

Jewish Leader Decries 'Particularist' Religious Claims

Bob Allen
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An American Jewish leader suggests Christians should abandon the notion that theirs is the only way to salvation in a new book warning of resurgent anti-Semitism.

Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, argues in the book, *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism*, that early warning signs of anti-Semitism are more troubling today than at any time since World War II.

Among potential threats—which include both a rise in open anti-Semitism around the world and “latent attitudes of hostility toward Jews”—Foxman identifies attitudes that arise from “discredited Christian theologies,” such as “particularist views on religion.”

“Particularism is the tendency to believe that one’s own faith is the only valid path in life,” he writes. “A particularist is apt to think, ‘I have the truth, and everybody else is wrong.’ It’s not much of a leap from this kind of thinking to hatred of those who belong to other faiths. After all, if you think God intends to subject those others to eternal damnation, surely they must deserve it.”

Foxman denounces efforts to target Jewish persons for evangelism, citing Southern Baptists in particular.

“An ongoing theme of particularist theology is the notion that Christians ought to devote their energies to ‘saving’ the Jews—that is, to converting them into Christians. Although this is supposedly motivated by love for the Jews, this idea is inherently anti-Semitic in that it implicitly denigrates the value of Jewish belief.”

Foxman credits the Catholic Church for formally renouncing efforts aimed at converting Jews but criticizes the Southern Baptist Convention for moving in the opposite direction, citing an SBC resolution in 1996 urging evangelization of Jews and a 1999 call for prayers that Jews would convert during that fall’s High Holy Days.

But Foxman finds even more troubling the tendency of the religious right to carry such ideas into the public arena. He refers to efforts to define America as a “Christian nation,” which he says implies that non-Christians aren’t real Americans, and attacking the separation of church and state as a falsehood promoted by liberals.

Foxman identifies a strategy by some “to transform American government into a wholly owned subsidiary of the evangelical movement—a concept that is utterly alien to the constitutional vision of the founders as well as opposed to the values of the vast majority of Americans.”

Foxman also disputes frequent claims by the religious right that conservative Christians are the targets of bigotry and discrimination in the United States. “It makes to no sense to speak as if Christians in America aren’t free to practice their faith—as if churches are being shuttered and ministers imprisoned by government fiat. Has any American politician ever experienced discrimination or been attacked for declaring his belief in Christianity? Of course not.”

“The reality, of course, is that those on the religious right aren’t truly interested in protecting their freedom to practice and preach their own faith. That protection already exists. Instead, they seek the power to impose that faith on everyone in America, replacing pluralism and tolerance with theocracy.”

Foxman says he understands the political reasons behind President Bush’s readiness to cater to the religious right, but it causes him to worry about Bush’s “even-handedness and his real commitment to church-state separation.”

While troubled by beliefs of the religious right, Foxman says they aren’t reason enough to reject conservative Christians’ support of Israel.

“My position on this matter—a controversial one in some quarters—is that, for the foreseeable future, American Jews will have to live with an influential religious right,” he writes.

"We must manage our relationship with the Christian right with care and vigilance, criticizing the movement forthrightly when our interests and values clash and accepting its support when they overlap." He illustrated the uneasy relationship with a line by Woody Allen, "The lion and the calf shall lie down together, but the calf won't get much sleep."

Foxman says he has been wrestling with some Christians' disdain for Judaism since 1980, when then-Southern Baptist Convention president Bailey Smith said at a national affairs briefing in Dallas that God doesn't hear the prayers of a Jew.

In an attempt to quell controversy over the statement, Foxman says, Smith visited ADL's offices in New York.

"His comments to me were quite revealing," Foxman says. "Smith said that until this controversy he had never realized that there was anti-Semitism in the United States! And what had opened his eyes? The fact that, as soon as the story hit the papers, he began receiving mail from 'Christian' supporters saying, in effect, 'Thanks for telling it like it is! You really gave it to those Jews.'"

Foxman says Smith professed to be appalled by such hateful sentiments and asked about ways he could help stand against bigotry and undo the damage his words had caused. They met for a couple of hours, finally joining hands in silent prayer. It seemed like "a breakthrough moment," Foxman says, but Smith later recanted, saying he had been "forced" to back away from his original statement by "pressure from the Jews."

Foxman has been national director of the ADL for 15 years. The group opposes all forms of bigotry, particularly when directed against Jews. The ADL monitors hate crimes and conducts periodic surveys designed to identify anti-Semitic views.

Despite lessons of the Holocaust, Foxman says anti-Semitism is still alive in the U.S. and many other parts of the world.

"I am convinced we currently face as great a threat to the safety and security of the Jewish people as the one we faced in the 1930s—if not a greater one," Foxman writes in the book, which goes on sale Oct. 21.

Foxman says not all groups criticized in the book deserve to be labeled anti-Semitic. "We are well aware of the power of that epithet, and we're very careful about how and when we use it," he writes.

Order *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism* now from Amazon.com.

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