

Christian Zionism

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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 legitimized their oppression in the name of the Gospel.

At its simplest, Christian Zionism has been defined as 'Christian support for Zionism.' Central to Christian Zionism is the belief in the abiding relevance of the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, 'I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

Christian Zionists tend to 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. It is rare therefore to find Christian Zionists who feel a similar solidarity with the Palestinians.

The most well known and influential British Christian Zionist organisations include the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People, also known as The Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (CMJ or ITAC); Christian Friends of Israel (CFI); Intercessors For Britain (IFB); Prayer Friends of Israel (PFI) and the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ). These are all part of an international coalition of Christian Zionist organisations which includes Bridges for Peace (BFP); The American Messianic Fellowship (AMF); The Messianic Jewish Alliance America (MJAA); Jews for Jesus (JFJ); and of course, the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ); These organisations are part of a broad coalition, which is shaping the content of the Christian Zionist agenda today.

Contemporary British Christian leaders such as Derek Prince, David Pawson, Lance Lambert, Walter Riggans, along with Americans like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Hal Lindsey, Mike Evans, Charles Dyer and John Walvoord. These writers have a considerable influence in popularising an apocalyptic premillennial eschatology and Zionist vision on the British Evangelical scene in particular.

That their teachings warrant the description "Armageddon theology" is evident from the provocative titles of some of their publications. In offering a definition, Louis Hamada traces what he sees as the correlation between Jewish and Christian Zionism.

The term Zionism refers to a political Jewish movement for the establishment of a national homeland in Palestine for the Jews that have been dispersed. On the other hand, a Christian Zionist is a person who is more interested in helping God fulfil His prophetic plan through the physical and political Israel, rather than helping Him fulfil His evangelistic plan through the Body of Christ.

CMJ was the first Christian Zionist organisation in Britain, founded in 1809 under the name 'The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews'. The less accurate description of 'London Jews' Society' (LJS) eventually proved more popular. At its inception LJS had a fourfold mission agenda.

- 1) declaring the Messiahship of Jesus to the Jew first and also to the non-Jew; 2) endeavouring to teach the Church its Jewish roots; 3) encouraging the physical restoration of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel - the Land of Israel; 4) encouraging the Hebrew Christian/Messianic Jewish movement.

During the last Century, in response to changing attitudes toward the Jews, LJS modified its name several times, first to 'Church Missions to Jews', to 'The Church's Mission to the Jews', then, 'The Church's Ministry Among the Jews', and finally in 1995 to 'The Church's Ministry Among Jewish People.' Their promotional literature now indicates a more subtle and less explicit three-fold strategy, The aims of CMJ are:

Evangelism: To be workers with God in his continuing purpose for the Jewish people, both in Israel and world-wide, especially in seeking to lead them to faith in Jesus the Messiah as their only Saviour.

Encouragement: Supporting Jewish believers in Jesus in all possible ways.

Education: To help Christians to appreciate the biblical, Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

This third aspect of their ministry was further modified in 1995 to emphasise not merely the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, but its living abiding relevance now, together with their concern, like the Council for Christians and Jews (CCJ), to confront anti-Semitism. The third 'aim' therefore now reads, To help Christians to appreciate the biblical, Jewish roots of the Christian faith and life. The concern to combat anti-Semitism.

Whether this justifies defending the State of Israel from criticism for its continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is a controversial and sensitive point within CMJ. Material obtained in 1990 from Emmanuel House in Jaffa indicates that the commitment of some members of CMJ leadership to 'restorationism', that is, the active encouraging of Jewish people to move to Eretz Israel, including the Occupied Territories, appears to remain an important, if not explicit or well publicised aspect of their ministry. Their leaflet explaining the ministry of Emmanuel House states, ITAC, as the London Jews Society is known today, has always believed, proclaimed and worked towards the return of the Jewish people to Zion. This policy is rooted in a firm belief in the message of biblical prophecy which has accurately foretold these things.

In the 1996 Annual Report of CMJ, their General Director explicitly and unequivocally identifies CMJ with restorationism and with the State of Israel.

Not to be out done by Christian Zionist organisations preoccupied with the fulfilment of biblical prophecy in Israel during what are regarded as the 'End Times', under the section of the Report, outlining 'CMJ Issues', and in the context of the primary tasks of evangelism and encouragement, Walter Riggans writes,

Within this focus we need to be aware that God's concern is with the Jewish people the world over. In our day there seems to be in some Christian circles a restriction of interest to the State of Israel and to the significance of various events for the unfolding of Biblical prophecies relating to the end times. CMJ has always been at the forefront of teaching about God's restoration of the Jewish people to and in Israel, and we are continually excited by, and watchful of all that is happening. We are humbled by what the Lord is doing among Israeli believers. In other words, our prayerful interest in the State of Israel is as constant and committed as ever.

Perhaps this is why Walter Riggans defines the term 'Christian Zionist' in an overtly political sense as '...any Christians who support 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.'

In a 'Resource Pack' produced in 1996 for group study as well as to answer objections to the work of CMJ, material is included under the bold heading, 'The State of Israel: Why should we support it?'

Christian Friends of Israel (CFI) likewise insists on the unconditional necessity of 'Standing with Israel' and bringing blessing to her as a nation, though in their case, primarily through prayer and humanitarian projects rather than by evangelism.

We believe the Lord Jesus is both Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world; however, our stand alongside Israel is not conditional upon her acceptance of our belief. 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.

The Council of Christians (CCJ) may also be regarded as a Zionist organisation. While prohibiting proselytism of Jews by Christians associated with CCJ, they nevertheless have shown more concern to defend the actions of the Israeli Government than with the claims of Christ. For example, when the book *The Forgotten Faithful* by Said Aburish was published in 1993, Beryl Norman wrote a fierce rebuttal in the *Church Times*, criticising him for being,

'...part of a major campaign now being waged to win over Christians in the West to the Palestinian cause, and ensure that Israel loses Western Christian support.'

When invited to elaborate in correspondence, she did not substantiate these claims, but made further allegations. In response to a request for evidence she claimed that,

'Militant Palestinian groups - PLO, Hamas - are using the churches. It is very easy to identify this - same vocabulary, same phrases, same stories. Our friends in Israel see this at first hand.'

Of all the Christian Zionist organisations, the International Christian Embassy (ICEJ) is probably the most influential and controversial, having many supporters in the UK. It is significant that many of the staff working for the International Christian Embassy apparently worship at the Anglican, Christ Church, near the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem, coincidentally the headquarters of the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ) in Israel. Ray Lockhart, the vicar of Christ Church, when invited to comment on the work of ICEJ, refused to express any criticism of them.

In what is a useful summary, Walter Riggans, General Director of CMJ, claims Christian Zionists generally agree on three cardinal beliefs, allowing for a wide diversity of views as to their theological significance eschatologically, as well as their implications for Christian practice.

The return of Jews to the land in the last 100 years and the establishment of the State of Israel should be (or can be) interpreted as a fulfilment of Old Testament promises and prophecies concerning the land, or at the very least as signs of God's continuing mercy and faithfulness to the Jewish people. For many Christians today the greatest visible sign of God's faithfulness is the survival of the Jewish people. God has preserved them, cared for them, directed them, against all the odds. And so, in a sense, the greatest sign of all is the State of Israel, and Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Israel; such is a classic Christian Zionist position...

The establishment of the State of Israel has special theological significance because of what it means for the Jews, or because of what it means in the sequence of events leading up to the turning of the Jewish people to their Messiah and the second coming of Christ.

Christians should not only support the idea of a Jewish state, but (at least in general terms) support its policies...in the most modest of ways I would suggest that Christians as Christians must give support in principle to the State of Israel as a sign of God's mercy and faithfulness, and as a biblical mark that God is very much at work in the world...

Karen Armstrong is not alone in tracing in Christian Zionism evidence of the legacy of the Crusades. Fundamentalists have, she claims, 'returned to a classical and extreme religious crusading.' Ruether also sees the danger of this kind of Christian Zionism in its, 'dualistic, Manichaean view of global politics. America and Israel together against an evil world.' Bishop Kenneth Cragg 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 people hood 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.

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.

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.

Christian Zionism had no place in the Middle East and should be repudiated by the universal Church. It is 'a dangerous distortion' and significant shift away from orthodox Christocentric expressions of the Christian faith.

(This is) ...a fundamental disservice also to Jews who may be inspired to liberate themselves from discriminatory attitudes and thereby rediscover equality with the Palestinians with whom they are expected to live God's justice and peace in the Holy Land.

Christian Zionism is a devious heresy and an unwelcome and alien intrusion into this culture, advocating an ethnocentric and nationalist political agenda running counter to the work of reconciliation, and patient witness among both Jews and Moslems.

As one leading Anglican cleric described it, 'Making God into a real estate agent is heart breaking...they are not preaching Jesus any more.'

They are, in the words of another Palestinian clergyman, 'instruments of destruction' Another senior churchman was equally forthright,

Their presence here is quite offensive....projecting themselves as really the Christians of the land... with total disregard for the indigenous Christian community.

Similarly outspoken criticisms of the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC) have been made by Palestinian Anglican clergy. CMJ are propagating Zionism rather than Christianity. It is working against the interests of the Anglican Church in Israel.

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 gospel; it has grave political ramifications and ultimately ignores the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of indigenous Christians. It is a situation that many believe Israel exploits to her advantage, cynically welcoming Christian Zionists as long as they remain docile and compliant with Israeli government policy.

Consequently, local Christians are caught in a degree of museumization. They are aware of tourists who come in great volume from the West to savour holy places but who are, for the most part, blithely disinterested in the people who indwell them. The pain of the indifference is not eased insofar as the same tourism is subtly manipulated to make the case for the entire legitimacy of the statehood that regulates it.

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.

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