

# On the Vital Role of Theology Today





# On the Vital Role of Theology Today

*Unedited version of an editorial published in [Dialog 50, 3 \(Fall 2011\)](#), 221-22.*

To ask what the theological views upon which U.S. foreign and domestic policy are based might sound like a strange question to many. Yet in the Religious News Survey conducted this past May by the Public Religion News Service following the killing of Osama Bin Laden, 51 % of those surveyed agreed with the affirmation that God has granted America a special role in human history. If the fact that another 18% chose the response “mostly disagree” rather than “completely disagree” is interpreted as indicating a minimal agreement with that affirmation on their part, then over two-thirds of those surveyed support the notion that, at least to some extent, the U.S. has a special, God-given role to carry out in the world.<sup>1</sup>

One can think of a whole host of follow-up questions that might be asked of those who agree with this affirmation. Who exactly is this God, and what exactly is this God attempting to accomplish in human history? Precisely what is the “special role” that this God has given to the U.S.? Has this God granted a special role in human history to other nations as well? If so, which ones? Do countries such as Guatemala or Uzbekistan or Mozambique or Indonesia, for example, also have a special God-given role to play in history? Or is the role of such countries simply to manifest their obedience to God by acknowledging that God has indeed given a special role in history to the U.S. and consequently cooperating submissively with the U.S. so that it may carry out that role in relation to them and others? Why has God chosen the U.S. for a special role? Is there something about the U.S. that merits such a choice on God’s part?<sup>2</sup>

If God has given the U.S. a special role in human history, then is not the use of unilateral force by the U.S. justified when other countries and groups resist its efforts to carry out that role? Is the American government not justified in ignoring resolutions passed by the United Nations or decisions taken by the International Court of Justice when it disagrees with those resolutions and decisions, since such organizations fail to acknowledge the truth that God has granted a special role to the U.S. in human history—a role that gives the U.S. rights and privileges not enjoyed by other nations who do not have such a special God-given role and justifies the U.S. judging others without being judged by them?

Such questions may sound facetious, yet I raise them in all seriousness. Why? Because every day I see how the belief of so many Americans that God has given the U.S. a special role in human history affects people throughout the world. From my own experience, even though many Americans who agree with this affirmation would claim not to have thought through many of the questions I have just raised, deep-down they would nevertheless have answers to them that they would be hesitant to share openly out of concern that they might appear prejudiced or racist. If that is indeed the case, it means that, to a large extent, our efforts to combat prejudice and racism have not succeeded in overcoming these problems, but have instead led to a reluctance to discuss them openly in public. And when such problems are not discussed openly and people refuse to share their real views out of fear of being condemned by others, it becomes impossible to address or challenge those problems and views. They merely remain entrenched under the surface, from where

---

<sup>1</sup> The survey is available at:  
[http://www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/58/May\\_PRRI-RNS\\_Topline.pdf](http://www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/58/May_PRRI-RNS_Topline.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> I have raised and addressed some of these questions previously in my article “Borders, Boundaries, and

---

Blessing: Mission as Converting Hypocrites into Sinners,” *Dialog* 49/3 (Spring 2010): 34-44.

they quietly continue to exert enormous power and influence in shaping reality.

The same is true regarding theological views. If U.S. foreign and domestic policy is in fact based on theological beliefs regarding God, the U.S., the world, and human history, then it is vital that such beliefs be brought out fully into the open and articulated clearly so that they can be discussed and analyzed. If we theologians do not do this, who will? The reality is that issues such as immigration, health care, human rights, poverty, education and foreign relations are at their root *theological* in nature. Decisions defining public policy with regard to such issues are based on theological beliefs about how God has determined that the world ought to be, how wealth and land and resources should be distributed, and who has a right to what.

Those who would reject such a claim while addressing such issues tend to base their arguments either on some concept of natural law, failing to see that nature and what is “natural” are themselves theological constructs, or on some self-evident truth which in reality is *not* self-evident. This is precisely the case of the starting-point and foundation of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, for example: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Obviously, that statement is as theological as they come; yet it is *not* self-evident, since it requires theological argumentation and a certain view of God and the world in order to be maintained. One could just as well claim on the basis of a different theological foundation that it is self-evident that all people are *not* created equal, that God has given some people rights that others do not have (especially if they alone have been given a special role to play in history in relation to the rest), and that God or nature has destined some in the world

to exercise power and control over others, and therefore they are fully justified in doing so.

My point in all of this is that, in our country and world today, it is urgent for those of us who are theologians to demonstrate and stress publicly the ways in which theology lies at the heart and core of all that takes place. As an indigenous colleague of mine at the Theological Community of Mexico often reminds the rest of us here, *everything is theological*. Theology *cannot* and *must* not play a peripheral role in society, because it *does* not.

The question is therefore not *whether* theology will continue to play a central role in all that goes on in our country and our world—that is beyond question—, but *how* it will do so, and to what extent it will do so openly and publicly or instead concealed beneath the surface, tacitly and silently guiding all that takes place while the vast majority denies its presence. And that is why, today more than ever, we need theology and theologians to be restored to a central position in the forum of public debate. Certainly, theology must not assume that role in many of the ways that it has in the past, such as serving as a means for some to justify imposing their will and views on others. Rather, the role that theology and theologians must assume is that of raising fundamental questions, bringing out into the open the theological views that are active in shaping reality from below the surface, and then working together with people from all different perspectives to analyze those views critically and constructively through dialogue. Until that happens, we and countless others will continue to pay the price for our silence.

David A. Brondos

Published online October 31, 2017

Image: [Wikipedia](#)