

A Christian Perspective on the Responsibility to Protect

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The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is an international legal norm that reinterprets state sovereignty to offer justification for humanitarian interventions, and its practical and ethical implications have been analyzed by scholars like Alex J. Bellamy, Gareth Evans, and Mohamed Sahnoun. This paper evaluates R2P in light of a Christian worldview and concludes that it is consistent with a biblical view of humanity, sin, the role of the state and violence, but one should be wary of any salvific notions that it will end all atrocities. This argument contributes to the discourse because although much has been written about Christianity and Just War or pacifism, even less is written about the Christian ethics of military intervention, and hardly anything integrating a conceptual understanding of relevant international norms.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is an international norm which offers a new framework for thinking about humanitarian interventions. It rearticulates state sovereignty to include the responsibility to protect the people within its borders. Thus, if the state fails to protect its people from crimes against humanity, then the international community has the right to take on this protective responsibility. Intervention would override the principle of non-intervention because the state had abdicated a part of its sovereignty by failing to protect.¹ Until recently, this framework held widespread consensus, but now it experiences criticism because of perceived abuses of R2P by Western countries and the framework's inability to accomplish its intended goals. This paper

will address a Christian perspective on R2P, in light of its perceived strengths and weaknesses.

II. NATURE OF R2P

1. Background

R2P was developed by the Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001, after a decade containing many high profile intervention mishaps. They include both poorly executed interventions, like Somalia, and failures to intervene at all, like Rwanda. Additionally, the controversy of legitimacy surrounding NATO's Kosovo intervention in 1999 demonstrated the lack of a normative, coherent framework for international interventions.² This context led to R2P's formulation. The felt need for a new humanitarian intervention

¹ "The Responsibility to Protect," XI.

² Evans and Sahnoun, "The Responsibility to Protect."

paradigm led to its unanimous acceptance by the UN General Assembly in 2005.³

Supporting this framework are two principles. First, state sovereignty necessitates responsibility, and the primary responsibility is to protect its people. This shifts the definition of sovereignty from a Westphalian concept of absolute authority by creating limits to its power. Second, when the state fails in its responsibility to protect its people (more on the specifics later) then the international responsibility to protect trumps the individual state's right to noninterference.⁴

However, the R2P framework is broader than mere military intervention. It entails three elements of that responsibility: to prevent, to react, and to rebuild. First, the responsibility to prevent entails the international community working towards a world where conflict does not happen in the first place.⁵ The report identifies that this is done by addressing political needs, contributing to economic development, and strengthening legal institutions.⁶ Second, the responsibility to react includes having to the will to act when conflict arises through political, economic, humanitarian, and if necessary, military means (more on the process of justifying armed action later).⁷ Third, the responsibility to rebuild means that the international community, after a situation of conflict, must seek peace, justice, and reconciliation so that future violence does not happen.⁸

Despite this, when R2P is talked about, it is most often referring to military interventions. There are six tests which a situation must pass in order for intervention to be considered legitimate by R2P, which are derived from the 'Just War' tradition.⁹ These are the just cause threshold, four different

precautionary principles, and right authority.¹⁰ First, the just cause threshold requires that a situation either include the large loss of life or ethnic cleansing. These both could result from either the state's direction action or negligence. Additionally, even if the cleansing or loss of life has not occurred yet, there is still just cause if it is clearly imminent.¹¹ The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document makes this more specific by identifying four crimes that would meet the threshold. These are genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.¹²

Once the threshold is met, four precautionary principles evaluate whether military intervention would be right. The first is right intention. This is not to say that a state must not have any vested interest in the outcome, but rather that the primary driver must be the well-being of the targeted population. Second, last resort must be established by exhausting nonmilitary options. Third, means must be used that are appropriately proportional to the situation. Fourth, there must be reasonable prospects of success. In other words, intervention should not have a more disastrous effect than inaction.¹³

After this, right authority must be established to legitimize military action. It is important to realize that R2P does not offer any new legal duties, but rather is a framework for utilizing ones that already exist.¹⁴ This is primarily done through the Security Council, as the already established means in the UN. Securing their approval is important so that there is a world order based on established norms.¹⁵ In the case that the Security Council is unable to give approval, there is the possibility for a special session of the UN General Assembly, as already established under the 'Uniting for Peace' procedure. If the UN still cannot grant authority, the ICISS report is mute on exactly

³ Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 1.

⁴ "The Responsibility to Protect," XI.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹ Evans and Sahnoun, "The Responsibility to Protect."

¹⁰ "The Responsibility to Protect," XII.

¹¹ Evans and Sahnoun, "The Responsibility to Protect."

¹² Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 15.

¹³ "The Responsibility to Protect," 35–38.

¹⁴ Amstutz, *International Ethics*, 188.

¹⁵ "The Responsibility to Protect," 47–52.

what should be done. It does, however, leave us with the ethical dilemma and emphasized the importance of the UN getting interventions right.¹⁶

2. *Positives and Negatives of R2P*

The biggest positive that R2P has is that it is a framework that works in our already conceptualized world of nation-states and international law.¹⁷ The crimes it addresses and means it utilizes already exist in UN international law. It contributes a coherent, normative framework for assessing interventions. Another positive is that its rearticulation of sovereignty as responsibility places a healthy limit on absolute sovereignty. Furthermore, it is a framework that broadens the scope of traditional intervention to include prevention by strengthening institutions.¹⁸

However, R2P is not without faults and criticisms. The largest problem is that R2P lacks the effective mechanism for judiciously authorizing lethal force to protect civilians everywhere. This results from the nature of the international system being composed of nation-states which primarily seek to advance their own interest. From this point, two additional criticisms are derived.

First, many claim that it only seeks to advance a Western agenda, and will be selectively applied by the stronger nations against the weaker.¹⁹ The NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 is an example of this. Although initially justified by R2P, during the course of the incursion, regime change was added to the mission's objective. This is not a viable purpose under R2P, and it appears the framework was coopted to achieve Western goals. Additionally, the result of the intervention was leaving Libya in a mess. The goal of R2P is to save civilian lives, but military action caused many more deaths than would have otherwise occurred.²⁰

Second, a broader criticism is that R2P is unable

to accomplish its intended goals. This is evidenced by the fact that it has done little to change state behavior. The failures to prevent atrocities in Darfur and Syria reinforce this idea. States will always be primarily motivated by national interest, and thus thinking that the international community will altruistically work towards ending violence is naïve.²¹ A different strain in the same argument is that R2P fails because it does little to address the systemic and ideological causes of violence because it focuses too much on the nation-state.²² After an initial analysis, it is clear that R2P promises much, but has yet to deliver. However, before evaluating R2P with a Christian worldview, it is imperative to examine relevant biblical norms.

III. RELEVANT BIBLICAL NORMS

Since the Bible is not a manual for international relations, one must distill universal moral and ethical principles before making a direct pronouncement on an issue. There are four biblical principles that undergird any Christian perspective on R2P which I wish to highlight. They are: 1) the dignity of each human person, 2) the depravity of humanity, 3) the role and limits of state sovereignty, and 4) the validity of violence to prevent greater evil.

1. *Human Dignity*

The Bible teaches that every individual human person hold dignity. This is root in the truth that every person, male and female, is created in the image of God.²³ One of the most direct implications of this is that every person's life is from God, and to arbitrarily take life opposes God. He commands Noah after the flood that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."²⁴ The witness of scripture confirms to us that God considers violating human dignity

¹⁶ Ibid., 53–56.

¹⁷ Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 15–16.

¹⁸ Evans and Sahnoun, "The Responsibility to Protect."

¹⁹ Reed, *Theology for International Law*, 178–179.

²⁰ Amstutz, *International Ethics*, 190–192.

²¹ Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 93–101.

²² Ibid., 102–103.

²³ Genesis 1:26, English Standard Version.

²⁴ Genesis 9:1

a great offense. He is moved by the “devastation of the afflicted” and “the groaning of the needy.”²⁵ The prophets are filled with commands calling out God’s people for not caring for the oppressed. For example, Isaiah tells Israel to “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless,” and to “plead the widow’s cause.”²⁶

2. Human Depravity

Since the fall, humanity experiences a broken, fallen nature. Since we are totally depraved and are unable on our own power to perform perfectly right actions, dignity is trampled on. Thus, we see the killing fields of Rwanda. Humans can, and do, make righteous choices, but these are only by God’s grace and they will not occur all the time. This is evident throughout scripture, but is stated most clearly in Romans. Here Paul says that “None is righteous, no, not one.”²⁷ In the passage that follows, he references six different Old Testament passages (Psalm 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-4; 36:1; 140:3; Isaiah 59:7-8) to bolster his claim. The entire biblical account does this to emphasize that only God through Christ is able to save humanity from their sins. Moreover, it is not only the relationship between humanity and God that was damaged at the fall, but also the one between humans.²⁸ Because of this, no human institution will be able to end sin, but common grace does allow restraints to occur.

3. The Role of the State

The state serves the God-ordained purpose of restraining sin, and its authority is limited by God. Government as organized authority, however, is not a result of the fall. Adam and Eve were charged to

‘have dominion’ over the earth, and we as Christians will rule with Christ in his final kingdom.²⁹ In our current fallen world, the state is an instrument of God’s common grace to establish justice and order to temper the effects of sin. Paul describes their role when he says that the state is “not a terror to good conduct, but to bad” by being “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”³⁰ Peter affirms this, saying that rulers are “sent by (God) to punish those who do evil.”³¹

However, it is not unchecked rule. The Bible teaches that the state, like all authority, derives its power from God. Paul makes this very clear when he says that “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”³² Furthermore, we are to “be subject for the Lord’s sake.”³³ Since the authority is from God, those in authority are held to his standards. Christians can and should disobey when the government goes directly against what God. Additionally, The Bible shows God disposes of unjust regimes, often by using other humans. For example, God used Cyrus “his anointed” to remove the Babylonians from power so that the Jews can return to Israel.³⁴ Despite this, the church does not have the mandate to take up the sword to enforce what they perceive to be God’s will. The church is to preach the gospel and submit to those in authority.

4. Violence as a Lesser Evil

It is my argument that the Bible condones the use of violence to prevent and punish evil. This is a point of controversy as some Christians hold that the nonviolent personal ethic of Jesus ought to be applied to governments as well. I do maintain that

²⁵ Psalm 12:5.

²⁶ Isaiah 1:17.

²⁷ Romans 3:10.

²⁸ Genesis 3:12, 16.

²⁹ Genesis 1:28; Revelation 20:4.

³⁰ Romans 13:3; 5.

³¹ 1 Peter 2:14.

³² Romans 13:1.

³³ 1 Peter 2:13.

³⁴ Isaiah 45:1; Ezra 1:2.

Jesus calls the church and every Christian as a part of their discipleship to be “peacemakers.”³⁵ However, as Reinhold Niebuhr argues, we cannot equate the Gospel only with the law of love. He contends that we cannot take a personal ethic of love and apply it directly to state policy.³⁶

Furthermore, the whole counsel of scripture, when taken together, permits military action by the state. The previous three biblical norms discussed here support this conclusion. The violation of human dignity in a fallen world and the God-ordained role of the state to bear the sword to punish evildoers allows for violence as last resort. One can isolate a few verses to construct Christian pacifism, but that does not factor in the view of war throughout the Bible.

IV. A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON R2P

On the basis of these biblical principles, a Christian perspective on R2P is optimism for the possible good that this framework can accomplish, but skepticism of any salvific notion that it will end human atrocities. This is largely the conclusion reached by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches in their statements between 2003 and 2008. They initially expressed enthusiastic acceptance of the norm, but as time wore on they expressed more caution.³⁷ My conclusion is nuanced from theirs in the following way. If we think of R2P as a framework that ought to end violent atrocities in our time, it has failed. However, if we rightfully think about it as a helpful framework which can serve to reduce, albeit imperfectly, the amount of atrocities, it is more acceptable through a Christian worldview.

As far as the foundations of R2P go, there are three primary points of connection with biblical norms. First, the disgust against systematic violence is grounded in an appreciation of human dignity. The driving force behind the formation of R2P was the horror at the atrocities committed in modern times

and the inability of the international community to address it.³⁸ Second, framing the responsibility to protect as an integral part of sovereignty is compatible with the biblical charge for states existing to punish the evildoer. Absolute sovereignty and nonintervention has its roots more in Westphalia than the Bible. Third, the recognition that military force can be used as a lesser evil to prevent and end atrocities coexists with a Christian view of violence.

Through a scholarly international relations lens, many of R2P’s critiques are unfounded. The charge that the nation-state system is the problem is antithetical to thoughtful political science discourse. In the current world order, this is the way that authority and legitimacy must be established.³⁹ Also, claims that R2P merely advances a Western agenda are refuted by knowing that it was unanimously passed as a norm in the UN, and many non-Western NGOs support and advocate for the norm.⁴⁰ The accusations of a double-standard in R2P should rather be levied at state actors as opposed to the principle itself. Furthermore, a moral foreign policy has to be pursued in conversation with practical interests and outcomes.⁴¹ An example of this is the current crisis in Syria. Due to practical considerations, it is likely that any Western intervention will produce more suffering than it would desire to alleviate.

Despite these positives, I claim that a Christian worldview cautions us against any notion that R2P can end all atrocities. I agree with Esther Reed’s conclusion that “a questioning response from the churches to (R2P)... is warranted.”⁴² States will always first be driven by national interest, and that is permissible because it is their role to primarily protect their own people. Additionally, in our fallen world, even our supposed selfless actions can easily disguise darker motives. We ought to strive and push our governments towards implementing a more just society, but always realizing that this will not be

³⁵ Matthew 5:9.

³⁶ Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 301–303.

³⁷ Reed, *Theology for International Law*, 172–181.

³⁸ Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 18–39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113–114.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 136–137.

⁴² Reed, *Theology for International Law*, 215.

realized in its fullness till Christ returns.

V. CONCLUSION

R2P provides a coherent and normative framework for working towards the reduction of violent atrocities in our world. It is far from perfect, largely because of the lack of effective mechanisms for its judicious implementation. However, it does present an ideal to strive towards. The principles behind this norm are compatible with Christian views of human dignity, the role of the state, and acceptable uses of violence to restrain evil. However, the presence and reality of sin pushes Christians to cautiously question any salvific notions we might have about the effectiveness of R2P.

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