

CHRISTIAN REALISM & U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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**SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, WHILE AMERICA SLEPT, WESTERN CIVILIZATION
WAS FIGHTING FOR ITS LIFE**

In September of 1940, after occupying and enslaving most of continental Europe in less than a year, Hitler's Germany turned its gaze north, across the English Channel. Beginning on September 7, the Luftwaffe unleashed a storm of death and destruction on the city of London: the Blitz. The first round of bombing raids lasted fifty-seven consecutive nights. CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow was there: "I've seen some horrible sights in this city during these days and nights, but not once have I heard man, woman, or child suggest that Britain should throw in her hand."

Everyone in Britain, including Prime Minister Winston Churchill, expected a Nazi invasion at any moment. And nearly everyone in the United States, including President Franklin Roosevelt, tried desperately to put Britain's existential struggle out of their minds. "I'll say it again, and again," vowed FDR during his 1940 re-election campaign. "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."

the nation's Christian leadership: its theologians, pastors, writers, and public intellectuals? The lamentable fact is that most failed to grasp the nature of Hitlerism; they refused to contemplate the practical consequences of a complete Nazi triumph over Europe. Instead, many insisted that the "ethics of Jesus" demanded a U.S. foreign policy of isolationism, pacifism, and national repentance.

We might expect this kind of talk from dissembling politicians, but what about

"Can military force do much against soul force which folds its arms and bides its

day?" asked Albert Palmer, president of the Chicago Theological Seminary. "Without military opposition the Hitlers wither away." Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of New York's Riverside Baptist Church and one of the most influential preachers of his day, was unmoved by the fate of millions already under Nazi occupation. "I can never use my Christian ministry in the support and sanction of war," he wrote in January 1941. "My personal judgment is that for the United States to become a belligerent in this conflict would be a colossal and futile disaster." Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the prestigious *Christian Century*, denounced American participation in the conflict as "a war for imperialism," as hateful a prospect as a Nazi victory. "For the United States to make a fateful decision to enter this war on the mistaken and irrational assumption that it is a war for the preservation of anything good in civilization will be the supreme tragedy of our history."

By the 1920s and 30s, American Christianity—especially its liberal wing—shared the same mental outlook as that of political progressivism. In politics, both reacted to the cataclysm of the First World War determined to make international peace their supreme goal, whatever the cost. In matters of religion, both embraced a spirit of disbelief and evasion: a reluctance to admit the stubbornness and pervasiveness of human evil.

"In this liberalism there is little understanding of the depth to which human malevolence may sink and the heights to which malignant power may rise," wrote Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940). "Some easy and vapid escape is sought from the terrors and woes of a tragic era."

This frame of mind has returned with a vengeance in the post-9/11 era, fueled by the costly and inconclusive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its motive force, though, is a blinkered vision of the Christian gospel that has unwittingly debased the Christian conscience. At the very moment when the political and religious ideals of the

West are threatened by new forms of terror and totalitarianism, much of the Protestant Christian church today lacks the intellectual and moral resources to fight back.

Consider the reaction of leading "progressive" Protestant ministers to the 9/11 attacks and the rise of radical Islamic extremism. The Rev. Tony Campolo, the self-described "Prophet of Red Letter Christianity," has focused his righteous rage on American foreign policy. He compares U.S. military action against Islamic militants to the campaign of beheadings launched by the Islamic State (ISIS) against alleged infidels. "What can we do to stop this cycle of violence?" he asks. His answer: "What if President Bush and President Obama stood together at the rostrum of the U.N. General Assembly and did the biblical thing? What if, on behalf of the American people, they repented of what our nation has done?"

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, Jim Wallis and his *Sojourners* magazine produced a manifesto called "Confessing Christ in a World of Violence." A critique of the U.S.-led "war on terror," the document was signed by scores of theology professors, ethicists and church leaders. Its signatories sought to soften what they called the "crude distinctions" being made between radical Islamic jihad and Western democracy. They thus offered a misappropriation of Solzhenitsyn: "The distinction between good and evil does not run between one nation and another, or one group and another," the petition read. "It runs straight through every human heart." More recently, Wallis finds the solution to ISIS barbarism in tackling the "root causes" of terrorism, which are economic and political in nature. "Terrorism is always built on grievances—real and perceived—that are used to recruit for and perpetuate its ideology and violence," he writes. "So addressing those grievances and correcting course along the way is essential to defeating terrorism."

Stanley Hauerwas, professor of ethics at Duke University, delivered a jeremiad against the United States, even as human

remains were being recovered from Ground Zero. He saw a terrible day of reckoning ahead: "I think that when America isn't able to rule the world, that people will exact some very strong judgments against America—and I think we will well deserve it." A look at his latest book, *War and the American Difference*, suggests that world events have left his views undisturbed. Hauerwas rejects U.S. military action in the Middle East, even to prevent crimes against humanity or genocide. "If the U.S. intervenes, we just reinforce the presumption, which is true, that we're an imperial power."

And on it goes. Religious progressives are not mistaken when they discover in the ministry of Jesus a life devoted to the love of neighbor: the unconditional love of God. Nor are they wrong to see in Jesus the quintessential peacemaker: the Prince of Peace. Yet their political vision is based entirely upon the principle of non-violence. Their politics, in all its particulars, is guided by one rule, "the law of love."

The fatal problem with this view is that historic Christianity—especially Protestant Christianity—has never reduced the gospel to these elements. The cross of Christ cannot be comprehended without an awareness of the depth of human guilt and the power of radical evil. "The gospel is something more than the law of love. The gospel deals with the fact that men violate the law of love," wrote Niebuhr in "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist". "The gospel presents Christ as the pledge and revelation of God's mercy which finds man in his rebellion and overcomes his sin."

Like no other American theologian of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr exposed the assumptions of progressive Christianity that helped to create a mood of political ambivalence and isolation in an age of global terror. Niebuhr's political theology—what became known as "Christian realism"—sought a more biblical view of how the Christian citizen can live responsibly within a civilization in crisis. During the 1930s and 40s, through his books, articles, and the magazine he founded and edited,

Christianity and Crisis, Niebuhr reminded his generation that Protestant Christianity possessed unique resources to confront the problems and perplexities of the modern age.

We need to recover something of the Christian realism that proved so prescient in an era of theological confusion. As Niebuhr argued, contemporary historical events confirm the Reformation emphasis on the persistence of sin at every level of moral achievement; there is no way to fully escape the corrupting influence of power in any political act. To believe otherwise is to imagine that politics can transcend these earthly realities if only "the ethics of Jesus" would shape our priorities and methods.

No amount of Bible citations, Niebuhr explained, can conceal the humanistic assumptions behind this effort:

We have, in other words, reinterpreted the Christian gospel in terms of the Renaissance faith in man...We have interpreted world history as a gradual ascent to the Kingdom of God which waits for final triumph only upon the willingness of Christians to 'take Christ seriously.' There is nothing in Christ's own teachings...to justify this interpretation of world history. In the whole of the New Testament, Gospels and Epistles alike, there is only one interpretation of world history. That pictures history as moving toward a climax in which both Christ and anti-Christ are revealed.

Progressive Christianity, whatever its merits, bases its politics on a fundamentally flawed understanding of the human predicament. By insisting on political outcomes akin to the vision of life held out in the Sermon on the Mount, it promotes a foreign policy largely detached from political reality.

A foreign policy rooted in Christian Realism, by contrast, begins with a sober view of the exercise of power. Enforcing justice, punishing wrongdoing, building democratic institutions—all of this is exceedingly difficult work, a truism as easily forgotten by political conservatives as

it is by progressives. One of the most deeply mistaken ideas surrounding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, was that liberal democracies would emerge organically, almost inevitably, out of the ashes of decades of repression and war.

In *The Case for Democracy*, former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky argued that the democratic revolutions which toppled the Soviet Union depended on three key elements: enslaved people who yearned to be free, leaders outside who believed they could be, and policies that linked the world community to the regime's treatment of its own people. The book was mandatory reading in the Bush White House. "It will work anywhere around the world," Sharansky wrote, "including in the Arab world."

How could that be true? History—especially recent history—reminds us that there is no formula to assure a transformation from tyranny to democratic self-government.

The Protestant tradition, which emerged as a reaction against Catholicism's doctrine of perfectionism, is well-equipped to defend against this myth of progress. "The political life of man," wrote Niebuhr, "must constantly steer between the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of tyranny." It is for good reason that the American Founders, armed with a strong dose of Protestant realism, worried that factions—especially those fueled by sectarian hatreds—would prove fatal to national unity. Thus Madison's insight in *The Federalist*: "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob."

Second, the Christian realist insists on an honest assessment of the threats to international peace and security. Let's take the challenge of radical Islamic *jihād*. The claims and ambitions of al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist groups cannot be wished away. Unlike the national security documents adopted by the Obama administration, a realistic National Security Strategy would identify the *religious* sources of the terrorist ideology that threatens the United States and its allies.

Evasive and generic references to "terrorists" and "extremists" obscure the nature of the problem.

Even the editors at *The New Republic*, hardly a source of Christian realist thinking, nevertheless got close to the mark in an editorial shortly after the 9/11 attacks. "No, it was not Islam that took the towers down. But it was not Episcopalianism either," they wrote. "The terrorists are waging a war of ideas, and the ideas upon which they are acting are ideas in the Islamic tradition...There are those who wish to deny the religious character of Al Qaeda's violence, so as to transform bin Ladenism into another variety of anti-colonial protest." Meanwhile, Protestantism, which has always cared deeply about theology - Luther's Reformation was, at its core, a spiritual campaign -has the necessary tools to come even closer to the mark. By placing the authority of the Bible above any individual or institution, Protestants are less restrained than other faith traditions in exposing the pretensions of political and religious leaders. They are better equipped to resist political correctness in any form.

For the Christian realist, the horrific acts of barbarism committed in the pursuit of a spiritual utopia are not the result of "grievances" with Western society. Rather, they are the latest expression of an ancient malignancy—the Will to Power—clothed in the robes and symbols of religion. C.S Lewis, in another context, described this will as the "ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration upon self, which is the mark of Hell." The demonic vision of radical Islam is not a force that can be bribed, appeased, accommodated, contained, or placated into submission.

Third, a foreign policy based on Christian realism makes the defense of Western political and religious ideals an overarching priority. Rooted in their understanding of divine grace, Protestant reformers delivered a withering critique of the entire legalistic project that had become "Christendom." They laid the foundation for our liberal democratic order. Government by consent, the separation of powers, a constitution based on natural rights and

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human equality, freedom of conscience, free speech, freedom of assembly—all of these achievements are inconceivable without the moral capital and spiritual insights of evangelical Christianity. They are the defining features of American exceptionalism.

Yet religious progressives, when obsessed with America’s shortcomings, lose sight of these accomplishments. They find it hard to make moral distinctions between American democracy and even the most loathsome and oppressive dictatorships. Thus the lament of John Haynes Holmes, a New York City minister and chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union, so typical of liberal theologians in the 1940s: “Our sins have found us out, that’s all,” he concluded. “If Hitler triumphs, it will be as the punishment for our transgressions.”

Here is the spirit of the embittered utopian, alive and well in progressive Christianity. Recall the disturbing refrain of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, President Obama’s ex-favorite pastor, in the wake of the 9/11 attack: “America’s chickens are coming home to roost...God damn America! God damn America!” Niebuhr and his

fellow Christian realists would have none of it: “When the mind is not confused by utopian illusions,” he wrote, “it is not difficult to recognize genuine achievements of justice, and to feel under obligation to defend them against the threats of tyranny and the negation of justice.”

A one-time socialist candidate for Congress, Niebuhr was not blind to the deep injustices—economic and racial—in American society. Yet he could no longer abide the morally debased reasoning of his fellow socialists in response to fascist aggression; he resigned from the party. He then turned his mind toward combatting the same moral confusion afflicting liberal Protestantism:

We believe the task of defending the rich inheritance of our civilization to be an imperative one, however much we might desire that our social system were more worthy of defense... We do not find it particularly impressive to celebrate one’s sensitive conscience by enlarging upon all the well-known evils of our western world and equating them with the evils of the totalitarian



The Gorgon Medusa, punished for her arrogance and for breaking her vows to Minerva, suggests the importance of humility and fidelity to God for the maintenance of prosperity

systems. It is just as important for Christians to be discriminating in their judgments, as for them to recognize the element of sin in all their endeavors.

The Christian realist can never equate American democratic values with gospel morality: this opens the door to Christian nationalism, a perversion of the faith. But a posture of cynicism toward the United States and the West is no less a corruption. Social perfection at home is not required before attempting to check aggression and punish injustice abroad.

It is at this point where Christian progressives fail most conspicuously in their stated objective: to demonstrate the love of Christ to their neighbor. Perhaps the most shameful behavior of American Christians during the Second World War was their practical indifference to the millions of victims of Nazism.

From 1938 to 1941, for example, American Protestant groups issued no fewer than 50 statements about how to achieve a just and durable peace. None offered a plan to rescue Jews from the anti-Semitic hatreds unleashed by the Nazis. There was lots of talk about debt relief and economic assistance. Yet barely a handful of these manifestos argued that the defeat of Nazism was essential to international justice.

Their progressive progeny are not hard to identify. Duke's Stanley Hauerwas speaks for many when he denies the need for a foreign policy that could thwart the depraved ambitions of terrorist groups or rogue regimes. "My only response is I do not have a foreign policy. I have something better—a church constituted by people who would rather die than kill."

What are we to make of this "theology of love"? The de facto pacifism of progressive Christianity presents us with a conscience insulated from human suffering. It is a conscience content to ignore the neighbor in crisis—whether he's the Jew marched to the gas at Auschwitz, the Tutsi villagers hacked to death in Rwanda, the girls forced into sexual slavery by Boko Haram, the families hunted down and executed by ISIS, the gays rounded up and tossed from rooftops, or the Syrian refugees facing starvation or extinction because of their faith.

Even secular political leaders at the United Nations have endorsed a doctrine known as the "responsibility to protect" when civilian populations become the object of genocide or crimes against humanity. At the moment when fresh thinking about the Christian just war tradition is desperately needed, religious progressives have abandoned the concept altogether. "Thus the Christian ideal of love has degenerated

into a lovelessness which cuts itself off from a sorrowing and suffering world,” wrote Niebuhr. “Love is made to mean not pity and sympathy or responsibility for the weal and woe of others, it becomes merely the abstract and negative perfection of peace in a warring world.”

In this, religious progressives succumb to an old temptation. They allow their hatred of war to blot out all other virtues and obligations. But the historic and orthodox Christian church has never viewed peace—peace at any cost—as the highest good. Such a peace always ends in a preference for tyranny. It always adds to the catalogue of human suffering.

For the person whose life is threatened by violence, servitude, or death, the Christian conscience summons a full range of obligations: empathy, courage, sacrifice, and a determination to protect the neighbor from great evil. Protestants have long appreciated the distinct role of government in helping to carry out the last of these obligations. In his tract aimed at political leaders, *On Secular Authority* (1523), Martin Luther explained that the sword of the State “is a very great benefit and necessary to the whole world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil.”

A just peace may be the final result of these pursuits, God willing. But if peace is made the supreme goal, if it consumes all other obligations, it becomes an idol—and a snare to the statesman as well as the saint.

Christian realism sets itself squarely against this idol, and against the utopian assumptions that give it life. The post-9/11 era has exposed the resilience of the utopian idea in both politics and religion; it continues to exert a powerful hold on the mind of modern liberalism. Unchecked, it represents a threat to the health and even survival of liberal democracy in America and the West.

Where do we begin in confronting this outlook? We need to recover the wisdom and resolve of those who recognized the

supreme malevolence of their own day. Only a handful of religious leaders realized the demons that Nazism had let loose in the world. Few could imagine the sacrifices required to meet them. And fewer still dared to predict the consequences of shrinking back from the duties assigned to America, Great Britain and their allies.

The Christians who did so sought to retrieve a more biblical understanding of the gospel as the foundation for their politics. They argued that the “gentleness” of Jesus was not the full and final revelation of the character of God. They insisted that both the Old and the New Testament took the wrath of God as well as the mercy of God seriously. “The divine mercy, apprehended by Christian faith in the life and death of Christ, is not some simple kindness indifferent to good and evil,” wrote Niebuhr. “The whole point of the Christian doctrine of Atonement is that God cannot be merciful without fulfilling within himself, and on man’s behalf, the requirements of divine justice.”

The biblical answer to the problem of evil in human history, Christ’s death and resurrection, cannot separate justice from mercy. Thus the way of Jesus—what C.S. Lewis once described as “terror and comfort intertwined”—dispels our utopian illusions. His gospel renders as futile our facile efforts to create a society based on “love” while failing to reckon with the negation of love which threatens every human endeavor.

Here there is no place for sentimental Christianity, either in our pulpits or our politics. Here is a road less travelled. And yet along this road lies our best hope: not for the immediate arrival of the kingdom of heaven, but for a greater measure of peace and justice within, and among, the nations of the earth. ■

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