

James W Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian Democratic Explorations*. Lanham/Washington DC 2004: Rowman and Littlefield/ Center for Public Justice. ISBN 074253524X.

James W. Skillen, *With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations*. Lanham/Washington DC 2005: Rowman and Littlefield/ Center for Public Justice. ISBN 0742535223.

In these two books, Jim Skillen provides his readers with the mature formulations of his long-term effort to develop a comprehensive reformational political science. One volume deals with US public policy issues, and the other is a critical evaluation of America's informal, liberal empire in the context of the "war on terrorism".

*In Pursuit of Justice* brings together previously published essays, edited to emphasize that they are "Christian democratic explorations". *With or Against the World?* is the result of the author's recent "foundational research", provoked by the events of September 11 2001, "to probe the historical depths of radical Islamism and American exceptionalism" (ix). Both elaborate Skillen's "principled pluralist" perspective, seeking to help Christians and other citizens better understand the religious character of America's political mission.

The volumes reviewed here have been written "mid-stream", developing an approach the author has been refining for decades, also in his articles for *Philosophia Reformata*. They are evidence that reformational philosophy is basic to his contribution. Since 2004 Skillen has published at least 15 major items, on a variety of related topics. Most are substantial pieces and this number does not include his articles in *Public Justice Report* and *Capital Commentary* for the Center for Public Justice for which he has worked since 1982.

*With or Against the World?* describes President Bush's National Security Strategy of 2002, as 'an *idealist* tract, calling for the shaping of a new world order' (101). That being said, it is not far-fetched to suggest that *With or Against the World?* is also a tract that adopts an alternative perspective to interpret the same political reality. Skillen develops an argument that culminates in an explanation of why normative statecraft is short-circuited by the prevailing trends of American foreign policy whether they be idealist or realist (Chapter 10, especially 133-147). This explains why Skillen does not attempt to criticise Bush's idealism from the standpoint of a counter-balancing "Christian" realism.

The reader's attention is drawn to "forgotten depths", and in this way Skillen embraces historical scholarship as a necessary part of political science. He argues that the ambiguities inherent in the US reaction to 9/11 are consistent with its problematic self-understanding. Moreover, by probing the historical sources of both Western and Muslim traditions (Chapter 2) the analysis confronts the religious self-understanding of Muslims and the radicalized perspective of those who are committed to jihad (holy war) against the West.

As a Christian scholarly tract, the book invites readers to face the realities of political life across the globe, and this includes the impact of the "America First" doctrine that dominates American foreign policy. As a reminder of ancient and modern sources, *With or Against the World?* is but an "initial exploration" of the re-emergence of Islam as a global movement and of the place of Islamist radicalism within the Muslim world. From 632AD, when Muhammad died, Islam's global reach kept advancing until the failure of the second Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683. That marked the beginning of a slow decline and as European dominance increased the Muslim world suffered setbacks, loss of territories and humiliations, until finally the Ottoman Empire was dissolved as an outcome of World War I (18). It is against this historical background that Islamist radicalism has emerged in various places as a movement seeking to reassert Islam's global impact by confronting the West in its state of idolatry [*jahiliyya*] (20).

“Forgotten Depths” (Chapter 2) expands upon Skillen’s negative answer to the question “Did 9/11 change the world?” (Chapter 1). The subsequent discussion calls into question the confusing rhetoric of Bush’s “war” on terrorism, providing a credible account of the *religious* confrontation between radical Islamism and American exceptionalism. Because this “initial exploration” limits itself to itemizing a vast range of philosophical, historical and political questions, the volume can be read as an extended bibliographical essay, a guide to the burgeoning literature, from a “normative statecraft” standpoint (140-147). As a Christian “tract for the times” it avoids “that dangerous impulse of journalistic superficiality” to which Dooyeweerd drew attention (see *Vernieuwing en Bezinning* (1963), 54; *Roots of Western Culture* (1979), 55).

At this point, readers of *Philosophia Reformata* should note that while Chapters 3, “Earliest Sources of the West’s Design on the World”, 4 “Western Christendom” and 5 “The Rise of the Modern State” provide an account of world history that preceded the American Revolution of 1776, they are also the most recent contribution to reformational formulations that explain the “roots of western culture”. Dooyeweerd’s series of popular articles which became *Vernieuwing en Bezinning* (cited above) confronted the “Doorbraak” movement in post World War II Netherlands by providing an historical discussion of the “achtergrond” of deep problems then faced by the western world. Similarly, in these three chapters, Skillen alerts fellow Americans, and other readers, to cultural and historical roots of the spiritual options now presenting themselves in these early years of the 21st century when the “war on terrorism” is being waged. “What is clear is that Americans and their leaders should not have marched off boldly into a “war” on terrorism in the Muslim world, ignorant of the deep religious roots out of which both they and their attackers spring” (21).

In Chapters 6 “The American Republic: Witness to the End of History”, 7 “Wilsonianism: From Witness to Vanguard”, and 8 “Another American Century?”, Skillen outlines the emergence of the “America First” doctrine and thereby explains why it is a spiritual competitor with a biblically-directed Christianity. Chapter 9 explores the question of war, just war and pacifism. By way of conclusion (Chapter 10 “What Role Among the Nations?”) Skillen sketches a role for America, which for all its global hegemony, must face up to the “great underachievement of the West’s design on the world”, a failure to discover the path to just international and transnational governance. “The question is whether the United States will stand with or against the world in rising to this challenge” (xi).

Those who have followed Skillen’s writings since the 1970s, will read this volume as an elaboration of the philosophical and scientific work he began back then. As a Christian college professor, he published articles critically probing the “America First” doctrine, the stated political goal of so many of his fellow American Christians. Skillen saw that this doctrine, a taken-for-granted goal of American foreign policy, was evidence of a pervasive absolutization of the “national interest” in American life, and is a crucial factor in America’s ambiguous contribution to international justice. But how was this to be demonstrated and what alternative could be offered?

In 1978, Skillen responded positively to an international conference paper by Bob Goudzwaard and John van Baars, which enunciated the following principle: ‘Thinking from the perspective of norms creates the greatest certainty concerning the steps which ought to be made at the beginning: the thinking from the perspective of future goals renders precisely those first steps that ought to be taken uncertain.’ All of Skillen’s writings attempt to show the *practical* significance of a *normative* statecraft, and his latest writings maintain that effort. Political science should acknowledge the rich heteronomous normative reality in which all of our life is disclosed, as it develops a critical understanding of the theoretical tendency to reduce normativity to “values”, “goals” and “trends”. While respecting any nation’s view of its own vital interests, a truly critical political theory must examine the

assumptions upon which all political goals are advanced, including those claiming to advance the “national interest”. Political theory develops concepts for the analysis of governance in a differentiating social order of multiple institutions. It specifically focuses upon the governance of states which, according to their own (normative) character, are called to initiate and maintain just public-legal integration, nationally and internationally. That, in brief, describes Skillen’s theoretical attempt to do justice to complex political reality in political science. The detailed and empirical analysis of states and inter-state relations considers “political phenomena” as the responses of “political subjects” (office bearers and citizens, states as “institutional subjects”) in a wide variety of capacities, using “political objects” (weapons, laws, technologies, media etc) to form political communities according to the supra-arbitrary norms which are creationally binding on social life in its entirety.

To insist upon a theoretical sensitivity to the normative demands of God’s creation order *at the outset of political theorising and analysis* does not require *insensitivity* to political science and political action sensitized by other absolute commitments. To the contrary. This is the path of certainty along which one is called to deepen insight-for-service in the context of philosophical and political agreements and disagreements. Such a perspective will remember how easy it is to become entangled in the prevalent view that we, as political actors, are simply building a political world for ourselves. To commit to public justice *at the beginning* of political theorizing, or of public policy research, or of international diplomacy, means a commitment to deepen political sensitivity for all our neighbors: the professional scientists who are our colleagues, the citizens with whom we share our public spaces, and all those who have to deal with the good and bad results of public policies implemented by governments.

There is also an authentic evangelical side to Skillen’s reformational political philosophy. Any choice to leave the political path of obedience to public justice must lead to a dead-end. For instance, it is self-defeating to take “national interest” as the comprehensive norm for national life. Political communities need to be guided by justice if they are to rightly form their “national interest”. Expressions of loyalty and love of country should not be viewed as acts ascribing normative status to the national interest even if they are motivated by national-ism. In Skillen’s “principled pluralist” view, national-ism — the absolutization evident in the “America First” doctrine — is *never* in the nation’s best interests. A normative political science will develop a critical appraisal of the political process by which any nation’s self-interest is formed as part of a political community’s valid and limited political task. But the national interest does not, and cannot, give the whole story, nor is it the basis for comprehensive political analysis.

Not only *With or Against the World?* but also *In Pursuit of Justice* emphasizes Skillen’s commitment to raising the issue of “normative statecraft” within political science. For this reason *In Pursuit* might come to serve as a text in any American political science classroom, even in university classrooms where the teacher disagrees with Skillen’s views. Chapters 1 to 3 provide Skillen’s “Christian Democratic” approach and the titles of these three chapters indicate general questions, answers to which provide Skillen’s philosophy of public policy research. “What distinguishes a Christian democratic point of view?” (Chapter 1) makes a case for a distinctively Christian political contribution, even in polities like the USA, that, in the main, are oblivious to the possibility. “Civil Society and Human Development” (Chapter 2) and “The Question of Being Human” (Chapter 3) explain why any comprehensive philosophy of public policy has to deal with diverse social responsibilities in which all citizens are called to live out their incredibly complex lives. These two chapters will prove to be useful for lecturers who want to form a political perspective on the ethical issues of “body politics” (e.g. civil agitation for the recognition of homosexual marriages; political debate over the use of human seed and embryos for scientific and medical research; the way parental authority relates to psychic well-being; the intersection of race,

religion and multiculturalism). This politically-focused discussion does not deal explicitly with these matters, but as an outline of a “general theory of human development” it is relevant to sociological, social-psychological and pedagogical studies as well.

Although this book is concerned with American public policy research it will serve a useful purpose wherever the search for a Christian democratic political contribution is taking place. For those outside the US, American stories of just changes to their laws may be inspiring — e.g. with respect to civil rights, faith-based welfare etc — but they are not normative. The policies discussed in Chapters 4 to 8 may inspire those seeking justice in other polities, but of course the book does not provide the background analysis that is needed for such policies in such other polities.

Skillen’s exposition of “The Cause of Racial Justice” (Chapter 5) explains why governments must give racism its proper definition as unlawful conduct. This means that political leaders have to find appropriate ways of leading their political communities to genuine *political* repentance. This will involve defining the structural and generation-by-generation consequences of racism so that appropriate retributive, distributive and restorative policies can be devised. This can not be a “one off” legislative act (or merely a series of symbolic acts) but must embody, in an ongoing way, the norm of justice for all citizens, particularly those disadvantaged today by the legalized racism of yesterday. This chapter has an incisive application for nations, like Australia, whose major political forces find it very difficult to face up to the racist legacy that has had a decisive impact upon national life. When a nation makes the “national interest” paramount, it turns to self-justification, making an historical appeal to its “freedom loving character”. Then, however, it is no longer truly facing up to the un-freedom that “we” have promoted in “our” past.

As well as stimulating reflection about the character of racism, and the political problems of overcoming the legacy of such injustice, there are other examples in which *In Pursuit of Justice* may prove to be a salient contribution to policy debate (welfare reform, education, environment, electoral reform) beyond the confines of the American polity.

One critical observation: the description of government “partnering” with non-state bodies in programs of social welfare delivery, as described in Chapter 4 (72-75), sounds similar to “shared governance” as advocated by Amartya Sen (see Chapter 2) and others, until it is realized that Skillen’s advocacy of “a fourth order of pluralism” within the US welfare tradition, derives from his “principled pluralist” call for an *end of public-monopoly privileges for “secular” moral majoritarians as well as for “religious” moral majoritarians* (73). This simply strengthens the case for international scholarly co-operation among those committed to “principled pluralism” from the Americas, the UK, the European Union, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Korea, Indonesia and Japan and wherever reformational political scientists are pursuing justice.

Though most of the essays in *In Pursuit of Justice* are edited versions of earlier published articles, the book remains a fresh statement of Christian democratic philosophy. A *concluding* essay in any second edition might emphasize what becomes evident as one works through the volume. Policy changes in any one area (e.g. welfare reform) have inner connections with policies in other areas (racial justice, education and environment). The analyses of Chapters 4-8 strengthen the view that when justice is done in one place it has a way of infiltrating other places as well, binding society together in new, creative and fruitful ways.

These two volumes about American statecraft deserve a wide readership among those seeking to develop a Christian democratic political philosophy. They help to explain how the US governs itself and highlight the ambiguities that are part of America’s contribution to international governance.

B. C. Wearne