

Christian Zionism & Foreign Policy: Irony & Tragedy

A news article by Michele Chabin in the December 14, 2010, *Christian Century* has reinforced my view about the irony & tragedy of the Christian Zionist movement ? now well over 100 years old, yet stronger and more influential than ever.

On the one hand, the movement's thousands of diverse churches and organizations are tremendously generous. Massive efforts at good works in Israel have funneled hundred of millions of dollars since the 1970s into a host of short- and long-term social and educational programs, hospitals, infrastructure projects, humanitarian aid initiatives, and many others. According to Chabin, Texas megachurch pastor John Hagee's San Antonio-based church and his Christian Zionist networks have raised an unprecedented \$50 million for Israel just since 2006.

On the other hand is the movement's influential foreign policy lobby, of which the Hagee-founded group, Christians United for Israel (CUFI), has in just a few short years become the paradigm. According to its website, CUFI is now the largest pro-Israel organization in the United States. One of its prominent initiatives has been its tireless foreign policy efforts in Washington DC. Every July, for example, its DC summit attracts thousands of leading American Christians to exert pressure on U.S. policy in the Middle East. (In her story, "Israel finds more to like about Christian Zionists," Chabin describes a recent sit-down in Israel between pastor Hagee and Israel's PM, Benjamin Netanyahu.)

The organizing principle of the movement's approach to the Middle East is dispensational theology, which is always on the lookout for signs that its view of history is being fulfilled. To dispensationalists, the clearest of these signs, to date, has been the founding of the modern state of Israel (1948). The next turning-point event would be the second coming of Christ. For Christian Zionists, the history of the world is currently experiencing the time between these two events.

The question must then be asked: What, according to the theology, needs to be occurring during this in-between period? To put it crudely, the theology needs to see Israel at war with its neighbors. But not just any old war. It must be war escalating so far beyond anything the world has ever experienced that it can, at some point, rightly be called ?Armageddon.? Although ordinary Christian Zionist supporters of Israel may not be aware of it, there is, then, a terribly disturbing militancy at work in the theology, which governs the foreign policy.

The violence needed to sustain the theology boggles the imagination of Christians committed, let us say, to the Sermon on the Mount, with Jesus' strong emphasis on peacemaking with one's neighbors. Reconciliation of enemies is at the heart of the gospel, and it is hard to see how this squares with the war theology that shapes the foreign policy of the Christian Zionist movement.

Here, then, is the the irony and tragedy of Christian Zionism. Its adherents believe they are finding their foreign policy in the Bible, their ultimate source of written authority. But the Bible is very clear that it is not dispensational theology but the wisdom tradition ? with its strong emphasis on impartial justice, negotiations, common ground agreements, and peaceableness among peoples who are different ? that functions as the normative biblical framework for international relations and foreign policy decision-making. This is the great category mistake made by the movement ? which, by the way, Palestinian Christians, even the Evangelical ones, see as heretical.