4 Can an Intervention Be Just?
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The questions with which these essays are concerned are all aspects of a conflict between two basic principles that are enshrined in uneasy juxtaposition in the UN Charter of 1945. On the one hand there is the prohibition of the use of force against 'the territorial integrity or political independence of any state', and of UN intervention 'in matters which are essentially within the jurisdiction of any State' (Articles 2(4) and 2(7) respectively). On the other hand it is stated that 'All members pledge themselves to take joint and separate action' in cooperation with the UN to promote 'universal respect for, and observance of, human rights' (Articles 55, 56). These two principles, at least in their present form, are of relatively recent origin. That rights, including the right to legislate and to administer justice without interference from outside their borders, belong to 'states' as such is a notion which first emerged in the eighteenth century (for example by de Vattel, 1758); that certain rights (now called human rights) belong to every person by virtue simply of membership of the human race, and that there is a universal obligation to ensure that these rights are respected, is a principle first articulated in the seventeenth century by Hugo Grotius and John Locke. It was then made a basis of public policy by the leaders of the French and American Revolutions, and issued in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1798). But the underlying motivation can be traced back much further. In particular there is a long tradition of Christian thought and practice, both in the respect due to rulers and in humanitarian concern for the oppressed, of which the roots can be found in the Scriptures themselves.

Not, of course, that there can be any easy application of scriptural texts to modern problems of intervention and humanitarian relief. So far as the Hebrew scriptures are concerned, the historic kingdoms of Judah and Israel were never (except perhaps under King Solomon) in a political or strategic position to intervene in the
affairs of a neighbouring nation even had they perceived a motive to do so; and in the preceding period such parallels as may be traced (such as the penalty imposed on the Benjaminites by neighbouring tribes for a flagrant breach of the laws of hospitality and respect for aliens as recorded in Judges 19–20) are, to say the least, remote. The same is true, to a still greater degree, of the New Testament, in so far as the infant Christian community was far too small and insignificant to have any opportunity of influencing the foreign policy of any nation, and such questions cannot be expected to receive even an oblique reference in Christian sources before at least the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. Yet there were texts in the teaching of both Jesus and St Paul which from very early times were seen to bear sharply on questions which did actually impinge on the lives and reflections of Christians, such as whether there were circumstances under which they might engage in military service or retaliatory action, and the need to find ways of relieving the oppression of the poor and vulnerable in obedience to a moral tradition that reaches far back into the Hebrew scriptures. At the same time, as we shall see, there are stern words in Paul’s Letter to the Romans enjoining implicit obedience to secular rulers which were to have a profound restraining influence on the will of Christians to risk any act of civil disobedience, even in the interests of humanitarian assistance to others (Romans 13.1–7). The inherent conflict between a concern for justice on the one hand and a respect for established authority on the other was made the more intractable by the existence of divinely inspired texts which could readily be quoted in support of either position.

‘Do not resist evil’ (Matthew 5.39); ‘Love your enemies’ (Matthew 5.44). Taken on their own, these commands of Jesus recorded in the Sermon on the Mount might seem to settle for ever the question of whether a Christian should take up arms or be prepared to use force to settle a dispute or remedy an injustice. Christianity, on this showing, must be a pacifist religion, and its followers must renounce the use of violence in all circumstances. Yet in practice it has only ever been a minority of Christians who have followed a policy of strict non-resistance. From the fourth century onwards Christians have generally been willing to bear arms, and their reluctance in early times to join the Roman Army was probably motivated more by the fear of being involved in idolatrous ceremonies than by any sense that the military calling was incompatible with the teaching of