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Preview Response

# THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION NEVER AGREED ON WHEN REBELLION IS JUSTIFIED

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I am delighted to see Nigel exploring these themes, which run parallel to much of my own work in the last two decades. With his general approach I am in the strongest sympathy, and in raising three questions I hope simply to tease out some of the underlying logic that a two-page summary inevitably glosses over.

"Goods" and objective moral order are prior to "principles" and the moral law, Nigel tells us, which I am sure is right. Could he tease out more what makes the difference between them? Would he agree that where goods evoke *worship,* principles evoke *action?* And if there is a genuine "first" and "second" in the order of our moral thinking, *from* goods *to* principles, would he agree that the decision whether to refer to the ensemble of assumed moral convictions as "natural law" or as "created order" cannot be *merely* a matter of a name, but must orient moral thought in one of two ways: as law, towards practice, or as order towards description.

In the political paragraph the mention of a "possibility of a morally justified rebellion" under the aegis of natural law seems to me to wrap up rather too much in one phrase. The tradition always believed, of course, that political regimes could sin (and could be known to do so) and then removed by God as a punishment. But it didn't always agree that action could or should be taken by citizens, or on the circumstances in which it might be. Thomas believed that we might judge our ruler to be a "tyrant" – therefore not a *legitimate* ruler – and so find ourselves to be (unnaturally) without lawful government at all, needing to take steps to clear the obstacles to a return to the governed state. The popes in the later middle ages claimed a (unique) competence to authorise the removal of a *formally legitimate* ruler for offences against natural law, a competence unhappily appealed to in support of the Spanish conquests in America. Some Calvinists went further still and defended resistance and deposition of a legitimate ruler on the basis not of natural law but of a breach of the historical covenant between God, the ruler and the people, which very often in fact turned on matters of revealed religion.

The last paragraph raises the largest question: is concern with the *truth,* which is rightly said to be

common to science and ethics, open to include a truth *about history?* Natural science, it would seem, concerns itself only with a truth of natural regularities. Humanistic disciplines often have to think about *unique* events (*e.g.* in history), *unique* objects (works of art in music, literature, architecture etc.), *unique* situations (in politics), in ways that bring out the "truth" of their significance, even though they are not mere instances of any larger class. What obligation does Nigel think ethics has to the historical truths Christians hold about redemption and eschatology? Does the fact of the cross and resurrection "change" or "develop" natural law/created order in some way? Is there "a purpose of God in history" that can be known and followed, though history is a once-and-unrepeatable process? Is there such a thing as a unique vocation that an individual may have – perhaps to suffer or labour in a certain way that other people need not? And would such a vocation constitute a *moral* duty alongside the *generic* obligations to which we are all subject as being members of a recognised class ("Husbands, love your wives….") or in a typical situation ("Repay no one evil for evil…")

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