

Messianic Politics.

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“It’s very dangerous, a person exploiting religion for political achievement, because everyone has their own relationship with God.” – Mohammad Ali Ayazi

Americans now live in a time dominated by the language of principles. With the rise of the neoconservative agenda of the Republican party in the United States, the idea of morality now envelops everything from domestic issues to international relations. Politicians use morality as a tool in pursuing political agenda in issues ranging from military intervention in foreign nations to the ethical use of stem cells in alleviating human suffering. Despite the predominance of the national discourse of values in America, such language is not limited to the United States alone. In Israel and Iran, there exists language and policies that suggest a common theme between these three nations. The rise of religious “fundamentalist” rhetoric in the political arena in recent years indicates that current policy is influenced by an eschatological view of nation and globe.

Eschatology is the study of the end times. In the context of three major world religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, it is the belief in a messianic figure coming from a hidden place, who brings about global peace and the destruction of the enemies of the believers. That being the case, how does something so outlandish make its way into government policy making? The upsurge in fundamentalism in the previous decades could have something to do with it, but more likely it is because ever since the creation of the modern governments of the United States, Israel, and Iran, eschatology has been critical in the establishment of these nations.

Starting with the United States, we can begin examining how eschatology can stay within a national consciousness since its conception only to emerge in present day policy making and discourse. In Christian eschatology, there are 3 views of the end, the premillennial, the postmillennial, and the amillennial. Despite the details of each view of the end, all include an idea of Jesus returning, the defeat of Satan and his armies, the Rapture of the believers into heaven, and a millennial messianic kingdom of peace on earth. To some of the puritans who helped establish the colonies in America, the new world was seen as a New Jerusalem, a new millennial kingdom (Jewett, 136). The end of the American Revolution was seen as the beginning of the Millennium, and this view of a millennial American could be seen in the motto

of the national seal, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (“the New Order of the Ages”), but more ominously, could be seen in the American imperialist notion of Manifest Destiny, which seeks to fulfill the millennial destiny of Christian expansion (Jewett, 58-59). Robert Bellah had this to say about the nation: “Behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes, Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth.” America was established as a virtuous nation, its people chosen or “almost chosen” as Abraham Lincoln called it. Washington was our Moses, who brought us out of oppression into the Promised Land, and Lincoln was our Christ (Huntington, 104-106). As the millennial kingdom of Revelations, America was founded on ideas that it had a responsibility to help bring about the Second Coming of Jesus, and with the recent neo-revivalism of the past few decades, we see a return to the language and ideas that helped found this nation.

Israel was founded, in some part, on the Deutero-Isaiah prophecies of a return of the dispersed peoples to their homeland. In Judaic eschatology, one view of the end times is that the Messiah will come and destroy the enemies of Israel after she has suffered much at the hands of heathens, bring together the chosen people who were dispersed, and restore the kingdom of Israel (Mowinckel, 303-311). Accomplishing these things, the Messiah will prove that he is the Messiah, and will allow for him to establish an earthly millennial kingdom. The redemption of Israel would then allow for the redemption of the world (Jewett, 157). Before the Holocaust, most religious scholars were opposed to the notion of Zionism, believing human intervention upset the Deutero-Isaiah prophecies. However, after the Holocaust, religious Jews saw the event as a “divine sign” that they had suffered enough according to prophecy, and that it was divinely willed that they should take the first step towards the end times and reestablish the kingdom of Israel. Even though Israel was supposed to be established as a secular state, its establishment had an impact on the Jewish eschatological timetable.

Iran was in part founded on the principles of Twelver Shi’ism, which believes that the 12th Imam, Mahdi, who was hidden, will come back one day to restore global dominance to the religion of Mohammed, and usher in an eternal era of peace. Although secular academics had a large part in the Iranian Revolution, it was the cult of personality of Ayatollah Khomeini that helped cement the fledgling revolutionary government together. Together with eschatological imagery, Khomeini established his absolute control over the Islamic Republic. Although he never claimed directly the authority of the Mahdi, his actions indicated to the people that he had

the Mahdi's authority, and even went so far as to allow people to come to their own conclusions that Khomeini might have even been the Mahdi himself. The first thing that Khomeini did was take up the charisma of the Mahdi (Aslan, 190). Next, he claimed descent from the 7th imam and accepted the title of imam, like the Mahdi before him. Then he cast the war with Iraq as revenge for the massacre of Hussayn and his family at Karbala even though such vengeance was the exclusive right of the Mahdi. His most overt connection with the authority of the Mahdi, though, was the doctrine of Valayat-e Faqih. There were similar doctrines before, stating that in the absence of the Mahdi, divine guidance comes from the Hidden Imam's representative on earth, the ulama. However, the difference between Khomeini's doctrine and the traditional doctrine was that Khomeini concentrated the powers into one person, and claimed additionally that the Faqih had authority identical to the Hidden Imam. The Faqih was the divine heir, and according to Khomeini, "it was the responsibility of the clerics to usher in the messianic era by establishing and governing the Mahdi's state for him" (Aslan, 191).

Having established that the United States, Israel and Iran all have a basis in eschatology, it is now possible to examine how eschatology affects the current policy making decisions in these governments. We can look at the domestic and foreign issues that these nations must deal with in order to get a better understanding of how the end times affect the here and now of government.

Starting with Israel, we can see a little bit about how the belief in a Messiah affects the decisions of the government. In the past, the Likud party, a conservative party with ties to the American "neoconservative" agenda, took a hard line towards Arab nations as well as to the Palestinians. Because part of the Deutero-Isaiah prophecies mentions the fact that Israel's enemies will be crushed/must be crushed with/before the appearance of the Messiah, some hard liners have opposed treaties such as the Oslo accords. By opposing peace and refusing to give up land, some believe that they can trigger the conflict that will finally ease Arab pressure with the destruction and domination of neighboring nations (Jewett, 133, Mowinckel, 269). Although the main reason for the recent Israeli incursion into Palestine and Lebanon has more to do with the sacredness of the soldier, the belief that dominating and destroying Israel's neighbors may have played a small role in its recent military conflicts. Part of the belief in accelerating the eschatological timetable lies in the fact that only after the Messiah has restored Israel, defeated Israel's enemies, and saved his people, will he have shown himself as the Messiah. So because of

this, some, like the Likud party, do not believe in compromise, but rather that violence can be used to accelerate the timetable, and this is supported in their eyes by the series of wars in the past decades which allowed Israel to expand the boundaries of the territories they claimed as their own (Jewett, 145, 155). The rationale for the domination and subjugation of surrounding nations, according to the Likud, can be explained by the quote by Kahane Kach, who says, “God wants us to live in a country of our own, so that we have the least possible contact with what is foreign” (Jewett, 157). However, one dramatic shift in policy occurred with 9/11 and the events afterwards. One can see that the impact of 9/11 decreased the threat to the state of Israel from Arabs (Karpin, 340). With the current US invasion of Iraq and the ongoing War on Terrorism, not only has some Arab resentment shifted from Israel to America, but Israel is also able to have her allies close by in case of an attack by her neighbors. As a result, with the overall decrease in threat, Israel has been able to give up Palestinian territory in the past, which allowed for an acceleration of the peace process. This in turn allowed for the possibility of both Palestinians and Jews to recognize permanent borders resulting in the potential recognition of states, of which, one can interpret to be the idea of a New Jerusalem. Instead of a violent outcome to the eschatological timetable – bringing about the coming of the Messiah through violence and antagonistic actions – one saw an emergence in more of an individualistic belief in the end times, which promoted holiness and righteousness as ways to bring about the Messiah, since the Messiah is hidden because of Israel’s sins (Mowinckel, 280, 295). Part of the language involves the notion of Israel being free, rich, and prosperous, which evokes Israel’s agrarian beginnings, tying in the notion of the land as sacred, and something to be cultivated (Mowinckel, 308). Instead of constantly looking out at possible aggression of neighbors, Israel could look in and pave the way for the Messiah to come by being holy. However, the belief in a nonviolent resolution to the end time may be put in jeopardy with the recent military conflicts that Israel has been involved in.

Even though Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2005, isn’t the Faqih (and as a result, cannot claim the power of the Mahdi), his actions still reflect the dominance of eschatological discourse in Iranian policy making. A true believer in the Mahdaviat school of thought, Ahmadinejad differs greatly from previous leaders in that he brings the religious realm to the office more conspicuously than his predecessors. In the past, Iranian policy was that of anti-Americanism (Pollack, 253). American military buildup during peacetime

as well as the establishment of bases in Qatar and agreements with the UAE were perceived as a threat to Iran. The destruction of Iraq's forces (a major threat to Iran since the Iran-Iraq war) in the Gulf War (1 and 2) as well as the emergence of new Muslim states in Central Asia as well as cheap arms from the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for Iran to have its own hegemonic aspirations, that Iran was to create a model state based on Islamic democracy to give to the world (Peterson). However, with Ahmadinejad, one sees acceleration towards the return of the Mahdi. Even a few months ago, in speaking to the UN, Ahmadinejad made a speech that ended with a prayer for the Mahdi to come back soon. His fervor towards the mahdaviat code ("Mahdaviat is a code for the revolution, and is the spirit of the revolution, it's the code of our identity": Peterson) leaves little room for compromise, and is supposed to influence the issues of his presidency, "from redressing the gulf between rich and poor in Iran, to challenging the United States and Israel and enhancing Iran's power with nuclear programs, every issue is designed to lay the foundation for the Mahdi's return" (Peterson). In the past, he has proposed building a train line directly to Jamkaran, the supposed site of the Mahdi's return, from Tehran, and has earmarked \$17 million for Jamkaran. Three years ago, signs in Tehran appeared, announcing that "He is coming." Even, or rather, especially, in his outlook on foreign policy, Mahdaviat influences his thinking. He views the United States as arrogantly trying to assume the role of Mahdi by trying to transform the Middle East in its image of democracy and justice, deploying military forces in the region, and developing new nuclear weapons. As more people in Iran's clerical circles begin to question the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's actions, one cannot help but notice the similarities between him and George W. Bush. After all, both have claimed that God tells them what to do.

Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of our examination of the effects of eschatology in government in Iran and Israel is that it is most illuminating when it comes to similarities that these nations share with the United States. The United States was not immune to the global neo-revivalism of religion that many other nations experienced in the past few decades. Today, one can argue that our nation is under the sway of the leaders of the "neorevivalist/neoconservative/fundamentalist" movement that seems to be gaining more supporters as we enter what some believe to be the end times. Perhaps the most noticeable sway of these "neoconservatives," as they're called in our national discourse, is the fact that these people have the ear of the president. George W. Bush is a self-avowed follower of the theologian Francis Schaeffer. Some may find this problematic because according to Schaeffer, the

neoconservative should “believe civil disobedience, especially focused on the abortion issue, is a necessary tactic to gain control of America until the Second Coming of Jesus and the final triumph of God’s kingdom on earth. Because the commandment to achieve Christian control of the entire world comes ‘from God,’ any tactic or strategy hastening that goal is not only acceptable, but divinely sanctioned. Divine ends, even violent ones, justify harsh means” (Rudin, 52). This partially explains why issues that seem to have little importance have become big issues in the national discourse in recent years. The prevalence of discussion on gay marriages and abortion seems to stem from the fact that a while back, convinced that the final crisis of world history was at hand, neoconservatives promoted candidates and policies suited for Armageddon, and part of the preparation for righteous victory over Satan was an uncompromising moral stance against such issues (along with support for a stronger nuclear force and enlarged military budget, an unquestioning support of Israel, and a rejection of Palestinian claims for autonomy) (Jewett, 140). Indeed, the rise of neoconservative politicians in the ‘80s could possibly stem from Pat Robertson’s call on millenarians to become political leaders “so that when the battle of Armageddon comes, in the very near future, the country will play its ordained role on the side of angels” (Jewett, 142). In fact, just like the governments of Israel and Iran, the United States has on some part tried to accelerate Armageddon and the Final Judgment through its policies. Part of the reason why environmental standards have become so lax during the Bush administration could stem from the neoconservative belief that by making earth desolate and barren like it is mentioned in Revelations, that they could trigger the end times. Cutting down trees, drilling for oil, all these things not only help fuel America’s hegemonic presence in the world, but also help destroy the land so that Jesus will come back sooner. Compared to the Jewish belief in stewardship of the land (Rudin, 53), America’s usage of its natural resources may seem irresponsible to liberals, but to neoconservatives, any means by which Jesus may hasten down to earth, bringing about the Rapture, and eternal peace (for neoconservatives: Jorstad, 147) is justified, no matter how gruesome it may seem to others. This line of thinking extends as well into the realm of business. Called on to be stewards of what God has given them, neoconservatives interpret Jesus’ parable of the talents to mean that they have a responsibility to obtain as much additional goods as possible (Jorstad, 140).

“It would be difficult, if not impossible, to infuse the political policies and structures of the United States with faith and values only as they apply within our shores. In a world of

globalization, a religiously revived America must also be an America that carries the message of that revival around the world” (Hart, 41). This quote by an ex-Senator Gary Hart best describes American foreign policy. When it comes to other nations, the neoconservative agenda shines the brightest. The greatest commandment that Jesus gave, according to neoconservatives, is to go out into the world and make converts of all nations (Matthew 28: 19-20), because once all nations know Jesus, He will come back and bring all the good neoconservative boys and girls with Him to heaven. However, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to nations isn’t always good enough. Sometimes the gospel has to be imposed on others. One of the reasons I heard in churches around California for why Iraq needed to be “liberated” was so that they could hear the Good News (additionally, America has a “moral responsibility” to strike first in order to thwart the maddened purposes of its enemies: Jorstad, 50). This belief in imposing our religious views do not only apply to people we consider our enemies, but also to our allies as well. Defense of Israel is integral to neoconservatives because it is the site of the Second Coming of Jesus (Halper, 41, 199). However, Israel is also integral in the battle of Armageddon, because the massive battle between the forces of good and evil is supposed to happen at Megiddo, which is just outside of Jerusalem (Jewett, 133, Jorstad, 134). Because of this, the Christian Right pushes for foreign policy that will trigger favored scenarios from Revelations (Jewett, 145), rejecting peace, and pushing for Israel to have a hard line towards the Palestinians (it’s no surprise then that the Christian right has close ties to Likud). In light of the recent conflict involving Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine, it is interesting to note that the United States vetoed a UN resolution calling for Israel to halt its military actions. In today’s climate of global conflict, where the United States is entrenched in two Middle Eastern nations, with eventual plans for Iran, the neoconservative does not think of himself as warmongering, since ultimately only God could destroy this planet and the nations within, and that wouldn’t happen until after the Final Judgment, and even then, the neoconservative doesn’t need to worry about suffering because he will be Raptured away before the suffering begins (Jorstad, 51).

One cannot separate religion from politics, and one cannot separate politics from religion. The eschatological views of the predominant religion on which a nation is based, also plays an important role in shaping the domestic and foreign policies of a nation. It is interesting to note that in the discourse on eschatology and policy, there exist relationships between each nation. Iran desires to destroy Israel and America as imposters to the authority of the Mahdi, Israel must

defend itself and ultimately conquer its neighbors, and America must help defend Israel until it can be engulfed in war (quite possibly with Iran). There is no better example of the relationship between these three nations than the recent events involving Lebanon and Israel: Israel invades a neighboring nation, the United States supports Israel with military aid, and Iran supports Hezbollah in its quest to destroy Israel. Because messianic politics ultimately calls for the complete and utter destruction of a nation's enemies, when multiple nations believe that they are doing God's work it is problematic when they confront each other. Living in a nuclear age, with America and Israel possessing nuclear weapons and Iran in pursuit of nuclear technology, believing that God has ordained a nation to destroy God's enemies is dangerous because it makes a nuclear option more justifiable, and even appealing. This is already the case: in April, 2006, President Bush said that he would not rule out the possibility of a nuclear strike on Iran in order to prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons. Humanity stands on the brink of the abyss facing an uncertain future, yet there are ideologies behind governments that would seek to push us over. If we are not wary about what is said and done between nations, we could very well face the end of humanity as we know it.

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