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Hallowed Secularism

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4-6-2008

### April 6, 2008: The Battle for Our Religions

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: The Battle for Our Religions

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4/6/2008--Fresh reminders today about how difficult it is for non-violent, tolerant religious believers to hold their own against those believers who have a more unrelenting view.

We think of Judaism as a "modern" religion and Islam as a violent one. And it is true that acts of assassination are rare among Jews, although not unheard of, unfortunately. But there is a sense in which the religious drive to occupy all of the lands of the mythic Davidic Kingship, the drive for Judea and Samaria, led to the disastrous post-1967 occupation that has poisoned relations between Israelis and Palestinians. And, although most American Jews no doubt rejected this biblical interpretation, I don't remember hearing "religious" objections to it in synagogue in all the years since.

Similarly, we think of Islam as violently resistant to conversion among Muslims. But World Magazine reports in its April 5-12 issue on the threats and assaults that Messianic Jews in the Israeli Town of Arad in the Negev have been receiving from "ultra-Orthodox" Jews there and the assistance this campaign of harassment has received from the Government of Israel. One such Messianic Jew was quoted as saying of the ultra-orthodox: "Many Christians are shocked to hear what these men in black are doing to Christians here. Many have the mistaken idea that these men are somehow 'holy,' but that is very far from the truth."

Even if the media reported on these events, liberal Jews would not denounce the ultra-Orthodox. For one thing, Jews in general are against conversion by members of a sect many find misleading in their claims to be Jewish. Second, it is always easier to ignore interpretations of one's religion that are ignorant and backward.

Conversely, the New York Times Book Review today contains Fareed Zakaria's gushing review of "Reconciliation," Benazir Bhutto's posthumous defense of an Islam protective of human rights and democracy. Whatever her failings as a politician, Bhutto gave her life for her vision of an Islam at peace with the world, governing and benefiting the lives of millions of people.

If your first commitment is to Enlightenment values, as is really the case with most progressive Jews and Christians in America, you are at a disadvantage contesting with conservative believers. Bluntly, they believe and you really don't. It took a Martin Buber and an Abraham Joshua Heschel, genuinely radical believers, to take on religious conservatives in good faith. It took a Martin Luther King, Jr.

This is in part why I gave up Judaism and now consider myself a secularist. It is also why I admire those who have stayed to fight for the soul of Our Religions. But it is the same fight, whether the issue is the rights of gays to be married in America or Jews who believe in Christ to live in Israel. We must stop looking down on Islam as different and stop making demands on "moderate Muslims" that we do not fulfill in regard to our own faiths. Bhutto's book shows us a model for progressive religion and a model for a courageous life trying to make that vision a reality.