

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE ARAB SPRING—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Theological Responses to the Arab Spring
Convener: Anna Floerke Scheid, Duquesne University
Moderator: Meghan J. Clark, St. John's University
Presenters: Anna Floerke Scheid, Duquesne University
Tobias L. Winright, Saint Louis University

This session included two papers that explored Christian approaches to peacemaking and the use of force in the context of the revolutionary movements that have recently swept across several Middle Eastern nations.

Anna Floerke Scheid's paper, "Just Revolution and the Salience of Nonviolence amidst Armed Resistance," examined the importance of nonviolent practices for revolutionary movements which intend to secure a just peace. Scheid used the categories of Just Peacemaking Theory (JPT) to argue that a wide array of nonviolent practices including direct action, grassroots community organizing, and nonviolent international support and intervention can be effective in forwarding the goals of a just revolution and relieving human suffering under oppressive regimes. Using the South African struggle against apartheid as a case study, Scheid argued that even when a revolutionary movement has determined that it has reached the "last resort" of armed resistance, nonviolent practices as they are identified by JPT ought to remain a major form of resistance for several reasons. First, specifically from the perspective of Catholic social ethics, nonviolent resistance stresses the ideal of political change without recourse to killing and testifies to the inherent dignity of the human person whose fundamental right to life generally ought not to be violated. Second, nonviolent strategies even alongside armed resistance may help to limit overall violence by hastening an end to repressive regimes, especially when they divide the regime's focus and energy. To support this argument, Scheid illustrated how the use of various forms of nonviolent practices in the South African context—including protest and international pressure—combined with limited armed resistance forced the apartheid regime to thin its repressive force over several fronts. Third, nonviolent practices provide a meaningful role for noncombatants in revolutionary struggle, and indeed they help to clarify who may be considered combatants and who may not. Here, Scheid noted that the Arab Spring demonstrates the strong desire citizens have to participate in structures that affect their lives. All persons can find ways to participate in nonviolent actions against oppression, which marks them as *opponents* to illegitimate regimes without becoming *combatants*.

In revolutionary situations, Scheid argued that the broad array of nonviolent practices of JPT ought to comprise the bulk of resistance against oppression. Even when armed strategies are employed as a last resort, just peacemaking practices can and should continue to assist communities in overcoming oppression and establishing peace with justice.

The second paper, "'Legitimate Defense' and the 'Responsibility to Protect,'" was presented by Tobias Winright. He argued that the Catholic Church's teaching on war and peace since Vatican II has continued to develop under the current rubric of "legitimate defense" of the innocent, either in national self-defense or in defense of those outside of one's nation who cannot defend themselves. *Gaudium et spes* called for a reevaluation of war. It praised nonviolence and conscientious objection, but did not revoke the traditional right of "legitimate defense." This was the first time that the phrase "legitimate defense" had been used in connection with the just war theory. Earlier tradition had employed this language in reference to private self-defense by an

individual, but it has been used increasingly in recent decades in Catholic teaching surrounding war. Winright suggested that this represents a more serious application of the just war theory, involving a tightening of its constraints, as later sources in Catholic Social Teaching extended “legitimate defense” to encompass also forceful interventions to protect innocent people within other nations.

Winright proposed that this trajectory in Catholic teaching coheres with an emerging international norm known as “the responsibility to protect” (R2P). Although debate about R2P continues in the international public square, it is undeniably gaining purchase during this second decade of the twenty-first century, most recently surrounding the Libyan and Syrian revolutions. R2P consists of three pillars: (1) the responsibility of the state to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing; (2) the responsibility of the international community to assist states in meeting their protective responsibility; and (3) the responsibility of member states to respond in a timely and decisive manner when a state fails to provide such protection. The international assistance and response in the second and third pillars involve, moreover, three primary responsibilities: prevention, reaction, and rebuilding. The World Council of Churches has studied and come to affirm R2P. The Roman Catholic Church has also begun to refer to R2P, with Pope Benedict XVI mentioning it in his address to the General Assembly of the UN on April 18, 2008 and, more recently, calling for its implementation in his major social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

An engaging discussion period followed the presentation of both papers. Most questions and comments converged around the ethics of the use of force under either the just peacemaking rubric or the legitimate defense and responsibility to protect paradigms. Particular attention in the discussion was paid to post-war, post-revolutionary, and post-intervention ethics.

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