

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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As many of you know, I have announced my retirement as Grace University's President, effective 30 June 2012. An important aspect of my retirement is the decision to end the radio edition of Issues in Perspective. The last radio broadcast of "Issues" will be the weekend of 28-29 January 2012. However, I will continue writing the weekly edition of Issues in Perspective, which you can access at www.issuesinperspective.com. (The archive of past editions of "Issues" will remain at that site.) Thank you for being a faithful listener and supporter of "Issues." To have had this radio ministry for nearly twenty years has been one of the joys of my life. I hope that you will continue to read Issues in Perspective at the website, www.issuesinperspective.com.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

Israel's Changing Population

The mixing of political and religious ideas is central to understanding Judaism and the modern state of Israel. Thomas Friedman, in his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, argues that there are four distinct groups of Jews within modern Israel (and the world). **(1)** The first and largest is the secular and nonobservant Jew who really built the modern state of Israel. Many of them are secular Zionists who came to Israel in part as a rebellion against their grandfathers and Orthodox Judaism. For these secular Jews, being in the land, erecting a modern society and army, and observing the Jewish holidays as national holidays all substitute for religious observance and faith. **(2)** The second group is the religious Zionists, who are traditional or modern Orthodox Jews, who fully support the secular Zionist state, but insist it is not a substitute for the synagogue. The creation of the Jewish state is a religious, "messianic" event. **(3)** The third group is the religious or messianic Zionists, who see the rebirth of the Jewish state as the first stage in a process that will culminate with the coming of the Messiah. The state is the necessary instrument for bringing the Messiah. Every inch of the land of Israel must be settled and all defense and foreign policies are devoted to this end. **(4)** The final group is the ultra-Orthodox, non-Zionist Jews, who do not regard the Jewish state as important. Only when the personal Messiah returns and the rule of Jewish law is complete will the true Jewish state be created. Therefore, Jews today reject the teaching that Jesus is the Messiah. Except among the ultra-Orthodox and some messianic Zionists, the idea of a personal Messiah who will return to bring about a kingdom of peace, righteousness and justice is foreign. The Messianic idea is either politicized and associated with the modern state of Israel or rejected as an aspect of an antiquated belief of a dead form of Judaism.

In 2012, the situation in modern Israel is even more problematic. Once a small minority in Israel, Orthodox Jews are now in the forefront of politics, often influencing the policy decisions of the state of Israel. According to *The Economist*, they comprise 40% of the ruling coalition's members and over 40% of new army officers and combat soldiers. In addition, the birth rate of Orthodox Jews is more than double that of secular Jews, meaning that their power and influence

will grow. Under the current political leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, the religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox have forged a working relationship. Both of these groups defend their assets, be it settlements in the West Bank, where they form at least 70% of the Jewish population, or the separate Torah educational systems they have created, both with state backing. In short, “both argue that Israel’s Jewish character is more vital than its democratic one.” Secular Jews, who were the key force in founding the modern state of Israel, now fear the emerging power of the Orthodox Jews. In fact, most secular Jews have left Jerusalem for Tel Aviv or Haifa on the coast. The difference between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in modern Israel is marked. Tel Aviv is a modern city that resembles New York or Chicago. Jerusalem is becoming a city of religious Zionists and Orthodox Jews, all of which are in constant conflict with resentful Arabs in the east part of the city. The growing influence of Orthodox Jewry is powerful and significant: “Under pressure from rabbinical authorities and their disciples, the hotter-headed religious soldiers boycott military pageants at which women perform. Municipalities cancel concerts with female artists or insist that they fully cover their bodies, and remove advertising of even modestly-clad women from streets and buses. [Only] In ultra-Orthodox suburbs of Tel Aviv, women . . . do not drive.” Finally, the Orthodox Jewish population tends to be more dismissive of Arabs than secular Jews and are willing to promote laws banning Arabs from living in Jewish neighborhoods. In addition, some polls even suggest that a high percentage of religious Jews would deny non-Jews the right to vote. The political realities of such positions are volatile and obviously explosive.

What then does a modern Jew believe, what is the theology of Judaism? With the end of the Temple, the sacrificial system and the priests in AD 70, the focal point of Judaism was the Law. The entire body of written and oral tradition of Judaism is known as “Torah,” which “represents to the Jew the whole mystery and tangible expression of God.” The debates, discussions and decisions of scholars and rabbis on the meaning of “Torah” were eventually compiled into a monumental work called the “Talmud,” which aids the Jew in making the connection between theology and life. Throughout Jewish history, there has not been much focus on articulating a creed or confession of what Jews believe. The most significant attempt to do so was that of the twelfth century Jewish teacher, Moses Maimonides, who listed thirteen articles. This list remains a part of the Authorized Prayer Book:

1. Belief in the existence of a Creator and Providence.
2. Belief in his unity.
3. Belief in his incorporeality [i.e., not of flesh and blood].
4. Belief in his eternity.
5. Belief that to him alone is worship due.
6. Belief in the words of the Prophets.
7. Belief that Moses was the greatest of all Prophets.
8. Belief in the revelation of the Lord to Moses at Sinai.
9. Belief in the immutability of the revealed Law.
10. Belief that God is omniscient.
11. Belief in the retribution in this world and the hereafter.
12. Belief in the coming of the Messiah.
13. Belief in the resurrection of the dead.

But, let me be more specific on key theological ideas of modern Judaism:

- **God** The theological center of Judaism is Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “The LORD (Yahweh) is our God (Elohim); the LORD is one.” Jews are to love Him with heart, soul and strength. God is transcendent (beyond the physical world) and is the Creator of all that there is. God is a God of righteousness, holiness, justice and love. He deserves singular worship and devotion. As Creator, He creates humans in His image, which becomes the basis for the value and worth of all humans. Jews teach that His revelation to humanity in the Old Testament (OT) is how we as creatures know about Him and understand Him.
- **The Scripture** Judaism looks at Scripture differently than Christianity. The Old Testament books remain the center of Jewish Scripture. In fact, between A.D. 69 and 90 a group of Jewish scholars, students and Rabbis gathered in Jamnia, Israel to finalize what books exactly were in the Old Testament canon. They agreed to group the OT into the Torah (the first five books of the OT), the Prophets (the history books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings; and the major and minor prophets) and the Miscellaneous books (that included the rest of the OT books). For most Jews this is the canon. However, over the history of Judaism other books of importance were added. About A.D. 200 the Mishnah was added, which includes about 4000 precepts of rabbinic law. About A.D. 500 the Mishnah was combined with the Halakah (oral tradition of the Jewish people with instructions for daily living) and the Haggadah (multiple synagogue homilies) to form the Talmud, a work of some 36 volumes. For Orthodox Jews, not only is the Torah their daily guide for life, but so is the Talmud. They seek to bring their lives into meticulous conformity with both the Torah and the Talmud. Eating procedures are very important to the Orthodox Jew. They will of course not eat pork or shellfish. Animals that are slaughtered for eating must be done so in a special “kosher” manner, certified as such by a rabbi. Further, Orthodox Jews will not work, travel, use the phone, touch money or even pose for pictures on the Sabbath. There are multiple examples of other restrictions from the Talmud. Orthodox Jews live a very rigid life. Conservative Jews and Reform Jews have departed significantly from Orthodox Jewry. Conservative Jews are more lenient in their interpretations of the law and Reform Jews teach that principles are more important than Jewish practices. In fact, Reform Jews rarely observe dietary or Sabbath restrictions.
- **Jewish Customs and Festivals** Whether a Jew is Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, there is agreement on one thing--observance of the Sabbath. For the Jew, the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday night and continues until sundown Saturday. In Orthodox and some Conservative Jewish homes, as the sun is setting on Friday, the mother (normally) lights the traditional candles and gives the blessing: “Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us by Thy laws and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light.” The father then blesses the wine, then everyone has a sip, and then he slices the Sabbath bread. After the Sabbath dinner, Conservative and Reform families go to the synagogue. For the Orthodox Jew, the main service is on Saturday morning and they and most Conservatives attend another Saturday service that afternoon. There are other High Holy Days within Judaism. Among those are Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year celebrated in September or October) and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These Holy Days are characterized by repentance, prayer and acts of kindness towards others. This

period of self-examination results in open confession and a commitment to abstain from these sins in the year to come. Although the Day of Atonement is wrapped around the OT sacrifice of the lamb which atoned for (covered) sin, the idea of substitutionary sacrifice is lost in much of modern Judaism. Also central is the celebration of Passover. Preceded by the Feast of Unleavened Bread where all leaven is removed from the home and occurring about the same time as the Christian celebration of Easter, Passover begins with the question from the youngest son, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” An older family member answers, “We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt and the Eternal our God led us from there with a mighty hand.” The Passover meal involves a roast shank bone to remind the family of the lamb that was slain and whose blood was sprinkled on the doors so that the angel of death would recognize Jewish homes and “Passover” them. Today the Passover celebration includes not only prayers and special foods, but also games for the children. When a Jewish boy reaches the age of thirteen, he becomes a “Son of the Commandment (or Covenant),” called a *Bar mitzvah*, and is called up to the reading of the Torah on the Sabbath following his birthday. On that occasion, he recites the words: “Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has chosen us from all peoples, and has given us Thy Torah.” Today in some Jewish synagogues, girls go through a similar ceremony called a *Bat mitzvah*.

- **The Messiah** For Jews of the Conservative and Reform perspective, the belief in a coming Messiah who will deliver Israel and bring about the consummation of history is no longer viable. Indeed, for many Jews, the rebirth of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is now directly associated with the idea of Messiah. For one of the founders of that state, David Ben Gurion, the Messianic vision is centralized in the establishment of the state: “The ingathering of the exiles, the return of the Jewish people to their land, is the beginning of the realization of the Messianic vision.”

See *The Economist* (10 December 2011), p. 53 and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 57-67.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Should We Privatize the Postal Service?

The US Postal Service (USPS) is in trouble. It has urged Congress to allow it to cancel Saturday deliveries, with discussion about the possibility of moving to three-days-a-week delivery of the mail. In the last fiscal year, it lost \$5.1 billion, with total losses exceeding \$14 billion—an amount larger than the budgets of 35 states of the US!!! Article I, Section 8 of the US Constitution states that “The Congress shall have the power to . . . establish post offices and post roads.” As the existence of Fed Ex and UPS indicate, it is possible for Congress to permit the postal service to be privatized. However, as columnist George Will argues, “The belief is ‘In government, whatever is should forever be.’” Changing anything in the postal service is almost impossible. This is the political culture we now face in the United States.

How did the USPS get itself into such a situation? There are at least three factors that explain the demise of the USPS: (1) The existence of email has had a profound effect on the USPS. For

example, today one can even send Christmas cards and other greeting cards via email. There is also now the digital delivery of movies and the ability to send almost anything , anywhere via an electronic format. (2) The USPS is the nation's second-largest civilian employer, with nearly 653,000 employees. And, the USPS must shed about 1/3 of its workforce to remain viable. The problem is that 80% of the USPS costs are labor costs (compared with 53% for UPS and 32% for Fed Ex). Obviously, these labor costs make it very difficult for the USPS to be competitive. (3) Mail volume has declined about 20% over the last five years, and there is little doubt but that this decline will accelerate.

It would require an act of Congress, but does not wisdom dictate that the United States government should consider permitting a private company to take over the postal service? Allow the free market to force the postal service to be competitive. I know of no real proposal to seriously deal with all the challenges that the USPS faces. But I do know that the USPS cannot continue doing the same thing and expect to survive. The federal government cannot further subsidize the USPS because of its own debt burden. So, is it not prudent for a private company, answerable to its stockholders, to take over the delivery of our mail? Someone once defined insanity as continuing to do the same thing but expecting different results. That seems to be the dilemma of the USPS.

See George Will in the *Washington Post* (28 November 2011).