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Christian Realism and the State as Idol: Feminist and Postcolonial Critique and Christian Realist Theology in an Interdependent World

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ABSTRACT

At a time of outspoken nationalism, Christian realism accurately diagnoses idolatry of the state as a political and theological problem. The power of sovereign states protects self-determination but can allow states to unjustly oppress members of minority groups. From a Christian realist perspective, states' power relative to other institutions can encourage religious idolatry, with citizens devoting their ultimate loyalty to a state. To mitigate this problem, Christian realism argues for recognition of states' limitations. However, Christian realism itself remains beholden to a notion of states' sovereign agency rooted in an incomplete picture of human nature. Recent feminist and postcolonial scholarship on human relationality shows how state sovereignty and agency are modified by relationships within networks of local, national, and global institutions. This analysis enriches Christian realist critiques of idolatry of the state. It argues for recognition of the role of grassroots communities and enhanced cooperation among states and other institutions.

KEYWORDS

Christian realism; feminist thought; postcolonial thought; state sovereignty; idolatry; relationality; grassroots

Introduction: vulnerability in a system of nation-states

In July 2018, the journalist Margarite Clarey interviewed members of the Rohingya Muslim community who had been violently expelled from villages in the Rakhine state of Myanmar and forced into squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh. Clarey recounts the following conversations:

They raped our mothers and sisters and stopped us from following our religion. We are religious people, we want to follow our religion. And we need nationality. If you give me these two things right now, I'll go [back to Myanmar] straight away," said former teacher Mohammad Ruhim.

Above all, the Rohingya people I spoke to in the camps want the rights and protection that they believe will only come with the Myanmar government recognizing them as citizens of Myanmar.

“Which nationality do you have?” Rohingya community health worker Abdul Kalom asked my young Bangladeshi interpreter. “See,” he said staring at her firmly, “you have an identity and so you have power. We have no identity, and that is why we have no power.”¹

Ruhim and Kalom’s point is that the Rohingya are unable to find security, or recourse after immense suffering, because they have no recognized nationality and no state willing to protect them. Myanmar does not consider the Rohingya to be citizens and has used that lack of status as one justification for pushing 730,000 members of the group out of the country, preventing most Rohingya from voting or running for office, and severely restricting both movement and access to basic needs like healthcare.²

Other countries and the United Nations have not been able to stop what many rights groups are calling a genocide. The International Court of Justice did order Myanmar to take measures to protect the Rohingya from genocide after a case was brought by The Gambia.³ But Myanmar blocked U.N. humanitarian aid to Rakhine State shortly after the crisis began, and the U.N. Security Council has produced only a few strongly worded statements; it has not imposed significant consequences or crafted serious diplomatic solutions.⁴ A major reason for inaction is that China, which has political and economic interests in Myanmar, has used its veto power on the Security Council to block any significant proposals.⁵ Humanitarian organizations, meanwhile, can only provide the most basic aid. They cannot change the conditions that make the community so vulnerable in the first place, and they often must tread extremely carefully to avoid seeming to challenge the government and being themselves threatened or expelled.⁶ Here, it appears that a single state has the power to kill thousands⁷ and displace hundreds of thousands without much consequence, while another state can forestall actions from the international community that might mitigate the crisis.

The suffering of the Rohingya community points to a dilemma that plagues many efforts to do justice and enhance human well-being in the contemporary global order. The world is becoming increasingly globalized, yet refugees, minority communities, and stateless persons can suffer greatly at the hands of a single state, with little recourse. The problem is exacerbated by increased prominence of vocally nationalist overnments

that view themselves as responsible to almost no one outside their borders and only some groups within.⁸ The old question of the “right to have rights,” articulated

1Clarey, “Facing the Future.”

2Naing, “Rohingya politicians excluded.”

3Human Rights Watch, “International Court of Justice Orders Burmese Authorities to Protect Rohingya Muslims from Genocide.”

4Khan and Ahmed, “Dealing with the Rohingya Crisis,” 126.

5Ibid., 124.

6Nilsen, “Perception of Rights and the Politics of Humanitarian Aid in Myanmar,” 339–40.

7Barron, “More than 43,000 Rohingya Parents May Be Missing. Experts Fear They Are Dead.” Exact numbers are hard to come by, but thousands of Rohingya are missing, and it seems clear that most of the missing are dead.

8Bieber, “Is Nationalism on the Rise,” 520, 522, 528, 537.

poignantly by Hannah Arendt,⁹ remains: how can human rights and dignity be universally protected, when one's ability to enjoy one's rights depends on secure membership in a state willing to do the protecting?

The contemporary global order to which states have ascribed, outlined in the Charter of the United Nations, purports to promote both self-determination of states and fundamental human rights.¹⁰ Yet in cases like that of the Rohingya, the two commitments seem to clash, with poor outcomes for people's well-being. States do protect the well-being of many, but when vulnerable groups must rely solely on individual states for their protection and instead end up in harm's way, it is worth exploring alternative conceptions of states' agency and relationships to other institutions.

A Christian realist lens

This essay undertakes such an exploration. Specifically, it lays out a Christian realist approach to contemporary ideologies of the state and offers ideas for how the scholarly tradition of Christian realism can better comprehend and address problems of human well-being in a globalized world of sovereign states. The argument is this: from a Christian realist perspective, idolatry of the state gives rise to injustice and harms human wellbeing. States have overwhelming power in relation to other institutions and communities that shape human life, and citizens and residents of states are encouraged to – and often do – invest their ultimate loyalty in their state. In contemporary political imagination, the fact that states have sovereign power politically is easily elided into a religious idolatry that views states as unfettered agents who can claim their people's absolute devotion and do as they please, with no proper check on their actions beyond self-interest. The power held by states provokes a temptation to idolatry; idolatry in turn motivates members and leaders of states to seek even more power for their own state. This idolatry is expressed explicitly in the rhetoric of nationalist politicians, but it also implicitly informs decisions made by governing authorities, populations, and diplomats, which is particularly troubling in cases where a vulnerable group is oppressed by a sovereign state.

The hegemony of this idea of the state is not consonant with the deepest insights of Christian realism for promoting justice in the political order. The purpose of the state is to promote human well-being by providing order, protection, and the material and social goods that allow people to live reasonably stable lives and pursue good and meaningful ends. A Christian realist conception of the state recognizes that states can properly use coercive power and claim a sufficient measure of their subjects' loyalty to fulfill that purpose. But the state is not itself an ultimate end to be pursued, or an ultimate authority that merits people's highest loyalty. States' promotion of their interests, and their use of sovereign power, remain subject to critique from a higher moral plane.

However, Christian realism has not fully leveraged this critique in our moment. Christian realism itself remains beholden to a notion of the agency of sovereign states that is rooted in an incomplete picture of human nature. Recent feminist and

⁹Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 296–9. See also Benhabib, *The Rights of Others*, Ch. 2.

¹⁰Charter of the United Nations, Preamble and Chapter 1, Articles 1-2.

postcolonial scholarship enriches a Christian realist perception of how sovereign states exercise agency, and thus enhances Christian realist analysis of current global affairs. It does this by pointing out that state sovereignty and agency are relational by nature, because human beings are relational by nature. Incorporating this relational conception of states' agency provides Christian realism with a firmer basis for describing and pushing back against idolatry of the state, and it opens up new possibilities for considering how human well-being might be promoted through the cooperative action of states with and alongside other communities and institutions.

Niebuhr's Christian realism: states' capacity for justice

Contemporary Christian realist thought both describes and resists idolatry of the state. Christian realism in its present-day form is most associated with the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr; for this analysis I will primarily engage Niebuhr's work and contemporary scholarship that draws on it. Niebuhr proposes two Christian realist solutions to the problem of idolatry of the state. The first is a balance of power between institutions, so that no single institution holds too much power or claims too much loyalty. Although Niebuhr's balance of power is often a balance between different states, he can also refer to balancing state power with the power of local or global institutions. Later Christian realists have taken this idea of balance farther, by more deeply examining the variety of institutions that bear on human lives and the relationships between them. The second goal Niebuhr says Christian realists should aim at is encouraging humility from policymakers, citizens, and intellectuals who seek to promote justice using state power.

Niebuhr's examination of the international political order is rooted in his theological conception of the human condition. For Niebuhr, human beings are conscious, spiritual beings who are able to transcend and reflect on our immediate circumstances. Yet we are vulnerable, to pain and death as well as to the good or evil caused by chance – what Niebuhr calls the “vicissitudes” of nature.¹¹ As spiritual creatures, human beings are conscious of our creaturely limitations and transcend them in our creativity and imagination, yet we remain subject to them. The contrast between the ability to rise above our immediate circumstances, and our continued vulnerability to them, causes a deep-seated anxiety.¹² That anxiety, in turn, leads us to sin by seeking inordinate worldly possessions and power, in a vain effort to overcome our limitations.¹³ This striving for possessions and power almost always harms the individuals and communities around us, since we tend to run roughshod over others as we seek our own good, and we use whatever power we gain in unjust ways.¹⁴

In contrast to the human tendency to favor our own good and seek power over others, Niebuhr argues that the moral demand placed on Christians is a demand of “agapic” love: seeking others' good to the point of self-denial.¹⁵ This demand is

¹¹Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny* Vol. I, 3–4, 26–27.

¹²*Ibid.*, 182.

¹³*Ibid.*, 16, 137–8.

¹⁴Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 6–11.

¹⁵Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny* Vol. II, 71, 246.

impossible for an individual to achieve in all moments, even if a few people can manage it sometimes, with God's help.¹⁶ And states, as institutions that ought to protect the well-being of their populations, cannot really be subject to such a demand. If authorities choose to disregard the good of their political community in order to seek the well-being of another individual or community, they are not (only) making a personal sacrifice but are forcing others – those over whom they have authority – to forego their own well-being. That is not agape, since disregarding the well-being of someone else is a very unloving act. For all his critique of overzealous patriotism and the ease with which individual egoism is multiplied in political communities,¹⁷ Niebuhr never called on states to give up the power to protect their populations.

What states, and other political institutions, can do is seek justice. For Niebuhr, justice in the political order, whether national or global, involves using human reason to properly weigh and balance the interests of individuals and communities.¹⁸ By placing checks upon the power that individuals or groups hold over each other, a just system restrains any single person or group, including the state and its authorities, from sinfully oppressing others.¹⁹ Some measure of coercion by those in authority is needed to promote the “rational and moral” end of equal justice for diverse individuals and groups in a society, but justice limits coercion as much as possible and subjects it to oversight, so that the power to promote equality does not become overweening power to promote the selfish ends of a few.²⁰

Justice and balance of power

The first answer to the problem of idolatry of the state is therefore a balance of power, not only between states, but also among institutions at different levels of authority. When Niebuhr considers international institutions as a potential counterbalance to the United Nations could provide a clearinghouse for a minimal level of oversight of states' use of power, a “social and political review.”²² It could also offer a platform for improved dialogue among states and encourage a stronger “voice” for less-powerful states. Niebuhr thinks this will help “western nations” better recognize their limitations and the moral failures that accompany even well-intentioned actions.²³

Niebuhr does not seem to think the United Nations would ever command much loyalty. However, he does believe that people might be able to temper their loyalty to states with a commitment to the moral ideals represented by the attempt to gather states around dialogue and a shared pursuit of limited moral goals. Niebuhr is well aware that states' policies will always be primarily driven by the “collective self-interest” of their people, yet our loyalties cannot rightly stop at the borders of the state: “Loyalty to the community is...morally tolerable only if it includes values wider than those of the

16Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny* Vol. I, 286–7.

17Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 91-92.

18Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol. II, 248–9.

19*ibid.*, 257–8; Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, viii, 178.

20Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 234, 238–9.

21Niebuhr, *Irony*, 136.

22*ibid.*, 136.

23*ibid.*, 137.

community.”²⁴ Those who ascribe to Christian realist principles must not be drawn into “complacent acceptance of national loyalty as the final moral possibility of history.”²⁵

Niebuhr speaks less often of balancing power and loyalty between the state and local or grassroots communities. Yet his examinations of the labor movement²⁶ and the Civil Rights movement²⁷ approvingly describe a balance between the power of the state and of locally organized communities. Labor and civil rights activists seek policy change at the national level, but it is not the state to which their loyalty and energy is directed; it is to the ideals of their movements, and to the gathered communities that push those movements forward. Recent Christian realist thinkers, described by Robin Lovin as “Pluralist Realists,” have fleshed out the argument that human beings seek good through multiple kinds of institutions,²⁸ of which local movements can be one.²⁹ States cannot protect human well-being and promote justice in every possible way, and sometimes they actively undermine well-being. Grassroots organizations rightly claim a measure of loyalty from their members. As long as these organizations, like any institution, remain within their own proper limits and seek justice, they can also set their own power in opposition to abuses of power by the state and can justly seek to persuade, even sometimes compel, governmental authorities into policy change.

Justice and humility in wielding power

The second Christian realist answer that Niebuhr provides to the problem of idolatry of the state is a good dose of humility on the part of governmental authorities and anyone who seeks to shape policies. States are fallible, and their use of power, even with good intentions in the service of justice, very easily leads to injustice. An idolatrous loyalty to a particular state, or even to “the state” as an institution and the contemporary international order of states, makes it impossible to maintain a posture of humility about the capabilities of states or to critique a state properly when it goes astray. In Niebuhr’s view this would be true of any political institution. But in the contemporary political order, this caution most clearly applies to states as the most powerful, sovereign institutions.

In a Christian realist conception, states’ purpose is to order human life so as to provide peace, security, and a measure of justice.³⁰ States contribute to human flourishing in the ways proper to political governance and authority. Robin Lovin argues that the state has the “limited” task “of securing peace and security within a given territory.”³¹ For Lovin, Christian realism, as a type of moral realism, distinguishes itself from political realism by positing an ideal of human flourishing from which states and their governing authorities cannot stray too far. It is not simply a question of paying attention to the full range of interests that political authorities must balance; it is a question of whether authorities promote the goods that human beings fundamentally

24Ibid., 36–7.

25Ibid., 144.

26Ibid., 31.

27Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 252–3.

28Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics*, 30–1.

29Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, 37–42.

30Niebuhr, *Structure of Nations and Empires*, 4–6; Lovin, 59–60.

31Lovin, 4.

need by nature.³² As Lovin rightly points out, states are a great good insofar as they provide peace, security, and justice, for we need these things. But human nature is shaped by and answers to something beyond the state, and humility about states' capabilities is needed too.

So again, in a Christian realist framework, states are not ultimate ends, and they do not deserve ultimate loyalty. For Niebuhr, those states which seek to place checks on power and do justice where possible should certainly be recognized for the relative good they can do.³³ Yet no state is ever above critique. For one thing, even with the great power they do have, no state is powerful enough to guarantee the precise outcomes of its actions. Intentions may be good and state authorities may act with a reasonable inclination toward justice, yet their plans may still easily go awry. Especially in foreign policy, there are simply too many factors that determine the outcome of an action for governing authorities to be confident that they can accomplish all they set out to do. This does not excuse leaders from acting to secure justice and peace as best they can, but their power is limited and must be wielded with appropriate humility.³⁴

Secondly, no state is free of sinfulness and collective egoism. Abuse of power is common; hence Christian realists' concern for a balance of power so that those who wield it are subject to oversight. Even more insidiously, virtues and ideals quickly become vices when states pursue them by the wrong means or are over-confident in their own innocence and virtue.³⁵ The use of political power, even to promote goods like peace, stability, and equality, is not possible without moral compromise, and it is quite easy for compromise to shade into a failure to promote those goods at all.

In short, while political institutions are needed to organize human life together, humility about the ability of states to do justice is required. States ought to be pushed to promote human good, but individuals should not be tempted to idolize the state (their own particular state, or states in general) as the power that promotes this good. This plays into a "self-deification" of the state, Niebuhr says, which claims more for itself than it can possibly merit.³⁶ For human governments or political institutions to claim they can provide perfect justice, or to demand undivided loyalty, leads, at the extreme, to the horrors of totalitarianism.³⁷ Instead, human beings' earthly loyalty is rightly divided between various groups, people, and institutions, each performing their own proper function to enhance human well-being. Christian realists have variously called these "mandates," "spheres," and "contexts,"³⁸ but the point is that multiple worldly institutions promote human well-being, and people should support and show loyalty toward all of these institutions in appropriate ways.

Contemporary idolatry of the state

³²Ibid., 8.

³³Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 1, 213–4.

³⁴Niebuhr, *Irony* 69, 72, 74–7.

³⁵Ibid., 133.

³⁶Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny* Vol. 1, 211, 213.

³⁷Lovin, 4; Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 243.

Unfortunately, many of the idolatrous tendencies against which Niebuhr and the Christian realist tradition warn are on display in our current moment. The “America first” slogan and policies exemplified by the Trump administration in the United States, and the “Britain first” attitude that accompanied the “Brexit” campaign in the United Kingdom, have been two of the most striking recent examples of political leadership elevating narrowly-defined interests of a state above all other considerations, including the moral ideals Niebuhr points to as a proper check on state arrogance. At the same time, there has been a rise of outspoken nationalism, where leaders idolize not just the institution of the state but an imagined ethnically and religiously rooted “nation-state.”³⁹

Niebuhr thinks that a shared feeling of “nationhood” can help bond people in political community, and thus can help states maintain a measure of peace by promoting unity.⁴⁰ Yet national fellow-feeling, Niebuhr says, easily becomes sinful idolatry of the nation and the state in which it holds power. Nationalism also wrongfully foments disdain for anyone who is not part of the national group; governing authorities who buy into this idolatry frequently commit injustice against real or perceived outsiders.⁴¹ In Myanmar, not only the Rohingya but also the Karen, Chin, and other minority groups have been forcibly relocated and targeted for government violence. In the United States, idolatry of a white, Christian nation manifested in attacks on immigrants by the Trump administration, including the “Muslim ban,” generating misleading statistics to falsely paint immigrants as criminals, separation of children from asylum-seeking parents, and using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to shut down the asylum system without any solid public health justification.

Even people who reject the worst excesses of nationalism, however, are in a sense forced into dependence on and loyalty to the state, simply because states do have overwhelming power that cannot be significantly mitigated by other kinds of institutions. It is certainly true, and much-discussed among scholars, that multinational corporations present challenges to state power on specific issues.⁴² But population flows, foreign aid, and management of conflict and diplomacy continue to fall almost entirely under control of states. This is proper and understandable in one sense: modern states have long been understood to have absolute or near-absolute power in these areas, and the global order operates under that assumption. But it presents a problem for Christian realists when states use their power as often to inhibit justice as to promote it. Again, in contrast to political realists, Christian realists critique political institutions based on the moral ideal of God’s command to love. In earthly terms, this entails pushing governing authorities and institutions to do justice for all people.

In the current moment, a Christian realist critique of the power and loyalty enjoyed by the state, at the expense of other institutions and often to the harm of individuals and families, is justified. The imbalance of power between the state and other entities means that not only is justice often denied, but even basic aid is

38Lovin, 151; Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 204ff.

39See, for example, Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian State*; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*.

40Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 83–4.

41Niebuhr, *Irony* 91; *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 1, 209–11.

42For one analysis, see Nester’s, *Globalization, Wealth, and Power in the Twenty-First Century*, especially pp. 10–12 and 170.

sometimes withheld. Major humanitarian initiatives depend on the political will of the world's four or five most influential states,⁴³ and as we have said, it is quite easy for one or two states to deny humanitarian access to large populations.

Idolatry of the state and an imbalance of power between the state and other institutions is not just a problem for individuals and communities, however. The legitimacy of states themselves is impacted by their failure to protect minority and other groups. One reason given for the importance of strong, sovereign states – by politicians, scholars, and recently the U.S. State Department⁴⁴ – is that states need “strong government institutions” to enhance their populations’ well-being and protect them from external threats.⁴⁵ When the governments of states make and uphold laws that do protect people, this makes sense. But if authorities instead neglect, persecute, or kill people over whom they have power, while arguing that state sovereignty allows them to act as they choose, they undermine the claim that human protection is best served in a global order where states enjoy overwhelming power. Furthermore, the world's more powerful states have often undermined the sovereignty and self-determination of less powerful states when it suited them, for instance during the many proxy wars imposed on states of the “third world” during the Cold War. So an idolatry of the state as an institution can incorporate, ironically, the undermining of some states’ sovereign power by other states.

Beyond idolatry: feminist and postcolonial insights on sovereignty and relationality

Christian realist thought articulates how contemporary idolatry of the state poses a problem even for the limited and approximate justice that Christian realists seek. This idolatry is especially worrisome when it is infused with idolatry of a “nation-state,” in which state governments are assumed to protect and uplift one particular ethnic, racial, or religious group at the expense of others. That said, the modern institution of the state is not going away anytime soon. For the foreseeable future, states will almost certainly continue to enjoy overweening power, and other institutions will be unable to check them in use of state power or even provide humanitarian aid to oppressed groups. In addition to this practical consideration, scholars who analyze the state and its sovereign power face a theoretical dilemma. As Jens Bartelson has noted, critique of the state has been around for a very long time. Yet political thinkers are far from finding common ground even on the nature of the state and its authority, let alone what a critical perspective can accomplish.⁴⁶

So how can Christian realists continue to critique idolatry of the state, and find more adequate ways of analyzing state sovereignty and power? Feminist insights into Christian realism offer one way forward, pointing scholars toward a more vigorous

43Theresa Reinold makes an intriguing argument along these lines in *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*. Reinold critiques the reliance of the global human rights regime on U.S. power and willingness to advocate for human rights norms, yet concludes that if the Responsibility to Protect principle is to gain traction, the U.S. must still play the primary role in promoting it.

44Commission on Unalienable Rights 33.

45Amstutz, “Two Theories of Immigration”; Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 53–4.

46Jens Bartelson, *The Critique of the State*, 2–5.

Christian realist understanding of contemporary justice that arises in conversation with feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Feminist thinkers like Jean Bethke Elshtain, Rebekah Miles, and Caron Gentry have begun to push Christian realism beyond its traditional focus on “great powers” and the weighing and balancing of interests. These scholars offer a more nuanced – a more realistic! – understanding of the nature of human community, by incorporating the recognition that human beings are creative, relational beings with the ability to cultivate bonds of love and cooperation among social groups.

I will describe some of Elshtain, Miles, and Gentry’s insights in this last third of the paper and then argue, with their work in mind, that conceptions of relational agency described in contemporary feminist and postcolonial thought can fruitfully inform a Christian realist critique of the idolatry of the state. I specifically draw on Sharon Krause’s work on personal sovereignty and agency to articulate a relational conception of state sovereignty and agency. Increased attention in Christian realist thought to human beings’ fundamentally relational nature can inform a more nuanced understanding of the nature of states, thus enhancing critique of idolatry of the state and more fully recognizing the crucial role of cooperation among people and institutions in promoting well-being.

Feminist critique of Christian realist thought

Christian realist scholars who examine the influence of gender ideology on political thought have pushed the field of Christian realism to expand the range of its views on human nature and on the social and political order. I refer to these scholars as feminist thinkers, though Elshtain in particular has a complicated relationship with the term. Feminist thinkers have encouraged Christian realists to better recognize how the uses of political power impact small communities and individuals, especially women. They also provide Christian realism with an analysis of how social power is negotiated not only in the arena of reasoned justice, but also within relationships of care and empathy. Feminist critique of Niebuhrian Christian realism goes back to Valerie Saiving’s 1960 essay “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.”⁴⁷ After the essay was republished in 1979 in Carol P. Christ’s and Judith Plaskow’s *Womanspirit Rising*,⁴⁸ feminist theologians began to consider it in earnest. Plaskow applied a lens of women’s experience specifically to Niebuhr’s ethics in *Sex, Sin and Grace* in 1980.⁴⁹ Prominent theologians, including Catherine Keller⁵⁰ and Beverly Wildung Harrison,⁵¹ recognized the influence and insight into public affairs that Niebuhr enjoyed, while pointing out Niebuhr’s sexism and his tendency to overlook women’s experiences, particularly in the “private” sphere, and thus his incomplete-at-best depiction of human nature, sin, and grace.

Jean Bethke Elshtain was arguably the most prominent scholar in this period to incorporate feminist insights into a sustained Christian realist project. Elshtain follows

⁴⁷Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.”

⁴⁸Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*. Saiving’s essay is on pp. 25–42.

⁴⁹Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*. Her major critiques of Niebuhr are on pp. 63–73 and 83–94.

⁵⁰Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 39–43.

⁵¹Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 27–8.

Niebuhr in asserting that, when subject to limits and critique, political sovereignty promotes human well-being.⁵² She expands the boundaries of Christian realist thought, however, with her deep appreciation for the local and communal. Elshtain argues that scholars cannot divorce conceptions of personal, state, and God's sovereignty.⁵³ She attends carefully to individual and local experiences of political issues, including successes and failures of grassroots networks and organizers.⁵⁴ Sovereignty and the international order are important themes in Elshtain's work, but she does not view the state as the only locus of justice. She analyzes power and agency of human communities at different levels of political life.

More recently, Rebekah Miles's "feminist Christian realism"⁵⁵ retains a Niebuhrian framework while drawing on feminist insights to rebalance Niebuhr's over-emphasis on human freedom. Miles appreciates the creativity and room for self-critique that Niebuhr's concepts of a transcendent God and human self-transcendence can provide.⁵⁶ But feminist thought, she argues, critiques and modifies Niebuhr's Christian realism by shows how human beings are bound to nature and community. Community, in fact, has its own moral valence. Miles contends that feminist thought helps Niebuhrian Christian realism more fully and accurately describe how the moral life is shaped in networks of connection to others and the natural world. These networks do not regulate our actions in a deterministic way, but they provide the bounded context within which human freedom acts as a transformative power.⁵⁷

Caron Gentry argues that emotion – specifically love – shapes relationships between political groups and motivates political action. Gentry applauds Niebuhr's Christian realist analysis of human fallibility, his recognition that political power is both necessary for doing justice in human life and a source of temptation to sin, and his critique of nationalism.⁵⁸ Yet Niebuhr, Gentry says, does not take into account the role of love as a cause of political action. Based on feelings of love for others, human beings can cultivate relationships that spark creative action to uplift people who are most vulnerable.⁵⁹ Recognition of human sinfulness and the need to constrain power through checks and balances remains essential. But, Gentry says, relationships between communities, including between states, are not only about reasoning out a balance of justice between antagonists; they are dynamic bonds, involving vulnerability and receptivity.

State sovereignty and relational agency

With these critiques from feminist Christian realist scholars in mind, I turn to the work of Sharon Krause, a political philosopher whose work draws on feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Krause challenges common conceptions of sovereignty and agency of the individual, and relates conceptions of individual sovereignty to that of the

⁵²Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*, 147–8, 158.

⁵³Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, x, xiii–xv.

⁵⁴Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*.

⁵⁵Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 3.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 151–2.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 147, 155.

⁵⁸Gentry, *This American Moment*, 23.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 52.

state.⁶⁰ Her work thus provides a lens through which Christian realist thinkers can comprehend state sovereignty and agency in more nuanced ways and develop a more effective critique of idolatry of the state.

Idolatry of the state as the center of power and loyalty presents a temptation partly because states are indeed powerful: they have final say in protecting rights, guarding borders, and going to war, among other things. They shape both global order and their internal affairs. And as we have seen, they certainly have the power to oppress vulnerable populations and keep other institutions from meaningfully addressing that oppression. But if we draw out the implications of Krause's examination of personal sovereignty and agency, we see that the power of states to shape the world and even their internal affairs only goes so far. Sovereignty does include self-determination and control over a population and territory, but in practice these powers are not absolute. The agency of states – their ability to use their sovereign power to get the effects they want – is in fact regulated and modified by the complicated network of relationships in which they are involved.⁶¹ Not only other states and global institutions, but also local and transnational grassroots groups, have the power to impact how states act and what effects their actions have. This point shores up Christian realist insights about the limits of state power and the need for humility, and then pushes them further. For Christian realist thinkers who wish to challenge idolatry of the state, a clearer description of the limits of states' agency can help break down ideologies of the state that contribute to idolatry, which in turn can promote engagement of states with other groups and institutions toward just ends.

In her work *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, Krause accurately describes the most common ideology of state sovereignty thus: sovereignty is control, the ability to determine what happens within the state's domain with no interference from outside entities.⁶² For Krause, this understanding of state sovereignty provides the basis for standard liberal notions of individual sovereignty and agency. Supposedly, to exercise agency, people must possess individual sovereignty: they must be able to control their actions and the effects of those actions without outside interference. Krause argues, however, that human beings' actual experience does not conform to this conception of agency. Instead, people exercise "non-sovereign agency."⁶³ The effects of

60Postcolonial critiques of state sovereignty from a number of different angles can be found in scholarship in international relations, political philosophy, and theology. See Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty*; Dhawan, *Decolonizing Enlightenment*; Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum*; Hansen and Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies*; Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco*; Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*. I draw from Krause's work because its discussion of relational agency intersects in fruitful ways with Christian realist conceptions of human agency, particularly in light of feminist critique.

61While Krause's work is indebted to and arguably falls within the scope of feminist as well as postcolonial thought, I consider *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty* in the context of postcolonial scholarship due to Krause's concern for reevaluating liberalism, sovereignty, and democratic theory in light of power relationships that impact the agency of subjects, especially marginalized subjects, and that shape how subjects and communities are understood by others. In this way Krause continues in the tradition of foundational postcolonial scholars Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. See, for example, Said, *The Selected Works of Edward Said, 1966-2006*; Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

62Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, 2.

63Krause distinguishes her concept of non-sovereign agency from the more-familiar "relational autonomy," a concept which has played a significant role in feminist thought. See, for instance, Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*; Oshana, *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression*; Veltman and Piper, *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*. Krause asserts that relational autonomy is concerned with individual choices rooted in relationships, whereas her own work examines agency as a socially distributed phenomenon. Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, 12.

our actions are not under our full control; they rely on perceptions, words, and actions of others. Agency is socially distributed, and other people are “integral” to the agency of a given individual. Other people or groups take up and give full meaning to an individual’s actions, whether simply by recognizing or understanding those actions, by amplifying or silencing them, or by building on or rejecting them.⁶⁴

In practice, the social distribution of agency means that human beings have both more and less responsibility for our actions than the concept of sovereign agency implies. If the impacts of our actions, including speech as well as activity, are (sometimes) amplified by others, then our responsibility ripples out through multiple interpretations of and responses to our actions. Furthermore, each of us acts within a network of relationships of power, including power conferred or denied under conditions of inequality driven by racism, sexism, nationalism, and so on. We did not individually cause these conditions, but if agency is socially distributed then each person bears some share of responsibility for their actions under such conditions.⁶⁵ At the same time, people cannot justly be held fully responsible for speech and actions whose effects are not entirely within their control. Our responsibility is diffused because we cannot be completely liable for whatever someone else might do once our actions have made their way into the world.⁶⁶ This is an expansive notion of responsibility that strives to take more fully into account the broad set of circumstances in which a person acts. What we do matters, and we remain responsible for it, especially if we enjoy a relatively high level of social power and thus do have more complete control over the results of our actions. Yet our responsibility, and our agency, play out in a web of social relationships.

So Krause rejects the application of a concept of sovereignty, drawn from the modern idea of state sovereignty, to individuals. But her argument works in reverse as well. Krause argues that human beings exercise a non-sovereign form of agency; states too, though indeed sovereign, nevertheless exercise agency only within networks of relationships. That states are sovereign does not mean they have complete self-determination and control over territory and population. Sovereignty as it exists in our

Christian realist thought has certainly recognized the limits of states’ sovereignty, agency, and power – we recall Niebuhr’s work in *Irony* as well as Lovin’s discussion of the power of multinational corporations and the thought of his “Pluralist Realists.” But Christian realist thought has tended to say that states’ agency and power are subject to appropriate constraints because we live in a sinful world. While these constraints can indeed hold unjust use of power in check, I propose that limitations on the agency of states arise not only or even primarily because of sin, but because human beings are fundamentally created as social, relational beings. That is to say, limitations on the exercise of sovereignty are not simply a consequence of the sinfulness of human communities that necessitates a balance of power; they arise from the nature of social life itself.

Therefore, governing authorities best promote human well-being when they take responsibility for acting within networks of individuals and institutions. Intentions toward good governance can best be fulfilled if decision-makers do not seek complete control over the effects of their words and actions – which of course is impossible –but instead

⁶⁴Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, 22.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 92–3.

act with clear attention to how their words and actions are taken up by others or how they might justly amplify the actions of others, including grassroots communities as well as political institutions. With reference to the examples below, this might mean favoring conversation and negotiation with grassroots activist movements over repressive actions whenever possible, or clearly-articulated public discussion of data on “push/pull” factors for immigration, in order to best cooperate with other countries and provide a clear message for citizens about the reasoning behind border security or detention policies.

Relational agency and transnational grassroots activism

The socially distributed, and limited, agency of states certainly comes to light in states’ relationships with each other, or when international institutions like the U.N. Security Council or International Court of Justice influence states’ actions. But states’ exercise of power is likewise limited by the agency of non-state sovereign nations; grassroots and activist networks; and the choices of individuals and small groups, particularly (in our current moment) immigrants. These sorts of limitations are less often discussed in detail in Christian realist scholarship, but they can be as significant as constraints imposed from the outside.

Native American tribes, who hold sovereignty yet are distinct from sovereign states, have recently offered challenges that modify and limit the agency of the United States government. They have done this by cultivating local as well as transnational connections. From 2016 to 2020, members of the Tohono O’odham nation protested, both alone and alongside environmental and human rights groups, against border wall construction through tribal lands.⁶⁷ Standing Rock Sioux, in a much-reported challenge to both corporate and federal power, have since 2016 brought together members of multiple tribes, environmental activists, clergy and religious groups, students, and military veterans. Their coalition has used both protest and legal mechanisms to oppose construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. While the coalition’s fortunes have shifted at times, in March 2020 a federal judge struck down permits for the pipeline and ordered a full environmental review.⁶⁸ The examples of these tribes show how groups that are sovereign, but not states, create their own centers of power and loyalty. They also show how states must navigate the relational nature of their agency and their inability to exercise absolute power over populations, in the face of tribal nations and coalitions of activists.

Transnational grassroots movements seeking racial and gender justice have likewise built relationships that are not confined within the borders of states, and have shown that the policies and activities of states filter through relationships not only with their own populations, but also worldwide. For instance, U.S. federal elections are of course extremely state-focused; their purpose is to select governing authorities for the state. But when the Women’s March of January 2017 arose relatively spontaneously after the election of Donald Trump and brought out millions of people in approximately

⁶⁷Carranza, “O’odham members block border wall,” and Kennedy-Howard, “No Ban, No Wall.”

⁶⁸Beitsch, “Court sides with tribes in Dakota Access Pipeline case.”

615 U.S. cities and towns and 261 cities and towns outside the U.S.,⁶⁹ it turned out that the election gave rise not only to a change in U.S. political leadership, but also to a global movement for justice for women and others, and against the type of idolatrous nationalism that Trump and his administration embraced. In the aftermath, women in the U.S. were inspired to run for office and create new local movements, and women worldwide drew on the energy of the protests to enhance activism aimed at rights for women – and more – in their own countries.⁷⁰ Transnational movements also connected activists in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and reinvigoration of Black Lives Matter protests in May 2020.⁷¹ As Kwok Pui-Lan has pointed out, these movements draw on social media – for all its faults – to connect people in ways that are not fully under the control of the states they live in.⁷²

The current state of international migration provides an even more poignant example of tensions between an ideology of the state as fully in control of its own territory and population, and the reality of the limits of states' agency in the face of mass migration by individuals and families, especially those driven by violence or economic hardship. A great deal of the rhetoric employed by contemporary ultra-nationalist politicians and parties has to do with punishing irregular migration, keeping asylum seekers out, and otherwise limiting immigration, particularly from certain areas of the world. Examples include anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration in the U.S. and anti-immigrant arguments made by U.K. politicians in support of "Brexit." And again to mention Myanmar, its government classifies the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh as part of its campaign against them.⁷³

And yet despite the promises to "build a wall" to keep immigrants out or "take back control" of immigration, no country can keep out all immigrants, or even all immigrants it deems undesirable. In the United States, there were approximately 10.5 million undocumented immigrants in 2017,⁷⁴ while Immigration and Customs Enforcement removed just over 265,000 immigrants in 2018 and 267,000 in 2019.⁷⁵ Hundreds of thousands more people continue to arrive in the U.S. without documentation each year,⁷⁶ and studies indicate that border enforcement has, if any, only short-term deterrent effects.⁷⁷ And as long as there are wars and gang violence there will be asylum-seekers; meanwhile, climate change only exacerbates the number of people who must flee their native countries each year.⁷⁸

69The best estimate of the number of cities and marches involved in the 2017 Women's March was conducted by political scientists Jeremy Pressman and Erica Chenoweth and tabulated on a publicly-available spreadsheet at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xa0iLqYKz8x9Yc_rfhtmSOJQ2EGgeUVjvV4A8LslaxY/htmlview#gid=0, accessed September 4, 2020. Chenoweth and Pressman discussed their work in the Washington Post article, "This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches."

70North, "The Women's Marches Are Shrinking. Their Influence Isn't." Herrera, "Global Women's Marches persevere."

71Cave, Albeck-Ripka, and Magra, "Huge Crowds around the Globe March in Solidarity against Police Brutality."

72Kwok, "Postcolonial Intervention in Political Theology," 224.

73Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization in Myanmar," 238–41.

74Kamarck and Stenglein. "How many undocumented immigrants are in the United States and who are they?"

75Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "ICE Statistics."

76Kamarck and Stenglein.

77Massey, Durand, and Pren, "Why Border Enforcement Backfired," 1557–8.

78United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Climate change and disaster displacement."

Controlling borders and population is considered a quintessential aspect of state self-determination, yet in reality, states' ability to control these things is limited by other states' ability or inability to protect their populations, by the determination of migrants to find security or join family, and even by the earth's climate. States themselves have begun recognizing that they cannot deal individually with increased migration. The 164 countries who signed the Global Compact for Migration (the United States was not one) seemed to agree that only a network of cooperation between countries, businesses, educational institutions, and NGOs would have sufficient scope to facilitate safe and orderly migration that spreads benefits and burdens among countries while upholding the well-being of migrants. The Compact insists that it honors the sovereignty of states,⁷⁹ and it cannot force states into specific actions. Yet even as a pledge of voluntary cooperation, it shows that most state authorities understand that the forces of global migration limit and shape every state's ability to control who enters its borders. The development of the Global Compact for Migration is just one small step, but it hints at a conception of the state that is both less idolatrous and more realistic than that of many contemporary political leaders. Certainly, it is more realistic than an ultra-nationalist ideology that seeks the interest of a state in a narrowly defined way. But it is more realistic even than a Niebuhrian-style Christian realist notion of states' sovereign agency. Contemporary Christian realism obviously recognizes the dangers of nationalism and understands the limitations and ironies of state actions. But a further step in analyzing, and refusing, the temptation to make an idol of the state becomes clear in conversation with feminist and postcolonial thought. Limitations on the agency of individual states do not arise only because of human sin; instead, many arise naturally out of the relationality of human beings and our communities. The state is not all-powerful and cannot be, because its agency will always be limited by the relationships it cannot help but have, with individuals and small communities as well as other states.

From a Christian realist perspective, absolute human loyalty rightly lies with the God who participates in and comprehends all relationships, not with any single institution. In this world, human loyalty should not be devoted to just one institution but should be spread across networks of relationships and communities, all of which have their ultimate end in God. These insights are better articulated by Christian realism when it incorporates insights from feminist and postcolonial thought. Especially as the connectedness of our world becomes more obvious with the impact of climate change, technology, and increased migration, the conversation between these areas of scholarship is sorely needed.

⁷⁹United Nations, Global Compact for Migration, 3.

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