

## Speaking About Israel: Some Ground Rules

return to religion-online

## Speaking About Israel: Some Ground Rules

by Robert McAfee Brown

Robert McAfee Brown, whose name is symbolic for engaged theologian and ethicist, is perhaps best known for being able to write clearly, for example, in *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Theology and Saying Yes and Saying No: On Rendering to God and Caesar*. This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, April 6, 1988, p. 338. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org). This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

The recent Palestinian demonstrations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and Israel's handling of them, have pushed to the forefront a series of questions most American Jews and Christians would prefer not to face. Can Jews criticize the state of Israel without being perceived as disloyal? Can Christians criticize the state of Israel without being perceived as anti-Semitic? How can Jews and Christians talk creatively and honestly with one another about the state of Israel?

We all live with these questions, though we are reluctant to discuss them openly. If we are to face them and move beyond them, Jews and Christians must be clear and honest about their expectations of each other. I want to test the waters for this discussion by setting out what I see as a number of preconditions for responsible discussion, beginning with what I think Jews have a right to expect from Christians.

1. Christians must unequivocally affirm the right of the state of Israel to exist and prosper. What a forbidding state of affairs that such a condition need even be mentioned! Do Americans demand from Germans such an assurance when we are working on the provisions of a trade agreement? Must Denmark's survival be made a precondition for export negotiations with the Dutch? Yet the survival of Israel is so precarious, and threatened from so many directions, that Jews are entitled to be assured that whatever Christians

say is not meant to weaken Israel and make it more vulnerable to attack. This is particularly true when Christians take up the cause of the Palestinians -- obviously a justice issue worth discussing.

2. Christians must disavow Armageddon scenarios. The Christian articulators of these scenarios support Israel not because that state has an inherent right to survive but because Israel plays a central role in the apocalyptic projections of a world ruled by Christ, a world in which there will be no more Israel, no more Judaism and no more Jews. The issue is important since Armageddon theology has been affirmed not only by fringe groups but by Ronald Reagan. Jews must be assured by Christians that they are more than pawns in Christian eschatologies illicitly extracted from Ezekiel or the Book of Revelation.

3. Christians must understand why Jews equate the state of Israel's survival with Jewish survival. Jews would regard the destruction of the state of Israel as virtually equivalent to their own destruction -- a tragedy of even vaster proportions than the Holocaust. A tragedy greater than the Holocaust? Can one imagine such a thing? Christians need to realize that every living Jew can imagine it, and can be daily threatened by its possibility. For Jews, Jewish destiny and Israel's destiny are forever linked.

4. Christians must understand why Jews of the diaspora are reluctant to criticize the state of Israel publicly. In the face of overwhelming tides of criticism from Israel's enemies, Jews living elsewhere are surely entitled to think, "Israel needs more critics?" And when so much of the criticism is angry and false and openly anti-Semitic, it is natural for diaspora Jews to have no interest in swelling the negative chorus. They are also understandably reluctant to criticize Jews who are on the battleground when they are removed from the immediacy of physical combat.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=933>

1 of

3

3/25/2008 4:36 PM

Speaking About Israel: Some Ground Rules

There are surely other things that Christians must understand to enter the debate about Israel, and Jews can state them more

poignantly and compellingly than any non-Jew can. Let that topic, then, be one of the subjects of our dialogue.

1. Christians should be able to criticize this or that political action by the state of Israel without automatically being labeled anti-Semitic. For a Christian to be a friend of Israel cannot mean giving Israel a political (or military) blank check, saying in effect: whatever you do, we will support you, or at least not oppose you. And yet it is one of the painful facts of American political life that Christians often find that political disagreement with Israel's policies is interpreted by Jews as at best

a political betrayal, at worst an instance of subtle or not-so-subtle anti-Semitism. When such Jewish voices are raised Christians have a right to hear other Jewish voices countermanding them.

2. Jews should understand that Christian disagreement with certain political policies of the state of Israel entails a theological as well as a political judgment. I am not proposing here to theologize about the state of Israel. but about discussions of the state of Israel.

Early in my theological work I learned from extended exposure to Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah that the worst sin is that of idolatry -- giving uncritical allegiance to human constructs that can never be worthy of uncritical allegiance. And the greatest candidate for idolatry is always the nation. I learned from the Hebrew prophets that no nation -- Assyria, Babylon.

Egypt, Persia or Judah -- is entitled to uncritical allegiance. I learned in the Hebrew Scriptures that the First Commandment,

"You shall have no other gods before me," is not only first numerically but first because the other nine flow from it. That belief

has been an axiom throughout both my theological life and my political life (two entities that I am unable to separate) One

reason I am sometimes perceived as overly critical of my own nation is the perennial temptation in the United States to assume that our nation enjoys God's special favor, and that any criticism of it is unworthy and unpatriotic. Nothing has more reinforced my conviction on this score than the recent case of a lieutenant colonel, a rear admiral, a CIA chief and a president conspiring to set themselves above the law, and insisting that we citizens should let them lie to us for our own good. That is idolatry.

If from the stance of Hebraic prophetism I have seen and continue to see idolatry in my own nation. I have seen it also in the

Germany of the 1930s and 40s. and I see it today in South Africa (and in the Soviet Union, Chile and El Salvador, to name only a few other countries) The common factor in the posture of these governments is that the state is placed above criticism: one is disloyal if one criticizes it.

The prophetic tradition issues one large No to such an attitude. And it is not part of the prophetic tradition to say that there can be criticism of all states save one, Israel. To be sure, there are widely varying degrees and kinds of idolatry in the states I have mentioned. But whenever, and by whom, the principle that the state is above criticism becomes a guiding axiom, there, especially, must criticism be made.

I do not want to be misunderstood on this point: I am not urging people to hold a magnifying glass over the state of Israel looking for things to criticize, while applying less exacting standards elsewhere. But I am saying that in the ongoing critique we must make of all political constructs in the name of the First Commandment, it may sometimes be the case that our critique will be directed at the state of Israel.

My point may be clarified further by emphasizing another insight from the prophetic tradition: the place where the magnifying glass should be held is always over the nation of which one is a citizen. The basic critique, the initial critique, is always self critique. I am amazed at how faithful the Hebrew Scriptures are to this fact; judgment after judgment is piled up against the various political actions of the Jewish nation. I am even more amazed that the critique is put not on the lips of the Jewish enemies but on the lips of the Jews, most notably the prophets. And I am most amazed of all that these unflattering descriptions are preserved for us not in the annals of the Jewish enemies, but in the sacred Scriptures of the Jews themselves. Those are staggering and exceedingly impressive realities, reminding us that we are not to locate the "evil empire" only somewhere else; we must first of all see it within ourselves. So Christians need to hear Jews say that critique of every nation, even Israel, is a part of the prophetic tradition that Jews and Christians share, not a deviation from that tradition.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=933>

2 of

3

3/25/2008 4:36 PM

## Speaking About Israel: Some Ground Rules

3. It follows from the prophetic tradition that Jews should speak critically of Israel's political policies, if injustice is being done. Such a plea may sound insufferably arrogant to Jews, who scarcely need instruction from Christians on how to behave Jewishly. So let me indicate some of the things it might mean. First, the prophetic tradition lays upon us all -- Jews as well as Christians -- an imperative to speak against injustice wherever it is found, even -- nay, especially -- when it is found within that political configuration we most admire. It is in relation to those things we most admire that we must be especially on guard against idolatry.

Second, it is a sign of great health that there has always been tremendous internal criticism within the state of Israel, and never more so than in recent weeks. There, if anywhere on earth, it is true that if there are two Jews arguing, there are three opinions. The vigor and sharpness of Israel's internal debate should be a model for every state on earth, encouraging all of us to say in our own situations whatever needs to be said.

Third, we should note that there are Jews outside of Israel who do lament certain Israeli policies and who work to change them. How they do this is their business, not mine. All honor to Elie Wiesel, who says, "When I want to criticize Israel, I go to Israel" -- and who goes to Israel frequently. All honor to those who make their critique within Jewish periodicals or at Jewish gatherings. Christians need to remember that Jews pay a price for this. I once told a Jewish activist that it was painful to be accused of anti-Semitism whenever I offered even a mild criticism of some action by the state of Israel, and he replied, "You think it is painful for you, on the outside? What do you think it is like for us, on the inside?" Let us note with gratitude then that in these past weeks many Jewish voices have been raised, some for the first time, to deplore the recent beatings and killings of

Palestinians.

Fourth, there is no inherent reason why people in Israel should listen to, or take seriously, the admonitions of thegoyim. What have we ever said to them in the past that has been a blessing? Consequently, when there are specific policies in the state of Israel that need challenging, the challenging words are far more likely to be heeded when they come from Jews than when they come from Christians.

In all of our discussions about Israel, we should keep in mind the words of Howard Singer of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. "Jews," he consoles us, "are not really as defensive as they appear. But they know that true critics, like true prophets, are those who criticize with love."  
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Love is our only valid passport into the territory of discussions about Israel. If there are occasions when we Christians feel compelled to speak critically of Israel, we must speak with love so that we do not give aid or comfort to those who seek by their criticism to bring about Israel's demise or weaken its place in the forum of world opinion. Let not any of our words, in tone or content, bring aid and comfort to those who deny Israel's right to exist. Let our critique of Israel spring from our love for Israel, from our desire that Israel be all that it is destined to be, both for its sake and our own, so that new meaning can continue to be given to the venerable description: "a light unto the gentiles." Israel's light is one we will always need.

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<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=933>

3 of

3

3/25/2008 4:36 PM