

AMSS 37th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity and Dialogue”

Hosted By:
The Harvard Divinity School
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
October 24 – 25, 2008

ABSTRACT

“ ‘In Keeping with the Teaching of Scripture:’ Jimmy Carter,
Religion, and the Pursuit of Middle East Peace”

By: D. Jason Berggren, Ph.D
(University of Georgia, Athens, GA)

“I will do everything in my power to make our nation an agent of peace in the Middle East; a just and lasting peace that will be in keeping with the teaching of Scripture.” (Jimmy Carter) Based on former President Jimmy Carter’s statement, this paper argues that Carter’s role as facilitator, partner, and mediator in the Camp David peace process between Israel and Egypt was largely driven by profound personal religious convictions. To illustrate the utility of religious faith for the purpose of peacemaking, this paper examines President Carter’s use of, and appeal to religious faith in three major ways. First, Carter’s motivation for peace in the Middle East is explored. Like most other evangelicals, President Carter saw the region through a religious lens. For him, it was *the Holy Land*, a place of profound significance because of what happened and for what is prophesied to happen there. Carter’s faith-based interest and preoccupation with Israel and the wider region explains his direct involvement in the peace process, his decision to make Middle East peace a cornerstone of his foreign policy agenda, and his willingness as president to take risks; risks that his advisors feared would jeopardize his political standing and reelection prospects. Second, Carter believed that politicians of sincere Christian faith were under Biblical command to pursue peace. In his speeches on the Middle East, Carter often invoked the New Testament beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” This section explores and documents the religious justifications Carter cited in his pursuit of Middle East peace. Third, to accomplish the task of peace, it is argued that Carter’s faith and reading of the Bible provided him with an appreciation for the “*Other*,” the diversity within the Western faith traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His reading of the Bible, for instance, particularly narratives surrounding the life of Abraham and his sons Ishmael and Isaac, provided him a means of *crossing boundaries*, reaching out to both Jews and Muslims, and forging an interfaith dialogue, especially with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. On this issue and/or area of concern, future presidents could learn from Carter’s example.

