7 *Ira Chernus*

THE THEOLOGY OF AMERICAN EMPIRE

In this selection, Professor of Religious Studies and author Ira Chernus searches for the roots of U.S. foreign policy. He finds them in, of all places, Christian theology, a foundation "hidden underground." He cites the work of twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as the touchstone for this theological perspective, with his dark view of human nature based in original sin. Although sharing some affinity with Niebuhr, today's neoconservative policy makers have distorted his "realism" to suit their own ends. Neoconservatives assert that while all people may be sinners, not all nations are; thus, they assert a hierarchy of nations within which America's enemies are on the bottom and America is on top with its allegedly pure motives. This "good versus evil" passion play leads to a mythic worldview where America stands tall with moral certainty and clarity—"the world's chosen people"—with reality only creeping in when U.S. military intervention doesn't follow this heavenly script. While Chernus notes some variations on these assumptions among foreign policy planners, the "mainstream foreign policy elite" have adopted the basic story of this script, while differing on some of the means for achieving the same ends of American global dominance wrapped in moral idealism. Chernus makes the case for the need for America to embrace "different moral certainties" and a "different narrative," in order to redefine national security altogether. If we can forge a new way of thinking about national interests within our political culture, we might have a chance to create a more peaceful, integrated global system.

American foreign policy is built on a deep foundation of Christian theology. Some of the people who make our foreign policy may understand that foundation. Most probably aren't even aware of it. But foundations are hidden underground. You can stand above them, and even take a strong stand upon them, without knowing they are there. When it comes to foreign policy, we are

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all influenced by theological foundations that we rarely see.

For example, few Americans have read the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, the most influential American theologian of the twentieth-century. Many have never even heard the name. Yet Niebuhr's thought affects us all. In the 1930s, he launched an attack on the liberal Christianity of the Social Gospel, a movement that powerfully influenced U.S. foreign policy in the first third of the twentieth-century. The liberals were starry-eyed fools, Niebuhr charged, because they trusted people to be reasonable enough to resolve international conflicts peacefully. They forgot the harsh reality of original sin.

Niebuhr wrapped that traditional notion of sin in a new intellectual package and sold it successfully, not only to theologians but to the foreign policy elite. Since the 1940s, foreign policy has largely been reduced to an endless round of debates about how to apply Niebuhr's "realism." Policymakers who still tried to follow the Social Gospel path have been marginalized and stigmatized with the harshest epithet a Niebuhrian can hurl: "unrealistic."

It's a Jungle Out There

Many policymakers, like much of the public at large, have come to find a strange comfort in the world as Niebuhr described it. They see a jungle where evildoers, who are all around, must be hunted down and destroyed. Though frightening, this world can easily become the stage for simplistic dramas of good against evil. And the moral certainty of being on the side of good—the side of God—can provide a sense of security that more than makes up for the constant terror. That was not what Niebuhr had in mind. But as he found out so painfully, once you let ideas loose in the world, you can't control what others do with them.

Niebuhr would have been pained to see what the neoconservatives have done with his ideas. Their theory starts out from his own premise: All people are born naturally selfish and impulsive. The godfather of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, was (like most of the early neocons) an intellectual—a teacher, writer, and editor—and (like many of the early neocons) a Jew. But he turned to Christian theology to describe his Niebuhrian view of human nature: "Original sin was one way of saying this, and I had no problem with that doctrine." Selfish impulses, when they get out of control, can tear society apart, he warned. To preserve social order we need a fixed moral order. We therefore need a clear sense of the absolute difference between good and bad, strict rules that tell us what is good, and powerful institutions that can get people to obey those rules.

According to this worldview, organized religion has been the most effective institution to promote moral absolutes and self-control. Religion now needs to be strengthened to stave off a rising tide of moral relativism that, along with secular humanism, is breaking down the bulwarks of social order and threatening to release a flood of selfish impulse to drown us all in chaos. A favorite neoconservative columnist, Charles Krauthammer, complains that American mass culture, dominated by skepticism and pleasure, is an "engine of social breakdown." The best antidote would be a "self-abnegating religious revival." Since that is not likely to happen, Krauthammer admits, the best place to recover moral discipline and will power is in foreign affairs: America must find the will to exercise its strength and become "confident enough to define international morality in its own, American terms."

Original Sin Goes Global

When neoconservatives apply their views to international relations, they deviate from Niebuhr's teaching. All people may be sinners, they imply, but not all nations. They assume an (often vaguely defined) hierarchy of nations. At the bottom are the enemies of America, consistently described as chaotic, irrational monsters who are incapable of self-control and bent on provoking instability and evil for its own sake. Above them are neutral nations and then U.S. allies near the top of the pyramid. At the top is the United States, in a class

by itself because its national motives are good and pure, somehow untainted by original sin.

Neoconservatives insist on this hierarchy, with its dramatic contrast between the good United States and its evil enemies, because it gives them the sense of moral clarity and certainty that they rely on to hold back the relativism they fear. They bolster their sense of certainty by reducing international affairs to simplistic myths: black-and-white tales of absolute good versus absolute evil. (Here I use the word "myth" in its religious sense of a narrative story that expresses a community's worldview and basic values.) George W. Bush tapped into this mythic world when he said that the war on terrorism is "a monumental struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail." The outcome is certain, according to Bush, because "we all know that this is one nation, under God." But Americans must do their world-ordering job pretty much alone, since other nations and international institutions are too selfish to be trusted. The United States must rely primarily on military might, since the only language that the sinful evildoers understand is force.

The neoconservatives did not invent this myth. It goes back to the Puritan belief in "the new Israel" and Americans as God's chosen people, with the special privilege and responsibility of bringing order to a sinful, chaotic world. Most Americans are still likely to see their nation as the global hero fulfilling that sacred task. Only the United States, they believe in a great leap of faith, is moved by an unselfish desire to serve the good of all humanity by spreading ordered liberty.

Throughout the Cold War era, across the political spectrum, there was no doubting the name of the threatening evil: Communism. After a decade of drift and uncertainty in the 1990s, the September 11 attacks, despite their horror, allowed the nation to breathe easier, at least in terms of the theology of foreign policy. Once again, it seemed that everyone agreed on the name of the monstrous sinners, the source of instability. Rudolph Giuliani could have been speaking for most Americans when he explained that the cultural payoff of the war on terrorism was moral stability: "The era of moral relativism . . . must end. Moral relativism does not have a place in this discussion." That crusading tone of certainty gave Bush and the neoconservatives a very free hand in the early post-September 11 days, when they launched the invasion of Afghanistan. The administration then invaded Iraq with the approval of 75% of the U.S. public and nearly all the foreign policy elite.

Iraq War

The myth of U.S. moral and global supremacy—Americans as the world's chosen people—went largely unchallenged until the U.S. venture in Iraq went sour. The myth says that the good guys are supposed to win every time, because they are good. When the myth does not get played out in reality, people start to complain. If you look at the current debate about Iraq from the standpoint of myth and theology, the complainers fall into three broad groups.

First there is the mainstream of the foreign policy elite, made up of Democrats and more moderate Republicans. They complain that the Bush administration is pursuing the right goals but using the wrong tactics. That's because the elite still hold on to some shreds of the old Social Gospel view. They give most of the world a bit more credit for rationality; they fear the impulses of original sin a bit less. So they see military strength as one of several ways to secure America's global hegemony. They are more willing to take a multilateral approach and use the carrot as well as the stick—to pull diplomatic and economic levers before calling out the troops.

But these differences, though they can be very important, are largely ones of degree and tactics. Across the board, members of the foreign policy establishment, even the liberal Democrats, still give a very respectful (sometimes slavish) hearing to the great theologian Niebuhr. But they apply his "realistic" view of original sin only to other nations. The liberals among the elite, too, want their sense of moral clarity and certainty reassured by seeing it played out in a global drama of

good against evil. So they make a huge exception for the supposedly pure and innocent motives of their own nation, the chosen people. They believe that the U.S. has a higher moral standing, which gives us the right and duty to rule. That's how they can justify the most ruthless policies against anyone who stands in their way.

The bipartisan elite may not value the display of American strength as an end in itself, the way neoconservatives do. They are willing to risk a short-term appearance of weakness in one place in order to bolster long-term U.S. strength everywhere else. But long-term strength (including a long-term military presence in Iraq) is still crucial, because they feel a sacred calling to enforce "stability"—their favorite code word for a single global order that protects U.S. interests—everywhere and forever.

The second group of war critics is on the right. A growing number of traditional conservatives criticize the administration and the bipartisan establishment for betraying genuine Niebuhrian "realism." These hard-core "realists" want the United States to recognize that it too is a sinful nation, limited in its goodness as well as its resources, all too likely to overreach and eventually destroy itself if it doesn't scale back its hubristic dream of enduring empire.

Thus the right-wing "realists" become strange bedfellows with the third group of war critics, the left-wingers, who, starting from very different principles, arrive at the same anti-imperialist conclusions. Though most of them don't know it, what makes leftists leftist is that they still champion many of the basic values of the Social Gospel movement. They do not accept the doctrine of original sin; they don't think people are inherently doomed to be selfish and unreasonable. They assume that the vast majority of people, if treated decently and given decent living conditions, will respond by being decent people. For the left, order and stability are not as important as human growth, creativity, and transformation. The key to a better world is not strength and dominance, but sharing and cooperation. And leftists often assume—or at least hope—that the long-term trend of history is leading to that better world, a view that is rooted in the biblical hope for redemption.

In Middle America

Leftists who are consistent extend their Social Gospel view to its logical conclusion: There are no monsters—no inherently bad people—only bad conditions. So the good guys versus bad guys myth always distorts reality. But a surprising number of leftists sacrifice logical consistency for the emotional pleasure of the traditional myth. For them, of course, the monsters are the Bush administration, the neoconservatives, sometimes the mainstream Democrats too, and always, above all, the corporate elite whose hand they see behind every gesture of U.S. imperialism.

This left-wing version of the myth does not play very well in middle America, or even on the coasts apart from a few ultra-liberal enclaves. The hardcore "realist" view may get slightly higher ratings, but not much. Most Americans still demand a heavy dose of moral idealism in their foreign policy. They want to continue believing in the myth of American innocence. They won't give in to a full-blown Niebuhrian pessimism about human nature—at least not when it comes to American humans. And they don't want to believe that the economic and political leaders of their nation are utterly cynical "realists," devoid of ideals, caring only about money and power.

So the mass of the citizenry, sick and tired of losing in Iraq, swing in line behind the only critical voice they can support: the foreign policy elite. The public criticizes the administration for its inept effort in Iraq. But most citizens don't raise any questions about the long-term goals or the theological premises underlying them.

Only when something looks broken do people think about fixing it. The last time the U.S. foreign policy system broke down was when the United States suffered defeat in Vietnam. However, after a short period of radical questioning, a powerful reaction set in, fueled by the deep and widespread need for idealism and moral

certainty. The neoconservatives got control of the public conversation in the late 1970s because they recognized that need and offered a Cold War myth that satisfied it.

The same need for moral clarity arose after September 11, but it's been bitterly betrayed by the failure in Iraq. How can we avoid a similar neoconservative reaction as we question the underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy in the years to come? And if the Iraq debacle boots the neoconservatives out of power for good, how can we use this window of opportunity to challenge the most powerful alternative view, the bipartisan establishment consensus? From the outset it won't help to scorn the average citizen's idealistic view of America. That's like wishing away the Rocky Mountains. Claiming that this worldview is unrealistic would be caving in to a simplistic Niebuhrian "realism." After all, we on the left believe in our own idealism. We are happy to hear right-wing "realists" argue that Americans are no more idealistic than anyone else. But we forget that Americans are no less idealistic either. That includes even the most powerful leaders of the nation. Rather than demonizing them and dismissing their claim to good intentions outright, we would do better to look for common values that we can all agree on and then find progressive programs that can put those values into practice.

Different Moral Certainties

Just about all Americans, from Bush and Cheney and the CEOs of Exxon and Lockheed-Martin on down, sincerely want the nation to be secure. As long as our notions of security are built on the myth of well-meaning Americans versus ever-threatening evildoers who embody original sin, we can never dispense with the evildoers. They are as necessary in U.S. foreign policy as sin is in Niebuhr's theology. They always have to be out there threatening us, in our imaginations at least, in order for our pursuit of national security to make any sense at all.

The bipartisan consensus on U.S. foreign policy calls for us to be powerful enough to dominate them. But every step we take to dominate only antagonizes more people and makes some of them really want to harm us. As long as we keep on this self-defeating road, we are not a national security state. We are a national insecurity state. So, we need to redefine national security in a way that meets people's need for a second value that so many of us share: moral certainty. This involves a faith in some rock-bottom kind of goodness in the world, which many Americans believe has a special home here in the United States.

There is a special kind of goodness, rooted in a special kind of theology, that does have an old and honored home here—the goodness of nonviolence. There have always been Christians who were certain that the only moral way to treat others, even enemies, is with love, not violence. They knew it because Jesus said it, right there in the Bible. In nineteenth-century America, the abolitionists and Thoreau turned the theology of nonviolence into a homegrown strategy for political change.

Martin Luther King, Jr. took this strategy a crucial step further. He preached that it's the government's role to help bring all people together in what he called "the beloved community" (something very much like what the Social Gospel called the Kingdom of God). Every government policy should promote "the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother [and sister]"—the responsibility to help every person fulfill their God-given potential.

In King's words, no matter how bad a person's behavior, "the image of God is never totally gone." So, government must serve everyone, everywhere. No one can be written off as a monstrous evildoer, sinful beyond redemption. That was a moral certainty for King, an essential foundation of his religious faith. King knew all about moral clarity and certainty. He was willing to die for the truths he believed in so firmly. But he was not willing to kill.

A Different Narrative

With King as our guide, we could have a distinctly American foreign policy based on the conviction of absolute moral certainty we find in the Social

Gospel and nonviolence traditions. Our goal would always be to move the world one step closer to becoming a universal beloved community. We would no longer act out the myth of good versus evil. We would not demonize a bin Laden or Saddam—or a Bush or Cheney. We would recognize that when people do bad things, their actions grow out of a global network of forces that we ourselves have helped to create. King said it most eloquently: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

We can never stand outside the network of mutuality, as if we were the Lone Ranger arriving on the scene to destroy an evil we played no part in creating. Just as Bush is tied to Osama, so each of us is tied to all those who do things that outrage us. We cannot simply destroy them and think that the outrages have been erased. To right the wrongs of the world, we must start by recognizing our own responsibility for helping to spawn those wrongs. Indeed, fixing our own part in the wrongs we see all over the world may be all that we can do.

But in the case of the United States in 2007, that alone would be more than a full time job for our foreign policy. We would have to, among other things:

- end the occupation that creates a breeding ground for violent jihadis in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- reverse the policy of supporting authoritarian regimes in the Middle East;
- stop participating in the mad rush for power and resources in Africa, which breeds disasters like Rwanda and Darfur;
- withdraw support for the corporations and financiers who would strangle the emerging popular democracies in Latin America;
- and treat everyone as our brothers and sisters, even the leaders of North Korea and Cuba and Iran.

In short, we would have to create a new notion of "national interest" based on the moral certainty that we are all threads in a network of mutuality that is the foundation of our national as well as individual life. Since our foundation is infinite and eternal, no one can threaten to destroy it, or us. Embracing that principle as the basis of foreign policy could set us on the road to a radically new way of thinking about genuine national security.

If that's not something all Americans can agree on, at least it's a program that gets the debate down to our most basic assumptions. This is a democracy. If the people want a religion-laden foreign policy based on the doctrine of original sin and the myth of good against evil, it's what we should have. But at least we should all talk about it together, openly and honestly.

Discussion Questions

1. Chernus contends that "when it comes to foreign policy, we are all influenced by theological foundations that we rarely see." Discuss the particulars of, and offer your own comments on, the theological foundations Chernus lays bare.
2. According to Chernus, "If people want a religion-laden foreign policy based on the doctrine of original sin and the myth of good against evil, it's what we should have. But at least we should all talk about it together, openly and honestly." From his perspective, what's *wrong* with foreign policy rooted in theology? Why do you think such roots tend not to be openly discussed?