

America and Israel

Religions are ways of life and not merely the consciously intended practices of worship and pastoral service. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim ways of life are supposed to guide the adherents of those faiths in what they do all week long and not only in the ways they worship. Religions as ways of life generally function like the glasses through which we see things; we are not always conscious of the glasses (or our eyes) when we see things, even though they are what make it possible to focus on anything in particular.

In this light it is possible to understand why the *American way of life* is often overlooked when people talk about religion, even though it often challenges or conflicts with the ways of life called for by the scriptures and authorities of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communions. The American way of life might not structure our Saturday or Sunday worship services, but it certainly functions as the glasses through which many Americans see and make sense of their daily lives. Let me illustrate.

We will never adequately understand America's support for the State of Israel unless we recognize that support as an expression of the American civil religion or way of life, which is often in conflict or tension with other religious ways of life. I am discovering the depth of the tensions among these religions as I write a paper on three Zionisms, a paper that will be part of a forthcoming book on religion in international affairs. The three Zionisms are (1) American new-Israelitism, (2) Jewish Zionism, and (3) contemporary Christian Zionism. These three Zionisms are very powerful influences shaping political practice and foreign policy decisions.

Consider the current American presidential campaign. In May, one of Barack Obama's advisers on Middle East policy, Robert Malley, was strongly criticized by pro-Israel advocates (both Christians and Jews) for having said that Israel as well as the Palestinians had been responsible for the failure of peace talks during the Clinton administration and for meeting more recently with officials of Hamas, which now controls the Gaza region of the Palestinian territory and is considered a terrorist organization by the George W. Bush administration. Obama felt compelled to dismiss Malley immediately from any formal advisory role in his campaign and assured critics that he is as fully supportive of Israel as Hillary Clinton and John McCain are.

Commenting on the Malley-Obama incident, Gordon Rachman (*Financial Times*, 5/27/08) writes that it's a shame the presidential candidates cannot even raise critical questions about Israel without fear of being denounced by the powerful Christian and Jewish pro-Israel lobbies in the United States. "This taboo is all the more bizarre," says Rachman, "since the Israeli government itself is currently negotiating with Hamas." Rachman adds that the "last time I was in Jerusalem, Israeli officials complained to me that the US's refusal to talk to the Syrians was foolish Now it turns out that the Israelis themselves are holding talks with Syria—but sponsored by Turkey, not the US." Rachman also quotes a McCain spokesman who said, "It is easier to have an open discussion on Palestine in Tel Aviv than in Washington." "Why is the American debate so constrained?" asks Rachman. It is, he says, because Jewish and Christian evangelical voters are so "fervently pro-Israel." But why, we must ask, are those voters so fervently and powerfully pro-Israel?

An adequate answer to the last question cannot be developed here, but it would move along the following lines. American Christian Zionists are convinced that the end of history and God's final judgment of the world will follow the fulfillment of certain biblical prophecies, which include God's blessing or cursing of America depending on whether America stands firm behind the State of Israel. American Jewish Zionists are strongly pro-Israel not for reasons of biblical prophecy but out of commitment to the success of modern Jewish nationalism, and they, too, demand American commitment to Israel above all else. And why are these two Zionisms so closely connected to the United States? This is where American new-Israelitism comes in. The American way of life is predicated on the conviction that God chose this nation to be a new Israel, a light to the world, a city set on a hill, to lead the world to freedom and democracy. And this new-covenant nation should now support the State of Israel (which represents God's old covenant people returning to the Promised Land) in order that the fulfillment of end-times prophecies will include God's blessing (rather than cursing) of America.

Now you may think that all of this is theological nonsense or beside the point, politically speaking. But you'd be wrong. Even though America's actual influence in the Middle East has been declining and many of its pro-Israel policies failing, the unquestioned civil-religious faith of Americanism that helps to sustain Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism lives on and is even gaining strength among vast numbers of Americans. And if any candidate wants to succeed in politics, he or she had better toe this line if they want support from the pro-Israel lobby.

To open a genuine public debate about American policy in the Middle East, therefore, will take more than standard political arguments. It will require debates that go all the way down to the religiously deep ways of life that drive peoples and nations. And it will require coming to grips with the religious character of the American way of life.

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