

***Religious Factors and American Public Support for Israel:  
1992-2008***

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### *Abstract*

The influence of religious institutions, people and ideas over American foreign policy has been a growing area of inquiry among social scientists and other scholars in recent years. And although there has been considerable disagreement about the extent of religious influences over a broad range of foreign policy questions, there is massive consensus on the efficacy of religious influence on one policy issue: the United States' long-term support for the state of Israel. This paper draws on the University of Akron's National Survey of Religion and Politics, administered in every presidential year since 1992, to trace the religious sources of that support within the American public, considering ethnoreligious factors, theological tendencies and political theology, in the context of other demographic and ideological influences. We find that religious variables far outweigh other factors in predicting public support for the state of Israel.

## *Introduction*

Political scientists have long ignored religion's influence on public attitudes about American foreign policy (Hero 1973; Jelen 1994). In recent years, however, journalists and scholars alike have been fascinated—and sometimes alarmed—by evidence that religious faith is now shaping both opinion and participation in the foreign policy arena (Boyer 2005; Urquhart 2005; Phillips 2006; Preston 2010). Indeed, the press has recounted religious activism on issues ranging from the Iraq war to global climate change. Although scholars have been slower to address the evidence, recent books and articles have shown that faith and foreign policy do intersect (Mead 2004, 2006; Guth 2009, 2010, 2011; Rock 2011.)

One exception to past neglect of religion's role in foreign policy has been the enduring interest in public attitudes toward Israel, and the consequences for American policy (Merkley 2001, 2004; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). Indeed, two eminent pollsters have argued that this is the *only* foreign policy issue where public opinion is influenced by religious views (Kohut and Stokes 2006). Although much evidence refutes this assertion (Page and Bouton 2006; Guth 2009), there is little doubt that religion profoundly shapes Americans' attitudes toward critical Middle East issues (Barker, Hurwitz and Nelson 2008; Baumgartner, Francia and Morris 2008; Froese and Mencken 2009; Guth et al. 1996; Smidt 2006).

Despite such findings, there are considerable gaps and a good bit of confusion in the literature. First, much of the analysis has focused on only two religious communities, Jews and Evangelicals. Not surprisingly, the first major review of religion and foreign policy attitudes discovered that American Jews overwhelmingly supported the state of Israel, whereas “Protestants” and “Catholics” were much less favorable and did not differ substantially from each other or the larger public (Hero 1973, 78). More recently, speculative attention has turned to

Evangelical Protestants' contribution to "Christian Zionism" (Weber 1983, 2004, 2010; Sizer 2004; Northcott 2004; Clark 2007; Dittmer and Sturm 2010) and empirical work has confirmed that these believers do feel warmer toward Israeli interests than other Christians (Guth et al. 1996, 2005). Some analysts even argue, or at least imply, that aside from Jews, Evangelicals hold the *only* distinctive attitudes on either side of this issue (Mayer 2004; Barker, Hurwitz and Nelson 2008).

While highlighting the postures of Jews and Evangelicals, most studies neglect the remaining three-fourths of the public (see, for example, Starobin 2010), even though there is substantial evidence that other religious groups also vary substantially in support for Israel. In fact, by the early 1990s Mainline Protestants were more sympathetic to Arab interests than their Evangelical brethren, and Roman Catholics, black Protestants, and secular citizens (in that order) were even more "balanced" in their approach (Guth et al. 1996; Wald et al. 1996). Of course, these positions may have changed over the past two decades, at the very same time that the American religious community has diversified, with increasing numbers of Latino Catholic and Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and members of other world religions, as well as growth in the ranks of secular Americans (Eck 2001; Green 2009). Clearly, a fresh and comprehensive analysis of religious influences on attitudes toward the Middle East is warranted, going beyond the simple descriptive patterns that characterize most studies.

In this paper, we consider a broad range of religious influences on American public attitudes toward the Middle East, more specifically on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. First, we outline two important theoretical perspectives on American religious politics, and more specifically, their impact on foreign policy attitudes. Second, we review the religious landscape on attitudes toward the Middle East conflict, considering opinion trends

among ethnoreligious traditions and theological factions. Third, we formalize our expectations about the influences of religious factors, based on our theoretical reflections and the previous literature. Finally, we test these hypotheses using the 2008 National Survey on Religion and Politics, a large-sample study with detailed measures of the religious dimensions of “belonging, believing and behaving.”

### ***Religious Influences on Foreign Policy***

Why do Americans in different religious traditions hold distinctive stances on Middle East policy? To organize the range of potential influences, we draw on two often competing interpretations of American religion’s political role, *ethnoreligious theory* and *restructuring theory*. Ethnoreligious theory emphasizes the way group affiliation shapes political alignments. This perspective owes much to *ethnocultural historians* who stress the political importance of the historic European religious groups that migrated to America and often multiplied upon reaching her shores. In their view, nineteenth-century party politics consisted largely of assembling winning coalitions of contending ethnoreligious groups (Kleppner 1979). Well into the twentieth century, the GOP represented historically dominant Mainline Protestant believers, such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Methodists, while Democrats spoke for religious minorities: Catholics, Jews, and Evangelical Protestants (especially in the South).

By the 1980s, these configurations had shifted, as Mainline Protestants dwindled in number, Evangelicals moved toward the GOP, the ancient Catholic—Democratic alliance frayed, and black Protestants became a critical Democratic bloc. Growing religious diversity added Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others to the equation, usually on the Democratic side. Even today many analysts think in ethnoreligious terms, referring to the “Evangelical,” “Catholic,” “Jewish” or “Muslim” vote. Although the assumptions underlying this analytic framework are

often incompletely articulated, historians in this school usually argued that ethnoreligious groups held differing worldviews, cultural preferences, and negative reference groups—all shaping their attitudes on public policy, including foreign affairs (Kellstedt et al. 2007; Swierenga 2009).

A few historical and contemporary illustrations show the relevance of ethnoreligious traditions to foreign policy. The distinctive antipathy of Irish Catholics toward Great Britain and the isolationism of German Lutherans and Catholics during the early twentieth century are two politically important examples of ethnoreligious influence (Berinsky 2009). Catholic anticommunism in the 1940s and 1950s was shaped not only by Church denunciations of that “Godless” system, but also by ethnoreligious solidarity with East European relatives under Soviet domination (Hero 1973). The interest of Armenian Christians in their homeland and its grievances, black Protestant concerns for Africa—and the persistent support of American Jews for Israel, are just three examples of the distinct postures of a host of American “ethnoreligious fragments” (Uslaner 2007).

Ethnoreligious theory may point out the relevant groups for analysis, but seldom really clarifies the extent to which attitudes are shaped by religion, ethnicity, or political context, respectively. While the reasons behind the Jewish support for Israel (or American Muslim opposition) may be self-evident,<sup>1</sup> the attitudes of other ethnoreligious groups may be more puzzling. For example, studies have found African Americans more critical of Israel and quite likely to cite religious reasons for that stance (Green 2009), but there is little consensus on the sources of these views, religious or otherwise. The same is true for distinct perspectives of Latino Catholics and Protestants, non-Christian religious minorities, and secular voters.

Of course, the tendencies of all ethnoreligious traditions may be shaped in part by

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<sup>1</sup> Even among Jewish Americans there are significant differences in attitudes toward Israel. See the fascinating analysis in Wald and Williams (2006).

leadership cues, whether these come from local clergy (Guth 2007), denominational officials (Rock 2011), or religious movement leaders (Barker, Hurwitz and Nelson 2008). Indeed, religious elites have often adopted highly visible, distinctive and often controversial postures that might well influence laity. Jewish support for Israel has been bolstered by the vocal pro-Israel policies of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee and other leadership groups (Tivnan 1987; Mearsheimer and Walt 2006), although local rabbis may cultivate a more nuanced position (Sokhey and Djupe 2006). Evangelical clergy are more pro-Israel than their Mainline counterparts (Guth 2007), and the gap is probably even larger among national denominational elites. The National Council of Churches and its constituent Mainline denominations have often criticized Israeli policies and identified with Palestinian aspirations, paralleling the historic orientation of the Vatican and the United States Catholic Bishops Conference.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Christian Right organizations have long staked out an adamant pro-Israel stance (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2004, 215), while organized religious liberals have often sympathized with the Palestinians (Tipton 2007, 217-218). Thus, the opinion differences among both large and small ethnoreligious communities may reflect leadership influences.

Observers differ, of course, in evaluating the impact that contemporary ethnoreligious politics has on American foreign policy. The late Samuel P. Huntington feared that U.S. foreign policy was unduly influenced by ethnoreligious “diasporas”—especially those from Latin America (2004, 285-291). Other scholars are more optimistic, arguing that the political

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<sup>2</sup> The explanation for the positions of mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches lies in both institutional history and theology. The mainline missions dating from the nineteenth have created lines of communications and identification with Arab Christians. Catholic institutional connections with local Christians are of even more ancient origins. In addition, shifting theological frameworks have played a role. Unlike their Evangelical counterparts, mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have generally insisted that the State of Israel has no theological significance and that God’s promise of the land of Palestine to Israel was limited or conditional, having little contemporary meaning (Smith and Levine 2010; Akin 2010). At the same time, the growth of liberation theology in both traditions actually produced a theological bias for the Palestinian cause (Guth 2007). For a recent example of Mainline and Catholic criticism of Israel, see Dart (2010).

emergence of such ethnoreligious minorities might produce a new type of public internationalism in American foreign policy, focused less on military power and more on diplomacy, international institutions, and human rights—values long neglected by dominant ethnoreligious traditions (Shain 1999). This perspective has some empirical support (Guth 2010a, 2010b).

An alternative way to understand American religion is the *religious restructuring* or *culture wars* theory, introduced first by Robert Wuthnow (1988), but brought into common political parlance by James D. Hunter's *Culture Wars* (1991). Hunter saw new religious battles emerging *within* the old traditions, based on theological differences: "Orthodox" believers accept "an external, definable, and transcendent authority," and adhere firmly to traditional doctrines, while "progressives" replace old religious tenets with new ones based on personal experience or scientific rationality (Hunter 1991, 44). The progressives are often joined by secular Americans who reject religion entirely but see morality in a similar vein. Indeed, since Wuthnow and Hunter wrote, the unaffiliated have grown in number, enhancing their potential influence and presumably bolstering the "progressive" camp (Hout and Fischer 2002). These religious divisions quickly congealed around issues such as abortion, feminism, and gay rights, but soon showed evidence of infusing other attitudes as well.

Indeed, the echoes of culture war battle cries are often heard in foreign policy debates. According to many analysts, religious traditionalists (Hunter's "orthodox") identify American foreign policy objectives with divine goals, adopt a dualistic emphasis on good and evil in international affairs and, most important, infuse U.S. military adventures with divine purpose, leading to support for what Eugene Wittkopf (1990) labeled "militant internationalism." Other conflicts are extensions of domestic politics, as when Catholic and Evangelical traditionalists fight population control policies of American aid agencies, the United Nations and other



international bodies, or insist on “abstinence only” strategies for fighting AIDs in Africa. On the “progressive” side, the communitarian social theology of many Mainline Protestants and liberal Catholics should encourage a less militaristic foreign policy, focused more on social welfare, economic development, and protection of the natural environment, policies usually associated with “cooperative internationalism” (Wittkopf 1990; Guth et al. 1997, 58-77; Kurtz and Fulton 2002; Rock 2011).

Thus, the restructuring perspective focuses on “orthodoxy/progressivism” and its policy consequences, without always specifying what sorts of religious beliefs are included or whether all religious communities are affected by these theological divisions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, widely used survey measures of “biblical orthodoxy” clearly tap a central component of restructuring. Some scholars have argued that pro-Israel sentiment owes much to such orthodoxy, which takes seriously Old Testament promises to Abraham of a land for his descendants. Such theological views dominate Evangelical Protestantism, but extend far into other Christian traditions as well. As a recent Catholic analyst noted, many traditionalist Catholics reason in this fashion: “God promised Israel the land in the Bible, so it’s theirs. Period.”—despite the lack of official Church sanction for this notion (Akin 2010).

Other religious beliefs are often associated with—or confused with—biblical orthodoxy, but have an independent existence. For example, studies of Evangelical Protestants have been obsessed with *premillennial dispensationalism*, “End Times thinking,” a doctrine which emphasizes Israel’s critical role in culmination of human history (Poythress 1987). As few surveys actually measure this perspective directly, it is usually inferred from more common

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<sup>3</sup> Our assumption here is that the theological struggles portrayed by Wuthnow and Hunter are most characteristic of the Evangelical, Mainline and Anglo-Catholic communities, and not the “minority” ethnoreligious communities such as Black Protestants, Latino Protestants and Catholics, Muslims, and so on. (Similar divisions are obviously present in the Jewish tradition.) In any case, the *Ns* in most surveys make it impossible to assess the impact of theological divisions in most such groups.

theological items, such as biblical inerrancy. While dispensationalist views are indeed concentrated among a subset of theological conservatives, “End Times thinking” is really an independent dimension of belief and should be measured separately.

Some theorists have suggested other theological influences that might explain attitudes toward Israel. Toff, Philpott and Shah (2011) emphasize the importance of *political theology* in giving foundational religious ideas social and political relevance.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, this concept may include several features of belief such as civil religion, religious exclusivism, and moral traditionalism, all of which may help define religious Americans’ views of the “international other.” Scholars have long argued that *civil religion* had the effect of infusing American politics with Divine purpose and meaning, resulting in “American exceptionalism” (Mead 2006; Skillen 2006). Without stretching matters too far, those who see America as a new “Chosen People” might expect that nation to protect God’s other chosen people, Israel (Judis 2005).<sup>5</sup>

In a related vein, *religious exclusivism* or “particularism”—the belief that there is only one true faith—might also lead American Christians to support the only nation representing “Judeo-Christian values” in the Middle East against the predominant Muslim “otherness” of the Arabs (Gitlin and Leibovitz 2011). In contrast, religious pluralists, those who see equal value in all great religions, might be expected to be more sympathetic to the Palestinians. Finally, *moral traditionalism*, support for traditional moral values, is a strong predictor of attitudes on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, but is also connected to conservative attitudes on a wide range of issues, such as a militant foreign policy (Conover and Feldman 1986). As a result, we expect that moralism will also buttress support for Israel. Thus, from the religious restructuring perspective we envision a division of opinion over Israel between the biblically orthodox,

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<sup>4</sup> In some of our earlier work, we use the term *social theology* to capture this dimension of belief (Guth et al. 1996?).

<sup>5</sup> Froese and Mencken (2009) use the term *sacralization ideology* to refer to conservative versions of civil religion. We have used *civic religion* in previous work, covering much the same conceptual territory (Guth et al. 2006).

dispensationalist supporters of conservative political theology on the one side, and their religious mirror images on the other.

Thus, both ethnocultural and restructuring perspectives may help us understand the contemporary role of religion in influencing public attitudes on Israel. To complicate matters a bit, there might be some interaction between ethnoreligious affiliation and religious belief and behavior. Members of traditions who exhibit orthodox beliefs and high religious commitment should hold the characteristic or “normative” views of their tradition, as defined by its formal institutions and leaders (Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Barker, Hurwitz and Nelson 2008). For example, orthodox and active Evangelicals should have a stronger commitment to Israel, as their churches and clergy are strongly attached to that perspective. On the other side, progressive and engaged Mainline Protestants and Catholics might reflect the vocal even-handed policy advocated by institutional leaders and most clergy in those traditions (Guth et al. 1997; Guth 2007). In any event, we suspect that religious belief and involvement should produce varying effects in different religious contexts.

### ***Overview: Religious Group Support for Israel, 1992 to 2008***

How has religious support for Israel changed over the past two decades? In each National Survey of Religion and Politics in presidential election years from 1992 through 2008,<sup>6</sup> we asked how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “The United States should support Israel over the Palestinians in the Middle East.” Although this question does not provide a clear choice of preferring the Palestinians or being neutral, it is a strong measure of American “favoritism” toward Israel, and has the merit of constant wording throughout the

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<sup>6</sup> See the Appendix for details on these studies.

period.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 reports the proportion of respondents in each ethnoreligious tradition who “strongly agree” or “agree” each year, as well as net changes from 1992 to 2008. For the three major white Christian traditions, we also report results for three theological factions, based on our measures of “biblical orthodoxy,” labeled as “traditionalists,” “centrists” and “modernists.”<sup>8</sup>

[Table 1 about here]

Public support for Israel clearly shows a secular increase over time: just over one-fourth of respondents supported pro-Israeli policy in 1992, but this increased to two-fifths in 2008. Although these quadrennial figures surely miss fluctuations in attitudes between elections, the overall trend seems clear. Not surprisingly, the strongest endorsement comes from Jews, who overwhelmingly prefer policy siding with Israel. That support peaked in the 1990s, dropped noticeably in 2000 before rebounding somewhat in 2008. Although declining support for Israel among Jews has been the subject of much controversy in that community (Beinart 2010), changes in the small Jewish population’s attitudes cannot account for any national shifts in opinion. To explain such changes, we must turn to larger religious communities.

Aside from Jews, Evangelical Protestants, one-fourth of the population, provide the strongest support for Israel. In the 1990s, two-fifths preferred Israel, a proportion that rose to well over half in 2004 and 2008, an increase that Mayer (2004) attributes to the highly visible activity of Christian Right leaders. That explanation is consistent with the responses of Evangelicalism’s theological factions: support for Israel grew most decidedly among traditionalists, the Christian Right’s base constituency, while centrists exhibited an eight-point increase, but modernists showed only a six-point gain. Nevertheless, Evangelicals clearly

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<sup>7</sup> This question actually produces somewhat more conservative estimates of favoritism toward Israel than the Pew Research Center’s inquiry, “Which side do you sympathize with more?” Nevertheless, the two questions produce results that move in concert and both show pro-Israel sentiment peaking in 2008 (Green 2009; Starobin 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See the appendix for the construction of these categories.

deserve their reputation as a bulwark for pro-Israel sentiment, becoming more stalwart over time. Latino Protestants' support for Israel is second only to that of Evangelicals among Christian groups, and also increased over the period. As Latino Protestants are predominantly evangelical in theology, this is not surprising, whether in the U.S. or in Latin America, where Evangelicals are also pro-Israel (Pew Forum 2006). Latter-day Saints follow close behind Latino Protestants as proponents of Israel, and also join the growing national support from 1992 to 2008.

The two other major American Christian traditions, Mainline Protestantism and Anglo-Catholicism, have adopted formal institutional stances that are often much more pro-Arab than those held by Jews and Evangelicals (Merkley 2001). In recent years, this has caused chronic tensions between Mainline and Jewish leaders (Stockton 2005; Smith and Levine 2010). Indeed, Mainline denominations have witnessed some of the fiercest internal debates, with the pro-Palestinian policies of elites challenged by theologically conservative denominational factions. As the Table shows, Mainline laity are consistently less pro-Israel than their Evangelical brethren, but slightly warmer than Anglo-Catholics.<sup>9</sup> And Mainline support has also risen, moving from about one-fourth of the community to about two-fifths. As with Evangelicals, that figure is highest among traditionalists and has grown the most among traditionalists (and centrists), but even among religious modernists, Israel has improved its reception. That trend may well explain the success of pro-Israel groups in moderating official positions of Mainline denominations in recent years (Smith and Levine 2010).

Except for showing slightly less support for Israel, Anglo-Catholics look remarkably like Mainline Protestants, both in theological patterning and the changes over time. Backing for Israel

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<sup>9</sup> Although the overall ranking of religious groups here matches quite closely Green's (2009) analysis of Pew Research Center data, in that study Mainline Protestants were *less* supportive of Israel than Anglo-Catholics. In part, this may reflect differing operational definitions: in the Akron study, Mainliners are determined by denominational affiliation; in the Pew Research Center analysis, they include all white Protestants who do not claim to be "born again." As in fact many members of Mainline denominations do make this claim—and are more supportive of Israel than those who don't—the Pew definition understates Mainline support and overstates that of Evangelicals.

is strongest among Catholic traditionalists, followed closely by centrists, and at a greater distance by modernists. Nevertheless, pro-Israel sentiment has increased in all three groups, but most notably in the two most orthodox theological factions. Although Catholic bishops and priests may support an even-handed or pro-Palestinian policy, following the Vatican's lead, they have apparently been no more successful than Mainline Protestant leaders in preventing some gravitation of lay opinion toward favoritism to Israel.

On the other hand, pro-Israeli sentiment is much weaker among most ethnoreligious "minorities." Among Latino Catholics, Black Protestants and other small Christian groups only about one-fourth of the respondents favor Israel, a proportion that has scarcely budged over two decades. Among the growing ranks of the religiously unaffiliated, preference for Israel is even lower, at around one-fifth of the respondents (although rising to 30 percent in 2008). As the breakdown shows, however, this increase was concentrated (and quite dramatic) among unaffiliated Americans who were nevertheless still "religious." Note also that the small coterie of self-identified agnostics and atheists were the only group (other than Jews) whose support for Israel has actually declined. Finally, the weakest support for Israel appeared among "other Non-Christians," including Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other small ethnoreligious groups.

These patterns suggest that both ethnoreligious tradition and theological orientations influence public attitudes toward Israel. In the following analysis, we use the 2008 National Survey of Religion and Politics, with its detailed religious measures, to explore the sources of these religious differences, as well as to test religious explanations of support for Israel against other factors often identified as important sources of foreign policy attitudes, including partisanship, ideology and general orientations toward international affairs.

On the basis of our literature review, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

**H1. Ethnoreligious traditions will vary in support for Israel, with Jews and Evangelicals more supportive, religious minorities and seculars more hostile, and Mainline and Catholic traditions at the center of opinion.**

**H2. Biblical orthodoxy and dispensationalist belief will produce greater sympathy for Israel.**

**H3. Religious involvement will generally produce greater support for Israel, but will have varying effects based on leadership cues, making active evangelicals more likely to adopt the position of their Christian Zionist leadership, but Mainline Protestants and Catholics more critical of Israel, following the dominant position of their elites.**

**H4. Support for civil religion, religious exclusivism and moralism will enhance support for Israel, independent of theology.**

**H5. Association with the Christian Right will produce more support for Israel, association with the Religious Left will reduce that support.**

**H6. Political orientations will influence attitudes, with Republicans, conservatives, American exceptionalists, militant internationalists, and opponents of cooperative internationalism more supportive of Israel.**

### ***Data and Methods***

To explore the religious sources of support for Israel in the American public, we use the 2008 National Survey of Religion and Politics (NSRP), conducted by the University of Akron. This survey has a number of advantages. First, the NSRP's large sample ( $N=4017$ ) permits consideration of a wider variety of religious groups with more confidence than would be warranted with fewer respondents. Second, a broad range of religious variables, including detailed religious affiliation, numerous belief items, and several religious behavior questions permit a much more nuanced analysis of religious influences. Finally, the NSRP has several items tapping aspects of what we have called *political theology* and includes standard measures of partisanship, ideology and general orientation toward international affairs.

With support for Israel as the dependent variable, we ran a series of OLS regressions incorporating religious factors, as well as more conventional political and foreign policy orientations, producing five predictive models. In each model we include but do not report controls for age, gender, income and education, variables linked to support for Israel in earlier studies (Holsti 2004, 220; Mayer 2004, 705; Green 2009).<sup>10</sup> Model 1 uses ethnoreligious tradition alone, with the “unaffiliated religious” and “other Christians” as the omitted reference category (these groups combined have a score that is almost identical to the sample mean). Model 2 adds *religious belief* and *religious behavior*, as well as interaction terms to the equation. *Biblicism* is a factor score derived from five questions that tap “biblical orthodoxy,” *Dispensationalism* is measured by an item on the “End Times,” and *religious involvement* is a factor score based on five common religious activities (see Appendix for more on these items). As we expect Biblicism, dispensationalism and religious involvement to have effects that vary by tradition, we tested interactive terms for the three largest ethnoreligious groups.

Model 3 introduces *political theology*, religious beliefs about the social and political world that might shape attitudes toward foreign policy. *Civil religion* is a factor score based on five questions about the appropriate role of religion in American politics. *Religious particularism* is tapped by a question about the equal truth value of all the world’s religions. *Moralism* asserts that there is only one moral system valid in all times and places.<sup>11</sup> Model 4 adds *religious mobilization*, gauged by respondents’ felt proximity to the “Christian Right” and “Religious Left.” Finally, Model 5 adds *political orientations* to the mix. We include party identification and ideology, both shown to be powerful influences on foreign policy attitudes in recent years

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<sup>10</sup> As in earlier studies, older respondents, men, and the wealthy are modestly more positive toward Israel. In this survey, however, education does not make a difference. These account for just over one percent of the variance..

<sup>11</sup> This item substitutes for the moral traditionalism scale available in ANES (Conover and Feldman 1986). Exploration shows that it behaves in very similar ways with dependent variables such as abortion and thus seems a reasonable proxy for the broader scale.



(Holsti 2004). In addition, we use items tapping important general foreign policy orientations: *Active part* internationalism (Page and Bouton 2006), *American exceptionalism* (Judis 2005; Skillen 2006), *militant internationalism* and *cooperative internationalism* (Wittkopf 1990; Holsti 2004). This procedure should reveal the paths that religious influences take in developing support for Israel and permits a hard test for those influences. If religious variables retain independent influence beyond indirect effects mediated by ideology, we can be sure of their power.

### ***Findings***

What religious factors influence American favoritism toward Israel? Table 2 reports the results from our regressions. Model 1 confirms the basic pattern seen in Table 1, one that is modified slightly but not altered substantially by the demographic controls. Not surprisingly, Jewish respondents are the most favorable toward Israel, with Evangelicals also showing a high level of sympathy. Latino Protestants and Latter-day Saints do not differ from the omitted reference groups, while virtually all the other ethnoreligious traditions are less supportive, including Mainline Protestants. Merely knowing the ethnoreligious affiliation of respondents (along with their demography) allows us to account for almost eight percent of the variance.

Model 2 introduces measures of religious belief and behavior that have often been found to influence attitudes on Middle East policy. Religious belief, as expected, has a powerful impact. Both Biblicism and dispensational ideas predict support for the Israeli side in Middle East conflicts. Contrary to expectations, however, analysis shows that Biblicism has the same impact across major religious traditions: none of the interaction terms we tried revealed even the hint of an “added” effect, so these were omitted from the final equation.<sup>12</sup> The case for “End

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<sup>12</sup> Although our theory tells us that religious restructuring is far advanced primarily among the large white Christian traditions in the United States, preliminary analysis shows that traditionalist belief is associated with pro-Israel attitudes even in the Latino Catholic, Latino Protestant and Black Protestant communities. We have not included

Times thinking” is different: although dispensationalism encourages pro-Israel attitudes across the sample, this effect is enhanced in the Evangelical context where, presumably, such attitudes find both community reinforcement and more frequent endorsement by religious leaders.

[Table 2 about here]

Religious involvement sometimes bolsters support for Israel, as discovered in some earlier studies, but that effect also varies by tradition. As predicted, religiously active Evangelicals show enhanced support for the Jewish state, while greater involvement in the Mainline and Catholic communities reduces it, suggesting that perhaps leadership cues in each tradition do have some effect, at least on the margin. Model 2 also demonstrates that for the major religious traditions, attitudes toward Israel are basically determined by belief and behavior, not affiliation with a tradition. Note that the inclusion of belief and behavior variables reduces the coefficients for Evangelical, Mainline and Anglo-Catholic affiliation to statistical insignificance. That is to say, the three traditions vary in attitudes toward Israel because of the distinctive patterns of religious beliefs and religious behavior among members. Evangelicals are pro-Israel because they are orthodox and often dispensationalist—and because their religious involvement reinforces those beliefs. Among Mainline Protestants and Catholics, traditional orthodoxy and End Times beliefs move some in a pro-Israel direction, but those not sharing such beliefs gravitate the other way, encouraged by higher engagement levels. Note that the coefficients for the two secular categories are also reduced to insignificance, suggesting that religious belief and behavior variables explain the distinctive views of these respondents as well. Belief and behavior measures clearly improve overall explanation, increasing the variance explained to almost fifteen percent.

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interaction terms for this effect in the analysis, given the relatively small *N* for the first two groups and the weakness of the pattern for Black Protestants.

Political theology also works as anticipated. *Civil religious* orientations produce more support for Israel, as do *religious exclusivism* and *moralism*. The inclusion of these variables in the equation dramatically reduces, but does not eliminate, the influence of biblical orthodoxy, suggesting that they mediate part of the influence of belief. The overall coefficient for religious behavior also drops below statistical significance, but the interaction terms remain strong. On the other hand, there is little impact on dispensationalism and no impact on those for ethnoreligious affiliation, except for enhancing slightly the coefficients for Jewish and Black Protestant membership. The political theology variables add about two percent to the variance explained.

Finally, Model 4 shows that proximity to religious political movements has an impact as well: those close to the Christian Right are more supportive of Israel, while those close to the Religious Left are less so. This last addition to the equation reduces slightly the impact of the theology and political theology variables, but leaves them as powerful predictors. With the addition of these final “religious” measures, Model 4 accounts for 17 percent of the variance. This degree of explanatory power ought to be stressed: using only basic religious variables we exceed the variance explained on a similar question by Page and Bouton (2006, 151-52) , even though they use a far more expansive set of demographic and attitudinal measures—but only crude religious ones.

Finally, in Model 5 we incorporate other important political orientations as controls. Over the past few decades, American party identification and ideological perspectives have been powerfully reshaped by religious factors (Kellstedt and Guth 2011), at the very same time that they have increasingly structured foreign policy attitudes (Holsti 2004), including attitudes toward Israel, where Republicans and conservatives have become more supportive than Democrats and liberals. Thus, we might expect that the influence of religious factors would be

largely mediated through these orientations. In fact, however, partisanship and ideology have little independent impact on attitudes toward Israel, with Democrats and liberals slightly less supportive when everything is in the equation. Those who want the United States to play an “active part” in the world (Page and Bouton 2006) are more supportive of Israel, as are adherents to American exceptionalism, an idea often tied to religious understandings of American history. Finally, those who favor a strong military posture for the United States are also more supportive of Israel, but those preferring stronger international institutions such as the UN go the other way.

Although religious variables play a significant role in producing all these ideological and foreign policy orientations, the incorporation of the latter does not eliminate the effects of religion. Although the coefficients for all of the affiliation variables except that for Jews become negative, Biblicism, dispensationalism and political theology still produce added support for Israel, as does proximity to the Christian Right. Religious involvement drops out as a significant indicator across the sample, but produces less favorable attitudes toward Israel among Mainline Protestants and Catholics, while still tending to bolster Evangelical favoritism (the coefficient barely misses significance). And closeness to the Religious Left continues to reduce support for Israel across the sample. In all, Model 5 accounts for almost one-fourth of the variance.

### *Discussion and Conclusions*

The findings here demonstrate the importance of widening the analytic horizons in seeking the sources of public support for Israel. Scholars have generally followed the popular press in its fascination with the roots of the “Israeli lobby” in the American Jewish community and the rise of Evangelical Protestant concern for the state of Israel. As in so much of the recent literature on the role of religious factors in American foreign policy, scholars work with a

truncated religious spectrum, in this case with Jews and Evangelicals as the main actors, largely ignoring the rest of the American public. As we have shown, full explanations for public support for Israel should include detailed measures of ethnoreligious affiliation, basic theological orientations, political theology, and religious mobilization.

Ethnoreligious groups clearly differ in attitude toward Israel. More striking than the natural support of Jews is the consistent negative tendency of most ethnoreligious minorities, especially Black Protestants, Latino Catholics and non-Christian groups. Unlike the attitudes of secular citizens, this opposition is not eliminated or even reduced by incorporating “restructuring” variables of belief and religious behavior in the equation. This raises a number of important questions about the sources of these attitudes. In some cases, those may be obvious: Muslims, for example, may naturally side with Palestinian co-believers in their struggle and, perhaps, as has been suggested, other minority ethnoreligious groups may identify with the struggle of a Middle Eastern “underdog.” Latino Catholics may perhaps respond to the strains of Latin American “liberationist” theologies, although they tend not to see religious values as the reason for their attitudes (Green 2009, 5).

And consider the case of Black Protestants. Their distinctive coolness toward the state of Israel has been noted in previous studies, but has often gone without explanation. When offered, the explanations take several forms, attributing this community’s attitudes variously to resentment at Israel’s alliance with the former apartheid South African regime, to anti-Semitism in the African-American community, to the influence of “black liberation theology,” to natural sympathy with a Middle East underdog, or to the posture of African-American political leaders. We have no way of testing these suggestions, but they are just as worthy of scholarly attention as the theological sources of pro-Israel sentiment among the larger Christian traditions, especially

as many Black Protestants cite religious beliefs as the basis for their views (Green 2009, 5). Indeed, the sources of opinion in many of these groups will require much more examination to sort out the ethnic, religious and political components.

In the large white Christian traditions, theological factors clearly play a major role in disposing Evangelicals, Mainliners and Anglo-Catholics toward one side or the other in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> To begin with, the conclusions of dozens of books and hundreds of articles about “End Times theology” are correct: adherents of these ideas do support Israel. But, as some scholars have recently argued, general biblical orthodoxy is an even more powerful influence over those attitudes, perhaps because of its broader reach into more religious communities (Weber 2010; cf. Green 2009). Indeed, these theological variables, buttressed by political theology, reduce remaining differences among the major traditions to insignificance and also explain the low support for Israel among secular voters, who by definition lack conservative religious motivators. Religious involvement has a general tendency to produce modest increases in support for Israel. More important, however, activism reinforces the modal position of each tradition, producing greater support for Israel among Evangelicals, but reducing it among Mainliners and Anglo-Catholics. And religious mobilization by Christian Right and Religious Left nudge opinion in opposite directions, pro-Israel for the former, and pro-Palestinian for the latter. And although more general political orientations may help shape citizen opinion on Middle East issues, religious variables account for the greatest proportion of the variance.

Upon reflection, this analysis also shows that the oft-noted “partisan gap” between Republicans and Democrats is really a “religious gap” between the base constituencies of the two parties; once religious variables are in the equation, there is virtually no partisan “residue”

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<sup>13</sup>Not all members of the three major communities see religion as a factor in their views on the Middle East. Fewer than half the Evangelicals and only ten percent or less of the other two communities cite religious beliefs (Green 2009). Of course, one need not consciously engage a belief system for it to influence other attitudes.

affecting opinion. If one is to project future support for Israel within the constituencies of each party, it appears that Israel has a stronger foothold in the GOP than in the historic home of most Jewish voters, the Democratic Party. Although Jewish Democrats still represent a vital reservoir of activism and campaign finance, giving them a voice on any Mideast policy formulated by a Democratic administration, the party's increasing electoral reliance on black Protestants, Latino Catholics, secular voters and other religious minorities makes its traditional pro-Israel stance less attractive for a Democratic president. As Paul Starobin puts it succinctly, "the coalition of liberal Democratic voters who turned out most strongly for [Obama] in the 2008 election is precisely the coalition of voters with the least amount of sympathy for Israel in its long-standing conflict with the Palestinians and Arab nations" (2010, 37).

The dramatic transformation of the GOP Middle East policy from the relatively "even-handed" approaches of the Eisenhower, Nixon and George H.W. Bush administrations to the warm Republican embrace of Israel since the late 1990s reflects in considerable part the increasing clout of Evangelicals in the GOP electorate, and among Republican elected officials (Oldmixon, Rosenson and Wald 2005). As one modest indicator, over twice as many Republican House members as Democrats (55 versus 26) chose to spend their August 2011 congressional recess in a visit to Israel sponsored by an AIPAC affiliate (Weinger 2011). Both the prominence of Evangelical candidates among 2012 GOP presidential hopefuls and their strong pro-Israel stances also reflect that dramatic shift. Of course, successful Republican candidates for high office require the votes of religious groups beyond Evangelical Protestants, but the most GOP-inclined among Mainline and Catholic voters—religious traditionalists—also tend to have warmer feelings toward Israel, as do Latter-day Saints and Latino Protestants.

Thus, contemporary religious politics seem likely to limit the discretion of chief executives of either party. The Obama administration's experience has certainly reflected these realities: overtures to Muslims and a hard line on West Bank settlements met with enthusiastic approval from some party constituencies, but harsh critiques from many Jewish Democrats, leading to quick back-pedaling by the administration. And, as George W. Bush discovered, the GOP religious base also presents major constraints to innovative solutions to the Middle East conflict offered by a Republican president (Marsden 2008, 215). Although the absolute level of American public support for Israel will depend in part on events in the region, major shifts in this religious pattern of attitudes are unlikely in the near term. An American president will be required to exhibit unusual political courage to overcome the obstacles presented by religious opinion to a peaceful settlement.

## Appendix

This study is based primarily on the pre-election sample of the Fifth National Survey of Religion and Politics, conducted June-August 2008 by the University of Akron. The survey produced a national random sample of 4,017 adult Americans (with a margin of error plus or minus 1.5 percent). The 2008 results are compared where appropriate to the results of previous versions of this survey conducted in 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004. The previous surveys were supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, and in 2004, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. The survey had a response rate of 36% of the telephone numbers contacted.

### *Variables*

*Biblicism* is a factor score utilizing five belief questions appropriate to the religious traditions of the vast majority of Americans (*theta reliability*=.82). *Religious involvement* is a religious behavior measure based on five common religious practices (*theta*=.80). Both are described in Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth (2009, 25). To create the categories of traditionalists, centrists and modernists, we arbitrarily divided the sample in thirds based on that factor score.

*Moralism* is a five-point scale item asking how strongly the respondent agreed or disagreed with the statement: "There are clear and absolute standards for right and wrong."

*Religious Exclusivism* is a five-point scale item asking how strongly the respondent agreed or disagreed with: "All the great religions of the world are equally true and good."

*Civil religion* is a factor score derived from a principal components analysis of five items tapping the respondent's sentiments about religion in public life. These include the perceived



importance of religious faith to the respondent's political thinking, whether or not the President should have a strong religious faith, whether politicians should discuss religion in public, and the appropriateness of the involvement of religious groups and institutions in the political process. (*theta reliability*=.74). For more information, see Guth et al. (2006).

*Dispensationalism* is measured by a five-point item asking how strongly the respondent agreed or disagreed with the statement: "The world will end in a battle at Armageddon between Jesus and the Anti-Christ." This question was asked of all Christians.

*Active-part internationalism* is tapped by a question asking how strongly a respondent agreed or disagreed with: "The United States should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own." (cf. Page and Bouton 2006, 70).

*American exceptionalism* is measured by a forced-choice question offering two options: "(1) The U.S. has a special role to play in world affairs and should behave differently than other nations, OR (2) The U.S. has no special role and should behave like any other nation."

*Militant internationalism* is represented by a question on the importance of the United States "maintaining a strong military," with options of "not," "somewhat," and "very" important.

*Cooperative internationalism* is represented by a question on the importance of "strengthening the United Nations," with options of "not," "somewhat," and "very" important.

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**Table 1. Support for Israel over the Palestinians by Religious Group, 1992-2008**

	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	Change +/-
<b>National Public</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Jewish</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>-6</b>
<b>Evangelical Protestant</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>15</b>
Traditionalist	49	50	53	70	73	24
Centrist	38	32	32	45	46	8
Modernist	30	22	24	34	36	6
<b>Latino Protestant</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Latter-Day Saints</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Mainline Protestant</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>16</b>
Traditionalist	34	36	31	40	52	18
Centrist	22	30	29	31	40	18
Modernist	19	21	24	29	33	14
<b>Anglo-Catholic</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>17</b>
Traditionalist	24	27	24	38	43	19
Centrist	18	28	22	33	37	19
Modernist	20	27	18	25	32	12
<b>Latino Catholic</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>-1</b>
<b>Black Protestant</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Other Christians</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>10</b>
Believers	22	18	21	20	42	20
Seculars	19	25	24	24	27	6
Atheist Agnostic	23	30	24	20	20	-3
<b>Other Non-Christians</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>6</b>

*Source:* National Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron

<b>Table 2. Religious Sources of Support For Israel, 2008</b>					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Religious Tradition</i>	<i>+Beliefs and Behavior</i>	<i>+ Political Theology</i>	<i>+ Religious Mobilization</i>	<i>+Political Orientations</i>
<b>Ethnoreligious Tradition</b>					
Jewish	.080***	.113***	.117***	.119***	.113***
Evangelical Protestant	.096**	-.015	-.039	-.042	-.065*
Latino Protestant	-.010	-.025	-.024	-.021	-.024
Latter-day Saints	.001	-.020	-.026	-.026	-.049**
Mainline Protestant	-.053*	-.020	-.025	-.026	-.044
Anglo-Catholic	-.077**	-.037	-.041	-.045	-.075**
Latino Catholic	-.091***	-.064**	-.058**	-.056**	-.057**
Black Protestant	-.064**	-.088**	-.097***	-.093***	-.090***
Secular	-.123***	-.009	-.008	-.012	-.025
Agnostic/Atheist	-.102***	-.030	-.024	-.025	-.017
Non-Christian	-.102***	-.062***	-.056**	-.053**	-.050**
<b>Religious Belief and Behavior</b>					
Biblicism		.186***	.117***	.101***	.080***
Dispensationalism		.082**	.072**	.071**	.076**
Evangelical*Dispensationalism		.051*	.039	-.040	.040
Mainline*Dispensationalism		.037	.027	.023	.015
Catholic*Dispensationalism		.007	.005	.004	.001
Religious Involvement		.074**	.031	.038	.050
Evangelical*Involvement		.059**	.056**	.052*	.029
Mainline*Involvement		-.067***	-.068***	-.065***	-.062***
Catholic*Involvement		-.063***	-.065***	-.065***	-.069***
<b>Political Theology</b>					
Civil Religion			.127***	.119***	.066***
Religious Exclusivism			.068***	.057***	-.018
Moralism			.066***	.059***	.053***
<b>Religious Mobilization</b>					
Close to Christian Right				.062***	.041*
Close to Religious Left				-.084**	-.054***
<b>Political Orientations</b>					
Party Identification (Democratic)					-.017
Ideology (Liberal)					-.017
“Active Part” Internationalism					.143***
U.S. Exceptionalism					.119***
Militant Internationalism					.104***
Cooperative Internationalism					-.099***
<i>Adjusted R squared</i>	.078	.146	.164	.170	.237

Source: Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron, 2008.  $N=4017$ . The “unaffiliated religious” and “other Christians” are the omitted reference group for the regression. See the appendix for variable construction.