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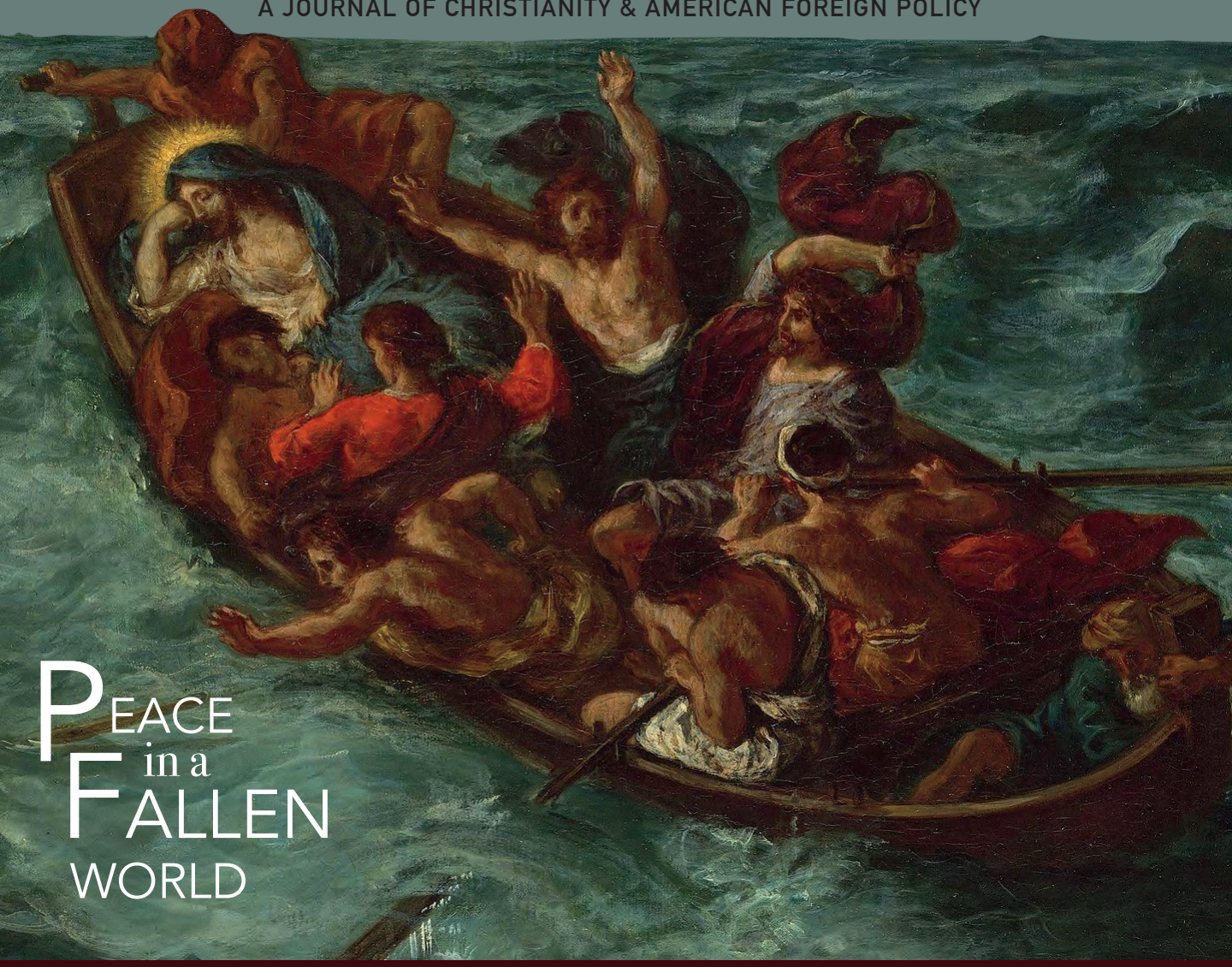

PEACE in a FALLEN WORLD

President Donald J. Trump showing Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman informational boards about how much business the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia generates in the United States, May 20, 2018. By Shealah Craighead. Source: White House.

Peace in a Fallen World

Robert Nicholson

The central dilemma of US foreign policy—the tension between values and interests—is reflec - ed nowhere more clearly than in the tension between the vision and mission of the US State Department:

> *Vision*: On behalf of the American people, we promote and demonstrate democratic values and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world.
>
> *Mission*: The US Department of State leads America's foreign policy through diplomacy, advocacy, and assistance by advancing the interests of the American people, their safety and economic prosperity.

This clash between a global vision based on values and a national mission based on interests reflects the predicament of the city upon a hill: a city that seeks to shine its light into the darkest corners of the world, but that also seeks to protect its own citizens in the chaos of the moment.

Whether the city can reasonably do both is worth asking now, just 70 years after the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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The paradox between values and interests is particularly troublesome in the area of human rights and especially during the presidency of Donald Trump, a populist president who unapologetically subordinates the former to the latter.

Some of the criticism leveled against Trump is unfair. For example, the oft-hurled accusation that he puts his own people before others is incoherent since any statesman who puts foreign-

ers before his own citizens will not last long at the helm of a state. A more sensible and damning critique is that Trump makes foreign policy with no concern for the world's huddled masses: North Korean civilians, Rohingya Muslims, Mexican migrants, political dissidents, religious minorities. Indeed, two years into his presidency, Trump seems more concerned about the feelings of the powerful than the plight of the powerless.

"I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions," Trump said at a September 2018 gathering of leaders at the United Nations General Assembly. "The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship. We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return." The implicit suggestion that America will ignore bad behavior as long as the world respects American sovereignty—*mind your business and we'll mind ours*—is hardly the soaring rhetoric you expect from a US president at a moment when human rights are receding around the globe.

Trump justifie his critics' concerns shortly after the UNGA when he ignored Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's wanton killing of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul. A $110 billion arms sale and continued collaboration against Iran were too important to justify a downgrade in the US-Saudi Arabia alliance, said Trump. No one should have been surprised, though, since it was precisely in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that Trump told a gathering of Arab despots in 2017, "We are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship." The message had been received loud and clear: *Do what you want, just stay out of our way*.

Trump supports the mission of the State Department without reservation, but he seems more than skeptical about its professed vision. His voting base mostly agrees with him. While a December CNN poll found that 43 percent of Republicans were dissatisfied with Trump's response to the Khashoggi murder, their dissatisfaction didn't translate into any serious Republican pressure on the Trump administration to act differently

His Christian supporters agree, too. Frustrated by third-world states that use the human rights discourse as a cudgel against the West, many conservatives see that discourse as just one more left-wing plot to undermine the country. That most of these anti-Western countries are themselves flagrant violators of human rights only lends weight to the conservative case. Pro-Trump Christians feel that that we should assert American rights for the American people. No more putting abstract values over tangible interests for the sake of others who hate what we stand for.

Pat Robertson, while unrepresentative of all conservative Christians, frequently channels popular sentiments on his television show *The 700 Club*. In the heat of the Khashoggi affair, Robertson took to the airwaves to say, "Look, these people are key allies… We've got an arms deal that everybody wanted a piece of… It'll be a lot of jobs, a lot of money come to our coffers. It's not something you want to blow up willy-nilly."

As my *Providence* colleague Mark Tooley wrote at *The Christian Post*, "Minimizing murder in exchange for profits from arms sales isn't a good look for a world-renowned evangelical notable." But Robertson's (admittedly selective and sporadic) doubt about moralism in international affairs is not unusual among American Christians. Their doubt stems from a healthy realism about the nature of man and the promise of politics, but it unknowingly frustrates any attempt to make America great by giving up the very thing that got us there in the first place.

Human rights are not optional in this regard. Properly defined and prioritized, they embody the vision that undergirds the national mission of the United States of America.

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A few guiding thoughts to keep in mind.

First, the human rights discourse is a secular manifestation of Hebraic morality. We created the discourse, not progressive liberals. It belongs to us. In his excellent new book *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics*, Jeremiah Unterman documents how the ancient Israelites birthed so much of the moral regime that we nowadays take for granted. With respect to more recent times, Samuel Moyn's 2015 *Christian Human Rights* recounts in great detail how, in the aftermath of World War II, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant thinkers gave birth to the modern human rights movement. Moyn's is a revisionist history in that it challenges the popular view of human

rights as the product of progressive thought. "Mainstream observers are generally unaware of—for their secular historians have nervously bypassed—the Christian incarnation of human rights," writes Moyn, "which interferes with their preferred understandings of today's highest principles." He concludes, "No one interested in where human rights came from can afford to ignore Christianity."

Second, human rights emerge where the power of the state is constrained. By Moyn's account, the Christian thinkers who gave birth to the modern human rights discourse were less interested in Enlightenment-inspired attempts to "liberate the human person" and more interested in restraining the power of the state to make way for meaningful spiritual life. Moyn traces the growth of Christian personalism and religious constitutionalism in European circles, noting a "vehement rejection of the secular liberal state long associated with the French Revolution and the widespread demand for an integrally religious social order." States needed to exist, but, in the shadow of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, it was understood that state power must be circumscribed for real human flouris - ing to take root. States must be accountable to a higher order. "Christian human rights were part and parcel of a reformulation of conservatism in the name of a vision of moral constraint," Moyn writes, "not human emancipation or individual liberation."

Third, the human rights discourse isn't innocent. It, too, is complicit in the pursuit of power that characterizes all human politics in history. Progressives like to posit some imagined dichotomy between power and human rights as if the two stand in opposition; but there are no human rights without power, and any exercise of power carries with it the potential for violence. "Just as they have moved to create a Whig interpretation of the history of human rights," Moyn observes, "contemporary scholars rarely show interest in how the intentions of morality are in fact swept into the violence of politics that it is their goal to reshape." Moyn discusses the "dubious" legacy of Christian realists like German scholar Gerhard Ritter but credits Christian realism for recognizing that morality needs power and must reckon with its frightful implications. "Without some assistance from real power," notes Moyn, "no ideal has ever been able to survive for long in the field of power politics." Human rights are not a "refuge of moral safety" free from the impurity of power, and will always be ambiguous in application because they depend on the vagaries of politics. Such is the lot of lofty ideals in a fallen world.

"The moment we cast off our concern for the world is the moment we reject the heritage we claim to defend."

Fourth, despite this ambiguity, states that claim to live by Western values cannot soon abandon them without losing a claim to Western civilization. What we call "Western values" are really Hebraic values in secular guise, representing the best we can offer in disestablished polity like the United States. As offspring of the Hebraic tradition, Western countries like the US are doomed to live in the tension between values and interests, universal and particular, other and self. The moment we cast off our concern for the world is the moment we reject the heritage we claim to defend.

Fifth, the content of human rights must be judged by convention and not by culture or custom. While we are indeed sons and daughters of the West, we cannot assume that Western values are universal and that non-Western states should thereby be judged. The great American statesman and Christian realist George Kennan made this point in a 1985 *Foreign Affair* essay entitled "Morality and Foreign Policy," where he pushed back against the hyper-moralization of global affairs by noting that there are no internationally accepted standards of morality to which the US can appeal.

Kennan ignored the fact that most countries have acceded, by their own volition, to a range of international instruments that set out standards of state conduct with some specificity. Kennan dismissed these documents as mere "semantic challenges" that Western diplomats hurl at their non-Western counterparts to please constituents; but he passed over that hoary principle of international law, *pacta sunt servanda*, that

dictates the performance of treaty obligations between states. Contemporary international law is rightly criticized for evolving far beyond its original mandate, but contractual reciprocity has stood at the heart of world order for thousands of years. There *are* internationally accepted standards of morality that can anchor human rights diplomacy, and this is precisely why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an achievement worth celebrating.

Sixth, values are best advanced when they are tied to interests. American diplomats can canvass the world waving the Universal Declaration in the face of every tyrant, but shouldn't be surprised if their preaching yields little result. States rarely respond to sermonizing, and usually prefer to lash out with a list of America's own sins rather than comply. American energy would be better spent weaving human rights priorities into existing diplomatic policy, understanding that expanded human rights will be one logical outcome of effect ve US engagement in a region. Old-fashioned strategies that involve balance of power and economic cooperation can yield much fruit in this regard, opening up spaces for humans to flourish in the absence of state control. If we want to advance our values, we must show other countries why it's tangibly advantageous to adopt them and not just the right thing to do.

Seventh, human rights advocacy must be prioritized. Deciding where and when to intervene comes only after recognizing the disparity between ends and means; for while the procurement of human rights is always a worthy end, it will be limited by the scarcity of material resources, political influence, and democratic will at our disposal. A prudent American policy will prioritize those cases that are the most serious, most proximate, and most ripe for American influence.

There will always be places in the world where human rights are violated. It would be unwise and unhistorical for us to imagine that we can eliminate them all. But we still wield tremendous power on the stage of history that can be leveraged toward life rather than death, and we should use it. This was why Trump's weak reaction to the Khashoggi murder was so appalling: it was a clear case of inhumanity perpetrated by a state with which the US maintains close ties and over which the US wields significant infl - ence. We could have sent Saudi Arabia and the world a message. We chose not to.

"The skeptics are wrong. We cannot abandon human rights just because our success will never be more than provisional, partial, and contingent."

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The skeptics are wrong. We cannot abandon human rights just because our success will never be more than provisional, partial, and contingent. We cannot save all humans, and human rights cannot save us. But our tradition goes out of its way to emphasize the importance of life, even a single life, and it is in that tradition that we must abide. Herein lies American exceptionalism: belief in, and dependence upon, the aspirational values rooted in the Hebraic tradition. It is our tradition that is exceptional, not our government. Without those values we are in the same category as everyone else.

Human rights matter. The only dilemma for a Christian comes in deciding how to prioritize the rights of neighbors near and far. It is well known that Christ called us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that the word "neighbor" may describe anyone on earth. Less known, however, is that the New Testament's call to universal love is qualified: like everything else in biblical thought, it flows from the particular to the universal and not the other way around. Christian love may extend globally, but it is applied proximately. Christ himself preached a special love for fathers and mothers, for brothers and sisters in the church, and for those—like the victim in the story of the Good Samaritan—who lie in our path. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar," the Apostle John writes. "For the person who does not love his brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen." One cannot love a distant neighbor without first caring for the neighbor next door.

This is why a Christian critique of Trump's "America First" policy is so strange. If Christians who are citizens of the Kingdom of God are called to love their nearest neighbors first, how much more so the kings of this world? Trump errs not in prioritizing American lives over foreign lives, but in treating foreign lives as irrelevant and expendable. Here is where citizens of conscience must challenge him to link values and interests as he makes foreign policy. Here lies the importance of a journal like *Providence*.

No one would think to accuse Henry Kissinger of high-minded idealism in his view of world affairs, but even Kissinger understands that values accompany interests in American grand strategy. "A nation unsure of its values cannot shape its future," Kissinger told an audience of the Upper Midwest Council in a 1975 speech. "A people confused about its direction will miss the opportunity to build a better and more peaceful world." Kissinger's speech, aimed at moral-minded Americans who in the name of human rights opposed his policy of détente with the Soviet Union, intended to explain how morality could work hand-in-hand with practical policymaking. "We need moral strength," Kissinger assured them, "to select among often agonizing choices and a sense of purpose to navigate between the shoals of difficul decisions. But we need as well a mature sense of means, lest we substitute wishful thinking for the requirements of survival." Kissinger's balanced approach to human rights remains the only viable and defensible approach for any American statesman.

America is a city on a hill because America is, in the words of Harvard historian Eric Nelson, a "Hebrew republic," a political project consciously modeled on the transcendent ethics of the Hebrew Bible. Imbued by a revealed morality, Americans feel burdened with a love for the world that the world doesn't always understand or reciprocate. Christians should never be surprised by this, for unreciprocated love is the burden we are called to bear in the image of our Lord. We must be that part of the populace that lobbies constantly for the thoughtful coordination of morality and power in our relations with the world, regardless of whether the world correctly divines or respects our intentions.

But we also must acknowledge that Christian love will manifest itself differently in the realm of statecraft. While it flows from the moral consensus of the citizens and is therefore a legitimate driver of democratic policy, it will be refracted through the mirrors of what is proper to government, what is practical, and what is proximate given the real-time conditions of international affairs. The final product will be less than satisfying for some Christians, but those who understand the difference between churches and states will see any human rights win as a net gain for the Kingdom.

The city *can* do both: The United States can protect its interests and promulgate its values at the same time. If we are to be exceptional, we must live in the tension that exceptionalism brings. The apparent clash between vision and mission reflects our Hebraic approach to the world, our recognition of what is, and our belief about what could be.

It is on us to embrace this clash—to own it. It is, we must remind ourselves, our greatest legacy in history. ■

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