

CONVICTION IN CRISIS: THE IMAGE OF GOD & CHRISTIAN GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Mosaic of the creation of Adam, circa 1180. Cattedrale di Monreale, Sicily, Italy. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

– “*The Second Coming*,” William Butler Yeats

INTRODUCTION:

Historian Robert Kagan’s recent article “Backing Into World War III” identifies two trends which could lead to the next world war: 1) a “loss of will” in Western democracies to engage in world affairs because of disillusionment with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and 2) the rise of “revisionist” powers—Russia and China—who desire to remake the international system for their political and economic gain. Kagan urges America not to give up, because when the world’s leading country fails to protect the international order, tyrants can unleash anarchy and incredible suffering on the masses.

How should Christians in America think about engaging in the world’s affairs? This essay begins with a discussion of the Biblical imperatives of the *imago Dei* (the image of God) in Genesis 29 and the command in Jeremiah 29 to the Israelite exiles in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city. It examines the perspectives of three eminent Christian leaders—Ambassador Charles Malik, Father Richard John Neuhaus, and Reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They were shaped by different theological traditions (Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran, respectively), but each wrestled with the political, cultural, and moral crises of their times according to their Christian convictions.

Revisiting their experiences is especially timely now. In addition to the rise of revisionist powers, the world faces a grave crisis—the growth of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), their global terror attacks, and their genocide against religious minorities. In addition to their campaign of murder, displacement, and rape of Yazidis, ISIS and its affiliates are targeting Assyrians, Chaldeans, Copts, and Protestants in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. The survival of the Church in the Middle East—the cradle of the faith—where it has played a crucial moderating role for centuries, now hangs in the balance.

Syria’s Christians, for instance, are part of a mass exodus taking place throughout the region. Today, Christians are only about four percent of the Middle East’s more than four hundred million people—and probably less. As several fellows at the Center for American Progress put it, they “have been subject to vicious murders at the hands of terrorist groups, forced out of their ancestral lands by civil wars, suffered societal intolerance fomented by Islamist groups, and subjected to institutional discrimination found in the legal codes and official practices of many Middle Eastern countries.”

AUGUSTINE & BENEDICT IN WORLD AFFAIRS

In the United States, public discussions of common morality have been displaced by what Swarthmore professor James Kurth describes as “expressive individualism”—an “ethic” which sees self-expression as the highest good.¹ The “realist” approach espoused by diplomat George F. Keenan after the Cold War is again gaining popularity.² The embrace of this philosophy by Americans in both major political parties suggests that our country may not just be post-Christian, but post-moral.³

American Christians are now vigorously debating how to respond to this moral decline in domestic affairs. The late Michael Cromartie, who was Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, suggested the “Augustine Option” in contrast to Rod Dreher’s “Benedict Option”—retreating to preserve Biblical values in communities separate from the world.⁴ Cromartie cited St. Augustine’s expression of Christian citizenship in two separate cities, the City of God and the City of Man, and the command in Jeremiah 29 to seek the welfare of the city in which we are exiled and the corollary promise from God that he who seeks the blessing of the city will also be blessed.⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life provides a remarkable example

of obedience to this command under the tyranny of Nazi Germany.

If current trends continue, Christians, like Bonhoeffer and Cromartie, and others who raise moral considerations in world affairs will face increasing skepticism and ridicule. We may need to temper any expectations of being persuasive. Nevertheless, for Christians who seek to live by Biblical imperatives, the wisdom of the *imago Dei* and Jeremiah 29 provide us with a moral compass for engaging in our world. Whether we do so successfully is not the essential point.

THE *IMAGO DEI* & UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

Since the word of God does not change from generation to generation, the most important starting point for a discussion of Christian engagement is the Bible. Genesis 1 introduces the idea of the *imago Dei*. After the creation of the earth and the heavens, plants, and animals, God utters something entirely unique about the man and woman he is about to create, “Let us make them in our image.” Theologians have identified several different aspects of God’s nature that are reflected in man, including his ability to create, reason, and be in relationship.⁶ God’s statement clearly shows that man is like no other created being. Only men and women have the stamp of the divine upon them. Because humans bear the image of God, each of us has inherent dignity. And those who follow God have a moral duty to protect their fellow image-bearers that transcends laws of the state.

David Van Drunen, Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics

at Westminster Seminary, has highlighted another imperative of the *imago Dei*—God’s judicial nature.⁷ Van Drunen highlights a portion of the Noahic Covenant in which God orders the Israelites to exercise a judicial function: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Genesis 9:6). The reason for punishing murder is explicitly tied to the image-bearing nature of the one whose blood is shed. Again, the image-bearer is unique. God’s emphasis on the relationship between the one who bears His imprint and the need for justice could not be clearer. Van Drunen also stresses that the punishment of evil is fully consistent with a Christian theology of the Atonement because it points to the cross of Christ as God’s way of rescuing sinners from judgment.”

In modern pluralistic societies, Christians do not hold authority over human rights abusers as ancient Israel did over murderers. But the Noahic Covenant’s imperative can be applied in the building of legal systems that will bring human rights offenders to justice when they shed blood. The *imago Dei* reminds us that God’s image is borne by every victim of ISIS, whether Christian, Yazidi, Shabak, or Shia Muslim. Punishing those who murder under the flag of ISIS does not contravene their identity as image-bearers. Rather, their choices remind us that evil has marred God’s image in them. There are many questions about how to protect human rights, but for the Christian, the *imago Dei* is a clear call to act justly when God’s image is threatened in other human beings.

CHARLES MALIK: ANCHORING HUMAN RIGHTS

As Lebanon’s representative to the United Nations (UN) and in his capacity as a draftee on the committee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from 1946-48, Ambassador Charles Malik (1906-87)⁸ helped codify into international law the concept of the image of God in every human being—albeit in its secular rendering of inherent dignity.⁹

Ambassador Malik would later become the President of the United Nations General Assembly from 1958-59. One of his many contributions to world affairs was to raise his voice in diplomatic circles to address the reasoning behind the concept of human dignity. He unequivocally stated the need for staking human rights in the authority of something external and transcendent. Ambassador Malik knew how easily the powerful could trample human rights by manipulating the law. Hitler had come to power through democratic elections and had used the law as a tool to confer rights on some citizens (Aryans) and to revoke them from others (non-Aryans and political opponents). Ambassador Malik warned of this danger in stark terms:

But if these rights and freedoms belong to man as man, then the state or the United Nations, far from conferring them upon him, must recognize and respect them, or else it would be violating the higher law of his being. This is the question of whether the state is subject to higher law, the law of nature, or whether it is a sufficient law unto

itself. If it is the latter, then nothing judges it: it is the judge of everything. But if there is something above it, which it can discover and to which it can conform, then any positive law that contradicts that transcendent norm is by nature null and void.¹⁰

For Malik the question of authority was crucial.¹¹ The official statement from the human rights commission was that dignity and rights were “*implicit in man’s nature*.”¹² But Malik was not afraid to address the deeper issue. If human rights were really to function as a shield for even the most vulnerable person—the man or woman without position, wealth, or status—against the power of the state or the majority, it would have to be supported by a higher authority. Malik anchored his explanation of human dignity and human rights in natural law.

At its most basic level, this law is based on observation of human nature and recognized through human reason. In addition to international human rights law, natural law also grounded the American Declaration of Independence. Both secular and religious thinkers from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to Hugo Grotius to John Locke to Thomas Jefferson espoused natural law as the first principle of ethical reasoning, placing it inherently higher than man-made law.

Today there is little taste for natural law in legal or diplomatic circles that are far more receptive to legal positivism. Yet the paradox persists. How can a system of rights (even one with near universal assent) justify itself without an external or transcendent reference point?

In 2016, an exchange between the Obama administration’s ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, and her Russian counterpart over the killing of civilians in Aleppo by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, highlighted the problem of law and moral authority. Addressing Russian president Vladimir Putin, Power asked:

Are you truly incapable of shame? Is there literally nothing that can shame you? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin?¹³

The Russian representative, Vitaly Churki, did not address whether or not Russia was responsible for Assad’s targeting of civilians, but questioned Power’s moral authority:

I wouldn’t want to remind this Western trio [France, US, UK]... about your role in the creation of ISIS as a result of US and UK intervention in Iraq... [T]he US representative...built her statement as if she is Mother Teresa herself.

While we can reject Churkin’s moral equivalency, the question remains: what moral authority exists for human rights? In 1979, Yale professor Arthur Leff concluded that there wasn’t one, but that self-sufficiency and self-justification of law was unsatisfying.

All I can say is this: it looks as if we are all we have... Nevertheless: Napalming babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved. Those who stood up to and died resisting Hitler, Stalin,

Amin, and Pol Pot—and General Custer too—have earned salvation. Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned. There is in the world such a thing as evil. [All together now:] Sez who? God help us.¹⁴

Given the West’s current disdain for natural law and Judeo-Christian ideas like the *imago Dei*, how can Christians or others engage with those who reject morality’s place in world affairs?

RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: EXILES WITH HOPE

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the search for moral answers seemed not just appropriate, but necessary.¹⁵ When Ambassador Malik discussed the existence of human rights with his diplomatic counterparts, they agreed that the fact that humanity possessed an “endowment” of reason and conscience was the strongest evidence for inherent human dignity. But they also agreed to ignore the question of an endower. However, over the nearly 70 years since the drafting of the UDHR, the West has not ignored the question but has grown increasingly skeptical that any such endower exists. Correlatively, so too is the question of whether moral reality exists or can be known increasingly answered in the negative. Catholic theologian and founder of the scholarly journal *First Things*, Father Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009) vividly describes this in his 2009 book *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile*. Neuhaus considers American philosopher Richard Rorty’s advancement of “liberal irony”—a deep skepticism towards moral truth—as one of the critical turning points in the moral arc. Rorty



Stained glass depiction of God breathing life into Adam, from the “Good Samaritan Window”, 1205–10. Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres, France. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

wanted to shatter faith in the knowability (or epistemology) of morality. He sought to move people “to the point where we no longer worship *anything*...treat *nothing* as a quasi-divinity...treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance” (italics added). Rorty urged followers to simply drop both moral questions and the vocabulary of morality.

Neuhaus compared American Christians in the 20th century to the ancient Israelite exiles in Babylon, and his book foreshadowed the current debates between the Benedict and Augustinian options. Father Neuhaus identified himself as an American citizen present in the City of Man, and as a citizen of heaven longing for the City of God. The prophet Jeremiah’s call to “seek the

peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile” applies to God’s followers in 21st-century America as well.

As Neuhaus saw it, God promised to prosper the Israelites when they followed His command, and this promise is ours as well. Globalization may even expand our definition of “city” beyond our national borders. In a world of interconnected commerce, international travel, and global communication, the world’s problems (e.g. terrorism, disease, financial crises) become our problems in a way that was not true in ancient Babylon. While some of God’s promised blessings may only be known in the eternal realm, there is reason to believe that obedience to God’s command to seek the peace and prosperity of the world will yield blessing on earth.

America’s history shows that there is strategic power in seeking the peace and prosperity of our neighbors. In the post-war period, the international community clearly understood that peace, security, and justice depend on one another. The drafters of the UN Charter acknowledged this when they called respect for human rights *essential* to saving succeeding generations from the “scourge of war.”¹⁶ From their vantage point, human rights and international law were the foundation for peace and security, not a separate and irrelevant concern.¹⁷

Since the founding of our country, part of our national narrative has been the relationship between America’s goodness and greatness first described by Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 book *Democracy in America*. For almost 250 years, we have lived out our beliefs in a world where allies viewed them with cynicism and enemies saw them with hostility. Yet it is undeniable that much of our success as a nation is due to our respect for the dignity of people around the world and advancement of their welfare.

From a founding document declaring the created equality of every human being, to leading the codification of human rights standards, to rebuilding defeated wartime foes, to investing in human development in the poorest parts of the world, the goodness of our foreign policy has borne fruit. It has given us tremendous soft power (“cultural influence”) abroad that drew great minds, like Albert Einstein, to seek refuge on our shores. It has caused like-minded nations to seek political and military alliances with us. It has created social capital and trust that have fostered trade. And

it has contributed to the peace and stability of nations where famine, poverty, and lack of education would have created instability that would threaten our interests. And yet, as a nation, we are losing confidence in our own story. General David H. Petraeus warns that this may be one of the greatest threats to our national security:

[T]he world order has also been undermined by something perhaps even more pernicious—a loss of self-confidence, resolve and strategic clarity on America’s part about our vital interest in preserving and protecting the system we sacrificed so much to bring into being and have sacrificed so much to preserve.¹⁸

As the crisis of genocide tests the liberal international order again, how will we respond? After the State Department designated ISIS’ genocide in the spring of 2016, the U.S. failed to take significant measures to aid victims or to stop the atrocity itself. As other justifications for defeating ISIS have moved front and center (terror attacks in Europe and potential terror attacks in the U.S.), the genocide has faded into the background of our strategy.¹⁹ Nor has the UN had a serious debate on its “responsibility to protect” (R2P), the mantra that was endorsed after the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda.

ISIS has broadcast its brutality in real-time and used social media to promote a global Caliphate that is rid of “infidels”—Christians, Jews, and others.²⁰ The church in the West is faced with a choice, follow the culture’s path of ambivalence or follow the imperative of the *imago Dei* and Jeremiah

29. Christian belief in human rights is anchored in something higher than human law itself. We see in the reflection of those around us the good and holy God whom we worship. We know that He has prepared for us an eternal home, but that we are also called to seek the peace and prosperity of our temporary one. Our times may be enshrouded in cynicism, but that is why the hope within us and the acts that it inspires may be all the more needed.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: RESPONDING TO SUFFERING & EVIL

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), the Lutheran theologian and pastor who led the Confessing Church’s resistance to Nazism in Germany, honored the *imago Dei* in others by ultimately giving his life for his fellow image-bearers. His example especially speaks to two aspects of world affairs: 1) the universal nature of human rights and 2) the duty to act against the state when it breaks moral law.

As early as 1933, six years before the outbreak of war, Hitler began—in the infamous “Aryan Paragraphs”—to order German churches to exclude baptized Jews from serving in the church.²¹ At this time Bonhoeffer was already alarmed by the Nazis’ abuse of legal and police power. Eventually, the Nuremberg laws would prevent Jews from owning businesses, being employed in universities, working in the medical and legal professions, and marrying non-Jews. For Hitler, the dignity of the German race (*volk*) was limited to Aryans. German Jews had neither dignity nor rights. Bonhoeffer was one of the first to see the moral conflict between Hitler’s stance and the

universality of human dignity. During his years in America prior to the war, Bonhoeffer was also deeply disturbed by the unequal treatment of blacks and whites. In both cases, Bonhoeffer knew no compromise could be made with a view of human dignity that excluded some of God’s image-bearers, whether on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, or religion.

He described three roles for the Church in the face of such a conflict with the state. First, the Church was responsible for helping the state be the state by questioning whether its laws created an appropriate atmosphere of law and order. Second, in the event that the state’s laws created an inappropriate or oppressive atmosphere, Bonhoeffer believed the Church had “an unconditional obligation to the victims... even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”²² Third, the Church’s responsibility was “not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.” Bonhoeffer saw the full implications of the *imago Dei*, both the need to protect the dignity of image-bearers and the duty to judge—by preventing the spilling of their blood. Such a statement was revolutionary to his peers, but for Bonhoeffer the dignity of American blacks and German Jews was an absolutely necessary extension of his faith. Under fascism, his belief in the image-bearing nature of all people gave him the moral courage to oppose Hitler’s dehumanization of Jews, whether or not they accepted Christ.

Bonhoeffer was transfixed by the word of God, the *imago Dei*, and the Cross of Christ. These immovable reference points gave him the conviction to challenge the evils of a temporal

authority to which the majority of his countrymen had acquiesced. Few men have influenced the history of their country and the Church as much as he did.

As we watch the images of a contemporary genocide play out, it is our generation's turn to confront evil in our own time. The culture around us may respond in a variety of ways, including by rejecting moral obligations altogether. For the Christian, our fixed point of instruction is the word of God. Therefore, we have the responsibility, and the honor, to act in the interests of our Creator by protecting the dignity of all who bear His image. [P](#)

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Endnotes

1 James Kurth, "The Protestant Deformation and American Foreign Policy," Speech to Philadelphia Society, April 22, 2001.

2 George F. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1985. See also Richard Holbrooke, "The Paradox of George F. Kennan," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2005: "[H]is [Keenan's] view that the promotion of human rights and democracy was a terrible, morally arrogant mistake."

3 See Derek Chollet and Todd Lindberg, "A Moral Core for American Foreign Policy," *Policy Review*, Hoover Institution, December 1, 2007. Chollet and Lindberg provide an in-depth discussion of the development of negative attitudes in both the Democratic and Republican parties to moral concerns in foreign policy after 9/11.

4 Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel,

2017).

5 Michael Cromartie, "What Now? Faithful Living in Challenging Times," *Broadcast Talks*, C.S. Lewis Institute, Volume 1, November 1, 2016.

6 Diane Chandler, "The Imago Dei in Historical Perspective," *Renewal Dynamics*, July 4, 2010. Bonhoeffer identified the relational aspect of God as a crucial part of the *Imago Dei* that is reflected in man.

7 David Van Drunen, *Political Theology and Natural Law: Justice, Commerce, and Community under Noah's Rainbow* (forthcoming). The author wishes to thank Prof. Van Drunen for sharing a draft of his book.

8 The author also wishes to thank Dr. Habib C. Malik, professor of history and cultural studies at the Lebanese American University and the son of Ambassador Charles Malik, for providing information about his late father's work and thoughts.

9 In addition to Malik, draftees included American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and representatives from China, France, and Russia and represented an incredible diversity of cultures, political, legal, and religious belief systems, including democracy, Communism, Judaism, Christianity, and Confucianism. They met on the common ground of "human dignity." On this shared understanding, they built the framework for the UN system of monitoring, reporting, and protecting human rights for almost 70 years. While the UDHR is non-binding, it has become part of customary international law.

10 Habib C. Malik, ed., *The Challenge of Human Rights: Charles Malik and the Universal Declaration*, Charles Malik Foundation & I. B. Tauris (2000).

11 Mary Ann Glendon, "Knowing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Notre Dame Law Review*, 1998.

12 The committee demurred from addressing the question of the source of human rights. The French draftee and Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain gave the tongue-in-cheek explanation, "Yes, we agree about the rights but on condition no one asks us why." Committee Chairwoman Eleanor Roosevelt asserted that rights are "a spiritual fact." Emphasis added.

13 Lauren Said-Moorehouse, "Are you truly incapable of shame?" Samantha Power blasts Assad regime, allies,"

CNN, December 14, 2016, [cnn.com](#).

14 Arthur A. Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," *Faculty Scholarship Series*, Paper 2826 (1979).

15 The moral consensus on the need for human rights protections among the diverse drafters of the UDHR was clear. They described the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family...the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." They described the "outrage [of] the conscience of mankind" at Hitler's barbarity. They believed that the protection of human rights by the rule of law was "essential" to peace because violations of rights would lead to rebellion against tyranny and oppression. See Preamble to UDHR, United Nations (1948).

16 UN Charter, United Nations (1945).

17 Political realists, like George Kennan, urge that America engage in foreign affairs purely according to political and economic self-interest without regard to moral concerns. This renders human rights and national interests a false binary. The basic lesson of World War II is that a dictator's aggression towards his people can be a critical early warning sign that he also poses a serious threat to international peace and security.

18 David H. Petraeus, "America Must Stand Tall," *Politico Magazine*, February 7, 2017.

19 In addition, in the wake of President Donald J. Trump's temporary ban on travel from seven countries with Muslim-majority populations, there was little focused discussion on the genocide and how America has historically put a legal priority on the victims of persecution in the refugee admissions process by creating a special category for them (Priority Two). This process was used to resettle Russian Jews and Iranian religious minorities. See Ian Spier, "We Must Prioritize the Persecuted," *Providence*, February 1, 2017, [ProvidenceMag.com](#). See also "What is the Lautenberg Amendment," Hebrew Immigration Society, [hias.org](#).

20 J.J. Daniels, "Cleansing the Caliphate," *Providence*, December 1, 2015, [ProvidenceMag.com](#).

21 Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson. 2011), 150-2.

22 Metaxas, 154.