

The American Religion and the Christian Religion:
Theological Reflections on the 2008 Campaign *

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It may seem strange to discuss the American election theologically, but both McCain and Obama are men who have put their confessions of faith at the center of their public self-presentations.

I will address four points, as time allows

1. What is Christianity?
 - a. this will be very brief
2. What is the American religion?
3. How does this affect the campaign?
4. What has all this to do with the Jews, and in particular, with Israel?

I. Let us start with the more familiar: Christianity. In Christianity there is a divine economy of salvation directed to the individual. Divine providence is for the individual, and what is crucial is not this life but the life to come. Eternal life or the life to come is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is a divine person, the Son of God the Father. Faith in Jesus means Faith that Jesus is sent by His heavenly Father to save all human beings from the punishment which their sins have earned. All human beings have earned eternal punishment

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because no individual is capable through his own efforts of living according to God's commands. This is the famous doctrine of original sin.

God chose the Jews, according to Christian doctrine, but He chose them by giving them "a law which is not good," a law that cannot be fulfilled. Hence, had it not been for Jesus, God in effect damned the Jews, for their failure to fulfill the law He gave them.

The Jews are chosen but no Gentile nation (no גוי) can be chosen. In fact, as Augustine argues, peoples as such do not exist: a people is a group of individuals united by a shared good, but the only genuine good that can be shared is faith in Jesus Christ, and those who share that faith in Christ are not Armenians, or Australians, or Americans, but Christians.

According to Christian doctrine God has providence for human beings as such, but his providence is expressed in his relation to individual, and not to peoples. The Christian God is concerned with the salvation of all human beings, but no peoples are chosen in the sense that their fate as peoples in this world depends on whether they are righteous before God. Jesus saves only those individuals who have faith in Him, but God brings rain, or earthquakes, upon the just and unjust alike as His wisdom decrees.

II. what is the American religion

The American Religion is the beliefs about god and man that bind Americans together as Americans. How can there be an American religion? Don't Americans have separation of religion and state? To speak precisely, as Professor Gutfeld has suggested, what they have is a separation of church and state. Whatever it is to be an American cannot be captured by the doctrine of this or that church. This leaves open the possibility that the doctrine of the American religion is one that, until recently, was denied by all Christian churches – "the stone which the builders refused is become the cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22).

Let me point to a large, concrete piece of evidence that there is such an American religion. Those of you who have been in Washington DC. At one end of Mall is the capitol,

and the other end is a neoclassical temple, a temple erected by the Federal government. Inside the temple is a statue of Abraham Lincoln. The statue is modeled after accounts of the statue of Zeus at Olympia. On the two walls to the left and the right of the statue are inscribed two speeches of Lincoln's, the Gettysburg Address, and his Second Inaugural Address. Both are written in the holy tongue, in the English in which God gave the Bible to King James. The American religion is the religion of the people who built, maintain, and worship at that temple.

Of course, most Americans have in addition to their "American religion", other religions. The Christian majority of Americans have, in addition to their civic religion, a personal religion, faith in Jesus Christ as their "personal savior," with appropriate doctrines about sin, redemption, atonement, and the proper organization of the Church.

What then, is the religion of the Americans? Here I will take as my source John McCain's 1999 memoir, Faith of My Fathers. McCain speaks of that faith as threefold (Faith of My Fathers, 212):

1. faith in god
2. faith in country
3. faith in one's fellows

First, faith in G-d. Faith in G-d is expressed in the creed which John McCain once saw written on a cell wall in his North Vietnamese Prison, inscribed there by a fellow prisoner: the creed: "I believe in G-d, the Father Almighty" (254). Note in this creed there is no mention of the Son! Readers of Rosenzweig should note that He is the Father Almighty. He is not "our father," אבִינוּ.

Faith in G-d the father Almighty is faith in the G-d of the Hebrew Bible, faith that he rewards those peoples who serve Him by upholding justice. The reward is this-worldly, bringing them into and maintaining them in a land "flowing with milk and honey." If the Americans are faithful to G-d and uphold their covenant of justice, he will grant them victory over their enemies, peace with their neighbors, and prosperity, so that "each man may dwell under his own fig and vine, and none shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4)

Second, faith in country. Faith in country is faith in the ideals of America, and faith that American institutions (the Presidency, the courts, the police, Wall Street, the United Way) are adequate to the pursuit of those ideals.

Third and finally, faith in one's fellow man. Faith in one's fellow man is faith that one's fellow Americans are themselves faithful to country and to G-d, that, whatever, their human weaknesses, they hold to the standards set by G-d's word in the Bible and by American ideals, and they will hold you to these standards

Faith in G-d and faith in America means not that G-d is on America's side. Americans are not "G-d's chosen people", but his "almost-chosen people", as Lincoln once put it in addressing the New Jersey Legislature. Faith in G-d and faith in America is faith that America will prosper as long as she is on G-d's side, "a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty," to coin Lincoln's phrase from the same speech (New Jersey speech). Crucial to keeping America on G-d's side, Americans have come to believe since the middle of the 20th Century, is for them to side with G-d's chosen people, the people of Israel, that is to say, **us**.

III. Campaign 2008

In regard to the American religion, since the "new birth of freedom" in the civil war, one party, the party of Lincoln, the Republican Party, has been the party of faith. The other party, the Democratic Party, has been the party of doubt: doubt that American institutions are adequate to realize American ideals, doubt in American ideals, doubt in divine providence over America. Since Woodrow Wilson Democrats have frequently professed faith in "Big Government," but faith in "Big Government" implies doubt that the limited government created by the U.S. Constitution is adequate to contemporary problems.

The Republican Party is the party of faith, faith in G-d, faith in country, and faith in one's fellow Americans. Yet my main point today is that this faith in divine providence and

in country denies the Christian critique of this-worldly fatherlands, while faith in one's fellow Americans denies human sinfulness. The crucial point from the theological point of view is that **it is the doubt, rather than the faith, that fits most easily with historical Christianity.**

This is why the American left, what in America are called "liberals," find the "Christian Right" hard to understand. One could say the Christian right is neither right nor Christian. It is not rightwing because it is on the Christian Right that we find the keepers of the faith in America and her revolutionary ideals: think about Sarah Palin and the right to bear arms. The so-called "Christian Right" is not Christian because the Christian right has what Christians call an "Old Testament Faith" in G-d's providence for America.

In normal times, doubt in America doesn't sell: of course, the worst financial crisis since 1933 is not normal times. What we are seeing today is the usual rule of American politics since 1860: people don't vote for the Democrats: they vote against the Republicans. The Democratic Party doesn't win elections -- the Republican Party loses them. The Republican Party loses elections because people come to have doubts in the competence of Republican officeholders to realize American ideals, and because they come to have doubts in those ideals.

What has all this to do with us? To imbibe the Old Testament, as most Americans still do is to feel in one's bones the belief that the historic Israel is G-d's chosen people, that Israel, not America, and not the community of Christian faithful, is the Israel of whom the prophets speak. Most Americans retain the childlike faith in the promise made by G-d to Abraham (genesis 12:3): "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

This means that the American religion does not share in the Christian rejection of the continuing Election of Israel. In fact the opposite: Americans have come to believe that G-d protects and preserves America because America protects and preserves the Jews. G-d blesses America not only because America has accepted as "Fellow Citizens" those Jews who are in exile in America, but especially because America protects the those Jews who dwell in

Zion, the Land of Israel. To quote the gloss of Lyndon Johnson's grandfather from Michael Oren's recent book , "Take care of the Jews, G-d's chosen people," to which his aunt added "If Israel is destroyed, the world will end" (Michael Oren, Power, Faith, and Fantasy 523). If you want a symbol of this aspect of the American faith, you need to consider only the small Israeli flag that Sarah Palin has in her office. She put this flag there well before John McCain named her as his running mate.

Now, Barack Obama is a convert to Christianity. He is one of the rare converts nowadays to mainstream Protestantism, in his case, the United Church of Christ, the successor to the Congregationalist Church of the pilgrims in New England. Obama is a well-accepted figure within his church, to the point that he addressed their 26th General Synod of the United Church of Christ in 2007. Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah "G-d damn America" Wright, certainly has been quite vocal about his doubts about American Election and her share in divine providence.

Whereas Evangelicals and Catholics since 1945 have come to reject the old denial of continuing providence over the Jews, the mainstream Protestant churches have stayed true to the religion of their fathers. This is why mainstream churches in America, unlike Evangelical churches and the Catholic Church, are bastions of support for the Palestinians in their struggle against the Jewish state. The United Church of Christ, for example, supports divestment from Israel, and opposes the separation wall, according to resolutions adopted at its 2005 General Synod and still in force.

When Obama talks about the centrality of religion in American life, it is to Christianity and the other private religions that he turns, leaving aside the religion of the Americans, the "Faith of Our Fathers" so central to McCain. He writes in his book The Audacity of Hope: "We are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers" (258). Are Americans really a nation of nonbelievers in America?

This does not mean that we should expect Barack Obama, if elected, to try to govern as a Christian, as Jimmy Carter tried. Before he was a Christian, Barack Obama was an

anthropologist, which means that he is very good at acknowledging that others have different beliefs. To be harsh, his approach to disagreement is to try to understand the other side, verify that the disagreement is indeed real and deep, and then run away from the issue as quickly as possible. This is more or less his attitude on abortion, for example, an issue he described this summer as "above his pay grade": Obama's views put him on the extreme end of the pro-abortion forces, but he has written with sympathy and insight about his opponents. Obama has never stood up and done something against these opponents unless he was one of a multitude. On Israel, therefore, his natural attitude will not be to try to lead Americans out of their Zionism and back to Christianity, but to save his political capital, and leave the matter in the hands of the professional diplomats, even if that comes at the price of accomplishing nothing.