

*The Responsibility to Protect- International Ecumenical Consultation
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**THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT
SCOPE AND CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCHES**

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Thank you for inviting me to this meeting. It is my first time in Germany and it is a great pleasure to be here. As a young theology student at Oxford, my intellectual life was dominated by the great German theologians of the twentieth century. Several of them changed my life. But I must confess that I did not understand them all although I certainly admired their stamina!

So, I am very pleased to be among a group of German Christians at last and will try to do four things this evening:

- Introduce the main subject of our meeting – protection
- Look at the scope of the R2P agenda
- Identify various different types of challenges we face in pursuing this policy
- Suggest some R2P roles for the churches.

The Responsibility to Protect

We are here to talk about how to protect our fellow human beings – young people, old people, black people, white people, men, women, boys, girls, people of all faiths and no faith. And, of course, we can start by knowing that this is what God wants. The God of love, the God of forgiveness calls us to protect, to love, to reconcile and to care about one another.

Throughout the gospels, Christ calls us to protect and always insists that we see the sanctity and preciousness of the person before us. In His healing ministry he repeatedly responds to protect individuals, even those He has never met like, for example, the Centurion's servant. In parables like the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches us the principle of universal neighbourliness and encourages us to protect those we encounter without reservation. In His teaching about the sheep and the goats, he tells us that we will be judged on the basis of how well we care for and protect others. And, in his quiet disarming of the violent crowd around a woman accused of adultery, he acts to prevent violence and protect her.

So – as so often in our moral lives – in discussions of our responsibility to protect, we are struggling and puzzling over a difficult area where God already is. This is, of course, a comfort. The question, as ever, is not so much “what does God want” but “what can we do?”

International Discussion and Action on R2P to date

In the last fifteen years, the policy debate which has eventually coalesced around the Responsibility to Protect is a marker for a very profound international discussion about the relationship between organized violence and the human person in the world at large. And, of course, it has not been an abstract discussion. Unfortunately, it is a debate which has been

animated by a stream of violence around the world, usually within states, as the blood letting of state formation, tyranny, genocide and political competition have taken their course in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Central Europe. Such violence is not new in the world. Indeed, it is by no means as bad in quantitative terms as much previous human violence in the twentieth century and in the many centuries beforehand. But recent violence has been televised and communicated to a very high degree while global institutions like the United Nations, the BBC, CNN and civil society networks have shaped a single international discussion of the subject in a way we have not seen since the nineteenth century Hague Peace Conferences and the League of Nations discussions in the early twentieth century.

This R2P discussion is really about what constitutes a just and effective political contract around violence and protection within states and international society. In short, it repeatedly discusses three levels of the violence contract in human relations:

- 1) What is the violence/protection contract between a people and a government within a state?
- 2) What is the violence/protection contract between one state and the international organization of states – the United Nations?
- 3) What is the violence/protection contract between the people within a state and the United Nations?

At each of these levels, the R2P discussion has asked how much violence and how much protection are appropriate and just, as well as the more awkward question of how much international violence is acceptable to protect people from intra-national violence.

Much of this discussion has turned on notions of human rights, state responsibility, just force, atrocity and the idea of the civilian as a critical identity with which to describe unarmed people who are the victims of violence. This and other terminology has come to make up the thick discourse of the R2P debate. In so doing, the R2P discussion has produced a new and highly contested international doctrine which effectively trumps state power with individual rights and affirms an international contract of prevention, armed response and reconstruction between individual victims and international society.

The Scope of R2P

The scope of R2P, therefore, asserts a duty to protect people from violence which extends from demands for responsible sovereignty (a protective state) to responsible internationalism (a protective United Nations). And, in each case, it identifies three phases of responsibility:

- The *responsibility to prevent* – and so to preserve the protection contract
- The *responsibility to react* – and so reinstate the protection contract when it has been broken, by force and violence if necessary
- The *responsibility to rebuild* – and so to repair the damage from a broken contract and reconstruct a new protection contract for the future.

If this is the scope of R2P responsibility, it also extends across many different types of violent context from extreme emergency such as genocide to lower levels of indiscriminate violence in war and the various human rights abuses of political oppression. Thus, R2P has been seen as relevant to Darfur and Zimbabwe, the Palestinian Territories and Burma, Sri Lanka and Northern Uganda.

This range of contexts is important to remember because the R2P debate can all too easily get mesmerised by the hardest cases of extreme violence like Rwanda and Darfur. But we must remember that the scope of our responsibility to protect exists in many different settings where there is a crisis of violence. Frustration and tragedy in one place should not lead to a universal fatalism about human efforts to protect nationally and internationally.

Challenges to R2P

But national and international protection is not easy. It faces severe ideological challenges as well as hard practical challenges.

- **Ideological Challenges**

Ideological challenges take two main forms. First, there is a range of views which disagree with protection *per se* and think it right to kill and hurt civilians as a method of war. We might call these beliefs anti-civilian ideologies. They are found in many state and non-state forces pursuing war today. Secondly, there is still a powerful cluster of political opinion that considers international intervention within the affairs of states unwise - at best counter-productive and at worst aggressive, imperial and self-interested. These views are held and aired consistently by states like China, India, Russia and many smaller countries in UN debates about R2P.

Anti-civilians ideologies take many forms.¹ They include genocidal thinking which believes in the rightful extermination of a group and extend to ideologies of subjugation and compliance which see extreme force as the best way to enforce deference and political obedience. Ideologies of necessity routinely argue that anti-civilian strategies, although extreme, are required to secure a just cause in times of supreme emergency when good military conduct will not win. Revenge also argues for extreme violence as reciprocal atrocity. Deep in many ideologies of violence are the twin logics of sacrifice and collectivism. Sacrifice believes that real change requires innocent blood. Collectivist thinking loses sight of individuals and easily encourages people to target whole groups. And there is the problem of ambiguity too. Many people inside a war refuse to believe that so-called civilians are simply that. They see their identity as more ambiguous so justifying attacks against them.

These forms of anti-civilian reasoning are powerful. They dominate most wars and always have done. They disagree profoundly with the moral premise of protection in R2P. With every killing they challenge the ideology of R2P. Repeatedly calling such ideologues to their “responsibility to protect” is futile if they do not think they have one and are, instead, convinced of their responsibility to kill. If R2P is seriously to engage such ideologies, it must recognize them, understand them and challenge them in their own terms. It must give

¹ See, Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness and Morality in War*, London, Hurst and Co, 2007, chapter 4.

compelling reasons and incentives for people to abandon these ideas and follow a pro-civilian logic in their wars.

Anti-interventionist ideologies are still more common and more powerful than R2P advocates care to admit. Powerful states believe in sovereignty as a principle that does not have to be earned but exists as an arena in which to carry on inevitable political struggles. States like China believe it is a people's responsibility to sort themselves out – self-determination of the hardest form. Stability and good politics are best made from within, seldom delivered by outsiders. China and others are also sceptical of an intervention's ability to act without significant negative consequences, fearing that the shadow of international action may often be longer and darker than its good intentions and original protection operations. And, in many cases, it is hard to prove them wrong. Again, those arguing for a responsibility to prevent, protect and repair must prove the case that external intervention has a creative role in state-formation.

- **Practical Challenges**

Implementing the responsibility to protect is practically difficult too. More often than not, R2P operations of all kinds involve significant compromises. Resources are never enough, mandates are contested, distances are great, alliances are brittle and the quality and commitment of intervening organizations are uneven. And, of course, as in Darfur, the government of the intervened state puts up a series of endless obstacles to international action. Alongside these practical differences are serious prudential difficulties. Is it wise to push the democracy agenda as part of preventive efforts or will such policies accelerate divisions? Is it wise to use international force and risk a longer internationalized war in a hostile region? Is it wise to repair and rebuild a post-war state to a degree of sophistication that its post-war economy cannot sustain the new infrastructure, legal system and health services that are typical of post-war gifts? All these challenges test the assumptions at the heart of R2P doctrine.

The Role of the Churches

In the face of these challenges but in essential accord with the main protective aims of R2P, the church can play enduring and important roles. Indeed, the best Christian response to R2P may be 4PR.

Prophetic – like the eighth century Jewish prophets who inspire so much of Christianity's teaching on social justice, the Church must engage in the long hard struggle of calling people to a just and protective political contract in every state in which it works. In particular, this means playing a prophetic role in shaping a just violence/protection contract in every society. This contract (or covenant) between people and power is a fundamental part of prevention and rebuilding.

Pastoral – in the midst of violence and suffering, the church should always reach out to save and heal. This includes the political mission of Esther and the healing ministry of Jesus and can be made manifest in active and courageous humanitarian programmes.

Priestly – in the slide to war, in its midst and in its recovery the church must remain in tact. There is a vital priestly role to be continued at all times which preserves the people of God as

a church by baptizing them, gathering them, teaching them, blessing them, consoling them, praying with them and burying them.

Passion-able – hardest of all, the church must be prepared to suffer with Christians and others who are living through war or being killed by it. The church must be able to accompany people, suffering itself, as it stands beside people who are suffering and fighting.

Risen – finally, as a community of resurrection, the Church must never lose sight of new life, new futures and the continuous possibility of resurrection in all parts and people of God's world. Even in the worst of times, the church must embody faith and hope in the risen Christ.

Conclusion

This is a brief introduction to R2P – the scope of its ambition, the challenges it faces and the role which the churches might play in supporting this new internationalist doctrine. I trust your experience and your discussions in the next two days will go much deeper and into greater practical detail than I am able to do.

The End