

UNDER COVER

Peace and the Demand for Justice

James Skillen's *International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice* (G. P. Welch Co. and Dordt College Press; 143 pp.; \$7.95) is addressed to committed Christians, but it also can speak to citizens at large. It is popular writing, clear and well crafted, homiletic but not obtrusively so. More remarkably, Skillen knows what kind of education citizens need and deserve.

Most public discussion about international politics is overwhelmingly concerned with practical issues or crises. Most popular writing about international affairs aims to mobilize the public in support of this or that position, not to instruct it. And motives aside, most of our pundits are incapable of teaching what needs to be learned. Their human and historical vision is limited to the world as we have known it, bounded by the culture and politics of modernity. This is true whether the author begins with established institutions and behaviors ("realism") or with established morality ("idealism"). In either case, conventional wisdom prevails.

Skillen, by contrast, recognizes that the public needs theory more than information. He is sensitive to the dilemmas of political action; he reveres *phronesis*, the practical wisdom of statesmen; he says any number of shrewd things about the contemporary world, North-South rivalries, and thermonuclear arms. Skillen's argument, however, turns on the proposition that we need to "step back" from our "pressing predicaments" and ask how we can "understand our world rightly and truthfully." Marx, like Machiavelli and the liberal pragmatists, taught the contrary lesson: Knowledge is a means to an end, action commands understanding, nature exists to be conquered. As Skillen observes, that modern teaching is inseparable from the crisis of world politics.

Modern institutions and technology are difficult enough, but as Skillen indicates, modern doctrines also instruct us to see reality as composed only of so many parts—nations, individuals, or social classes—rather than perceiving these things as parts of a whole. Justice, consequently, is subordinated to the claims of these parts. Americans believe, Skillen notes, that international cooperation is a good thing, but we also believe that each nation should look after and "determine" itself. This contradiction is almost invariably resolved in favor of the nation (or the individual or the proletariat, depending on one's doctrine): The fact of interdependence has not led us to abandon the moral basis of modern political thought.

There is nothing new in this argument, of course, any more than there is in Skillen's observation that biblical religion, in contrast to modernity, sees the world as an ordered, governed whole, a kingdom above the nations. Skillen is trying to preach, not invent, and that is justification enough.

Skillen's own critical abilities are also evident. He

shows, for example, that theorists as diverse as Henry Kissinger, Hans Morgenthau, and Karl Deutsch all share the premises of liberal political philosophy.

Hobbes likened states to individuals in the state of nature but with one crucial difference. Self-preservation is the supreme goal of both, but in international politics, peace is not as essential to the survival of the individual. Regimes in a state of war "uphold thereby the industry of their subjects." States, consequently, are not driven or drawn to form an international Leviathan. Peace is possible only when the threat to life is so great, so immediate, and so continuous as to lead individuals to forgo everything that might conflict with peace, including justice.

In our times, obviously, peace seems more necessary to survival. Liberal theorists, following Hobbes's logic, are increasingly willing to give up other moral claims in the interest of international peace. Kissinger's vision, Skillen points out, aims only at the "mutual acceptance by states of whatever international order can be established with relative stability." Hans Morgenthau, although he doubted its practicability, prescribed a world Leviathan able to enforce peace. The scientism of Karl Deutsch, Skillen argues, simply follows another liberal route to peace: the reliance on material interest. Locke modified Hobbes by arguing that property might make us peaceful. Prudently pessimistic, Deutsch still hopes that functional interdependence and the tendency of systems toward equilibrium (the market metaphor, dressed in the jargon of social science) will produce peace without the necessity of an international sovereign.

None of this is enough, however, because—as Skillen indicates—peace, let alone justice, in the contemporary world will require nations to risk or sacrifice their interests for the good of the whole. Indeed, it may require them to sacrifice their political survival.

I have a number of quarrels with Skillen's argument. For example, he slights the extent to which justice may compel one state or the international community to intervene in the affairs of another. But these are minor cavils. Skillen speaks to issues too important for any of us to ignore. A world state, Skillen observes, would be too impersonal to be just and, given human limitations, would pose a standing threat to freedom. Political justice requires "a diversity of limited domains"; world unity, to be compatible with justice, must be founded on the spirit, not on political forms. Justice implies a world in which war is possible and, hence, one in which modern technology is decisively unsafe. (This, evidently, puts a premium on efforts to limit or control technology.) Liberalism, and modern political philosophy in general, prefers a politics guided by peace and the quest for the mastery of nature. As Skillen reminds his readers, however, human beings are not suited to be masters, and they will yearn for and demand justice even when it hazards peace. For confronting his readers with that challenging truth, Skillen deserves great thanks.

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