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**Catholicism and Israel:
A Question of Values**

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George Weigel, Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center, gives his views on the Catholic case for supporting Israel

The Catholic Church has been thinking about ethics and international relations since St. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in the 5th century. The Catholic Church has been thinking about the moral foundations of modern free societies since Pope Leo XIII created Catholic social doctrine in 1891. Both the contemporary Catholic theory of democracy and the classic Catholic understanding of world order should inspire Catholics around the world to stand in solidarity with the State of Israel as it confronts a globally orchestrated campaign of delegitimation.

Democracy. The Catholic case for democracy was stated clearly by the late Pope John Paul II. Given the available alternatives in the 21st century, the Church prefers democracies because democracies are founded on the constitutional protection of inalienable human rights; because democracies respect the institutions of civil society such as the family, voluntary associations, economic and cultural groups, and religious bodies; because democracies embody the superiority of the rule of law over the rule of brute coercion; because democracies afford their citizens the opportunity to debate the common good, participate in government, and thus fulfill their civic responsibilities; and because democratic methods of self-governance make peaceful political change possible.

None of the 192 member states of the United Nations embodies the Catholic understanding of democracy perfectly. In the modern Middle East, only one country has made an ongoing and reasonably successful attempt to build its politics around the moral truths and political values that undergird the Catholic theory of democracy. That country is the State of Israel.

For decades, Lebanon made the effort; but Lebanon is now being destroyed by Iran and Syria in the name of a very different understanding of politics than that endorsed by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Iraq, we may hope, is moving in the direction of pluralist democracy, although that process is now threatened by jihadist assaults on Iraq's remaining Christians. Israel is not only the one, stable, functioning democracy in the Middle East; Israel is the Middle Eastern state that comes closest to approximating the Catholic understanding of what a 21st century polity should be. It is, to be sure, an imperfect approximation of the free and virtuous society commended by the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. But then so is the United States.

In a region marked by religious and ethnic intolerance, Israel, a country constantly under threat from its neighbors, has made a serious effort to honor the principles of pluralist democracy. Israeli Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, have the vote; Israel's parliament has Arab members; an Arab Christian sits on Israel's Supreme Court. Life for Arab Christians in Israel is not ideal, but Arab Christian life in Israel is far better than Arab Christian life in Gaza or in the Palestinian Authority. State-tolerated violent persecution of Christians is all too common in Egypt; there is no such violent persecution of Christians in Israel, where religious freedom – which much of the Arab Islamic world regards as heresy – is legally guaranteed. These often unremarked realities explain a remarkable fact: the Christian population of Israel has been growing since 1948, while the Christian population of other Middle Eastern countries has been shrinking.

World Order. Throughout the sanguinary 20th century, the Bishops of Rome proposed a vision of world order built on the global recognition of fundamental human rights that could be known by reason. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have carried that vision into the 21st century, in which the Catholic Church often seems the last true believer in the possibility of a law-governed global community.

The campaign to delegitimize the State of Israel morally is a direct assault on the principles of world order that have been supported by every pope from

Benedict XV through Benedict XVI. The State of Israel came into being as a result of an act of the United Nations General Assembly. Its destruction – through a nuclear assault from Iran or by a campaign of international pressure that eventually changes the country’s demographic character – would be a grave blow to the vision of a world in which politics and law replace mass violence in resolving conflict.

Alone among its neighbors, Israel has traded land for peace. All relevant political parties in Israel accept the idea of a Palestinian state. Many Arab Islamic states refuse to accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel, even as they quietly support Israel’s efforts to rein in jihadist terrorists and the apocalyptic clerics of Tehran – efforts the Arab Islamic world is often unwilling to make itself. For this bizarre and, frankly, hypocritical situation to end in the destruction of the one state in the region that has shown a capacity for reaching peaceful accommodations with its neighbors would be as fatal a blow to the cause of law-governed world order as were the events of 1938 in Austria and Czechoslovakia.

A Question of Values. The Catholic case for Israel does not rest on fundamentalist readings of the Bible, nor does it involve a romantic vision of the Jewish state. A Catholic commitment to Israel does not involve giving the Israeli government a blank check, just as the Catholic commitment to Israel can and must co-exist with a profound concern for Christians throughout the Middle East. The Catholic case for Israel is based on truths about the free and just society that can be known by reason – truths that can be known by all men and women of good will. It also reflects the prudential judgment that the destruction of the one state in the Middle East that takes religious freedom seriously would be a lethal blow to the cause of religious freedom throughout that conflicted region, and indeed throughout the world.

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