

# LIBERTY AND POWER

A DIALOGUE ON RELIGION  
AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY  
IN AN UNJUST WORLD

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# THE PARADOXES OF RELIGION AND FOREIGN POLICY

## AN INTRODUCTION

E.J. DIONNE JR., KAYLA M. DROGOSZ,  
AND JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

BRINGING RELIGION into international relations scares people, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001. It also seems a new departure, even if it is not. As J. Bryan Hehir notes in his pathbreaking essay in these pages, the dominant attitude over the last half century on the subject was expressed well by Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's secretary of state. "Moral Talk was fine preaching for the Final Day of Judgment," Acheson said, "but it was not a view I would entertain as a public servant."

A lot of public servants and foreign policy analysts feel that way. As Louise Richardson notes herein, "The arguments on the basis of moral obligation are entirely convincing when they are preached to the choir, but they fall on deaf ears when they are proposed to the policymakers."

James Lindsay agrees strongly with Hehir on the need to "think a lot more about the impact of religion on world politics." But Lindsay adds, rightly, "This is going to be hard to do. We are not used to thinking about the topic. We do not have much practice handling religion, and the consequences of getting it wrong could be enormous." Indeed.

The unease over introducing religion into foreign affairs is rooted in two fears. The first is that it can be a conversation stopper and retard rather than advance an honest discussion of morality. "In the contemporary world," writes Michael Walzer, perhaps the nation's premier student

of just war, “I suggest that we need to worry about faith—for when it turns into dogma and certainty, as it frequently does, it tends to override morality.” Walzer concludes: “A faith-based foreign policy is a bad idea.”

Lindsay expresses sympathy for “the tendency of Americans to cast their foreign policy preferences in moral terms.” But he adds, “That tendency . . . can squelch debate. When people become certain of their moral rectitude, they can easily drift into sanctimony, so anybody who disagrees with them must, by definition, not be really interested in moral issues. That attitude tends to poison debate rather than advance it.” Of course, one must note that *realpolitik*—if it hardens into dogma—similarly quashes debate and brooks no opposition.

Charles Krauthammer is even more direct in his rejection of religion’s utility as a guide to “a moral foreign policy.” He writes, “Religion as an abstraction will not tell, inform, or guide anyone about how to act collectively or individually.”

The second fear is rooted in the bloody history of wars over religion in past centuries and in today’s acts of terrorism that are often justified in religious terms. Hehir provides a useful and important history of the Westphalian synthesis, created by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. It recognized the emergence of the modern sovereign state in order to “move decisively beyond the century of religious warfare that had ravaged European politics.” Under the Westphalian synthesis, political actors would stop using religious differences as reasons for interfering in the affairs of territories under the rule of others. “Sovereignty,” Hehir writes, “meant a defined territory, an effective exercise of authority within the territory and—a decisive change—the refusal of the sovereign to recognize any superior authority, temporal or spiritual.” A key moment in the birth of the idea of “separating church and state” was that treaty.

There is a great fear, especially among foreign policy realists, that the abandonment of the Westphalian synthesis will invite a return to the religious wars of old. Walzer, for his part, fears that “just war” theories might be displaced by a “faith-based” model. He writes, “There is an alternative tradition, a medieval rival of just war, which has not been wholly supplanted: the crusade, the holy war, the jihad. All these words describe a faith-based struggle against the forces of darkness and evil, which are generally understood in explicitly religious terms: infidels, idolaters, the

antichrist. In the West, especially after 9/11, we are a little leery about holy wars.”

So are religious principles a blessing or a curse in guiding our understanding of relations among states and nations? The most popular answer—“Well, it depends”—is not necessarily the most helpful, though it may be the most honest. It depends upon which religious principles, how they are applied, and what questions they purport to answer or problems they address. And Shibley Telhami is absolutely right when he suggests that the discussion of the relationship of religion to politics (domestic as well as international) is confusing because too little effort is made to differentiate “between the role of religious ideas and the role of religious organizations.” It is clearly the case, as Telhami points out, that the African American church was essential in building the civil rights movement, just as the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was essential in organizing opposition to that country’s Communist dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. In each case, Christian ideas were mobilized on behalf of a just cause. But in each case, as well, the sheer organizational power of the churches—and the fact that the church was one of the few available institutions in which independent political action could be rooted—was at least as important.

Because the questions at stake on this subject are so vexing *and* so urgent, the editors of this series are especially grateful to the exceptional thinkers who accepted our invitation to join in this dialogue. This volume is the fourth in a series that is a joint project of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Brookings Institution. The series is based on a simple proposition, one that its editors see as obvious but that others might see as controversial: Religious voices and insights rooted in faith have a great deal to contribute to our public deliberations about politics and public policy. As our coeditor Jean Bethke Elshtain says, “American politics is indecipherable if it is severed from the interplay and panoply of America’s religions.”<sup>1</sup> The same is increasingly true of world politics.

The series is also rooted in the idea that religious people—including people who share the same faith and live the same religious tradition—can disagree fundamentally on political questions not only because they see the facts differently, but also because they read and experience their traditions differently. The series emphatically rejects the idea that faith

commitments render the messy facts about politics and policy irrelevant. On the contrary, we sought out people of faith who respect the facts and have genuine knowledge of the issues about which they speak.

The first volume of the series, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty, and Welfare Reform*, brings together in dialogue Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence M. Mead, two of the nation's premier experts on poverty and welfare policy. Both care profoundly about the facts—and their faith. In *Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice*, Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn show how their reflections on economics, rooted in years of engagement with the subject, interact with their moral commitments rooted in faith. Bane and Mead, Blank and McGurn all perform a service in demonstrating that faith speaks to questions that are not easily pigeonholed as religious issues. And they provide a model in demonstrating the obligations of the person of faith in the public realm: They make arguments accessible and engaging to those who may not share their particular brands of faith, their specific approaches to theology. The third volume, *One Electorate under God?* takes on the broad question of the relationship between faith and American politics. Anchored in a discussion between former New York governor Mario Cuomo and Representative Mark Souder of Indiana—they reflect on the role of faith in their own political lives—the volume brings together a wide array of voices on a set of questions that relate to but also transcend the sharp debates of a particular election year.

The inspiration behind the series is captured in that earlier volume by Martha Minow, a professor at Harvard Law School. “Religiously inflected arguments and perspectives bring critical and prophetic insight and energy to politics and public affairs.” There is, she says, “something woefully lacking in any view that excludes religion entirely from the public sphere.” Yet one can believe this and still accept that “difficulties arise if government actions cross over from reflecting religious sources of vision and energy to preferring one kind of religion over others.” And Lord knows (if one may invoke the Almighty in this context), that is especially true in foreign policy and in relations among states.

This volume began taking shape in February 2003, when we invited five of our authors to a meeting at which they were asked to discuss faith, morals, and foreign policy. (Shibley Telhami, who did not attend that ses-

sion, was later invited to join the discussion, and we are very grateful he has.) We gave the participants a list of questions—some of them refer to these questions in the text—to open, though not limit, the discussion. Hehir and Walzer were asked to give lengthy reflections. The other authors were asked to respond to them, though we also asked them not to be shy about pushing the discussion in any direction they thought helpful. (Fortunately, this is not a shy group.) The timing of the original event in some ways sharpened the debate, since the meeting was held at the moment when the United States was preparing to go to war in Iraq. We later asked our authors to use their remarks as the basis for the essays here. They were put in final form early in 2004.

We are biased, perhaps, but we think we have brought together some of our country's most powerful voices on this topic. J. Bryan Hehir has devoted his life to combining the roles of a committed diocesan priest, a prominent scholar on international affairs, and one of the nation's leading moral voices on foreign policy. He came to wide attention for his work as a policy adviser at the U.S. Catholic Conference. A principal author of the bishops' famous pastoral letter on nuclear weapons, *The Challenge of Peace*, Hehir has remained active in politics and foreign policy and exerted enormous influence on the policy agenda that the American bishops pursued. "Being engaged with the world has been a major emphasis in my life. I wanted to go into politics," he says, "before I went into the ministry. I was sure I wanted to study diplomacy before I knew I wanted to study theology."<sup>2</sup> Hehir is seen by many Catholics—and many non-Catholics as well—as a successor to the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, the leading Catholic theologian and intellectual of his day.<sup>3</sup> As noted in these pages, the late Reinhold Niebuhr's theological insights proved so valuable to those who did not share his faith that a group of intellectuals came to describe themselves informally as Atheists for Niebuhr. A comparable group no doubt exists where Bryan Hehir is concerned, even as his deep religious faith shines through all of his work.

Michael Walzer has grappled with these questions throughout an extraordinary life that has bridged the worlds of philosophical reflection and political commitment. One of his first major works, *The Revolution of the Saints*, explores the interaction of religious faith and revolutionary politics in the time of Oliver Cromwell. It still stands as a model for



understanding the interplay between realms so often treated separately. Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* continues to stand as a definitive discussion of the subject. He has been at work on a multivolume collection on Jewish political philosophy. And his *Exodus and Revolution* is a powerful reminder of how tradition can be usefully studied and invoked, generation after generation, to illuminate contemporary dilemmas and to inspire right action. Since 1980 he has been a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where he has written some of the best-known books on moral philosophy, social criticism, Jewish political theory, and politics. Perhaps most important, Walzer, like Hehir, is admired for his ability to marry sustained political commitment with a moral outlook that is not inhibited or limited by ideology and that is open to insights from other shores, intellectual as well as geographic.

With the Hehir and Walzer chapters the bedrock of this collection, our respondents did, indeed, do far more than respond. They offered creative alternative views of their own and helped highlight central themes of this volume: the role of realism in foreign policy, the relationship between realism and other views rooted in moral and religious traditions, and the ways in which globalization and nonstate actors (including terrorists) call into question old paradigms of foreign relations.

Louise Richardson, the senior administrative officer of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, has written widely on terrorism and ethnic conflict. She has a profound understanding of the darker side of politics. Her most recent research focuses on a study of decisionmaking inside terrorist organizations and patterns of terrorist violence.

Shibley Telhami, who has a long association with the Brookings Institution and is a professor at the University of Maryland, is a distinguished scholar of the Middle East. Many know he is a political scientist, but few know he also has a graduate degree in philosophy and religion from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he studied Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and their connection to politics. Shibley can reach to his own biography to understand ethnic and religious conflict—and the inspirations that faith can offer. A Christian Arab, he was born in Haifa, Israel. He identifies with being called both a Palestinian Arab and an Arab Israeli and has been active in encouraging a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. His fair-mindedness and analytical

independence is well reflected in his recent book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East*.

James Lindsay, a vice president at the Council on Foreign Relations and before that a colleague of ours at Brookings, is a premier student of contemporary foreign policy and a powerful voice in contemporary debates. Having served as a consultant to the Hart-Rudmann Commission, he is, like Richardson, well versed in the politics of terrorism. With Ivo Daalder, he is the author of *America Unbound*, widely seen as the definitive first look at the Bush administration's foreign policy.

And Charles Krauthammer is a well-known (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) syndicated columnist who invented the idea of a Reagan Doctrine and is one of the most important interpreters of the realist approach to foreign policy. Krauthammer, whose publications include *Cutting Edges: Making Sense of the Eighties*, provides, as readers will discover, a powerful counterpoint to some of the perspectives offered by Hehir, Walzer, and Telhami in particular. Krauthammer's very skepticism of the project embodied in this book makes his an especially important—and at times, puckish—voice. With candor, he writes, “I am sure one can find any message one seeks in the Bible, depending on where one looks.”

Well, yes, but. . . . As the essays here show, it is certainly possible for political actors to fish out from scripture or tradition whatever arguments might accommodate their interests. But serious students of morality and foreign policy—and certainly serious students of tradition—often find themselves disciplined, intellectually and morally, by the traditions from which they spring. And it is not at all surprising that those who share a tradition (or think they do) can disagree profoundly about the implications of that tradition for contemporary action. Walzer, we think, has it exactly right when he says, “Traditions are sites for arguments, and that's not less true of religious than of secular traditions.” Reinhold Niebuhr, whose name rightly appears often in these pages, took sharp issue with his pacifist Christian colleagues in the years before World War II, even as both invoked the same scriptures to make their respective cases.

Invoking Niebuhr is a reminder of our country's rich tradition of ethical and religious reflection on foreign affairs. Hehir's essay notes that the “Christian realist” tradition has long jostled with ideas rooted in Catholic natural law theory and that Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*

(*Peace on Earth*) had a powerful impact on the American debate. Niebuhr also stands as a trenchant counterpoint to those who would claim that religious voices and religious arguments lead inevitably to overreaching and arrogant certainty. On the contrary, as Richard Fox, one of Niebuhr's leading interpreters, has said, one of the great theologian's primary lessons is the need for humility. Niebuhr, Fox says, asserted repeatedly that an "awareness of sin—of one's often hidden desire for fame, power, privilege, and other kinds of self-aggrandizement—can counteract religious people's temptation to see themselves as chosen instruments for divinely sponsored action."<sup>4</sup>

This is just one of the many paradoxes—or should one say *seeming* paradoxes?—explored in these pages. Other paradoxes emerge in the complicated relationship between realist arguments and moral arguments. On one side, Walzer tells the fascinating story of the arguments within the British government over the strategic bombing campaign against Germany during World War II. The question at the time was whether the goal of the campaign should be "to kill as many German civilians as possible, so as to demoralize the enemy and shut down the economy, or should the planes aim only at military targets—railroad yards, tank factories, and army bases." As Walzer argues, both sides made their case entirely in practical terms. "Inside the government, there seemed to be a ban on moral talk: there's no one here but us realists!" Yet when one examines the postwar political and moral commitments of the partisans on each side, "it seems clear that their moral and political convictions—most crucially, their views about the rightness or wrongness of killing enemy civilians—had driven their wartime arguments." We are accustomed to moralism as a cover for realism. We are less sensitive to the way in which arguments seemingly rooted in a realist tradition are in fact surrogates for moral or even religious commitments.

From a slightly different angle, Shibley Telhami makes the case that nations that root their behavior in morality often find that morality also has highly practical uses—or as Telhami puts it, "A strong instrumental argument can be made on behalf of international ethical behavior." For example, stopping terrorism is a central goal of the United States' foreign policy. But the core argument against terrorism, as Telhami writes, is *moral*—"the ends, no matter how worthy, cannot justify the means"—and "boils down to the notion that deliberate attack on civilian targets is unac-

ceptable under any circumstances.” The key, he says, is that “to persuade others of this worthy notion, those who make the argument must speak with moral authority.” To boil down Telhami’s case: To achieve the practical end of eradicating or reducing terrorism, the United States needs moral authority on its side, an authority that can ultimately be won only through moral action.

This book appears at a moment of great contention in foreign policy, and readers should know that all the authors here closely link their ideas and their arguments to the very practical issues that confront us: the costs and benefits of preemptive and preventive war (and the differences between the two); the advisability (or lack thereof) of the United States’ intervention in Iraq; the obligations created by the United States’ unprecedented military advantages (and the dangers thereof); the best ways of judging when “humanitarian” interventions are feasible, moral, necessary—and, yes, genuinely humanitarian.

It is possible, of course, for those who care about international relations to minimize their engagement with issues rooted in religion. But we would assert, with Hehir, that it is not possible even for the clearest-eyed realist to avoid grappling with the importance of religious forces in shaping the world as it now exists. And we are certain that those who *are* religious cannot possibly avoid the questions raised here. At the very least, religious people need to question themselves to make sure that what they see as religious imperatives are not in fact cloaks for other interests. It is always possible, as Telhami puts it, that “one may be having a delusion, not hearing the real voice of God.”

The obligation of religious people to engage the world was put most pointedly by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the anti-Nazi theologian who was imprisoned for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler and later killed. Bonhoeffer judges harshly those who retreat into the “sanctuary of private virtuousness” when confronted with hideous injustice. “Anyone who does this must shut his mouth and his eyes to the injustices around him,” Bonhoeffer writes. “Responsible action involves contamination—one cannot altogether avoid getting ‘dirty hands’ when acting in the political world in responsible ways.”<sup>5</sup>

But how dirty—and bloody—must one’s hands get? At what point does the contamination of which Bonhoeffer speaks become a threat to

the responsible action to which he rightly calls us? Ultimately, these are the questions with which our authors grapple. In an imperfect world, they are the questions that all people of faith, and also those without faith, must inevitably confront.

*Notes*

1. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "God Talk and the Citizen-Believer," from *One Electorate under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics*, edited by E. J. Dionne Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Kayla M. Drogosz (Brookings, 2004), p. 94.

2. J. Bryan Hehir, "Catholic Theology at Its Best," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 27, nos. 2–3 (1998): 13.

3. See also William J. Gould, "Father J. Bryan Hehir: Priest, Policy Analyst, and Theologian of Dialogue," in *Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Politics*, edited by Jo Renee Formicola and Hubert Morken (Oxford, U.K.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

4. Richard Wightman Fox, "The Politics of Religion in a Sinful World," in *One Electorate under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics*, edited by E. J. Dionne Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Kayla M. Drogosz (Brookings, 2004), pp. 96–97.

5. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 4–5. See also Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).