Sullivan’s “unfinished conversations” between different cultural traditions that continue for generations and enable disagreements to be waged by activists and politicians rather than gun thugs. Consider the parallel with missionary Christianity, which could be both an imposition and a vehicle for defensive reorganization.

So there’s an important difference between 1) analyzing how human rights can lead to moral imperialism and 2) assuming that human rights, along with any other exercise of Western thought or influence, is fated to become moral imperialism. This second position is reductionist and leads to no good. We all need to face the likelihood that our current niche in the safety zones of global capitalism is coming to an end. Gender and racial equity is not assured even in the most prosperous countries, let alone elsewhere. There is no shortage of religious zealots who would like to destroy the Enlightenment and their targeted killing of the civil population. Faced with this new reality, my response to Goode’s provocative question necessarily takes a detour into the field of violence, a detour that any contemporary reflection on the topic of human rights must take into account.

**Valuing Enlightenment Ideals**

In conclusion, if you plan to continue speaking your mind regardless of your gender, ethnicity and sexual preference, then stand up for the flawed but open-ended cultural tradition that makes it possible for you to do so. Won’t it be a shame if we are so busy critiquing the West, transcending the episteme, and multiplying our unconquerable subjectivities, that we fail to defend liberal guarantees and truth-standards in their hour of need?

Fortunately, Enlightenment ideals of equality, personal choice and empirical truth are attractive far beyond our own social boundaries. The permutations of these ideas in other cultures are endless and fascinating. The other traditions we study have helped us to appreciate the crimes and limits of the West. Thus we can safely acknowledge our vested interest in the Enlightenment and in the Western human rights tradition without disrespecting the rest of the human race.

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**Human Rights and State Violence**

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First started composing my thoughts in response to Mark Goodale’s question on whether the spread of human rights discourse since the end of the Cold War is a form of moral imperialism while conducting research in Lebanon this summer. These preliminary reflections were, however, hijacked by Israel’s military attack on Lebanon in mid-July, and the subsequent destruction the Israeli Defense Forces have visited upon the country’s infrastructure and their targeted killing of the civilian population. Faced with this new reality, my response to Goodale’s provocative question necessarily takes a detour into the field of violence, a detour that any contemporary reflection on the topic of human rights must take into account.

**Commentary**

**US and the Middle East**

For many of us who have watched events unfold in the Middle East over the last 10 years, it is clear that Israel’s war on Lebanon is a new front in the Bush administration’s ambitious plan to reshape the present and future map of the Middle East. This is evident in the unqualified military, strategic and diplomatic support Israel has received from the US government in Israel’s savage assault on Lebanon, and the Bush administration’s consistent refusal to support an early ceasefire that would hamper the execution of the Israeli-American mission—all this to the tune of cynically cheery remarks made by US State Department officials such as Condoleezza Rice that the devastation of Lebanon is evidence of the “birth pangs of a new Middle East.”

As news and pictures of civilian casualties (the majority of whom are children, women and the elderly) pour in, one cannot but ask what the relevance of human rights discourse is in this moment? How might this exercise of unobstructed violence lead us to reconsider what, if any, moral force does human rights discourse command in putting an end to this carnage? Or, as many in the Middle East are asking right now, is it not the case that the agenda of human rights and democracy is only a foil for the more insidious goals of the US to establish unparalleled imperial hegemony in the region? Why else, the victims of this unrelenting violence ask, would the international institutions be so incapable of intervening in the situation?

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