

Christian Clergy & Israel

There are some high feelings about the apparent failure of Christian clergy to respond to the current plight of Israel with full and spontaneous support.

Actually the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns issued a clearly pro-Israel statement when the Arab invasion began this time—and more than 50 local Christian clergymen individually endorsed that statement. Rabbi **Malcolm Sparer** wrote 105 local clergymen, and some 40 of them responded by opening their pulpits to a pro-Israel speaker. A number of individual clergymen around the country similarly came to the support of Israel. But it was not a notably spontaneous movement and, for the most part, the official Christian establishment bodies did not even respond on request. Or when they did, it was often with statements that were objectively hostile towards Israel.



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The National Council of Churches, for example, called for both the United States and the Soviet Union to immediately halt arms shipments to the belligerents. That is roughly equivalent to calling for an "impartial" six months food embargo on both Biafra and California. Executives of the American Jewish Committee immediately called a news conference outside the Board room of the National Council of Churches in order to condemn the Council's "total inability to morally condemn" Egypt and Syria.

Why is the Jewish community seemingly so exercised by the seeming "failure" of the Christian clergy? No other segment of the non-Jewish community rushed in any more spontaneously or vigorously to express their support. And few people consider the clergymen influential in shaping American political opinion.

The opinion poll surveys have typically found a yawning gap of about 40 percent between the opinions of clergy and of their church-goers on questions like Vietnam and civil rights.

Perhaps that's just the point. The clergymen are still often seen as the "moral conscience" of the community—and they are supposed to be out ahead of the general population on moral issues. Jews think of the support of Israel as a moral issue. Of course, that's probably one reason why American Jews are a little out of touch with general opinion on the subject of Israel. Most Americans—by an overwhelming proportion—are sympathetic to Israel—but not primarily for "moral" reasons.

And, of course, the Middle East stands of official religious bodies, such as the National Council of Churches—or, indeed, of the Vatican—are heavily political and "foreign policy" rather than moral in nature. To put it bluntly, they have more Arab than Jewish constituents—both at home and abroad.

There are undoubtedly other reasons for Jewish disappointment at official Christian reaction in this country. Jews were long accustomed to gauging their "acceptance" in society by the measure of acceptance which official Christian leaders gave them. For most of the diaspora, church and state were one. So, we probably have an historical hangover, and feel particularly vulnerable to rejection by Christian clergy, even though they are not all that influential in America today.

However, the main disappointment is probably related to the failure of the Christian clergy to spontaneously act on the moral dimensions of this issue, especially in their official bodies—even though that failure doesn't have much to do with American public opinion, or official American stance on Israel. Without allaying that special disappointment, there is some perspective to be found in the fact that a goodly number of local clergymen have responded sympathetically on Israel to the Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns, and to Rabbi Sparer.