Religion in Israeli Society, Politics and Foreign Policy

The state of Israel lies at the center of US foreign policy concerns in the greater Middle East. Its strategic location, its volatile political-security relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and the determined commitment of its American supporters all lend to Israel a particular salience in any calculus of US interests. Indeed, in America most discussion of Israel focuses on the Israeli—Palestinian crisis and its associated difficulties involving land, refugees, holy sites and terrorism. These, of course, are vital issues—for Israel, the Palestinians, the Middle East and the United States.

Cutting across all these subjects, however, is one that receives far less attention—the health of the Israeli state as a self-styled Jewish democracy. This conference examined that issue from a particular perspective, i.e., the subject of religion in Israeli society, politics and foreign policy. Participants grappled with the question of what it means to be a Jewish State and its implications for Israel’s policies.

In a very real sense, to call Israel a “Jewish democracy” is to call it a “religious democracy.” Such a polity is quite unusual in the numbers of democracies around the world. Some nascent Muslim democracies might fit into this category—such as Iraq and Afghanistan—but they are still too fragile to be called stable, consolidated democracies. Israel, however, is a stable, consolidated democracy.

Panelists were asked to engage the question of whether a democracy can be both religious and secular. How does such a state address the inevitable tensions between the overlapping authorities of religion and state?

Of course, there are vigorous disagreements among Israelis and supporters of Israel about the role of Judaism in the nation’s public life. But Israel, the Jewish State, guarantees religious freedom for all its citizens. Given the resurgence of religion around the world—the desecularization that is now widely accepted among scholars, if not politicians—we considered the following questions:

**SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS**

Chair: Thomas Farr, Berkley Center Senior Fellow and Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Service

Rabbi Michael Melchior, Knesset member, Rabbi of a Jerusalem congregation and Chief Rabbi of Norway

David Elcott, lecturer and organizational consultant

Rabbi Avi Shafran, Director of Public Affairs, Agudath Israel of America
1. To what extent is Israel a secular democracy, a Jewish State, or both? How well do both elements of Israeli political identity coexist in practice? What are the implications for Israel’s relations with its neighbors and the rest of the world?

2. How is religious freedom protected in Israeli law? How has that legal framework evolved over time, and with what consequences for domestic politics and foreign policy? How does religious freedom impact Israel’s status as a stable, mature democracy?

3. Is Israel today marked by an increasing religious pluralism? What are the major trends within the Jewish community and across Muslim and Christian minorities? How does religious pluralism impact Israel’s democracy, its foreign policy and its international standing?

RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF FOREIGN POLICY

The January 2008 symposium is part of a broader project on the Religious Sources of Foreign Policy within the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs. The program addresses the impact of religion on the foreign policies of key states around the world, placing the US case in an international context. Its key components include new undergraduate and graduate courses and symposia that bring together scholars and policy experts around emergent issues, such as the mobilization of religious groups around foreign policy, the intersection between religion, migration, and foreign policy, and the politics of international religious freedom.

above: Rabbi Michael Melchior
top: Professor Thomas Farr and panelists
**Interview with Rabbi Avi Shafran**

**Thomas Farr:** To what extent is Israel a secular democracy, a Jewish State, or both? How well do both elements of Israeli political identity coexist in practice? What are the implications for Israel’s relations with its neighbors and the rest of the world?

**Rabbi Shafran:** Our world includes theocracies, but Israel is not among them. A system of government that allows the expression of majority will, expressed by elected representatives, is clearly a democracy. Yet, like many other examples of representative governments that embrace religious identities to one or another degree, Israel considers a religion—in her case Judaism—to be an inherent part of her identity.

Israel is thus a Jewish, not secular democracy. The coexistence between Israel’s Jewishness and its democratic ideals has been seized upon by some to tar the State as “racist,” and occasionally creates controversies at points of interface between the two elements of Israel’s nature. But there has been no fundamental conflict born of Israel’s “dual identity” over the past 60 years.

**Thomas Farr:** How is religious freedom protected in Israeli law? How has that legal framework evolved over time, and with what consequences for domestic politics and foreign policy? How does religious freedom impact Israel’s status as a stable, mature democracy?

**Rabbi Shafran:** The State’s commitment to religious freedom is enshrined in both the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel and in a document that preceded and informed it, the June 19, 1947 “Status Quo Agreement” as it has come to be known.

Great care has been taken to fulfill the Declaration of Israel’s pledge to ensure that the citizens of the State enjoy full freedom of religion and to “safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.” The evidence shows that, other than in cases of legitimate security concerns, Israel has generally done well in this regard. There have, though, been charges of inequities in funding for upkeep of some Muslim holy places. There have also been allegations that land has been appropriated by the government in a discriminatory fashion. The State’s courts have adjudicated some such cases, and represent an important check on government actions in these realms.

In a world where many state and individual actors are predisposed to judge Israel harshly with or without evidence, Israel’s record in such matters has obvious implications as a backdrop to both domestic politics and foreign policy.

While the charge of Israel’s “racism” is, to understate the matter, unconvincing to any objective eye, Israel has not always taken sufficient care to deprive it of fuel. In a neighborhood and a larger world that have proven themselves conspicuously susceptible to animus against Jews, Israel does well to wear its Jewish clothing carefully. Thus, while it is probably impossible to deprive determined critics of Israel of hooks on which to hang their
hatreds, the Jewish State needs to make every effort to avoid serving up on silver platters opportunities for others to accuse it of insensitivity. If, for example, as Israeli government commissions themselves have asserted, there has been mistreatment of Arabs at checkpoints, even sporadically, no effort should be spared by Israel to ensure that such bad behavior is uprooted entirely.

And, in the diplomatic realm, the lack of finesse that is sometimes born of nationalistic pride should have no place in either policy or rhetoric. Here, Jewish values are precisely what the Doctor (with an upper-case “D”) ordered (most literally): the Jewish ideals of modesty, gentility and humility. Yes, carefully considered stances based on legitimate security needs are proper, indeed crucial. But bluster’s place is in bars, not geopolitical arenas.

Thomas Farr: Is Israel today marked by an increasing religious pluralism? What are the major trends within the Jewish community and across Muslim and Christian minorities? How does religious pluralism impact Israel’s democracy, its foreign policy and its international standing?

Rabbi Shafran: Religious pluralism thrives in Israel today, as it always has. The State’s Muslim and Christian communities are free of persecution and fully protected from harm. While there are frequent complaints about how Israeli measures like the security barrier make life more difficult for some Israeli Arabs and Arabs in Palestinian Authority territories, such difficulties, lamentable though they are, are incidental to the measures’ intent, which is to provide security for all Israelis. And so even the impact such measures may have on the ability of some Muslims to worship in the mosque of their first choice cannot, I think, be reasonably construed as akin to a gratuitous denial of religious rights.

The concept of “Jewish pluralism”—the idea of multiple Judaisms with widely divergent belief systems—presents a special challenge. Here we are not dealing with different religions seeking recognition as such, but rather with Jewish groups seeking to broaden and redefine Judaism. That represents an undermining of the aforementioned Status Quo Agreement. That foundational document, while it reiterates the State’s commitment to religious freedom, also pledged state observance of the Jewish Sabbath as the official day of rest, provision of only kosher food in government kitchens and a system of traditional Jewish religious education, and promised that that “everything possible will be done [to] avoid, Heaven forfend, the splitting of the House of Israel into two” that could result from multiple standards regarding Jewish “personal status issues” like marriage, divorce and conversion.

It is precisely such multiple standards that heterodox Jewish groups seek to enshrine in Israeli law. Thus far, however, due both to the historical and legal importance of the Status Quo Agreement and the traditional bent of a large majority of Israelis, the fundamental challenges to the nature of Israel’s Jewishness have not met with any substantial success. The official Israeli Rabbinate, which is Orthodox, currently remains the decisor with regard to religious matters of Jewish personal status.
That “single standard approach” (or as many media like to call it, “Orthodox monopoly”) in Israeli religious matters does not currently have a major impact on Israel’s democracy, as a large majority of Israel’s citizenry is either Orthodox or “traditional” (respectful of Jewish Orthodoxy’s beliefs and practices). It does, though, have the potential of alienating Diaspora Jews who have been raised on the idea that Judaism is a bird of many wings.

Which brings us to a major concern, at least for those who wish to see the continued honoring of the Status Quo Agreement, is the State’s highest court.

A comprehensive review of the Israeli Supreme Court’s arrogation of power deserves a symposium of its own. Let it suffice here to note that the “secular revolution” mindset of Aharon Barak survives his tenure as Chief Justice, both in the precedents he set and in the like-mindedness of justices still sitting. It has been widely documented, and widely decried, that the High Court has taken for itself the role of effectively legislating by fiat, in disregard of the Knesset, the societal consensus, the military establishment, and certainly the religious one.

Toward the goal of empowering what it deems to be the “fundamental values of democracy,” the Court remains guided by Justice Barak’s infamously audacious declaration that “everything is justiciable.” That attitude is what brought the respected and influential American judge Richard Posner to call Mr. Barak a “judicial buccaneer” and an “enlightened despot,” and Professor Robert Bork to award the former Israeli Chief Justice the “world record for judicial hubris.”

What the Israeli Supreme Court may in future years choose to deem “enlightened” or “unenlightened” is anyone’s guess. But an educated guess would certainly yield more than a modicum of concern in the heads and hearts of those who consider Israel’s Jewish character essential to its identity. One can only hope that Israelis recognize that a dictatorial and non-representative branch of government, no matter how “enlightened” it perceives itself to be, is, in the end, antithetical to the idea of a democracy.
Interview with David Elcott

**Thomas Farr:** To what extent is Israel a secular democracy, a Jewish State, or both? How well do both elements of Israeli political identity coexist in practice? What are the implications for Israel’s relations with its neighbors and the rest of the world?

**David Elcott:** I want to recognize the three competitive principles which govern the political, social and legal structure of Israel:

1. Israel is a democracy committed to the right of its elected unicameral legislature that also holds executive power, to express the collective will of the majority as expressed in its Declaration of Independence: “This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable. This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.”

2. Israel is a liberal state in the classic tradition that is committed to the rights of each of its inhabitants as individuals, protecting each person’s liberties: “it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

3. Israel is a Jewish State which declared the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.

Inherent in the establishment of Israel, then, is a threefold contradiction: a democracy with the right to impose its will based on majority rule, a liberal state with personal liberties at its core that protects each individual from the will of the majority, and a Jewish State that privileges one group’s history, culture and identity. Outbursts of anger and conflict that reflect this inner tension are frequent, but mainly within the Jewish community over issues of public religious observance, recognition of alternatives to the controlling power of the Chief rabbinate, and personal status decisions that undermine individual liberties. There are infrequent conflicts between or among religious communities, such as control of religious holy sites. Yet these are not constitutional, but episodic, often centuries old, and usually resolved quite quickly.

The tension over democratic majority rule, liberal protection of minority rights and a national identity linked to religion is not, of course, unique to Israel.

We in the US struggle with this daily over abortion, gay rights, government funded faith-based programs, or the language employed by Christian political candidates about faith in Jesus or America as a Christian country. Until 1828, a non-Christian could not serve...
in the Maryland state government. In England, the queen is also the head of the Anglican Church, whose bishops serve in the House of Lords. There are established churches in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In Germany, one pays a “religion tax” that funds religious life, while clergy receive salaries paid by the state. The Catholic Church has intervened directly to affect policies in Italy, Spain, Portugal, the US and Ireland. Greece and Bulgaria established the Eastern Orthodox Church as the national religion.

I am not even mentioning Muslim countries where conversion is apostasy that could lead to a death sentence, or the history in South America, with its trinity of Church-State-Military power that continues to suppress indigenous culture.

In fact, Israel follows almost untouched the Ottoman and British Mandate traditions of allowing religious communities self-determination on issues of personal status. The Palestine Order in Council of 1922 assured that: “all persons ... shall enjoy full liberty of conscience and the free exercise of their forms of worship, subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals,” and “no ordinance shall be promulgated which shall restrict complete freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of worship.”

The frustration for those of us who love Israel and yet are often critical of governmental policies and behaviors is to see Israel attacked over issues of religious freedom when its behavior is quite respectable. The demonstrations against Israel in terms of religious freedom for Muslims or Christians make about as much sense as the riots, violence and deaths over a Danish political cartoon that Muslims claimed defamed the prophet and Islam. Not only are minority religions protected in Israel, but the religious zealotry of so many nations that historically led to conquest—think Manifest Destiny, think the “white man’s burden” of British colonialism, think Spanish padres blessing the slaughter of native populations, the massacres between India and Pakistan, Tsarist Russia’s quest for Constantinople as well as historic and present day Jihadist Dar al-Islam proclamations of the new Caliphate—this zealotry has not infected Israeli foreign policy, which remains pragmatic and devoid of religious doctrine. In spite of the fanaticism of a small number of Jewish settlers, the Government of Israel does not justify its occupation of areas conquered in 1967 in religious terms, it left Gaza with a minimum of conflict and continues to publicly state its willingness to leave the heartland of its history, the places where God spoke to the Israelites, the venerated holy sites of Judaism, if security and peace can be assured. The biblical promise from God of Greater Israel that spreads from the Euphrates to the Nile finds absolutely no resonance in Israel policies. The fact that a division of Jerusalem can even be considered reminds us that traditional Jewish law, values or passions are not determinative or even influential in foreign policy and security decision making. From my perspective, there is little more to say on the subject.
**Thomas Farr:** How is religious freedom protected in Israeli law? How has that legal framework evolved over time, and with what consequences for domestic politics and foreign policy? How does religious freedom impact Israel’s status as a stable, mature democracy?

**David Elcott:** As Prof. Shimon Shetreet has noted:

The Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty refers to a “Jewish and democratic State”. However, Judaism has not been proclaimed the official religion of Israel. Rather, the law and practice in Israel regarding religious freedom may best be understood as a sort of hybrid between non-intervention in religious affairs, on the one hand, and the inter-involvement of religion and government in several forms on the other, and by government funding of authorities which provide religious services to several of the religious communities

The State of Israel established jurisdiction for religious courts in specified matters of “personal status,” such as birth, education, marriage, divorce, inheritance, death and burial. The religious communities include Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze and Baha’i. Within the Christian religion the following denominations are recognized: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latin (Roman Catholic), Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Chaldaic (Catholic) and Evangelical Episcopal (Anglican). The umbrella Protestant community, Ethiopian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox have applied for recognition. All of these religious groups enjoy wide state financial support, in the form of both direct funding and tax exemptions; they practice their religions freely and maintain communal institutions.

Shetreet adds that many provisions of Israeli statutory law are devoted to the protection of holy places and sites that serve for prayers and, other religious purposes. Even in this highly charged environment, it is an offense under penal law to cause damage to any place of worship or to any object sacred to any religion with the intention of affronting the religion of any class of persons. There are, for example, penal sanctions for trespass on places of worship and burial, for indignity to corpses, and for disturbances at funeral ceremonies.

It is ironic that, because of Israel’s deep commitment to religious freedom for those who are of other faiths and its desire to protect their religious uniqueness and the authority of non-Jewish religious leaders, it has not found a mechanism to address the complexity of Jewish identity and expression that exist anywhere else in the world where Jews live.

**Thomas Farr:** Is Israel today marked by an increasing religious pluralism? What are the major trends within the Jewish community and across Muslim and Christian minorities? How does religious pluralism impact Israel’s democracy, its foreign policy and its international standing?

**David Elcott:** The area where pluralism fails Israel, where rights are likely to be trampled, is within the Jewish community. Jewish is not simply a religious identity—it is a national identity, a cultural identity and a historical association that can be devoid of religious belief entirely. Stuck with an Ottoman conceived, colonial British reinforced system, Israel deprives the overwhelming majority of its citizens who identify as Jews their basic freedoms of association, religious expression, and their rights
to control the most intimate aspects of their personal lives. Of course, due to this confessional system, secular Muslims or Christians, those who do not want to associate with their religious identities, would be equally oppressed by this political structure. Yet this structure does allow for a “national” Palestinian identity that can express itself through affiliation with Islam or Christianity—the confessional system actually nurtures and secures the right of Israel’s minorities to sustain their unique ethnic-national-religious identities in spite of the overwhelming dominance of the Jewish majority.

Again, so that I am clear: I recognize the imbalance in funding between Jewish and non-Jewish institutions, the use of security concerns to limit Muslim access to holy sites and the second-class status experienced by Arab citizens who are Christian or Muslim. Yet I am very proud of Israel’s commitment to preserve and protect the unique religious rights of non-Jewish minorities. In the large picture of the world today, as we watch the legal rights of Muslims or Christians, Jews or Hindus, Bahais and others erode on every continent, Israel—a nation that is constantly threatened with eradication by peoples of other faiths—is remarkable in the ways the society, its legislature, and courts have addressed freedom of religion for minorities. While Israeli actions toward its Arab minority can and must be challenged when they cross over from legitimate self-defense to illegal land seizure and expropriation, or when they suppress civil or human rights or fund the Arab community at a second-class status, the issue is not religious—neither from the side of Israeli Jews or toward Arabs as Muslim or Christian. In these cases, deplorable as they may be at times, it is national ethnicity and not religion that is primary.

It is how the majority Jews are treated that draws offense and anger and challenges the freedom of Israeli citizens to have their religious choices respected by the State.

In this sense, Israel is not a representative democracy since the Chief Rabbinate rules against the will of the majority, as the latest surveys indicate:

- 63% favor giving Reform and Conservative Judaism equal legal status to that possessed by the Orthodox tradition.
- 63% favored allowing couples to choose Reform and Conservative Jewish marriage ceremonies
- 64% supported operating public transportation on the weekly Sabbath, which runs from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.
- 78% favor opening shopping malls outside city centers on the Sabbath.
- 45% “either prefer or is open to receiving religious life-cycle services from Reform” or Conservative authorities.

Israel is not a classic liberal state that eschews any religious preference and protects its citizens by assuring them free religious expression. And most ironic, Israel is not a Jewish State because it is the only Western nation that denies free religious expression and legal sanction to those who seek to live as Jews differently from those prescribed and adhered to by a small minority that monopolizes power.
Remarks by 
Rabbi Michael Melchior
January 17, 2008

I would talk just a little bit on the 60th birthday of the state of Israel and take us back where the Jewish people were 100 years ago. 90% of the Jews in the world were living in extended Poland, less than 10% in Western Europe, America and Northern Africa.

The Jewish people were in a situation of immediate threat, since no Jew knew the situation they faced when getting up the next day. There was a threat of physical extinction under a totalitarian framework which later, of course, led to the catastrophe of the twentieth century, the Holocaust—the biggest crime of human history. But it led also to the battle for survival of the Jewish people. And this most prominent moment of survival led to the formation of the state of Israel.

But Israel was thrown into creation without a lot of thought except that this was first of all to be the haven for the Jewish people, to solve the problem of the threat to Jewish existence, the problem of anti-Semitism. There was also the creation of the new Jew, especially because the areas where Jews could be active in centuries of exile were very limited and suddenly coming back to your own homeland means also to reestablish what the Jewishness of this Homeland means... Only now, 60 years after, we have still not yet come to terms with what we really mean by saying that Israel is a Jewish State.

I thought about it here when, very close to this place that we are sitting now, in Annapolis, a very short time ago there was a very strong Israeli demand to the Palestinians that they should define us as a Jewish State. And I commented in Israel in an Israeli government caucus that maybe we should start defining for ourselves what we mean by “Jewish State” and maybe then we can ask the Palestinians to do this afterwards. And by that I mean we should accept the basic notion that the Palestinians also accepted in Annapolis, of two states for two peoples, which also means that the state of Israel is the state of the Jewish people. But there were different concepts which led to compromises and status quos and other kinds of deals. Israel does not have a constitution, but Israel was established on the basis—which for me is the biggest miracle—of the Declaration of Independence. This is a very, very important basic document for understanding the state of Israel. There is probably no point in Jewish history before or after where every facet of Jewish life signed onto one declaration. This is for me the uniqueness of the establishment of the State of Israel. Everybody from ultra-capitalists to communists, to sworn communists, from liberalists and secular atheist fighters, to the segments of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Hasidim and Mignadim, and the Reformed Jews, and Orthodox Jews—the whole spectrum—everybody signed that document.

This is a very interesting truth that very few people know, that Israel was defined as a democracy in the Declaration of Independence. It doesn't say anything about it; it's so obvious nobody even thought about writing it in the document, but now, only in 1992, in
what is called in Israel the “basic laws,” was the concept of being a democracy introduced as a basic law in Israel. Up until then, Israel functioned fully as a democracy and had already established the whole series of rules establishing the democracy and, first of all, created the Supreme Court, which has a very unique function in Israel. Unlike in any other country in the world, the Court gives a considerable contribution to the concepts of basic human rights and freedom, civil freedom, in the up-building of all the years of the state, of the judicial up-building of the state.

What it did state in the Declaration of Independence is that Israel is a Jewish State. The question, then, is what does it mean that Israel is a Jewish State and, is there a tension between the Jewishness of the state and the democracy of the state. Now, it depends on how you define the Jewishness of the state. If you define it from [the perspective of] a narrow Jewish Orthodox religion, then there are tensions in the freedoms with Israel being a democracy with full civil rights and with the interpretation of the Jewish religion as it is. And this tension, first of all, in Israel comes to its extension in two areas. One area is that the state of Israel is not a religious state, not a theocracy. There is a relationship between state and religion in Israel but that doesn’t mean that Israel is a religious democracy.

I have functioned as Chief Rabbi, but it’s good to have fallback positions in politics, and I am still the Chief Rabbi in Norway. Norway is considered to be a country with full liberties, human freedoms, and so on, but Norway is a Lutheran state and defined by its constitution that the King has to be Lutheran, the majority of the government has to be Lutheran, in short, the Lutheran religion is the state religion which controls and, in fact, there are far more liberties in Israel for minority religions than there are in Norway for minority religions. So, therefore, the establishment of it being a religious state, of the connection between religion and state, has nothing to do with attacking the democracies and personal freedoms of the consensus of the state.

I remember I was in a very critical forum in the University of California, Berkeley, some time ago, where the conversation turned out to be not so critical. A couple of thousand students attended, and there was one critical question about how can Israel claim that it provides religious freedom to the non-Jewish population of Israel if it has in its primary state symbol, on its flag, a Star of David? And I said, “with all due respect the country where I am the Chief Rabbi, which is considered to be a full democracy and so on, has a big cross in its state symbol—the flag of Norway—and not only the flag of Norway but the flags of all the Nordic countries. So that symbol, in itself, doesn’t mean anything. It depends what the rules are, the rules of the game.

Now, what Israel has done is different. Israel is a secular, civil democracy, as I think you can define it—a state that has given authorization, a religious authorization according to the law of the State of Israel, in certain areas. The most important area of religious authorization is the area of family jurisdiction and there you can say that, from a pluralist’s civil liberty point-of-view, Israel does not have that level of freedoms in this area as any other western democracy has. Not everybody can marry each other in Israel. For example, a Jew and a non-Jew cannot, under Israeli law, get married in a Jewish marriage,
and cannot in a non-Jewish marriage. There are no civil marriages at all; there are religious marriages or you can’t get married. Inside, let’s say, the Jewish system, a person who is a Cohen, who is of the descendents of Moses’ Brother Aaron Cohen, cannot marry in Israel somebody who is divorced. They cannot get married according to Israeli law. And that’s one area; the other area is what is generally considered religious pluralism. This is the area of relations to the unorthodox segments of Judaism, who in Israel do not have the rights under the law that the Orthodox segment of Judaism do, which means that a Reformed Rabbi cannot perform a conversion to Judaism in Israel under Israeli law.

However, the State has established, in a series of laws, both freedom of religion and freedom from religion. I’ll just mention a couple of the laws which are important. For example, a person of any religion can chose his day of Sabbath, the free day of the week, according to his religion. So a Muslim who works in any work in Israel has a right to take Friday as his day off, a right which doesn’t exist, at least in Norway. I don’t know how it is in America, but in Norway you can’t do that and in Israel you can. And a Christian likewise on a Sunday can take that as his day off, the same, of course, along with other religious holidays. There is an Israeli law, a very strict criminal law, against people being offensive for religious reasons to anybody of any religion. And in the school system there is a very quite extended pluralism for different religions and inside the Jewish religion. You have Reformed Jewish schools, you have conservative Jewish schools, and you have Orthodox Jewish schools, as well as all other different kinds, and you have secular schools. According to the law in Israel, civil burials are allowed; not civil marriage but civil burials in the Jewish system.

Where I think we should be going with this issue is we should close down the tension on this issue by doing two things. First, I think we should minimize religious legislation. I think we should open up civil marriages in Israel, which would solve this problem. In a sense, I’m saying that the State of Israel, as a secular state, should not deal with who is a Jew, according to my opinion. That is a religious question and the State should begin with answering who is an Israeli; by dealing with who is an Israeli, you take out the sharpness of the discussion which is between the different segments of Judaism. Just as you have non-Jewish Israelis, you have Muslim Israelis, and, by the way, we are not 80% Jewish Israelis, they are hardly 70% because there is a big segment in Israel, especially of the new immigrants who have come from the former Soviet Union, who have defined themselves as not having Jewish religion. We don’t even have 70% today who have confessed by our own definition as Jews. Now, I understand how you divided it and it’s right and it’s true that you have 20% as Muslims and Christians. But in everything, we have this big segment in 300,000 people who come from the former Soviet Union and who are undefined according to Israeli law. We need to establish a civil marriage system in Israel, and I think there is growing support for that even inside the religious parties in Israel. We also need to differentiate conversions between our religious definition of conversion and the civil definition of conversion, and I think that will solve the basic tensions which exist today in the State of Israel. I am very much against any type of religious course. I myself am an Orthodox Rabbi and I believe in conversion according to the Jewish law, which is according to the traditional Jewish law. If somebody comes to my synagogue and has a conversion, by law it is a non-Orthodox conversion. The law has this defined as not being a conversion, a fact that I can accept as a legislation in the State of Israel. I cannot say that a conversion that is accepted by a big segment of the Jewish people should not be defined by the State of Israel as an acceptable conversion under the law.

On the other hand, I think that the Jewish religion should have a far bigger role in the substance of the State of Israel. Not in the legislation, not in conversion, but in the thinking and the matters of social ethics, of social and economic politics, of external relations. When I was the deputy minister of foreign affairs, I believed that the Jewish religion, Jewish tradition, Jewish thinking, Jewish history, Jewish experience, and Jewish narratives should have a far bigger role in foreign affairs than they have had. We have now a very big problem which you have discussed here in America, particularly about the relationship with Turkey and Armenia, and the genocide against the Armenians. How can we be Jews, in light of the Jewish experience, in this situation? How can we, even though we need desperately good relations with Turkey, avoid talking about the Armenian genocide? As a minister of the Cabinet, I could not accept the Turkish demands on this issue and many other issues. How can we as a Jewish State sell weapons to totalitarian states in
As a Jewish State, I am saying, there are many legitimate interests that we have to look at when we talk about military industry. But as a Jewish State, this should be a part of who we are and why we are. When we talk about our relationships with other religions, and we are going to say, “According to Israeli law we are very good on that issue.” We’re far better on that issue than most of the European countries, on the issue of giving autonomy and full religious rights to the religious minorities of Israel. But we have not developed our relationship as a Jewish State to the surrounding states, to Islam, for example. And this is a big debate which I think will be central in the debate over the next decade. I think we have an internal problem and an external challenge. The internal problem is that we have more and more people in Israel and, I’m saying this in a serious way, who want to define the Arabs out of Israeli democracy. And their proposals consistently in the Knesset are in this direction. If these proposals succeed, Israel will cease to be a democracy, and it is not given that this will not happen over the next couple of years. I hope it won’t succeed, and we will fight the battle, because this is a battle, not only of the democratic soul of Israel, but the Jewish soul of Israel.

There are many people, also in this country, who look at Israel as a spearhead in a kind of Judeo-Christian battle of civilizations against the civilization of Islam. In Israel we have leading politicians, rabbis, thinkers, and others who go for this concept. It is a very dangerous concept. There is no future in it, there is no hope in it. I think on the opposite, and I have in this area a broad coalition, also amongst the Orthodox thinkers and the ultra-Orthodox thinkers that believe that Israel should be a bridgehead of a coalition of civilizations. Israel and the Jewish people being historically in a position with one leg in the Western liberal democratic tradition, and with one leg in the East geographically, and also in the East in philosophy, and in tradition, and religious practice, and with respect for values which are valued in a world of religion. And I agree with you totally. I believe that the 21st century is going to be a century of religion. I don’t know if it’s good or bad—that we can debate—it depends on what kind of religion we are talking about. But this is the development in the world.

Israel has a unique role, the Jewish people have a unique role in creating the spearhead. I think that we should start off by creating a religious peace between Judaism and Islam which will inspire a political process and make it possible. The political process is not doing too well. In spite of what happened in the recent weeks, it’s not doing too well. It will not happen without a religious peace between Judaism and Islam. The good news is that it’s possible. There are very strong forces, both on the Jewish side and on the Islamic side. Some of the people you would be very surprised to hear are involved, but they are very, very strong forces involved who are willing to do this. They understand it is good; it’s good for religion, it’s good for the people, and it’s the only possibility to create a different perspective, a different vision, a different hope for both people living today in the Holy Land. Thank you.
Rabbi Michael Melchior, member of the Knesset, has served as Rabbi of a Jerusalem congregation since 1986, and also holds the title of Chief Rabbi of Norway (since 1980). Melchior has served as International Director of the Elie Wiesel Foundation as well as an administrator of various human rights, immigration and educational organizations. Since 1996, Rabbi Melchior has been the chairman of Meimad, a modern-Orthodox party, which in 1999 became a faction of One Israel. He was elected to the Knesset in May 1999. From August 1999 until March 2001, Melchior served as Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, responsible for Diaspora and social affairs. Rabbi Melchior currently serves in the 17th Knesset as Chairman of the Committee for Education, Culture and Sports.

David Elcott is a lecturer, organizational consultant and the author of *A Sacred Journey: The Jewish Quest for a Perfect World*. Elcott earned a doctorate in political psychology and Middle East studies with a specialty in Islam and Arab culture from Columbia University. He has worked with religious communal organizations and social justice agencies, as well as international corporations, to re-tool their missions and vision in response to the new conditions of 21st century life. Elcott has helped communities in the US and Canada create leadership institutes and community-wide projects grounded in the Jewish principles of Tikkun Olam.

Rabbi Avi Shafran studied in Israel and at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, received his rabbinical ordination from the latter institution and currently serves as Director of Public Affairs at Agudath Israel of America and as the American head of Am Echad, an Orthodox educational outreach effort and media resource. Before assuming his current position, Rabbi Shafran served as a Jewish Studies teacher in secondary schools for nearly twenty years. He has written widely in the Jewish and general press, including six years’ worth of a weekly column that is syndicated to Jewish and general media worldwide, and is the author of several books, most recently, *Migrant Soul: The Story of an American Ger* (Targum/Feldheim).

Thomas Farr, a former American diplomat, is a Visiting Associate Professor of Religion and International Affairs in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. A Senior Fellow in the Berkley Center, he directs the Religion and US Foreign Policy program. After a distinguished career in the US Army and the Foreign Service, Farr served as the first director of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom from 1999–2003. In that capacity he traveled widely to promote religious liberty, engaging governments, religious communities, and the victims of religious persecution, and testified before the US House International Relations Committee. Farr has published widely, including “Diplomacy in an Age of Faith,” in *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2008), and *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford, 2008).
About the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs

Religion is a critical but neglected factor in world affairs. The Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs, announced in 2005, seeks to deepen American understanding of religion as a factor in international policy issues. The Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University is the recipient of a two-year grant that funds the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs, implemented in collaboration with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

The Luce/SFS Program focuses on two thematic areas: religion and global development and the religious sources of foreign policy. Luce Foundation support enables innovative teaching, research, and outreach activities in both areas, as well as innovative publications and web-based knowledge resources.

**Above:** Professor Thomas Banchoff, Berkley Center Director; **Right:** Professor Carol Lancaster, Director of the Mortara Center for International Studies

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THE EDMUND A. WALSH SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE

Founded in 1919 to educate students and prepare them for leadership roles in international affairs, the School of Foreign Service conducts an undergraduate program for over 1,300 students and graduate programs at the Master’s level for more than 700 students. Under the leadership of Dean Robert L. Gallucci, the School houses more than a dozen regional and functional programs that offer courses, conduct research, host events, and contribute to the intellectual development of the field of international affairs. In 2007, a survey of faculty published in Foreign Policy ranked Georgetown University as #1 in Master’s degree programs in international relations.

PROGRAM FOR JEWISH CIVILIZATION

The Program for Jewish Civilization, in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, introduces students to Judaism’s global dimensions, achievements, ethical aspects, and relationships with other peoples and polities. PJC’s endeavor is unique among Jewish programs in American universities. In addition to the study of religion and literature, a staple of traditional “Jewish Studies” programs, PJC incorporates the wider economic, cultural, political, historical, philosophical, scientific, and literary accomplishments of the Jewish people. PJC benefits from the expertise of faculty throughout Georgetown as well as visiting scholars and practitioners who teach a variety of courses and conduct research. In 2005, the School of Foreign Service established a Certificate in Jewish Civilization, and in the following year the College of Arts and Sciences followed suit by endorsing the equivalent minor in Jewish Civilization. PJC has conducted an ambitious schedule of public programs, including weekly lectures, the annual endowed Herman Allen “Hal” Israel Lecture on Jewish-Catholic Relations, and two yearly conferences that bring together internationally recognized scholars in partnership with other Georgetown academic entities. The PJC publishes a series of Occasional Papers with contributions by leading authors, public intellectuals, and religious leaders who have taken part in our programs.

THE BERKLEY CENTER

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, created within the Office of the President in March 2006, is part of a university-wide effort to build knowledge about religion’s role in world affairs and promote interreligious understanding in the service of peace. The Center explores the intersection of religion with contemporary global challenges. Through research, teaching, and outreach activities, the Berkley Center builds knowledge, promotes dialogue, and supports action in the service of peace. Thomas Banchoff, Associate Professor in the Department of Government and the School of Foreign Service, is the Center’s founding director.

MORTARA CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Mortara Center for International Studies is a critical partner in the implementation of the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs. Located within the School of Foreign Service, the Center is at the heart of campus-wide activities centered on foreign policy and international relations, one of Georgetown’s research and teaching strengths. Center Director Carol Lancaster is a leading expert on development policy and its links back to domestic US politics. She is author, most recently, of Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics (University of Chicago Press, 2006).
About The Berkley Center Religious Literacy Series

This paper is part of a series of reports that addresses the impact of religion on the foreign policies of key states around the world. These reports explore emergent issues, such as the mobilization of religious groups around foreign policy, the intersection between religion, migration, and foreign policy, and the politics of international religious freedom.

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