

American Evangelicals

American Evangelicals: They May Surprise You

by Charles Strohmer

Many Christians in America have a blinkered view of the Muslim world. Terribly misinformed, they tend to stereotype non-Western Muslims as religious-political extremists, instead of understanding the many and varied expressions of Islam. Equally lamentable is the fact that many Muslims outside America have stereotyped Christians in America as religious right extremists. It's true, of course, that the religious right, especially its hard-line fundamentalists, is sometimes publicly foolish about the Middle East policies that it lobbies for in Washington. And when that happens, it usually gets media coverage overseas, while wiser policy recommendations of other Christian voices get ignored.

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Add to that a President outspoken about his Christian faith, but whose martial footprint in the Middle East may, in the opinion of former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, go down as the worst foreign policy disaster in U.S. history, and it's hard to fault Muslims for feeling badly about American Christianity. Here in the States, however, a refreshing breeze is blowing, largely under the media's radar so far, and it's coming from the biggest Christian constituency in America, the Evangelicals. Many prominent Evangelicals have begun to decry publicly the rigid, sectarian fundamentalism of the religious right and to call for profoundly increased interfaith dialogue and wiser approaches to U.S.-Mideast relations.

?Evangelical? is an umbrella term for a diverse array of Protestant Christian denominations and loosely knit independent churches, colleges, and parachurch organizations that are broadly and in the main theologically and socially conservative. Evangelicals comprise between 35%-40% of the U.S. population. But it's a very mixed bag. Even some prominent religious right fundamentalists, such as Pat Robertson and John Hagee, would identify themselves as Evangelical. In contrast to them and their followers, the popular Evangelical leader Jim Wallis and his large Sojourners parachurch organization represent a more theologically inclusive and socially progressive wing. In fact, it was when Wallis' book *God's Politics* made *The New York Times* best-seller list in 2005, that it became clear just how broad and deep was the disillusionment about religious right politics. Boldly challenging assumptions of the religious right and policies of the Bush administration while also calling for a new vision, the book struck a nerve in the American psyche.

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A promising religious-political chain reaction followed, when a further wise step was taken by many prominent Evangelicals in 2007. A significant step, it moved forward interfaith dialogue between Western Christian leaders and non-Western Muslim leaders, and it had a rather unlikely beginning the previous year, with Pope Benedict's controversial Regensburg address in September 2006. Just one month later, spring-boarding off the Pope's address, a diverse group of 38 Islamic authorities and scholars published an ?Open Letter to the Pope.? Writing in ?a spirit of open exchange,? the signatories acknowledged Pope Benedict's efforts to oppose positivism and materialism and to maintain the proper place of reason vis a vis faith in God, but they also addressed errors about Islam which the Pope had made in his Regensburg speech. Then in October 2007, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals reached out to Christian leaders everywhere by publishing a remarkable document, ?A Common Word Between Us and You.?

That common ground approach to relationships between people who are different quickly evoked a constructive Christian reply, ?Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ?A Common Word Between Us and You'.? Written by several prominent Christian scholars and theologians in America, it commended ?A Common Word? and welcomed further inter-faith dialogue. It ran as a full page open letter in the November 18, 2007 edition of *The New York Times*. To date, it has been signed by over 400 Christian theologians, academics, ministers, and intellectuals, including prominent American Evangelicals such as Ellen Charry, Richard Cizik, David Heim, Bill Hybels, Brian McClaren, Richard Mouw, Jim Wallis, and Rick Warren.

Also in 2007, the ?Letter to President Bush from Evangelical Leaders? decried the perception that all American Evangelicals oppose

the creation of a Palestinian state that includes the vast majority of the West Bank. Published in The New York Times on July 29, the letter argued strongly for a two-state solution and admonished the Bush administration to "proceed confidently and forthrightly in negotiations with both sides."

In all of these documents and initiatives one finds, either implied or stated overtly, not the methodology of religious-political sectarian checklists but a call for more common ground, or wisdom based, approaches. "A Common Word Between Us and You," for instance, is not polemical. Instead, the signatories employed the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scriptures, and they explained that the basis for common ground already exists between Christianity and Islam in "the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of God and love of neighbor," noting that this provides the basis for peace and understanding.

This more wisdom-based approach can also be seen from a Christian perspective in two important developments this past spring. In one, a committee of 20 Evangelical leaders drafted a 7,000 word foreign policy document titled the "Matthew 5:21-26 Project." Besides drawing from other parts of the Bible, the committee was particularly inspired by Jesus' teaching to make peace with an adversary, to love one's neighbor as one's self, and to love one's enemies. It extrapolates these teachings of Jesus to geopolitics by calling for the next White House administration to formulate its Middle East policies based on increased international cooperation and, importantly, talking to adversaries not only to allies. The signatories, who range across the spectrum of Evangelical Christianity, have agreed that such actions would facilitate dialogue and trust-building in working with others for the common public good, and that this would help curb the temptation to use American power "in inappropriate ways."

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Also this past spring, another mixed group of influential Evangelicals released the "Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity in Public Commitment." The Manifesto eschews sectarianism and reaffirms the historic Evangelical commitment to a pluralistic public square, domestically and internationally. "What we need," said former U.S. Ambassador Robert Seiple, himself an Evangelical, "is a civil public square where we know our own faith at its richest and deepest best, and enough about our neighbor's to respect it."

Echoing the cry of many Muslims who practice *ijtihad*, the Evangelical Manifesto calls for humility and "self-examination, reflection, and a willingness to be corrected and to change," and to "find a new understanding of our place in public life." To be followers of Jesus, they write, "is to seek to be faithful to the freedom, justice, peace, and well-being that are at the heart of the kingdom of God, to bring these gifts into public life as a service to all, and to work with all who share these ideals and care for the common good."

Add to all of these developments other auspicious signs, such as the memberships given by the Council on Foreign Relations to prominent Evangelicals such as Richard Land and Rick Warren, and those here in the States with ears to hear and eyes to see notice a trend away from religious right polemics toward a more wisdom-based (common ground) style in U.S.-Mideast relations.

Although Evangelicals in America have the Bible in one hand, they do not have a sword in the other. They are fed up with sectarian fundamentalism, whether of the secular or religious variety. They are calling for mature common ground approaches to religion and politics among people who are different. And they are finding increasing degrees of like-mindedness among Muslims, who with the Qur'an in one hand have extended the other hand in peace and understanding. Things do seem more hopeful, though struggle remains. But if the breeze increases, maybe our politicians will get the message. And maybe our media will, too.

(First published in the Turkish Daily News, July 7, 2008. Charles Strohmer's religious and political writings appear in numerous magazines and online publications. He is a visiting research fellow of the Center for Public Justice and is writing a book on wisdom-based U.S.-Mideast relations.)

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