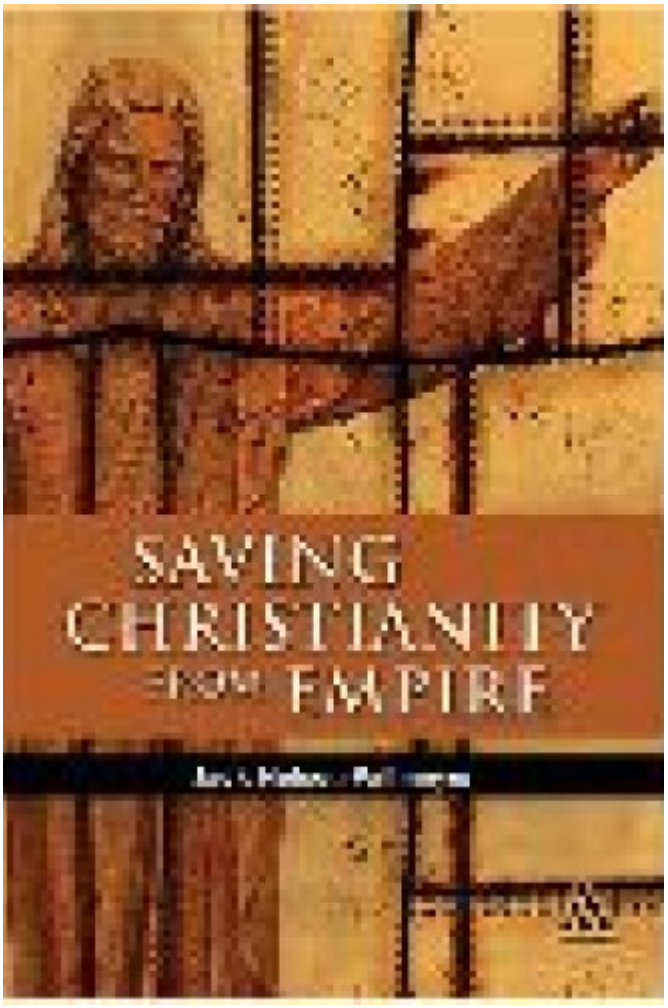
On a mission

By Lloyd H. Steffen in the April 5, 2005 issue

In Review

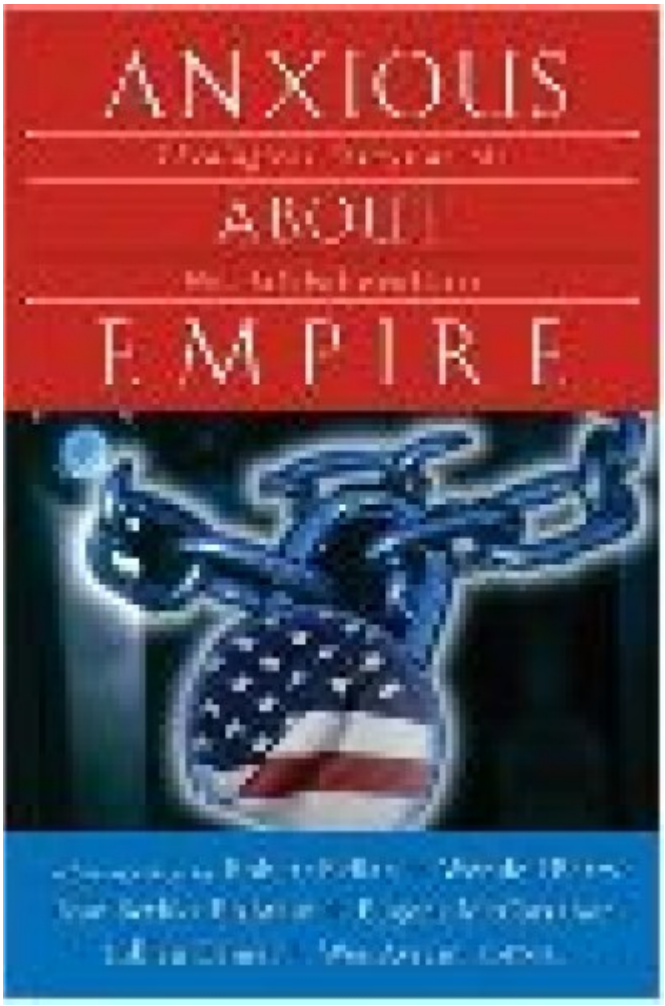
Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana

Gary Dorrien
Routledge



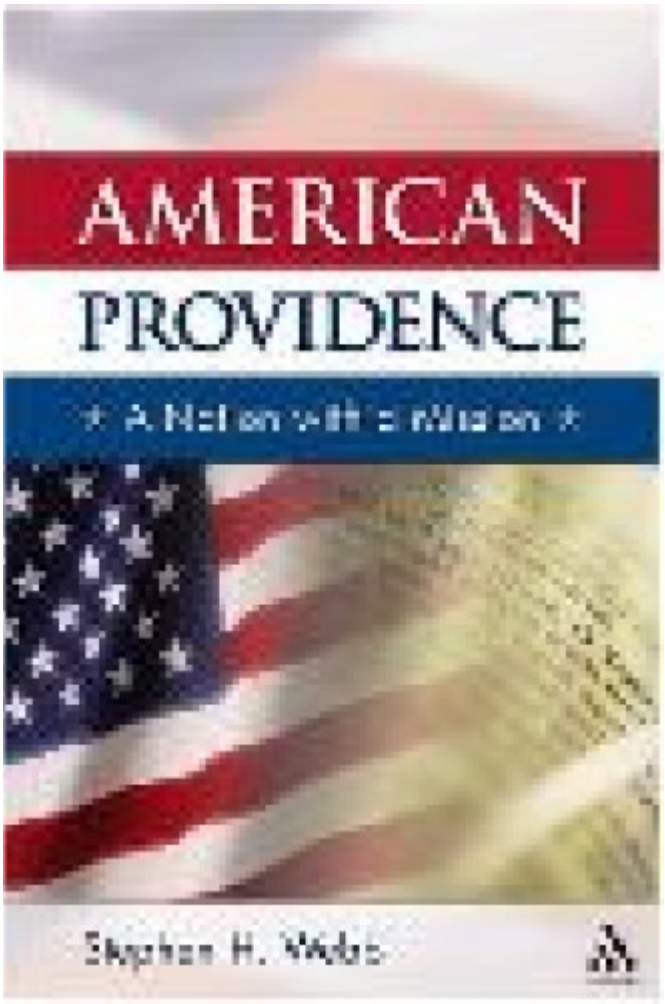
Saving Christianity from Empire.

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer
Continuum



Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities

Wes Avram, ed.
Brazos



American Providence: A Nation with a Mission

Stephen H. Webb
Continuum

The United States goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote in 1821. "She is a well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. If the United States took up all foreign affairs, it would become entangled in all the wars of interest and intrigue, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own soul."

Some 80 years later President McKinley, stymied about what to do in the Philippines, went into a late-night, down-on-the-knees prayer session in the White House and emerged with a different vision. It had come to him that he could take all the islands

and—“by God’s grace” he said—educate, uplift, civilize and Christianize the Filipinos. Having received divine endorsement for an imperial military incursion, McKinley put his worries about empire to rest. “I went to bed,” he said, “and went to sleep, and slept soundly.”

Adams’s warning has gone unheeded, and McKinley’s appeal to a long-standing national belief that America enjoys a special or “exceptionalist” destiny in the history of nations continues to lurk around the edges of many current foreign policy initiatives. The idea that America has received a divinely approved mission to spread freedom, democracy and capitalist prosperity to the world through its economic and military might persists, even as foreign affairs are increasingly preoccupied with the very activities Adams feared—searching out monsters (terrorists), entangling the nation in wars of interest and intrigue, and becoming an imperial “dictatress.” Yet public officials deny any fall into imperialism. Despite preemptive military action, the post-“victory” occupation of Iraq and global involvements elsewhere, America’s present policy makers and public officials insist that the term “empire” simply does not apply.

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer differs. An empire, he contends, is a nation ambitious to exercise control over the political and economic systems of other nations—and the international order itself—to the end of preserving, promoting and advancing its own interests. If Nelson-Pallmeyer is right, then the policy makers’ denials are hollow. The U.S. has become an imperial nation.

Nelson-Pallmeyer’s *Saving Christianity from Empire* and three other recent books subject the idea of American empire to moral and theological reflection. Just as the nation is divided politically over the question of empire, these books expose a moral and theological divide.

In *Imperial Designs* Gary Dorrien, a prolific author whose writings include two volumes in an acclaimed series on American liberal Christianity and a decade-old book on neoconservative ideology, thoroughly rehearses the movement of the ideas and people operating the U.S. foreign policy machinery. In an astonishingly comprehensive discussion of the neoconservatives’ rise to power, Dorrien identifies the major players who devised the grand strategy of unipolarism, which calls for America to assert itself as the preeminent global power in the post–Cold War world.

The neoconservatives, Dorrien explains, are a group of originally liberal intellectuals who became disaffected with McGovernism. They have advocated capitalist economics, a minimal welfare state, and a militantly interventionist, anticommunist, expansionist and nationalistic Americanism. The neocons left the Left in the ’70s, gravitated to the Reaganite Republican Party in the ’80s, faded in the ’90s when the Republicans were out of power and then reemerged with the election of George W. Bush. Dorrien demonstrates how neocons came to influence foreign policy and asserts that 9/11 provided an unexpected opportunity for them to assert a new and aggressive unilateral Americanism as the cornerstone of foreign policy.

Although Dorrien attends to important figures who are sympathetic to neoconservative ideology, including President Bush both before and after 9/11, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, his focus is on the neocons, or unipolarists, whose ideas and intellectual biographies he presents against the backdrop of their work inside and outside of government: Paul Wolfowitz, Colin Powell, Charles Krauthammer, Joshua Muravchik, Max Boot, Ben Wattenberg, William Kristol and Robert Kagan.

For all that the neoconservatives have said publicly about their vision of American power, a coherent narrative of the development of their policy has been needed, and Dorrien provides that account impressively. He reveals that the purported reasons for the Iraq invasion (defending America from weapons of mass destruction and spreading democracy and freedom) were a mere gloss intended for public consumption. The neocon position has for over a decade focused on advancing American strategic interests in the oil-rich Middle East and finding ways to establish bases for military operations to protect those interests. Readers will be sobered by Dorrien’s account of Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz arguing that Saddam Hussein would have to be overthrown whether or not a connection to 9/11 was found.

Iraq was a target for Wolfowitz in a grand strategy predating the 9/11 attacks, and it is in light of this strategy that one should understand President Bush’s comment that the Iraq war was justified even though no weapons of mass destruction were found. In the late ’90s the neocons urged President Clinton to take military action against Iraq; their letter to him is reproduced on the dust jacket of Dorrien’s book. After the neocons came to power, Iraq was the top agenda item at the first National Security Council meeting of George W. Bush’s administration.

Because Dorrien presents his narrative without invasive judgmentalism, the story he tells is all the more fascinating. But he does make clear his disagreement with the unipolarist vision, which he claims is “plausible, important, and wrong.” Understanding that the neocons’ vision is imperialistic and that they will not be content to stop at Iraq, Dorrien laments that America’s precious reputation for *not* being a threatening, colonizing, aggressive power has faded. Heightening American militarism is not the solution to rising anti-Americanism, Dorrien writes; rather, it is “a perfectly self-fulfilling prescription for perpetual war.” The hope for world democracy lies not in imperialism but in anti-imperialism.

Though Dorrien offers this critical assessment, the heart of the book is his compelling narrative of the development and coming to power of an expansionist ideology. Even neoconservatives should appreciate the fairness of Dorrien’s presentation and the skill with which he tells their important, world-altering story.

In *Anxious about Empire*, Yale Divinity School communications professor Wes Avram collects theological perspectives on America’s role in global affairs. He invited 13 essayists to respond to the Bush administration’s September 2002 National Security Strategy document, which is reprinted in the volume.

Robert Bellah’s opening article, “The New American Empire,” sets a tone of nervousness. He expresses fear that America’s Iraq policy and the drive toward hegemonic military control will turn the world against America, and he views the Iraq policy as the latest expression of American pride and the arrogance of power.

Avram himself offers one of the best interpretive engagements in this useful and wide-ranging collection. He critiques the authors of the security strategy document for failing to listen to the many opponents of the policy, and for neglecting to analyze critically the threat to America that is the ostensible reason for the document. Avram reminds readers that there is wisdom in listening to one’s enemies and asks why a nation’s power should be equated with military power.

Many of the essays attend to the role of the church. Arthur Paul Boers focuses on pastoral leadership; Lillian Daniel offers a moving reflection on liturgy, a congregation’s division over a war-resolution debate, and a surprising instance of local church triumphalism; and Eugene McCarraher argues that the church is the political community within which Christians must debate war and peace.

Diversity of viewpoint is apparent. Jean Bethke Elshtain is sympathetic to the strategy document, supporting military intervention on the principle of equal regard, though not all situations of clear injustice, or even genocide, require intervention. Elshtain's "just war" idea is that a justice claim can be made whenever innocents are harmed and are in no position to defend themselves—there is then a presumptive case in favor of the use of armed force by a powerful state or alliance of states that have the means to intervene, interdict and punish on behalf of those under assault. This is the version of just-war theory that policy makers employ to justify resorting to force when considerations other than equal regard have already decided matters.

Elshtain's presentation denies "just war" theory its role as a constraint on the use of force. Just war as a moral theory rests on the presumption that force ought not be used to settle conflicts. Lifting that presumption to make an "exception" ought to be difficult. If just-war theory is in poor repute today, it is because it has been pressed into service to justify war rather than to prevent or restrain it; rather than being used to advance the cause of peace or justice, the theory has often provided a quickly accessible patina of moral justifiability to disguise aggression and expansionist policy.

Nelson-Pallmeyer's *Saving Christianity from Empire* and Stephen Webb's *American Providence* present diametrically opposite theological visions of American empire. Nelson-Pallmeyer examines not only neoconservatives and their call for increased American militarization but also the neoliberals of the Clinton era, who emphasized economic globalization as a means to advance American domination in the world. He offers a five-stage history of post–World War II American foreign policy, explaining the rationale for U.S. support of repressive military regimes, the shift toward advancing empire through globalized capitalist expansion, and the current drive for global military supremacy. Drawing on documentary history, he shows how defense planning today is committed to preventing the emergence of any rival to American power. This end is being accomplished by means of unilateralist military and economic policies that aggressively promote American values and interests.

Nelson-Pallmeyer's description of a foreign policy that has moved from containment to preemptive offensive war is fascinating, troubling and always historically informed. The question at the heart of his book is whether America will be an empire or a republic, and the spiritual issues involved in this question allow him to reflect on the theological meaning of American policy. Even religious people, he explains, are

seduced into thinking that violence offers the ultimate way to security. If God is our exemplar of a superior violence, violence itself becomes the object of faith, and religious people then engage in a perpetual holy war that is deemed a valid form of religious expression.

Contending that the empire option dramatically compromises the gospel vision of peace, Nelson-Pallmeyer jettisons just-war theory and advocates reclaiming Jesus' radical model of nonviolence. He challenges Christians to reject militarism and those aspects of their religious tradition that encourage or endorse violence, and he presents nonviolent alternatives that refuse to sanction violence as part of God's providential care of the world.

Webb, professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, articulates a very different understanding of God's providence. He moves from a belief central in Western monotheism, that God acts in history, to claim that American foreign policy can—and should—be viewed as an instrument God uses to realize God's ultimate plan. America is doing more than any other nation to spread the kind of political structures that can best prepare the globe for God's ultimate work of establishing the final kingdom, Webb contends, and he proceeds to quote from a variety of sources to support a role for providence in contemporary theological thinking while interpreting America's rise to world power as a divine blessing that comes with special responsibilities. He argues that God has chosen nations other than Israel to accomplish the task God gave Israel, and that the American effort to spread political freedom can be interpreted as a specific geopolitics that advances a providential mission. Webb commends President Bush for recognizing this mission.

A good book ought to be engaging and serious, and Webb's book is certainly both. However, a good book, even one I am happy to recommend, can seriously promote ideas that are unsound. Providence is itself a troublesome notion with weak scriptural warrants. Theologically, providence may mean that God cares as much for all people as he cares for individuals—a simple yet profound idea. But interpreting providence in light of historical specifics leads to nothing but problems, because one will end up with a God who cares for some people (or peoples) more than others. The logic of a tsunami survivor being spared providentially while thousands of others perish leads to a parallel in which American policy leading to war in Iraq is a providential set-up for a democratic election. Such an invocation of providence ignores what must then be divine complicity in the slaughter of tens of thousand Iraqi civilians, whose deaths were part of a plan for the realization of the kingdom

through the Bush doctrine. The doctrine of providence shields a theology of acceptable losses.

The other major problem with Webb's argument is that he simply does not give attention to the details of foreign policy development that are so important to Dorrien and Nelson-Pallmeyer. The details of that history make providence seem far-fetched as a tool for theo-historical interpretation.

Webb's position on providence does provoke the important question of how we are to read history in light of God's acting in that history. How should we interpret providence when what is driving national policy is not the advance of freedom and democratic values but special powers in the form of elite economic cabals or corporate oil moguls? How are we to invoke providence to discern the meaning of setbacks in our foreign policy and of events like the 9/11 attacks? Providentially minded critics of American imperialism could as easily make the case that God in his providence is radically anti-American, that American failures and setbacks are manifestations of God's judgment on the U.S. Webb is aware of these question but seems not to entertain them seriously.

There is much in this book that many will find infuriating. Webb sneaks up on a justification for a gospel of wealth; claims that the poor providentially provide an occasion for the wealthy to show charity; discounts pluralism (though with qualification); and fails to attend to the black experience in the American story or to consider the thought of Martin Luther King, who held to a view of providential American exceptionalism yet was critical of military adventurism. Webb lacks critical appreciation for the ways in which the powerful can appeal to providence in self-serving ways, convincing themselves that their hold on power is itself a sign of God's favor.

Webb's views reflect a perspective that is deeply held by many Americans, and his use of the standard resources of theology to articulate these views is one of the reasons this book ought not be simply dismissed. If this is what theology is coming to affirm—that God is working providentially through American foreign policy to advance an ultimate divine plan that is consonant with the interests of an economic elite—then this is a God who might need to be ushered off the stage. We may be entering a time of theological ferment not unlike that of the '60s, when a controversial "death of God" movement arose to push theological thinking away from a problem-solving God, whom many deemed irrelevant and lifeless. Perhaps we

are in need of resurrecting a “death of God” position because a God approving this kind of imperial activity has taken the divine eye off the ball. Theological thinking that folds in the face of imperial interests and supports actions that are destructive of people and of hopes for peace in the world—one definition of demonic religion—is in need of radical challenge.

Nelson-Pallmeyer is right: Americans face a choice between republic and empire. And religious people confront a decision about how to be religious—either in the life-affirming way that eschews domination, violence and militarism and espouses nonviolence and forgiveness in accordance with the gospel vision, or in the imperial way that leads to perpetual war and indebtedness. John Quincy Adams foresaw that the temptation to empire puts the soul of the nation in peril. People of faith ought to heed his counsel and see to it that the architects and supporters of imperial policy are denied the sleep of an easy conscience.