



VOL. 2, №2 JANUARY 2007

ISSN 1991-2773

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Review of International American Studies (RIAS), is the electronic journal of the International American Studies Association, the only worldwide, independent, non-governmental association of American Studies. *RIAS* serves as agora for the global network of international scholars, teachers, and students of America as hemispheric and global phenomenon. *RIAS* is published three times a year: in September, January and May by IASA with the institutional support of the University of Silesia in Katowice lending server space to some of IASA websites and the electronic support of the Soft For Humans CMS Designers. Subscription rates for *RIAS* are included along with the Association's annual dues as specified in the "Membership" section of the Association's website (www.iasaweb.org).

All topical manuscripts should be directed to the Editor via online submission forms available at *RIAS* website (www.iasa-rias.org). General correspondence and matters concerning the functioning of *RIAS* should be addressed to *RIAS* Editor-in-Chief:

Michael Boyden
Harvard University
Department of English and American
Literature and Language
Barker Center
12 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
USA

e-mail: michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF MULTILINGUALISM

REPLY TO 'AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AT WORK' (II)

Melani McAlister

George Washington University

I am writing in response to Dr. Gönül Pultar's conference report from the *America in the Middle East/The Middle in America* conference at the American University of Beirut in December 2005, which appeared in the first issue of *RIAS*. In her report, Dr. Pultar discusses my lecture on the 'Global Visions of American Evangelicals'. Unfortunately, I think she misunderstands my argument—or, at least, its intent. My aim was to convey the multi-faceted ways that American evangelical Christians are involved in global issues.

Those involvements are surprisingly complex. They range from direct support of the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric, which positions evangelicals as major backers of the Bush administration's 'War on Terror', to activism on global poverty and health issues. These latter activities, while often problematic, have had the effect of making some American evangelicals into supporters of debt relief for Africa, and of raising awareness about the US role as an omnivorous consumer of global resources. Dr. Pultar found my lecture to be 'almost like a slap in the face' (Pultar: 44), because she took me to mean that there is no hope—either for those who are fearful of the role of American evangelicals as conservative stalwarts, or for those of us who want to change US foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere.

What I intended to convey was the opposite. It's true that I believe evangelicalism will remain a significant force in the United States for some time to come; what we are facing is not a temporary phenomenon. My goal in this research is to show the complexity of the ways that power operates. I don't believe it does any of us a service to either minimize the power of evangelicals in the United States or to simplify their role. For some people, the controversial aspects of my talk were those that showed the possibilities of change among evangelicals. These possibilities include the emergence of a critique of US militarism within a population that has long been predominantly and deeply conservative. I'm not overly sanguine about those changes, but I see them as important to understand. And I have some hope that a liberalizing front among evangelicals might have an impact on US policies in the future. Because I made this argument, some people saw me as 'soft' on evangelicals. Dr. Pultar apparently found the opposite, and believes that I presented evangelicals as uniformly belligerent and fully in control of US policy. She left with the sense that I was at the conference to tell people in the Middle East to 'get used to it'. If that was



her impression, I can certainly understand why she found a ‘bitter taste’ in her mouth (44). I wish it had been otherwise.

I had hoped my colleagues at the conference would emerge with a richer sense of the lay of the land among the diverse group of people who call themselves evangelicals. That group includes many people who are committed to a preponderance of American power and a vision of Christian superiority. However, it also includes some others who see themselves as challenging aspects of both the Bush administration agenda and their own community’s complacency in the face of global inequality.

The proceedings of *America in the Middle East/The Middle East in America* give a good sense of the intellectual richness of the conversations at the conference, which went far beyond my talk or any other single presentation. Our shared endeavor in Beirut was analyzing, and disagreeing about, the nature of the multiple relationships between the United States and the Middle East. Those relationships include profound and deadly political conflict, racism, religious bigotry, and an ongoing struggle over the politics of representation. They also include moments of contact, connection, and community. In the face of an urgent global situation, we do not have the luxury of either denial or despair. Instead, we are required to be intellectually honest, politically engaged, and determined to struggle for a better world. I believe the conference was part of that project, though I know for certain that it was neither the beginning nor the end of the task.

WORKS CITED:

— Pultar, G. (2006) ‘American Diplomacy at Work: An American Studies Conference in Beirut’, *Review of International American Studies* 1(1) : 41–44.