

Munther Isaac: Christian Zionism as Imperial Theology in Text Format and Video



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Note from Webmaster: I converted the YouTube on the bottom of this article to text and added the punctuation. There may be a few errors, but I think the message is crystal clear.

Good morning. I hope you're enjoying the conference so far. The title of my talk this morning is Christian Zionism as an imperial theology. And I will argue that Christian Zionism is more than just a theological belief about Israel and the Jewish people, but it is also today willingly or not a political movement.

And so let me first define Christian Zionism as I will use it in this thought, and I will use a definition by my good friend Robert Smith who defines it as: Christian Zionism as political action informed by specifically Christian commitments, to promote or preserve Jewish control over the geographic area now comprising Israel and Palestine.

And indeed it is important to see Christian Zionism as a political movement.

Today, Christian Zionists lobby on behalf of Israel in Parliaments and Congress and support the occupation even support the settlements politically and financially. My goal is not to engage with the theology of Christian Zionism, and Hank will do that, and I have done this elsewhere, you can buy my book, it's a good way to promote things. (Laughter) Rather, I want to undercover the ideologies that shape Christian Zionism.

And before I start I want to say two preliminary remarks. First is that this talk is the result of years of engagement with evangelical Christians, may I add God fearing Jesus loving evangelical Christians, around the issue of Palestine and Israel. The quotes that I will use are represent of what I heard over the years by many many evangelical leaders who came and visited us. And I must admit that this was not an easy paper to write since many of the positions I will challenge and critique today I have are held by some that I considered true friends who are evangelicals or Messianic Jews. So my aim is not to attack persons or individuals but to challenge beliefs and positions.

And my second point: Sammy pleaded with us in the earlier session pleaded with you, to give us a chance to be heard as Palestinian Christians. And this is exactly what I aim to do today. I want you to see Christian Zionism the way we see it as Palestinian Christians, what does it look like to be on the receiving end of the theology of Christian Zionism.

And with that we can start and I will talk about two main characteristics of Christian Zionism. The first one is the employment of God. "God is on Israel's side." And in this point we talk about a chosen state. Christian Zionists emphasize that Jews are the chosen people of God today. And with that "chosenness" comes entitlement and privilege. This is not simply a theological belief about the Jewish people, but with the modern State of Israel being confused with the Jews and Biblical Israel, any opposition to the State of Israel or the occupation is deemed anti-Jewish, and by implication, anti-God.

For example, Joel Rosenberg, a New York Times bestseller and a regular political Fox News analyst, recently wrote, and I quote, "For an American president or Congress or the American people to turn against Israel and the Jewish people would be more than bad policy or unfortunate politics. According to Bible prophecy such moves would pose an existential threat to the future of the United States." "Existential threat to the future of the United States", and if this applies to Americans, then what does this leave us Palestinians when it comes to defending our rights or opposing the occupation of our land?

Now of course, Rosenberg, like many others bases this quote among many other things on Genesis 12:1-3. And he says in Genesis 12:1-3, the Lord God vows he will bless those who bless Israel and the Jewish people and curse those who curse them. What really amazes me is that Genesis 12:1-3 actually does not speak about Israel, or even Abraham's descendants, it speaks about Abraham. This verse comes in the midst of a glorious mandate to Abraham to become a blessing to the nations, a mandate that eventually was fulfilled in Jesus, who according to Paul is Abraham's seed, and Who fulfilled these blessings to

the nation when He died on the cross and rose from death.

Now how on earth was this glorious promise turned into the recipe of foreign policy today toward a secular state is beyond my comprehension. The core issue here is that opposing Israel or the occupation, is portrayed as opposing God. Can we oppose God? Consider this article in Christianity today in 2012: "Do Jews have a divine right to Israel's land?" The debate was between two respected and influential evangelical leaders, and I actually respect both of them. My issue is with the question they were debating. First of all, what's there to debate? They already call that Israel's land! (Laughter) But my other concern here is with the language of "divine right." What if the answer to the question is yes? What if Jews did indeed hold a divine right to the land? What does this leave me as a Palestinian? Again, can I say no? And if I say no, to whom in reality am I saying no according to this rationale?

And notice how we go crazy when Muslims use the language of divine right, but we have no problem when it is applied to Israel. And in this rationale even justice is relativized. The Justice of God is relativized and qualified. It is now relative to Christian Zionists presuppositions. As such, a Messianic Jewish theologian can argue, and I quote again here, "if Palestinians refuse to recognize what God says about the Jewish people and their connection to the Land of Israel, then suffering will result. Justice in regards to the land requires that there be a submission to what God has declared about the land. So if the Palestinians do not acknowledge God's promise, they are foundationally unjust, and are themselves resisted by God, and lose the right in the land."

My second point about Christian Zionism is what I would call notions or aspects of prejudice and superiority. Christian Zionist control the narrative. Usually the strong and powerful control the narrative and language here matters. Consider, for example, the notion that Jews returned to their land, and so all of a sudden, if someone who is born in Russia today can prove that his grandmother is a Jew, he has more right to live in this land, more than a Palestinian refugee who was born here and who can trace his roots in the land for hundreds if not thousands of years. We can also speak about the role of archaeology and historiography, where Palestine is portrayed in many books as virtually barren desolate or empty waiting to be made fertile and populated by Israel.

And there's also a double standard when it comes to termed contemporary realities. Almost every time I speak to a Christian Zionist group I am asked, "do you acknowledge Israel's right to exist?" It's quite amazing to me that I, the occupied, am being asked to recognize the right of my occupier to exist! Does Israel acknowledge my right to exist? And do you as Christians who seek to defend Israel give me the right to exist and the right for self-determination?

The same apply to many other issues I can speak about. A lot has been mentioned also about the dehumanization of Palestinian Christians. You see a theology that privileges people produces prejudice and sometimes bigotry. In the theology of Christian Zionism, Palestinians are often viewed as an

irrelevant afterthought. They are secondary to the interest of Israel. Even from the very beginning of Christian Zionism we see Lord Shaftesbury who was president of the London society for promoting Christianity among the Jews, now known as CMJ. He argued for a country without a nation for a nation without a country. And I often wondered, did he know that the country had the nation? I'm sure he did. But you see, we were irrelevant. There was something far more important. The same applied to Lord Balfour who made the same infamous declaration. And if you see what he said for, "in Palestine, we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country." We don't matter.

"The four great powers are committed to Zionism, and Zionism is rooted in age long traditions in present needs in future hopes of far profound import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land." (Quoted from the Balford Declaration) In this mentality, we were considered complete irrelevance. For the Zionists, and I will argue for Christian Zionists, Palestine was empty, not literally, but in terms of people of equal worth to the incoming settler. This I believe reflects a typical colonial, that I even say, Christian mentality. The land had people but they can be easily removed. And hence today we still hear, "why don't you go to Jordan?" And many Christians even today continue to speak about the land as if it's empty.

I have already mentioned the article in Christianity Today, "Do Jews have a Divine Right to Israel's land?" Can you imagine how I as a Palestinians felt when seeing the title of this article? I wondered, "well what about the people of the land? Does our opinion matter? We just happen to be living here." For me this is a typical case of two western theologians sitting in the comfort of their offices discussing our land as if it was empty. And if you want to see Palestinians continually being demonized and dismissed just watch the presidential debates in America today where Palestinians are described as invented, as hate-filled people who teach their children in school how to kill Jews. And what amazes me is that these notions are never challenged, they are just said and no one challenges them. And of course this dismissal justifies the occupation.

And even among the many Christians who want to be fair and compassionate with the Palestinians, and they'll want to speak positively about the Palestinians, they still do not put us in the same category with the Jewish people. This is done when we are referred to for example, as the children of Ishmael. "You know God loves them as well, but they are not chosen. We need to be nice to them."

Sometimes we are the "strangers." And they say, "look in the Old Testament, God told Israel to be kind to the strangers." I'm sorry we're not the strangers in this land, we've been living in this land for hundreds if not thousands of years. And other times we are Samaritans or anything else.

And please don't get me wrong, we are not looking for sympathy or charity, we simply want to be viewed with the same lens that you view the Jewish people, both created in the image of God both loved by God, both deserving to live in dignity and pride.

And I strongly encourage you tomorrow to listen to a presentation by Jack about how many Christian Zionists attack Palestinian Christians, to know how deep this thing is today about the dehumanization of Palestinians.

Another thing that Christian Zionists used and Sammy alluded to earlier is the issue of fear. The marginalization becomes dehumanization and even demonization, and this creates fear. And Christian Zionists instill fear. Today it is so easy to portray the Arabs and Muslims as the enemy that we need to fight and unite against. The world is divided into good versus evil. And even the tragic persecution of Christians in the Middle East has provided the perfect opportunity for some to make political gains. This is why so many people in the West characterize the conflict today as a religious one. Where the good becomes a religious conflict with the good side is the Judeo-Christian tradition, us, and the evil is Islam. And this is where, by the way, we Palestinian Christians pose the problem because we're Palestinians, but we're not Muslims, and many people don't know what to do with us. (Laughter) But you see, putting the world into these two axes of good and evil again justifies actions of Israel as war on terror, even fighting in many ways the war of God.

And the issue of fear, many of you were warned before coming here, that it's dangerous. (Meaning to be at that conference.) And just think of that. And I hope you go back and tell them how dangerous it was listening to our ideas. (Laughter)

One other thing is the use of the whole notion of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which I will argue in many ways today is used to to promote cultural or to express cultural superiority. One of the common phrases we hear today in many Christian circles is they are a friend to the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is no time to consider the roots of this phrase, and at first glance the phrase seems to affirm the common roots of Christianity and Judaism. And clearly such an affirmation was and is needed in response to years of anti Judaism and anti-semitism. The problem however is that the term is used today in such a way that it communicates superiority and prejudice.

A quote from right-wing Jewish commentator beloved by conservative Christians, Dennis Prager, illustrates this. He says that only America has called itself Judeo-Christian. America is also unique in that it has always combined secular government with a society based on religious values. Along with the belief in liberty, as opposed to for example the European belief in equality the Muslim belief in theocracy, and the Eastern belief in social conformity, Judeo-Christian values are what distinguished America from all other countries. That is why Americans coin feature these two messages In God We Trust and Liberty. No need to tell you how this comes across to people from outside.

Recently I even heard another messianic rabbi claiming, and listen to this, he was praying with a big group of evangelical leaders, and church pastors, they were praying over Donald Trump, and he said, only two nations have been in relationship with God in history, Israel and the United States of America. I am more and more convinced that the use of this term today has come to

refer to cultural superiority. Meteoroid says, that this term is utilized theologically and implicitly against the Palestinian people and within the context of the clash of civilization against Islam. And when we read these quotes today you understand why it is perfectly acceptable today to say that Christians and Jews worship the same God but not acceptable to say that Christians and Muslim worship the same God even though both Jews and Muslims do not believe in the deity of Christ or the Trinity. I'm not talking about anything in particular. (Laughter)

In addition, this tradition is used by Christian Zionism to promote their cause. Think for example of John Hagee's claim that the alliance between evangelicals and Jews is a "match made in heaven." And in many ways we can see this articulated 2000 many times. Proper theology Christian Zionism has no place for opposing views. You are either a Christian Zionist or an antisemite. There is no middle ground. As a result now we Palestinian Christians must always confirm to the Christian Zionists theology or else we are deemed heretics or anti-semites. This again reflects a mentality of superiority, a colonial mentality.

IF YOU CAN READ THIS, PLEASE COME BACK TOMORROW. THE TALK TRANSCRIPTION IS ONLY 2/3 FINISHED.