



The Menachem Begin-Jerry Falwell Connection: A Revolution in Fundamentalism

Author(s): Joe L. Kincheloe and George Staley

Source: *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1982), pp. 35-39

Published by: Caddo Gap Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42588966>

Accessed: 25-06-2016 02:05 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Caddo Gap Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Thought*

The Menachem Begin– Jerry Falwell Connection: A Revolution in Fundamentalism

Joe L. Kincheloe
Sinte Gleska College
Rosebud, South Dakota 57570

George Staley
Sinte Gleska College
Rosebud, South Dakota 57570

A revolution is taking place in American fundamentalism concerning fundamental Christian attitudes toward Judaism. The Moral Majority under the leadership of Jerry Falwell is quickly becoming one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the state of Israel and Menachem Begin's foreign policy. This support of the state of Israel has begun to temper much of the anti-Semitism which has marred the history of evangelical fundamentalism in the United States.

Jerry Falwell emerged from a fundamental Christian tradition which not only denied the place of Jews in the Kingdom of God, but considered Catholics and non-literal Protestants outsiders as well. Of course, Christians have made Jews scapegoats and pariahs as long as Christianity has existed, but American evangelical fundamentalists in the Falwell tradition have been especially hard on Judaism. Not only was the old Christ killer myth perpetuated, but the Jewish allegiance to America was a grave concern in the eyes of the 100% American fundamentalists.

The modern fundamentalists are not without their own manifestations of anti-Semitism. A doctrine as literal and as strict as fundamental Christianity cannot refrain from occasionally displaying intolerance for diversity. In August 1980 at a Dallas meeting—a meeting where presidential candidate Ronald Reagan was a featured speaker—The Reverend Bailey Smith struck an emotional chord when he proclaimed that God does not listen to the prayers of Jews. Subsequently, Reverend Falwell met with Bailey Smith to discuss what the Moral Majority leaders refer to as “Bailey's bad mistake.” Reverend Smith, according to a Moral Majority spokesman, has, since the meeting, often proclaimed his love of Jewish people and his support for the state of Israel.

Over the last two years, the close relationship between Begin and

Falwell has developed quickly. Falwell met Begin in Jerusalem during an American fundamental Christian trip to the Holy land. The two leaders recognized the benefits to be derived from a supportive relationship and genuinely seemed to admire each other personally. Since their initial meeting, Falwell and Begin have met frequently in Israel and in the United States. During Begin's official visit with Jimmy Carter in 1980, the Prime Minister met privately with Falwell at Blair House. Later that year in New York at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the spiritual leader of Zionism, Begin presented Falwell with a citation as a supporter of Israel and then met with him again for private talks. In September of 1981 during Begin's meeting with Ronald Reagan, the Prime Minister took time to meet again with Falwell. The Israeli embassy confirms that the two men remain in regular communication.

The revolution in the relationship between fundamental Christianity and Judaism is perhaps best illustrated by Begin's call to Falwell after the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in June 1981. The call indeed indicates a number of significant changes in political and theological attitudes which demand analysis.

It must be remembered that the call was made in the midst of the Israeli campaign. Begin was fighting for his political existence, as he trailed Shimon Peres in the polls. After the raid in Iraq, Begin was besieged by criticism from portions of the American Christian community. The National Council of Churches, for example, was critical of the bombing and urged President Reagan to stop arms shipments to Israel immediately. The perception of the Israeli electorate that the American Christian community disapproved of the raid was politically damaging to Begin, and he needed to persuade voters that such was not the case. At this point, he turned to his friend, Falwell, asking him to tell the world—especially the Israeli electorate—that the National Council of Churches did not speak for the majority of Christians in America. It was then Falwell, not Begin, who released the news of the call to the press. Falwell followed the call with several pronouncements on the support of Americans and American Christians for the state of Israel.

Since then, Falwell has made the call for American support of Israel an integral part of his message which is broadcast over 394 television stations and 500 radio stations. The basic theme of all his

pronouncements on the topic was that American support of Israel is not a political issue but a scriptural one. God deals with nations as they deal with Israel, he claimed, and “you touch the apple of God’s eyes when you touch Israel.” In one sermon he contended that it is good for America to be for the Jew, for God blesses America because it has granted a haven for the Jew.

Prime Minister Begin knows that there are many political reasons for strengthening and continuing the alliance with Falwell. The traditional base of Israeli support in America has come from the political left. With the decline of liberalism in America during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s and the corresponding increase in the political power of fundamentalists, Begin perceives the need for a new power base in American politics. This need is compounded by the negative reactions of traditional liberal supporters toward his bombing of the Baghdad reactor and the raid on the PLO headquarters in Beirut. Begin also fears the “oil factor,” the possible shift of American public opinion toward the oil-rich Arab states as supplies continue to dwindle. Thus, Begin realizes the need to tap a new source of American support—the conservative movement in general and the fundamentalist segment in particular. By attaining the good will of the Moral Majority and the fundamentalists, Begin can watch a traditional source of anti-Semitism begin to melt away. Indeed, the reduction of fundamental Christian anti-Semitism can only open the door for additional American support for pro-Israeli positions. Given the negative world reaction to recent Israeli foreign policy moves, Begin realizes that he needs American support more than ever—a perception shared by the Israeli electorate. By aligning himself with the American religious right, Begin strengthens his tenuous personal political position and forges an alliance with the perceived core of American political power.

Reverend Falwell, too, has a number of reasons for perpetuating a Jewish–fundamental Christian alliance. To have a “regular communication” with the Prime Minister of a foreign state as important as Israel puts the relationship far beyond mere friendship. Begin’s call to Falwell to clarify the American Christian reaction to the bombing of Iraq’s nuclear facility places Falwell in the category of international leadership—a boost to Falwell’s prestige and certainly to his ego.

The relationship between Begin and Falwell also serves the latter

in bringing him closer to the Reagan administration—that is, the center of power. It makes Falwell a more valuable political ally and thus potentially more influential. The increased visibility and the proximity to the popular Reagan, which the alliance provides, gives yet another clue to the motivation behind the alliance—Falwell likes winners. Israel is a working, democratic theocracy; it is the strongest military power in the Middle East, and, as such, has the ability to do as it pleases; and it is America's bulwark against Communist intervention in the region.

Finally, the alliance is an attempt by Falwell, as it is with Begin, to broaden his base of support beyond the core of fundamental Christians. In this regard, the alliance is a move to give Falwell more credibility, which will give him and the Moral Majority more power with which to influence the American political scene—much as Begin is now doing in Israel.

Since the June elections and the subsequent negotiations between Begin's Likud block and the three small religious parties, Begin's Israel has moved closer to Orthodox Jewish theocracy. Begin has accepted stricter Sabbaths and Jewish holidays marked by no air service, closure of seaports, and no work by government-owned firms. The fundamental government will provide special status for the Orthodox with new wage scales for rabbis and more aid to the religious school system. Begin will also take a more conservative approach toward women's rights. Limitations will be placed on the rights of common-law wives, and married women will be exempted from military service.

Thus, the Begin-Falwell relationship is a classic potential symbiosis. In many respects it is a natural alliance, too, as both men read their scriptures in a very literal sense. Both leaders have worked to align their countries' legal codes more closely with the scriptural laws of their forefathers. Neither man seems to fear the intimate connection between religious conviction and governmental policy inasmuch as both accept the Calvinist model that regards the state as an arm of the church.

Jerry Falwell has emerged as an extremely powerful political leader. Through his media network and his influence with the recently elected Congress, Falwell is revolutionizing fundamentalism in America. The roots of fundamentalist anti-Semitism run deep, and Falwell is attempting to alter an established tradition in a short period

Joe L. Kincheloe & George Staley

of time. It would be quite a testimony to the power of the preacher if he succeeds. Menachem Begin apparently thinks that Falwell can do it.