

God and His sacred real estate

By M.L. FISCHER

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Looking at a newspaper photo of a man praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall, I couldn't help thinking: This is only a wall, an inanimate object.

I know the wall was undoubtedly built for some practical purpose. Even houses of worship are practical, as they provide the place for a congregation to congregate.

At some time in the past, people had declared this spot sacred. It has a human history, one that centered around the needs, desires and sociopolitical identity of a particular people, in this case Jewish people.

Somehow they came to regard their local interests as identical to the Almighty's interests.

In the article accompanying the photo, someone is quoted as saying, "God is holding the land for us."

If you really take that idea out of context and examine it closely, it makes little sense.

To get to that conclusion, several assumptions must be in place, one after the other:

- 1: There is an intelligence directing the universe.
- 2: That intelligence is vested in an individual who resides somehow apart from the universe He or She designed.
- 3: That individual has a personality not unlike a human personality.
- 4: He or She has favored groups of people and is concerned with local real estate disputes.
- 5: He or She has entered into a contract with a certain ethnic group, promising a piece of land to them for all time in exchange for some ongoing rituals.
- 6: He or She will keep natural geological processes from turning the property into glaciers or sea floor in



The Associated Press

In Bethlehem, an Israeli soldier takes up position outside the Church of Nativity, highlighting the question of whether religions battle over holy sites or real estate.

the future.

In case someone is inclined to think I'm making sport of Jewish beliefs, these same kinds of attitudes run through all religions.

Jerusalem is considered a holy place for three of the major world religions. Muslims also bow to the city of Mecca, and many Christians think God takes up residence in the churches they build. This is quite a chain of suppositions.

If the universe was indeed created by a God, then every millimeter of the universe is holy and sacred, not a few pieces of geography on some obscure planet.

If a God created everyone, then every group is a favored people, and minor ethnic or cultural difference don't matter. One would also assume that every species is a favored one, not just big-brained, hairless apes.

It seems that once the emotional rhetoric of religion is stripped away, these ideas have more to do with politics, business and the furthering of cultural identity than any real estate bargain made with some deity.

Perhaps if we stop dragging God into our disputes in order to justify them, we might start learning to get along with each other.

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Religious and spiritual people from all callings are invited to share their thoughts through this open forum. You can mail your contributions to Bob Fenster, features editor, Santa Cruz Sentinel, PO Box 638, Santa Cruz, CA 95061. Or send them by e-mail to bfenster@santa-cruz.com.