

Richard A. Shweder

*George W. Bush &  
the missionary position*

Jesus Christ is George W. Bush's favorite political philosopher – or so he said in a Republican primary debate leading up to his nomination. And the president's sense of mission runs deep. Speaking with evangelical zeal well over a year before the invasion of Iraq, President Bush delivered one of his earliest and most broadly appealing justifications for the project of global nation building as a moral crusade. He spoke with an uncanny prescience and with intimations of the preemptive use of American force to promote human progress.

The date was January 29, 2002. The occasion was Mr. Bush's first State of the Union address to Congress and the nation after the terrorist attacks of September 11. Listen carefully to his augury:

---

*Richard A. Shweder, a cultural anthropologist, is the William Claude Reavis Distinguished Service Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago, a Carnegie Scholar, and the author of "Why Do Men Barbecue?: Recipes for Cultural Psychology" (2003). He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997. Parts of this essay are drawn from a keynote address, "The Idea of Moral Progress: Bush versus Posner versus Berlin," presented at the 2003 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society.*

---

© 2004 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intention of imposing our culture, but America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance.

Those are weighty and portentous words from a leader who believes that American wealth and power should be used to uphold a universal framework for promoting social, political, and moral development on a global scale – a framework, the speech strongly implies, that is governed by a transcendent moral force.

This State of the Union message subsequently became one of the philosophical foundations for U.S. foreign policy. The president's words seemed convincing to a majority of Americans, regardless of their location on the political spectrum. In the fifteen months leading up to the war against Iraq it became apparent that one did not have to be a born-again Christian to be inspired by his address. Mr. Bush's perfectly pitched and high-minded imperial tone of moral progressivism and his discourse of liber-

ation and human rights struck a chord that was music to the ears of interventionists on both the Left and the Right. His words produced a harmonic (and hormonal) patriotic response from religious fundamentalists and ‘American exceptionalists’ such as the neoconservative commentator David Brooks, for whom the mere mention of moral equivalence – the idea that the American way of life, while unique, is only one among many morally decent and rationally defensible ways of life – is a sign of self-hatred or ethical weakness.

His sense of mission was also ardently embraced by liberals of many stripes – Tony Blair, Hillary Clinton, Thomas Friedman, human rights activists like Michael Ignatieff, sexual revolutionaries, as well as first-world feminists, many of whom believe that female gender interests are universal and that the sisters of the world should unite against any form of life that deviates from first-world feminist conceptions of work, family, sexuality, and gender roles.

Even a good many citizens who have a profound secular aversion to the invocation of Jesus Christ in public political forums or a strong humanistic distaste for jingoism or for strident nationalistic political conservatism supported the military campaign, in some measure because of their faith in the existence of natural or inalienable values and non-negotiable demands of precisely the sort invoked by President Bush. Thus many Americans both on the Right and on the Left felt neither shocked nor awed, but rather proud and justified, when the bombs that fell on Baghdad in the spring of 2003 were dropped carrying the Orwellian inscription “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

The president’s address gave forceful expression to the idea that America has

an obligation – a burden, as the British once called it – to promulgate objective and universally binding moral standards, for example, by “defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere.” This intellectual stance may be called *missionary moral progressivism*. Here I want to focus on three of George W. Bush’s key claims in his 2002 State of the Union address:

1. that there are non-negotiable demands for the design of any decent society;
2. that those demands are non-negotiable precisely because they are grounded on matters of fact concerning universal moral truths, and not simply because the president or the people of the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world happen to like them or embrace them as their own ideals; and
3. that these universal moral truths can be defined in ways that are (a) substantial enough to allow the United States to lead the world in the direction of progressive social, political, and cultural reform, and also (b) objective enough to avoid the hazards of cultural parochialism and ethnocentrism – for, as he states, “we have no intention of imposing our culture.”

More recently, on April 4, 2004, in a public denunciation of the Iraqi insurgency movement, Mr. Bush made these points this way: “We love freedom and they hate freedom – that’s where the clash occurs. Freedom is not America’s gift to the world; it is God’s gift to the world.”

The idea of “right and true” moral ideals (or, for those who are more theologically minded, of “God’s gift to the world”) is potentially appealing. After all, if such truths exist, then they can be

*George W. Bush & the missionary position*

used to define an objective universal standard for assessing moral progress. The existence of objective goods – universally binding moral values or inalienable natural rights – would place everyone (insiders and outsiders, minority and majority factions) within a single frame of reference for judging what is right and wrong. It would lend rational authority to those who are well positioned or well organized enough to do the right thing. Interventions (political, economic, or military) might then be justified, so long as they are done for the sake of what is right and true – or, as Bob Dylan once facetiously put it, “with God on our side.”

If there really does exist a blueprint (for example, the Constitution of the United States of America) for the design of the single best human society, then resistance to the impulse to promote human progress on a global scale is irrational. But that is a very big ‘if.’ In the face of righteous appeals to use this country’s power and wealth to promote universal moral progress, a particular doubt sometimes arises in the minds of thoughtful people. Let’s call it the Bob Dylan question: Is it really possible to formulate a meaningful statement about moral rights, goods, duties, and values that is free of ethnocentrism, political self-interest, or the hazards of projecting one’s own local or denominational point of view? Those who have rational doubts, or even fears, about righteous crusades justified in the name of universal moral progress harbor such anxieties because they suspect that the whole enterprise is a form of high-minded imperial domination by those who are powerful or wealthy enough to mandate that everyone should see and value the world in only one way, namely, according to the dominant group’s pre-

ferred (and quite possibly parochial) set of values.

It is one thing to assert that there are universal objective truths about the physical world – for example, that force equals mass times acceleration everywhere you go on the globe. It is quite another to assert that the existing contemporary social norms and moral judgments of one’s own group are not products of local history, context, preference, or taste, but rather are accurate representations of universal moral facts. Human arrogance assumes many forms, but it appears undisguised when those in possession of power and wealth assert that whatever they desire is the kind of thing that all morally decent and fully rational human beings ought to desire, regardless of history, context, and culture. Or so the worry goes.

One way to get a better sense of the skeptic’s response to such generalized moral progressivism is to reflect on a counterclaim that is common to the doctrines of pluralism, relativism, subjectivism, and contextualism. While those four doctrines are distinguishable from each other (for example, not all pluralists are subjectivists), they share the conviction that anyone who asserts that his or her own particular moral judgments are universally right and true is probably wrong. Consider, for example, the critique of the idea of non-negotiable moral demands and right and true values developed by U.S. Appellate Judge (and University of Chicago legal scholar) Richard Posner, who is both a moral subjectivist and a moral relativist of sorts.

In his 1997 Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures at Harvard University titled “The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory,” Judge Posner states:

I shall be arguing first of all that morality is local, and that there are no interesting

moral universals. There are tautological ones, such as “murder is wrong,” where “murder” means “wrongful killing,” or “bribery is wrong,” where bribery means “wrongful paying.” But what counts as murder, or as bribery, varies enormously from society to society. There are a handful of rudimentary principles of social cooperation – such as don’t lie all the time or don’t break promises without any reason or kill your relatives or neighbors indiscriminately – that may be common to all human societies, and if one wants to call these rudimentary principles the universal moral law, that is fine with me. But they are too abstract to be criterial. Meaningful moral realism is therefore out, and a form (not every form) of moral relativism is in. Relativism in turn invites an adaptationist conception of morality, in which morality is judged – nonmorally, in the way that a hammer might be judged well or poorly adapted to its goal of hammering nails into wood or plaster – by its contribution to the survival, or other ultimate goals, of a society or some group within it. Moral relativism implies that the expression “moral progress” must be used with great caution, because it is perspectival rather than objective; moral progress is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>1</sup>

In his Harvard lectures, Judge Posner offers a sustained attack on the idea that there are right and true universal moral facts that can be usefully applied by leaders to resolve moral disputes between groups. He embraces moral subjectivism, in the sense that he believes that there are no reasonably concrete transcultural moral truths – thus, in effect, implying that there is no independent or

1 Richard A. Posner, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6; and Posner, “The Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures: The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory,” *Harvard Law Review* 111 (7) (1998): 1637–1717.

transcendent or objective domain of the right and the true, no “objective order of goodness” to which one might appeal to rationally justify one’s particular judgments about what is right or wrong. Posner allows that he is a moral relativist, in that he believes “that the criteria for pronouncing a moral claim valid are given by the culture in which the claim is advanced rather than by some transcultural (‘universal’) source of moral values, so that we cannot, except for polemical effect, call another immoral unless we add ‘by our lights.’”<sup>2</sup> He argues that “many moral claims are just the gift wrapping of theoretically ungrounded (and ungroundable) preferences and aversions.” Those relatively few moral claims that are unchanging for all people everywhere, he suggests, are unchanging and universal primarily because they are empty truisms or abstract tautologies, devoid of any useful content. It is possible that Judge Posner might admire President Bush’s speech for its polemical effect, but presumably not for the truth of its message.

Another kind of skeptical response to missionary moral progressivism involves considering the character and implications of the historical and cross-cultural persistence of deep human disagreements about the design of a good society. Consider, for example, what the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, writing ten years prior to the events of September 11, had to say about what he describes as “the outstanding political problem of our time.”

The political problem, as Hampshire perceives it, is the relation between “self-consciously traditional societies” and “liberal democratic societies.” In

2 Posner, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory*, 8.

George W.  
Bush & the  
missionary  
position

self-consciously traditional societies, he suggests, “priests of the church, or rabbis or imams or mullahs, and other experts in the will of God maintain a single conception of the good which determines the way of life of the society as a whole.” Liberal democratic societies, in contrast, “permit, or encourage, a plurality of conceptions of the good.” By his account:

The severity of this problem was for a long time concealed by the belief in a positivist theory of modernization, a theory that is traceable to the French Enlightenment. The positivists believed that all societies across the globe will gradually discard their traditional attachments to supernatural forces because of the need for rational, scientific and experimental methods of thought which a modern industrial economy involves. This is the old faith, widespread in the 19th Century, that there must be a step-by-step convergence on liberal values, on “our values.” We now know that there is no “must” about it and that all such theories of human history have a predictive value of zero.

Hampshire goes on to say:

In fact, it is not only possible but, on the present evidence, probable that most conceptions of the good, and most ways of life, which are typical of commercial, liberal, industrialized societies will often seem altogether hateful to substantial minorities within these societies and even more hateful to most of the populations within traditional societies in other continents. As a liberal by philosophical conviction, I think I ought to expect to be hated, and to be found to be superficial and contemptible, by a large part of mankind. In looking for principles of minimum justice, one needs to see that one’s way of life and habits of speech and of thought, not only seem wrong to large populations [but] can be repugnant in

very much the same way in which alien habits of eating, or alien sexual customs, can be repugnant.<sup>3</sup>

If Hampshire is right, then that sense of repugnance is likely to be mutual. Witness, for example, the utter contempt with which human rights activists – hailing mostly from liberal commercial industrialized societies and from descendents of Westernized elite populations in former first-world colonies – often react to the beliefs and practices concerning gender, discipline, sexuality, modesty, dress, reproduction, family life, etc. endorsed by majority populations in Africa and Asia. If Hampshire is right, then that mutual sense of repugnance is not likely to go away, in part because there are just too many values, and no universally binding and rational way to determine for all times and places which of them ought to be given priority in the design of the good society. Under such conditions of rational uncertainty, political wisdom may favor the balancing of power, rather than the mere assertion of it, for the sake of a sustainable live-and-let-live policy of mutual co-existence. Whether mutual repugnance might then one day be transformed into mutual sufferance, or even mutual toleration, remains to be seen. Hoping for a mutuality of understanding may be asking for too much – though one still may hope.

For some years my colleagues and I have been conducting research on moral reasoning by women and men in a Hindu temple town in India and in a secular middle-class community in the United

3 Stuart Hampshire, “Nationalism,” in Edna Margalit and Avishai Margalit, eds., *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991); and Hampshire, “1991 Presidential Address,” *American Philosophical Association Proceedings* 65 (1991): 19 – 27.

States. The moral judgments of the residents of these two communities diverge on many issues – for example, on whether an arranged marriage is preferable to a ‘love marriage’; whether family honor is more important than personal freedom; whether a refusal to treat a patient at a hospital is more serious or less serious than a violation of pollution norms or of food taboos; and whether the sexual division of labor in the family is moral or immoral.

The moral views of the men and women within each of the two cultural communities are very similar. But across the two cultural communities the moral views of members of the same sex differ in many ways: when one looks at concrete moral judgments worldwide, there is no universal moral ‘sisterhood,’ just as there is no universal moral ‘brotherhood.’ Moreover, each community has somewhat different conceptions of which values and moral goods are most important in life. The predominantly secular middle-class Americans (female and male) emphasize what might be called the ethics of autonomy, which includes an elaborate discourse about the freedom to have the things you want, social equality, and human rights. Meanwhile, the Hindus (female and male) in the Indian temple town emphasize what might be called the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity, which includes an elaborate discourse about duty, sacrifice, loyalty, purity, pollution, and personal sanctity.<sup>4</sup>

4 See, for example, Richard A. Shweder, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller, “Culture and Moral Development,” in James Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, eds., *Cultural Psychology: Essays in the Comparative Study of Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); originally published in Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb, eds., *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Rich-

When conducting this type of research in comparative ethics, one witnesses two historically grounded communities, each full of men and women who invoke local conceptions of truth and virtue, and who justify their social norms in the light of those conceptions. While conducting this type of research one also frequently observes the astonishment, dismay, and at times outrage and revulsion experienced by members of each community when they realize just how different their convictions, judgments, and feelings about right and wrong can be from those of people in other lands. Of course, the existence of persistent differences in values or in views about the nature of a good society does not necessarily imply a hostile or aggressive clash of cultures; after all, human history – aside from the intermittent periods of conflict – has been about finding a way to live and let live in a world of unavoidable differences. Only monists and missionaries think that differences must be removed, or that differences will just disappear once everyone is ‘liberated’ and free to see the light.

There is a third way to get a better sense of the skeptic’s response to missionary moral progressivism – by recognizing that right and true values are not lived timelessly and in the abstract but, rather, that they are always made manifest and given character in some here and now, in some local, thickly substantive, and history-laden tradition of value.

ard A. Shweder, Nancy C. Much, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Lawrence Park, “The Big Three of Morality (Autonomy, Community and Divinity) and the Big Three Explanations of Suffering,” in Richard A. Shweder, *Why Do Men Barbecue?: Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); originally published in Allan Brandt and Paul Rozin, eds., *Morality and Health* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

George W.  
Bush & the  
missionary  
position

In his State of the Union address, President Bush called on Americans to defend and promote right and true values that are unchanging for all people everywhere, such as free speech, respect for women, and limits on the power of the state – but he added the disarming qualification that “We have no intention of imposing our culture.” His words seem to suggest that he wants the United States to exercise moral leadership (i.e., to use our wealth and military power to build new nations), but without being parochial or ethnocentric in our conception of progress.

All this sounds well and good, at least in the abstract – but what do his words mean concretely? One might interpret them as implying that he is not an American exceptionalist; that he is not in possession of an imperial vision of a single best way of life to be enforced or promoted by well-financed, powerful, and coercive national (or first-world) institutions; that he does not really believe that the currently occupied or soon to be occupied peoples or nations of the world should be strongly encouraged or reshaped to be just like the United States in their social, political, family, and gender norms. Taken literally and seriously, his qualification that “We have no intention of imposing our culture” might even suggest that Mr. Bush recognizes that the abstract ideals of free speech, equal justice, religious tolerance, respect for women, and so forth may take very different forms in different religious, cultural, moral, and legal traditions. His words might even lead us to suppose that he recognizes that right and true values are often in conflict with each other and may be weighed and balanced differently and valued in different degrees by rational and morally decent people in other societies.

On the other hand, perhaps the president’s careful language should not be

taken seriously. It is possible to read his qualification simply as an ambiguous aside, or even as a calculated rhetorical device designed to counter accusations that the United States is not a humble nation and is really just intent on controlling the world and spreading its way of life hither and yon. So before following the president on his moral mission, one would like to be clear about what precisely he has in mind when he appeals to universal values and enumerates his non-negotiable demands. What are the specific shape and substance of those demands? What are their policy implications?

For example, are we to believe that current interpretations of the right to freedom of speech in the United States should be universally binding? In the United States, the right to freedom of speech allows public expressions of hatred for ethnic, racial, and religious groups. That is not true in India and many other parts of the world where ethnic conflict is a potential threat to social order, and hence communal hate speech and even blasphemy is against the law. Would Mr. Bush, having no intention to impose our culture on others, accept that other nations might legitimately interpret the right to free speech more restrictively, or at least have a different view of what counts as a clear and present danger?

Are we to believe that our principle of the separation of church and state, which disallows the promulgation of theological doctrines in our public schools, should be universally binding? Or would the president allow, out of respect for cultural differences, that Germany, like other European nations where religious instruction is an option in the public schools, is entitled to its somewhat different design for society, guided by its own historical lights? Are we to believe that current interpreta-

tions of the right to family privacy in the United States are non-negotiable? In the United States, the right to family privacy makes it unthinkable that the power of the state could be exercised to create the kind of laws restricting the number of children allowed per family that China has enacted to counter overpopulation. Would our president accept that other nations might legitimately interpret the right to family privacy differently?

What about the ideal of respect for women? Is that ideal compatible with Muslim and Hindu traditions of family values in which women gain power and feel dignified by virtue of being guardians of the home?<sup>5</sup> Would the president, not wanting to impose our culture on others, grant that there are cultural locations in the world where wearing sexually suggestive, or ‘immodest,’ modes of dress in public is socially prohibited in some measure out of respect for women?

In other words, before embracing this crusade one wants to know whether there is a specific face to Mr. Bush’s moral vision – for example, the face of bourgeois liberal feminism, or the face of American constitutionalism as interpreted by our current Supreme Court, or the face of middle-class Judeo-Christian family life in the United States today. Most importantly, since public policy and proposals for nation building require that leaders make the move from the abstract to the concrete, it seems reasonable to wonder how it is possible to enforce a universal vision of moral progress without imposing one’s own paro-

5 See, for example, Usha Menon, “Neither Victim Nor Rebel: Feminism and the Morality of Gender and Family Life in a Hindu Temple Town,” in Richard A. Shweder, Martha Minow, and Hazel Markus, eds., *Engaging Cultural Differences: The Multicultural Challenge in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2002).

chial conception of things on others. Once the substance of Mr. Bush’s moral vision is made transparent, all may not be well and good, given the hazards of ethnocentrism.

A skeptical response to missionary moral progressivism does not entail rejecting the very idea of moral progress – but it does require remaining alert to the ways in which this idea may be abused and dangerously misused. Moral progress means having more and more of something that is ‘desirable,’ that is to say, something that ought to be desired because it is good. Moral decline means having less and less of it. Thus, the transcendental semantics of the concept are pretty clear. At times the application of the idea can be clear, too, especially if we are able to agree on our description of a specific good (e.g., taking care of parents in their old age, reducing the frequency of contagious diseases, increasing personal freedom). We can then make objective judgments about moral progress and decline, with respect to that good. Indeed, arguably there are non-negotiable demands of human reason that apply universally in international attempts to understand and evaluate any particular political tradition or cultural way of life. For example, the requirement that ‘insiders’ should be willing and able to justify themselves (to anyone who is willing and able to listen in an open-minded way) by pointing to one or more of the recognizable goods served by their own social, cultural, and political norms and practices. Also, for example, the requirement that ‘outsiders’ should be willing and able to listen to others in an open-minded sort of way – fully aware of the hazards of provincialism, parochialism, and ethnocentrism.

We can, of course, go even further, morally mapping the world. Thus, if increasing the likelihood of child survival

*George W. Bush & the missionary position*



during the first nine months after birth is the measure of moral progress, then Europe and the United States are objectively more morally advanced than India and Brazil. If increasing the likelihood of child survival during the first nine months after conception is the measure of moral progress, then Tunisia and Mexico (where abortion rates are relatively low) are objectively more morally advanced than Eastern Europe and the United States (where abortion rates are relatively high – 50 percent in parts of Eastern Europe and nearly 25 percent in the United States when I last looked). The result of this exercise depends entirely on what we elect to include in our list of moral goods.

One does not have to subscribe fully to Richard Posner's particular version of moral subjectivism-relativism; seemingly empty or tautological moral abstractions (such as "treat like cases alike and different cases differently") and ethical truisms (such as "cruelty is wicked") may still be valuable in starting the right type of conversations (about the relevant, and irrelevant, ways particular cases are alike or different; about which deliberate inflictions of pain are arbitrary and unjustified, and which not, and why). Nor does one have to endorse (as I do) Stuart Hampshire's particular version of rationally irreconcilable conceptions of a good society, to recognize that there is much that is discretionary in any decision about how to name and identify specific goods and how to map the world morally.<sup>6</sup> For example, the sheer quantity of life, or reproductive fitness, is the measure used by evolutionary biologists for estimating the success of a population. By that standard, how are we to evaluate the birth control pill, the legal-

ization of abortion, and the reduction of family size in the high-tech societies of the first world? Do we narrate a story of cultural decline? The mapping of the relative moral progress of nations, cultures, or human societies can be as subjective, hazardous, and polemical as it is seductive and beguiling – which is yet one more reason for the skeptic's response.

Nation building through bombing may appear to be an ironic perversion of the idea of promoting moral progress. Nevertheless, there is really nothing new in President Bush's claim of a moral high ground to justify the dropping of bombs. Long before the invention of hellfire missiles and five-thousand-pound bunker busters, missionary moral progressives – some armed with a secular sense of a great Northern European Enlightenment, others armed with a religious sense of a great Christian Awakening – felt entitled to civilize and uplift non-Western peoples; to assume military, political, and economic control over their lands in order to liberate and enlighten them, if not save their souls.

These moral crusaders didn't think of themselves as invaders or intruders, but rather as architects of a more just social order, as bearers of transcendent gifts, bringing the blessings of education, democracy, and human rights to peoples they pitied (or loathed) as backward, primitive, or barbaric. Saving the children, for example, is what Australia's 'enlightened' liberal Anglo-Saxon population thought it was doing when it took children away from their Aboriginal par-

---

realism ("moral universalism without the uniformity"), see Richard A. Shweder, "Moral Realism without the Ethnocentrism: Is It Just a List of Empty Truisms?" in András Sajó, ed., *Human Rights with Modesty: The Problem of Universalism* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2004).

6 For a more detailed evaluation of the philosophical stances of Posner, Hampshire, and Bush, a discussion of the hazards of ethnocentrism, and a defense of one version of moral

ents and placed them in mainstream middle-class homes and missionary schools.

Perhaps the most famous version of missionary moral progressivism was the nineteenth-century British understanding of the ‘white man’s burden,’ which obligated the Victorian generation to protect the unfortunate residents of the ‘dark continents’ of the world, to rid the populations of Africa and Asia of poverty, savagery, tyranny, ignorance, and disease. In that era, the French and the Germans, like the British, believed their wealth and power were divine signs of their virtue. Like George Bush today, they assumed that Western views were “right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere” – so universally right and true that people everywhere would soon enough acknowledge these views as their own.

In the light of that history, Mr. Bush should not be surprised by the fierce resistance his American missionaries now face in Iraq – which is perhaps the latest evidence that even the most impeccably ‘enlightened’ or liberal moral views about political legitimacy, gender relations, and the specific character and application of human rights are in fact *not* universally regarded as right and true by all people everywhere.

Until relatively recently, the president’s views about America’s moral role in the world had relatively broad support, and spanned the political spectrum in the United States, producing some strange bedfellows: Paul Wolfowitz and Hillary Clinton, Donald Rumsfeld and Michael Ignatieff, Thomas Friedman and William Safire. Nevertheless, not every American was enthralled with the president’s 2002 State of the Union address, nor did every American feel a strong sense of solidarity with the imperial alliance of neoconservatives and liberals

that eventually fostered the invasion of Iraq.

Fifteen months after the president’s speech, I watched a television broadcast of an American flag being lifted by a marine over the Iraqi port town of Umm Qasr. As I watched, I wondered whether we were at risk of losing our way as a people. Indeed, throughout the occupation, the stream of images from Iraq continues to feel disturbingly discordant with our national identity. Something seems terribly wrong with the picture when it is our country that begins to look like the Empire (rather than the Federation) in the *Star Wars* trilogy. Something seems to have gone terribly wrong with human understanding (and, of course, with international diplomacy) when grievances of the sort enumerated in our own Declaration of Independence (“Quartering large bodies of troops among us,” “depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury,” “declaring themselves vested with the power to legislate for us”) are taken up for use as accusations against the United States.

As the world has gone to pieces, such feelings and judgments are being more frequently expressed. There was, and increasingly there is, a notable divide in reactions to the president’s use of American wealth and power to promote a global conception of human progress. But the divide is not between Left and Right, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican. It hints at a tension of a different kind. The split is between those who embrace universalizing missionary efforts of either a religious (Christian, Islamic) or secular (human rights, international liberationist) sort – and those who react to such missions with diffidence, doubt, distrust, indignation, and even fear.

When powerful, highly motivated, well-intended, well-connected, and well-financed public or private activists

*George W. Bush & the missionary position*

*Richard A.  
Shweder  
on  
progress*

decide to launch global campaigns to spread 'the good news,' enlighten the ignorant, civilize the savages, or impose some unitary conception of truth or of the good life, there are still many people in the world who think there is good reason to get nervous – and to raise the standard for critically evaluating the conviction that there is only one God and that we are acting with Him (or Her) on our side.