



# Spirit in the World: Christianity and the Clash of Interests

GARY DORRIEN

*Kalamazoo College  
Kalamazoo, Michigan*

THE QUESTION OF HOW THE UNITED STATES SHOULD RELATE TO THE REST OF THE world is notoriously perplexing, complicated, and dangerous. The question of how progressive/mainline American Christianity should seek to influence American foreign policy is similarly confounding and perilous, not least because in this case the legitimacy of the question itself is open to serious dispute. In 1961, when John C. Bennett was asked at a conference to comment on the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr's career as a Christian ethicist, Bennett began by remarking that, of course, Niebuhr's chief concern throughout his career was to influence the direction of the American government. This gathering of distinguished theologians and political theorists proceeded to analyze Niebuhr's thought quite vigorously, but none of them raised the basic question whether it is appropriate for a theologian to be concerned primarily with influencing government policy. It is one measure of the difference between Niebuhr's time and ours that, today, none of his assumptions about the social vocation of theology go unchallenged, including his core assumption that the church is obliged to accept moral responsibility for the moral problems of the state. The fragmentation of contemporary Christian thought is nowhere more apparent than in this area.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bennett is quoted in Harold R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1962) 88.

GARY DORRIEN is a religion professor, chapel dean, and chair of humanities at Kalamazoo College. He is the author of *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of American Social Christianity* (Fortress, 1995).

Many of us are finding it very difficult to get our bearings in a postmodern cultural situation in which virtually no assumption gains widespread agreement. With regard to the problems of international affairs, this difficulty has intensified in the aftermath of the cold war. The disintegration of Soviet communism and the collapse of the cold war system of international relations have eviscerated the structures, theories, and political narratives by which many of us formerly made sense of the world. Though the end of the cold war has created extraordinary new opportunities for the cause of freedom and significantly lessened the threat of a full-scale nuclear war, it has also unleashed a host of explosive smaller-scale conflicts. Moreover, the dramatic globalization of capitalism and technology are producing a single world-embracing competitive market that undermines the capacity of national governments to gain any control over the direction or effects of economic forces. In this situation, assuming for the moment that American Christians have a legitimate and even obligatory moral interest in the question, how should we relate to current debates over the role of the United States in world affairs?

#### I. LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

Three distinctive perspectives dominate our current national debates in this area. None of these positions is exclusively conservative or liberal; each has a wide-ranging right/center/left continuum; each perspective has a history in modern Christian social thought. The most influential approach is liberal internationalism, the dominant ideology of the American foreign policy establishment, which has shifted in recent years from a nearly exclusive emphasis on world management to a stronger emphasis on democracy-building. Liberal internationalism seeks to secure world peace and stability by securing collective agreements from nation states to comply with international law. Proponents of this strategy invest great importance in the attainment of multilateral state agreements to respect each other's national sovereignty, maintain the rule of law, uphold human rights, and minimize trade barriers. In its more aggressive or idealistic forms, liberal internationalism conceives the struggle for world peace and sustainable order as a struggle for world democracy.

For most of this century, American liberal internationalism has been the creed of a management-oriented diplomatic establishment. While spurning the world-embracing democratic idealism of their Wilsonian past, liberal internationalists have played a leading role in creating the United Nations, the World Bank, various security alliances, and other organizations that are designed to promote western-style international stability, cooperation, and economic development. For most of the past half-century, most American liberal internationalist policymakers and theorists were strongly anticommunist; though they devoted much effort to identifying issues and interests on which diplomatic agreements could be forged, they viewed the Soviet Union as a threatening, hostile, freedom-extinguishing enemy. Soviet communism was not only a rival power, but a rival creed that threatened the existence of liberal democracy throughout the world.

With the dissolution of the Communist threat, however, a number of liberal internationalists have been arguing that America needs to pursue a stronger, more positive mission in the world than the traditional project of getting nations to get along and buy goods from each other. The moment to redeem Woodrow Wilson's moral ambition for his country has arrived. Having won its epochal struggle against the Communist idea, America must now accept the full measure of its moral and political responsibility as the world's only superpower by using its power to export, build, and sustain democratic governments throughout the world. With prudent self-confidence, the democracy-exporters proclaim, America must at last make the world safe for democracy. It must prove willing to commit its blood and treasure to the cause of creating a world community that is a community of democracies. And as the exemplar of the liberal democratic idea, America must not shrink from its moral and ideological obligation to establish a new Pax Americana. No other nation has the means or stature to put tyrants in their place or uphold the rules of a liberal democratic world order.

Neoconservatives such as Joshua Muravchik, Charles Krauthammer, Samuel Huntington, Michael Novak, and Ben Wattenberg have made the case for American "democratic globalism" with particular zeal, but they are joined by various cold-war liberals and a smattering of liberal internationalists (notably Anthony Lewis) who were doves during the cold war. Though the fact is easily forgotten today, the Democratic candidate for President in 1992 based his foreign policy speeches on this vision, which called for a pro-democratic alliance "as united and steadfast as the global alliance that defeated Communism." Candidate Bill Clinton chided President Bush for his lack of democratic idealism in world affairs, especially with regard to American policy in Croatia, Bosnia, Burma, and Haiti.

He thus appealed to an American sentiment that is deeply rooted in modern American protestantism. In the early years of the progressive era, American church leaders, including social gospelers such as Walter Rauschenbusch, strongly supported Theodore Roosevelt's Latin American adventures in democratic imperialism. Though Rauschenbusch later became a near-pacifist, his movement was firmly committed to the worldwide expansion of American democracy/Christianity. The social gospelers used "democratize" and "Christianize" as interchangeable terms; for them, America was the redeemer nation that incarnated the Christian-influenced democratic idea. As Lyman Abbott explained in 1906, "democracy is not merely a political theory, it is not merely a social opinion; it is a profound religious faith." In the name of this faith, Shailer Mathews urged that Christian America was obliged to "conquer civilization." The social gospelers were sensitive to the charge that this self-appointed mission sacralized American imperialism. Abbott countered that it was "the function of the Anglo-Saxon race" to confer the civilizing gifts of commerce, law, and education on backward peoples. "It is said that we have no right to go to a land occupied by a barbaric people and interfere with their life," he observed. "I deny the right of a barbaric people to retain possession of any quarter of the globe. Barbarism has no rights which civilization is bound to respect. Barbarians have rights which civilized people are bound to respect, but they have

no right to their barbarism.” His social gospel colleagues, the leaders of American Christian progressivism, typically said the same thing with nicer words.<sup>2</sup>

Today we blush at the cultural arrogance and chauvinism of the social gospelers, but their defining faith in the regenerative power of democracy is acquiring a new respectability. Though it was until recently an arguable point, today almost no one disputes that there is a strong correlation between the ways that governments treat their own citizens and the ways they relate to other nations. Neither do we argue any longer about whether the expansion of democracy reduces world conflict, because, in this war-ravaged century, we have not seen democracies go to war with each other. Moreover, it has become equally clear that the most effective deterrent to famine and the abuse of human rights is to establish a democratic regime with political opposition parties and a free press. There has never been a famine in a country that allows political opposition and a free press, even in very poor countries, because democratic governments put into place an early warning system (the free press) and a political incentive (removal from office) that deter governments from allowing famines and similar disasters to occur. The ruling class never starves in any society, no matter how impoverished its economic condition may be. As the social gospelers never tired of pointing out, the idea of democracy is to expand the base of political, cultural, and economic power. When the social gospelers proclaimed that democracy is the best antidote to violence and oppression, their claims were based upon faith and a meager supply of historical evidence. Today the evidence is formidable.

## II. BALANCE-OF-POWER REALISM

But democratic idealism is still essentially a faith, for the evidence that bolsters the case for democracy as a desirable end does not necessarily establish that America bears any obligation to foster or export democracy anywhere in the world. On this much, if nothing else, the realist and anti-interventionist traditions agree that liberal internationalism (even in its milder managerial forms) is presumptuous and overreaching. Realists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Alan Tonelson, and Jeane Kirkpatrick begin with the assumption that the purpose of American foreign policy should be to advance and defend the nation’s vital interests, especially its security and economic interests, while giving little regard to moral or ideological factors. Realists view the world as a theater of perpetual struggles for power among competing interests. The object of *Realpolitik* is not to create any particular kind of world community, but simply to ensure a balance of power among existing regimes. From this perspective, it would be ridiculous for the United States to give its blood or treasure to the cause of “building democracy” in Iraq or Bosnia or Rwanda, but a self-confident America will pay attention to any region in which American national interests are at stake,

<sup>2</sup>Abbott is quoted in Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University, 1984)109; Shailer Mathews, *The Individual and the Social Gospel* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1914) 66-67.

principally by helping to create or maintain an equitable correlation of forces in that region. Thus the Bush administration left Saddam Hussein in power, not because Bush was squeamish about invading Baghdad, but because the United States has an overriding interest in maintaining Iraqi sovereignty against Hussein's domestic and foreign enemies.

Balance-of-power realism has a history in modern American theology principally through the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr. In the 1930s and '40s, Niebuhr blasted the moral idealism and pacifism of liberal protestant leaders with shattering contempt while teaching the church how to speak the language of real-life power politics. He repeatedly attacked the "soft utopianism" of the social gospels and secular liberals, who imagined "that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill." The liberal idealists were soft, Niebuhr argued, because they failed to accept the inevitability of collective egotism in all social groups, as well as the necessity of using violence to make gains toward social justice. Because they refused to recognize the brutal character of all social relationships and the violence that permeates all forms of political rule, liberals confused and often impeded the historical struggle for justice, despite their glowing words of tribute to it.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr did not reduce realism to a Machiavellian lesser-evilism; as a Christian ethicist, he spent much of his later career cautioning his secular followers that political realism without a moral dimension is inevitably cynical and corrupting. But he never doubted that his primary vocation as an American Christian ethicist was to help America use its power to contain communism, maintain a western-dominated world order, and establish an equitable balance among domestic interests. Niebuhr's notable success in this endeavor reinforced his perception after World War II that American civilization was fulfilling the ends of attainable justice. In 1952, he wrote that the secret to America's success "in establishing justice and insuring domestic tranquility" was that America had successfully practiced a politics of balance-of-power realism not only in world affairs, but at home: "We have attained a certain equilibrium in economic society itself by setting organized power against organized power."<sup>4</sup>

In Niebuhr's generation, under his towering influence, liberal protestantism became more realistic about the necessity of using violent means to attain justice and deter aggression. The Niebuhrians ridiculed the moralism, sentimentality, and anti-interventionism of progressive-era liberal theology with devastating polemical force. But in Niebuhr's theology, as in liberal protestantism, America was still the redeemer nation that is destined by its unique history and character to be a light to all nations. Though his rhetoric of interest, balance of power, and coercive justice was alien to the spirit and rhetoric of Mathews-style liberal protestantism,

<sup>3</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1947) xii.

<sup>4</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1952) 101.

Niebuhr never doubted any more than the social gospelers that America has the right and obligation to make history come out right. A morally responsible American Christianity must assume moral responsibility for organizing the world.

### III. ANTI-INTERVENTIONISM

This is precisely the assumption that America's various anti-interventionist movements past and present have disputed. From the isolationist nationalism of the old right, to the Christian neo-pacifism that Niebuhr attacked, to the antiwar radicalism of the new left, American politics has produced sizable movements throughout this century that oppose foreign military operations on principle. Anti-interventionism in modern American history has been too wide-ranging, contradictory, and diffuse to be called a tradition; but in all its forms it has pressed the much-needed question whether the good is ever served by invading or ruling over one's neighbors.

In recent Christian ethics, Stanley Hauerwas especially has made the case for a peacemaking communal understanding of Christianity that categorically rejects the burdens of empire. For Hauerwas, the center of Christianity is not any particular belief about Jesus constructed by the church, nor is the purpose of Christian ethics to assume moral responsibility for managing the world. The center of Christianity is the community-forming way of Christ that inspires a new kind of corporate spiritual existence in an alien world. Christianity is the messianic community faith of those who inhabit the new aeon, the kingdom of God, in the face of the prevailing principalities and powers. In plainer terms, Hauerwas explains, "Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ."<sup>5</sup>

To those who argue that this approach abandons the church's moral responsibility to keep society from disintegrating into chaos, he replies that there appears to be no shortage of liberal Constantinians who want to manage the world in a "good" way. America's policy institutes and universities are bursting with people who believe that they can make the world a better place if they attain power. It is not any part of the church's moral mission to reinforce this Constantinian disposition, Hauerwas argues. The Christ-following church is not called to promote democracy or sustain American society, but to live faithfully in the light of Christ's proleptic kingdom.

### IV. THEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

Modern American theology has thus adopted and reshaped each of the major perspectives that dominate most debates about America's political relation to the world. Moreover, each significant attempt to blend selected elements of these perspectives into a mediating position has also found its theological expression.

<sup>5</sup>Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 24; see Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

The religious neoconservatism of Novak and George Wiegel, for example, combines Niebuhr's realism with an aggressive form of democratic idealism. I believe that the constructive work of stitching together various strands from a complex religious and political inheritance is a necessary ongoing project for Christian ethics. Each of the major positions that I have outlined contributes something to the reconstructive Christian ethic that is needed. The liberal internationalist commitments to democracy, cooperative problem-solving, and universalistic human rights are important components of this ethic, as is the liberal internationalist commitment to create structures that transcend nationalism. Similarly, the realist emphasis on the pervasive, indwelling, and systemic reality of evil in individuals and society is indispensable to any Christian movement that struggles for attainable gains toward social justice in a world of horrendous violence and oppression. Realism is morally chastening as a brake on self-righteousness and politically chastening as a reminder of the limits of political action. While acknowledging that some governments are more evil than others, realism rightly cautions that all nations are self-interested and power-seeking, and that democracy is therefore valuable primarily as a brake on human greed and will-to-power. Above all, as a movement that gives witness to and indwells the kingdom of Christ, the church must be a movement that practices the nonviolent way of Christ. That is, the church is normatively the kingdom-bearing body of Christ that gives witness to the peaceable way of Christ. If the kingdom ethic does not reduce Christianity to ethical fundamentalism—which I assume in arguing for an integrative, justice-making perspective—it is axiomatic, nonetheless, that authentic Christianity is centered in the reality of Christ's kingdom-bringing Spirit.

#### V. BEYOND PRESENT CONVENTION

But the Christian ethic that is required also needs other elements that are not central to any of the three conventional perspectives. Liberationist and ecofeminist theologies have arisen during the past generation as responses to the limitations of these dominant approaches. Over the past 25 years, the liberation theology movement has embraced its share of ill-considered political programs, but for all the mistakes and illusions of this many-sided movement, it is liberation theology that has recovered the heart of prophetic biblical Christianity by taking the biblical option for the poor. Just as scripture repeatedly calls the faithful to "establish justice in the gate" and "execute justice one with another" (Amos 5:15; Jer 7:5), liberation theology insists that the test of a worthy politics is how it treats the poor. Hauerwas complains that contemporary Christian ethics, influenced by liberation theology, is overly preoccupied with social justice, but this is surely a "fault" of biblical faith. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed that his mission was to serve the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and liberate those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He spoke of justice and mercy and faith as "the weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23:23). He distinguished between justice and mercy and called his followers to pour themselves out in faith for both justice and mercy. The way of Christ is not merely a communal ethic, for the nations shall be judged

according to whether they have served Christ by caring for the hungry, the poor, the destitute, and those in prison (Matt 25:31-46).

The insistent biblical identification of justice-making with the will of God stands against the sectarian claim that God doesn't care about the right ordering of the world. In its insistence on viewing the world religiously and politically from the perspectives of the poor, the hurting, and the vulnerable, liberation theology has recovered what Rauschenbusch once called "the beating heart" of authentic Christianity – the prophetic biblical witness. It is liberation theology, at least in its most faithful expressions, that has given voices to the poor of the world and seen the face of Christ in their faces. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked a half-century ago, it is a transforming experience to learn "to see the great events of the history of the world from below," from the perspectives of those who suffer from neglect and oppression. An American Christianity that recognizes Christ in the faces of oppressed people will steadfastly oppose the incessant message of the dominant culture that the poor are reaping what they deserve. It will speak unequivocally against the demeaning, often racist ways of speaking about poor people and poor countries, like Haiti, that have become commonplace in American life.

It will also fiercely resist the ever-deepening militarization of American society. A primary symptom of the fragmentation and demoralization of American mainline Christianity is that most of us have become too dispirited to raise a voice against the spectacle of an expanding war industry. How else shall we account for the fact that in a period when deficit reduction has become imperative to the long-term health of American society, no opposition has arisen to a \$290 billion defense budget? Only a few years ago, those of us who fantasized about the dissolution of the cold war typically assumed that the end of the cold war would produce a "peace dividend" that would, in turn, pay for something that we called "economic conversion" to a demilitarized society. We resisted the arguments of theorists such as Seymour Melman, who claimed that America's political and economic systems are fueled by and dependent upon the existence of a permanent war economy.

Today it is hard to remember that we actually believed in the peace dividend. According to figures from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the United States is currently spending as much on defense as the rest of the world combined. Japan has the world's next largest military budget, at \$40 billion; when military spending by U.S. allies is excluded, the United States is spending *twice* as much on "defense" as the rest of the world combined. American troops are stationed in 75 countries; each branch of the armed services has its own air force; and billions of dollars are being thrown at Osprey aircraft and new aircraft carriers that virtually no one believes are needed. Meanwhile the star wars lobby is back with a joyful vengeance, thanks to the "Contract with America," proposing to fill the heavens with a fantastically expensive antiballistic missile system to ward off nuclear attacks from a fantasized enemy.

The official rationale for outspending the rest of the world on preparations for war is that the United States needs to be prepared to fight two full-scale



regional wars at the same time. I try to keep up, but I somehow missed the public discussion in which this objective became a national policy imperative. There is no reason to blame Pentagon officials for dreaming up a military objective that maintains a cold war defense structure in the absence of a cold war. They are simply doing their jobs. But the acquiescence of American churches to this nakedly imperialist agenda is another matter. We citizens of the democratic United States are paying for grotesque levels of overkill capacity and force structure while allowing our own civilization to rot from neglect. At the end of a century that began with social gospel hopes for a “cooperative commonwealth,” American federal and state prisons are stuffed beyond capacity, large areas of major cities are destroyed, the political system is deeply corrupted by the power of organized economic interests, economic insecurity is rampant, and the ravages of racial hatred, ethnic tension, and injustice tear at the remaining fabric of society.

I have suggested that the lack of any effective or even visible opposition to the continued militarization of American society is a sign that many of us are dispirited. There is a spirit of self-pitying meanness in American politics today that makes any kind of politics of the common good seem futile, if not ridiculous. One of the spiritual tasks of the church in this situation is to keep alive the vision of a better society, even at the cost of seeming ridiculous. This is a daunting mission for churches that are already deeply compromised by their ties to the dominant order. The utter lack of resistance to an absurdly oversized defense establishment is also a sign, however, that many of us have become overly impressed with the perplexing, ambiguous, complicated character of the issues we face as a civilization. A church that stands idly by, wringing its hands over the complexity and relativity of disputed issues, does not stand for anything. If American church leaders can't find the wherewithal to protest against a \$290 billion defense budget, this may be a sign that the acids of cynicism and despair have found a home within us. ⊕