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BOOK REVIEW:

The Mighty and the Almighty:

Reflections on America, God and World Affairs

By Madeleine Albright

HarperCollins, 2007

352 pp.; \$25.95

Reviewed by Mahmood Ahmad*

The debate on the relationship between politics and religion is primarily the subject of analysis in the sociology of religion and the theory of international relations in Social Science. While each of these fields endorses different approaches to study their interdependency the individual's perception of religion and politics is neglected by current research. The faithful, who takes part in religious ceremonies, listening and behaving according to particular religious teachings, actively engaging in the liturgical life of the institutional form of his religion, has a particular way of understanding the relationship between religion and politics.¹ Though, this aspect is under-researched and misrepresented in the literature of international relations and sociology.² Conversely, a more intricate analysis is offered by the study of nationalism, and especially by its ethnosymbolic approach, which includes at the micro and macro societal level the presence of myths and symbols as part of the individual's and the nation's life.

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The role of religion and its place in political life has been a topic of heated discussion for years on end. Some have argued for a strong religious influence on the workings of government while others have pushed for no influence at all. Nations throughout the world have differed widely in terms of their ideas of religion and its place in the state. Some of these nations have failed while others have succeeded greatly, but their influences in choosing the system of governance can usually be traced back to one of three central political philosophers. The ideologies of Niccolo Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Joseph Priestley all are similar in some aspects, but an area in which they differ pertains to their notions of the role of Religion. Machiavelli, the earliest of the three, champions religion as a powerful, governing institution. He advocated that a ruler can use the power of the church to establish and maintain his reign, which maintains stability in a society.³ Rousseau, who came nearly 200 years later, took a more middle of the road approach in discussing the topic. He believed that a government can only be legitimate if it has been sanctioned by the people, in the role of the sovereign.⁴ And Priestley, who followed Rousseau, took an approach nearly opposite of Niccolo Machiavelli's design of hundreds of years before and has emphasized more on the separation of church and state.⁵ The debate on the role of Religion in Politics is still raging today in the United States and through out the world. Religion has long played a role in the West's relationship to the rest of the world, but more as a way to divide populations than to convert them. The United States is not unique in using religion not simply to save souls but to achieve certain strategic goals. For instance, U.S. military strategy has revolved around the attempt to secure access to energy sources in Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa. The administration and its religious allies have played the

religious card alongside traditional military tactics to achieve this national security goal. In a report, *Mixed Blessing: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Post-Prone Setting*, the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project of Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) encourages the administration and the Congress to deepen their understanding and attention to the role of religion dynamic in conflict situations in more constructive ways.⁶ The study compiled findings from a year of research and interviews with government officials into how religion is, or is not, addressed within the structure and practices of U.S. foreign policy. The conclusion of the report was not surprising: U.S. government were hesitant to approach issues of religion, there is a deficit of understanding and the overemphasis on terrorism in approaches to religion and there is little institutional capacity for effectively addressing the role of religion dynamics within U.S. foreign policy. Jon Alterman, Director of CSIS noted that Religion, sometimes, is a continuation of politics by other means⁷, are Christian evangelicals, in what is arguably the most religious administration in history of United States, driving the Bush administration's agenda in the Middle East and Africa? Or is the religious content of U.S. foreign policy simply "politics by other means"? Is the current culture war against Islam by people like historian Bernard Lewis, philosopher Francis Fukuyama and Pope Benedict XVI, a return to the religious mania of the First Crusade, or does it have more in common with TV evangelists whose concerns are the contents of their parishioner's wallets rather than state of their souls? In her book: *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs* written by former secretary of state Madeleine Albright gives a personal perspective on the age-old question about the role of religion in politics. She argues that decision makers need to do a better job of

understanding religion's role in the world. She also suggests the government should use religious leaders to support and explain U.S. foreign policy.

Review

In the foreword of Madeleine Albright's book: *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs*,⁸ Bill Clinton says this book was written against the best advice of friends.⁹ Reading it makes it clear why the advice might have been to abstain but over all, the author treads a dangerous terrain yet comes out rather unmarked. The book presents a combination of professional and personal experience, academic perspective, moral principles and religious themes, which should be evident from the title of the book as well as from her own background. The book is organized into three sections, 'God, Liberty, Country', 'Cross, Crescent, Star' and 'Final Reflections'. Part One deals with America's position in the world and the role played by religion and morality in shaping U.S. foreign policy, both now and in the past. Part Two concentrates on troubled relationships between Islamic communities and the West. Part Three offers her personal thoughts about how U.S. foreign policy and religion can be intersect.

Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under President Clinton and a devout Catholic (with recently discovered Jewish roots), has taken to tackle the complicated subject of the role of faith in World Politics. In a very convenient, even blustery style, she looks at these issues in light of recent history both at home and abroad, from the religious movement that led to the ouster of the shah of Iran to the invasion of Iraq and American venture of exporting western democracy to the Middle East regions. Albright also looks critically at President Bush, an evangelical

Christian who invokes God in the name of fighting “evil.” Albright observes that President Bush has spoken of the need to “rid the world of evil”. However, she comments, that the form in which the *majority* of the world's population encounters an “axis of evil” each day—that form is not “terrorism.”

*“No, for most people the form in which they encounter an “axis of evil” in this world is the everyday oppressiveness of “poverty, ignorance, and disease.” It is these evils of poverty, ignorance, and disease, she observes, that “cause far more avoidable deaths than [does] terror and are at the root of [even] more anguish and loss of hope”.*¹⁰

In this determined, thoughtful, and comprehensive demeanor, Albright suggests to balance the need to deal with religious unrest and the need to temper one’s own beliefs in the public realm. While fully admitting the threat al-Qaeda pretenses, Albright discards the notion that a “clash of civilizations” is in progress and recommends for care and nuance in how America approaches international confrontations that are associated with religion.

She believes that U.S. has not acknowledged the big role religion plays among its community and especially not in its negotiations with other states. It is very crucial to study how different people see the Almighty to the development of a successful foreign policy.

Albright endorsed in these particular items about the division of religion and state:

1. No religious test for public office

2. No established state religion
3. No condensation of right to religious liberty¹¹

She comments, however, it does not mean we must confiscate God from all aspects of our public life. Each one of us can worship God in his/her own way. No doubt our activities can be influenced by our faiths. Religion is extremely important to many people and must be considered in any diplomatic activity. However, we must keep religion out of the public domain. According to Albright, too often in the past, America has stripped all issues of their religious aspects in deciding how to negotiate. She says this makes no sense:

*"If diplomacy is the art of persuading others to act as we would wish, effective foreign policy requires that we comprehend why others act as they do."*¹²

Much of what foreign leaders do depends on how they and their constituents view their religion. The religion is Islam in the Arab World. This means we must get to know Islam carefully. To get us along, Albright has a chapter about Islam wherein she tried to illustrate to the reader that Islam is not very different from Christianity, or Judaism. All these religions advocate forgiveness and reconciliation.

"The Torah instructs us, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Zoroaster observed, "What I hold good for myself, I should hold for all." The Christian gospel demands "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." The Quran warns that a true believe must love for his brother what he loves for himself. Finally, the world's first known legal code [that of Hammurabi of Babylon, now Iraq] had as its announced purpose "to cause

justice to prevail and to ensure that the strong do not oppress the weak.”¹³

Sure, there are some aggressive statements about non-Muslims in the Koran. But, she points out, there are plenty of such belligerent statements in the Bible. The general thrust of all these sacred texts is “love thy neighbor as thyself”.

"If we truly believe that [every human being counts] ... and [if we truly] act upon [that belief] as a nation and in our own lives... [then we] will live up to our own founding ideals. We will take a small step forward in meeting the demands of religious faith. And we will more fully earn the right to ask—though never demand or simply assume—that God Bless America”.¹⁴

Albright argues that, bringing democracy to any part of the region is a valuable objective, but we must be cautious of how we do it. Surely, democracy can not be imposed from outside by mere force, it must grow from within. It will take dissimilar shapes in different regions. We can't invade a country just by brutal force like Iraq and make it a democracy. As one can see we made a mess out of it. There is no way we can achieve “victory.” However, we must see that the country does not fall apart.

In Arab countries, even though we know that Islamists would probably win, we should support democracy. Albright believes that when Islamists would get involved in the democratic process and activities, their attitudes will alleviate and will become more moderate. She says:

*"The inclusion of Islamist parties will give them a stake in the democratic process, just as their exclusion would give them a stake in trying to destroy the process."*¹⁵

Albright also suggests that we must negotiate with everyone. And in order to have successful negotiations with leaders of Muslim countries, she likes to quote the approach of President Bill Clinton:

*"If you're dealing with people who profess faith, they must believe there is a Creator; if they believe that, they should agree that God created everyone. This takes them from the specific to the universal. Once they acknowledge their common humanity, it becomes harder to kill each other; then compromise becomes easier because they've admitted that they are dealing with people like themselves, not some kind of Satan or subhuman species."*¹⁶

In *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Madeleine Albright examines the deep impact of religion on America's view of itself, the effect on U.S. policy of the rise of the Christian right, the Bush administration's successes and failures in responding to 9/11, the challenges posed by the war in Iraq, and the importance of understanding Islam. She offers a balanced but, when necessary, critical analysis of U.S. strategy and condemns the devotees of all faiths who exploit religious zeal to create divisions or enhance their own power. Essence of her teaching is that religion should be the source of uniting the human race rather than dividing it.

In this illuminating manifestation, Albright argues that, in order to be effective, U.S. policy-makers must recognize and acknowledge the place and power of religion in inspiring others and in coloring how American actions are professed. Challenging the conventional wisdom,

she proposes not only that religion and politics are indivisible, but that their relationship, if properly utilized, can be a force for peace and justice.

Albright concludes with a careful observation, restating the leitmotif of Bill Clinton's introduction,

"To have faith is to believe in the existence of absolute truth. It is quite another thing to assert that imperfect human beings can be in full possession of this truth, or that we have a political ideology that is fully true and allows us to penalize, coerce, or abuse those who believe differently."¹⁷

When humility substitutes triumphalism, however, the discourse becomes more acceptable, the tone more polite, the result more enduring and, ultimately, the faith more attractive. Indeed Madeleine Albright is looking at the issue of religion through the prism of an oft-times dysfunctional world, is realistic about what can be achieved. A careful read of *The Mighty and the Almighty*, however, gets us started in the same direction.

End Notes

¹ Lucian N. Leustean, *Towards an integrative theory of religion and politics*, Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, Volume 17, Number 4, 2005

² Kevin J. Christiano, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*, AltaMira Press, 2002

³ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Penguin Classics; New Ed edition (May 1, 1984, Also available at:

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machiavelli/niccolo/m149d/>

⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (Translated by G. D. H. Cole), bnpublishing.com (September 28, 2007) Also available at: <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm>

⁵ Joseph Priestley, *Essay of the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty*, Kessinger Publishing, 2003

⁶ Liora Danan, *Mixed Blessing: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Post-Prone Setting*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington D.C. U.S.A. 2007

⁷ Jon B. Alterman, *Middle East Notes and Comment: The Real Shi'a-Sunni Conflict*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington D.C. U.S.A. 2007

⁸ Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs*, HarperCollins, 2007

⁹ Ibid; p. ix

¹⁰ Ibid; p. 95

¹¹ Ibid; p. 27

¹² Ibid; p. 75

¹³ Ibid; p. 290

¹⁴ Ibid; p. 32

¹⁵ Ibid; p. 229

¹⁶ Ibid; p. xii

¹⁷ Ibid; p. x

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