

## Christian Zionism

Christian Zionism is a relatively modern theological and political stance. This essay treats the two aspects separately but they are closely intertwined, the political implications being a direct consequence of the theological belief.

The term Zionism refers to a political Jewish movement for the establishment of a national homeland in Palestine for the Jews. Christian Zionism is an ideological belief that sees the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, as being in accordance with – indeed in fulfilment of – biblical prophecy, and thus in line with the desired will of God. The modern State of Israel therefore deserves political, financial, and religious support. As a further twist, Christian Zionists think that it was necessary for the Jewish People to return to ‘The Holy Land’ in order to put in train the events which will lead to the Second Coming of Christ. This belief is not necessarily sympathetic to the Jewish people or to Judaism, because it holds that once the Jews have gathered within modern Israel, a significant number will accept Christ as the Messiah while the others will be wiped out. So Christian Zionists are supporters of Jewish Zionism, but only as a means to hasten the ‘End Times’.

Christian Zionism holds that there is an essential continuity between Old and New Testaments and their peoples. S.Paul says, rather touchingly: ‘Tell me then, has God disowned his people? That is not to be thought of. Why, I am an Israelite myself’. He thinks of the Church as an olive tree. The root is the Jewish people. The Jewish branches have been thinned out and the Gentiles, like a wild olive, grafted in – but still drawing life from the root. (1) The Puritans were the first to seize on this point. Keen to read the Bible in its original texts they were forced to seek out Rabbis, in Amsterdam, to teach them Hebrew. From them they also learned that God’s covenant with the Jews was eternal; that Palestine was their rightful home and that God would eventually ensure their return. The same idea was picked up 200 years later in the 1830s by evangelical Christians and influenced such major figures as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Shaftesbury. John Nelson Darby, an Irish Anglican who defected from the church and helped to form the Plymouth Brethren, did most to spread these ideas by regular trips to the United States around 1870. Darby added some ideas of his own: for example, that ‘born again’ Christians would be swept up to heaven prior to Jesus’ return. (1 *Thessalonians 4:16-17*) This event came to be called the ‘Rapture’. Perhaps the greatest advance in the popularity of this thinking came from the publication, by the American Congregational minister Cyrus I.Scofield, of the *Schofield Study Bible* in 1909. The Christian Zionism of its day had a great effect on David Lloyd George and Lord Balfour. Its theories coincided neatly with British imperial ambitions for a land bridge to India, and they came together in Balfour’s famous speech in 1919:

*“For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country ... The four great powers are committed to Zionism, and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit the ancient land.”* (2)

As they seek to deal with Christian Zionism in Israel, the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem describe it as a ‘worldview where the Gospel is identified with the

ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.' (3) Christian Zionism, therefore, and those who promote it, clearly pose a very serious challenge to the churches and to the communities that make up that land which we (rightly or wrongly) call 'Holy'.

### ***Theological critique***

This modern theological and political movement embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, and thereby poses major theological and biblical problems for Christians and for Jews. Scripture, and the interpretation of it, is at the heart of these issues. One view, which dates right back to the early Christian Fathers, is that in God's eyes the Church has replaced Israel as inheritors of His promise to Abraham. Origen, the great intellectual super-star of the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD, believed that Israel's favoured role with God has been lost. For him the Gentile majority of the church is now the 'New Israel'. The Promised Land is now the whole world, which will hear the good news of Jesus and where the church will be established. Jerusalem is the heavenly city, which will eventually be the home of all Christians. Because of the way the Jews had tortured to death the 'Saviour of the Human Race' not only was the earthly Jerusalem destroyed and Israel sent into exile but their divine election was revoked and they were destined to stand in perpetual opposition to God. Much of Christendom has always believed this. It has fed Christian anti-Semitism down the ages and we must be alert to this danger.

The theological response of Christian Zionism to the current situation in Palestine/Israel, is equally dangerous for Jewish people. Whilst many would view the Christian Zionist approach to be sympathetic to the Jewish cause (especially in the USA), nothing could be further from the truth. Many Christian Zionists believe that, for biblical prophecy to be fulfilled, a significant number of Jews must accept Jesus as their Messiah; the rest will be destroyed. Uri Avnery, the leader of Gush Shalom - an Israeli Peace Group - has written:

*'According to its theological beliefs, the Jews must congregate in Palestine and establish a Jewish state on all its territory so as to make the second coming of Jesus Christ possible ... [They] don't like to dwell openly on what comes next: before the coming [of the Messiah], the Jews must convert to Christianity. Those who don't will perish in a gigantic holocaust in the battle of Armageddon. This is basically an anti-Semitic teaching ....' (4)*

Christian Zionism, therefore, seeks openly to use the Jewish Zionist cause in order to achieve its own theological and political reality, with dire consequences. For to claim that God favours one people, at the expense of others, runs directly counter to Paul's claim that: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus'. (5) Such racial and religious exclusivity leads to dispossession and, ultimately, ethnic cleansing.

The Christian Zionist worldview has cataclysmic consequences for a lasting peace in Palestine/Israel. It attempts to build barriers rather than bridges between communities. It paints a picture of a God who chooses only one people at the expense of others when, in

reality, the biblical picture of God in Christ is one who chooses all people. Christian Zionism portrays an unjust God, favouring an unjust people. For a lasting peace, with justice, in Palestine/Israel, tolerance of difference and respect for the other needs to be at the top of any theological agenda – for Jew, Christian and Muslim alike. Christian Zionism seeks to exclude and expel and, ultimately, eliminate whatever is perceived to be alien to its cause.

### ***Political implications***

Many within the Republican Party in the USA are believed to have Christian Zionist leanings, and thus to have influenced the policies of George W. Bush. Broadly speaking Christian Zionism promotes unquestioning support for the state of Israel and opposes those who are critical of or objective about it. This support, not just of Israel's existence but also of its policies, has been particularly vocal when the right wing (Likud Party) has been in power in the Knesset. Among the policies of the Israeli government which have been seen as particularly worthy of support has been the policy of occupation, as Christian Zionism emphasises that the Jewish People must have sovereignty over the whole of 'Eretz Israel' - that is all the land identified as being promised by God in the Old Testament. At its simplest this means from the Nile to the Euphrates. (*Genesis 15:18*) Judaea and Samaria (now known as the 'West Bank') are the heartland of this territory, centred on Jerusalem itself.

Christian Zionism has become significantly more prominent in the last 20 years, since the establishment of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, and in particular since 11 September 2001. The main annual focus for the work of the International Christian Embassy is the Feast of Tabernacles, a week-long event coinciding with the Jewish festival of Succot. The week offers seminars and teaching, worship and public demonstrations, and is welcomed by Israeli ministers. In October 2007 a record attendance of over 7,000 Christian pilgrims from 90 nations took part in the Jerusalem March. Ignoring a rabbinic ban on Jewish participation, some 30,000 Israelis joined the Christian pilgrims, watched by tens of thousands of on-lookers.(6)

Coupled with this support for Israel is a lack of concern for and indeed hostility towards the Palestinians within Israel. Their presence is regarded as irrelevant in the end times. This lack of concern leads to a complete disregard for the indigenous Christians, because of the belief that God will bring about the final consummation by apocalyptic interventions rather than the Church. In practical terms, Christian Zionism legitimises the oppression of Palestinians in the name of the gospel. The doctrine does not promote harmony between Jewish and other residents in Israel/Palestine but actively views Muslims as enemies of Israel and of Christ.

Christian Zionists also profess themselves to be eager for the series of wars which, they believe, will presage Jesus' return. This clearly has important, not to say dangerous ramifications for the whole of the Middle East, since a build up of military capability and subsequently wars themselves are welcomed. Christian Zionists in America thought judgement day was near during the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 2006, and lobbied to delay a ceasefire. They actively support the continued massive military aid which helps to pay for the Israeli Defence Force and keep it as the superior power in the region. It is this force which maintains the occupation of the Occupied Territories. While this continues, there can be no justice for the Palestinian people and therefore no peace with Israel's neighbours.

## ***What Hope for the Middle East?***

There has been over the years a series of 'if onlys' in the search for Middle East peace: if only democracy can be spread; if only the Palestine-Israel disputes can find an agreed settlement; if only we could 'take out' the extremists. The truth perhaps is that hope comes not in grand plans but in small steps, not borne by the battalions but dragged by the desperate, not in theories but in people, not grandly on a chariot but humbly on a donkey. If hope is hard to find, this does not mean that hope is absent. Hope seemed absent in the Northern Ireland of the troubles or the South Africa of apartheid, but in both places a relatively peaceful resolution has been found.

Let's not forget the hopefulness of presence, and finish by recalling that level of human interaction. The call has been made repeatedly for people to visit - to visit where the need is greatest, where the pain is most acute, and where life feels most hopeless. For where there is positive human interaction hope can still be found.

[2000 words]

### **Notes**

1. Romans 11:1 and 17,18
2. Quoted by Donald Wagner in an article for the US newspaper, the *Daily Star*, 22.1.07
3. *The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism*, The Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, August 22, 2006.
4. *The Theology of Land and Covenant*, A Report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 2003. (Paragraph 1.4).
5. Uri Avnery [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_isra.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_isra.htm)
6. Colossians 3:11
7. See [www.icej.org/article/feast\\_pilgrims](http://www.icej.org/article/feast_pilgrims)

This essay is based largely on a report from the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council for the 2007 General Assembly on the Middle East.

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