

Blog Post: Evangelical Zionism

Once upon a time – in 1946, to be more precise – American Christian support for Zionism was expressed through an organization called the American Christian Palestine Committee. Its membership was drawn principally from liberal churches, and in the run-up to the establishment of Israel it played an important role. Some years later (1967), Dr. Franklin Littell founded “Christians Concerned for Israel,” again drawing mostly on mainline churches, and in 1978 CCI grew into the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel.

So “Christian Zionism” has roots in this country.

Obviously, however, times have changed; those roots have lately produced a very different tree from the one some of us still remember. Preeminent among today’s Christian Zionists is Pastor Frank Hagee’s “Christians United for Israel.” Unlike ACPC, CCI and NCLCI, CUFI is a grass roots organization, with 13 regional directors, 40 state directors and 80 city directors. And they are all very busy mobilizing support for Israel.

CUFI sends missions to Israel, raises considerable funds for Israel and organizes advocacy efforts on Israel’s behalf.

Some Jews find this very exciting. When Hagee spoke at last year’s AIPAC conference, he was repeatedly interrupted by ecstatic applause. In the last two years, since its birth, CUFI has held 75 times, in cities all across America, sponsored a “Night to Honor Israel,” most if not all including participation by local rabbis and Jewish federation executives.

At the same time, some Jews find all this disconcerting. Many know that a special role is assigned to Jews in Christian theology, a role in “end times,” and that role is not pleasant to contemplate. Yet it remains bedrock theology among Evangelical Christians.

A current book by David Brog, CUFI’s executive director (himself a Jew) tries to soft-pedal all the Armageddon and end times understanding, to make the case that a very different set of motives inspires contemporary Christian Zionism – at least in its Evangelical incarnation. According to Brog, “Their Zionism comes directly from their theology. But, as opposed to what most people think, this theology is driven by the biblical promises of the Book of Genesis, not the biblical prophecies of the Book of Revelations.” It is based, that is, specifically on God’s promise to the Jewish people.

But Hagee and the Evangelicals are Biblical literalists, and to them the Bible includes not only what they call the “Old Testament” but the New Testament as well. On CUFI’s own website, Christian Zionism is defined as deriving from sources that go well beyond those underscored by Brog. “Christian Zionists interpret both the Torah and the New Testament as prophetic texts that describe future events of how the world will one day end with the return of Jesus from Heaven to rule on Earth. Israel and its people are central to their vision. They interpret passages from the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah as foreshadowing the coming Christian era. The New Testament Book of Revelation is read by many Christians as a prophetic text of how the world will be in the End Times.”

When it comes to interpreting the motives of Christian Zionists, to assessing the relative importance of God's promise to the Jews and the understanding of End Times, I am at a distinct disadvantage. I do find it disconcerting to think that the reason for my being embraced by these Christians is their belief that save as I return to Israel, there either to convert to Christianity or to be slaughtered. So I am happy to read, in Brog's "Standing With Israel," that the end times understanding has nothing to do with the enthusiastic pro-Israelism of the movement he directs. Skeptical, but happy.

Yet I remain troubled, quite deeply, by CUFI and its kindred organizational expressions. It is their politics rather than their theology that troubles me.

I begin with the proposition that there is no acceptable future for the state of Israel that is not some version of what's come to be known as a "two-state" solution. Yet everything I hear and read of the Evangelical Zionist position tells me that it opposes a two-state solution.

Thus Hagee earlier this month: "When the Annapolis Conference was being planned and the topic of dividing Jerusalem came up, one man asked me, 'Where do you stand on this based on the Bible?' I responded that 'the plan of the anti-Christ is to divide Jerusalem.' If America puts pressure on Israel to divide Jerusalem we are following the blueprint of the Prince of Darkness. Amos 3:2 states that any nation that divides the land of Israel will come under the severe judgment of God. Whose side is America on? More importantly, whose side are we, as Christians on?"

And Hagee last October: "God is a covenant-keeping God and He wants the whole world to know it. He not only allotted His land, He allotted Eretz Israel to the Jewish people through covenant and He confirms this transaction in Amos 9:15 emphatically stating that the Jewish people will never be uprooted again, 'I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them.' The land that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob placed in the hands of the Jewish people by covenant was not Canada or Alaska, it was Zion...it is Eretz Israel."

Brog wants us to understand Christian Zionism differently. In a book that improbably wants to persuade us that today's Christian Zionists are heirs to yesterday's Righteous Gentiles, he contends that "Christian supporters of Israel who ignore the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and the moral traditions of Zionism" are nothing more than a "lunatic fringe." The core of the movement understands and accepts its place, and that place is clear: "The Christian Zionists have largely followed AIPAC's lead," supporting the policies of Israel's government be that government left-leaning or right-leaning.

But that's Brog, the apologist, not Hagee the ideologue, not the Hagee who quotes Amos approvingly: "Any nation that divides the land of Israel will come under the severe judgment of God."

I am not the judge of who can claim to be "pro-Israel" and who cannot make that claim. Pragmatically, I do not see how anyone who opposes a two-state solution, whether explicitly or by clear implication, can think himself pro-Israel, and I surely cannot see how such a person can be thought pro-Israel by serious people. (So yes, I also have problems with the more extreme Jewish organizations that, though they may formally endorse a two-state solution, put forward

conditions that render that endorsement meaningless.)

All this creates a problem in political courtesy. Some Christian Zionists have become positively Judeophilic. I do not seek their love, but their disgust with anti-Semitism is touching and their tangible support for Israel may be, on balance, more blessing than curse. Yet their ardent opposition to a politics of (painful) compromise is potentially disastrous.

There's that, and then of course there's all the rest of the baggage that so many of them bring with them. Even were I to assess their support for Israel more positively, do I really want to get into bed with people who oppose the teaching of evolution or who insist that if it is taught, creationism be given at least equal time? Do I, in fact, want to do anything that emboldens them, that strengthens them?

Well, that's one of the issues that inherently challenges a pluralistic polity. When and with whom do you form coalitions?

One answer to that question is offered by the Republican Jewish Coalition, which has undertaken the mass distribution of Brog's book. It is not clear what lists the RJC has used for its mailing. We're told that all Reform rabbis have received it, and I know of one person with no Jewish affiliations at all and a name that cannot be mistaken as Jewish who received a copy as well. More: The book as sent by the RJC comes packaged with a DVD entitled, "Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West." While I've not yet had the time to view the DVD, it is plainly an offspring of "clash of civilizations" doctrine. One wonders why the Republican Jewish Coalition has chosen to make this a cause – and suspects that it may have something to do with Barack Obama's middle name. And one wonders just why the RJC has decided to endorse Brog's apologia for Christian Zionism.

If CUFI and the RJC are now partners in coalition, their first endeavor is more pathetic than offensive. It does no honor to Israel, nor favor, to encourage its hard liners.

Yet that alone does not tell us what the Jewish communal response to CUFI should be. Cold shoulder? Turning away? Tepid handshake? Brushed cheek-kissing? But please, no fawning thanks, no more ecstatic applause.