POLICY BRIEF | POLITICS

The Dangerous Exceptionalism of Christian Zionism

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Introduction

In recent years, much has been written about the rise of white supremacist movements in the US, their support for alt-right politics, and former President Donald Trump as their political champion. Similarly, since 2016 much has been written about the overwhelming support Trump has received from white evangelical Christians, particularly Christian Zionists. Less examined is the relationship between white supremacy and Christian Zionism, namely their overlapping ideologies and political clout.

While the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is often cited as the preeminent Zionist lobby in the US, Christian Zionists comprise a considerably larger political bloc with unwavering support for Israel and its continued displacement of Palestinians through both the expansion of settlements and apartheid rule. Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a major US Christian Zionist organization, claims over 10 million members, and the actual number of evangelicals who espouse Christian Zionist beliefs is likely much larger. Among white evangelical Christians, who comprise 14% of the US population and who supported Trump's 2016 and 2020 elections by a wide margin, 80% believe that the establishment of the state of Israel and the "regathering of millions of Jewish people to Israel" are fulfilments of biblical prophecy.

Political organizing against white supremacy, Israeli apartheid, and antisemitism would do well to join forces and focus on the close relationship between white supremacy and Christian Zionism among evangelicals. In this policy brief, the authors explain the nature and history of these political bedfellows and recommend ways for civil society to counter their influence. Israel's current far right-wing government provides a particularly opportune moment to inform both progressive as well as mainstream US evangelicals, as the government has emboldened Israel's Jewish fundamentalists, whose anti-Palestinian agenda is both stridently anti-Muslim and anti-Christian.

Tenets of Christian Zionism

Christian Zionism can be defined by the unquestioning support for the Zionist colonial project, from the violent establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948 to continued Jewish settlement in Palestine, as part of one's faith as a Christian. The basis for this theology dates back to 16th-century Protestant Christian interpretations of Biblical eschatology, or signs and precursors of Jesus' return at the end of time.[1] Evangelical Christian Zionists believe that among precursors to Jesus' return is Jewish settlement in and control of Palestine, treating modern Jews as the biblical nation of Israel whom Christians are commanded to "bless" to facilitate the Messiah's return. Thus, Christian Zionists see support for Israel as a way to take part in biblical prophecy. Adherents to the "Prosperity Gospel"—now 17% of US Christians—also believe in personal financial gain and prosperity if one blesses Israel.

Christian Zionists' support for Jewish settlement in Palestine is a precursor to their own (the Church's) salvation, not that of Jewish people; they actively seek an end of times in which Jews and other non-Christians will be destroyed while they ascend to heaven.[2] Their support for Jews and Israel is a superficial pretense for Christian salvation at the expense of Jews. Still, this ideological

commitment aligns Christian Zionists with Israeli governments and their colonial and belligerent policies toward Palestinians, Iran, and other adversaries of the Israeli regime. Ironically, the right-wing ethnoreligious nationalists who support the present Netanyahu government have also increased their belligerence toward Christians, Palestinian and otherwise, making this alignment even more perplexing.

Moreover, Christian Zionist views of Jewish people are characteristically antisemitic. For example, they rely on belief in a singular, internationally-connected, and powerful population of Jews, and the modern Israeli regime as the embodiment of the biblical nation that represents Jews everywhere. Such beliefs mimic the conspiratorial elements of antisemitism in Europe and blend support for Jewish settlement in Palestine with antisemitic notions of international Jewry. In so doing, Christian Zionists cynically enmesh themselves with white supremacists, who fear being "replaced" by Jews or people of color—and who feel threatened by antisemitic notions of Jewish people's power and influence.

Some forms of Christian Zionism, especially those that historically took root in Britain, were predicated on both Jewish conversion and Jewish settlement in and control of Palestine. These notions considered Jews in the diaspora as both a problematic and biblically crucial population to influence on the path toward the Church's destiny of salvation. These ideas developed further in the 20th century among various denominations of Christian evangelicals, and Jewish conversion was seen as unnecessary. The Christian Zionist consensus that took hold in the US and elsewhere, especially after the 1967 war and in the 1980s, sees the modern-day Zionist colonial project as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, preceding the ascendance of Christians to heaven and the destruction of all others on earth. Even among those Christians who believe in these precursors to Armageddon but who gloss over the end-of-times scenario, the ultimate focus is on Christian salvation that requires Jewish settlement in Palestine.

Though many Jewish Zionist leaders acknowledge the cynical nature of an alliance with Christian Zionists, their support is ultimately welcomed as it advances the Israeli regime's political goals and shields it from critique. One of the ways Christian Zionists accomplish this is by contributing to narratives of the regime's vulnerability in the midst of hostile Arab and Muslim neighbors who are also depicted as characteristically inferior. These narratives invoke racist ideas of Palestinians and Muslims as backwards, violent, technologically underdeveloped, and expendable—narratives similar to those used among white supremacists. In fact, Christian evangelicals have been among the most virulent propagators of anti-Muslim racism in the US. Likewise, Christian Zionists shore up the mythology of Jewish colonization and development of Palestine in continuity with an ancient past, contributing to questionable archaeology that helps to stymie Palestinian self-determination, including Christian Palestinians' access to cherished sites of religious significance.

Christian Zionism and US Policy Toward the Israeli Regime

Evangelical Christian Zionists fervently supported the Trump administration—with some in top positions, such as Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo–implementing what was essentially the Christian Zionist playbook during the administration's four-year term. Yet this was not the first US administration or other political leadership that took direction from the "Armageddon Lobby."

Christian Zionism's political influence in the US became pronounced in the 1980s, when the annual Zionist conference of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem first began. Major figures included the late Jerry Falwell, a conservative Baptist pastor and televangelist, and the late Pat Robertson, also a religious broadcaster and Southern Baptist minister as well as one-time Republican presidential candidate and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network

(CBN).[3] Under President Ronald Reagan, Falwell's and Robertson's influences were clear: Not only did Reagan advocate for military strength in the US to prepare for the battle of Armageddon, but both he and Attorney General Edwin Meese reportedly prayed for Armageddon to come.[4]

Falwell established a group known as the Moral Majority in 1979, a political organizing body for evangelicalism that mobilized thousands of churches and millions of registered voters as "the Christian Right." By 2003, the Moral Majority represented the largest voting bloc within the Republican Party and was a major social movement with direct ties to the Israeli government, Falwell having been honored by Menachem Begin himself in 1979.

An affiliate of the Moral Majority, the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel (NCLCI), led a successful campaign to repeal UN Resolution 3379, which stated that Zionism was a form of racism while also declaring opposition to all forms of racism. Pro-Israel lobbies in the US, including the likes of the World Jewish Congress and AIPAC, pressed US officials to oppose the resolution immediately following its passage in 1975. However, it is arguably only when the Christian Zionist lobby began its concerted campaign from 1985 to 1990 that US elected officials responded. In 1990, the House of Representatives passed HR 457 , calling on the UN to repeal the resolution; it was syndicated and passed thereafter in the Senate with unanimous support and signed by President George H. W. Bush. The UN overturned the resolution the following year in a rare redaction.

During the later George W. Bush administration, Christian Zionist figures like Falwell continued to hold sway on issues of US foreign policy in the Middle East, supporting Israeli settlement expansion and opposing overtures toward peace or Palestinian statehood. For example, in June 2003, Bush backpedaled on pressure to move forward with the Middle East Quartet-sponsored "roadmap for peace"

that purportedly aimed to establish a Palestinian state. When the US was meant to act as a third-party mediator at a meeting between Israeli PM Ariel Sharon and newly-appointed Palestinian PM Mahmoud Abbas, a Christian Zionist organization known as the Apostolic Congress sent more than 50,000 postcards to the White House opposing the roadmap, and the administration subsequently delayed action until after the 2004 elections.[5]

Today, the largest pro-Israel advocacy group in the US is CUFI. Other notable organizations that either represent or are financially supported by Christian Zionists include the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. University campus-based affiliates include Passages, a Christian Zionist tour group, and the Campus Maccabees or Maccabee Task Force, a multi-million dollar effort opposing the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement with direct financial support from CUFI and right-wing Zionists.

The culmination of decades of growing Christian Zionist political influence was a 2016 White House whose alignment with the far right among both Zionists and white supremacists was seamless. In addition to Pence and Pompeo, Trump appointed Steve Bannon as chief strategist. Bannon, who declared himself a Christian Zionist, also called his news site, Breitbart, "the platform for the alt-right" and was celebrated by white nationalists. David Friedman, US Ambassador to Israel under Trump and a known funder and supporter of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, also enjoyed ties to Christian Zionist leadership.

The result was an administration that opposed international consensus on illegal settlements in the West Bank; moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem, declaring it Israel's "eternal capital"; made an unprecedented diplomatic visit to a settlement funded by Christian Zionists; reneged on the Iran nuclear deal in favor of a more aggressive and pro-Israel stance against Iran; signed enormous military arms deals with Saudi Arabia and advanced normalization between Israel and the

Gulf; withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council citing "anti-Israel bias;" and did away with any regard for Palestinian demands and self-determination in the so-called "Deal of the Century." Trump left office having solidified US support for right-wing religious ethnonationalism in Israel and for the illegal settlement enterprise; unsurprisingly, annexation of Palestinian land also increased during his term.

The administration also supported US federal agencies' aggression toward Palestinian activism at home: The Department of Education under Betsy DeVos sought to punish Palestinian student activists for critique of Israel,[6] and the State Department similarly accepted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, stifling criticism of Israel. The Biden administration has not reversed these actions, and this continued indifference or tacit endorsement of Trump's legacy dangerously ignores the links between the Christian Zionist agenda and white supremacy, flying in the face of what the administration declares to be its policy of anti-racism.

White Supremacy and Christian Zionism

The ties between Christian Zionism and white supremacy date back to the early European Christian Zionists.[7] Though British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour's 1917 declaration that his government would support the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine might on the surface appear to have been benevolent toward Jews, it was, in fact, steeped in white supremacy and antisemitism. Indeed, Balfour's support of Zionism originated in a desire to stem Jewish immigration to Britain. He wrote, for instance, in his 1919 introduction to Nahum Sokolow's *History of Zionism* that the Zionist movement would "mitigate the age-long miseries created for Western civilization by the presence in its midst of a Body which it too long regarded as alien and even hostile, but which it was equally unable to expel or to absorb."

It should therefore come as no surprise that while contemporary white supremacists declare a desire for Jews to leave "white societies" for Israel, they also proclaim admiration for Zionism and its manifestation in the Israeli state. Richard Spencer, a leader of the "alt-right" movement in the US, which espouses a white ethnostate, has called himself a "white Zionist." Relatedly, those who display Confederate flags may pair them with Israeli flags, and Israeli flags are often on display at right-wing rallies, including on January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters stormed the Washington, DC, capitol.

Though Spencer is not a religious person, his and other white supremacists' desire for a white ethnostate is steeped in Christianity through a call for their fellow whites to be conscious not only of their white identity but also of their shared Christian heritage—a heritage that itself has white supremacist roots. To be sure, analysts and activists such as Mae Elise Cannon and Graylan Hagler have pointed out that Christian nationalism, white supremacy, Zionism, and Christian Zionism make cozy bedfellows. This was as true in Balfour's time as it is today. The scholar Robert O. Smith has found, for instance, through an analysis of US polling data since the mid-1980s that support for Israel is "predicated…by a combination of religious traditionalism, belief in American exceptionalism, and whiteness."

It is perhaps the notion of exceptionalism that best articulates and links these dangerous ideologies. Cannon notes that "Both Christian nationalism and Christian Zionists espouse an ideology of exceptionalism…Exceptionalists inhabit binary, exclusionary worlds," and Hagler writes in an essay on white supremacy and Christian Zionism that "[a]ll forms of supremacy are exceptionalist." The idea that one group is superior to another and deserves certain rights at the expense of "outsider" groups—whether white and Christian versus Jewish, Black, Muslim, and otherwise in the case of the Richard Spencers in the US, or white and Jewish versus Palestinian in the case of Christian Zionism, Zionism, and Israel—is one that

begets violence and oppression.

Evangelical Opportunities

It is important to emphasize the diversity among evangelicals: Not all evangelicals are Christian Zionists. In fact, there are a number of individuals and institutions that work against the ideology in the interest of Palestinian rights, such as Cannon of the DC-based Churches for Middle East Peace, the Christ at the Checkpoint initiative at Bethlehem Bible College, and *Sojourners* magazine, which emerged from an evangelical divinity school in Illinois in the 1970s. Further, non-white evangelicals tend to be less biased in their views toward Israel and the Palestinian struggle. That said, as noted above, the majority of evangelicals express Christian Zionist beliefs.

However, recent polling suggests that support for Israel among younger evangelicals is decreasing. A 2021 survey reports that support among this group dropped from 75 percent to 34 percent between 2018 and 2021, in contrast to more steady support among older evangelicals. Professor Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland has also conducted polling on this issue since 2015; his research demonstrates a similar trend and that the gap between the age groups had already widened appreciably by 2018.

Further, white evangelicals–particularly young white evangelicals–have been turning away from evangelicalism, or are reluctant to be labeled as such. This is in part a rejection of Trump's policies and rhetoric so bolstered by the bloc. While this inclination has resulted in some young white people leaving organized religion more broadly, others are desirous of a different type of experience, one that fosters community and social transformation.

Gary Burge, Professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently spoke with author Kirk about this burgeoning group

and the churches they are flocking to: "Young people don't feel the church is addressing what is most heartfelt to them, which are issues like racial equality, poverty alleviation, and the environment."

New churches that brand themselves as "not your parents' church" are attracting these youth Burge describes one such establishment in Grand Rapids that was founded in 2017 and started with 30 or 40 people. Today, around 900 people are members. "The minister has a PhD in sociology, a fantastic beard, a motorcycle with a sidecar, keen insight into how churches grow, and an infectious passion that shows up in every sermon," Burge says. "And he has limited interest in evangelical culture. His audience is what he calls post-church." According to Burge, non-traditional churches like this one are expanding nationwide, and he sees evangelicalism reinventing itself in this mold in the coming century.

While support for Israel is not common in the new churches Burge describes, neither is support for Palestinians, as the parishioners are more concerned with domestic issues such as gun control and racism. In a recent interview Jonathan Brenneman, a Palestinian-American activist told Kirk that he agrees that former evangelicals or current evangelicals interested in social justice may not have Palestine "at the top of their list," but notes they are willing to challenge Christian Zionist ideas. Such a position presents an important opportunity to counter Christian Zionist influence.

Policy Recommendations

With younger evangelicals moving away from robust support for Israel, there is an opportunity for both short and long-term change. This could take the form of diverse groups working together against the Israeli right, including in regard to Palestinian liberation. The task for activists for Palestinian rights will be to educate and bring alienated social justice-oriented evangelicals together to work against

Israeli settler colonialism, theocracy, and apartheid.

- Civil society organizations that support Palestinian rights should conduct outreach among young evangelicals and evangelicals of color to make connections between them and progressive groups, such as those advocating for Black Lives Matter, Indigenous rights, and police accountability. This outreach must necessarily stress the ties between Christian Zionism, white supremacy, ethnonationalism, and antisemitism, creating understanding and subsequent opportunity for these groups to work together for Palestinian rights as well as other progressive, anti-racist causes.
- Once this larger network is in place, civil society groups should make contact with their national and local governments–such as the Biden administration's Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships–among other outreach, to influence mainstream churches and organizations with messaging that calls attention to problematic ties between Christian Zionism and ethnonationalism.
- Civil society organizations should educate progressive and mainstream Christians about the growing Israeli right-wing religious fascist animosity toward Christians and its relationship to ethnonationalism and apartheid more broadly.
- Alternative pilgrimage and ethical tourism to Palestine for Christians—such as Friends of Sabeel Witness Trips or Eyewitness Palestine delegations—must be encouraged. They can play an important role in opposing Christian Zionist narratives and re-orienting young evangelicals who may identify with anti-racist movements and who wish to avoid complicity in Palestinian displacement.

1. *Stephen Sizer, Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon? (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021).*
2. *Sizer, Christian Zionism.*

3. *Sizer, Christian Zionism.*
4. *Dugger, Ronnie. "Does Reagan Expect a Nuclear Armageddon?" Washington Post. April 18 1984.*
5. *See also Perlstein's account of Apostolic Congress lobbying and influence.*
6. *However, the Department of Education under the Biden Administration has rejected the IHRA definition of antisemitism*
7. *Sizer. Christian Zionism .*

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