

# Commentary

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## Unimaginable

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

**B**ISHOP ROBERT BARRON WAS IRKED. ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT Catholic prelates and interviewers in the country, with an online audience of many millions, Barron had watched some of the highlights of the funeral service of the late Jimmy Carter. Much of the service paid tribute to the Christian faith that was so prominently part of the former president's life, along with the hymns to match: The Navy and Army Bands performed rousing renditions of "Eternal Father," "Come Thou Almighty King," and of course "Amazing Grace."

But one of the songs sung was not like the others. At one point, country stars Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood took center stage, giving a performance that was anything but Christian: a rendition of one of the most famous songs on earth, John Lennon's "Imagine." The song asks us to "imagine there's no Heaven," as well as a world in which there are "no countries," and "no religions too." Only, the song implies, if we do away with nationalities and with faith, will a genuine heaven on earth come to be: "Imagine all the people / living life in peace." In such a scenario, then it is possible to imagine an age in which "the world will be as one." As he watched and heard these words sung in a house of worship, Bishop Barron took to X to make his annoyance known:



I was watching highlights from President Carter's funeral service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. I found some of the speeches very moving. But I was appalled when two country singers launched into a rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine." Under the soaring vault of what I think is still a Christian church, they reverently intoned, "Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try" and "imagine there's no country; it isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too." Vested ministers sat patiently while a hymn to atheistic humanism was sung. This was not only an insult to the memory of a devoutly believing Christian but also an indicator of the spinelessness of too much of established religion in our country.

This is eloquent, concise, and largely correct; singing "Imagine" at a Christian funeral, in an edifice that is known as a "National Cathedral," is akin to a cantor singing an anti-Semitic song on Yom Kippur. But, alas, contra Bishop Barron, an insult to the memory of Jimmy Carter it was not. For when, in 2007, the former president was asked to name his favorite song by the Beatles, he responded by citing not a selection from the diverse catalogue of that impactful band, but rather with one sung after it disbanded. "My favorite is 'Imagine,'" he replied. "When I go to a strange country, Cuba and other places, in some of those nations, 'Imagine' has become a national anthem. If you go to Havana, for instance, you'll see a statue of John Lennon."

It is a creepy quote, linking the love of a song to hearing it sung not in America, but rather in a regime that was its foe. But the quote is also apt, for it reminds us of who would actually share in the song's utopian vision of an age in which all religious and national difference disappeared. "Throughout history," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, "utopian thinkers have dreamed of a perfect world in which all individual striving is abolished, its place taken by harmony. That dream has led to some of the worst bloodshed in history." The playing of "Imagine" at the funeral of the 39th president reminds us that the most enduring image of Carter's years after the White House will not be his advocacy for Habitats for Humanity, but rather his embrace of, and praise for, tyrants as if they were legitimate leaders. When, in 2008, Carter was asked what he thought of the fact that political leaders in Israel refused to meet with him after he accused Israel of apartheid, he responded with a striking statement: "In a

democracy, I realize you don't need to talk to the top leader to know how the country feels. When I go to a dictatorship, I only have to talk to one person and that's the dictator, because he speaks for all the people.”

The tragedy of Jimmy Carter's life is that a man who placed his faith at the center of his political persona sought to legitimize enemies of the Western world who hated and sought to undermine that very faith and indeed the very Christendom in which it was nurtured. And they hated the Jews, for it is the mysterious endurance of the Jewish people that, more than any other, proves the existence of Heaven, of a God beyond the world, and of the truth of the Hebrew Bible that they bequeathed to the world. When Carter, during the negotiation over the Camp David accords, warned Menachem Begin that this was Israel's last chance for peace, the Israeli prime minister replied, “Our people lived thousands of years before Camp David and shall continue to exist thousands of years after. . . . There are no last opportunities or chances. There is always new opportunity.” The stubborn refusal of the Jewish people to die and disappear, and the resurrection of the Jewish state, stuck in the craw of those who dreamt of a world with no free countries—and no freedom of religion too.

It is easy to understand why Bishop Barron was so upset at what he saw and heard. Any serious Christian—indeed any person of faith—ought to be aghast that “Imagine” was paired with hymns celebrating the grace and glory of God. But in a certain sense, the song that Carter lovingly recalled hearing sung in Communist Cuba was not really out of place. The Israeli scholar Ze'ev Maghen, who wrote an entire book refuting the ethos of “Imagine,” once reflected that John Lennon's most famous composition is indeed a song for a funeral, only of a very different kind:



John's beautiful ballad is a death march, a requiem mass for the human race. His seemingly lovely lyrics constitute in truth the single most hideous and most unfortunate combination of syllables ever to be put to music. The realization of his dream, or even just a large part of it, would perforce entail the wholesale and irreversible destruction of the dreams, hopes, happinesses and very reason for living of yourself and every single person you know. If we, who for so long have unthinkingly admired and warbled Lennon's words, were to live to see his wish come true, the result would be more staggeringly horrific and more devastatingly ruinous than you could ever possibly—  
imagine.

Maghen is, of course, correct. That Jimmy Carter did not understand this tells us more about his post-presidency than any eulogy ever could.

*Photo: Thaer Ganaim/Getty Images*

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