



THE PEW  
FORUM  
ON RELIGION  
& PUBLIC LIFE

# LIBERTY AND POWER: A DIALOGUE ON RELIGION AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN AN UNJUST WORLD

*Does religion have a place in the formulation of American foreign policy? Even asking the question frightens some people, especially in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This issue is the subject of a new collection of essays by six of the nation's most distinguished moral and political thinkers. Entitled **Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World**, the volume is part of a series on religion and public policy edited by E.J. Dionne, Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain and Kayla M. Drogoz. Some of the book's contributors make powerful arguments that issues of faith should not intrude upon the nation's international agenda, while others contend that religion and foreign policy are inextricably intertwined and that the real question is how best to manage the relationship. This executive summary, drawn from the volume's introduction and essays, highlights this debate and other important themes discussed in the collection.*

Much of the American diplomatic establishment has long accepted the notion that religion should be consigned to the private realm and thus play no role in the formulation of foreign policy. In his insightful essay for the collection, J. Bryan Hehir sums up this dominant attitude by quoting Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's Secretary of State. "Moral talk was fine preaching for the Final Day of Judgment," Acheson said more than a half century ago, "but it was not a view I would entertain as a public servant."

Acheson's view is echoed by many public servants today. As Radcliffe Dean Louise Richardson notes in her essay for the volume, "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."

The unease over introducing religion into the conduct of foreign policy is rooted in two fears.

The first is that it can be a conversation stopper, that it may retard rather than advance an honest discussion of morality. "In the contemporary world," writes contributor Michael Walzer, one of the nation's premier scholars of just war theory, "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."

Like Walzer, long-time foreign policy expert and contributor James Lindsay also sees dangers in "a faith-based foreign policy," while at the same time expressing sympathy for "the tendency of Americans to cast their foreign policy preferences in moral terms." Still, 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 really be interested in moral issues. That attitude tends to poison debate rather than advance it."

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In her essay, Richardson applies these notions to the current war on terrorism. She is particularly troubled by the tendency, since the September 11th attacks, to cast the conflict in stark moral and religious terms. “When our president paraphrased Jesus, as quoted in Matthew 12:30, ‘Those who are not with us are against us,’ he adopted a starkly bifurcated view, depriving the world of nuance or complexity,” she writes. “Depicting enemies as evil incarnate may help mobilize the domestic population against them... [but] it does not help us to understand them or even, ultimately, defeat them.”

In his essay for the collection, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Charles Krauthammer is even more direct in his rejection of religion’s utility as a guide to “a moral foreign policy.” Because religion often means very different things to different people, he writes, it “will not tell, inform, or guide anyone about how to act collectively or individually.”

In Krauthammer’s view, American power and American notions of civilization (which are derived from the Enlightenment and are largely secular) are ultimately what matter. “The foundation of the current order in the world, the guarantor of the peace in just about every region, is power and, most specifically, American power.”

The second fear about the mixing of faith and foreign policy is rooted in the bloody wars over religion in past centuries and in today’s many acts of terrorism that are justified in religious terms. Hehir, one of the country’s leading Catholic intellectuals, provides a useful and important historical link to this concern through his explanation of the Westphalian system, named for the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. The treaty, which ended the bloody and religiously motivated Thirty Years War

in Europe and signaled the emergence of the modern sovereign state, was intended to “move decisively beyond the century of religious warfare that had ravaged European politics.” Under the Westphalian system, political actors would refrain from using religious differences as reasons for interfering in the internal affairs of territories ruled by 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.” The document represented a key moment in the birth of the idea of “separating church and state,” Hehir concludes.

Some foreign policy realists today fear that the abandonment of the Westphalian framework will invite a return to the religious wars of old. Walzer, for his part, worries that “just war” theories might be displaced by that “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.”

But Hehir cautions against over-reliance on the Westphalian system. He argues that while the Westphalian concept of a modern sovereign state remains “the basic unit of world politics,” it does not exist in a geopolitical vacuum and “must share the stage of history today with other actors.” Economic interdependence, human rights claims and other factors all work to “limit national sovereignty.” By way of example, Hehir repeats former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s recent obser-

*“We need to worry about faith — for when it turns into dogma and certainty, as it frequently does, it tends to override morality.... A faith-based foreign policy is a bad idea.”*

*Michael Walzer*

vation that there has “been the general acceptance of the proposition that certain universal principles are deemed enforceable either by the United Nations or, in extreme situations, by a group of states.” Indeed, since the early 1990s, foreign forces, both with and without U.N. approval, have intervened for humanitarian reasons in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and East Timor, as well as a host of sub-Saharan African hot spots.

Hehir also takes to task the notion that religious ideas have no significant role to play in the conduct of foreign relations, arguing that “there is a growing consensus that a complete secularization of world politics, or an analytical effort to divorce religion from the political order, yields a distorted conception of contemporary world politics.”

While Hehir agrees with George Washington University history professor Leo Ribuffo’s contention that “no major diplomatic decision has turned on religious issues alone,” matters of faith have indirectly influenced many policies. He points to evangelical Christians — with their active support of Israel and their opposition to population control programs — to underscore this point.

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 indeed depends on which religious principles one is referring to, how they are applied, what questions they purport to answer, and what problems they address. This kind of ambiguity often leads to great differences among religious people, even those of the same faith tradition. For instance, as contributor

Shibley Telhami points out, Shia clerics sit on both sides of the political divide in Iran, where “reformers” and “conservatives” are locked in an ongoing struggle over the future direction of the country.

In addition, Telhami argues, when political leaders strongly associate themselves with a religious tradition, they can end up alienating opponents and further dividing the body politic. “If one does not agree with the behavior and politics of President George W. Bush but believes that this behavior is driven by deep religious faith, one is doubly troubled.” The lesson, he writes, is that “the appeal to religious

claims in our society cannot possibly determine what the moral course ought to be. Only broader societal ethical norms can be used as measures....”

*“There is a growing consensus that a complete secularization of world politics, or an analytical effort to divorce religion from the political order, yields a distorted conception of contemporary world politics.”*

*J. Bryan Hehir*

Telhami, a frequent commentator on the Middle East, also points out that a discussion of the relationship of religion to politics (domestic as well as international) can be 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, he says, 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 both instances, Christian ideas were mobilized on behalf of a just cause. But 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 were at least as important.

These as well as other issues are fully addressed in *Liberty and Power*, which is the fourth in the series on the interplay between faith and public policy published jointly by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and the Brookings Institution. *Liberty and Power* began taking shape in February 2003, when five of the six contributors to this volume were invited to meet and discuss faith, morals and foreign policy. (The sixth, Telhami, was asked to join the discussion after this initial gathering.) At this first meeting, the participants were given 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 offer longer reflections. The other participants were then asked to respond and, if they desired, to push the discussion in any direction they thought relevant. 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. Later, the participants were asked to use their remarks as the basis for the essays, which were put in final form early in 2004.

The resulting volume brings together the thoughts of some of the nation's most respected voices on this topic. While Hehir and Walzer's chapters form the bedrock of this collection, the other four respondents do more than simply respond: they offer creative views of their own. They thus help highlight the main 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 international relations.

Questioning old paradigms, as well as creating new ones, is something columnist Charles

Krauthammer has been doing for much of his professional life. And indeed, in his essay for this volume, he casts a skeptical eye on the themes and even the purpose of the book, making his an especially important voice. With candor, he writes, "I am sure one can find any message one seeks in the Bible, depending on where one looks."

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 often find themselves disciplined, intellectually and morally, by the traditions from which they spring. Nonetheless, it is not at all surprising that those who stand in the same tradition sometimes disagree profoundly about the implications of that tradition for contemporary action. Walzer illuminates this notion when he writes: "Traditions are sites for arguments, and that's not less true of religious than of secular traditions."

Famed Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, for instance, 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 the nation's rich tradition of ethical and religious reflection on foreign affairs. Hehir's essay points out that the "Christian realist" tradition has long jostled with ideas rooted in Catholic natural law theory, and that Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), had a remarkable impact on the American debate. Niebuhr also stands as a powerful counterpoint to those who would claim that religious voices and religious arguments lead inevitably to overreaching and unremitting certainty. On the contrary, as Richard Wrightman

*"Depicting enemies as evil incarnate may help mobilize the domestic population against them... [but] it does not help us to understand them or even, ultimately, defeat them."*

*Louise Richardson*

Fox notes in a previous volume in the Brookings/Pew Forum series, *One Electorate Under God?: A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics*, one of the great theologian's primary lessons is the need for humility. According to Fox, a professor of history at the University of Southern California and a Niebuhr biographer, the theologian believed that an "awareness of sin — of one's often hidden desire for fame, power, privilege, and other kinds of self-aggrandizement — could counteract religious people's temptation to see themselves as chosen instruments for divinely sponsored action."

This is just one of the many paradoxes explored in *Liberty and Power*. One can find other seeming contradictions in the complicated relationship between realist arguments and moral arguments. For instance, Walzer tells the fascinating story of the debate 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 to strike "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."

Indeed, history abounds with examples of people or peoples who used moralism as a cover for realism. Less frequent, or at least less obvious, are instances in which arguments seemingly rooted in a realist

tradition were in fact surrogates for moral or even religious commitments.

From a slightly different angle, Telhami makes the case that nations that base their behavior on moral considerations often find that morality has highly practical uses. 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 U.S. 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 unacceptable under any circumstances." To persuade others of this worthy notion, he contends that "those who make the argument must speak with moral authority." In other words, to achieve the practical end of reducing or eradicating terrorism, the United States needs moral authority on its side, an authority that ultimately can be established only through moral action.

*"The appeal to religious claims in our society cannot possibly determine what the moral course ought to be. Only broader societal ethical norms can be used as measures."*

*Shibley Telhami*

*Liberty and Power* appears at a contentious moment in the study and practice of American foreign policy. Not surprisingly, all of the contributors to the volume closely link their ideas and arguments to the very practical issues that confront the nation: the costs and benefits of preemptive and preventive war (and the differences between the two); the advisability (or lack thereof) of the American intervention in Iraq; the obligations created by the United States' unprecedented military advantages (and the dangers thereof); and the best ways of judging when humanitarian interventions are feasible, moral and necessary — that is to say, genuinely humanitarian.

It is possible, of course, for those who care about international relations to minimize their engagement with issues rooted in religion. But as Hehir asserts, 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. Similarly, Lindsay points out that even “realists” like Krauthammer take moral considerations into account when making foreign policy calculations. “Americans are particularly uncomfortable with raw pure realpolitik,” he writes, citing Kissinger’s tenure first as National Security Advisor and then as Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford as a case in point. “His approach to foreign policy generated many critics, but they came from the left and the right. Although they may have disagreed on the specifics of what Kissinger got wrong, they were united in one thing — that Kissinger’s belief that statesmen should put moral consideration aside when making foreign policy was wrong.”

And, of course, those who are religious cannot possibly avoid the pressing questions raised here. At the very least, religious people need to ask themselves whether what they see as religious imperatives are not in fact covers for other interests. For 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 is argued most forcefully by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the anti-Nazi theologian who was imprisoned and later executed for his part in a 1944 plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Bonhoeffer

*“When people become certain of their moral rectitude, they can easily drift into sanctimony, so anybody who disagrees with them must, by definition, not really be interested in moral issues. That attitude tends to poison debate rather than advance it.”*

*James Lindsay*

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 wrote from prison. “Responsible action involves contamination — one cannot altogether avoid getting ‘dirty hands’ when acting in the political world in responsible ways.”

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 that he rightly urges? 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.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**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 public attention for his work as a policy adviser at the U.S. Catholic Conference, where he was broadly acknowledged as the principal author of the bishops' famous pastoral letter on nuclear weapons, "The Challenge of Peace." Hehir was recently appointed the Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Religion and Public Life at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Previously, he was president of Catholic Charities USA and taught at Harvard Divinity School and at Georgetown University.

**CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER** is a well-known 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. Since 1985, he has been a columnist for *The Washington Post*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary in 1987. Krauthammer also contributes to *Time*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Republic* and Fox News Channel.

**JAMES LINDSAY** is vice president at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he is a leading authority on domestic influences on American foreign policy. Previously, Lindsay was a senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution and a professor of political science at the University of Iowa. He also served as a consultant to the Hart-Rudman Commission and is well versed in the politics of terrorism. He is the author (with Ivo H. Daalder) of *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*.

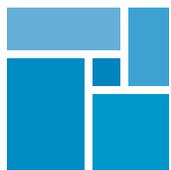
**LOUISE RICHARDSON** is executive dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. Prior to her appointment in 2001, Dean Richardson was an associate professor of government at Harvard. She has written widely on international relations and ethnic conflict and is the author of *When Allies Differ: Anglo-American Relations in the Suez and Falklands Crises*. Her most recent research focuses on decision-making inside terrorist organizations and patterns of terrorist violence.

**SHIBLEY TELHAMI** is Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a nonresident senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution. He also has taught at Cornell University, Princeton University and Ohio State University. Telhami can reach into 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 himself as both a Palestinian Arab and an Arab Israeli, and has been active in encouraging a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. His most recent book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East*, was published in 2002.

**MICHAEL WALZER** has grappled with ethical and moral 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 during the time of Oliver Cromwell. It still stands as a model for understanding the interplay between realms that often are seen as quite separate from each other. Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* continues to stand as a definitive discussion of the subject. Since 1980, he has taught at the Institute for Advanced Study's School of Social Science in Princeton, N.J., where he is currently UPS Foundation Professor.

---

*Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World* is published jointly by the Brookings Institution and Georgetown University. The volume is available from the Brookings Institution Press. For more information about this publication please visit [www.pewforum.org/dialogues](http://www.pewforum.org/dialogues).



THE PEW  
FORUM  
ON RELIGION  
& PUBLIC LIFE

---

THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE DELIVERS TIMELY, IMPARTIAL INFORMATION ON ISSUES AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND PROVIDES A NEUTRAL VENUE FOR DISCUSSIONS OF THESE IMPORTANT ISSUES.

THE FORUM IS A PROJECT OF THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER.

1150 18TH STREET, NW SUITE 775 WASHINGTON, DC 20036-3823  
202 955 5075 TEL 202 955 0658 FAX [WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG](http://WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG)