

## Christian Zionism

“Christian Zionism” like “Christian Violence” is an oxymoron. Both insights were “coming-of-age” insights over against the quintessential fundamentalism, (historian Ernest R. Sandeen’s claim in *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Sandeen, 1970/2008) ) of my Plymouth Brethren (PB) upbringing. Dispensationalist millenarianism was a PB invention in fact by early PB John Nelson Darby, an apocalyptic Johnny-come-lately in Christian history, though with antecedents. The teaching spread like wildfire along many sawdust trails and otherwise of 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century Evangelical worldwide evangelistic and missionary expansionism.

The opportunism of this eschatology “was an effective evangelistic tool of terror to scare people into making decisions for Christ and to stimulate believers to ‘witness for Christ’ to add stars to their heavenly crowns before it was everlastingly too late (Wilson, 1977, p. 218).” Wilson further declared, “It is not likely that the situation will change greatly (*ibid*, p. 228).” The massive sales alone of the *Left Behind* series by Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (see <http://www.leftbehind.com/>, last accessed October 29, 2014) show this to be enormous understatement almost 40 years later.

In 1975 the United Nations passed “Resolution 3379” that declared “Zionism is Racism”. It was rightly repealed 16 years later. “Zionism” is surely righteous that provides land-based self-fulfilment to the Jews after 2,000 years of destructive *diaspora*, not least due to past brutal Christian supersessionist theology and related violent mistreatment of Jews that climaxed in the Nazi *Holocaust* and was experienced throughout much of Western Christian history.

Christian Zionism affirms commitment to:

- The Jews as “God’s Chosen People”
- The 1948 founding of the state of Israel as fulfilment of biblical prophecy
- The end of history has consequently been set in motion
- The Second Coming of Christ is imminent since the founding of the state of Israel
- The state of Israel as God’s declared right of existence for God’s Chosen People
- Israel is key to God’s plan in the Middle East
- There is a biblical obligation to bless Israel

“Christian Zionists” represent 82% of white evangelicals in the United States who believe that “God gave Israel to the Jews (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/27/strong-support-for-israel-in-u-s-cuts-across-religious-lines/>, last accessed October 29, 2014)”. They appear to affirm the biblical *violent apocalyptic* in isolation from the biblical *just peacemaking eschatological/prophetic*. Christian Zionists affirm a vision of the End Times as Ultimate Bloodbath of majority humanity, not as Ultimate Peaceable Kingdom for all humanity. This vision meshes with *hell* as Ultimate Punishment of majority humanity over against *heaven* as Ultimate Restoration for all humanity. Christian Zionist apocalyptic contains a kind of “manifest destiny” violence like American Manifest Destiny. It similarly affirms Israeli exceptionalism in relation to a biblical theology of peace and justice for all humanity. There is related teaching of Israeli entitlement and privilege that creates misplaced Christian loyalties towards Israel.

This seems the context of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's January 2014 claim in Israel to the Knesset that "those who oppose the Jewish state are little more than hateful anti-Semites ([http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/01/20/stephen-harper-israel-parliament\\_n\\_4632269.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/01/20/stephen-harper-israel-parliament_n_4632269.html), last accessed October 29, 2014)."

Christian Zionism in this way perpetuates centuries-long church violence in the West of which anti-Semitism is longstanding instance. This tradition of violence has aligned with "just war" in response to international State enemies, "just deserts" in response to domestic State enemies, and "just hell" in response to spiritual enemies.

"Zionism" in this sense is child of the Western Christian European ethos that since Saint Augustine elevated nation and the nation state to God-ordained inviolability. (Though there is far greater complexity to the rise of the nation state in Europe. See Cavanaugh, 2009 and 2011.) Augustine's development of Christian "Just War" theory in the fifth century was over against/end run around the Jewish "*Torah of Nonviolence*". Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb designates longstanding Jewish biblical interpretation thus in a book by that title (Gottlieb, 2013), and Jesus' explicit modelling and teaching an ethic of "*love your enemies*".

Two compelling publications that discuss the North American Christian ethos *vis à vis* this kind of violent nationalism are: *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003), and *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* (McDonald, 2010). One thought Canada was a safe democracy. One thought the United States stood in reality for making the world safe for democracy. Both books urgently assert, *Think again!* They stand in the tradition of what the first publication names prophetic realism, a strong biblical motif. The authors write: "It avoids taking the stances of complete innocence and selflessness. It seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favoured status for individual nations (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003, p. 8)." It is not in the end merely a question of what kind of country we wish to live in, it is what kind of God we choose to serve. Both books aver: the god of zealous nationalism in the final analysis is an idol. One can add: *in Canada, the United States and Israel*.

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb similarly explains: "The issue of occupation and the question of power is [*sic*] important because Israel claims to be a democracy. But it is not. It is a democracy for Jews, but not for Palestinians living under Israeli rule. Israel's system of governance is properly called an ethnocracy (Gottlieb, 2013, p. 279)." *This is idolatry*.

In Chapter Seven, "The Question of Palestine", after about 40 years of addressing this question, Rabbi Gottlieb provides only a partial list of anti-Palestinian violence comprising "The Anatomy of Occupation", in turn of which "Each of these components barely scratches the surface of the tens of thousands, if not millions of stories associated with each category (*ibid*, p. 281)." Her admitted incomplete multiple categories list of Israeli *apartheid* in chapter seven demonstrates continuing overwhelming state-sanctioned harms done to the Palestinians by modern-day Israel. Such stories of violent oppression of Palestinians elicit the saints' cry in the Book of Revelation (6:10): "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of [Israel] and avenge our blood?*" (Israel was put in brackets, instead of "earth" to make the point.)" This cry was also indeed that of the *diaspora* Jews for 2,000 years of Western Christian history.

It was as young evangelist for two years (1972 to 1974) on the streets of West Berlin that I began to realize that the old *formulae* for inducing people to embrace the Gospel just did not work. If “God Loves You and Has a Wonderful Plan for Your life” à la Four Spiritual Laws by Bill Bright did not elicit belief, *fear of being “left behind”* at Christ’s return, and *fear of “hell”* were threatened.

In a life-giving two-year reflection time beginning fall 1974 at Regent College as an eager theologian, a course on the Books of Amos and Galatians by mentors Clark Pinnock and Carl Armerding began introducing me to a whole new take on the *eschatological*. We were to live out *now* Kingdom peace and justice realities in light of their promised fulfilment *then*. I eventually learned to eschew the violent *apocalyptic* through amongst other theologians James Alison who wrote: “The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (Alison, 1996, p. 48).”

This at Regent College was reinforced in early 1975 in an interterm course by Clark Pinnock called “The Politics of Jesus”, also title of a 1972 study that we were to read on Luke’s Gospel by John Howard Yoder (Yoder, 1994). I also learned at Regent College through Donald Bloesch’s *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (2005) and since that “Hell is not to love any more, madame. Not to love any more... (Bernanos, 2002, p. 164).” Hell is *not* to be *no longer* loved by God. On the contrary, God’s “*wrath, you see, is fleeting, but His grace [hesed] lasts a lifetime* (Psalm 30:5)”.

Put differently and by extension: “*Christian Zionism*” and “*Christian Violence*” are not only *oxymorons* they are ultimately *anti-Christ* or technically *heresies* (false choices/ways). They are part of the “*the wide, broad, easy, crowded path [that] leads to death* (Matthew 7:13).”, for “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. Simply calling Me ‘Lord’ will not be enough. Only those who do the will of My Father who is in heaven will join Me in heaven* (Matthew 7: 21, boldface added)”. But this is ever humanity’s, not God’s choice. Only *I* can choose *to enter*, or *to ban myself from*, the Kingdom of God. Heaven cannot be blackmailed and remain *heaven* as C. S. Lewis presents in *The Great Divorce*. Likewise, God ultimately says to us, “Thy will be done.” Violence by definition and by choice rejects the Peaceable Kingdom *then*, to be lived out in the ever existential *now* of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

To paraphrase theologian Walter Wink: if violent Zionism is Christian, *the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion* (the original quotation is in Wink, 1992, p. 149).

## Bibliography

Alison, James, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, New York: Crossroad, 1996.

Bernanos, Georges, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, New York: Carrol and Graf, 2002.

Cavanaugh, William T., *The Myth of Religious Violence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

Gottlieb, Linda, *Trail Guide to the Torah of Nonviolence*, Paris: Éditions Terre d'Espérance (Earth of Hope) Publishing, 2013.

Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

McDonald, Marci, *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*, Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2010.

Sandeen, Ernest, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970/2008.

Yoder, John Howard, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

Wilson, Dwight, *Armageddon Now!: The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977.

Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.