Theology as Counsel: The Work of Oliver O’Donovan and Nigel Biggar

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In his *Memoirs*, the French political thinker Raymond Aron recounts a significant episode that occurred when he was a precocious young graduate of France’s preeminent École Normale Supérieure. Deeply interested in foreign affairs, Aron, the phenomenon of his generation, obtained an interview with an undersecretary in the Foreign Office of the French government. Invited to express his views to the undersecretary, he offered a brilliant précis of the state of world affairs. The undersecretary, not without sympathy, then asked him a simple question: all this is wonderful, he said, “but if you were in the minister’s position, what would you do?”\(^1\)

This question stopped Aron in his tracks. It also set his thought on the course it would take for the rest of his life. It underscored for him something not taught in the training for the *Agrégation*: namely, that learning is for living, that the erudition of scholarship cannot be simply, solely for academics, that it must inform the way we inhabit the world, and that part of the responsibility of the intellectual is to help us all understand how to take that wisdom in, so that it transforms our lives and makes them better.

Such recognition seems sadly lacking in much theology and ethics today, at least in the United States. Among us, our conversations are overwhelmingly intramurally scholastic, cosseted within the halls of *academe*, and few if any respected academic theologians have any kind of audience outside those halls. This is especially damaging to theology, for it has not only the general public to which it owes its insights, but also the more specific precincts of the churches deserve

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illumination from theologians’ learning. Certainly there is a great deal of know-nothing contempt directed toward academics today; but the proper response to that is not a blithe (or worse) indifference, but rather a reinvigorated commitment to informing one another, and those who, if they knew aright, would expect from us some insight and guidance for the adventure of living a faithful Christian life.

The academization of theology is lamentable, and has been not infrequently lamented, but hardly anyone ever seems to get beyond lamentation, to ask why it has happened and what we can do about it. Yet those among us who would speak to audiences beyond faculties of theology today typically recoil from this scholasticism into a condition fundamentally opposed to it, which makes it no better: a condition of desperate immediate “relevance” to some moral struggle, presented as so urgent as to bespeak no hesitation in our commitment to some moral revolution. This is an old maneuver: it hearkens back to Walter Rauschenbusch’s call for the churches to attend to “the social crisis.” Such a crisis permits no middle ground, no compromise, no moderation; one must be for something, or else one is effectively against it. Theology so constrained is no longer faith seeking understanding: it is faith seeking some—inevitably—partial, finite justice.

Though such crises do exist, we are not always in a state of emergency, and we owe it to our constituencies, and to ourselves, to offer guidance for the mundane everyday—for ordinary time, as it were. Theology must surely escape its Babylonian captivity to an academic context whose criteria for success—preeminently difficulty, obscurity, and in-group self-awareness—are not organically rooted in values that Christians ought to promote. But it cannot escape that to find itself nothing more than a tool of whatever moral crusade some group of people find idolatrously exclusively interesting. It must be both relevant and reflective, committed and contemplative, aware of the world we inhabit but also with a foot in another world, another time—now and not yet, as it were.

Amidst these ruins, perhaps there remains a place for a form of theology that makes the most of the leisure afforded those of us given the time for extended reflection, without succumbing to the tempting idea that our theological sophistication is measured by its ultimate in-utility to everyday life. There is, in other words, a need for more, not fewer, able and willing professors (not necessarily Professors!) of “moral and pastoral theology.” After all, the undersecretary’s question
to Aron did not ask him to do the minister’s work, nor to opine Arctic-

cally on the *monde politique*, as if he were an entomologist studying

a mildly interesting species of ant: it invited Aron to give his advice,

his insight, his *counsel* to a person who was—hypothetically at least—

actively soliciting it. Imagine that you are in someone else’s shoes,

though you recognize you are not: this will solicit humility and yet,

hopefully, the courage of one’s insights; and one’s insights, so com-

posed and communicated humbly yet with proper frankness, will be-

come what we call counsel. It is this idea of *counsel* that we wish to

pursue here, as a possible route for theology.

What is counsel? This is an old word, largely shoved to one side
today by our desire for data, for information. But in fact counsel may
be what we most need, and most palpably lack. Most simply, counsel is

insight given to a willing recipient, from a wise colleague or fellow-

traveler along the way; one who is earnest in care of the auditor, and

who has some insight or wisdom to convey, yet who recognizes that all

such insight can only be offered, can never be forced, and must inevi-
tably be apprehended and put to work by the person on the spot, not

the one giving the advice. Counsel, so understood, is part of a larger

moral worldview, which understands that people face challenges that

are difficult, murky, and obscure, that are not immediately amenable
to clear and simple solutions. To confront such challenges, people
seek insight from one another, but all must finally recognize the du-
ties of each that fall to each, and each alone, and so everyone must
confront their challenges frankly, without hiding behind any other hu-
man, without eschewing responsibility by some outward code they
proclaim they cannot but follow, without any attempt to efface the
role of their own particular judgment and deliberation in making what
are, after all, decisions that are ultimately theirs alone. Thus counsel,
as a mode of moral communication, entails the recognition of differ-
ence, and especially the recognition of the difference between the
one who gives and the one who receives. Each one of us has been
charged with particular tasks—“offices,” duties, or vocations—and
each of us must own up to those tasks and do the best we can to fulfill
them. In a way, then, counsel is a matter of *knowing your place*, and

the place of the other, in the moral theater of the cosmos.

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2 See Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflec-
Counsel is particularly theologically charged as well: As Oliver O’Donovan puts it, counsel is “the church’s most characteristic form of address to the individual, because it respects his status as one whom God also addresses directly, and whose particular decisions are partly hidden from public gaze.” Hence, the theology of counsel respects the inescapable role of the subject in digesting and deliberating for her or himself. Nonetheless, this does not disarm the church of its whole normative urgency: “It is not . . . that the church pretends to know nothing about the rights and wrongs of individual decision. . . . Thus the church counsels with authority.” Indeed, counsel turns out to be fundamental to the church’s mission in the world: for essentially the church “is a didactic moral authority, appealing to the authority of a truth which stands above it and seeking to place the hearer in an equality of perspective with the teacher. . . . Its counsel, therefore, is authoritative without being coercive . . . at once exercising authority and standing under it.” As an institution, guided by the Holy Spirit, yet composed of humans called to help one another, with each of us placed in our particular (and to some degree inescapably peculiar) situations of unique insight and distinct authority, we try to help one another; and that help is best understood, perhaps, as “counsel.”

We suspect that such an idea of “counsel” is rumbling around in the back of many thinkers’ minds today, but it has lacked for us the formal formulation of a self-conscious term of theological art. By looking at the work of two Anglican theologians in the United Kingdom, we hope to reintroduce it to the forefront of your consciousness. Furthermore, in doing this, we hope to highlight some of the differences between the style of theological-ethical reflection that they embody, and the forms more commonly found on this side of the Atlantic. Oliver O’Donovan and Nigel Biggar are the two most recent holders (O’Donovan from 1982 to 2006, Biggar from 2007 forward) of the Regius Chair in Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University. The holder of this chair is, importantly, charged with canonical duties within Christ Church Cathedral as well as academic duties within the university’s theological faculty. Hence, built into the very nature of the post itself is the expectation not only that moral theologians will have something interesting

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to say, but that their particular vocation will include the provision of
counsel to multiple constituencies at once. Whether or not this was
Henry VIII’s intention when Christ Church was established as both
a collegiate institution and a cathedral for Oxford and the surround-
ing areas, the Regius Chair is, in some sense, both the institutional
instantiation of the idea of theology as counsel and without analogue
in other societies and universities. Here we will see how that chair has
been filled, first by O’Donovan, then by Biggar.

I. Oliver O’Donovan: Augustinian Judiciousness

Oliver O’Donovan, just retired from a Chair in Theology and
Ethics at Edinburgh, is perhaps the most formidable Anglican moral
theologian since Kenneth Kirk. His work has stretched from particular
quasi-casuistical studies of discrete moral topics, through fundamental
moral theology, to political theology, historical theology, and a sermon
series (a study waits to be written comparing O’Donovan’s published
sermons with the interestingly different ones of his friend, the Arch-
bishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams). In all this work a minimally
sensitive reader will gather a number of impressions: of a tremen-
dously well-formed and educated mind, dealing delicately with issues
of enormous complexity—a complexity the reader may well not fully
appreciate until she or he has seen O’Donovan unravel it—historically
erudite, philosophically acute, and theologically profound.

No one, however, has ever accused O’Donovan of writing too
simplistically, and his impact has been, so far, perhaps unduly limited
by the impression of rebarbative indirectness and obliqueness that
marks his prose. Yet we anticipate that the slowness of that impact—
in recent years, however, gathering steam—is due more to the impact
it is designed to make than to any failure on his part to communicate.
For his aim is not simply to give us content, but to introduce us to a
way of thinking, a way of thinking quite different from what normally
passes for thought among us. As readers today, we are typically impa-
tient of answers—we want people to offer us clear statements, stake a
position, and then show us why every other possible answer is wrong.
That is not O’Donovan’s style; indeed, his style works systematically
to undo those expectations for us. Reading him is an exercise in virtue
formation (or perhaps vice de-formation), a habituation to a calmer,
less confrontational, more sober mode of reflection. Often he begins
a discussion in a way apparently tremendously oblique to the matter
we think is at hand, only to show us, if we follow him, that in fact the
approach is not oblique at all, but in fact precisely on target. (The
opening of his magnum opus, *The Desire of the Nations*, exemplifies
this—he begins a work in political theology by talking about the *Te
Deum*, among the least expected beginnings in the history of political
theology.) O’Donovan means to teach us *judiciousness*, a quality of
mind that is all too rare in our world today, not least among believ-
ers and the theologically-minded who mean to minister to them. In a
world of noise, flash, and celebrities, intellectual and otherwise, the
cultivation of such an intellectual and moral virtue is hard to appre-
ciate, before we undergo its surprisingly gentle tutelage; but after-
wards, one wonders why one ever imagined wanting anything else.

This interest in judiciousness marks out O’Donovan’s work from
its beginnings, even in the choice of topics on which to work. Further-
more, his has been a distinctively *Augustinian* judiciousness—one
attuned to the complexities and paradoxes of a sin-riddled creature,
immured in this world but longing for a divine happiness that never
has more than a fugitive presence here, and all the ironies and nec-
essary compromises attendant on such a creature’s existence in our
world. That Augustine would be a major influence was apparent from
the start: O’Donovan did some of his earliest work on Augustine. In
particular, he focused on one of the most exegetically intricate and
philosophically fundamental issues in Augustinian scholarship: the
vexed question of whether Augustine is a “eudaemonist”—that is, a
thinker who believes that people should be (or inescapably are) gov-
erned by concern for their own happiness (however such “happiness”
is conceived). O’Donovan’s first book, *The Problem of Self-Love in
St. Augustine*, is a very fine and careful study of this primordial issue
in Augustinian moral psychology. What a decade of thinking about,
through, and with Augustine gave him was an appreciation of how
any such theory is likely to do damage to the full complexity of human
subjectivity, and the true scope and meaning of redemption; thus he
ends his discussion with a return to the famous “agape versus eros”
fight that Anders Nygren tried to pick with Augustine. Now, at the
end of this Augustinian engagement, that debate is revealed to be
about the meaning of salvation itself, and of Christ (as Augustine la-
bored hard to show that most important theological disagreements
are about): “It is the meaning of salvation that is at stake: is it ‘fulfill-
ment,’ ‘recapitulation’? . . . Between that which is and that which will
be there must be a line of connection, the redemptive purpose of
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God. From the beginning, then, O’Donovan teaches his readers to see that recondite debates about philosophical technicalities are often nourished by theological disputes of immense pastoral and pedagogical importance; yet he also teaches that the theologian’s task must not be simply to clarify the academic matters at issue, but also to demonstrate the theological stakes of the debate itself.

Another thing we see in this book, indeed in the passage quoted, is an insistence on a connection, some continuity, between this life and the life to come. There is no fundamental apophaticism in O’Donovan’s work, as Rowan Williams sometimes flirts with (mostly, O’Donovan would hasten to say, to our collective betterment); rather, there is a sturdy and durable (and perhaps less Augustinian than he thinks) insistence that things are clear enough—that, in fear and trembling, we can know at least something of what to do. Getting at the theological basis for that conviction is partly the impetus, one suspects, for O’Donovan’s second major work, Resurrection and Moral Order (significantly subtitled An Outline for Evangelical Ethics [emphasis added]). This is a book of tremendous scope that remains the most underappreciated of O’Donovan’s major works. Perhaps this is because of its relentlessly prolegomenatical character—it is, again, for an ethic, that is to say, it does not itself embody that ethic but identifies the theological framework within which any such ethic should begin. It is, to innocent readers, a curiously compound work, at times highly scriptural, at other times verging on sounding like a work in natural law, held together by an insistence that the fundamental act, encompassing and completing all others, is the resurrection of Christ: “Morality is man’s participation in the created order. Christian morality is his glad response to the deed of God which has restored, proved, and fulfilled that order, making man free to conform to it.”

Such an ethic would have a “realist principle”—in being responsive to the realities which exist in the world, and to which all, Christian and not, are accountable (these realities—at least some of them, anyway, are or can be visible to all of us, Christian or not, to some degree anyway); this principle anchors O’Donovan’s appreciation of the natural law. Yet such an ethic will also have “Evangelical” and “Easter”

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6 O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, 76.
principles, for that realism is founded on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

There is a resolutely moral voice in this work, clear in its dissents from various academic interlocutors, but always insistently on the complexity and seriousness of the topic before us. Indeed, in a prescient moment well into the book, O’Donovan notes that such a moral theology, as propaedeutic to a Christian ethic, will need to ensure that its audience does not mistake its own volume for simplicity of command; and so O’Donovan urges that “the exercise of political authority is the search for a compromise which, while bearing the fullest witness to the truth that can in the circumstances be borne, will, nevertheless, lie within the scope of possible public action in the particular community of fallen men which it has to serve.” This insistence on compromise becomes of decisive import in O’Donovan’s later major works in political theology.

Those works, however, were accompanied by a series of small books and pamphlets that he has been writing, from the very beginning of his career. These small gems—including The Christian and the Unborn Child, Measure for Measure: Justice in Punishment and the Sentence of Death, Marriage and Permanence, Peace and Certainty: A Theological Essay on Deterrence, The Just War Revisited, Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion, among others—all are, in different ways, attempts to discern the proper shape of a moral response. What one gleans from them is not so much primarily an answer to these questions but a lesson in what it is to hold oneself seriously responsible both to the moral realities at issue and to the joyful tradition of Christian witness which proclaims mercy and forgiveness to all. In an interview, O’Donovan insisted on the difference between what he called—somewhat dismissively?—“prison visiting” and theology, further pointing out that “it’s not the task of a theologian to pronounce judgement on particular governmental policies. The theologian is a citizen, too, of course, and forms views on policy like any other citizen. Yet it is not those views that theology is in business to promote, but the categories and criteria that are relevant for forming them.” From where we sit, in a university setting but

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7 O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, 130.
8 Comments are from the interview with Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan in Rupert Shortt, God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 263, 271.
with some acquaintance with pastoral formation in seminaries, this is a distinction that can benefit from being appreciated more fully by many ministers and ministerial educators.

All of this impressive body of work suddenly became stained with the tint of apprentice-pieces, however, when O’Donovan published, in 1996, The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology. That work simply recast the field of “political theology,” forcing everyone to begin again. Up until that work, discussion of “church and state” issues had largely been occupied by a running debate between ecclesially-minded “narrative theologians” of Hauerwasian and Yoderian varieties, on the one hand, and those “public theologians” for whom the Christian’s presence in a liberal society was a given fact that needed to be acknowledged: the former saw the latter as perniciously collaborationist, while the latter saw the former as hopelessly sectarian. (Liberationist voices were around as well, of course, but they still seemed unable to come to terms with the collapse of Communism in 1989. Too many of them still do.) O’Donovan’s book rearranged the categories for everyone, both taking Scripture and church if anything more seriously than the narrativists, and also engaging in the public order more constructively and collaboratively than the public theologians. It began from a simple premise: namely, that most of the discussion of religion and politics was not being done with sufficient theological seriousness. “The point is not to reduce the semantic range of speech about God’s acts to the limits of our commonplace political discussion—that would be reductionism indeed!—but to push back the horizon of commonplace politics and open it up to the activity of God. . . . Theology needs more than scattered political images; it needs a full political conceptuality. And politics, for its part, needs a theological conceptuality.” We lack “true political concepts,” concepts that can help the Christian churches understand their history, their present obligations, and their future destiny, in a world which is moving toward a political consummation, in the kingdom of God in Christ, who is the desire of the nations.

For all these reasons, The Desire of the Nations inaugurated a new era in theological thinking on politics.

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9 Another work, almost at the same time, was Ronald F. Thiemann’s Religion in Public Life (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), but that was more a programmatic call for a more serious engagement, rather than such an engagement itself.

This work took some time to make an impact—it was effectively entirely ignored in Jeffrey Stout’s well-regarded Democracy and Tradition (2004), though it offers a more serious and interesting interlocutor for Stout than any of the figures engaged therein—but it has been revolutionary, especially among younger scholars. Furthermore, the impact of the work was not to convince people of the correctness of its argument, but rather to change the terms on which the conversation was being had—to shift to a more richly and traditionally theological language, one which was found to be more far-ranging, and with more means for internal disagreement, than many had perhaps expected there to be. As O’Donovan himself had insisted, the important matter was to frame the debates within a thoroughly theological idiom.

The project of that book continued with the work O’Donovan edited with his wife and intellectual partner, Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought. (Joan Lockwood O’Donovan’s contribution to these political-theological works has been massive as well; trained in theology and modern political thought, she clearly offered much of the basis of Oliver’s critique of contemporary political life and thought. But this topic is too complicated to go into here.) This massive work—838 pages—was just what it purported to be: a collection of primary texts, with acute editorial framing, meant to help introduce Christians to the polyvocal tradition of Christian political thought. Together with a series of other works written in the past fifteen years, such as The Ways of Judgment—a “political ethics” to complement the “political theology” of The Desire of the Nations—and Common Objects of Love and Bonds of Imperfection (co-authored, again with Joan Lockwood O’Donovan), O’Donovan’s work now represents a position that must be confronted in any future discussion in political theology, and that can deeply inform positions of a quite wide variety in theology and ethics, whether they agree with his particular conclusions or not.

All in all, O’Donovan’s work collectively communicates a judiciousness and erudition that is his greatest lesson. It is, in fact, his way of seeing the world, not the discrete arguments he offers, nor his critique of modernity per se, that is his most important teaching. He envisions the world as natively theologically and ethically charged, and solicitous of our best selves. And yet it is not his vision of the world, but the example of his own mind—a mind from which a scrupulous, well-balanced, judicious counsel is solicited by the world so perceived—that is the greatest lesson he has to teach.
II. Nigel Biggar: The Patient Vocation of “Barthian Thomism”

Given how early he is in his tenure of his current post, any comparably comprehensive assessment of Nigel Biggar’s occupancy of the Regius Chair risks a great deal; and yet, in both his published works and the products of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, the capaciousness of his intellect and general contours of his methodology are fairly clear. To date, the defining feature of Biggar’s career is an unwavering commitment to follow through on what he takes to be the heart of Barth’s moral theology: namely, that God’s loving relation to human beings eventuates not in the self-satisfaction of individual believers or the church as a whole but in a sense of vocation, what Biggar, following Barth, calls “a calling to a particular act of service—a particular contribution to the history of the redemption of the world—that only the individual addressed is in a position (in terms of time, place, skills, and disposition) to perform.”

In this, like O’Donovan, Biggar understands himself as a provider of counsel. Whether it be his early work on Barth’s ethics, his continued presence in debates surrounding the ethics of end-of-life care in general and physician-assisted suicide in particular, his sustained interest in the relevance of natural law thinking for Christian moral reflection, or his prescient reflections on the ethics of armed conflict and the nature of Christian forgiveness, one way to understand the unifying thread of Biggar’s career to date is as a perduring commitment to perform what Barth describes. Moral theology is, in this sense, most itself when it responds to two basic facts: that (1) if it is to be of any use, it must honor the integrity of the vocations of the human world’s various practitioners (whether they be politicians, healthcare providers, journalists, or what have you) by (2) bringing all the relevant theological material to bear upon the forces and factors that

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12 This has led Professor Biggar not only to write in an eclectic collection of forms and venues (including pamphlets for local congregations and op-eds to UK newspapers as well as monographs for university publishers), but also to work collaboratively, as in *Religious Voices in Public Places* (edited with Linda Hogan) and *The Revival of Natural Law: Philosophical, Theological, and Ethical Responses to the Finnis-Grisez School* (edited with Rufus Black). In his role as director of Christ Church’s McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, Professor Biggar has also organized a number of important conferences concerning the pressing issues of the day.
inhibit those practitioners from fully inhabiting their particular vocations; by doing this, moral theology helps to protect and preserve the goods that adhere to the myriad aspects of everyday life.

This has led Biggar to forge surprising alliances between forms of theological thinking. In the concluding chapter of the recently published *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics*, Professor Biggar sketches the outline of a moral theology that understands itself as a “Barthian Thomism.” He says:

> I have sought neither narrativism nor autonomism, and neither secularism nor theological authoritarianism: instead, I have sought to plow a middle furrow between these two sets of options. Of course, middle ways tend to attract scorn. They tend to be seen as the resort of ditherers who cannot bring themselves to make a grown-up decision, or of wishful thinkers who fancy having their cake and still eating it. No doubt that is sometimes true; no doubt, what purports to be a third way is sometimes just a lazy, fanciful cobbling together of elements whose compatibility has not been wrought. But surely, this need not be so; surely, sometimes a third way can make up a stable *via media*, constructing the half-truths of unbalanced alternatives into a coherent synthesis. True, its colors may not flash as garishly. But since when was strength always stark? Surely, it can be subtle too.

In our view, this commitment to a kind of theological strength that need not be garish marks Biggar’s work from the very beginning. And yet, readers should not confuse this rejection of the rhetoric of excess with any lack of ambition; for Biggar frankly acknowledges that the kind of synthesis his work represents inevitably requires “constructive integration” across a number of streams of Christian thought. That the terms themselves—“Barthian” and “Thomism”—are mutually qualifying demonstrates Biggar’s dissatisfaction with unadulterated

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versions of both traditions. In forging a “Barthian Thomism,” then, Biggar is, like O’Donovan, distancing himself from certain configurations of natural law thinking (what he calls “autonomist” thinking) yet also resisting the “narrativist” theologians who eschew all talk of a normative ethical order at least partially apprehensible to human moral reflection in favor of grounding the churches’ moral theology specifically in either Scripture or ecclesial practice.

But this does not mean that Biggar fails to avail himself of the best of those traditions at precisely the moments where they can be put to use most profitably. Unsurprisingly, most modern natural law accounts are in some form or fashion indebted to Aquinas’s famous (and brief) treatise on law within the *Summa*. And yet, as astute readers will well know, appropriating Aquinas and the tradition of thought his work has generated has always entailed making a set of interpretive judgments, the importance of which can be seen in the fact that accounts as different as what we previously described in Oliver O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order* and the “basic goods” theory of the Finnis-Grisez school each claim fidelity to aspects of the Thomistic tradition. Biggar, however, aligns himself most closely with versions of contemporary Thomism that foreground the necessity of the virtues for both discerning goods at stake in moral decision-making and responding appropriately. He is keen to avoid the type of natural law thinking that sacrifices the distinctiveness of Christian belief at the altar of universal access. “The Christian church,” Biggar tells us, “is not redundant. It has a calling and a duty to tell the truth about God in the light of Jesus Christ, and about the human good and right action in the light of this God.”¹⁵ This is what it means to say that the proper Thomism must be qualified by “Barthian.”

We should be careful, however, to note that by introducing the qualifier “Barthian” and making clear the church’s priority for moral decision-making, what Biggar embraces is not an approach to moral theology that sees Christian distinctiveness as an end in itself. In this regard, the title of the first chapter of *Behaving in Public* is instructive: “Integrity, Not Distinctiveness.” Here Biggar is setting himself at some distance from the thought of thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas, who, in the wake of Barth’s unrelenting attempt to have the form of Christian theology match its object, have often insisted upon an

oppositional relationship to the wider world. At the heart of this oppositional view is the denial of any sort of neutral arbiter of the good. Insisting upon a prior commitment to the utter distinctiveness of Christian belief and practices shaped by the narratives of Christian Scripture, thinkers like Hauerwas take little interest in developing any robust account of natural law or substantive ethic regarding the manner in which Christians should relate to goods held in common. And these thinkers defend this move by and large by appealing to the example of Barth.

For Biggar, this is a mistake. As Barth himself knew, it is the integrity of Christian faith that should matter more than its distinctiveness. The substantial difference between integrity and distinctiveness is the fact that “one of them is a virtue” while the other is “an accident of history.” There may well be points of overlap between Christian conceptions of the moral life and ones outside the church, which Christians have their own theological reasons to affirm. If God is, as Christians believe, the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, and if “all that is” refers (as it does) to Christians and non-Christians alike, Christian thinkers should not be surprised to find moral wisdom outside the Christian community. The goods of the world, Biggar claims, are goods really and truly given to all.

This conviction regarding the shared goods of creation and the moral theologian’s task in modern liberal societies shines forth most brightly in Biggar’s contributions to bioethical debates, particularly around the morality of euthanasia. The argument Biggar develops in Aiming to Kill: The Ethics of Suicide and Euthanasia is premised upon Biggar’s confidence not only that non-theologians (in fact, non-theists) can understand Christian counsel on death and dying, but that Christian theologians can often make their arguments compelling to those outside the churches’ walls. “Not everything that a Christian

16 Biggar, Behaving in Public, 8.

17 One implication of this line of thought for Biggar is that it is sufficient warrant for Christian participation in public life. “Since the truth that the church has to tell is of the God who loved the world in Jesus Christ,” Biggar says, “and since the good of that world is not only individual but also common, Christians should care to shape public life” (Biggar, Behaving in Public, 107). For an interesting development of this thought, see Luke Bretherton’s recent Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness (Cambridge, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). Of note is Bretherton’s eschewal of a notion of “the common good” in favor of discussion of “goods held in common.”
theist affirms,” Biggar tells us, “will every kind of agnostic or atheist
feel the need to deny. Not everything that a moral theologian has to
say,” he goes on, “will depend at all, or depend directly, on theologi-
cal premises.” Importantly, Biggar’s argument against the legaliza-
tion of physician-assisted suicide has become the occasion for more
sustained reflection regarding the shape of Christian contributions to
public debate. In, for example, his inaugural lecture for his current
post (the lecture that also, coincidentally, served to launch the Mc-
Donald Centre), Professor Biggar identified a set of liberal political
theorists—Jeffrey Stout, Jürgen Habermas, and, at moments, the late
John Rawls—under the moniker of “humane liberalisms” that stand
in complicated tension with crude variants of libertarianism and myr-
iad forms of utilitarian rationality. These liberals, in contrast, exhibit
“a considerably more exalted view of human individuals” wherein in-
dividual persons are “a rationality that is not just the canny servant of
the individual’s appetite for pleasure and aversion to pain, but rather
is one that admires the beauty of human dignity and acknowledges
the obligations of justice that emanate from it.” Here we hear not
only Biggar’s insistence that theologians rigorously resist engaging in
the rhetoric of excess, but also a profound respect for the particular
vocations of political theorists in our day.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Biggar’s forthcoming work,
tentatively titled In Defence of War: Just War, Christianity, and Real-
ism. If we hold, along with Biggar, the twinned claims that “no human
action or enterprise is pure and unblemished” and, therefore, “even
when [war] is justified . . . war is always waged by one set of sinners
against another, and never by the simply righteous against the simply
unrighteous,” then one’s basic disposition toward those civil servants
and elected officials burdened with the weight of decision cannot first
and foremost be that of suspicion. Rather than merely acknowledging
that the calling of she who wages war differs from he who writes about
it, Biggar’s reflections on war begin with the conviction that the only
sort of counsel that could be of use to civil servants is one that refuses
to collapse the space between the counsellor and the recipient of his

18 Nigel Biggar, Aiming to Kill: The Ethics of Suicide and Euthanasia (Cleveland,
19 This lecture was originally delivered on April 22, 2008 and published as “Saving
the Secular: The Public Vocation of Moral Theology,” Journal of Religious Ethics 37,
no. 1 (March 2009): 162.
counsel. Each has their role, and each can only play that role well if both remain cognizant of that fact. In this particular book, this insight generates for Biggar a patient disposition that is willing to tarry with the myriad complexities of history that may have proved decisive for political leaders as they decide to engage in justified war, continue in fighting when weariness has set in, or, in fact, to go against the public’s opinion either in refusing to fight or committing troops to an unpopular cause.

This disposition of patience is, in some sense, the result of Biggar’s realism, a realism simultaneously anthropological, ontological-moral, and practical. For Biggar, the anthropological realist is one who affirms his notion that “human beings are capable of loving what is good and doing what is right, sometimes with heroic courage. Equally, however, they are capable of becoming so wedded to evil that sweet reason, for all its patience, cannot detach them.”20 Moral realism, however, takes a further step when it affirms that “human understanding of what is good and right is preceded by, and responsible to, a moral order that is rooted (somehow) in the nature of things—in objective reality.” When these two aspects of Biggar’s realism are understood, we are then prepared to see how they relate to “practical” realism—that is, the criteria by which decisions can and should be made.

For Biggar the counselor’s work only becomes intelligible when that counsel is able to resist, on the one hand, any form of moral perfectionism, and unthinking indifference to the moral order, on the other. It is only then that the path of practical wisdom becomes discernible. Biggar’s realism is as far from cynicism as it is from idealism, being marked as it is by patience and especially that particularly moral species of patience that we call mercy.

Conclusion

Though much more could be said about the work of Professors O’Donovan and Biggar, at least three tentative conclusions present themselves. In the first place, it is worth noticing the marked differences in context between Episcopal theological ethics in the United States and Anglican theological ethics in the United Kingdom. Were

20 From a pre-publication manuscript version of In Defence of War: Just War, Christianity, and Realism.
Theology as Counsel

it not for the eccentricities of Oxford in general, and Christ Church in particular, positions such as the Regius Chair—committed as it is both to the contemplation of moral theology and its propagation to academy, church, and larger society—might not exist. And yet it does, and in the context of the United Kingdom and its history, these eccentricities make a good deal of sense, for their work draws on a very old tradition, back at least to John of Salisbury, and the particular institutional location they have serially occupied offers the possibility of a certain kind of voice in theological and ethical reflection—that of counsel, and in particular counsel to the three audiences of academy, church, and state. Given that the vocation of “theologian as counselor” has not had so vigorous a presence in the United States—to say the least—it provides an interesting contrast within which to think about theology, and to see what lessons we in the United States can take from this.

The peculiarities of their institutional location, both at Oxford and in the United Kingdom in general (at least compared to the American context), entail several different implications for their work relative to their various contemporaries. First of all, in contrast to many American theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, who are more anxiously ecclesio-centric in their thought, these thinkers inhabit a world with an established church. Indeed, they have both publicly defended that establishment. (In other ways, of course, the public sphere they inhabit is far more secularized than the U.S. context; but that is a topic for another essay.) Ironically, while they make less noise about the church than such American theologians, the church has a more fundamental architectonic role to play in their thinking than it does in our own context, which provides no institutional counterweight to individual scholars’ free-floating theological reflections. Furthermore, this institutional establishment means that the tradition of “theology as counsel” that they represent in the Anglican tradition has a historical anchor in ecclesial life, and with other forms of theological-ethical reflection, in a way also unlike the American context. Just as the genre of moral casuistry emerged organically from the churches’ confessional practices and the manuals drafted to support them, so the genre of “theology as counsel” emerged from the reality that certain high ecclesial authorities functioned both politically and juridically within the councils of the kings and queens of Europe. (In another way, the tradition of counsel can be seen as a—perhaps the—specification of the casuist tradition as it pertains to public affairs.)
At least from Charlemagne on this was indubitably true, and gave rise to the tradition of “mirrors of the Christian prince” that were so popular in medieval political thought. And before that, in the traditions of quasi-public letter-writing and sermons, theologians such as Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Chrysostom, to name but the most prominent, gave voice to such counsel in precedent-setting ways, both formally and materially. What this tradition of moral reasoning suggests, therefore, is that one way for theologians to faithfully inhabit their vocation is to do more than name crude forms of utilitarianism or market fundamentalism that appears within the political realm; they can also advise—that is, honor—the vocation of rulers by helping to train those rulers into their best selves, to deal practically with these challenges. (And perhaps this pedagogy, designed for princes, can be transformed, or expanded, into one for citizens, as well.)

Before we leave this first point, however, we should note that by depicting both of these thinkers as quintessentially English we have inadvertently concealed nuances that complicate this story. It is possible, of course, either to overlook or to overplay the abiding influence of North American theologians on both of these thinkers: O’Donovan spent a formative year with Paul Ramsey at Princeton and Biggar actually received his Ph.D. under James Gustafson at the University of Chicago in the 1980s. Both, then, have been deeply informed by American “Christian ethics”—an approach unheard of in Britain when they were receiving their education there, but one that has been appropriated in the United Kingdom in recent years, not least by their help. (It is, in fact, an interesting question, whether both of them benefited from training in Christian ethics in America, and the more traditional doctrinal forms of education in the United Kingdom, unlike their American and other English contemporaries, whose educations were typically more lamentably one-sided.) Perhaps it is safest to say that they have managed to incorporate the lessons from multiple contexts while taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of their own local setting.

A second major conclusion complements their contextualization in the UK setting: for beyond the particular context in which they have worked, both O’Donovan and Biggar began their careers with extended scholarly studies of major figures in Christian thought. In this they manifest not only deep prudential wisdom in selecting worthy partners for investigation and conversation but, more profoundly still,
recognition that one needs to do a great deal of theological work if one aspires not only to engage in conversation but to have something to say, particularly something of enduring import. So much of what passes for significant work in theology and ethics today is a matter of sheer secondariness, mindlessly derivative of other work—so much simply replicates the past, or merely points back to it, or is content with trivia. By confronting the enormous weight of the past, sifting it for insight, and learning from it in constructive ways, both of these thinkers exemplify a more creative way of being enabled by these precedents, neither reiterating them nor fleeing them.

Third and finally, and again in a complementary manner to the first two points above: the institutional and historical shaping of these thinkers is aided by a further commonality visible in their work: namely, their commitment, in their own distinct ways, to advancing the historical via media that we in the Anglican tradition purport, typically in smug complacency, to represent. We often lazily affirm this, but these thinkers really attempt it. In their acceptance of multiple contexts for their work, and multiple audiences for their arguments; in their commitment to various sources for reflection on the theological-ethical task; in their willingness to countenance the hard cases of concrete ethical reflection; in their recognition of the inescapability of good-faith compromise, when the goods in those hard cases are not fully reconcilable, or when good cannot but be mixed with ambivalent regrets—in all these ways, Biggar and O'Donovan show us what it means to try genuinely to travel that via media.

That way is narrow. By and large we humans are zealots, fanatics of one side of every argument; when we discover that we do not hold strongly to one side or another, we quickly pick sides, and when we cannot find another point of view, we will imagine one into existence. True moderates in thought are far fewer than we think, because "moderation" is no easy thing. Moderation is not a place to start from, it is a position to be achieved; and it is achieved not by averaging out the best points of two sides, but by thinking through, in a serious and sometimes harrowing way, the insights of both sides, to the bitter end. Then, and only then, are you able to advance, in fear and trembling, a view that, though you know it will disappoint devotees of both sides, is your best effort at capturing what you judge to be the truth in both sides. This, we judge, is something of what Biggar means when he says that strength need not be stark.
In this way, especially as a *via media*, the views of O’Donovan and Biggar echo Richard Hooker’s deep, almost kenotic sensitivity to multiple, critical voices, and his willingness to incorporate those voices into his own. In this way, perhaps, these thinkers point us to an old truth: that the judicious Hooker remains “the undiscovered country” for Anglican moral theology.