

Spring 2009

# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

THE FIRE NEXT TIME:  
FAITH AND THE FUTURE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS



# One Superpower, Under God

By Tyler Wigg-Stevenson

*For far too long the American church has failed in any sort of critical engagement with the exercise of U.S. state power. We have erred on the liberal side toward a reflexive mistrust of America, the tepid pacifism of those whose relative wealth and citizenship insulate them from the worst violence of evil, and a tacit disbelief in God's sovereignty over human history. We have been blinded on the conservative side by an un-Christian American exceptionalism with deep cultural roots in our nation's religious history, but none whatsoever in the revelation of God.*

The former position is bad enough, but I leave it to liberal Christianity to right its own wrongs. I come from the latter wing of the church, where our conventions lead much too easily to a default approval of any American use of force. Because America and its purposes are righteous, the unarticulated logic often goes, so are any actions it employs in the national interest. And we have allowed a cultural distaste for secular peace activists – morally loose, unpatriotic, long-hairs; we all know the stereotypes – to diminish in our own imaginations that work of peacemaking that Christ called *blessed*, conferring upon those who practiced it an inheritance of being named *sons and daughters of God* (cf. Matt. 5:9).

## **Reawakening Fear of the Lord**

In taking an uncritical position on the exercise of American power, we pride ourselves on being “realists.” *Contra* the proverbial peaceniks, we think we see the hard reality of a fallen world and sinful human nature and realize the toughness needed to survive within it. But this attitude fails to account for the fact that realism is variable, not absolute: it depends entirely on one's perspective about what is *real* – about the facts determining a given situation. Narrow realism may seem to yield immediate success, but fail in the longer term due to a lack of

perspective about the larger forces at play. And the broadest perspective of all is the Biblical scope of God's rule in which we all dwell. Every tyrant in human history has been a consummate realist about the power dynamics of his given situation. What all have lacked, however, is the wisdom – in Biblical terms, the fear of God – to recognize the divine sovereignty that inexorably subordinates all temporal perceptions of the real.

As a people for whom the fear of God is a paramount value, evangelicals should have a far more robust theological perspective regarding security, violence, and peace. We should do so first and foremost because it represents fidelity to our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. But we should also do so because our times demand it.

Two converging yet conflicting factors define our present situation. First, the economic and demographic forces fuelling globalization are moving us toward what Os Guinness and others have termed a polycentric world. In the coming decades, all roads will not lead to Rome, or London, or Washington. Converging is not something roads will even *do* anymore; instead, they will trace a network between Washington-Beijing-Delhi-Tokyo-Brussels-London-Rio-Dubai-Singapore-etc.

Second, even leaving aside America's other forms of power, the U.S. is responsible for nearly half of the 1.3 trillion military dollars spent globally each year. We presently spend as much on our military as every other nation on earth does on theirs – combined – and our globe-spanning technologies give

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us an astonishing (though not limitless) capacity to project our power around the world.

These two factors suggest we are emerging in a world that is not ours to rule by fiat – the multiple centers preclude the success of any imperial ambitions – but within which we will continue to exert extraordinary dominance and influence. We are like a trucker steering a giant rig down a steep and crowded road: we cannot drive as though the other cars will simply clear out of our way; neither can we simply leap from the wheel and let the machine go where it will. Either extreme leads to horrific violence. And American Christians find ourselves with a hand on the wheel. What shall we do?

### **Rethinking American Power**

In other words, we need to deal with the problem of our national power. This is not to say that American power is bad *per se*. The very God who judges the nations also ordained human government and created it for human good. The state's authority to use violent force was given as a necessary measure in a fallen world, so that the social order might be maintained and wrongdoing might be punished (cf. Rom. 13:1-7). But this ordination of state power is given to *each* nation that *all* peoples might be protected and secured against the chaos of human sinfulness. God's purpose for peace and order is no respecter of borders – he wants American state power to benefit Americans to the same degree that he wants Canadian state power to benefit Canadians.

The very existence of a superpower, then, presents a dilemma for Christian thinking. A superpower, by definition, has accumulated vastly more power than it requires to maintain its own social order. A modern superpower – especially the world's only superpower – can exercise its will across the globe. The problem thus becomes a matter of how a superpower will handle its overwhelming influence. America has been and should be a force for good in the world, but we cannot assume, as many

have, that any exercise of American force is therefore good. It is within our capacity to become an imperialism, global policeman, or tyrant; certain appeals to temporal realism might advise such a course. Doing so, however, would fail to consider a God-fearing realism – in which we recognize that *power in excess of national need is power divinely intended for the global common good, not national interest*. Such conditions constitute a hard call to responsibility for American Christians.

The case is not that America is responsible for the world – a hubristic, idolatrous fallacy that no Christian can support – but rather that we are responsible for the way in which American power affects other nations. This is the difference between a parent's responsibility for an infant and a peer's responsibility for a peer. A recognition of God's sovereignty should keep us ever mindful that, from a heavenly perspective, a superpower is no more than an overgrown child on a crowded playground. If we arrogate to ourselves God's sovereign care over the earth, then we place one foot on a slippery slope toward justifying any means – like torture, or nuclear weapons – that we deem necessary in the exercise of that responsibility. Thus lies the path toward tyranny, however well-intentioned. The question for us is, instead, one of stewardship: in light of God's dominion over all nations, how do we responsibly exercise the excess power that we have accumulated?

Our proverbial big rig careening down the hill of history is, as George Shultz writes, the sort of insoluble problem that requires constant vigilance. We have to keep steering around every turn. I propose two ancient principles of wisdom that can serve as rules for the road: *universality* and *reciprocity*.

Universality is simply the condition of something applying to everyone: the recognition, to extend our metaphor, that we are all on the same road, whether we are driving a Mack truck or a Cooper Mini. Reciprocity is the mechanism for attaining it – most simply expressed in the Golden Rule of doing/not doing to others as you would have them do/not do to you. The greatest asset that American Christians have in pursuing these principles is the fact that they are the very ideals enshrined in the two great commandments that govern our faith: love the Lord your God – who is God of all (universality) – and love your neighbor as yourself (reciprocity).

These principles are important for all nations, and perhaps increasingly so in proportion to a nation's power, because they serve as guarantors of the divinely ordained common good. They ensure that the well-being and security of one party does

not come at the flagrant expense of another. And the singular test case by which we will judge how these principles govern the responsible exercise of American power over the coming decades is that of nuclear weapons.

Elsewhere in this *Reflections*, others argue persuasively that the present crisis of nuclear-weapons proliferation stems from the codification of a two-tier system of nuclear haves and have-nots. But the family of nations is no longer willing to accept such an arrangement indefinitely – which is why global leaders can no longer plausibly seek the security benefits of nonproliferation without simultaneously working toward universal nuclear disarmament.

If we pursue disarmament we have a chance to end the atomic age without the detonation of another nuclear weapon. On the other hand, if we do not seek to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether, we inevitably face nuclear proliferation leading to eventual use, whether in war, terrorism, or by accident. The physical and environmental fallout from even a single nuclear weapon would kill tens or hundreds of thousands; and, in a globalized world, the political and economic fallout would cause massive upheaval and suffering. There is no moral legitimacy to such an act, regardless of the interest it purports to serve. Yet this will someday be the consequence of maintaining a two-tier status quo.

This evaluation means quite simply that the only responsible use of state power concerning nuclear weapons is their careful, multilateral elimination and abolition. President Obama shouldered this responsibility in his groundbreaking Palm Sunday address in Prague, declaring:

Just as we stood for freedom in the twentieth century, we must stand together for the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the twenty-first century. And as a nuclear power ... the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it. So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.

The declaration of our collective goal of nuclear abolition imparts moral nobility to an unavoidably laborious political process and guides our way toward a nuclear-weapons-free world. It also gives purpose to the timely implementation of measures that would immediately reduce nuclear tensions and forbid the use of the weapons themselves. This is a good start to the long, hard middle course of steady

global leadership – working with our nuclear peer, Russia, and the family of nations to chart out the phased, multilateral process that is the only nuclear disarmament that will work.

### **A Case of Timidity**

The question of nuclear weapons is again rising to the forefront of public awareness. And it presents a stark challenge to the American church. These weapons represent a terminal rejection of universality and reciprocity: they treat the globe and human history as mere collateral for one party's interest and shatter any attempt at the international give-and-take necessary for those cohabitating God's creation. The unequivocal condemnation of nuclear weapons by the church would certainly enable our elected officials to act with greater boldness in speeding their abolition.

Unfortunately, we have a long way to go. At the YDS conference in September 2008 that gave rise to this *Reflections*, Ambassador Sergio Duarte was gracious to praise, as a diplomat and the UN disarmament chief, the contribution that religious leaders have made to the cause of nuclear disarmament. I am not a diplomat, however, and I hope that I might

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have the prerogative of noting as one religious leader to others that our contributions have not been nearly enough, not by half. Consider that one of the achievements Ambassador Duarte duly noted was the decision, in 2000, of a group of religious leaders who agreed to join with the UN in calling on the nations to abolish nuclear weapons.

“Agreed to join?” “Calling on the nations?” These are the words of a people who imagine the issue in question to be an attractive option, a nice moral principle, a goal perhaps preferable to the alternative – but not a theological imperative of life and death. Would we merely “agree to join” in a call to abolish slavery, establish civil rights, end sex trafficking? Or, faced with these evils, would we grab our leaders by the lapels and stare them in the eyes and say with all our strength: these things are abhorrent to God?

Ambassador Duarte's essay in this magazine aptly describes disarmament as the “fusion of idealism and realism ... the right thing to do, and it works.” If we take theology's long view, however,

the fusion of idealism and realism is thoroughly unremarkable. The two are eternally conjoined in the will of the righteous God who has already authored history's conclusion; whose moral universe, as Dr. King said, bends in a long arc toward justice. It is only in our mortal myopia that unrighteousness appears to be efficacious. The adoption of wickedness as a "necessary" stop-gap is enacted atheism, a vote of no confidence in the authority of God; it is disbelief in the reality, timeliness, and justice of his sovereign judgment.

The temperate viewpoint on nuclear weapons will not lack for advocates. So let me close with an exhortation far more immoderate. An indefinite reliance on nuclear weapons elevates America – and all other nuclear powers – above that which God has ordained any nation to be. And this places us squarely in the face of his coming judgment.

I know it is horribly unfashionable, embarrassing, and even impolite to talk about the wrath and judgment of God. But I do not know how to read

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the Bible, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, without believing that that which he saves us from is nothing less than the righteous judgment of *El Elyon*, God Most High, whose anger against this blood-soaked world is the proof that what we do to each other matters to God.

The level of destructive power we have arrogated to ourselves with nuclear weapons makes an idol out of national interest. This is the ultimate perversion of state power because it categorically subordinates the welfare of every other nation to its own interests – sacrifices even itself, given that nuclear weapons would be devastating to their user as well. These weapons fatefully mark the entire world as *herem*, set apart for total destruction. No temporal power has the right to do this. A nation that imagines it is an authority unto itself might do so. But a nation that recognizes itself to be under God, fearing God, will quail at such a prospect.

If this is the case, then anything but the active pursuit of global nuclear disarmament constitutes a fundamentally godless course of action. Those who fear God know that immoral security in temporal affairs is simply vulnerability deferred. Christians who fail to note what is happening in plain sight – or worse, who recognize this blasphemy but fail to name it as such – are without excuse.

I am not suggesting that we face some imminent exercise of supernatural wrath, nor that we can read the tea leaves of history for God's intention, as some Christians do in the wake of natural disasters. As per Reinhold Niebuhr, the purposes of history far outstrip our mortal scope of discernment. However, a God-fearing realism and fidelity to the Biblical witness should lead us to seek the strains of divine judgment in what might otherwise seem accidents of history or coincidences of cause and effect. The creator of the nations wrote the laws of causality into the fabric of the universe.

This is a test of our belief. This is a test of whether we truly fear God. If the God we worship is less than we believe him to be, then would-be tyrants can walk with their heads held high. But if God is real then we cannot bear lightly a nation's flagrant blasphemy in his sight. Perhaps we are afraid of being called "anti-American" or "unpatriotic" if we call upon America to limit its ambitions. We are accustomed to equating patriotism and love of country with support for the unlimited acquisition of national power. But these are atheistic definitions of the terms. If we acknowledge that we are under the authority of God, nothing could be *more* pro-American or *more* patriotic than to see our nation employ its power with a humility that merits divine favor.

Calling America to restrain its power is only anti-American if there is no God. Leave it to the critics who fear neither human beings nor God to take their pick. For our part, sister and brother Christians, let us speak the truth in fearless fury.

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