

FAITH, VALUES, AND GLOBAL STRUCTURES

Two recent books that have gotten national attention offer some hope that the majority religion in the United States, Christianity, may be finding a different political voice from the loud voice of the religious far right wing, with its knee-jerk hostility to global law and institutions. (Note of personal disclosure: I was brought up a Protestant fundamentalist but am now a universalist, neither a traditional Christian nor hostile toward Christianity.) In *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*, former President Jimmy Carter speaks of values in relation to U.S. foreign policy with the easy authority of an insider and a practitioner, and also with the jargon-free clarity of a seasoned politician.

He speaks of his own faith as a traditional Christian and a Southern Baptist, revealing how deeply committed he is to this point of view and also how a person of this persuasion may be at odds with the current militaristic and unilateralist foreign policy of American leaders. He has some startling things to say about the political dimension of the national divide on this subject. One example: “The sharp and growing difference over the issue of whether international disputes can better be resolved by diplomacy or by military action is the *most accurate predictor* of party affiliation—more important than gay marriage, homosexuality or abortion.” (p. 10.) Unfortunately, he doesn't provide the polling source of this fascinating observation. If it's true, it does help explain the difficulty peace-oriented NGO's have in maintaining a strictly non-partisan stance in supporting peace-oriented policies and politicians.

Carter makes a valuable contribution in defining a type of fundamentalism that is distinct from Christianity and the evangelical movement in general. In his view it has certain psychological characteristics that drive its outlook: “Almost invariably, fundamentalist movements are led by authoritarian males who...have an overwhelming commitment to subjugate women and to dominate their fellow believers.” (p.34.) From this observation, it's not difficult to see the motive behind the far-right's opposition to women's rights, as embodied in CEDAW. Carter wraps up a page of striking insights into this type of fundamentalism with this summary: “there are three words that characterize this brand of fundamentalism: rigidity, domination, and exclusion.” (p. 35.) It is probably not a coincidence that the new, radical American foreign policy Carter portrays in the rest of the book can best be summarized by those same three words. Rigidity and exclusion — “you are either with us or against us”— drive a refusal to negotiate with rivals. The alternative is to dominate and coerce, which in turn leads to a preference for economic threats and military options. With this emphasis, domination of the rest of the world requires that the U.S. be unconstrained by international law in dealing with the International Criminal Court and a multiplicity of treaties.

Carter's book is loaded with trenchant observations on a long list of international issues and personalities: John Bolton's accurate reflection of the current U.S. policy in his explicit rejection of all international law, the Neoconservatives and their drive to establish an uncontested U.S. military dominance in the Middle East, the U.S. abandonment of progress in negotiating accords with North Korea on nuclear weapons in favor of bellicose confrontation, the Bush Administration's hostile obsession with the International Criminal Court, the U.S. abandonment of its traditional adherence to human

rights in the course of the war on terror, the embracing of violence implicit in the radical new policy of preventive war, U.S. violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and the weakness of the U.S. commitment to deal with global poverty.

This book is a satisfying read for a person committed both to traditional religious values and American values, and also to a planetary evolution toward a cooperative, multilateral system of global governance that is the exact opposite of the current policy of American imperial dominance. One hopes that at least some people of a moderately conservative Christian stripe may read this book by one of their own and see a positive viewpoint they can link their values to a cooperative and law-abiding foreign policy rather than a domineering and violent one.

Jim Wallis's book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, also speaks to a far richer values framework than the narrow obsessions of the religious far right. Wallis begins with the powerful observation: "an enormous public misrepresentation of Christianity has taken place...many people around the world now think Christian faith stands for political commitments that are almost the opposite of its true meaning. How did the faith of Jesus come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American?" He often points out that abortion and to gay marriage, the hot-button issues exploited by the Republicans in the last election, are issues on which large percentages of Christians differ, and are less important than larger issues such as war and poverty, on which the Bible has much more to say.

Wallis's book is both more stridently Christian and more overtly passionate about justice and poverty, peace and human rights than is Carter's book, but it arrives at similar conclusions, namely that the values espoused by America's majority religion are far from those currently held and practiced by its government. Wallis criticizes both the political right and the left with the following observation: "One group would impose the doctrines of a political theocracy on their fellow citizens, while the other would deprive the public square of needed moral and spiritual values often shaped by faith."

Although *God's Politics* is about domestic issues as well, it devotes six chapters to international issues in a way that should hearten any proponent of peace and global governance. Wallis begins by decrying fear as a foundation for U.S. foreign policy and proposes alternatives that go to the core of what it is to be human. He rejects the eruption of "we're good, they're bad" theology and policy that poured forth after 9/11, and proposes going to the roots of terrorism to find the answer to how to fight it. He devotes chapters to Iraq, "Not a Just War," the (American) theology of empire, and means for effective peacemaking. He concludes with what he calls "the Micah challenge," the Biblical vision of the prophet Micah emphasizing that people can only beat their swords into plowshares when they have security against hunger and poverty, when the economic disparities that we have now are corrected by real action for social and economic justice.

Proponents of global governance will argue correctly that eliminating poverty alone will not also eliminate war, since armed, ego-centric nation-states could and probably would fight each other over ever-larger pieces of the world's pie even if everyone had minimally

enough. While this observation is true, we who look to structural solutions need also to recognize that no structures of global governance could maintain peace in the long run between “haves” and desperate have-nots. Our vision of a global democratic federation will only work if it successfully tackles poverty and creates economic justice in the world.

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