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Reading Politics Through Scripture: International Relations, the Bible and Conservative Christianity¹

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Abstract

Whilst the rise of secularisation in the West is evident and well documented, the importance of religion and its power as a motivating force for people of faith cannot be underestimated. Taking as an example a narrative commonly espoused by conservative Christians around the status of Israel, this paper identifies some key lessons for policymakers in engaging with faith communities and argues for the inclusion of theological reflection in the policy toolbox.

Keywords

International relations, politics, Bible, Israel, policy, secularisation

It is something of an understatement to acknowledge that the last 20 years or so of global history has brought us one or two significant surprises. The events of our times have been at times horrific, at times astonishing, and now and then remarkably uplifting, but is not only the events that have been so surprising: the deeper cultural changes which sometimes arise in response to those events and experiences (and, in other contexts, have provoked them) have been, if anything, more dramatic. The world we knew in the 1990s is not the world that will welcome in the 2020s, and the social predictions of earlier years now seem almost laughable with the passing of time.

It seems to me that the traditional narrative around secularisation falls into this category. God is not, after all, dead. Clearly religion has lost the privileged status that it had in many contexts; the decline of belief in the West is well-evidenced and frequently explored. But on the global stage, what is noteworthy is rather how religious we still are. The twentieth century's presumption of the end of faith (or, perhaps, to step back my rhetoric a little, its privatisation and marginalisation) has

¹ This paper was originally written for a symposium on religion and politics held at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University in March 2017. An earlier version of the paper was also delivered at the Religion and Politics seminar of the International Studies Association Annual Meeting in Baltimore, MD, that same month. I am grateful to colleagues who participated in that symposium for their feedback and suggestions.

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proven to be at least in need of modification. Religion is not dead, and not even sleeping. It is undoubtedly changing, and has a long way yet to go in this process, perhaps. But writing faith out of the story of humanity was, it is now evident, a futurology fail of epic proportions.

It seems to me that a large part of the problem with some of the earlier secularisation models and a key reason for their ultimate failure at global level is that, consciously or otherwise, they tended to treat religion as just one competing ideology or metanarrative among many. It was often assumed that with the broader cycle of historical development, as ideas come into and out of prominence, that religion, so dominant for centuries, would soon have had its time, would fall into terminal decline. And if we were to treat religion as an idea, then this does make good sense. Ideas do not last unchanged forever. They all have their season in the sun, only to be replaced by 'better' ideas as the world moves on. The most obvious options for sidelining or replacing religion are, on the one hand, perhaps to deprivilege it and invite it to compete with other political and cultural ideologies for market dominance; or, alternatively, to exclude the idea of religion from debate, push it out of the mainstream altogether by banning religious discourse from public life in some way. But both 'marketplacings' and 'no platforming' religion have been tried in both theoretical and practical contexts and have failed. In fact, it seems to me that both options are in fact ultimately doomed to failure, irrespective of the thoughtfulness of their implementation, because both models fail to appreciate that religion is so much more than just a metanarrative. Individual faiths can be understood as ideologies, sure. Individual religions have succeeded at least in part because they were ideas whose time and opportunity came, and their individual traditions will continue to develop and come into and out of prominence in various locations at various stages of history. The story of the last century of Christianity and the dramatic shift of its power-base to the Global South demonstrates this clearly, as, arguably, does the rise of Pentecostalism. But religion in itself has been a consistent phenomenon in the human story, for good or ill, and it is only as other epic metanarratives phase in and out of vogue that it has repeatedly been eclipsed and re-revealed. So my suggestion is that religion is neither going away, nor coming back – it has always been there. Perhaps from time to time it has been underestimated, and it has often been overlooked, but the collapse of so many other previously-cherished worldviews since the end of the Cold War has left religion standing alone as the dominant idea-pillar of our generation. Religion of all forms, including ideological commitments to its rejection, shapes our world more than could ever have been imagined a generation ago. It therefore has to be dealt with intelligently as a global phenomenon and a cultural fundamental.

However, although we are now starting to take religion seriously at global level, it seems to me there is still a widespread failure to appreciate in practical terms quite how important religion is for *individuals* as a motivating force. I am sure we have all seen how passionately religious believers can cling to their beliefs, sometimes in the face of evidence which might be seen by others as contradicting their belief. Again, this is because religious belief is not just an idea as traditionally understood. For those with deep religious commitments, particularly within conservative religious traditions, their faith is not a part of their life, one aspect of their identity; it is all of it. It is not something they can switch on and off. It is not something they give mere intellectual assent to, but it is their entire motivating force. Their religion is not a factor that feeds into their broader thinking and approach to life – it is the lens through which they view everything. And the more conservative the religious perspective they adopt, often the more dominant, prominent and sharply focussed that lens is. The danger is that they can tend to reinforce both their lenses and their wider beliefs by surrounding themselves only with others like them – listening to those who feel similarly and excluding from their world those who think differently. For ‘policy experts’ to engage with conservative faith communities without a genuine appreciation of their beliefs and needs and in terms that make little sense to them only adds to their hostility to those outside the community and reinforces their scepticism towards ‘liberal elites’ such as academics.

What I will call for the purposes of this paper ‘Conservative Protestant Christianity’, aligns broadly, though not absolutely, with the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions (and some of what I say will be true of some Roman Catholic expressions of Christianity too). I speak as a Pentecostal myself, albeit very much on the more progressive wing of the movement. Let me just add, though, that ‘conservative’ is very different from ‘fundamentalist’, which itself should not be conflated with ‘extremist’. This community is most obviously seen and most easily studied in its political context in the USA, where it accounts for around 1 in 4 of the US population.³ We are told that 81% of white Evangelicals voted for President Trump, a higher proportion than for any previous Presidential candidate, and it certainly appears that they did so on the basis of their social ethics – particularly fears over religious freedom and deep hostility to abortion.⁴ After Trump’s first

³ Cf. for example Becka A. Alper and Aleksandra Sandstrom, ‘If the U.S. had 100 people: Charting Americans’ religious affiliations’, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/14/if-the-u-s-had-100-people-charting-americans-religious-affiliations/

⁴ Sarah Pulliam Bailey (2016), ‘White Evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, exit polls show’, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for->

hundred days in office, his approval ratings among white Evangelicals were significantly higher than among the population as a whole.⁵ Even though it is the traditional denominations that are generally labelled 'mainline', Conservative Protestants account for approaching twice as many of the US's Christians, and their numbers are broadly holding steady in the face of decline in other Christian denominations.⁶ Furthermore, they are more likely to be more deeply committed to their religious tradition, and, as I said, understand their faith as the overriding motivating factor in their decision making, lifestyle, worldview and actions.

I first came to appreciate how radical a realisation the importance of religion as an motivation for action was at the end of a major project on British megachurches and social engagement which concluded in 2016.⁷ Time and time again when asked, the church members involved in these social concern projects explained to us that they did what they did in response to God's love for them and as a sign of his love for all humanity. It was not fundamentally about getting conversions or inviting people to join the church. They saw the social challenges of their community through distinctive religious lenses and were inspired by their faith to act. To me, as a scholar of religion who also happens to be a practicing Christian, that seems a little unremarkable, but what did surprise me was that the non-religious policymakers and politicians with whom we engaged clearly could not begin to understand this. Schooled in a secularising mode of operation, their intellectual frameworks did not at first accommodate any awareness of the motivational force of religion, or of the depth of commitment religious adherents exhibit to religious ideas and ideals.

So let me say bluntly and clearly: we really need to appreciate and fully grasp, therefore, that those who uphold a conservative religious ideal generally and genuinely believe what they say (whilst I'm talking predominantly of Christians, this is true of all faiths). They are not spinning. They are not repeating an empty party line just for their own political gain. Their commitment to their religion is absolute and non-negotiable because it is the framework through which they build their interaction with the wider world. They really do believe with all their

[donald-trump/?utm_term=.5b920a97fee7](https://www.donald-trump.com/?utm_term=.5b920a97fee7); the dismissal of these statistics by Joe Carter (2016), 'No, the majority of American Evangelicals did not Vote for Trump', <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/no-the-majority-of-american-evangelicals-did-not-vote-for-trump> is a little disingenuous, by my reading.

⁵ Gregory A. Smith (2017), 'Among white Evangelicals, regular churchgoers are the most supportive of Trump', www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/

⁶ Pew Research Centre (2015), 'America's Changing Religious Landscape',

<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

⁷ <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/megachurches>; the final conclusions of the project are to be published later in 2018.

hearts that abortion is so wrong because it is a breach of God's commandment against killing, irrespective of any other entirely rational and reasonable arguments. Equally – perhaps anomalously – some of them believe that the death penalty is appropriate despite its inhumanity, because the Bible says 'the soul that sins shall die' (Ezekiel 18:20), even though this passage has absolutely nothing to do with human judicial processes.

And they take their sacred texts seriously. Many conservative Christians don't view Genesis as a myth of origins, they consider it to be historical fact. They take the conquest narratives of Joshua literally; they believe in a real Babylonian exile and a real return; the real existence of Jesus goes of course without question; and they are equally confident in his real – and impending – return at the end of the age, presaged by various 'signs of the times' which can be seen in the present global geopolitical context by those who know what to look for. Whether they are wrong or right to think this way is irrelevant for our discussion – we need to appreciate that the Conservative Christian understanding of their faith and their scriptures impacts every area of how religious believers view policy, foreign and domestic, and, crucially, it impacts how they vote and what intervention they advocate. Given the increasing political influence of the religious right in the USA, there is, therefore, a very real assumption on their part that the perspectives they see as being biblical should shape government policy, if society is to be truly honouring to God. In such a scenario, there is little value in offering a response to these communities based entirely on a particular secular mode of understanding, because conservative communities view the world through religious eyes, and only respond to a theological agenda. In terms of international relations and foreign policy, conservative Christian attitudes to global affairs are governed and motivated by what they believe the Bible has to say, and they believe it has plenty to say about the world today. Nowhere is this belief more obvious, or arguably more problematic, than in the context of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, so let me illustrate my point here by reference to that example.⁸

Israel and the Challenge of The Land

As far as many Conservative Christians are concerned, the Bible offers a particular and very clear insight into this situation.⁹ A large proportion

⁸ Samuel Mohr, 'Understanding American Christian Zionism: Case Studies of Christians United for Israel and Christian Friends of Israeli Communities', *Journal of Politics & International Studies* 9 (2013), pp. 287-331 offers an excellent and thoughtful critique of two of the most prominent movements shaping conservative Christian responses to this issue and their core ideologies.

⁹ For example, popular publications addressing the issue include John Hagee, *In Defense of Israel: The Bible's Mandate for Supporting the Jewish State* (Lake Mary, FL:

believe it is their religious duty to ‘stand with Israel’,¹⁰ even if this practically means that they find themselves standing in opposition to Palestinian Christians. Those conservative Christians who adopt a Christian Zionist position do so because they cling to a particular reading of the biblical narrative, which follows these lines:

1. *The Bible explicitly claims that Israel was specifically and directly given the land by God.*

“On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” (Genesis 15:18-21).

The phrase ‘the land the Lord your God is giving to you’ is a prominent epithet for the promised land in the book of Deuteronomy (cf. e.g. Deut. 18:9; 26:1; 17:14; 16:20; 1:21), which presents itself as Moses’s last words to the people of Israel before they cross over the Jordan and begin the conquest of Canaan. The book of Joshua describes the efforts of the people to fully possess the land and – along with Deuteronomy and Numbers – talks frequently of the land as the Israelites’ ‘inheritance’ (cf. Josh. 11:23), with individual pieces of territory being specifically allocated in perpetuity to specific clans and families (cf. Joshua 13-21). It is worth noting that the boundaries of the land that God is described as giving to the people in Joshua 1:4 (cf. also Josh. 13-21) go significantly beyond the present (even extended and disputed) borders of the State of Israel. Furthermore, the territory that Kings David and Solomon are described as possessing is, if anything, greater still (2 Samuel 8, 10; 1 Kings 4:21, 24). Yet there are clear indications within the Bible that the conquest was not as comprehensive a victory as might be assumed. The book of Judges shows that the twelve tribes were not entirely successful in this quest, at least until the establishment of the monarchy. David conquers a city that up to his day was in Israelite territory but not in the possession of Israel to make it into his capital, Jerusalem. So, in the Conservative Christian narrative,

Frontline, 2007); John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World* (Lake Mary, FL: Frontline, 2005); John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East: What the Bible Says About the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990); Derek Prince, *The Key to the Middle East: Discovering The Future Of Israel In Biblical Prophecy* (Ada, MI: Chosen Books, repr. 2013); Timothy Dailey, *Apocalypse Rising: Chaos in the Middle East, the Fall of the West, and Other Signs of the End Times* (Ada, MI: Chosen Books, 2016).

¹⁰ The motto of one of the largest pro-Israel movements, Christians United for Israel, <https://www.cufi.org>

the Land (and more of the land than is presently possessed by the State of Israel) was God's gift to the Israelites, and so it belongs to the Jews today, and 'the Jews' must and can only be identified entirely and totally with the modern State of Israel (even though that is fundamentally secular in constitution and configuration). The Jews remain God's people in a distinctive sense. No one can withdraw God's rather generous offer of the Land to them, and if anything even the present boundaries of the State are insufficient, because he promised them even more than this.

2. The land they were given was not empty, but Israel was told by God to take the land from its inhabitants.

So, for example, God in Leviticus 20 tells the Israelites:

23 You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. 24 But I said to you, "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations (Leviticus 20:23-24).

Similarly in Joshua:

This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites (Joshua 3:10)

In other words, the land was occupied when God gave it to Israel. The biblical narrative suggests he gave it to them because of the wickedness of the various Canaanite tribes, but the long and short of it is, the land wasn't empty. Conservative Christians acknowledge this and indeed some of them have used it as justification for taking possession of Palestinian homes and territories, their argument being that the Palestinians had no right to lay claim to what was always Israel's land anyway.¹¹

3. Israel was told to kill those in its way

It is clear that the Israelites initially take possession of the land through terrible violence. At the taking of Jericho, for example, we are told:

¹¹ Cf. for example the explanation offered by Christian Friends of Israeli Communities, 'What is a Settlement?', <https://www.cfoic.com/what-is-settlement/>

20 When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. 21 They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys (Joshua 6:20-21).

Whilst (reassuringly) I have not personally heard any prominent Christians advocating a similar extermination of the Palestinians, there is certainly a clear line taken – for which, actually, the Bible arguably offers something of a justification too – that Israel's later problems arise partially from its failure to adequately follow through on the mass murder of the Canaanites. Certainly though the use of such extreme violence to sustain and extend one's hold upon one's territory is very plainly felt not only to be defensible but actually invited, if not required, by God himself. Christians United for Israel, for example, has consistently taken an extremely hard line on the negotiations with Iran and has objected to any de-escalation of hostilities.¹²

Let us pause a moment to reflect on the tradition I have just outlined, then. A couple of points immediately spring to mind. First, there is no sense of nuance or subtlety in the biblical interpretation here. The texts I have highlighted are often wrested from their context, taken literally and in their fullest possible meaning, and redeployed into a context which is at best only analogous to the biblical one. It seems to me the assumption that the promises made to the ancient kingdom automatically pass on to the contemporary secular state is problematic to say the least. And, for that matter, the promise of the land in the first instance is made to Abraham and his descendants, which *on even the Bible's own reading* include the descendants of Ishmael, the Arab world. In other words – it is not entirely obvious that the Bible does mean here precisely the Christian Zionists believe it says, and it is equally unclear that even if it does, its promises and instructions really apply to contemporary Israel.

However, the most significant political implications of this tradition for international relations are most significantly summarised in a fourth biblical assertion often made by conservative Christians:

4. Other nations are commanded to bless Israel

Part of God's promise – again initially to Abraham, but interpreted by Conservative Christians as being a promise to Israel, including the contemporary state, is:

¹² Cf. for example Christians United for Israel, 'Talking Points: Obama's Dangerous Iran Framework', <https://www.cufi.org/obamas-dangerous-iran-framework/>

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:1-3).

So conservative Christians argue that not only should Israel be supported, defended and 'blessed' because the Jews are God's chosen people, but also because standing with Israel is key to the success and wellbeing of their own nation. They believe they are commanded by God to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem' and promised that those who love Israel will prosper (Ps. 122). Any attempt to silence or rebuke Israel is met with howls of animosity and protest. The Simon Wiesenthal Centre rated President Obama's refusal to veto the UN rebuke to Israel in 2016 as 'the most anti-Semitic action of 2016',¹³ but even that indictment paled into insignificance in comparison with some of the criticism the abstention received from Christian leaders, including a major campaign to entirely de-fund the US contribution to the United Nations. In contrast, President Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy there was labelled 'one of most courageous political things that's been done in Washington in a long time' by leading Christian Zionist John Hagee.¹⁴

This strongly-held position arises not only – not primarily – from the pragmatic realisation that Israel is a key ally and the most truly democratic government in the region, but more from a deep theological conviction that God requires America to 'stand with Israel', both now and at the great end-time battle which all the nations of the world will join and which will result in the triumphant return of Jesus Christ to rule the earth for a thousand years. This belief is also widespread – the leading pro-Israel network Christians United for Israel, for example, now boasts well over 2 million members, considerably more than the Episcopal Church. Such communities are incredibly vocal, and together, carry just about enough weight to sway a national election. It would take an extremely brave politician to choose anything other than to side with this so-called biblical perspective on Israel.

Implications and Options

¹³ Valerie Richardson, 'Obama's refusal to veto anti-Israel U.N. vote ranked most anti-Semitic incident of 2016'

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/27/obama-refusal-israel-vote-most-anti-semitic-2016/>

¹⁴ Mark Martin, "'Biblical Timing of Absolute Precision": John Hagee Praises Trump's Jerusalem Decision', <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2017/december/biblical-timing-of-absolute-precision-john-hagee-praises-trumps-jerusalem-decision>

So what is to be done about this challenge? The first thing to note is religion has to be part of the solution. There is not going to be a successful resolution of the Palestinian issue that ignores religious traditions and expectations — partially because of the immense lobbying power of the Christian pro-Israel lobby in the USA and partially because of Jewish land ideologies. But there is little purpose in seeking a geopolitical solution which fails to handle the religious expectations. Finding any solution to this crisis will be incredibly challenging, but it will require policy engagement at the very highest level from those who are religiously literate, and that requires a conscious decision to educate our future diplomats and civil servants as well as our politicians and help them develop a nuanced appreciation of how to read and interpret religious narratives.

Second, it is worth noting that how seriously believers take their scriptures has huge implications in terms of our whole approach to countering radicalisation, and suggests that a theological approach there will be at least as important as a securitised one.

Third, if there is any value in my initial suggestions, then we need theologians and biblical scholars to join the policy and political debate. They have expertise that needs to be heard. They lack the political science and international relations underpinning that they need to help them work their ideas through and they cannot even think about working alone, but in an interdisciplinary context, led forward by international relations scholars, they can make a significant and positive contribution to at least developing better understanding and also, I think, to building interventions at home and abroad. And fourth, some of them need to be from conservative religious communities. It is unhelpful to assume that conservative religious ideologies are in themselves contemptible — should I say deplorable? — and parody them. These ideas do not need to be taken on board, but they do need to be understood and engaged on their own terms.

Fifth, Church leaders need to be responsible in their political interventions. They need to learn to express their views with caution and respect, to cherish diversity and to draw on some of the counter examples and alternative traditions within the Bible which offer a more positive, open and engaged worldview. There are plenty of these texts. The Old Testament Law encourages the people of God to care for the ‘alien in their midst’ and establishes special and separate provision for foreigners who live in the land. The New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan establishes that our neighbours are not always those who are like us, but may include those who are decidedly ‘other’ — our cultural and historic enemies. The Prophet Isaiah looks forward to a great day when the peoples of the world ‘shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore’ (Isa. 2:4).

Sixth, we need to appreciate that any substantive change will take a long period of time, and we need to focus our attention now on the next generation, in the hope of changing some of these ideologies before they are irreparably engrained. There is, however, no time like the present to make a start.

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