

Book Review

Mark Amstutz, *Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 272 pp., \$29.25 (hardcover), ISBN 9780199987634

Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy is concise, clear and honest. It ably distills a complex topic and contributes to the underdeveloped effort to unite Evangelical theology with political science. This is an excellent book for students and scholars seeking a reliable and readable guide, and it is a helpful text for Evangelicals seeking to engage their own tradition. The work itself is Janus-faced: it seeks to correct outsiders' misconceptions about Evangelicals and to challenge believers 'to engage public policy concerns without losing their focus on religious matters' (4). Unfortunately, the final product proves more effective at describing than building a positive conceptual program, an outcome underscoring Evangelicalism's fundamentally thin intellectual foundations.

Amstutz bifurcates this book. The first half sets out the beliefs and history of Evangelicals as those relate to foreign policy. He argues that this religious movement can and should serve as a moral compass for America's international affairs. The latter half offers Amstutz's analysis of Evangelical engagement on specific issues, such as global poverty. Relying largely on secondary sources, the book lucidly canvasses current events, political philosophy and theological debate.

Amstutz stakes out some early, dramatic assertions. Foreign policy, for instance, 'is inextricably a moral enterprise' (14). Without at least a 'thin moral code', (10) Amstutz insists, international politics would be incoherent and foreign policy makers would lack a key 'basis for judgment'. Realists contest this claim. Morality can only obtain at the individual level in that tradition, but Amstutz raises and then dismisses the realist vision with little further explication. Of course, no author can fight every battle, but this particular position will return to menace Amstutz's conclusions. Granting that point for now, though, Amstutz then sets forth a 'Biblical Code of Peace and Justice' that he has presumably worked out elsewhere (but does not cite). Here, states are morally legitimate, God is sovereign over all peoples, all persons enjoy dignity, sin is universal, love is a priority, justice is demanded, transcendent peace is the standard, and forgiveness is necessary. Rather than a theory, this is a set of principles that overlap on issues like human trafficking and should animate political action.

Unfortunately, several of these presumptions are too contentious, even for other Evangelicals, to simply assert without appealing to a robust intellectual tradition. States, to take one example, may simply be human artifacts. To imbue them with intrinsic moral legitimacy could be a major concession. In addition, Amstutz never directly engages classical liberal theory. This is problematic because, first, his ultimate claims overlap on key liberal (or, more specifically, cosmopolitan) positions, and second, liberal claims about rights, law, economy and institutions are typically the current global standard against which all other political theories are compared.

Amstutz next turns to Evangelical history. As a 'transdenominational Protestant movement' (30), Evangelicalism is intertwined with US history, and Amstutz expertly guides the reader through several centuries. Amstutz's real target, though, is fundamentalism, which

he considers to be more literal, pietistic, and uncompromising than mainstream Evangelicalism. That both approaches may represent ends of a spectrum or may be intertwined demographically and theologically is not seriously considered, here. Whatever the status of fundamentalism, Evangelicals of all stripes have founded hospitals and schools around the world, and they have proven valuable intermediaries for US foreign policy makers. Amstutz even argues that Evangelicals have comported themselves as defenders of local and individual rights rather than agents of empire. Though propagating at least some aspects of Western cultural hegemony, they have played a facilitative role as some societies entered the modern world. Amstutz makes a plausible (if myopic) case that 'to a significant degree, missionaries were the first American internationalists' (60) and that 'the notion of a coherent moral world is a by-product of the Christian belief that God created the world and loves all persons' (71). Despite lacking a 'full-bodied social and political theology' (73), this notion of human dignity becomes the fixed center of Amstutz's argument for the movement's moral legitimacy.

Amstutz next turns to specific issue areas. On global poverty, he rightly points out that Evangelicals boast a long and well-developed humanitarian assistance capacity. In some cases, this complements US efforts; but the larger problem for Amstutz is that serious poverty reduction involves economic development, not relief. On Israel, Amstutz holds that Christian Zionism's influence has been greatly exaggerated. Evangelicals, for instance, support Israel at roughly the same levels as other Americans. He then traces out Evangelicalism's major theological approaches to Jews and Israel and argues that the fundamentalist, 'prophetic' strain is of marginal influence. Overall, Amstutz endorses Evangelical foreign policy advocacy. With a strong infrastructure, Evangelicals since at least the 1980s have mobilized to advocate human rights in places like Sudan, have raised awareness of issues like human trafficking, and have become essential with fighting diseases like HIV/AIDS in Africa. For Amstutz, this illustrates the power and potential of Evangelicals' moral acuity.

This is also where Amstutz's argument reveals its thin foundations. In the final two chapters, Amstutz observes that ad hoc conferences and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) have generated a litany of policy statements, yet these often prove impotent and, at times, self-defeating. Too often, he argues, Evangelicals simplistically export their principles to specific policy challenges. Instead, Evangelicals' goal 'should be to influence moral analysis on foreign policy problems and global issues without getting directly involved in political decision making – to influence moral reasoning about issues without becoming a political pressure group' (196–7). This is an argument for comparative advantage. Though Evangelicals have often failed at comprehensive analysis, Amstutz insists that their attention to moral truths leaves them well positioned to advocate guiding principles in a way that leaves their spiritual mission intact.

The argument, here, treats Evangelicals and their theology as capable of sophisticated thought. This is, frankly, uncertain, though not for lack of intelligence. Rather, Evangelicalism is structurally predisposed to activism and mobilization, and it is reductionist in the sense that all thought exists in reference to scripture and must be compatible with a proscribed set of conclusions. Twenty years after Mark Noll published *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, his basic finding – that 'there is not much of an Evangelical mind' – remains compelling. Amstutz has effectively articulated a moderate and careful political framework, and he makes a strong case that Evangelicals can and do offer an effective conscience, such as in Sudan or with human trafficking, where most other political actors are silent. Still, he admits that his five principles of Evangelical ethics 'do not constitute a developed political theology' (200).

To find a sophisticated moral and ethical model, Amstutz turns to Reinhold Niebuhr, the mid-twentieth-century theologian whose model of Christian Realism Amstutz details. This

is profoundly ironic. First, Niebuhr explicitly rejected what he considered to be postwar Evangelicalism's intellectual and theological (if earnest) shallowness. Indeed, Niebuhr's theological style was more consistent with certain liberal and mainline traditions than with subsequent Evangelicalism. Second, as a Christian Realist, while not intrinsically pessimistic about achieving moral ends in politics, Niebuhr set out the distinction between individual and collective morality that Amstutz rejects. For instance, Niebuhr directly influenced foreign policy thinkers like Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan (who Amstutz rejects), as well as the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. That fertilization may represent America's final great Christian intersection with the wider intellectual community before mainline denominations entered massive decline and Evangelicals dramatically expanded. As Amstutz's reach for Niebuhr suggests, no widely influential Evangelical since the 1950s has appeared; and the question remains whether such an appearance is now possible.

Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy is a work of corrective analysis and informed advocacy. As a concise guide both to the Evangelical interactions with US foreign policy and to Evangelical leaders' beliefs, it is indispensable. Working from within the Evangelical tradition, however, it also reveals the movement's limitations. Though disowning fundamentalism, it is intertwined with that tradition. Though activist, it can be passive on major issues. Though literate and universalizing, it is often uncurious and parochial. Amstutz sees Evangelicals playing a crucial moral role in the world as civil society actors and through US foreign policy. Nevertheless, Evangelicalism alone has never been either necessary or sufficient for liberal democracy. Amstutz himself admits that 'absolutist ethics may work in the heavenly kingdom, but they are inappropriate for statecraft' (170). Modern states remain stable and interact with one another effectively in part because they operate under Hugo Grotius' *etsi deus non daretur* ('even if God did not exist') assumption. That nuanced, secularizing trajectory may not square with Amstutz's vision of moral activism.

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