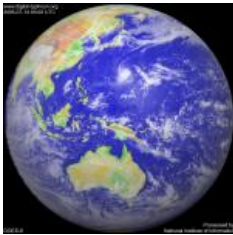


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## As Others See Us — Evangelicals and Foreign Policy

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Walter Russell Mead argues that American evangelicals are exerting a significant influence on the nation's foreign policy. Writing in the distinguished journal *Foreign Affairs*, Mead argues that the evangelical influence is likely to continue for some time.

Mead serves as Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and his article, "God's Country," is important as a study of American evangelicalism, as well as an analysis of the questions related to foreign policy.

Consider his historical overview of evangelical development:

*Fundamentalists, liberal Christians, and evangelicals are all part of the historical mainstream of American Protestantism, and as such all were profoundly affected by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. For much of the 1800s, most Protestants believed that science confirmed biblical teaching. When Darwinian biology and scholarly "higher criticism" began to cast increasing doubt on traditional views of the Bible's authorship and veracity, however, the American Protestant movement broke apart. Modernists argued that the best way to defend Christianity in an enlightened age was to incorporate the new scholarship into theology, and mainline Protestant denominations followed this logic. The fundamentalists believed that churches should remain loyal to the "fundamentals" of Protestant faith, such as the literal truth of the Bible.*

*The fundamentalists themselves were divided into two strands, originally distinguished as much by culture and temperament as by theology. The "separatists" argued that true believers should abandon churches that compromised with or tolerated modernism in any form. As U.S. society and culture became more secular and pluralistic, the separatists increasingly withdrew from both politics and culture. The other strand of the original fundamentalist movement sought continual engagement with the rest of the world. This strand was originally called neo-evangelical. Today, the separatists proudly retain the label of fundamentalist, while the neo-evangelicals have dropped the prefix and are now simply known as evangelicals.*

I might quibble with a word here or there, but this is a fairly accurate explanation of evangelical origins. In later sections of his essay, he demonstrates a bit of confusion about basic evangelical beliefs.

Mead's essay gets really interesting when he attempts to explain how different strands of American Protestantism lead to different models of foreign policy:

*The three contemporary streams of American Protestantism (fundamentalist, liberal, and evangelical) lead to very different ideas about what the country's role in the world should be. In this context, the most important differences have to do with the degree to which each promotes optimism about the possibilities for a stable, peaceful, and enlightened international order and the importance each places on the difference between believers and nonbelievers. In a nutshell, fundamentalists are deeply pessimistic about the prospects for world order and see an unbridgeable divide between believers and nonbelievers. Liberals are optimistic about the prospects for world order and see little difference between Christians and nonbelievers. And evangelicals stand somewhere in between these extremes.*

Later:

*The growing influence of evangelicals has affected U.S. foreign policy in several ways; two issues in particular illustrate the resultant changes. On the question of humanitarian and human rights policies, evangelical leadership is altering priorities and methods while increasing overall support for both foreign aid and the defense of human rights. And on the question of Israel, rising evangelical power has deepened U.S. support for the Jewish state, even as the liberal Christian establishment has distanced itself from Jerusalem.*

Walter Russell Mead has written a very thoughtful and provocative essay that should prompt a good bit of thinking among evangelicals. Is he right? Consider when he writes:

*Evangelicals are likely to focus more on U.S. exceptionalism than liberals would like, and they are likely to care more about the morality of U.S. foreign policy than most realists prefer. But evangelical power is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and those concerned about U.S. foreign policy would do well to reach out. As more evangelical leaders acquire firsthand experience in foreign policy, they are likely to provide something now sadly lacking in the world of U.S. foreign policy: a trusted group of experts, well versed in the nuances and dilemmas of the international situation, who are able to persuade large numbers of Americans to support the complex and counterintuitive policies that are sometimes necessary in this wicked and frustrating — or, dare one say it, fallen — world.*

Finally:

*In one sense, religion is so important to life in the United States that it disappears into the mix. Partisans on all sides of important questions regularly appeal to religious principles to support their views, and the country is so religiously diverse that support for almost any conceivable foreign policy can be found somewhere.*

*Yet the balance of power among the different religious strands shifts over time; in the last generation, this balance has shifted significantly, and with dramatic consequences. The more conservative strains within American Protestantism have gained adherents, and the liberal Protestantism that dominated the country during the middle years of the twentieth century has weakened. This shift has already changed U.S. foreign policy in profound ways.*

Just how should evangelical Christians influence foreign policy? The missing element in Mead's fascinating analysis is the issue of religious freedom. Nevertheless, his essay deserves careful evangelical attention and reflection.

