

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