



Christian Zionism from a Perspective of Jewish-Christian Relations

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In classical Christian anti-Judaism a distorted view of Judaism is pressed into the service of a Christian Heilsgeschichte narrative. It is ironic to find the same dynamics undergirding the present-day surge of Christian Zionism, which gives reason for profound concern by both Jews and Christians, while also encouraging the Christian community to take a crucial step forward in a partnership to Jews and Israel that is free of such distortions.

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Peter A. Pettit *

1. Thesis

The essential lines of classical Christian anti-Judaism are by now familiar to many, documented in such seminal works as James Parkes' *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* and Rosemary Radford Reuther's *Faith and Fratricide* and more recently chronicled for readers of the *New York Times* bestseller list in James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*.¹ Three of the most salient points in the profile are the dualistic opposition of all things Jewish to those of Christianity, the false portrait of contemporary Judaism (of whatever era) that derives from the *adversus Iudaeos* dynamic, and the insistence on pressing this falsely-characterized Judaism into the service of a Christian *Heilsgeschichte* narrative. It is ironic to find the same dynamics undergirding the present-day surge of Christian Zionism, which seems so friendly to Israel and is so appealing to the worldwide Jewish community for whom Israel is a vital, existential issue. I would suggest that the structural flaws in the Christian Zionist approach to supporting Israel are reason for profound concern by both Jews and Christians, while also encouraging the Christian community to take a crucial step forward as a partner to Jews and Israel.

2. The Dynamics of Classical Christian Anti-Judaism

Reuther's analysis of anti-Judaism as "the left hand of Christology" has persuaded many of us that the early Christian theological practice of defining Christianity's tenets in contrast to Judaism has indelibly marred our relationship with Judaism – if not perhaps our very identity as Christians. In some cases, this took the form of contrasting Judaism's errors with Christianity's truths: flesh and spirit, law and grace, and fear and love are only some of the more obvious, central contrasts from which a whole worldview of opposition emerged. In other cases, it took the form of trumping Judaism's virtues with higher Christian virtues: a priestly class with the one high priest, an earthly temple with the heavenly temple, outward obedience/circumcision with obedience/circumcision of the heart, national peoplehood with universal peoplehood, etc., in a pattern that has become familiar to us as supersessionism. The sum total of the approach amounted to a "replacement theology" in which the church became the new, true Israel, with no room left in God's covenant for the old, benighted Israel.

The pattern led of necessity and by default to a characterization of Jews and Judaism that took its bearings more from the needs of Christianity than from Jewish life and community. Many

Christians had little awareness of how Judaism was actually practiced, yet they learned from their Christian preachers all they needed to know. Such knowledge was most often drawn from a selective patchwork of New Testament images, which had themselves developed in a strongly polemical context, and tendentiously exploited passages from the Talmud, framed not around the questions and concerns of Jewish life but as a foil for expositing orthodox Christian doctrine. Mary Boys and A. J. Levine have shown how even today, in some feminist Christian theology and in third-world liberation theology, the tendency persists to identify as “Jewish” everything that the gospel opposes.² Note the sequence: first Christian theology sets its own task and defines its own truth; then it categorically casts as “Jewish” whatever it opposes or corrects.

Yet Judaism could not be jettisoned entirely from the Christian worldview, lest the essential markers of Jesus’ own identity lose their points of reference and the kingdom he proclaimed be emptied of its content. St. Augustine provided the category of “witness people,”³ arguing that the Jews are necessary for the continuation of Christian life until the eschaton. Wrong as they are, the Jews in their very error serve the purposes of vindicating the Messianic prophecies that Jesus fulfills, exemplifying the contemporary consequences of rejecting God’s grace, and validating the Second Coming by their acknowledgement of the one whom they have not previously recognized. As I have summarized it elsewhere, the Jews may by definition be diametrically “other” than what Christianity is, but they are the “necessary other” of Christianity’s ongoing life.⁴

3. Old Wine in New Wineskins

While the Roman Catholic church in its landmark Vatican II statement, *Nostra Aetate*, together with many Protestant denominations and theologians of all stripes, has rejected replacement theology and declared the intention to honor Jews as God’s covenant people and to counteract antisemitism in all its forms, the evangelical wing of Protestantism has mostly maintained a missionary posture towards Jews and a rejection of the Jewish covenant’s continuing validity. Explicit proselytizing and confrontational witnessing have been downplayed as largely ineffective, but the objective of bringing effective Christian witness before the Jewish people, motivated by love and concern for their spiritual well-being, has retained its force.

Within evangelical circles, at the same time, there has been a new growth of Zionist sentiment particularly since 1967 and the expansion of Israeli control over Sinai, the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. Christian Zionists have taken this development as a sign of the beginning of the eschatological ingathering of Israel. During the Palestinian Intifadas, when tourism in Israel was at historic lows, a high point each year was the influx of evangelical Christian Zionists for the festival of *Sukkot*, a harvest festival that for them anticipates the great harvest of the kingdom and the rebuilding of the Temple. The full restoration of Israel the people to Israel the land is an essential step in attaining that promised goal. Therefore, many Christian Zionists responded to both the surrender of Sinai and, especially, the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli settlements from Gaza in 2005 with disappointment and disapproval.

When Christian Zionists embrace *Sukkot* as a focal celebration and renounce Israeli efforts to make overtures to the Palestinian and wider Arab communities that would help stabilize relations and move toward peace, they are following a familiar course, similar to the long-standing casting of Jews as foils in Christendom’s march toward fulfillment. Debates in the Jewish community run wide and deep regarding the virtues of *aliyah* (Jewish emigration to Israel) and the advantages of a stable, strong diaspora Jewish community, as well as regarding the relative merits of negotiated or unilateral relinquishment of land in the quest of peace. Such debates find little place in the discussions of Christian Zionists, however, as they take up the issues from the standpoint of the Christian eschatological hope rather than the future of a viable state of Israel.

In 2006, the evangelical community has begun to undertake a broad initiative to nurture awareness

and support of Israel. Christians United for Israel is the organizational embodiment of the initiative, birthed and nourished under the umbrella of the John Hagee ministries based at the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, TX. In several dozen places around the United States, as recently at Morning Star Fellowship in Bechtelsville, PA, Christians United for Israel (CUFI) is staging “A Night to Honor Israel,” affording Christians the opportunity to “speak and act with one voice in support of Israel in matters related to Biblical issues.”⁵ The biblical issues are not detailed in the CUFI website, but one of the organization’s two main objectives states that it is “crucial to educate Christians on the biblical and moral imperatives of supporting Israel.”⁶ Among the purposes of a planned July 2007 summit in Washington DC is to express “our concerns for Israel’s security and our support of Israel’s right to the land by Biblical Mandate”;⁷ long-term goals include education of all Christians about “the Jewish contribution to Christianity and Israel’s biblical mandate to the land.”⁸ The consistent theme in these statements is the protection of Israel from threat, which is explicitly identified on the website as coming from Iran’s President, Hamas and radical Islam.⁹

At the event in Bechtelsville, the Northeast Regional Director of CUFI, Robert Stearns, assured the audience, and especially the Jews in the audience, that this support for Israel is not based on theories about the tribulation, or apocalyptic expectation, or conversionary conspiracies. Remarking that he has been “pre-trib, post-trib, and mid-trib” at different times, he dismissed the eschatological agenda by saying he is now “pan-trib: in the end God will make it all pan out.” Rather, he shifted his focus to the theme that is sounded on the CUFI website – the concern about Israel’s safety before a new onslaught of hatred stemming from the “Islamofascists.”

Stearns grounded his appeal for support of Israel in two subordinate and one primary assertions. In the subordinate place he acknowledged, first, that Christianity owes its heritage of faith to Israel and, second, that the history of Christian anti-Judaism leaves a burden of responsibility on the Christian community for repentance. He also conceded that there are many points at which Jews and evangelical Christians will differ on theology and social issues. But the one thing on which there is a common stance, his primary ground for cultivating Christian support of Israel, is that there is no place in the world for antisemitism. And that common stance derives from the recognition of a common enemy, radical Islam.

Building on Stearns’ keynote was David Brog, Executive Director of CUFI and author of *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State*.¹⁰ Brog called Genesis “nothing less than a Zionist document” and cited as evidence of its contemporary fulfillment the thriving of churches that reject replacement theology and the struggle and dwindling of churches that embrace it. Thus “God blesses those who bless Israel,” referring to Genesis 12:3. The existential threat today, according to Brog, is to Israel as a country, with the threat coming from Iran and other Muslim forces that have set themselves against Israel. In that regard, Israel serves as a bellwether, for as Israel goes, so will go Judeo-Christian civilization throughout the world.¹¹

Stearns had been more graphic: Israel is the canary in the coal mine; Israel has been the scout in the conflict of Western civilization with radical Islam. Israel’s engagement with the common enemy has been going on for decades. For that engagement, for Israel’s achievement in enduring, for Israel’s steadfastness in the face of efforts to annihilate the heritage shared by Jews and Christians for millennia, the Christians in Bechtelsville had gathered “to honor Israel.” As the event coincided with *Yom haZikkaron*, Israel’s Memorial Day, Lou Balcher of the Israeli Consulate in Philadelphia added the crowning image: the members of CUFI, like the fallen soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, are the true defenders of Israel.

While the exponents of Christian Zionism’s “new initiative” are careful to distance themselves from the conversionist and millenarian language of their heritage, the same habits of Christian theology that are shared across both the evangelical and mainline communities remain present. That is, the Israel for which support is cultivated is a Christian construction – an Israel that would

represent the vanguard of the “Judeo-Christian civilization”¹² that must be protected, an Israel that would not be conflicted about its own complicit role in extending the conflict with the Arab world and the Palestinian community, an Israel that would understand itself clearly and simply as the fruit of biblical promise and hope. This is the Israel that the Christian Zionists would have, but it is not the Israel that exists today, particularly if one takes “Israel” to include the whole Jewish people and not only the Jewish state.

Moreover, this Israel is once again pressed into service for the benefit of a Christian narrative. The sense of an immediate threat pushes away images of the end of the story, but that end remains entirely Christian, and the America that will benefit most immediately from Israel’s successful defense against radical Islam would be, for these Christian Zionists, a (conservative, evangelical) Christian America. Both in portraying a false image of Jews and Judaism, then, and in making that image serve wholly Christian ends, this new initiative of Christian Zionism embodies two of the very sour substances of old Christian anti-Judaism.

Even in the third characteristic of the classical pattern, the hermeneutics of *adversus Iudaeos*, this new initiative betrays itself as the same old story. Theologians of the *adversus Iudaeos* tradition constructed Christian self-understanding in contrast to Judaism, whether through repudiation of Judaism’s supposed errors or by supersession of Judaism’s virtues. In either case, a categorical other was made to stand opposite what Christianity sought to claim as its own advantage. Christian Zionism, too, clearly identifies such an other – not in Judaism, this time, but in radical Islam (or perhaps in Islam generally, since David Brog could say in Bechtelsville that “when Muslims are the heroes of the piece, something’s wrong”). But identifying and demonizing that other undermines yet one more characteristic of the real nation of Israel, which is the broad demographic diversity that includes more than one million Muslim Arabs as Israeli citizens. Of these Israelis and their story, not a word was spoken nor a picture shown. The identified other may be different in the new story, but the distortion of Israel’s actual identity and character is no less a consequence than when medieval Christians painted horns and tails into their depictions of Jews.

4. “A Land without People for a People without Land”

From the standpoint of those who cherish Israel and seek to affirm the Jewish people as among God’s chosen, it might even be worth the bargain to see the old patterns of Christian anti-Jewish thinking given new form, if it means forming a large segment of the Christian world into supporters of Israel.¹³ It might – were it not for a telling and unavoidable factor: the deal seems to require Palestinian invisibility. This was plainly the case at the Night to Honor Israel, where the lives and fortunes of Palestinians – even those who live within Israel as citizens – were in total eclipse. Modern Israel became wholly Jewish, identified exclusively with the biblical promise to Abraham as the progenitor of the Jews alone.

The scene brought to mind the old Zionist slogan, “a land without people for a people without land.” That slogan painted a false picture of the land of Palestine to which Jews were called on *aliya* and from which the Jewish state was built. Under its sway, admittedly abetted by the real hostility of some local Palestinians and every neighboring Arab state, a militant, defensive, defiant attitude of survival developed in Israel; if this had been a land without people, then the people who came to settle it and develop it were under siege anytime another people protested any aspect of their presence. That the siege was real on many occasions does not invalidate the fact that the slogan predisposed Israelis and their Jewish supporters to feel besieged at every turn, and to develop an anti-Arab sentiment as a consequence.

Christian Zionists have taken up the image by “honoring Israel” in complete disregard of the Palestinians, those who live within Israel and particularly those who are under Israeli influence in the Palestinian territories. This understandably gives rise to the feeling of disregard and disrespect

that underlies the 2006 outcry of four Palestinian heads of churches against the Christian Zionist movement. “Christian Zionism ... embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism,” says their statement.¹⁴ It goes on to decry “the contemporary alliance of Christian Zionist leaders and organizations with elements in the governments of Israel and the United States that are presently imposing their unilateral pre-emptive borders and domination over Palestine.” Their protest of “extreme ideology” and “unilateral pre-emptive” action responds to the false image of Palestinian invisibility that Christian Zionism has adopted.

In charging that such Christian Zionist teaching helps “advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war,” the authors of the Jerusalem statement reflect the perception that the Zionist slogan has helped to inculcate defensiveness, militarism, fear and ethnic animus in the Israeli people. Insofar as one could tell from the Christian Zionists gathering in Bechtelsville, the same attitudes clearly accompany the slogan’s image in its new setting. This was evident not only in the absence of any reference to Palestinian life or existence, save that Hamas is one arm of the radical Islam that threatens Israel, but also in the statements about Israel and its land: in 1948 God gave the land back to the Jews; Genesis is nothing less than a Zionist document; as goes Israel, so goes Judeo-Christian civilization throughout the world. The Christian leaders are right to warn against such simplistic and over-reaching claims, particularly when they are considered adequate ground for determining the policies of international relations.

But they are right only up to a point, because the second half of the Zionist slogan is not false. Until 1948, the Jews were “a people without a land.” The consequences of that homelessness, succinctly (if mistakenly) decreed for them by Christian theology as a consequence of Jesus’ death, were tragically and horrendously realized in the years preceding the partition of mandatory Palestine by the United Nations. The State of Israel is not like any other state, because no other state has been birthed in the context of such human suffering countenanced by such inhumane indifference. Nor has any other state in the modern era lived in a perpetual state of declared war for so long, indeed, for its entire existence. The threats to Israel remain real, until proven otherwise; we cannot ignore that reality.

The evils of Christian Zionism that the Jerusalem leaders enumerate are not those of Zionism alone. Some are shared by those who have sworn themselves to seemingly perpetual enmity against Israel. Empire, colonialism, militarism and apocalyptic scenarios are not the exclusive province of Zionists, Christian or Jewish; Islam, non-Zionist Christianity and many other secular and religious powers have each known their share of these. Some would assert them against Israel today, given the opportunity. The Jerusalem heads of churches may affirm the inalienable rights of all people and the capacity of Palestinians and Israelis to live together, they may reject ideologies that privilege one people over another and they may commit themselves to non-violence, but not all who live in the neighborhood with them have done so or would do so.

It is just as unfair to discount Israel’s virtues and achievements as it is to make Palestinians invisible to Zionist aspiration; it is just as dangerous to ignore Arab and Palestinian rejectionism as it is to whitewash Israeli abuses of power. The complexities of the forces that shape the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict today demand the most nuanced and careful analysis by those who would understand it. Neither the Christian Zionists nor the Jerusalem heads of churches seem yet to have crafted a public articulation of their understanding that would take adequate account of the many dimensions of the conflict and its parties, especially for those of us who do not live in the immediate context of the conflict on a daily basis.

5. A Woeful Path and a Crying Need

The call from Christians United for Israel for a worldwide Christian rallying to the support of Israel is not the unalloyed blessing that supporters of Israel may at first perceive. Its central motive – if we

agree to set aside the traditional evangelical agenda of millenarianism – is both Manichean and militant; it gives regard to Israel's self-understanding and Judaism's integrity only insofar as these may serve the primary goal of defeating a common enemy, radical Islam (or "Islamofascism"). The language is the language of warfare, even when cast in spiritual terms, and the enemy is clearly embodied in a particular array of Muslim groups and individuals. Their defeat is the mission of the evangelical community on behalf of Judeo-Christian civilization. Israel is honored as a nation that has taken the point position in the battle even before others knew there was a battle to be waged.

The legacy of Christian anti-Judaism must offer more than ancillary motivation for Christians to embrace this mission, however. The legacy of Christian anti-Judaism is one in which such dualistic constructions and militant postures have proven woefully counterproductive and tragically wrong. The dialectics of Lutheran ethics, in particular, caution against any easy carving up of the world into saints and sinners; that line runs through the heart of each of us. One can and must act to restrain evil, but in the very act of doing so one must also be careful to abet evil in the least degree possible.

To see Christian Zionists fashion a new hobgoblin out of "radical Islam" – with all the crass oversimplification that such a term demands – must lead those of us who know the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism to cry out for a more humane and discerning approach to those we see as our enemies. Dehumanization and broad strokes of condemnation have proven to be, even in the words of Robert Stearns, the tools of those who are "not true Christians."¹⁵ Can we really expect the old pattern of adversative thinking to yield any better results in our day than it has in days past? Down that path, we can assume from hard experience, lies only more woe – first for our enemies and eventually for all of us.

Moreover, our legacy of anti-Judaism lays a serious responsibility on us for our present relationship with the Jewish community. It is too easy to find examples throughout our shared and baleful history when alliances of expediency worked for a time to ameliorate the suffering of Jews in some particular place. The terms of such alliances may have been shaped initially by Jews when conditions permitted, but ultimately it was the Christian power-brokers who determined the long-range outcome, which was never to Jewish benefit. To enter an alliance for the sake of Israel's support in the near term, when that alliance is predicated on definitions of Israel and Judaism that are crafted by the Christian party, only perpetuates a failed pattern.

Are things different today because Israel is a sovereign state and Jews are a potent force in American politics? Not when the United States remains the guarantor of Israel's interests at the United Nations and David Brog defends the CUFJ agenda precisely because President "Bush's faith does affect administration policy, both foreign and domestic."¹⁶ That a powerful Christian political elite has at times extended considerable patronage and protection to favored Jews, even for a long time, has never before provided assurance that a fall from grace, including persecution and expulsion, cannot happen.

The Jewish community deserves better from a Christianity that has truly examined its complicity in the history of Jewish suffering. Christian Zionism would seem to offer a new and benign patronage of Israel (and perhaps even Judaism) within a Christian hegemony, but it remains patronage and that remains suspect, at best. Rather, the Christian community owes to its Jewish brothers and sisters the full dignity of autonomous self-definition and independent self-control, combined with the compassionate critique that characterizes successful mature partnerships of every kind. In that ideal maturity, Christians and Jews can together engage in debate about Israel's character and policy choices, with the best-informed and most effective Israeli decision being the commonly shared desideratum. Lest we transgress again the commandment against false witness, it will require a full accounting of the broad reality that is Israel and Judaism today, rather than a new and prettier façade that stands in for Judaism/Israel where a Christian narrative requires it.

Before such a dialogue can take place, however, there remains a serious task for the Christian community. We must discern for ourselves a theology of the Promised Land that is adequate both to the biblical witness and to the exigencies of that land today. We can no longer get by with a knowing wink when the subject arises in dialogue. Our heritage on this score gives inadequate articulation for present circumstances; one cannot coherently speak of an enduring covenant of God with Israel and exclude the land from consideration. Nor can one only generalize about all lands, I think, without addressing the particulars of that land which God promised to biblical Israel. The path here is not well marked, nor are there even preliminary blazes on all its segments. But the task is unavoidable, and the blessing at its end – for Jews, for Christians, for Israel and for the world – will be divine.

Notes

1. Parkes, James, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (NY: Atheneum 1981, reprinted by arrangement with The Jewish Publication Society of America); Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury 1974; NY: Search Press 1975); Carroll, James, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* (Boston & NY: Houghton Mifflin 2001). [2](#)
2. Boys, Mary C., "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation*, edited by Mary C. Boys (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2005) 70-79; Levine, Amy-Jill, "With Friends Like These..." (chapter five), *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2006) 167-190.
3. Haynes, Stephen A. *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Know 1995) 28ff.
4. Pettit, Peter A., "From Sour Grapes to Sacrament: Jews as the Other that Christians Encounter," unpublished conference paper, *Nostra Aetate Today*, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome (October 2005).
5. From "About CUFI: Statement of Purpose," retrieved 14 May 2007 from www.cufi.org/about-purpose.aspx. The website does cite a number of biblical verses without commentary or exegesis: Genesis 12:3; 13:14-15; Isaiah 2:3 (=Micah 4:2); 62:1; Ezekiel 3:17; Romans 15:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; Hebrews 10:25.
6. From "About CUFI: 2 Main Objectives," retrieved 14 May 2007 from www.cufi.org/about.aspx.
7. From "About CUFI: Short Term Goals," retrieved 14 May 2007 from www.cufi.org/about-purpose.aspx.
8. From "About CUFI: Long Term Goals," retrieved 14 May 2007 from www.cufi.org/about-purpose.aspx.
9. From "About CUFI: Overview," retrieved 14 May 2007 from www.cufi.org/about.aspx.
10. Brog, David. *Standing With Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State*. Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine 2006.
11. See also Brog's interview in *The National Review Online*, 22 May 2006: "On September 11, 2001, evangelicals recognized ... that radical Islam was the greatest threat facing our country and that we were in a war with its proponents. And in this war, Israel is seen as an ally and as the first line of defense of Judeo-Christian civilization"; retrieved 14 May 2007 from article.nationalreview.com/print/.
12. Cohen, Arthur A. *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (NY: Schocken Books 1971).
13. Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, for example, seems willing to take the evangelical deal as long as the prospects of proselytizing are adequately dealt with (*Sh'ma* 37/368 [May 2007/Iyar 5767] 1-3).
14. "The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism" (August 22, 2006), retrieved 14 May 2007 at www.holyland-lutherans.org/06 August HOC Statement on Christian Zionism.doc;

the statement is signed by the Latin Patriarch and the bishops of the Syrian Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran communions.

15. So Stearns at Bechtelsville, in reference to those Christians of past ages who perpetrated libels and physical attacks on Jews.
16. *The National Review Online*, 22 May 2006, retrieved 14 May 2007 from article.nationalreview.com/print/

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