African American Thought on Authority and War

Why Listen to Marginalized Voices?

There are good reasons to turn toward nontraditional sources. First, opening up the conversation about just war can ameliorate the critiques of just war theory as too limited in perspective. Elshtain, for example, has demonstrated the efficacy and necessity of doing this by highlighting feminist perspectives on war. What is more, while the criteria of just war theory may be universally acceptable, these criteria require an interpretation that may be limited by the author’s social location. Second, a turn to liberation theology may provide a model of God that is more adequate to modern theology. Recent just war theory, as Carlson and Owens have suggested, doesn’t offer a substantive, consistent understanding of how just war theory is a theological ethic, since, with the rise of international law and secularism, the theological underpinnings of the theory have been partly eclipsed by some theorists.

There are also practical reasons for turning toward marginalized perspectives in developing hermeneutics for just war theory. First, the emphasis on obedience and deference found in traditional just war theory is no longer an adequate model for understanding Christians’ relations to the state. With the realities of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and human rights abuses among the dominant concerns for scholars of war and peace today, the virtue of obedience can hardly be an intrinsic aspect of just war theory in the twenty-first century. Yet, this requires something more than just deleting that part of the tradition. As the previous chapter attempted to demonstrate, obedience was a
logical consequence of more basic assumptions about God, humans, and government. Undoing this will require investigating these more basic claims.

Second, while traditional just war theory has tended to focus on the actions of sovereigns, war in the twenty-first century is less likely to involve actors who might traditionally be considered “sovereign.” These include citizens’ movements (e.g. Libyan resistance to Qaddafi in 2011), non-state, transnational networks (e.g. al Qaeda), and sub-national, nonsovereign territories (e.g. Taiwan). The old methods of defining “right authority” are rapidly becoming obsolete, as a number of books and articles on changes in the definition of sovereignty suggest. Third, it is unlikely that war in the near future will resemble war in the recent past. Rather than the interstate conflicts that dominated most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, war in the twenty-first century is more likely to involve subnational parties, to address humanitarian concerns, and to require international cooperation. Just as the Peace of Westphalia revolutionized our understanding of authority 400 years ago, so too, is globalization currently revolutionizing our understanding of authority today. The question is, which sources will we draw on to reshape this understanding? African American thought may be a particularly helpful resource as just war theory develops in the changing landscape of the twenty-first century.

**Source of Authority**

If we are asking about right authority and war, the question really is, by what right does authority use force? Divine mandate? International law? Territorial sovereignty? Most Christian just war theorists have attributed the right to use force to God, that the right to wage war attaches to an office is the result of God’s establishment of that office and its rights, responsibilities, and duties. As should be clear, this theological foundation grounded (and grounds) the deference to authority found in the tradition. We can say accurately of the Christian just war tradition that lurking behind claims about right authority are claims about God. Investigating these claims may point not only to some shortcomings of some writers in the tradition but also to potential remedies for these flaws.

For Augustine, God was identified with the human authorities in each sphere of life—principally, the *paterfamilias* in the household and the emperor in the empire. For Aquinas, God was identified with the wise, those most closely associated with the power of reason. In modern just war theory, God’s political authority is understood