

## Book Review

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Jason M. Olson

### **America's Road to Jerusalem: The Impact of the Six-Day War on Protestant Politics**

London: Lexington Books, 2018, 235 pp.

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The main thrust of Jason Olson's indispensable work is that Israel's decisive victory in the Six-Day War in 1967 upended power relations between the two major wings of Protestantism in the United States. Evangelical Protestants, who believed in the definitive accuracy of Biblical accounts, and therefore rejected Darwin's theory of evolution, had been on the losing end of a culture war since the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925 – which resulted in a legal victory, but was a public relations disaster for conservative Protestants.

In the decades after the trial, Evangelicals and their fundamentalist brethren continually lost ground to liberal Protestants who accepted the theory of evolution and generally had an easier time adapting to modernity. But the Evangelical faith in the restoration of the Jewish people, as foretold in the Bible, was confirmed by Israel's 1967 victory. And this confirmation proved crucial in setting the stage for an Evangelical resurgence in the following years, Olson reports.

"[W]hat the Scopes trial was for science and religion in America, the Six-Day War was for history and religion in America," Olson writes. "This war, more than others, seemed to show that biblical prophecies concerning a Jewish State were fulfilled in history" (p. xiii).

Because Evangelicals had a better grasp of history than the social gospellers (described below), they enjoyed greater influence over the White House during crucial moments in the life of the Jewish state, with Evangelical leader Billy Graham pressuring President Nixon to send weapons to Israel during the 1973 War and Evangelical leaders playing a

significant role in President Trump's decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2017.

Olson's analysis of the ascendancy of American Evangelicalism in the wake of the Six-Day War is well documented and valuable, but readers will also be particularly enlightened by his detailed assessment of what happened in mainline Protestant churches in the United States before and after the war.

Olson divides the mainline community into three segments. The first, "the social gossellers," founded the National Council of Churches, boosted the worldwide ecumenical movement by supporting the World Council of Churches, and dominated the pages of *Christian Century*, the flagship publication for mainline Protestantism in the United States.

The social gossellers exhibited some support for Israel in the pages of the *Christian Century* just after the Six-Day War, but expressed increasing opposition to Israel as Arab promises to destroy the Jewish state faded from memory. For this community, Jewish nationalism became a hindrance to progress toward world peace.

Standing in opposition to the utopian impulse promoted by the social gossellers was a group of "Christian realists," who included Reinhold Niebuhr and his disciples, such as Alice and Roy Eckhart and Frank Littel. This movement, which effectively faded from the scene in the years after Niebuhr's death in 1971, supported Jewish sovereignty and self-determination in the pages of *Christianity and Crisis*, a small but highly influential magazine founded by Niebuhr, partially in response to the Christian perfectionism and pacifism promoted in the pages of *Christian Century*.

The third mainline group Olson discusses is the "liberation theologians," who promoted Palestinian nationalism after the Six-Day War and viewed Israel as a colonialist power. Ironically, the liberation theologians were led by John C. Bennett, a writer at the Niebuhr-founded magazine, *Christianity and Crisis*.

"[F]or Bennett, the Palestinians were a 'real nation' and could exercise their sovereignty through Palestinian Liberation Organization activism," Olson writes. "Since Jews were not a 'real nation,' they did not really have a solid right to exercise sovereignty. But since they were oppressed refugees from the Holocaust, Jews as individuals could exist" (p. 5). Similar thinking is readily apparent in the writings of Palestinian Christian liberation theologian Naim Ateek, who assails Jewish sovereignty while affirming Palestinian nationalism.

Prior to the Six-Day War, the Christian realists represented the most vocal supporters for Israel in American Protestantism. In the years after the war, the Christian realists lost ground in the American Evangelical mainline and were supplanted by the "New Evangelicals," who ran *Christianity Today* and were led by Billy Graham, and the fundamentalists, led by Carl McIntire. The "New Evangelicals" and the fundamentalists became Israel's new champions on the American scene.

Olson's text provides an invaluable analysis of the history of how various Protestant groups dealt with issues relating to Jewish peoplehood, Israeli sovereignty, and biblical prophecy. His book also reveals some details about how the Israeli government navigated the changing circumstances of religious life in the United States in the years before and after the Six-Day War.

After reading Olson's book, it becomes evident why Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and their American allies faced so little resistance in turning mainline Protestant churches in the United States into bastions of anti-Israel propaganda during and after the Second Intifada. With their utopian worldview, reflexive support for the underdog, and contempt for the Jewish right to self-determination (what Olson calls "national supersessionism"), mainline churches were easy prey for anti-Israel agitators.

This book provides the context readers need to understand why Palestinian Christians have worked so assiduously to undermine Evangelical support for Israel in the United States. Sadly, with their numerous attacks on pro-Israel American Christians, Palestinian Christians have proven more adept at influencing religious thought in the United States than they have been at promoting the things that make for peace in Palestinian society.

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