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Taking War Captive: A Recommendation of Daniel Bell's *Just War as Christian Discipleship*

Joel P. Meyer

Teaching about just war often lies on the periphery of Christian theology. Far from the orbit of such central loci as the Trinity, Christology, and justification, just war often has a place tucked away in the study of ethics. This has not always been the case. In his seminal essay, "How 'Christian Ethics' Came to Be," Stanley Hauerwas points out that the gap between theology and ethics is a recent phenomenon.¹ From the early church fathers to Luther, questions about how to live could not be separated from convictions about God's work in Jesus. Issues of morality were encompassed within the divine economy. With the dawning of modernity, though, questions about how to live were removed from the life and theology of the church. Hauerwas explains:

[M]odern people think of themselves as haunted by the problem of relativism. If our "ethics" are relative to time and place, what if anything prevents our moral opinions from being "conventional"? And if they are conventional, some assume they must also be "arbitrary." But if our morality is conventional, how can we ever expect to secure agreements between people who disagree?²

Therefore, in the interest of creating a unified culture, modernity tried to ground moral convictions in something more rational and universal than Christianity. Ethics developed as a form of reflection on human life that was sharply distinguished from core Christian convictions about God.

On issues of war and violence, Lutherans have done little to overcome modernity's divide. In fact, Lutherans have a confessional commitment to just war. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession states that "Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, "How 'Christian Ethics' Came to Be," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 37-49.

² Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics," 44.

just war, to serve as soldiers,” and that “Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws except when commanded to sin. For then they owe greater obedience to God than to human beings (Acts 5[:29])” (AC XVI 2, 6–7). Nevertheless, as Reinhard Hütter has made clear, this confessional commitment has rarely been in working order.³ Lutherans have not defined what counts as a just war, nor have they consistently taught the tradition. Even more significantly, though, Lutherans have often eclipsed just war teaching with the emphasis that the state is one of the orders of creation and that war is a legitimate practice of the state. As a result, Lutherans are not adept at using their theological convictions to understand contemporary matters of war and violence. In other words, Lutherans have lost the theological resources to judge when we owe due obedience to civil authorities and when we must obey God rather than human beings.

Recently Daniel M. Bell Jr., Professor of Theological Ethics at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, has addressed this gap in an impressive and challenging way with the publication of *Just War as Christian Discipleship*.⁴ To be sure, his is an unassuming volume. The book introduces the tradition of just war to laity and pastors alike. To that end, Bell writes with clarity and simplicity, almost to a fault. He refrains from engaging the scholarly debates and has minimal discussion of current events. While these qualities would make Bell’s book seem uninteresting to the average Lutheran pastor or theologian, the burden of this study’s argument will be to demonstrate why Bell’s book is essential reading for American Lutherans.

By placing the book within the context of recent and relevant literature on Christianity and American politics, this study will argue that Bell’s book addresses a significant challenge posed by American culture to the Lutheran teaching on two-kingdom theology. Lutherans confess that vocations of the sword are God-pleasing, because God uses them to preserve life and society until the return of Christ. American politics, however, configures these vocations so that core Christian convictions become marginalized as merely private values that function in strictly therapeutic and individualistic ways. In matters of war and violence, American politics have out-narrated the Christian faith. The goal of this study will be to

³ Reinhard Hütter, “Be Honest in Just War Thinking! Lutherans, the Just War Tradition, and Selective Conscientious Objection,” in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 69–83.

⁴ Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather Than the State* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

show that by grounding just war in the Christian narrative and the practice of the church Bell's book gives Christians the resources to recapture the narratives that describe war.

I. Just War as Christian Discipleship

The most unique aspect of Bell's book is the way that it describes just war as a form of Christian discipleship. In many discussions of just war, the traditional criteria (such as legitimate authority, just cause, right intent, and last resort) are described as a checklist and guideline for state policy makers.⁵ Bell, however, takes just war out of the realm of foreign policy strategists and places it in the ordinary practices of the Christian life. According to Bell, the criteria of just war signify ways that the ordinary love and justice that Christians have for their neighbors extend into the field of international conflict. Just war, in that sense, is simply Christian discipleship.

An important question for Bell in this regard is whether Christians consider just war to be a lesser evil or a positive good. When considered a lesser evil, just war is thought to be a concession to the reality that Christians have the responsibility to rule. Ordinarily, Christians would be non-violent followers of Jesus, but since they also have a responsibility to run the world, they must put aside their commitment to Jesus and operate by another standard of judgment. Since they find themselves in vocations of statehood, they must get their hands dirty and sin boldly. Although Bell does not mention him explicitly, Reinhold Niebuhr has certainly been the most prominent theologian to give this sort of account of Christian participation in war. For instance, in his essay, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," Niebuhr argues that since every human endeavor is contaminated with sin, human beings will never be able to achieve perfection.⁶ At best, we can only recognize the limits of any attempt to bring about an ultimate and absolute justice and act responsibly within those constraints.

Bell, though, argues that "lesser evil" accounts of just war undermine the criteria that would limit war in the first place. For instance, "one could

⁵ See Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Like Bell, O'Donovan holds that Just War is an extension of ordinary Christian forms of judgment into the field of war. Unlike Bell, however, O'Donovan's book addresses those who are in position to influence state policy.

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102-119.

argue that the just war tradition itself represents an impossible ideal that at any given moment must be discarded for the sake of warding off a greater evil.⁷ Therefore, a fundamental break with the Christian tradition occurs when just war is construed as a lesser evil. No longer are just warriors obligated to follow Jesus when assessing and participating in a war; instead, Christian convictions about God become eclipsed by concerns of effectiveness.

To the contrary, Bell argues that Christians should understand just war as a positive good. Building on the work of Augustine, Bell describes just war as a means of following Jesus' command to love our neighbors. According to Augustine, an individual Christian is not to kill another person even in self-defense. Out of love for the neighbor it is better to be killed than to kill. But this does not mean that Christians cannot serve in the military. War can be an act of love for the neighbor insofar as it serves as a harsh kindness that aims to restore peace and justice. The just war tradition, therefore, provides the criteria for ensuring that a war serves as a form of love for the enemy. In that sense just war is "rightly understood not as a departure from the moral vision of Jesus and the early church but as an extension of that vision in different times and under changed circumstances."⁸ The benefit of this understanding is that Christian convictions about God are put to use in thinking about and acting in war rather than laid aside as irrelevant and ineffective.

Moreover, when placed within the context of Christian discipleship, the criteria for just war find their ground in the triune God's economy of salvation rather than the narrative of the modern nation-state. Bell identifies two different accounts of just war. He calls them "Just War as Public Policy Checklist" (JWPPC) and "Just War as Christian Discipleship" (JWCD). JWPPC places just war within the narrative of the modern nation-state, while JWCD places just war within the triune economy. Each account describes the criteria differently according to a different underlying rationale. For instance, both JWPPC and JWCD hold that only a legitimate authority may wage war. Moreover, both agree that the modern state is the legitimate authority, but they each account for the authority of the state in their own way. The JWPPC tradition argues that states have the authority to wage war because they are sovereign over a territory of people who have the natural right of self-preservation. On the other hand, the JWCD tradition has a theological rationale for the state's authority: only God has

⁷ Bell, *Just War*, 34.

⁸ Bell, *Just War*, 33.

the right to kill, and God has given that right to the government in order to keep civic peace.

While the differences might seem subtle, they have significant consequences that impact the rest of the criteria. For instance, JWPPC tends to limit just cause to matters of self-defense, since nation-states have sovereignty over a territory in order to maintain the right of self-preservation. This also means that JWPPC has minimal use for the concept of right intent (the criteria that governs the motives of the would-be just warrior), since the justice sought in war is primarily a justice concerned with the rights of the people within the sovereign's territory. On the other hand, JWCD understands just cause in a more robust sense, namely as the restoration of the common good—that is, not only the good of the people within our territory but also the good of allies and enemies alike. Therefore, JWCD places greater emphasis on right intent. If the intent of war is not to restore the common good for all parties involved, then other avenues should be sought besides war.

Finally, when they are grounded in the Christian narrative about God, the criteria serve as more than a checklist for public policy makers. They function as nodes of Christian moral formation. Bell does not cease to remind the reader that the justice and love that we seek cannot be summoned spontaneously in war. Rather, if we are to be a just war people, we must be trained in the everyday habits of seeking justice and loving our neighbor. Therefore, the disciplines necessary to be just warriors flow naturally from the everyday habits of the church's life. It follows that the challenge of just war is not primarily a challenge for the Pentagon or the United States military; it is first and foremost a challenge for the church. And at the end of every chapter, Bell identifies a number of challenges that the church will need to consider if it is to form a people who have such an understanding of just war.

Bell's challenges are remarkably ordinary in character, which makes them deeply penetrating. For instance, a challenge for the church concerning right intent is whether or not churches foster love for enemies. Bell asks,

Do we regularly pray for our enemies in both private and corporate prayer, or do we pray only for our side and our own? We might ask if apart from war we can even name our enemies. Or have we succumbed to a culture of niceness that shies away from doing so because it is considered impolite? If we find it difficult even to acknowledge forthrightly the presence of enemies, we will be hard pressed to love them on those occasions when we cannot avoid facing them. Likewise

. . . we might ask ourselves if in the midst of a highly charged, ideologically polarized culture the church encourages and models in its own life ways of dealing with conflict that manifest the love of enemies. Or do we simply avoid the difficult task of loving enemies by separating from those with whom we disagree? . . . Alternatively, do we avoid loving our enemies by repressing conflict altogether or by clinging to a sentimentality that refuses to accept that sometimes love must be tough, benevolence severe, kindness harsh?⁹

Bell's commentary in these sections provokes honest reflection on our most common and ordinary practices, and such reflection on our practices can be considered the most illuminating and significant contribution of his book. For instance, when we take Bell's challenges to heart, we should notice that many churches pray for the United States military, but few, if any, pray for Al-Qaida or ISIS. Such habits of prayer reveal the simple but profound importance of Bell's argument. At a basic level, the Christian narrative does not always form our practice of Christianity.

II. The Constantinian Synthesis

How has this happened? Again, take for example our common habits of prayer. That many churches in the United States pray for the American military but not for Al-Qaida raises an important question: What are the determinative commitments of American Christians if we pray at church for the military but rarely, if ever, think to pray for people who want to kill us? John Howard Yoder's account of Constantinianism begins to answer that question and to place Bell's book within a larger context.¹⁰

Yoder uses the term Constantinianism to mark the shift that took place when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Official cooperation between Constantine and the bishops created a new social and political arrangement that redefined what it meant to be a Christian. Before the Constantinian era, identifying oneself as a Christian required "at least a degree of conviction," but after the synthesis, "the church was everybody," and "it would take exceptional conviction not to be counted as Christian."¹¹

⁹ Bell, *Just War*, 176.

¹⁰ "Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics" is a chapter in John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹¹ Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 136.

According to Yoder, this new political and social context generated developments in Christian thought and practice. The most important development was a transformed understanding of eschatology. Prior to the synthesis, the lordship of Christ was understood in terms similar to the victory of D-Day in World War Two, when the Allies successfully invaded the mainland of Europe. At that point, the fate of the war was determined. But the final victory was still yet to come. Yoder suggests that “this corresponds to the age of the church. Evil is potentially subdued, and its submission is already a reality in the reign of Christ, but the final triumph of God is yet to come.”¹² Therefore, while the church was God’s primary agent in bringing about the consummation of history, the secular state played a supporting role in so far as it was the emergency measure that God used to keep order in the meantime. But after the synthesis, this eschatological perspective of the state was transformed. Now that a particular state was the bearer of Christianity, the success of Christianity depended on the success of that particular state. Thus, the state rather than the church became the true bearer of history.

Consequently, when a particular state became the agent by which God would bring about the consummation of history—when a particular political entity became the bearer of Christianity to the world—the survival of that particular state became an end in itself. Prior to Constantine, the eschatological victory of Christ defined the boundaries of any state. Political authorities were not an end in themselves but only an emergency measure to restrain evil and keep good order. Now, however, “the state, blessed by the church, becomes plaintiff, judge, jury, and executioner; and the rightness of the cause justifies any methods, even the suppression or extermination of the enemy.”¹³

Likewise, Christian ethics, which were previously defined in terms of discipleship to Jesus, now became preoccupied with how to preserve this particular society and its government. For instance, Yoder suggests that in this environment two questions came to determine and limit Christian ethics: Can you ask such behavior of everyone? And, what would happen if everyone did it? These questions are used to exclude Jesus’ call to discipleship as irresponsible and unrealistic to the task of managing

¹² John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 60.

¹³ Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 67.

society.¹⁴ In this approach, the survival and the promotion of the state thus become the central goal of the church.¹⁵

III. Migrations of the Holy

One might reasonably ask what any of this has to do with our American context. After all, the separation of church and state was intended to ensure that the state does not use its political power and persuasion to evangelize. Yoder, however, argues that the basic “structural error” of identifying a particular state “as a bearer of God’s cause” has endured throughout the history of the West, although it has been “transposed into a new key.”¹⁶ William Cavanaugh’s book, *The Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, shows how the Constantinian synthesis has endured to this day.¹⁷ Cavanaugh writes his book as a contribution to the debate about secularization. While most scholars agree that religion has declined in the West, Cavanaugh argues that it never went away. Instead, the commitments and hopes that were traditionally associated with the church have migrated to the modern nation-state. Because the nation-state claims to be the keeper of the common good, our imaginations are trained to look to the state for all good in life. In turn, the nation-state demands our total loyalty and works to subordinate all other attachments to itself.

For example, Cavanaugh unmasks the subtle idolatry of the nation-state by carefully deconstructing the idea that the state is the keeper of the common good.¹⁸ Political theorists—including well-intentioned Christians—argue that the state is the keeper of the common good because it sits atop a social pyramid. At the base of the pyramid lies the family. Moving upward one finds intermediary social groups and associations like the church. And at the top one finds the state, which is supposed to protect and ensure the survival of these more basic social institutions. Cavanaugh argues that this understanding of the state has little basis in history or common experience. Instead, the modern nation-state develops its power and authority by undermining the significance of intermediary associ-

¹⁴ Yoder, “Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” 139.

¹⁵ Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 146–153.

¹⁶ Yoder, “Constantinian Sources,” 141–144. See also Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 146–153.

¹⁷ William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹⁸ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 1–6.

ations like the church. Sociologists Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam have long noticed that these groups no longer function to provide identity and meaning for Western people. Cavanaugh argues that the nation-state has used the ideology of individual rights to disconnect us from these intermediate associations and to create a more direct and unmediated relationship between the individual and the state. Put simply, our identities are determined by the abstract notion of individual rights, and these rights are protected and guaranteed by the nation-state. Cavanaugh concludes that the nation-state has monopolized the commitments, loyalties, and imaginations of Western people.

Furthermore, in a chapter entitled "Messianic Nation: A Christian Critique of American Exceptionalism," Cavanaugh shows how thoroughly the nation-state has captured the imagination of some American Christians. American exceptionalism—the idea that America has a unique role in making history turn out right—has both a theological and secular strain. The theological strain posits a direct relationship between God and America. America is God's chosen and elect nation—either to enforce and promulgate Christianity (Puritans) or to spread freedom from tyranny. The secular version does not refer to God's election. In this understanding, what makes America exceptional is that its citizens have the freedom to worship whatever God they want. In this case, "Freedom is not a substantive good but a formal structure that maximizes the possibility of each person to realize his or her particular goods. What America has discovered, therefore, is not particular to America, but is the key to happiness and peace for the whole world."¹⁹ Christian theologian Stephen Webb even combines the two by arguing that America is God's chosen nation because its freedoms provide the best opportunity for people to choose Christianity. Cavanaugh, like Yoder before him, argues against this theological embrace of American exceptionalism: "What has happened in effect is that America has become the new church. When the relationship of America and God is this direct, there is little to check the identification of God's will with America's."²⁰

Cavanaugh's arguments demonstrate what Yoder means when he says that the basic structural error of Constantinianism has been transposed into a new key. Despite the separation of church and state, citizens of modern nation-states (and especially the United States of America) often look to the state for all good in this life, including the security to worship

¹⁹ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 93.

²⁰ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 104.

whatever God we want. Cavanaugh tries to change the subject of the debate about the decline of religion from secularization to “the age-old sin of idolatry.”²¹ If Luther’s description of idolatry in the Large Catechism is correct, Cavanaugh succeeds at his goal.

IV. The Two Kingdoms in the Modern Context

Ironically, the doctrine of the two kingdoms can open Lutherans to the possibility of this idolatry. I say ironically, because the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine should describe secular authority in terms that eliminate the sacred status of any particular state. For instance, in his treatise “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” Luther describes the state within God’s economy of salvation centered in Christ.²² God rules his creation primarily through the proclamation of the gospel about his Son, which creates faith active in love. Because the fullness of the kingdom of God in Jesus is still yet to come, however, God has ordained civil governments with the authority to use the sword in order to restrain evil and maintain good order. In the meantime, Christians are called to fulfill vocations of civil authority, because these are opportunities to love and serve our neighbor. In this basic account of the economy of salvation, secular authorities are rendered “temporal” in the sense that no one particular state carries the burden of salvation. As Robert Benne puts it, in light of the kingdom of Christ, all human efforts “deal with penultimate improvements in the human condition, with relative goods and bads, not with salvation. This means that politics is desacralized and relativized. Salvation is through Christ, not through human political schemes nor through psychological or religious efforts.”²³

While the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms has this positive feature, it can also open a space for its co-option by temporal authorities. To recognize the ultimate limits of the state is one matter; to give positive substance as to how we should fulfill the vocations of temporal authority is another. For that purpose, Lutherans usually argue that all human beings share a capacity for common moral reasoning. Again, according to Benne, “this moral reason is finally a reflection of the Law ‘written on the heart’

²¹ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 2.

²² Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. J. J. Schindel, ed. Walther I. Brandt, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 81–129.

²³ Robert Benne, *Reasonable Ethics: A Christian Approach to Social, Economic, and Political Concerns* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 93.

(Rom. 2:15) that God has placed in every human soul. Thus non-Christians also have God-given capacities to discern the moral ordering of our common life."²⁴

This account of human reasoning has several problems. Most troublesome is that such claims about the ability of human reason render innocuous the strong theological convictions that underlie the two-kingdom doctrine. The temporal nature of human government is not common sense. Christians derive it from our conviction that God is ruling this world first and foremost through the proclamation of the gospel. In other words, our belief that the state is not a means of human salvation depends on our belief that the God of Israel raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and made him Lord and Christ. But when Christians debate in the left-hand realm of God's reign with no more substantive convictions than the Decalogue (or whatever counts as the law written on the heart), then we effectively lay aside the theological resources we possess that would desacralize the state.

Put another way, Christians today face a struggle between competing master narratives. If we do not bring the entire Christian narrative to the table—including our more particular convictions about God—we will find that even our best moral reasoning will be fit into another story altogether.

V. The Myth of Religious Violence

Even while the doctrine of the two kingdoms intends to make any given government relative to God's work through Christ, it can simultaneously create the space for governments to control the master narrative. William Cavanaugh argues in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence* that the modern liberal nation-state achieves just such control over Christianity by perpetuating the myth that religion is inherently prone to violence.²⁵ The idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life that is especially prone to violence, and that the secular state is a necessary development to stave off religious conflict, has achieved mythical status in the West. It functions as a myth because it has captured our collective imaginations without much argument. Upon closer inspection, Cavanaugh unveils not only its incoherence, but the way it functions to undermine the unquestioned authority of modern nation-states.

²⁴ Benne, *Reasonable Ethics*, 60–61.

²⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The discussion that follows draws on this book.

Cavanaugh argues that attempts to separate a distinct sphere of “religion,” which is prone to violence because it is either absolutist, divisive, or irrational, from a sphere of “the secular” inevitably fail. When those who espouse the myth try to define what counts as religion, they cannot help but also describe features that apply to “secular” realities as well. For instance, those who suggest that religion is prone to violence because it is absolutist have a hard time explaining why the term religion does not also apply to sentiments of nationalism. Cavanaugh does not simply wish to argue that secular realities are just as violent as religious realities. Rather, he identifies these inconsistencies in order to illuminate and disestablish the arrangements of power that would distinguish between some forms of violence as “religious” and “irrational” from other forms of violence as “secular” and “rational.” He finds that the Western societies perpetuate the myth of religious violence as justification for the violence of the modern Western nation-state.

Thus, the promulgation of this myth has accomplished two feats at once. It has banned religious convictions from public influence while at the same time secured the absolute authority of the state on issues of violence and war. Cavanaugh argues that “this myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labeled religious, while underwriting the nation-state’s monopoly on its citizens’ willingness to sacrifice and kill.”²⁶

If Cavanaugh is right, the myth ensures that American Christians will consider their convictions about God insignificant (and possibly even dangerous) in regard to foreign affairs. At the same time, the myth deifies the modern liberal nation-state as the only entity that can ensure peace. Therefore, the danger is not only that Christians will act unethically in times of war. Rather, the danger is also that their thoughts and actions with regard to war perpetuate a subtle idolatry. This situation is exactly what makes Bell’s book significant. By arguing for just war as a form of Christian discipleship, Bell gives the church the resources to recapture the master narrative in the imagination of Christians.

VI. Conclusion

By summarizing the arguments of Bell, Yoder, and Cavanaugh, and by placing them alongside brief selections from Luther and Benne, I have not tried to give anything close to a comprehensive account of religion and politics in America, the Constantinian synthesis, religion and violence,

²⁶ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4.

American war, the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine, or contemporary Lutheran public theology. I have only tried to make the connections between recent and relevant literature on these topics with the hope of illuminating the conversation into which Bell's book fits. At the most, I have argued that the Constantinian synthesis described by John Howard Yoder continues in contemporary America through the conviction that America is an exceptional nation. What makes it exceptional, in the minds of many, is the same thing that renders Christian convictions about God individualistic and strictly therapeutic—namely that religion is not only kept out of matters of public policy, but that it also ceases to grant Americans identity and purpose. Bell's book can give churches the resources to reverse this decay by showing how common Christian convictions might shape our public lives in quite ordinary, and yet profoundly forgotten, ways.