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I

The issue of how the moral principles stemming from the example and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth should be applied to political life has always been uncertain and controversial. This largely because, as the son of a village carpenter in 1st century Palestine, Jesus had no responsibility of any kind for government. How, then, should Christians with political responsibility, whether as electors or officials, seek to follow him? In particular, how should they—how *can* they—stay faithful to the principle of self-sacrificial love and realise it politically? Does it require the repudiation of all kinds of 'interest'? Does it oblige the rejection of all kinds of 'force'? And how can one 'love' the perpetrator and the victim equally?

Some Christians have taken a 'purist' line and sought to isolate themselves from wider political life and its grubby compromises with self-interest and the use of force, by creating self-contained communities. The medieval monastic and Reformation-era Anabaptist traditions are prime examples of such an attempt to maintain apolitical Christian purity.

Others have supposed that Christian love can find direct political expression, by downplaying the political contest of vying interests and the need for the use of force. Such was the view of the 'Social Gospel' tradition of late 19th and early 20th century liberal Protestantism.

Yet others, recognising the contested nature of political life, the unavoidable operation of interests, and the necessity of the use of various kinds of force, have nevertheless sought to work out how to bring Christian love to bear upon them. One such was the American Lutheran, Reinhold Niebuhr, who, as a pastor

in Detroit during the First World War, realised that the pieties of the Social Gospel did not survive contact with the realities of economic conflict between the assembly-line workers in Henry Ford's automobile factories and their bosses. This pastoral experience compelled Niebuhr to undertake a lifelong re-evaluation of the political relevance and role of Christian love, the first results of which were published in his 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Niebuhr's attempts to marry Christian ethics with political realities subsequently attracted the label, 'Christian Realism'.

However, although Christian Realism is now primarily associated with Niebuhr, it should not be confined to him. Others, both before and after him, have sought to do as he did. Therefore, Christian Realism needs to be understood more broadly. In my view, it is best understood in contrast to four different things.

II

The first foil to Christian Realism is moral 'idealism' in the popular rather than philosophical sense, namely, as the adherence to, and assertion of, moral ideals without due recognition of the limits of human resources and the propensity of human beings to vice and wrongdoing—that is to say, without due recognition of creaturely finitude and sin.

One example of this can be seen in the debate about legalising physician-assisted suicide. Advocates of legalisation make their case on the main ground of the principle of individual autonomy, and they propose legislation that prescribes safeguards that would protect vulnerable people against undue pressure to 'choose' assistance in suicide. However, what they consistently fail to do, because it would weaken their case, is to take into account the practical difficulty of identifying subtle social pressure from family members and even healthcare staff, and to consider what well-intentioned safeguards would amount to in practice in a health-care system hard-pressed to find sufficient beds and whose staff are short of time and patience. They also overlook the phenomenon—rare, but not rare enough—of physicians and nurses who are addicted to the power that they exercise over their patients, a lust for domination that reaches its consummation in killing them.

A second example of reality-evading moral idealism comes from a meeting of the Pontifical Academy for Life, which I attended in June 2018. There the Roman Catholic moral theologian, Lisa Sowle Cahill, lamented the fact that 'the world has fallen short in its responsibility for the health and well-being of children, especially girl children, and their mothers', mainly because 'most of the world's societies' suffer from a 'lack of political will'.[1] In response, she urged that the welfare of children and mothers be made 'a practical priority, as well as a legally and politically recognized obligation'. [2] While she herself did not speak explicitly of the 'rights' of children and mothers, she did appeal to Catholic social teaching's recognition of such rights, and she did not demur when her respondent, Laura Palazzani, interpreted her to be asserting 'the fundamental human rights to life and health, the rights of children, and the rights of women'.[3]

Now, there is no doubt that that health and welfare of children and mothers across the globe are very important goods that deserve protection and promotion. But there are many other goods—some of them equally or perhaps even more important—that deserve protection and promotion. Unlike single-interest lobbyists and bodies, however, governments bear the unenviable responsibility of having to decide how to allocate finite resources to secure which rights and goods, and to what degree. They have to work within the unyielding limits of material, financial, and political feasibility. No government can give all rights equal priority; every government has to make compromises.[4] So if governments are to do as Professors Cahill and Palazzani want and make the rights of children and mothers a priority, other rights and goods will have to make way and suffer demotion. Which ones should they be, and why? Riding high on rights idealism and professionally unburdened by the responsibility to

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[1] Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Ethics of "Coming into the World"', in Vincenzo Paglia and Renzo Pegoraro, eds, *Equal Beginnings. But Then? A Global Responsibility*, proceedings of the XXIV General Assembly of Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life (Rome: Pontifical Academy for Life, 2018), p. 83.

[2] Cahill, 'Ethics of "Coming into the World"', p. 88.

[3] Cahill, 'Ethics of "Coming into the World"', pp. 85-7; Laura Pallazani, 'Commentary on the paper, "The Ethics of Coming into the World" by Lisa S. Cahill', in Paglia and Pegoraro, *Equal Beginnings*, p. 96.

[4] Referring to the rights created by the I.C.E.S.C.R., Eric Posner comments: 'States that seek to satisfy these rights [to work, health care, education, and social welfare] must make trade-offs. Because states have limited resources, money used to provide health care comes from education, or vice-versa' (*The Twilight of Human Rights Law*, p. 87).

face hard choices and make any political compromises, the professors gave no answers.

III

A second illuminating contrast is between Christian Realism and abstract thinking. In 2015 I published an essay entitled, 'Less Hegel, More History: Christian Ethics and Political Realities'. In it I observed that a vice infecting much academic Christian ethics today is the habit of trying to grasp the world through abstractions, which, preserved from interrogation by the world's angular realities, function as substitutes for actually *looking at* the world. I noticed, for example, that some young Christian ethicists emerging from Princeton University were much impressed by the republican philosophy of Philip Pettit, which argues that domination is an intrinsically bad thing. Since Pettit himself stipulates that 'domination' means arbitrary rule and enslavement, he cannot be faulted, since it is wicked by definition—like 'torture' or 'rape'. The problem arises, however, when Pettit's disciples proceed to assume that anything in the real world that involves hierarchy or coercion—that is, one person dominating another—is necessarily an instance of 'domination' as stipulated and therefore immoral.

If one comes to this line of thinking, as I do, from intensive study of the ethics and history of both war and the British empire, then it seems obviously wrongheaded. Surely, we *want* the police to *dominate* the mafia, don't we? And we *want* those fighting in a just cause to *dominate* those fighting in an unjust one? And, no, although all actual empires involve the use and threat of coercion (just like nation-states and, indeed, republics), they have not always been simply arbitrary or enslaving in their rule. The British empire, for example, granted Roman Catholics in Quebec freedom of religion in 1763 (much to the irritation of American colonists), suppressed the slave trade across the Atlantic and in Africa throughout the 19th century, granted black Africans in Cape Colony the vote (subject to a remarkably low property requirement) as early as 1853, and appointed native Indians as judges under the Raj decades before the American republic appointed African American ones. Without bracing contact with empirical and historical reality, abstract concepts such as 'domination' or 'colonialism' too easily become the vehicles of fashionable prejudice.

A variation on the problem of trying to grasp the world through abstractions can be found in the writing of the influential American Protestant ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas. In one of his most mature works, for example, he sets the 'church' over and against the 'world' and proceeds to describe the latter in terms of broad-brush abstractions, all of them pejorative: 'Constantinianism', 'liberalism', 'modernity', 'democracy', and 'technocracy'.[5] Let me take just one of these: 'liberalism'. As I have complained elsewhere, Hauerwas's engagement with political liberalism is ad hoc, underdeveloped, and indiscriminate.[6] Liberal political thought is not all of a single kind. Indeed, some of it is not merely compatible with Christian belief but actually required by it. Hauerwas does not actually deny this, but he ignores it nonetheless.[7] He continues to essentialise 'liberalism' (negatively) as he continues to essentialise 'the world' (negatively). At one point he objects that 'Constantinianism' holds that the validity of the church or Jesus Christ or the New Testament 'is to be judged by standards derived from the world'.[8] To which I say, 'Never mind the provenance, pay attention to the data'. Or, to echo Wittgenstein, 'Don't assume, look! And then discriminate'.[9] The Spirit of the One God is Lord of the whole world and not just of the church. So, we cannot assume that everything in the world is alien to the kingdom of God. We have to discern the spirits, not rubbish them by labelling them with dismissive abstractions.

One remedy for this ailment is for Christians to read less moral theology and political philosophy and more history. So, for example, suppose that a Christian is thinking about the ethics of the use of violent force in terms of the doctrine of just war. From his general theological education, he will know that love is a Christian virtue, and in the light of the example of Jesus, he might assume that love should always take the form of compassion. From his reading of St

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[5] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 216, 221, 222.

[6] Nigel Biggar, 'Is Stanley Hauerwas Sectarian?', in Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells, eds, *Faithfulness and Fortitude. In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), pp. 152-60

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Where Would I be Without Friends?', in Nation and Wells, *Faithfulness and Fortitude*, pp. 325-6.

[8] Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, p. 221.

[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwells, 1972), section 66: 'Don't think, but look'; Rush Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1981), p. 171: 'I'll teach you differences'.

Augustine, he will know that love must always motivate and discipline war, if it is to be just. And from his wider reading of the 'just war' literature, he will know that one of the standard features of a justified decision to go to war is that there is a reasonable prospect of success.

Imagine, then, that one evening our Christian lays down his copy of Augustine's *Letters* and takes up Barrie Pitt's history of the battle of El Alamein, when the British Empire scored its first major victory on land over the Germans in the Second World War. He comes to page 396, where he reads of a briefing conference held in the middle of the battle, in which Major General Freyberg communicates General Montgomery's orders to Brigadier Currie, commander of the 9th Armoured Brigade:

> The task for 9th Armoured Brigade—to advance past the infantry objective, break through the enemy defences and immediately beyond the Rahman Track and then hold open the gap against enemy counter-attacks until the heavy brigades of the 1st Armoured Division had gone through — was so obviously one of difficulty and danger that when Currie's time came to make comment, he rather diffidently suggested that by the end of the day his brigade might well have suffered 50 per cent casualties. To this Freyberg had replied with studied nonchalance, 'Perhaps more than that. The Army Commander [Montgomery] says that he is prepared to accept a hundred per cent'.[10]

This account of a particular moment in North Africa in October 1942 reminds our ethicist of other reading he has done in military history, and it gives birth to the unsettling thought that one of the conditions of military success is a commander's possession of a certain kind of 'callousness'—or, less provocatively, 'callous*ed*ness'. A successful commander has to be willing to order soldiers, who may be close personal friends, to fight to the death. And in order to do this, he has to be able to distance himself from the human consequences of his decision, to harden or callous himself against them. This is what Winston Churchill observed of General Douglas Haig, who commanded the British Army on the Western Front during the First World War. 'He presents

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[10] Barrie Pitt, *The Crucible of War. 2 vols. Vol. 1: Year of Alamein 1942* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 396-7.

to me in those red years', wrote Churchill, 'the same mental picture as a great surgeon before the days of anaesthetics: … intent upon the operation, entirely removed in his professional capacity from the agony of the patient…. He would operate without excitement … and if the patient died, he would not reproach himself'. But then Churchill adds: 'It must be understood that I speak only of his professional actions. Once out of the theatre, his heart was a warm as any man's'.[11] History, then, teaches that a kind of certain professional callousedness is a condition of military success. Just war doctrine requires that military success be possible. The logic of just war doctrine, therefore, appears to make callousedness a necessary military virtue.

But can callousedness really be a *Christian* virtue? Our Christian reflects on his conversation the previous evening with an actual surgeon, and on his own experience of heading a university department in the wake of severe cuts in funding, and he realises that all sorts of leading social roles require well-intentioned human beings to make decisions and perform acts that will foreseeably hurt others; and that in order to make and do them, they have to grow thick skin—they have to callous themselves. Thus, observing that callousedness need not involve a culpable lack of care or a failure to love, our Christian finds himself brought to the novel conclusion that it can be a Christian virtue. Had he not picked up a history book, however, this would never have occurred to him. So: less Hegel and more history, please—if Christian ethics is going to do justice to political and military reality and so deserve a hearing from policy-makers and decision-takers.

A second remedy is for Christians—especially academics in seminaries or departments of Theology—to get out more. One reason that Christian ethics so often manages to evade the challenges posed by empirical reality is that social contact between academics (not least those in departments of religion and theology) and those whom Reinhold Niebuhr nicely called 'the burden-bearers of the world'[12] is so often lacking. At one point in his critique of my book, *In Defence of War*, the scholar of international relations, Cian O'Driscoll, writes that just war theorists like me are inevitably part of 'the war-machine' that we

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[11] Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1937), pp 226, 227.
[12] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 15.

are trying to constrain, and that we therefore stand in danger of coming so close to the flame of power that we get burnt by it.[13] I understand what he means: institutions do acquire a momentum of their own—sometimes perverse—that is hard to stop, and well-meaning individuals need to take care lest they get carried away. Nevertheless, it struck me that where Cian sees a machine, I see faces— the faces of friends in public office, who are, I think, more morally reflective and sensitive than the average citizen, humbler, less sanctimonious, and who have shouldered responsibilities and taken risks that academics like me have chosen careers to avoid. It is well known that remoteness from the exercise of political power yields the important advantage of critical distance. What is less well known is that it also occasions a grave temptation—a temptation to relish too much the self-flattering role of righteous prophet, to indulge in wishful thinking, to day-dream among the 'what ifs', and never to grasp the necessary nettle. Christians need to get to know those in public office, get acquainted with the burdens they bear, appreciate the constraints under which they must operate, and enter with them imaginatively into the tragic dilemmas they must face. Then, having taken the trouble to exercise their love in playing pastor, they will have earned the right to play prophet.

Augustine would approve. In AD 408 he wrote to Paulinus of Nola:

> On the subject of punishing or refraining from punishment, what am I to say? It is our desire that when we decide whether or not to punish people, in either case it should contribute wholly to their security. These are indeed deep and obscure matters: what limit ought to be set to punishment with regard to both the nature and extent of guilt, and also the strength of spirit the wrongdoers possess? What ought each one to suffer?… What do we do when, as often happens, punishing someone will lead to his destruction, but leaving him unpunished will lead to someone else being destroyed?... What trembling, what darkness!… Trembling and fear have come upon me and darkness has covered me,

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[13] Cian O'Driscoll, 'Tough Reading: Nigel Biggar on Callousness and Just War', *Soundings*, 97/2 (2014), p. 212.

> and I said, Who will give me wings like a dove's? Then I will fly away and be at rest'…. [Psalm 55 (54).5-8].[14]

But Augustine did not flee. He did not run away. He stayed. He continued to shoulder the responsibilities of bishop, which, as the Roman Empire crumbled around him, were increasingly those of government. He kept up pastoral correspondence with military tribunes like Boniface and Marcellinus, whose Christian consciences were troubled by what they had to do. With them he lamented the tragic dilemmas of political life, but he didn't flinch from facing them. And note: none of this prevented Augustine from developing the prophetic critique of the Roman Empire that became *The City of God*. He stands, therefore, as shining example of one who took the risk of coming close to the flame of power and yet was not consumed by it—of one who risked playing pastor and yet could still play prophet. Christian ethicists should follow Augustine, and not merely read him.

IV

A third, and very important, contrast is between Christian Realism and Hobbesian realism.

According to the 17th century thinking of Thomas Hobbes, the State of Nature, before and apart from civil society—say, on virgin territory or under conditions of anarchy—is completely amoral. All morality arises from social contracts and before these contracts there is no morality. Instead, there is absolute liberty. Such a view stands in a long tradition of thought that reaches back to the Roman concept of pre-legal *dominium* or absolute 'mastery'[15] that is implied in Cicero's version of the State of Nature: 'There was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals … they did nothing by the guidance of reason …'.[16] This Roman tradition was adopted by Renaissance humanists in the 16th century, such as Andrea Alciato, who wrote that 'ancient authors relate that in

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[14] Augustine, 'Letter 95', in E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, eds, *Augustine: Political Writings*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 23-4.
[15] Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights*, pp. 16-17.
[16] Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.2; cited in Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, p. 33.

the first infancy of humankind men were unsociable … unconscious of religion or of human duties …'.[17]

The concept of an original liberty that is absolute, suffering no constraint, logically displaces any notion of natural moral law. Therefore, it should also displace any notion of natural *right*, insofar as 'right' connotes *moral* authority or force. In Hobbes's case, however, it did not. Notwithstanding his conception of natural moral law as subsequent to social contracts, Hobbes persisted in asserting a single, original, natural 'right' of self-preservation. By 'right' here, he does not mean merely liberty; he seems to mean something closer to 'duty', since it is something that one cannot (or may not?) renounce.[18] However, Hobbes's natural 'right' is not really a moral right or duty at all, but rather a natural force or impulse or drive: it is not a moral norm, but a brute fact.[19] As such, it may compel, but it cannot oblige.

This Hobbesian conception of a basically amoral natural reality stands in stark contradiction to the Christian tradition, according to which the world that God has created and that precedes every human choice, is morally structured at bottom. Even in the absence of social contracts and civil society, natural moral law still obtains. Accordingly, Hugo Grotius, writing shortly before Hobbes, argued that in the absence of properly functioning judicial institutions, the individual's 'antient Liberty [to punish wrongdoing], which the Law of Nature at first gave us' revives.[20]

This Christian view, that alongside and co-original with physical reality there is a basic moral *reality*, bears the title, 'moral realism'.

V

Finally, a fourth illuminating contrast is between Christian Realism and Kantian altruism. In the popular Kantian view of ethics, what is moral is purely altruistic

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[17] Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, p. 36.
[18] Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, p. 129.
[19] See above, Chapter One, footnote 28.
[20] Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace*, II.XX.VIII.5, p. 970; see also II.XX.IX.5, p. 975.

and self-interest is seen as a necessarily immoral motive.[21] According to this view, therefore, where national interests motivate military intervention, they always vitiate it.

There is, however, an alternative and, I think, superior tradition, which found classic expression in Thomas Aquinas. Combining the Book of Genesis' affirmation of the goodness of creation with Aristotle, Thomist thought does not view all self-interest as selfish and immoral. Indeed, it holds that there is such a thing as morally obligatory self-love. The human individual has a duty to care for himself properly, to seek what is genuinely his own good. As with an individual, so with a national community and the organ of its cohesion and decision, namely, its government: a national government has a moral duty to look after the wellbeing of its own people—and in that sense to advance its genuine interests. As Yves Simon wrote, 'What should we think, truly, about a government that would leave out of its preoccupations the interests of the nation that it governs?'.[22] This duty is not unlimited, of course. There cannot be a moral obligation to pursue the interests of one's own nation by riding roughshod over the rights of others. Still, not every pursuit of national interest does involve the committing of injustice; so, the fact that national interests are among the motives for military intervention does not by itself vitiate the latter's moral justification. Some interests are morally legitimate.

This is politically important, because some kind of national interest needs to be involved if military intervention is to attract popular support; and because without such support intervention is hard, eventually impossible, to sustain. One such interest can be moral integrity. Nations usually care about more than just being safe and fat. Usually, they want to believe that they are doing the right or the noble thing, and they will tolerate the costs of war—up to a point—in a just cause that looks set to succeed. I have yet to meet a Briton who is not proud of what British troops achieved in Sierra Leone in the year 2000, even though

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[21] The ethics of Immanuel Kant are usually held to be simply 'deontological', viewing the only truly moral act as one that is done out of a pure sense of duty or reverence for the moral law. So conceived, the truly moral act stands in stark contrast to a merely prudential one, which seeks to promote the agent's interests. Whether this common, deontological view of Kant fully captures his thought I doubt. I think that a better reading has him argue that truly moral acts are those where the duty of justice as fairness disciplines—rather than excludes—the pursuit of interest.

[22] Yves R. Simon, *The Ethiopian Campaign and French Political Thought*, ed. Anthony O. Simon, trans. Robert Royal (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2009), p. 55.

Britain had no material stake in the outcome of that country's civil war, and even though intervention there cost British taxpayers money and British families casualties.[23] Citizens care that their country should do the right thing.

The nation's interest in its own moral integrity and nobility alone, however, will probably not underwrite military intervention that incurs very heavy costs. So other interests—such as national security—are needed to stiffen popular support for a major intervention. But even a nation's interest in its own security is not simply selfish. After all, it amounts to a national government's concern for the security of millions of fellow-countrymen. Nor need it be private; for one nation's security is often bound up with others'. As Gareth Evans puts it: 'these days, good international citizenship is a matter of national self-interest'.[24]

So national interest need not vitiate the motivation for military intervention. Indeed, some kind of interest will be necessary to make it politically possible and sustainable. It is not unreasonable for a national people to ask why they should bear the burdens of military intervention, especially in remote parts of the world. It is not unreasonable for them to ask why *they* should bear the burdens *rather than* others. It is not unreasonable for them to ask why *their* sons and daughters should suffer and die. And the answer to those reasonable questions will have to present itself in terms of the nation's own interests. And it could and ought to present itself in terms of the nation's own morally legitimate interests.

Christian Realism is morally realistic: it holds that there is a natural moral reality or order. But it does not think of morality in Kantian terms as excluding every self-interested, non-altruistic motive.

VI

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[23] The British casualties were very light: one dead, one seriously injured, and twelve wounded (http://www.eliteukforces.info/special-air-service/sas-operations/operation-barras/, as at 24 November 2009).
[24] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2008), p. 144.

Now, the contraposition of Christian Realism and Kantian altruism on the topic of self-interest is my view. It is not the view taken by the patriarch of Christian Realism, Niebuhr himself. Niebuhr regarded self-interest as necessarily egoistic, selfish, and sinful. This view he derived more from Luther than from Kant, but Kant was a cradle Lutheran, too. Niebuhr's realism consists partly in recognising the secular intractability of sinful egoism (especially of social bodies), but also in the need for political compromise, and in sufficient justice as the aptly modest goal of politics.

He first began to influence British thinking through the international Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State in 1937, where he met William Temple, who would become Archbishop of Canterbury five years later. Temple had drunk deeply at the well of British (Hegelian) Idealism, but in the 1930s a combination of political experience and the influence of Niebuhr combined to make him more appreciative of the entrenched realities of class and collective egoism, less sanguine about the possibility of giving social expression to Christian love, and therefore more critical of Hegelian optimism about the realization of social harmony.[25] Accordingly, in his best known work, *Christianity and the Social Order* (1942), Temple wrote soberly as follows: 'A statesman who supposes that a mass of citizens can be governed without appeal to their self-interest is living in dreamland and is a public menace. The art of government in fact is the art of so ordering life that self-interest prompts what justice demands'.[26] After Temple's death in 1944 Niebuhr wrote of him that he 'was able to relate the ultimate insights of religion about the human situation to the immediate necessities of political justice and the proximate possibilities of a

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[25] See Alan Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism: Scott Holland to Tony Blair*, the 1998 Scott Holland Lectures (London: SCM, 1998), pp. 116-7; William Temple, 'Christian Faith and the Common Life', in *Christian Faith and the Common Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), pp. 47ff.

[26] William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (London: Penguin, 1942), p. 43.

just social order more vitally and creatively than any modern Christian leader'.[27] Nevertheless, it seems that Niebuhr never quite broke the spell that Hegel, through his British mediator, T. H. Green, had over Temple. According to Alan Wilkinson, 'Niebuhr's influence did not fundamentally alter his cast of mind which was unable … to go down into the pit of despair and tragedy …. Niebuhr's theology arose out of the experience of industrial conflict in Detroit. All Temple's ministry was among those high tables of life'.[28]

Temple, however, was not the only British churchman to be influenced by Niebuhr. Ronald Preston (1913-2001), who became the dominant British force in Christian social ethics from the late 1970s until his death, was among the first in the United Kingdom to read Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and it was thanks in part to his enthusiasm that SCM Press were persuaded to publish *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in 1935.[29] Two years later Preston attended the Oxford conference, where, as a joint secretary of the Youth Section, he met Niebuhr in the flesh.[30] Niebuhr had a profound influence on him, as he himself attests in his article, 'Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)'.[31] Normunds Kamergrauzis, who has made a book-length study of Preston's social ethics, writes: '[his] interpretation of the Kingdom of God, the assessment of human moral possibilities and the relationship between a disclosure of God's love and justice reflect development of the characteristic Niebuhrian way of approaching ethics'.[32]

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[27] Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Nation*, 11 November 1944, p. 585, cited in Alan Suggate, 'Reflections on William Temple's Social Ethics', *Crucible*, October-December 1981, p. 155.
[28] Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, p. 127
[29] Uppsala University, Normunds Kamergrauzis, *The Persistence of Christian Realism: A Study of the Social Ethics of Ronald H. Preston*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 27 (Uppsala 2001), p. 23. In my account of Preston here I have relied heavily on Kamergrauzis' comprehensive study.
[30] Kamergrauzis, *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 23
[31] Ronald Preston, 'Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)', in *Theological Themes*, Vol. 1/2 (1992).
[32] Kamergrauzis, *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 23.

Nevertheless, Preston's appropriation of Niebuhr was characteristically Anglican, in that it expressed an un-Lutheran optimism about the persistence of human moral and rational capacities, which echoes its Thomist heritage. Thus, Preston chose to assert the ethical implications of original righteousness as much as those of original sin:

> Original Righteousness is just as much a fact of human life as Original Sin. There are not fixed bounds to human achievements under God, and to the quest for social justice which love motivates. Nor, of course, are there guarantees that the achievements of one generation will be maintained by future ones. Nevertheless, Christian Realism is not a gloomy outlook, but a hopeful one. It is not disposed to be satisfied with things as they are; the Christian gospel has a radical challenge accompanying its good news.[33]

Further, Preston endorsed the Thomist concept of conscience that survived in 17th century Anglican moral theology and was revived by Kenneth Kirk, with its confidence in the ability of (even sinful) humans to engage in moral reasoning together.[34] He also affirmed a more nuanced view of self-interest, which does not assume that it is always regrettable: 'self-interest is a powerful and necessary element in human life which must be allowed for and harnessed, but … it is also a dangerous element which has to be handled with care'.[35] As Kamergrauzis comments, for Preston 'to promote the good of the other need not necessarily mean to disregard one's own interests'.[36] As implied earlier, I concur.

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[33] Ronald H. Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics: Problems for Geneva and Rome* (London: SCM, 1994), p. 126

[34] Kamergrauzis, *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 67

[35] Ronald H. Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism* (London: SCM, 1979), p. 72.

[36] Kamergrauzis, *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 115.

One of Preston's greatest contributions to Christian Realism was his development of the methodological concept of 'middle axioms'.[37] This was first formulated by J. H. Oldham at the Oxford conference in 1937. As he saw it, the Church's role is to articulate, not only the general ethical demands of the Gospel, but also more specific 'middle axioms' that 'define the directions in which, in a particular state of society, Christian faith must express itself'. These 'are not binding for all time, but are provisional definitions of the type of behaviour required of Christians at a given period in given circumstances'. Nor are they so definite as to relieve the individual of 'responsibility of decision in concrete situations'.[38] Preston endorsed this concept partly in order to clarify the role and authority of official church pronouncements on political, social, and economic issues. On most matters of this kind a variety of views about the implications of Christian theological belief and moral principles for policy can be held by more or less reasonable people, and churches invariably contain such variety: 'Christians who accept the aim may well conscientiously disagree on the details'.[39] Therefore, '[i]t is generally better for churches to keep at this middle level of main directions than to go into detailed policies, because the more detailed one becomes, the more likelihood there is of genuine differences of opinion in interpreting such data as are available, and on the probable outcome of the different policies that are on offer'.[40]

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[37] Kamergrauzis provides a very useful discussion of the history of the concept of 'middle axioms' in *Persistence of Christian Realism*, pp. 45, 51-2, and especially Chapter 4, 'Middle Axioms in Christian Social Ethics'. Preston's own fullest treatment of the concept appears in Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task*, the Scott Holland Lectures for 1983 (London: SCM, 1983), Appendix 2, 'Middle Axioms in Christian Social Ethics', pp. 141-56. Niebuhr himself neither invented nor developed the idea, but he did endorse it, albeit at a certain distance: 'The Oxford Conference sought a middle ground between a Christian view which offered no general directives to the Christian with regard to social and political institutions, and the view which tried to identify the mind of Christ too simply with specific economic and social and political programmes. For the ecumenical movement, in the opinion of many, this middle ground is still the proper basis of approach'
 (*The Church and the Disorder of Society: An ecumenical study prepared under the auspices of the World Council of Churches*, Man's Disorder and God's Design III (London: SCM, 1948), p. 28n.1).
[38] J. H. Oldham, 'The Function of the Church in Society', in Willem A. Visser t'Hooft and Joseph H. Oldham, *The Church and its Function in Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), pp. 209-10.
[39] Ronald Preston, 'Letters', in *Crucible*, October-December 1997, p. 215.
[40] Ronald H. Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism* (London: SCM, 1991), p. 82.

Preston's own development of Oldham's approach was shaped by his experience as a student of economics at the London School of Economics from 1932-5, which gave him an appreciation of the relative autonomy of the social sciences in relation to theology and ethics. Consequently, he went beyond Oldham—as well as John C. Bennett—in understanding 'middle axioms' as the product of dialectic between Christian ethical principles and empirical data, 'allowing theology to use its categories to analyse the data of this world and our responsibilities in it; and the data of this world to call in question theological irrelevancies and abstractions'.[41] For that reason, he was not entirely happy with the term, 'middle axioms', 'which suggests a process of deductive logic which is not at all what [Oldham] had in mind'. Rather than 'a deduction from a basic doctrinal premise … they involve assessment of empirical evidence'.[42] Again, I concur. One of the practical implications of this high regard for empirical data is the importance of Christian theologians entering into dialogue with social scientists and other academic experts. This itself has a wider importance, as Kamergrauzis points out: 'Since the procedure demands the empirical expertise of professionals and the direct experience of the affected parties, it also promotes co-operation, mutual respect (and even friendship) between Christians and those with other views of life'.[43]

VII

British proponents of some version of Christian Realism were not confined to the ranks of theologians. In 'The Tragic Element in Modern International

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[41] Kamergrauzis reports this quotation of Preston in *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 125n.30. However, the reference he gives—'ibid., p. 29'—is indeterminate, since the immediately preceding work is not by Preston and it is not clear to which other work he is referring. John C. Bennett also took up and developed his own version of 'middle axioms', in for example, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1946), pp. 77-83.
[42] Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics*, p. 157.
[43] Kamergrauzis, *Persistence of Christian Realism*, p. 133.

Conflict' (1950), the historian and Methodist lay-preacher, Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979), began to develop what Brendan Simms has called 'a pessimistically "Christian" view of international politics':

> He was particularly critical of national self-righteousness and utopianism in foreign policy: conflict could only be managed, not abolished; and there was no such thing as total security, which could only be bought at the cost of the total insecurity of others. Butterfield could see no pattern in international history, no working towards a preordained goal, only the mysterious workings of 'Providence': all the statesman could do was 'work with Providence'.[44]

Christian pessimism, however, cannot be absolute. So, whatever the tragic element, Butterfield also thought that 'the history of diplomacy, properly studied, betrayed human value and personality in its recesses and confuted any idea that international relations could be understood as a desiccated science of power'.[45] Although his name had already been widely associated with Niebuhr's by reviewers of *Christianity and History* (1949),[46] his realism was *sui generis*. It was not until 1956 that the two men met at Columbia University, but when they did, they recognised in each other intellectual allies with a common debt to the political thought of St Augustine.[47]

Much the same is true of Martin Wight (1913-72), the father of the 'English School' of international relations. Wight certainly admired Niebuhr, commenting in a review of the latter's *Discerning the Signs of the Times*:

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[44] Brendan Simms, 'Butterfield, Sir Herbert', *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30888 (as at 20 November 2019). See Herbert Butterfield, 'The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict', *Review of Politics*, 12/2 (April 1950).

[45] Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science, and God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 339.

[46] Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield*, p. 223.

[47] Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield*, p. 339-40.

Sermons for Today and Tomorrow: 'As a political scientist this restless, angular, unconformable New York theologian can make rings round half the professionals. He knows the forces of power better than Mr Wallace on his left, their moral tensions and ambiguities better than Mr Bullitt on his right'.[48] What is more, commentators noticed the similarity of their views.[49] And, like Niebuhr (and Butterfield), '[h]e was to remain impressed by St Augustine's *City of God*'.[50] Nevertheless, in his account of the history of thought about international relations—*International Theory: The Three Traditions* (published posthumously in 1991)—Wight makes only a passing reference to Niebuhr.[51] His own intellectual debt is rather to a combination of Hugo Grotius and Edmund Burke.[52] On the one hand, following Grotius, he believed that there is such a thing as an international society of states, bound together by interests wider and deeper than mere survival and by a consequent sense of obligation to the common good.[53] There are indeed duties 'owed, not only by each government to its subjects, but by one government to another, and by one people to another'.[54] On the other hand, he had no time for naïve idealism of the sort espoused by Woodrow Wilson and, after quoting Burke, he wrote soberly: 'Politics is the perpetual movement from one stage of the provisional to another. There are no

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[48] Martin Wight, 'Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow', book review, *International Affairs*, 23 October 1947, p. 558.

[49] For example, Robert Jackson comments that Wight's position 'is very near to that of Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield' ('From Colonialism to Theology: encounters with Martin Wight's international thought', *International Affairs*, 84.2 [2008], p. 359). See also Roger Epp, 'The "Augustinian moment" in International Politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the reclaiming of a tradition', International politics research occasional paper 10 (Aberystwyth: Department of International Politics, University of Aberystwyth, 1991).

[50] H. G. Pitt, 'Wight, (Robert James) Martin (1913-1972', *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-38935 (as at 20 November 2019).

[51] Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Bernard Porter, intro. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991).

[52] In fact, Wight's own position was more subtle. As his former student, Hedley Bull, wrote: 'he would regard it as ideal to be a Grotian, while partaking of the realism of the Macchiavellians, without their cynicism, and the idealism of the Kantians, without their fanaticism' ('Martin Wight and the Theory of International Relations', in Wight, *International Theory*, p. xiv).

[53] Molly Cochran, 'The Ethics of the English School', Chapter 16, *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 286-7.

[54] Martin Wight, 'Western Values in International Relations', in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, ed. H. Butterfield and M. Wight (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 128.

complete solutions, only the constantly repeated approximation towards the embodiment of justice in concrete arrangements, which do constantly dissolve with the passage of time'.[55] The necessary middle ground between personal morality and *raison d'etat* is what Wight called 'political morality', which rests partly on the view that ethics and interest need not be at odds with one another.[56]

Another English source of quasi-Christian Realism is the thought of the politically conservative philosopher, Michael Oakeshott (1901-90). In a contribution to a 2008 collection of essays on the Anglican Church and British foreign policy, the scholar of international relations, Adrian Hyde-Price, saw fit to appeal to Oakeshott.[57] A realist ethic, Hyde-Price tells us, cannot aim to achieve a particular telos—a 'single substantive purpose'—and so must be 'non-teleological'.[58] It rejects 'the illusion that in politics there is anywhere a safe harbour, a destination to be reached or even a detectable strand of progress.'[59] Accordingly, statecraft seeks to navigate the shifting tides of international politics with 'neither starting-place nor appointed destination',[60] seeking not perfection but the lesser evil, preferring 'present laughter to utopian bliss'.[61] My own view, however, is that Oakeshott's realism is far too lacking in eschatological tension, too much reduced to demoralised prudential manoeuvring, too Hobbesian, to count as properly Christian; and Hyde-Price

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[55] Wight, *International Theory*, p. 243. Robert Jackson, 'From Colonialism to Theology', p. 358: 'Woodrow Wilson in particular is a target of Wight's philosophy'.

[56] Cochran, 'Ethics of the English School', p. 294.

[57] Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Christian Ethics and the Dilemmas of Foreign Policy', in *British Foreign Policy and the Anglican Church: Christian Engagement with the Contemporary World*, ed. Timothy Blewitt, Adrian Hyde-Price, and Wyn Rees (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 24-5.

[58] Hyde-Price cites Michael Oakeshott, Part Three: 'On Hobbes', 'Logos and Telos', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 358.

[59] Oakeshott, 'Political Education', *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 66.

[60] Oakeshott, 'Political Education', *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 60.

[61] Oakeshott, 'On Being Conservative', *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 408

himself implies as much when he concludes by invoking Niebuhr's paradox: that

> in order to mobilise the energy and enthusiasm necessary to overcome entrenched vested interests and achieve the desired reforms that can approximate the prophetic vision, it is necessary to nurture and encourage a 'sublime madness in the soul' that only an illusory belief in perfect justice and universal brotherhood can ignite.[62]

VIII

In sum, there are varieties of Christian Realism. Some are more articulate than others in recognising the need for general moral ideals or principles to grapple with, and be educated by, particular empirical realities. Ronald Preston thought of this in terms of 'middle axioms'; I think of it in terms of 'dialectical casuistry'. Indeed, I coined that term in the very first academic article I published in 1989.[63]

What the varieties all have in common is a sober recognition of the secular intractability of human sinfulness and selfishness, especially in political life. Accordingly, they acknowledge the need to aim modestly at justice that is proximate rather than ultimate, and to make do with compromise.

Nevertheless, for *Christian* Realists the obligations of created, natural moral law, qualified by the revelation in Jesus Christ of the Kingdom of God, are operative. For them, the persistently sinful world is not a Hobbesian moral wasteland, where atomistic individuals do whatever it takes to survive. Even

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[62] Hyde-Price, 'Christian Ethics and the Dilemmas of Foreign Policy', p. 27
[63] Nigel Biggar, 'A Case for Casuistry in the Church', *Modern Theology*, 6/1 (October 1989).

necessary compromises, as I have argued elsewhere, should be principled.[64] And even Niebuhr recognised that the vision of the Kingdom of God, while not susceptible of direct human realisation, still has an indirect effect upon political life. For what he called the 'impossible possibility' of self-sacrificial, Christian love nonetheless raises up secular justice, preventing it from becoming an instrument of mere vengeance.

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[64] Nigel Biggar, 'Compromise: What Makes it Bad?', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 31/1 (February 2018).