Perhaps this could change; but until it does, the moral obligations of national leaders will remain what they have always been.

This fact of life leads to the important question of the international accountability of a powerful country such as the United States. Serious moral reasoning about that question does not begin by assuming that the present UN system is the only, or perhaps even the primary, locus for measuring that accountability. The development of morally and politically worthy international institutions of conflict resolution—which is demanded both by the just war tradition (as the Archbishop suggests) and by Catholic social doctrine from Pius XII through John Paul II—must begin with a frank assessment of the corruptions of the present UN system, not with the assumption that the UN has achieved any sort of monopoly on the moral legitimation of the use of armed force in defense of the peace of right order.

I gladly accept Dr. Williams’ proposal that “virtue” (with specific reference to the virtue of prudence) is the apt word for getting at the distinctive habitus to be desired in public authorities, while assuring him that, in using “charism,” I was not suggesting that the presidential oath of office (or its British parliamentary equivalent) involves an infusion of any particular gift of the Holy Spirit. And we are quite agreed that public authorities ought to consult widely in developing their own moral clarity in this time of war. It is certainly true that those outside the halls of power can sometimes see things that those inside have difficulty discerning. From my own experience with the present U.S. administration, I can say with some assurance that this point is well understood in the White House, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense.

These things happen differently in the United States than in Great Britain, where the policy debate (at least as I observe it) is conducted within far more confined circles; the Archbishop rightly cautions against drawing that circle of consultation too narrowly. By the same token, as a distinguished theologian, he surely agrees that public authorities will be more willing to learn from theology’s distinctive perspective on national and international security issues when theologians and clergymen demonstrate that their perceptions are informed by a clear view of the just war tradition as part of a responsible Christian theory of statecraft.

Having written early and at length that a revolution of conscience preceded and made possible the Revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, I am not unaware of the imperative of sustaining what Dr. Williams nicely describes as “the freedom of moral theology to sustain the self-critical habit in a nation and its political classes.” Perhaps the aforementioned difference between the United States and Great Britain as political cultures leads me to be somewhat less concerned about the possibility of a weakening of theology’s critical voice in the foreign policy debates.
of the early twenty-first century. My confidence that the debate will continue to be morally informed here in America may also have something to do with the relative culture-forming capacities of Christian communities here and in Britain. (It would be interesting, for example, to learn if the just war tradition is as alive in the British defense and military establishment, or at Sandhurst and Dartmouth, as it is in the American officer corps, and at West Point and Annapolis.)

In any event, and to return to the beginning, I take Dr. Williams’ lecture—and our basic agreement on the intrinsic relationship of the just war tradition to a morally informed Christian theory of statecraft—as a hopeful sign that what I termed the “forgetting” of the just war tradition may be remedied by the kind of forthright, critical, and ecumenical conversation to which the Archbishop and I are both committed.

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Flotsam on a Winter Tide

Round again on the full tide, churning close to the quiet foreshore, then caught by the undertow and turning round again—

slowing now: as far-traveled men, turning back with regret or yearning, drift for a while near journey’s end.

Knowing all and beyond all knowing, Nature speaks at the tide’s turn, when all that drifts is gathered, going round again.

David Anthony