

Christian Zionism and its impact on justice

DR REV STEPHEN SIZER

Is a Vicar at Christ Church, Virginia Water and an area Tutor at the School of Theology, Westminster College Oxford. He holds several positions of a trustee and is renowned for his lectures on Christian Zionism. He besides having numerous articles published on the Palestinian issue also has a book published by Eagle Publishers, The Panorama of the Holy Land, a spiritual tour guide of important sites in Palestine.

A Definition: What is Christian Zionism?

At its simplest, Christian Zionism has been defined as 'Christian support for Zionism.' In 1975, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 3379 defining Zionism as, 'a form of racism and racial discrimination.' Contemporary Christian Zionism is in part a reaction to increasing world-wide criticism of Israel's form of apartheid.

So, for example, in 1967, following the passing of U.N. Resolution 242 condemning Israel's occupation of the West Bank when the entire international community closed their embassy's in Jerusalem, the International Christian Embassy moved to Jerusalem expressly to show solidarity with Israel.

Christian Zionists see themselves as defenders of and apologists for the Jewish people and in particular, the State of Israel. This support involves opposing those deemed to be critical of, or hostile toward Israel. Anti-Zionism is equated quite wrongly with anti-Semitism. Yet it is also rare therefore to find Christian Zionists who feel a similar compassion or solidarity with the Palestinians. Walter Riggans defines the term 'Christian Zionist' in an overtly political sense as,

'...any Christian who supports the Zionist aim of the sovereign State of Israel, its army, government, education etc; but it can describe a Christian who claims to support the State of Israel for any reason.'

Christian Zionism then describes a broad coalition of agencies, some predominantly Gentile, others Jewish Christians who believe Jesus is their Messiah. There are today well over 250 Christian Zionist organisations operating in America alone.

The History of Christian Zionism

In Der Judenstaat, published in 1896, Theodor Herzl forcefully articulated the aspirations of Jewish Zionists for their own homeland, but the Zionist dream was largely nurtured and shaped by Christian Zionists especially from the 1820's long before it was able to inspire widespread Jewish support a century later. This was in part a result of the rise of Evangelicalism - a belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible and especially the Hebrew scriptures, the growth in travel literature about the Middle East, the rise of 19th Western pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and above all by French and British Colonialist strategies for controlling the Middle East as a bridgehead to the trade routes to India and China. British politicians like Lord Shaftesbury, Palmerston, Lloyd George, Balfour, T.E. Lawrence and General Allenby were all Christian Zionists.

Just one example, Writing to the British ambassador in Constantinople in 1840, Lord Palmerston claimed, There exists at the present time among the Jews dispersed over Europe, a strong notion that the time is approaching when their nation is to return to Palestine... It would be of manifest importance to the Sultan to encourage the Jews to return and to settle in Palestine because the wealth which they would bring with them would increase the resources of the Sultan's dominions; and

the Jewish people, if returning under the sanction and protection and at the invitation of the Sultan, would be a check upon any future evil designs of Mohamet Ali or his successor... I have to instruct Your Excellency strongly to recommend [the Turkish government] to hold out every just encouragement to the Jews of Europe to return to Palestine. In the 20th Century many leading American politicians were Christian Zionists including Ronald Reagan and Jimmie Carter.

The Theology of Christian Zionism

1. Biblical Literalism

Christian Zionism originated essentially in the 1820's when a group of influential Christian leaders began to speculate that promises made in the Hebrew scriptures that has not been yet fulfilled literally must therefore await future fulfilment. So for example the borders of the land promised to Abraham and the descendents of Isaac - from the Nile to the Euphrates - will Christian Zionists claim, become the future borders of the State of Israel. Because the Jewish temple as described by the prophet Ezekiel has never been built, it must one day be built in place of the Masjidul al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. Promises made during the exile of Jews in Babylon in the 5th Century BC are made to apply 2500 years later to the emigration of Soviet Jews to Palestine today.

It is this biblical literalism - where every word must be taken literally and unconditionally - that fuels Christian Zionism. Instead of allowing Jesus and his Apostles to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures they are made to speak about present and future events almost as if the Christian Scriptures were never written. Just one quote from the New testament that refutes this position.

By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear... The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. (Hebrews 8:13; 10:1)

Under the Old Covenant, revelation from God came often in shadow, image, form and prophecy. In the New Covenant that revelation finds its consummation in reality, substance and fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The question is not whether the promises of the covenant are to be understood literally or spiritually as Christian Zionists like to stress. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Covenant shadow or in terms of New Covenant reality. This is the most basic hermeneutical assumption which Christian Zionists consistently fail to acknowledge.

2. Covenant Chosenness

Because of their biblical literalism Christian Zionists believe that the Jews remain God's chosen people and have a unique relationship to God. The promises made to Abraham remain true today for the descendants of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. In Genesis 15 God indicates the extent of that land,

"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates." (Genesis 15:18)

Christian Friends of Israel insist,

The Bible teaches that Israel (people, land, nation) has a Divinely ordained and glorious future, and that God has neither rejected nor replaced His Jewish people.

Bridges For Peace similarly affirm,

'Through programs both in Israel and world-wide, we are giving Christians the opportunity to actively express our biblical responsibility before God to be faithful to Israel and the Jewish community.'

The Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA) claims to be the largest association of Messianic Jewish believers in the world, founded in 1915. MJAA has affiliations in 15 countries, 250 Messianic Synagogues, and 350,000 Messianic Jews world-wide. They insist they are 'the leading representative organisation for American Jews who believe in Messiah Yeshua.' Their simple statement of belief states,

We believe in G-d's eternal covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We, therefore, stand with and support the Jewish people and the State of Israel and hold fast to the Biblical heritage of our forefathers.

Christian Zionists err because they fail to recognise in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, 'chosenness' becomes the gift of God's grace to all who trust in Him, irrespective of their racial origins.

3 Restorationism

The theology of Christian Zionism is based on a belief in Restorationism, that is the promise of the land made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph was unconditional and eternal. Therefore, Christian Zionists encourage Jews to return to Palestine and occupy what they see as their eternal heritage.

The International Christian Embassy is the most politicised Christian Zionist organisation. At the Third International

Christian Zionist Congress held in Jerusalem 25-29 February, 1996 under the auspices of ICEJ, some 1,500 delegates from over 40 countries unanimously affirmed an affirmation of Christian Zionism including the following,

The Lord in His zealous love for Israel and the Jewish People blesses and curses peoples and judges nations based upon their treatment of the Chosen People of Israel... According to God's distribution of nations, the Land of Israel has been given to the Jewish People by God as an everlasting possession by an eternal covenant. The Jewish People have the absolute right to possess and dwell in the Land, including Judea, Samaria, Gaza and the Golan.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, founding president of Dallas Theological Seminary, United States, the most influential Christian Zionist academic institution in the world, claims,

'Israel is an eternal nation, heir to an eternal land, with an eternal kingdom, on which David rules from an eternal throne'

These ideologies forms the basis on how their theology influences or determines their politics.

The Politics of Christian Zionism

Three aspects of the politics of Christian Zionism that impact the search for justice in the Middle East.

1. Attitudes toward Arabs and Palestinians

Christian Zionists while lovers of Israel are invariably also hostile toward Arabs and Palestinians. The demise of the Soviet Union, the rise of militant Islam, the success of the Allies in the Gulf War, and the beginning of third millennium have only fuelled more imaginative speculations among

fundamentalists, while the same anti-Arab prejudices and Orientalist stereotypes persist.

Hal Lindsey is the most popular Christian Zionist writer author of over 20 books with sales exceeding 50 million copies. He insists,

Long ago the psalmist predicted the final mad attempt of the confederated Arab armies to destroy the nation of Israel... The Palestinians are determined to trouble the world until they repossess what they feel is their land. The Arab nations consider it a matter of racial honour to destroy the State of Israel. Islam considers it a sacred mission of religious honour to recapture Old Jerusalem.

Charles Dyer, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary warns that Saddam Hussein plans to attempt to repeat Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Israel, the only Arab ever to have done so. 'The Middle East is the world's time bomb, and Babylon is the fuse that will ignite the events of the end times.'

For American Christian Zionists, in particular, America is seen as the great redeemer, her role in the world providentially and politically preordained. The two nations of America and Israel are like Siamese twins, linked not only by common self interest but more significantly by similar religious foundations. Together they are perceived to be pitted against an evil world dominated by Communist and Islamic regimes, antithetical to the values of America and Israel.

2. Apocalyptic View of the Future

The 1967 'Six Day War' marked a significant watershed for evangelical Christian interest in Israel and Zionism. For example, Jerry Falwell did not begin to speak about modern-day Israel until after Israel's 1967 military victory.

Falwell changed completely. He entered into politics and became an avid supporter of the Zionist State... the stunning Israeli victory made a big impact not only on Falwell, but on a lot of Americans... Remember that in 1967, the United States was mired in the Vietnam war. Many felt a sense of defeat, helplessness and discouragement... Many Americans, including Falwell, turned worshipful glances toward Israel, which they viewed as militarily strong and invincible. They gave their unstinting approval to the Israeli take-over of Arab lands because they perceived this conquest as power and righteousness... Macho or muscular Christians such as Falwell credited Israeli General Moshe Dayan with this victory over Arab forces and termed him the Miracle Man of the Age, and the Pentagon invited him to Vietnam and tell us how to win the war.

The titles of Hal Lindsey's books show an increasingly exaggerated and almost pathological emphasis on the apocalyptic, on death and suffering. They are replete with categorical assertions that biblical prophecy is being fulfilled in this generation signalling the imminent destruction of the world. Hal Lindsey dogmatically asserts,

We are the generation the prophets were talking about. We have witnessed biblical prophecies come true. The birth of Israel. The decline in American power and morality. The rise of Russian and Chinese might. The threat of war in the Middle East. The increase of earthquakes, volcanoes, famine and drought. The Bible foretells the signs that precede Armageddon... We are the generation that will see the end times ...and the return of Jesus.

Lindsey's last but one book, The Final Battle, includes the statement on the cover,

"Never before, in one book, has there been such a complete and detailed look at the events leading up to 'The Battle of Armageddon.'"

Lindsey confidently asserts that the world is degenerating and that the forces of evil manifest in godless Communism and militant Islam are the real enemies of Israel. He describes in detail the events leading to the great battle at Megiddo between the massive Russian, Chinese and African armies that will attempt but fail to destroy Israel. He offers illustrated plans showing future military movements of armies and naval convoys leading up to the battle of Armageddon. These will merely hasten the return of Jesus Christ as King of the Jews who will rule over the other nations from the rebuilt Jewish temple on the site of the destroyed Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Obstacle or no obstacle, it is certain that the Temple will be rebuilt. Prophecy demands it... With the Jewish nation reborn in the land of Palestine, ancient Jerusalem once again under total Jewish control for the first time in 2600 years, and talk of rebuilding the great Temple, the most important sign of Jesus Christ's soon coming is before us... It is like the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle being found... For all those who trust in Jesus Christ, it is a time of electrifying excitement.

An indication of how seriously Christian Zionists take the military aspect of their apocalyptic scenario can be seen from the content of the itinerary used by Jerry Falwell, in his 'Friendship Tour to Israel'. It includes meetings with top Israeli government and military officials and,

....On-site tour of modern Israeli battlefields... Official visit to an Israeli defence installation... strategic military positions, plus experience first hand the battle Israel faces as a nation.

3. Hostility toward the Peace Negotiations

The International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem, as the semi-official voice of Zionist organisations, is frequently cultivated, exploited and quoted by the Israeli Government whenever a sympathetic Christian viewpoint is needed to enhance their own policies, and rebut Western criticism. Every Israeli Prime Minister since 1980 has spoken at their annual international gatherings in Jerusalem.

In October 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu the Israeli Prime Minister spoke at the Jerusalem 3000 rally organised by the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem, to support Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem. Following the provocative opening of an underground tunnel by the Israelis from the Western Wall through the Moslem Quarter, he was cheered when he insisted the tunnel, 'is open. It will stay open. It will always stay open.' The religio-political agenda of the International Christian Embassy is made quite explicit in this declaration.

Because of the sovereign purposes of God for the City, Jerusalem must remain undivided, under Israeli sovereignty, open to all peoples, the capital of Israel only, and all nations should so concur and place their embassies here. As a faith bound to love and forgiveness we are appreciative of the attempts by the Government of Israel to work tirelessly for peace. However, the truths of God are sovereign and it is written that the Land which He promised to His People is not to be partitioned... It would be further error for the nations to recognise a Palestinian state in any part of Eretz Israel... The Golan is part of biblical Israel and is a vital strategic asset necessary for the security and defence of the entire country....

To this end we commit to work with Israel and to encourage the Diaspora to fulfil the vision and goal of gathering to Israel

the greater majority of all Jewish People from throughout the world.

Not surprisingly therefore the Oslo Peace-Accord has been sharply criticised by Christian Zionist groups who see it as a threat to the realisation of Eretz Israel. In particular they have opposed the handing back of the West Bank and the threat to the status of the Jewish settlements. For example, Theodore Temple Beckett, Chairman of the Christian Friends of Israel Community Development Foundation has initiated an 'adopt-a-settlement' program among American Evangelical Churches. The Jewish town of Ariel has already been adopted by Faith Bible Chapel in Denver. By the end of 1995 it was Beckett's expectation that around 70 Jewish settlements would have been adopted by churches,

...with larger churches adopting larger settlements and smaller churches adopting smaller settlements and giving all a morale boost to show them they are not alone and are loved by many.

4. Conclusions: A Critique of Christian Zionism

Karen Armstrong is not alone in tracing in Western Christian Zionism evidence of the legacy of the Crusades. Fundamentalists have, she claims, 'returned to a classical and extreme religious crusading.' Rosemary Ruether also sees the danger of this kind of Christian Zionism in its, 'dualistic, Manichean view of global politics. America and Israel together against an evil world.' The following quote from Senator Bob Dole is a good example,

American-Israeli friendship is no accident. It is a product of our shared values. We are both democracies. We are both pioneer states. We have both opened our doors to the oppressed. We have both shown a passion for freedom and we have gone to war to protect it.

This 'simple dualism' and 'highly dogmatic thinking' is something Bishop Kenneth Cragg, probably the greatest English Christian Islamic scholar alive today, comments on. Satirically, he writes,

It is so; God chose the Jews; the land is theirs by divine gift. These dicta cannot be questioned or resisted. They are final. Such verdicts come infallibly from Christian biblicists for whom Israel can do no wrong-thus fortified. But can such positivism, this unquestioning finality, be compatible with the integrity of the Prophets themselves? It certainly cannot square with the open peoplehood under God which is the crux of New Testament faith. Nor can it well be reconciled with the ethical demands central to law and election alike.

The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), representing the indigenous and ancient Oriental and Eastern Churches, has been highly critical of the activities of Christian Zionists. They assert Christian Zionists have aggressively imposed an aberrant expression of the Christian faith and an erroneous interpretation of the Bible, which is subservient to the political agenda of the modern State of Israel. Indeed they represent a tendency to,

...force the Zionist model of theocratic and ethnocentric nationalism on the Middle East... (rejecting)... the movement of Christian unity and inter-religious understanding which is promoted by the (indigenous) churches in the region. The Christian Zionist programme, with its elevation of modern political Zionism, provides the Christian with a world view where the gospel is identified with the ideology of success and militarism. It places its emphasis on events leading up to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that among the Middle East churches generally, Christian Zionism is regarded as a devious heresy, an unwelcome and alien intrusion into their culture, which advocates an ethnocentric and nationalist political agenda running counter to their work of seeking justice and reconciliation among both Jews and Muslims.

Essentially, Christian Zionism fails to recognise the deep seated problems that exist between Palestinians and Israelis; it distorts the Bible and marginalises the universal imperative of the Christian message that God loves all people; it has grave political ramifications and ultimately ignores the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of indigenous Christians. It is a situation that many believe the Government of Israel exploits to her advantage, cynically welcoming Christian Zionists as long as they remain docile and compliant with Israeli government policy. Kenneth Cragg offers this astute critique of Christian Zionism,

The overriding criteria of Christian perception have to be those of equal grace and common justice. From these there can be no proper exemption, however alleged or presumed. Chosenness cannot properly be either an ethnic exclusivism or a political facility.

Christian Zionism offers an uncritical endorsement of the Israeli political right and at the same time shows an inexcusable lack of compassion for the Palestinian tragedy. In doing so it has legitimised their oppression in the name of God. In the words of Kenneth Leech, Christian Zionism as a form of fundamentalism,

"...represents a narrowing of vision, a closing of doors, a diminishing of human beings, and a backward force in human history..."

Christian Zionism : True Friends of Israel?

Constructive Destructive

- 1. Encouragement of dialogue between Jews and Christians 1. Justifies apartheid in an exclusive Jewish State**
- 2. Opposition to Anti-Semitism 2. Supports ethnic-cleansing of Palestinians and building of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories to create Eretz Israel**
- 3. Education of the Jewish origins of the Christian faith 3. Encourages religious intolerance, demonising Islam and any opposition to Israel**
- 4. Humanitarian work among Jewish refugees 4. Incites religious fanaticism in supporting building of Jewish Temple on Mount Moriah**
- 5. Dismisses moderate Jewish position who are willing to negotiate land for peace**
- 6. Undermines Christian faith by justifying the denial of human rights**
- 7. Apocalyptic Eschatology is in danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.**

To be frank, Israel is a materialistic and apartheid State practising repressive and dehumanising measures against the Palestinians in flagrant disregard of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Christian Zionists who endorse such policies would do well to heed Joshua's final words,

Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the

LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD'S anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you (Joshua 23:14-16).

Like Isaac's children Jacob and Esau, it is time to stop fighting over the birthright and start sharing the blessings.

Christian Zionists sensed that "end times" were coming. Christian Zionism is grounded on an interpretation of the Bible that supports the ingathering of all Jews to Israel and their exclusive claim to the whole land of Palestine based on the gift of the Land to Abraham and the Jewish people as the "chosen people". As Don Wagner points out "Christian Zionists and pre-millennial dispensationalists have a pessimistic view of history and wait in eager anticipation for the unfolding of a series of wars and tragedies pointing to the return of Jesus. The establishment of the state of Israel, the rebu 4 Christian Zionism. 5 Islamic Zionism. 6 Modern anti-Zionism; Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement." For the first half-century of its existence, Zionism was overwhelmingly a movement of secular Jews. Herzl himself was not particularly observant and actually considered himself rather assimilated until the anti-Semitic rage that followed the Dreyfus affair (see above) convinced him that even the most assimilated Jews would always be perceived as "other". My insistence on "linking...anti-Zionism with the prophetic tradition of social justice" implies that I think "Zionism is...somehow opposed to the best in Judaism." Bingo! He is also correct to associate me with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which I support. Christian Zionism merges theology and politics. It teaches that the secular State of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Christian Zionism believes that this fulfillment of Biblical prophecy began when European Jews started moving to Palestine in the 1800s, and continued as Israel became a. They declare that it is the responsibility of Christians to support the State of Israel and its policies. An invitation for you. We invite you to explore the basis for Christian Zionism and to find answers to some perplexing questions. For example, is contemporary Israel the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy? Are the Jewish people God's chosen people today? Has God promised the land of Palestine exclusively to the Jewish people as an everlasting inheritance?