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

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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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# ON MORALITY & THE CRISIS IN SYRIA

ROBERT NICHOLSON



Looking eastward: *Reflections on Western engagement with the Middle East.*

It was odd to watch conservative pundits spend the final months of 2016 condemning Barack Obama for his inaction in Syria and blaming him, at least in part, for the hundreds of thousands of Syrian dead and the millions displaced around the world. The public discourse of innocence and guilt was extreme. In the words of John McCain and Lindsey Graham, “[T]he name Aleppo will echo through history, like Srebrenica and Rwanda, as a testament to our moral failure and everlasting shame.”

Such rhetoric was odd to behold given that it wasn’t just

President Obama and his supporters who let Syria burn for six years. Many on the right were more than happy to distance themselves from that part of the world, rejecting the impulse George Kennan once described as “the feeling that we must have the solution to everyone’s problems and a finger in every pie.” Indeed, the rise of Donald Trump made clear what had been only tacit, unmasking a Republican base that wanted to do less in the world, not more, and to defend vital interests alone or venture abroad only when there was something immediate and tangible to be gained.

The question of whether morality should play a role in our foreign policy is being answered by many, on the right and left alike, in the negative. The Trump Administration seems on track to channel their sentiments.

Unfortunately, the binary often made between considerations of conscience and of self-interest is insufficient—a US foreign policy absent the strong, principled, and prudent promotion of justice ignores not only our better angels but our own self-interest as well. The situation in Syria, left alone, doesn’t just result in the loss of more Syrian life. It undermines our hard-earned

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position as leader of the free world.

In his now famous, or infamous, interview with Jeffrey Goldberg at *The Atlantic*, Obama articulated his view of the world this way:

[T]he world is a tough, complicated, messy, mean place, and full of hardship and tragedy. And in order to advance both our security interests and those ideals and values that we care about, we've got to be hardheaded at the same time as we're bighearted, and pick and choose our spots, and recognize that there are going to be times where the best that we can do is to shine a spotlight on something that's terrible, but not believe that we can automatically solve it... There are going to be times where we can do something about innocent people being killed, but there are going to be times where we can't.

Christian realists will find much to endorse here. Making tough decisions in a fallen world means drawing upon all virtues, but none more so than prudence. A statesman tasked with protecting his people may decide that war, even in the name of justice, is irresponsible and injurious to the common weal. "Prudence in a ruler is almost as great a source of authority as the sense of justice," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "because men rightly abhor the chaos of war even more than the evils of injustice."

Yet Christian realists also hold a moral view of man that complicates any simple analysis. The goal of realism is order; the goal of Christianity is cosmic justice. Christian realism is an attempt to find a mean between the two, recognizing that man is

wicked but that God loves him anyway and ordained the sword of human government for his protection, and that incremental justice can and should be gained in this world where possible. The Christian realist knows that power and morality go hand in hand, however difficult it may be to discern the hallmarks of a truly moral foreign policy.

In a *Foreign Affairs* essay entitled "Morality and Foreign Policy," George Kennan, a lifelong Presbyterian who was instrumental in creating the Cold War containment strategy (the policy of applying American counter-force against Soviet influence at an array of shifting geographical and political points), argued that a moral foreign policy would be one that actually avoided the "masquerade of moral principle" and pursued national interests with "inherent honesty and openness of purpose." He was less worried about amoral policymaking than he was about moralistic hypocrisy. "[L]ack of consistency," he wrote, "implies a lack of principle in the eyes of much of the world; whereas morality, if not principled, is not really morality."

A moral foreign policy, Kennan insisted, would be aware of its own limitations, recognizing "the immense gap between what we dream of doing and what we really have to offer." It would also embrace a negative imperative over a positive one. In his words, "avoidance of the worst should often be a more practical undertaking than the achievement of the best." This formulation was perhaps a more elegant precursor to Obama's vernacular "Don't do stupid s\*\*t."

Kennan's skepticism about foreign intervention stemmed from a fear of unintended outcomes.

"It seldom seems to occur to us," he wrote, "that even if a given situation is bad, the alternatives might be worse—though history provides plenty of examples of just this phenomenon." Ultimately, he averred, the US seeks stability, not morality: "In some parts of the world, the main requirement of American security is not an unnatural imitation of the American model but sheer stability."

In an essay entitled "The Sources of American Prestige", the great Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr took a different approach. He attempted to integrate power with morality, similar to how Einstein integrated matter with energy. Niebuhr started from the unavoidable fact of American power—power that we did not seek but nevertheless amassed over time through economic and military might. This power led to our *de facto* leadership in world affairs and the creation of a ubiquitous, though largely unseen, American world order over which we preside.

American power undoubtedly serves, and rightly so, the interests of the American people. So among the first priorities of any US president is the preservation of that power. Sovereign power, Niebuhr noted, creates an implied consent among those that fall under its sway; but this consent cannot last forever. "[P]ower...cannot maintain itself very long," he wrote, "if prestige is not added as a source of authority." The role of prestige, or legitimacy, is the key to Niebuhr's foreign policy equation.

The great kings of history ensured prestige by wielding coercive power, dynastic title, or special relationship to the gods. Today American prestige rests

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exclusively on our reputation for maintaining order and justice in areas under our hegemony. This points toward why moral leadership is in the national interest. “The problem we face,” said Niebuhr, “is whether we can put enough moral content into our hegemony to make our physical power morally sufferable to our allies.”

The tension between order and justice, between stability and human rights, between states and individuals, lies at the heart of America’s quest for international legitimacy. Nothing exposes that tension more than the question of military intervention. Is it better to tolerate the reign of Bashar al-Assad because he is a foreign sovereign and his ouster may lead to more chaos and death? Or is it better to overthrow him and hopefully save lives, understanding that the crisis inside Syria could get even worse?

Niebuhr would create a hierarchy, or at least a sequence, between order and justice. As Marc LiVecche notes in his essay for this issue, Niebuhr saw a continual conflict between impossible-to-attain ideals and other, possibly lesser, ideals which were possible to attain at least approximately. Order, more possible than anything like perfect justice, must come first. Like Kennan, Niebuhr believed that stability is itself a moral

good from which other moral goods flow, and that without stability other moral goods cannot flourish.

Closely connected to order, however, is justice. Power requires prestige to be sustainable; so too order ultimately requires justice. “[O]rder precedes justice in the strategy of government,” Niebuhr wrote, “but...only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace.”

Following Kennan and Niebuhr, a moral US foreign policy would be prudent, consistent, forthright, aware of its limitations, and driven by the national interest. But if the national interest desires the maintenance of American power, our policymakers must think hard about “put[ting] enough moral content into our hegemony”—not just moral language—to keep that power afloat.

The question is not whether our foreign policy will be one that implicates justice, but where and how we execute that justice in a way that enhances, and doesn’t undermine, order.

The question of Syria is not simple. It is a conflict that presents a host of bad actors and options, none of which seems likely to bring about an immediate end to the war. The polar options of nonintervention and full-scale invasion are unlikely to balance

the tension between order and justice. But that doesn’t mean the answer is disengagement.

The Trump Administration should consider a variety of mediating solutions that are on the table, including the creation of safe zones that would recognize underlying demography and provide a path for stable post-conflict governance. Such safe zones, implemented well, would offer the chance to establish order in the midst of chaos—even in geographically discreet ways—that could lead to new opportunities for justice.

What is not possible is a continued policy of inaction. Turning a blind eye to Syria tells the world one of two things: either we are too weak to act, or we don’t care about justice like we claim. Regardless of the answer, it will prompt a further decline in American prestige and will ultimately undermine our power. And unless we are prepared to let someone else lead in this most ancient, most sacred, and most unstable part of our planet, diminished power is an outcome that is entirely unacceptable. P

**Robert Nicholson** is the executive director of the Philos Project, and co-publisher of *Providence*.

AD ORIENTEM will be a regular feature offering commentary on the Middle East from a Western perspective.



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DOMINION /də'mɪnyən (IS NOT)  
DOMINATION /dəmən'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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