



*The Jewish community should recognize the depth of religious faith among Christian evangelicals and treat the Religious Right with tolerance and respect.*

Why do Jews find it so difficult to talk to the Religious Right? And indeed, why do they fear the political activity of evangelical churches?

It does not seem to matter to Jews how strong the Religious Right's support for Israel may be. Or even that they profess support for the Judeo-Christian tradition as America's "civil" religion. Most Jewish liberals (and that's most American Jews) treat the Religious Right as proto-fascists ready to pounce upon their civil liberties and freedoms.

These fears notwithstanding, the fact is that the value concerns articulated by the Religious Right are, more and more, shared instinctively by millions of other Americans—even by Bill Clinton. Increasing numbers of Americans are rejecting what Stephen Carter of Yale has called the "culture of disbelief" in which the intellectual and cultural elite give primacy of place to non-belief and religious belief is deemed abnormal.

I once talked to the sophisticated and well-educated rabbi of a large Conservative congregation who had joined a well-known anti-pornography group. Most of its leaders were Catholic or evangelical. Its membership was largely blue collar. "Rabbi," I suggested, "these are not your kind of people." He told me that he had joined up because he was embarrassed before the priests and ministers of his city. He didn't want his spiritual colleagues to think that Jews don't care about pornography.

This anecdote casts in sharp relief the mutual misunderstandings between Jews and the Religious Right. The great fear that Jews have about the Religious Right is in part ideological. It is also, in part, style: Jews think of themselves as urban sophisticates, while evangelicals are stereotyped as populist bumpkins. And in part Jews fear that conversion is on the Religious Right's hidden agen-

da. But that anxiety also reflects a more basic and principled concern—that "rendering unto Caesar" requires that religion's role in political life should be limited and delineated.

The traditional view is that democratic life requires a separation of religious conviction from political decision making. The argument runs as follows: Religious justification is based on faith, not reason. Discourse in a democratic society requires a common language with which everyone can engage. Thus while political discourse in a democracy can be grounded on religious conviction, it need not, and perhaps should not, be justified or explained through religious language alone.

Whether or not it is possible to have morality without religion (a problem, however posed, to be resolved by wiser heads), the fact remains that many of the public policies proposed by the Religious Right can be justified from a purely secular rationale. Commentators like William Bennett in their focus on the notion of virtue have begun to do this.

If the Religious Right wants to engage the Jewish community, it needs to adopt a posture of religious forbearance in the political arena and develop a public rhetoric of inclusion and tolerance. Whenever possible, they should justify their religious views by appeals to the public good, not only to religious faith.

To advocate this change is not to denigrate religious motivation or to suggest that religious conservatives ought not speak with a religious voice. Nor is it to deny that many claims for accommodation of religious needs under the First Amendment's "free exercise" clause can only be defended on religious grounds. It suggests only that when speaking outside the world of the church, more broadly based arguments will be more successful.

Some years ago the Reverend Jerry Falwell and I discussed Jewish concerns about invoking the name of "our Lord Jesus Christ" when making public benedictions. Jews, I told him, feel excluded from the faith community when such a prayer is uttered at a public gathering. "Why," I asked, "can't you pray to Our Lord, or even to God the Father?" "Because that's not my God," he told me. "I can't pray to a generic god and you should not expect me to."

Reluctantly, I agreed. But I also pointed out that he can't expect Jews to find such a denominational prayer congenial and that if he wishes to be inclusive he needs to search for a locution that makes clear that "as those of us who are Christians would say," etc.

There is evidence that many leaders of the Religious Right recognize the need to reach beyond its membership. In a seminal article in *Policy Review*, Ralph Reed, Jr., Executive Director of the Christian Coalition, called on the Religious Right to articulate a broader issues agenda, including crime, taxation, welfare reform and education.

The Jewish community too has its responsibilities. It needs to accept the depth and legitimacy of religious faith among Christian evangelicals. It must extend to the Religious Right the same tolerance that Jews themselves expect and enjoy in American society. Only when Jews treat the Religious Right with respect can we demand pluralism and tolerance in return.

Will such forthrightness evaporate our differences? Likely not. But should we take this path, while disagreements will no doubt abound, our mutual fears and suspicions will surely abate. ●

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