

# **Democracy, Conflict & the Bible:**

## **Reflections on the role of the Bible in International Affairs**

Editors:

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**Democracy, Conflict & the Bible: Reflections on the role of the Bible in International Affairs**

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# Introduction

*"The past is never dead. It's not even past."* William Faulkner



The global rise of democracy, human rights and international peace-keeping are the hallmarks of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s barely more than a dozen countries could be described as democratic. However, by the year 2000 about 70 (out of 190 countries represented at the United Nations) were said to be democratic. As G. J. Buijs et al point out, now even the countries which are dictatorial and repressive at heart are trying to legitimise their rule by not only adopting the term “democracy” as jargon, but also imitating democratic procedures such as elections and multi-party parliamentary systems.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the quest for democracy caused a political earthquake across the Arab world propelling some enthusiasts to coin the term “Arab Spring”. Until the Arab Spring transformed itself into what can now be called the “Arab Winter”, it looked like Francis Fukuyama’s prediction that the advance of democracy will bring about the “end of history” was about to be realised.

Democracy, as a means to end repression, realise freedom and achieve global peace has been seen – in both the media and in academia – as the ultimate political accomplishment. What is not discussed as much however are the origins of democracy, and how the concept itself evolved to global prominence. This publication, therefore, aims to fill in this gap by highlighting the contribution of the Bible to democracy and peacebuilding not only by tracing its origin but also by referring to accounts from recent history. Democracy, on the surface, is not a biblical term or concept we find in the Christian Scriptures. The question, therefore, is: how did the Bible contribute to the birth and development of democracy?

The Bible talks at length about governance. Many people recognise the biblical vision for good governance as aligning with democracy, and certainly much of Western political tradition has been profoundly influenced by the idea, expressed in Deuteronomy 17.14–20, that the law applies equally to all. The king of Israel could command huge authority as God’s anointed, but ultimately was under the same judgement as everyone else. The centrality of the law in the Bible is key to understanding how the Bible and Christianity relate to democracy, government and political power. Its universality and pervasiveness for the people of Israel instituted a kind of government of the people by the people.

The Bible has often been used as a force for good in the extension of democracy around the world. Values such as freedom, individual conscience and human rights can be traced back to the Bible and the Christian tradition as it unfolded over centuries. For example, the egalitarian communal experience of the Early Church was a model for modern emphases on social equality. The notions of subsidiarity and common good are said to have developed amidst the interaction between medieval Christianity and Aristotelian political philosophy. Also, concepts like individual dignity, human rights, freedom of conscience or religious tolerance may be traced back to the radical Reformation, English non-conformity and North American liberal Protestantism and were profoundly shaped by the Scriptures.

Yet parallel to this, ambiguous interpretations have at times led to the Bible being used as justification for dictatorial regimes and conflict. From bishops opposing the great democratic Reform Act of 1832 in the UK, to churches offering theological justification to Nazism and Communism in twentieth

century Europe, the Bible often appears supportive of hierarchical and authoritarian forms of political authority. Some Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have chequered pasts espousing tendencies toward hierarchy and absolutism often biblically justified, while formally claiming support for democracy and human dignity. During the Balkan wars of the last century, it was said that churches' support of nationalism blinded their clergy to the atrocities committed in the name of religion and ethnicity, while during the Rwandan genocide, the church buildings became primary killing grounds.

However, while appearing to support conflict, the Bible has been fundamental to the entire constitution of international order. Not only human security and peacekeeping, but foreign aid, environmental stewardship, and other such key issues have all been rooted in the biblical ideas of justice. These have shaped the early articulation of international order, of the 'just and durable peace' envisioned after World War II, having a decisive influence on the constitution of the United Nations and its approach to peace and diplomacy. The purpose of this publication is therefore to highlight the role that the Bible can play in international affairs and governance.

Thus, in the first chapter, Robert Joustra explores the origins and outlook of the Bible and U.N. peacekeeping by showing how biblical ideas of justice influenced the principle and ideas for international order envisioned by political and Christian leaders at the end of World War II. Using the U.N. armed-peace keeping missions – starting with Suez in 1956 – as case-studies, Joustra argues that the biblical vision for international order enabled and supported the practice of peacekeeping. He concludes that a fresh re-engagement with the Bible remains significant to the future of peacekeeping as part of global governance and for realising Isaiah's ancient invocation of 'beating swords into ploughshares.'

Another way of addressing conflict is through attempts at reconciliation and conflict resolution. Thus, in the second chapter, Sean Oliver-Dee discusses the contribution of the Bible to addressing social conflict using case-studies. The chapter begins by surveying the perspectives of theologians and psychologists on the possibility of reconciliation and conflict resolution. It looks at the necessity of 'forgiveness' in the reconciliation process, before digging into two modern day conflicts to show how the Bible continues to be a valuable tool for healing societies which have been torn apart by extreme social conflicts. The first case-study looks at Rwanda, where the ethno-tribal divide led to a genocide which brought international outcry, and where the work of knitting back together the deep wounds it caused involved NGOs turning to the Bible as a tool for bringing long-term peace and solidarity to the country. The second study takes stock of Cambodia where the clash of ideologies led to the systematic and brutal extermination carried out by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, and whose effects still fester in a society unused to forgiveness. Here the author explores how the biblical doctrine of justice and reconciliation through Christ's sacrifice is permeating the growing Cambodian churches and, in turn, bringing reconciliation and the closure needed by many Cambodians towards the horrors of the past.

In the third chapter, Nick Spencer tests the relationship between the U.N. and democracy, exploring the ways in which the Bible supports attempts by the U.N. to extend democracy around the world. Nick describes the ambiguous relation of the Bible and democracy, suggesting that the Bible is seemingly both opposed to structures of governance and supportive of the moral content of governance. He identifies and outlines four key commitments – to the depth of law, the rule of law, the demands of the good, and the limits to power – from which a positive and measured Christian engagement with democracy can be fashioned. Following this analysis, he argues that the Bible does offer support to democracy – not because democratic systems are salvific, but because the decentred nature of its power system allows political rulers to hear the needs of their people and puts better checks on political abuse than other systems. The author concludes that the Bible does support attempts by the UN to extend democracy around the world, so long as these U.N. efforts are not limited to the development of democratic structures and processes within a country but are also aimed at nurturing and protecting the culture and wider social commitments within which a just and stable democracy may develop.

The work of churches that shape society through a rediscovery of the importance of the Bible is further explored in the fourth chapter, where Tobias Winright reflects on Catholic social teaching and the Roman Catholic Church's position on democracy and human rights in Latin America. Winright argues that the tenets of Catholic social teaching, such as the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, respect for human rights, and subsidiarity, represent key components for peace-making and for the promotion of democracy and human rights in Latin America. The chapter traces the changing perspective of Roman Catholicism during and after the Second Vatican Council exemplified through an emphasis on the Bible and liturgical and other reforms. It then argues that such developments had significant repercussions in Latin America, with bishops shifting their stance to identifying with and working on behalf of the poor, the growth of small Bible study groups and the development of liberation theology. Through an increase in the reading and study of the Scriptures in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic social teaching began emphasising social justice, human dignity, the communitarian character of social life, subsidiarity, stewardship of the environment, and a preferential option for the poor. All these radically changed Roman Catholicism's stance and contributed to the democratisation of Latin America and to the promotion of peacebuilding.

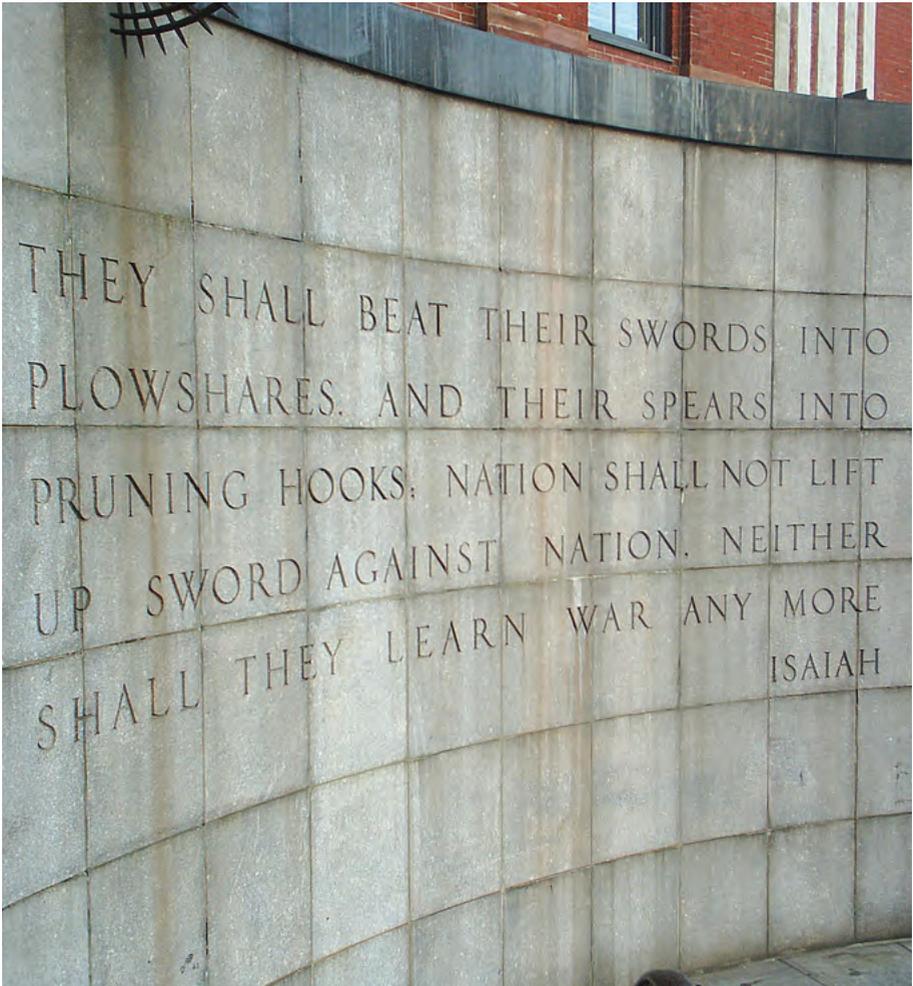
We hope these various themes and international perspectives on the positive contribution of the Bible to international order, governance, democratisation and peacebuilding will challenge the reader and contribute to a dialogue between biblical scholars, civil society and politicians.

Cristian Romocea

## References

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# The Isaiah Wall and the World: Origins and Outlook of the Bible and U.N. Peacekeeping



## Abstract

*The Bible matters for global affairs. It matters not only because it was influential once upon a time, but because it is a living, serious book which shapes hearts, minds, systems, and institutions even in the present day. The question of the United Nations and peace-keeping, the subject of this chapter, is therefore like a case study. I show, first, how biblical ideas of justice shaped the early articulation of international order, of the 'just and durable peace' envisioned after World War II. I then show how this vision became translated and practically enabled, as in the case of the first armed-peace keeping mission in Suez in 1956. Over the course of the U.N.'s 69 peacekeeping missions (56 of them since 1988) this vision, and the practice of peacekeeping which is a part of it, has been seriously tested, and while in many cases found badly wanting, it remains a significant tool for that original Scriptural-project, a just and durable peace. Finally, I make an argument for the future of peacekeeping as part of global governance, for the special significance of engaging the Bible afresh for that future, and the possibilities this holds for realising Isaiah's ancient invocation to 'beat swords into ploughshares.'*

## Introduction

On First Avenue, across from the United Nations in New York City, sits a small park, less than a quarter of an acre, named for Ralph Bunche, the first African-American recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. It's so close to the U.N. that people often mistake the park for being part of it. It's not. But the mistake is natural, because the park is also home to the famous 'Isaiah Wall', which so many people naturally associate with the United Nations and its peacekeeping. There, carved into granite, is the old prophesy of an obscure Hebrew itinerant, predicting a day that seems as far away now as it did then in ancient Mesopotamia; that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall we learn war any longer.

And yet, "Isaiah's vision of human security," as international relations scholar Scott Thomas puts it, has shaped the world in powerful and profound ways. Writes Thomas, "Indeed, the Book of Isaiah with its visions of peace and the restoration of Israel has loomed larger in the Western theo-political imagination than almost any book of the Hebrew Bible."<sup>1</sup> It has contributed, he argues, to various types of messianic ideas and schemes, Zionism as well as anti-Semitism, Catholic liberation theology, feminist, environmentalist, peacekeeping, and inter-faith theologies. Even William Penn famously used it in a practical way in his "Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe" (1693).<sup>2</sup> And, strikingly, argues Thomas, Isaiah's vision for *human security* and for peace has been and continues to be an essential 'normative' component of the United Nations, and of its discourse and practice.

The influence of Scripture on peacekeeping and global governance, of course, is not limited to the Book of Isaiah. The Bible itself, as an integral whole, has been fundamental to the entire constitution of international order. Not only human security, but foreign aid, environmental stewardship, and a host

of other issues have all been rooted in biblical injunctions and interpretations. This is not to overstate matters and say that “*the biblical perspective*” on twenty-first century global order is straight forward. It certainly is not. The same Bible that built the Isaiah Wall and fuels the diplomatic optimism of a future peace, has also fuelled terrible crimes, even genocide, in the last century. Isaiah’s vision for ‘human security’ sits in the same book as Joshua’s cleansing of the Canaanites, a text of such terrible, violent imagery that Philip Jenkins argues it has often been at the root of some of our century’s worst crimes, like Rwanda.<sup>3</sup> *Interpretation*, in other words, matters. ‘Scripture alone’ (*sola Scriptura*), the Protestant Reformers may have shouted, but Scripture is never alone.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter therefore aims to fill part of this conversation: the use and interpretation of Scripture for a vision of international order and justice as applied to the United Nations efforts at peacekeeping. Other chapters could, and should, be written. Chapters on Scripture and the International Criminal Court, chapters on Scripture and accords on climate change and the environment, chapters on Scripture and holy war, just war, on human rights and human freedoms, on weapons of mass destruction, nuclear deterrence and nuclear disarmament. The Bible, as well as other sacred texts, forms a fundamental normative foundation for global institutions and global order in this century. Especially with the now widely accepted discrediting of what academics called the ‘secularisation thesis’ (the idea that religion is going away), prudent students of both the Bible and the world will need to pay ever closer attention to the use (and abuse) of the Bible in global affairs. We live in *God’s Century*, argue Monica Toft, Timothy Shah, and Daniel Philpott.<sup>5</sup> These conversations must be, and are becoming, strikingly common.

“*the biblical story is intrinsically international, it spans the minor, temporal boundaries of power and wealth*”

My argument in this chapter is that the Bible *matters* for global affairs. It matters not only because it *was* influential, once upon a time, but because it *is* a living, serious book which shapes hearts, minds, systems, and institutions even in the present day. The question of the United Nations and peace-keeping, the subject of this chapter, is therefore like a case study. I will show, first, how biblical ideas of justice shaped the early articulation of international order, of the ‘just and

durable peace’ envisioned after World War II. I will then show how this vision became *translated* and *practically* enabled, as in the case of the first armed-peace keeping mission in Suez in 1956. Over the course of the U.N.’s 69 peacekeeping missions (56 of them since 1988) this vision, and the practice of peacekeeping which is a part of it, has been seriously tested, and while in many cases found badly wanting, it *remains* a significant tool for that original Scriptural-project, a just and durable peace. Finally, I will make an argument for the future of peacekeeping *as part of* global governance, for the special significance of engaging the Bible afresh for that future, and the possibilities this holds for realising Isaiah’s ancient invocation to “beat swords into ploughshares.”