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# PROVIDENCE

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIANITY & AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY



## REINHOLD NIEBUHR & THE PROBLEM OF PARADOX

By MARC LiVECCHÉ

## THE GREAT WAR & THE DAWN OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

By JOSEPH LOCONTE

## WILL CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST? A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

By KENT R. HILL

ALSO: ROBERT NICHOLSON LOOKS EAST TOWARD THE SYRIAN CRISIS • MARK TOOLEY CONSIDERS CHRISTIANS & EMPIRE • LUBO ONDRASEK PAYS TRIBUTE TO JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN • MICHAEL NOVAK IS COMMEMORATED • WAYNE SCHROEDER CALLS CHRISTIANS TO PEACE WORK • THORIN OAKENSHIELD MAKES A DEATHBED CONFESSION • DOUGLAS BURTON REPORTS ON MOSUL • AMITAI ETZIONI PRESCRIBES MORAL TRIAGE • HERMAN MELVILLE REMEMBERS THE BATTLE OF SHILOH • & ALAN DOWD REFLECTS ON AMERICA'S LONG DEFENSE OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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Portrait of Reinhold Niebuhr by Hannah Strauss, original commission, 2017. A pensive Reinhold Niebuhr considers the scene before him, surrounded by iconic images from the Second World War. While referencing historical events, horrific locations, and the machinery of warfare, these images also suggest the focal points of Niebuhr's internal conflicts as he wrestled with his own theological and ethical conceptual dilemmas. Immediately behind Niebuhr is an amphibious assault, with warfighters disembarking a landing craft and wading toward a shoreline already engaged with the fire, smoke, and din of battle. Above him, bombers swarm in deadly formation. Below are rendered scenes depicting the hated guard towers and dreaded gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Taken together, these scenes begin to describe the reach, the moral and political complexity, and the devastation of human conflict.

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Quaternion Eagle printed, by David de Negker based on a circa 1510 woodcut by Hans Burgkmair and Jost de Negker. Source: Wikimedia Commons. This version of the Holy Roman Empire's coat of arms includes both imperial and Christian imagery.

# CHRISTIANS & AMERICAN EMPIRE

MARK TOOLEY

## CHRISTIANS & EMPIRE

Preoccupation with “empire” by some American Christian elites may be back. In the 2000s many commentators in Christian Left and Neo-Anabaptist circles obsessed over the threat of American empire. Their fears were stoked by the U.S.-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and compounded by the now-quaint talk of “theocracy” after Evangelicals supported George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection.

During the Obama years, Christian fears of empire

subsided a bit, partly in reaction to limited U.S. strategic withdrawal and the cooling of presidential rhetoric about U.S. global responsibilities. Now that Donald Trump is president, the empire conversation is reigniting.

In terms of America’s global reach, Trump’s sometimes neo-isolationist campaign rhetoric, critical of Bush’s wars and skeptical of the global liberal order sustained by American alliances like NATO, should have pleased Christian critics

of empire. Trump’s national security appointments, however, seem more conventionally supportive of longtime American international commitments. Proposed increased military spending implies that the U.S. role in the world will not significantly recede.

Christian critique of empire does not focus exclusively on America’s military and economic footprint. Because empire is seen as incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ, critics reject any collaboration with

the global capitalist order, which is sometimes compared with ancient empires that tormented God's people in the Bible. In the Old Testament, it was Hebrew suffering under Egypt and Babylon. In the New Testament, Christians and Jews were oppressed by Rome, which crucified Jesus.

Much of the anti-empire pre-occupation originated in the teachings of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, author of *The Politics of Jesus* who was popularized by Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University's Divinity School. They insist that Christian faithfulness demands rejection of all violence, including by the state through law enforcement and the military. Hauerwas demonizes America for offering, unlike any other nation, a universal meta-narrative asserting human rights and democracy for all. This vision supposedly conflicts with Christian calls for surrender and self-denial.

Activist Shane Claiborne, whose 2004 book *Jesus for President* equated America with the Third Reich, relies on the Yoder-Hauerwas schematic. So too do popular pastors/writers Greg Boyd and Brian Zahnd, the latter of whom compulsively tweets against "empire." There is also Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who relies more strictly on old-style liberal Protestant allegorizing of the Scriptures to achieve his social justice denunciation of empire.

These Christian critics of empire are not consistent. They typically want America and the West to accept all immigrants and refugees, to regulate the global environment, to sustain larger welfare states, and coercively to impose a Western-inspired

egalitarian economic, social, and sexual ethos on the world. They demand their own form of "empire," reputedly based on the Sermon on the Mount.

While Christian critics of empire don't want militaries, capitalist economies, robust nation states, or any acknowledgement of the universal pursuit of self-interest manifest in human fallenness, they live in the upper echelons of the "empire." They benefit from it and indeed would not exist without it, yet seem mostly unaware of the paradox.

The Christian commentariat against empire, from privileged perches at large churches and

universities, is free to tweet, chatter, and gather large followings of mostly suburban middle class evangelicals and Protestants thanks to the safety and wealth of the American "empire." Their lofty social vision of poverty alleviation, universal healthcare, equality for women, and a clean environment would be impossible without the "empire" of powerful regimes sustained by the wealth engines of capitalism and protected by lethal militaries on guard against terror, aggression, and domination.

Among its other omissions, the contemporary Christian critique of "empire" forgets that unlike



Columbia's Easter Bonnet, by Samuel D. Ehrhart and Louis Dalrymple, April 6, 1901. Source: Library of Congress. Puck's cover depicts one way an American "empire" has been perceived.

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ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Rome, the current American-led global order has been profoundly shaped by Christian teaching, however haphazardly. The ancient empires may have achieved order, which is not morally insignificant. But the current global order provides stability while also advocating education, disease eradication, increased standard of living for all, democracy, and human rights, including religious freedom, which ought to interest all who claim the name of Christ and wish to extol their love of Him.

It's noteworthy that critics of "empire," which they portray as the enemy and oppressor of Christ's faithful followers, typically evince little to no interest in genuinely persecuted Christians around the world. Casualties of U.S. drone strikes provoke far more sympathy and interest than Christians killed or imprisoned by Islamist regimes or mobs or by communist tyrannies like North Korea.

Suffering Christians in the Middle East, Pakistan, Sudan,

China, Vietnam, or countless other oppressive societies likely wish they could live under the protection of "empire." Ideally, their plight would at least be somewhat alleviated if America and the West advocated harder on their behalf, citing religious freedom as an intrinsic human right guaranteed by the United Nations Charter on Human Rights.

Sadly, critics of "empire" often think Christian-inspired Western notions of human rights and religious liberty are just another tentacle of empire. They root the supposed corruption of Christianity in Emperor Constantine's embrace of the church, which began the end of Rome's persecution of Christians. That Constantine's conversion led to an approximate religious liberty and began the centuries-long Christian-inspired quest for a more just social order does not terribly interest the anti-empire Christian school of thought.

In the wake of Constantine and living in the distress of the Roman Empire's weakness, St.

Augustine of Hippo wrote of God's providential superintendency of political kingdoms, their rise and fall. But critics of empire are reluctant to admit God's hand in the temporal order. At best, for them regimes are grudgingly tolerated by the Almighty as a judgement on and foil for the church. Augustine might respond that these critics underestimate the Lord and the wideness of His power and goodness.

American Christians, as agents of "empire," have been graced by our Lord with a special responsibility for power and influence, which can be used for good or ill, prudentially deployed or cavalierly disregarded. We can advocate a global statecraft that pursues stability, liberty, law, and prosperity. Or we can, as critics of empire seem to demand, self-indulgently and parasitically denounce our blessings while evading responsibility. Surely both godly duty and wisdom summon us to the former. **P**

**Mark Tooley** is president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy and co-publisher and editor of *Providence*.



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DOMINION /də'minyən (IS NOT)  
DOMINATION /dəmə'nāSH(ə)n/

“Let us make mankind in our image; and let them have dominion over all the earth...” Called to share the Divine likeness, human beings were made to exercise rule in the form of dominion: delegated, providential care—responsibility—for the conditions of history, in history. Such care is characterized by other-centered acts of self-donation. This contrasts sharply with domination. Since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, human beings have been afflicted by the *libido dominandi*—we have been ruled by the lust to rule. Domination is characterized by self-centered acts of other-donation that feed our hunger for power, advantage, and glory through the forced submission of the powerless to our will.

The political-theological patrimony of the Christian intellectual tradition, including just war casuistry, helps guide human beings back to the just exercise of our governing vocation. In our private and public lives, including through the work of government, human dominion is approximate, limited, and imperfect. Following after God’s work of creating, sustaining, and liberating all of creation, human beings exercise power with the aim of peace, characterized by the presence of justice and order as oriented toward genuine human flourishing.

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