

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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2-3 July 2011

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *Update on the Middle East*

I believe strongly that God desires we keep our focus on the Middle East. No matter what your position on eschatology, the end of history will occur in this region. The campaign of Armageddon will be in the Jezreel Valley of Israel and that campaign will involve all major world powers. So, it matters to us what is occurring in this region. In this *Perspective*, I want to review recent developments in the region.

- First is the contrast between how President Obama is treating Israel and how he is treating Syria. By and large, Obama's response to the so-called Arab Spring has been rather timid. No one could argue that he is taking the lead among world leaders in promoting democratic change in the Middle East. Further, Obama remains cautious in condemning Bashar al-Assad, the current dictator of Syria. Assad has been using tanks and helicopter gunships against his own people to hold on to power. The slaughter of his own people should have produced a blistering condemnation from the US government. It has not. This timidity informs even how the US responds to Syria! But there is one exception to this timidity—Israel! Obama is relentlessly tough on Israel. Listen to columnist Jackson Diehl: “[Obama] has spoken in public on Syria just twice since its massacres began [over] three months ago. But he chose to spell out US terms for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations without the agreement of Israel's prime minister, on the eve of meeting him at the White House and with only a few hours' notice—arguably the most high-handed presidential act in US-Israeli relations since the Eisenhower administration. Now, with prodding from the European Union, Obama is attempting to strong-arm Israelis and Palestinians into beginning negotiations on the parameters he set. The talks must be agreed to this month, says Washington; they should begin by September.” Consider the two parties to these negotiations: (1) Benjamin Netanyahu: He leads an Israeli right-wing coalition that would collapse should he agree to Obama's terms. No Israeli leader could survive negotiations where the 1967 lines are the basis for negotiations. (2) Mahmoud Abbas: He is 76 years old, planning to retire. Diehl writes that “he has committed himself to spending the next year seeing through reconciliation with the Hamas movement, arranging elections for his successor and seeking recognition for Palestine at the United Nations. For two years, he has refused to negotiate with Netanyahu, whom he despises. Even Yasser Arafat appeared more disposed than this Palestinian leader to make the wrenching concessions needed for a deal. And who would guarantee that the Palestinian president elected next May would pick up where Abbas left off?” What is astonishing about our current president is that he is so tough and, in his words, “speaks truth” to Israel, but has no stomach for speaking “truth” to Assad of Syria. Israel is our friend and partner in the Middle East. Engaging “the moderate” (Obama's words) Assad of Syria is absolutely fruitless and naive. Such engagement has only produced more terror for the

people of Syria. I find all of this quite perplexing—and I am rather ashamed of our current government because of it.

- Second, a few thoughts on the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Jeffrey Goldberg, national correspondent for the *Atlantic*, writes that the Brotherhood “believes, generally, in the primacy of Muslim law; in the supremacy of Islam; and in the idea that women and men should play their traditional roles in society. They also tend to believe that the West (and Israel, the country they consider a Western outpost in the Middle East) seeks, through conspiracy, to undermine their way of life.” Goldberg reports that he had an extensive interview with one of the key leaders of the Egyptian Brotherhood, who absolutely refused to respond to the two most sensitive questions facing them: Would the Brotherhood support a Christian for the Egyptian presidency? Could it support a woman? (The Brotherhood’s 2007 draft party platform, from which the organization is now trying to distance itself, makes clear that a Christian could not serve as president of Egypt.) Furthermore, the creed of the Brotherhood is rather categorical: “Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Quran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.” Over the last few weeks, news reports have detailed the formation of an offshoot of the Brotherhood of younger Muslims, who do not want to restrict women’s rights and resist the integration of Shariah law into Egyptian society. But this splinter group is smaller and younger than the seasoned Brotherhood leaders. In short, it is difficult to be positive about the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Should they attain any degree of power in the upcoming elections in Egypt, it would not be a positive development.
- Third, a word about Pakistan. Since the US killed Osama bin Laden, the US-Pakistani relationship is at an all-time low. There is little doubt that the Pakistani military is undergoing a deep internal crisis of identity. Traditionally, the Pakistani military has been viewed as a secular and disciplined organization. However, as Fareed Zakaria argues, “the evidence is now overwhelming that it has been infiltrated at all levels by violent Islamists, including Taliban and al Qaeda sympathizers.” It appears that Islamist ideology is replacing strategy. Zakaria writes that “For 60 years, Pakistan’s military has focused obsessively on its rivalry with India. Large elements within that military appear to be switching obsessions, and the United States is replacing India as the organizing principle around which Pakistan’s military understands its national security interests. If this happens, not only is the Afghan war lost but Pakistan is also lost.” Pakistan is drifting into a strategic black hole. Does it really wish to become an enemy of the United States, currying favor with Islamic militants? Or does it want to join the family of nations and seek to destroy the jihadist militants that are destroying Pakistan? Because the United States has poured over \$20 billion into Pakistan, how these questions are answered is critical for America as well.
- Finally, a brief word about Turkey. Since World War II, Turkey has been a reliable ally of the West. As a member of NATO, it was on the front-line of the Cold War. But, by 2000, Turkey was a feeble nation, both in terms of its regional influence and its economy. But now in 2011, things have changed. Turkey stands absolutely transformed as a nation. Unlike all the other Mediterranean nations (e.g., Greece, Spain and Portugal), Turkey has an economy that is robust, with an investment-grade credit rating, low inflation and no pressure from the International Monetary Fund. It is now a vocal member of the G-20 club of important

economies and some forecasters predict that during the next decade it will grow faster than any country except China and India. In short, Turkey has a flourishing economy and a young population. As *The Economist* argues, [Turkey] has become a pivotal [nation]. Its geographical position, wedged between the European landmass, Russia and the Middle East, has given it a new strategic importance, especially in the energy-pipeline business. And its new assertive foreign policy is making it count not just in neighboring countries but as far afield as China and Africa.” Turkey is also a critically important nation in the Muslim world: It is a Muslim nation functioning as a secular democracy. Compared with much of the Arab world, it has been hugely successful in economic, diplomatic and military terms. Membership in the European Union, which was Turkey’s goal for years, no longer seems as important. In fact, the way the EU treated Turkey, with the list of demands for changing its culture, is it any wonder that Turkey now sees the EU as superfluous? Turkey was once an ally of Israel but no longer. It sees itself as the resurgent leader of the Muslim world.

As this *Perspective* has shown, the Middle East is a region in the middle of enormous change. These changes overall do not bode well for the US and certainly not for Israel.

See *The Economist* (23 October 2010 and 21 May 2011); Fareed Zakaria in the *Washington Post* (22 June 2011); Jeffrey Goldberg in the *Atlantic* (June 2011), pp 50-51; and Jackson Diehl in the *Washington Post* (19 June 2011).

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### ***The Fad of Reincarnation***

In the United States, there is a growing fascination with the belief in reincarnation. In fact, adherence to this belief is a part of psychiatric therapy—something called “hypnotic regression” or “past-lives therapy.” One very famous psychiatrist, Dr. Paul DeBell, believes that he was a caveman in a past life and that his eternal soul also inhabited the body of a Tibetan monk and a conscientious German who refused to betray his Jewish neighbors in the Holocaust. Dr. Brian Weiss, another well-known psychiatrist, conducts group hypnotherapy sessions in which he takes people through their past lives—for a fee of \$355. [According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, over 25% of Americans now believe in reincarnation. (Women are more likely to believe than men; Democrats more than Republicans.) The growing love affair with the East in American probably began in 1968 when the Beatles took their infamous pilgrimage to India and spent a significant amount of time with a Hindu guru. Their music and their lifestyles changed as a result—especially that of John Lennon.] How do such hypnotic sessions (or past-lives therapy) work? Such a session takes several hours and costs about \$100 per hour. Under hypnosis, the patient follows a guided visualization. For example, Dr. Weiss encourages his hypnotized patients to imagine walking through one of five doors. One has on it the year 1850, another 1700, another 1500, and so on. This entire approach to therapy is controversial and not widely accepted in the psychiatric profession, but it does symbolize the lure of the East. With the demise of a commitment to biblical Christianity and the growing pluralism of this Postmodern culture, we should not be surprised with this fascination with Eastern mysticism, especially reincarnation. Two important facts about biblical Christianity are important: (1) Biblical Christianity clearly articulates a linear view of history, not the cyclical one of the East.

Time has a very specific point of beginning—creation. God’s program of redemption—the key to history—is clearly linear. Any study of the Bible necessitates a rejection of the cyclical view of history so central to a belief in the cycles of reincarnation. (2) Hebrews 9:27 makes it quite clear that there is no cycle to life, to reincarnation: “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that the judgment.”

It is imperative that those committed to genuine biblical Christianity have a biblical perspective on the spiritual world of Eastern thought, especially Hinduism, one of the key sources of a belief in reincarnation. God’s truth provides answers to Eastern mysticism. The Christian gospel is clear and straightforward, but it is the convincing and convicting work of the Holy Spirit that brings a person to Christ. As we share Christ in both word and deed, it is imperative to remember that our prayers and our dependence on the Spirit bear the fruit of the gospel. Nonetheless, there are critical bridges or contact points of similarity between Christianity and Eastern mysticism that the Spirit can use:

**Bridge #1:** As with the Christian, the Hindu believes that ultimate reality is spirit. John 4:24 teaches that “God is spirit and those that worship Him worship Him in spirit and in truth.” That there is a spiritual world and that that world is ultimate reality is a powerful commonality between the two faiths.

**Bridge #2:** Central to Hinduism is the idea of a unity to all things; a unity centered in the belief in Nigurna Brahman. Given this conviction, the Christian can build the bridge that natural revelation reveals this unity, focused on God Himself (see Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18ff.). The next critical step is of course to get the Hindu to focus on the special revelation in Jesus Christ.

**Bridge #3:** Rooted in the Law of Karma, Hinduism also teaches that there is a sense of justice that permeates the universe. If the Hindu falls short of Karma’s requirements, he is condemned to the endless cycle of reincarnation. For the Christian, that sense of justice has been met in the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary’s cross.

**Bridge #4:** Seeking to break the cycle of the soul’s transmigration (reincarnation), Hinduism has a passion for freedom. For Christianity, Jesus provides that longing for freedom. Faith in Jesus Christ provides the freedom from sin and its bondage (see John 8:32).

**Bridge #5:** Hinduism teaches and respects the significant cost there is to the religious life. The typical Hindu honors and defers to the devout, the holy and the ascetic leaders of the Hindu faith, for they are close to breaking the law of karma and the freedom from reincarnation. Although Christianity rejects the extreme asceticism of Hinduism, it does teach “death to self,” and other-centered, self-sacrificial love as paramount virtues of the faith. Hindus can identify with this and witness the liberation from legalism that biblical Christianity brings.

These five bridges are most helpful in sharing Christianity with Hindus and other Eastern mystics, but there are three significant barriers to which Christians must be sensitive. Only God the Spirit can break down these barriers, but the Christian must be conscious of them and their power.

1. Most Hindus believe that ultimate truth is a synthesis of many truths. They separate the Jesus revealed in history from the Christ of the Christian faith. He is not the only path to truth nor to salvation. Christians of course reject this syncretism. Revelation is the only source for truth and Christians cannot surrender this.

2. Many Hindus believe that all religions lead to the same goals and that none possess full truth. Often, Hindus contend that Jesus is **a** way to salvation but will not tolerate that He is **the** way of salvation. Here then is perhaps the most formidable barrier between Christianity and Hinduism. Jesus is exclusive and His path of salvation is exclusive (John 14:6). This truth cannot be surrendered.
3. Hindus believe that there is divine revelation in all religions and that none can claim exclusivity. Therefore, Christianity is not unique. But, because it is rooted in revelation, Christianity is unique and exclusive. With love and compassion, this truth must be maintained. Only God's Spirit can break down this barrier. Hinduism resembles a sponge, for it soaks up all teachings, absorbs them and then redefines them according to the syncretistic teachings of Hinduism. If Christians are to reach Hindus, we must understand this tendency, build the bridges and then allow the Holy Spirit to do His supernatural work. There is no other way to reach the Hindu for Jesus Christ.

See Lisa Miller in the *New York Times* (29 August 2010) and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 21-29.