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POPULISTS OR INTERNATIONALISTS? EVANGELICAL TRIBES AND GLOBALIZATION

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Tending the Garden of the Real

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Early in the extraordinary film *Gladiator*—two decades old next year—we witness a discussion between Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his celebrated general Maximus Decius. Encamped in Germania, on the fringes of the empire, Maximus has just led the Roman army to a great victory, securing the border and ending the war. But the aging emperor casts doubts on whether they really accomplished anything meaningful. Maximus, with nearly half his men slain, refuses to believe that his soldiers fought and died for nothing. “They fought for *Rome!*” he asserts. When Aurelius asks what, precisely, that is supposed to mean, Maximus waxes near-lyrical: “I have seen much of the rest of the world. It is brutal, and cruel, and dark. Rome is the light!”

It’s a stirring moment, to be certain. But Rome, of course, really wasn’t the light. At its best, it reflected the Light, or bits of it. But that’s a different thing. Maximus can be forgiven the error, as Augustine wouldn’t write his magisterial *City of God* for another few hundred years.

There, in the opening chapters of Book 19, Augustine presents an overview of the Roman scholar Marcus Varro’s 288 theories of the good life. He then rejects all of them as inadequate. Peter Brown, the great Augustine biographer, called this moment “the end of classical thought.” Augustine, contrary to much of the received wisdom of Greco-Roman philosophy that had come before him, is rejecting the idea that the political community can serve as the location in which human beings can be perfected in virtue. Augustine, scholar [Gilbert Meilaender suggests](#), is thereby draining the notion of a “high moral purpose from our understanding of politics.” No political community, Meilaender continues, “can satisfy the restless heart that Augustine evokes in his *Confessions*.” The political community, for Augustine, is not—it *cannot* be—ultimate. It cannot, *pace* Maximus, be redemptive.

If the classical age was ending in Augustine’s desacralizing of the political realm, it might be that the age of Christian realism was just beginning to take root. A stream of political theology that strives to avoid both idealistic sentimentality as well as cynicism, Christian realism brings values to bear on national interests and personal and communal duties to act responsibly and prudentially in pursuit of

justice, order and peace in the world. As such, Christian realism is grounded in some basic Augustinian assumptions.

One of these is Augustine's assertion that political communities are always caught between two "cities." The first is the city of God, in which peace truly reigns. The second, the city of man, is that rather more quotidian realm in which men are themselves dominated by the lust to dominate others. These cities map rather well on the divided nature of individual human beings. Within every heart vie competing loves. On the one side is *caritas*—charity—an orientation toward the love of God that manifests in other-centered acts of self-donation. On the other is *cupiditas*—cupidity—a disordered orientation toward self-love that manifests in self-centered acts of *other*-donation.

Because of these competing loves, no political realm will ever fully furnish the conditions necessary for peace characterized by justice and order—basic human goods without which no other human good, such as health or life, can long endure. This side of the end of history, any earthly peace we might fashion is going to be unjust, to some degree or another.

That said, Augustine—and the Christian realist—knows that there is much that political communities *can* do. They can do no harm, they can help where they are able and they can put limits on the human predilection for dominating the helpless. This is not nothing. Maximus was partly right; Rome, probably better than any alternative then on the market, could approximate a kind of peace which, however lacking in perfect justice, was a far sight better than anarchy. Still, the Christian realist—following Christ and not Hobbes—knows that sometimes order and security are not enough, and that a sovereign's right to rule hinges significantly on their responsibility for the common good.

For all these reasons, Christians retain strong, though limited, respect for secular authority, gratitude for the goods governing powers provide and appreciation for the morally complex dimensions of responsible statecraft. Every Sunday in America, churches across the land pray for the president, the leaders of the nation and those in positions of authority. Importantly, however, for many Christians, such support is not necessarily enough. A primary preoccupation of the Christian realist is figuring out the full extent of Christian responsibility in light of the conditions of the world and the important role of our governing authorities. How Christian realism answers that question helps distance it from other Christian traditions or points of view.

Among evangelical Protestants, one significant rift appears between Christian realism and evangelical populism. While the Christian realist will share populism's recognition of the importance of national interests, it will reject its more jingoistic expressions, which often stokes an isolationist impulse away from responsible engagement in global affairs. Against this, the Christian realist understands that human beings, made in the image of God, have a divine mandate to exercise dominion—providential care—in creation. In this contemporary version of the creation mandate to cultivate the Garden (Genesis 2:15), the "garden" is the world order. [Cultivating the garden of world order](#) includes tending to the tasks that uphold public safety, execute justice and promote human flourishing.

Often enough, this is happily achieved in the mundane daily craft of foreign and defense policy involving the management and implementation of policies to preserve order, maintain stable borders, manage alliances and protect the international flow of trade and communications. This is the kind of work, often unseen, that enables the vast majority of American citizens to go about their daily lives rarely having to even think about foreign policy.

Other times, however, the promotion of human flourishing is hamstrung by contrary interests, and responsible government requires the use of force. Believing that war can be compatible with love, the Christian realist stands within the just war tradition. As a branch of moral theology, the just war tradition instructs us that wars may be justly fought in the last resort and with discriminate force proportional to the aim of peace. That is, when a sovereign authority—over whom there is no one greater charged with the care of the political community—determines that nothing else will retribute a sufficiently grave evil, take back what has wrongly been taken or protect the innocent. This, naturally, distances the Christian realist from the Christian pacifist.

Against the pacifists, the Christian realist rejects the claim that while God ordained the sword to maintain peace, order and justice, this is a business somehow limited to the government alone, while Christians are supposed to provide the counter-cultural witness of non-violence. But to the Christian realist, the idea that Christians are called away from supporting the use of force and power in order to provide a witness of an alternative, peaceable kingdom is a dereliction of Christian love. If the peaceable kingdom were a viable alternative to hard coercion then, surely, God would have ordained such a kingdom *instead* of, rather than alongside, the government's sword. Given that God has in fact ordained the sword, I stand among those who infer, therefore, that the sword is necessary. And if the sword is necessary, then that makes the peaceable kingdom parasitic—because it rejects in principle what it relies upon in practice. Moreover, the idea that Christians would allow others to dirty their hands while keeping their own Christian souls clean is morally abhorrent and a violation of basic charity.

Against these dispositions toward isolationism and pacifism, the Christian realist believes that Christian faith comes with a deep burden of responsibility. Neighbor requires not simply love for our proximate, domestic neighbor, but for those more distant foreign neighbors as well. More than this, concern for our neighbor—both near and far—means concern for the conditions of his neighborhood as well. While this is a mandate shared by all peoples, those of us who live in a powerful country have special stewardship responsibilities. The United States is the most powerful nation in human history. But this is no accident of history.

The United States has cultivated power, not simply for our own security, but for the cultivation and maintenance of global good. This is not simply altruism. A global liberal order characterized by accountable governance, free entrepreneurship and mutual security redounds to the security of the United States. Moreover, when the United States uses its power to help bring about the conditions required for human flourishing throughout the world, it helps to make our power sufferable to those beneath it. Therefore, Christian realists believe in the prudent use of American power to encourage, grow and defend the institutions and culture of ordered liberty among the community of responsible sovereign nations. This power has to be humble and limited in aspiration, chastened by the Augustinian conviction that all earthly peace will lack in perfect justice. And this power has to be understood in the context of our time and place within history.

In these convictions, Christian realism would seem to have much in common with the aspirations of what's been called evangelical internationalism. While roughly undefined, it seems clear that evangelical internationalists support the prudent use of American power abroad, not solely through military intervention, but through a diverse array of foreign policy ambitions and priorities ranging from humanitarian mission, anti-human trafficking, poverty and relief work and the like. Some want to suggest that evangelical internationalism has gone through an evolution that distances itself from

the “old” evangelical internationalism that went out with the end of the presidency of George W. Bush. The degree to which this is true is unclear to me. It was President Bush, after all, who in the midst of waging the war on terror also deployed what [Bono called](#) “the greatest health intervention in the history of medicine.” The billions of dollars in funding to combat AIDS in Africa has possibly saved tens of millions of lives.

In any case, what this probably points to is the simple fact that evangelical internationalism comes in many kinds. Within the broader tribe will be found varying degrees of preference for multilateralism over going it alone, different ways of balancing out concerns for compassion and security when it comes to immigrants and refugees flows, even differences in the willingness or hesitance to engage in religious proselytization in the midst of humanitarian relief.

To be sure, Christian realism itself comes with sometimes significantly different points of emphasis and theological grounding. My own work at [Providence](#)—a journal intersecting Christian faith with foreign policy, military ethics, international relations and the like, has brought together Christians from diverse theological and political camps to congregate under a common core. This core includes the insistence on taking the world as it is—and not as we want it to be; on incorporating into our decision-making the reality of the bifurcated human heart; on avoiding utopian impulses; and on denying that national interest is somehow immoral. It also includes the willingness to see moral claims as *real* claims and, therefore, it includes the corresponding *unwillingness* to dampen the humanitarian impulses of the human heart.

I would like to think the core also includes the belief that America—while no new Israel—nevertheless is exceptional, if for no other reason than that we have cultivated tremendous power and yet recognize that while it might be “excellent to have a giant’s strength...it’s tyranny to use it like a giant.” The Christian realist knows that while America is not the Light, it might still be that city on a hill.

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