
Christian Zionism in Comparative Perspective

An Introduction

Göran Gunner

“Christian Zionism” has frequently been used both as a self-description of individuals and groups and as an issue in academic research. Its roots can be traced back through the centuries, even if the term as such is relatively new. This is not a concept that is easily captured by one obvious definition but one that easily creates positive and negative feelings, discussions, and activities. It is complex, with different connotations depending on the point of departure. Still, there is to a large extent a common knowledge about what Christian Zionism entails.

Individuals and organizations that proudly call themselves Christian Zionists will appear in this book, but also groups and individuals that suffer the consequences of activities supported by

Christian Zionists. Hopefully, the chapters presented here will provide a substantial contribution to the understanding of Christian Zionism in contemporary society by offering different approaches to and explanations of its historical, theological, and political complexity. We will end the book by returning to the questions of how to define and perceive Christian Zionism.

The Christian Zionism in Comparative Perspective Seminar

In 2009, a wildcard session called “International Christian Perspectives on Christian Zionism”¹ was held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Montréal. It showed the extensive interest in the issue of Christian Zionism, so the following year the AAR began a series of seminars under the headline “Christian Zionism in Comparative Perspective.” The mission for the seminars—continuing for five years—was as follows:

The phenomenon of Christian Zionism—in its contemporary forms, faith-based Christian political support for the State of Israel—provides opportunities for reflecting on the intersections of religion with history, popular culture, domestic political movements, foreign policy analysis, and interreligious engagement, among other topics. Specifically, the subject is becoming a locus of rich intra-Christian conversation, including matters of biblical interpretation, fundamentalism, and evangelicalism. Although Christian Zionism is largely an Anglo-American phenomenon, scholars in several contexts have turned their attention to the topic. More precise studies are needed so the phenomenon can be better comprehended.

Based on this mission, the theme for the 2010 seminar in Atlanta was “Setting the Stage for Christian Zionism Studies.”² The following

1. Papers presented by Robert O. Smith (then of Baylor University), Göran Gunner (Church of Sweden Research Unit), and Paul Merkley (Carleton University). Donald E. Wagner (then with North Park University) responded and Amy Johnson Frykholm (*The Christian Century*) presided.

year, the theme of the seminar in San Francisco was “Christian Zionism, the Holy Land, and Identity Formation.”³ The call for papers asked: What political implications can be attributed to Christian Zionist perspectives on theology and biblical interpretation? What implications do these views have for relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the region? and How does the movement inform political and communal relations in other contexts, especially in areas of Muslim–Christian tension? In Chicago in 2012, the seminar was cohosted with the Middle Eastern Christianity Group and was titled “Christian Zionist Implications for Palestinian Christians and Nationalist Theologies.”⁴ We asked for contributions that elucidated the doctrinal elements present in many Christian Zionist writings as well as the biblical hermeneutics used by both Western and Middle Eastern Christian communities. The contributions to this volume represent a selection of the presentations at these seminars.

2. Papers presented by William Girard (University of California, Santa Cruz), Gershon Greenberg (American University), Matt Westbrook (Drew University), Rosemary Ruether (Claremont Graduate University), Faydra Shapiro (Wilfrid Laurier University), and Andrew Crome (University of Manchester). Robert O. Smith (then of Baylor University) responded and Göran Gunner (Church of Sweden Research Unit) presided.
3. Papers presented by Elizabeth Phillips (Westcott House), Sean Durbin (Macquarie University), Mae Cannon (University of California, Davis), Curtis Hutt (University of Nebraska, Omaha and University of the Holy Land, Jerusalem), and Aron Engberg (Lund University). Göran Gunner (Church of Sweden Research Unit) responded and Robert O. Smith (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) presided.
4. Papers presented by George Faithful (Seton Hall University), Yaakov Ariel (University of North Carolina), Timo Stewart (University of Helsinki), Robert Smith (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), and Mitri Raheb (Diyar Consortium and Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem). Maria Leppäkari (Åbo Akademi University, Finland) and Ginger Hanks Harwood (La Sierra University) responded and Göran Gunner (Church of Sweden Research Unit) presided.

Overview of the Contents

This book is thematically divided into three parts. In the first, Christian Zionism as a contemporary phenomenon is exemplified and analyzed through individuals, congregations, and groups with an outspoken Christian Zionist agenda.

In the chapter “Saying ‘Peace’ When There is No Peace: An American Christian Zionist Congregation on Peace, Militarism, and Settlements,” Elizabeth Phillips describes how a congregation in Colorado reconciles their focus on praying for peace with their support of the Israeli military and a West Bank settlement. Through their activism, they understand themselves as participating in God’s ultimate intentions for the world. While Phillips is critical of their political activism and eschatology, she suggests there may be lessons to learn from how they understand the relationship between eschatology and politics.

Aron Engberg analyzes and discusses data from a single personal story in the chapter “‘A Fool for Christ’: Sense-Making and Negotiation of Identity in the Life Story of a Christian Soldier.” In order to protect the chosen people, a Swedish Christian Pentecostal decides to join the Israeli Defense Forces. His conviction that this is according to the master plan of God is treated as an example of *lived* Christian Zionism. As a soldier in the Golani brigade, the storyteller “is experiencing God.”

In the next chapter, “Broadcasting Jesus’ Return: Televangelism and the Appropriation of Israel through Israeli-Granted Broadcasting Rights,” Matt Westbrook analyzes the Christian television networks Trinity Broadcasting Network and DayStar. These networks, measured by organizational assets, represent the largest Christian Zionist organizations in the world. Both have obtained licensing rights to broadcast live both from and into Israel. The chapter raises

questions about Christian evangelization in Israel, fundraising by the networks using a millennialist view of Israel as the draw, and the influence of Messianic Judaism. It also explores the possible reasons that Israel granted these networks access to Israeli households.

Sean Durbin is the author of the chapter “Walking in the Mantle of Esther: ‘Political’ Action as ‘Religious’ Practice.” He focuses on the American Christian Zionist lobby group Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and its relation to Iran, paying special attention to a reading of the book of Esther. Durbin examines how political activities can become reconstituted as acts of “religious” devotion through particular discursive practices. In his conclusion Durbin argues that “Christian Zionists are not ‘forcing God’s hand’ through their political efforts” but are rather “walking in the mantle of Esther.”

In William Girard’s chapter, “Christian Zionism at *Jerusalén* Church in Copán Ruinas, Honduras, an ‘Out-of-the-Way’ Place,” he analyzes Christian Zionist discourses and practices in a small-town Pentecostal church in Honduras. In the process, he describes the importance of “both a geographical imaginary of the nation as an autonomous actor and a specific history of ethnic and racial formation in Honduras” for the shape Christian Zionism takes within that country.

“Christian Zionist Pilgrimage in the Twenty-first Century: The ‘Holy’ in the ‘Holy Land,’” written by Curtis Hutt, focuses on present-day pilgrims. He specifically examines Christian Zionist pilgrims of different varieties while reviewing their pilgrimages and plotting them on an “Iconoclasm Scale.” He also compares Christian, Jewish, and Muslim pilgrims. Special attention is paid to identifying what is “Holy” in the “Holy Land” for these diverse groups.

In her chapter, “Living in the Hour of Restoration: Christian Zionism, Immigration, and *Aliyah*,” Faydra L. Shapiro discusses evangelical Christian Zionist supporters of Israel through the angle of

aliyah, Jewish immigration to Israel—an ongoing project promoted and encouraged by Christian Zionism. She finds an important theological framework that gains its power from its “ostensibly authoritative source (the Bible), its breadth (from Abraham to the second coming) and its scope of influence (the entire world, Jews and gentiles alike).”

The second part of the book includes chapters dealing with historical approaches to Christian Zionism but also chapters describing how others perceive Christian Zionism. Rosemary Radford Ruether is the author of “Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches.” She broadens the concept of Christian Zionism from a narrow interpretation to discuss its influence in mainline churches. Based on British and American identification of themselves as elect nations through the years and examples from Jewish-Christian dialogue, she argues for strong affiliations with Christian Zionism.

In the chapter “Palestinian Christian Reflections on Christian Zionism,” Mitri Raheb analyzes the consequences of Christian Zionism as experienced by Palestinian Christians. He makes five arguments: that Christian Zionism is part of European colonial history, is politically to be placed to the right of the Likud ideology, is economically a booming business, is theologically searching for a “Deus Revelatos,” and finally that Christian Zionists “might be the last allies that Israel has.”

Yaakov Ariel is the author of “From the *Institutum Judaicum* to the International Christian Embassy: Christian Zionism with a European Accent.” He focuses on European Pietist Protestant attempts to support Jewish restoration to Palestine, beginning with thinkers in the sixteenth century and proceeding to the present-day International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ). Ariel finds contradictory feelings as well as frustrations over the Jewish refusal

to recognize Christian claims, and draws attention to the unusual phenomenon that one religious group can consider “members of another religious and ethnic community to be the chosen people.”

In the chapter “Mischief Making in Palestine: American Protestant Christian Attitudes toward the Holy Land, 1917–1949,” Mae Elise Cannon discusses American Christian involvement in Palestine during this time and its relation to the Jewish Zionist agenda. She examines liberal Protestant support for Zionism and the creation of a Jewish state. She also describes the shift in opinions after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War in favor of justice on behalf of the displaced Arab community.

In his chapter, “Israelis, Israelites, and God’s Hand in History: Finnish Christian Attitudes toward the Creation of the State of Israel,” Timo R. Stewart goes back in history to the establishment of the State of Israel. Analyzing Finnish newspapers of the time, especially the Christian press, he finds interpretations that range from indifference to concluding that prophecies were being fulfilled. He states that Christian Zionist interpretations of events went unchallenged, and “believers interpreted Israel as a clear and very tangible sign of God’s existence through his work in history.”

“The Rise of Hitler, Zion, and the Tribulation: Between Christian Zionism and Orthodox Judaism” is written by Gershon Greenberg. He analyzes Zionist Christian thinkers vis-à-vis Orthodox Jewish religious thinkers beginning with Kristallnacht (1938). While they shared themes of dispersion as a result of sin, the people of Israel as unique, and apocalyptic tensions, the respective ramifications were opposed. He concludes that in the end, Christian Zionists saw the land of Israel as a station in the final destruction of Judaism, for Orthodox Jews it was the location of Israel’s redemption.

George Faithful, in the chapter “Inverting the Eagle to Embrace the Star of David: The Nationalist Roots of German Christian

Zionism,” discusses how German nationalism provided a foundation for Christian Zionism in Germany in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary exemplified an ideology in which “Christians promoted the welfare of the Jewish people as a means for advancing God’s purposes on earth.” He presents and analyzes the writings of the sisterhood’s founding theologian, Klara Schlink—Mother Basilea.

In Robert O. Smith’s concluding chapter, “The Quest to Comprehend Christian Zionism,” he discusses the difficulty in precisely defining Christian Zionism and offers his own historical research as one means of interpreting the movement in its present forms in the United States and around the world. He suggests that Christian Zionism is a meme that carries forth cultural information; therefore it is an essential topic for continued academic investigation.

Contributors

The contributors to this book have all presented papers at the American Academy of Religion. They represent a variety in academic experience, from well-known professors emeriti to PhD candidates, as well as different religious affiliations. They also represent a geographical coverage that includes Australia, Finland, Israel, Palestine, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with Honduras, Israel, Palestine, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States in focus. They are presented here according to the order in which their chapters appear:

Dr. **Elizabeth Phillips** is Tutor in Theology and Ethics at Westcott House, Cambridge, United Kingdom. In her doctoral thesis she examined the relationship between eschatology and politics in an

American Christian Zionist congregation. She is the author of the book *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* and several articles.⁵

PhD candidate **Aron Engberg** is doing his research at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Sweden. His specific area of research relates to Christian Zionism and identity construction in Israel, examining how Israel is understood and filled with meaning from a Christian Zionist horizon. He has also published an article in *Swedish Missiological Themes*.⁶

Dr. **Matt Westbrook** received his PhD in 2014 from the Graduate Division of Religion at Drew University, with a focus in the sociology of religion. He has presented in professional societies on Christian Zionism for a number of years, and did his dissertation field research in Israel with a Christian Zionist organization.

Dr. **Sean Durbin** received his PhD in 2014 from the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He has published articles on various aspects of contemporary Christian Zionism in *The Journal of Contemporary Religion, Culture and Religion, Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, and *Political Theology*.⁷

5. *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); “Charting the ‘Ethnographic Turn’: Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); “Adopt a Settlement: Christian Zionists and the West Bank,” *The Christian Century* (December 26, 2011); and “We’ve Read the End of the Book’: An Engagement with Contemporary Christian Zionism through the Eschatology of John Howard Yoder,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21:3 (2008): 342–61.

6. “Evangelicalism in the Interspaces: The Construction of Judeo-Christian Identity in a Messianic Community in Jerusalem,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 100:3 (2012): 263–81.

7. “For Such a Time as This’: Reading (and Becoming) Esther with Christians United for Israel,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2:1 (2012): 65–90; “I Will Bless Those Who Bless You’: Christian Zionism, Fetishism, and Unleashing the Blessings of God,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28:3 (2013): 507–21; and “Mediating the Past Through the Present and the Present Through Past: The Symbiotic Relationship of Christian Zionism’s Alien Enemies and Internal Heretics,” *Political Theology* (forthcoming).

Dr. **William M. Girard** received his PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His dissertation, *Enacting Pentecostalism: Spirit-Filled Modernity and the Honduran Coup d'État*, considers how Honduran Pentecostals work to modernize Honduras by fusing secular and religious practices.

Dr. **Curtis Hutt** is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. He splits his time between Nebraska and Jerusalem, teaching in both places as well as doing field research in Jerusalem. He wrote his dissertation on religion and the ethics of historical belief, and in 2012 he published a related article on comparative pilgrimage to the Holy Land.⁸

Dr. **Faydra L. Shapiro** is the Director of the Galilee Center for Studies in Jewish–Christian Relations at Yezreel Valley College, Israel. In her research she has a special interest in Jewish–evangelical relations and Christian Zionism. She has recently published several articles.⁹

Professor **Rosemary Radford Ruether** is the Carpenter Professor Emerita of Feminist Theology at Pacific School of Religion and the GTU, as well as the Georgia Harkness Professor Emerita of Applied Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. She currently is teaching feminist theology at the Claremont Graduate University and School of Theology in Claremont, California. She

8. *John Dewey and the Ethics of Historical Belief: Religion and the Representation of the Past* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013); and “Pilgrimage in Turbulent Contexts: One Hundred Years of Pilgrimage to the Holy Land,” *ID: International Dialogue* 2 (2012): 23–50.

9. “Jews Without Judaism: The Ambivalent Love of Christian Zionism,” *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* 4 (2013): 401–419; “Thank you Israel, for Supporting America: The Transnational Flow of Christian Zionist Resources,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 5 (2012): 616–31; “Jesus for Jews: The Unique Problem of Messianic Judaism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2012): 1–17; and “The Messiah and Rabbi Jesus: Policing the Jewish–Christian Border in Christian Zionism,” *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4 (2011): 463–77.

has published several books such as *Faith and Fratricide*, *The Wrath of Jonah*, and *America, Amerikkka*, as well as numerous articles.¹⁰

Dr. **Mitri Raheb** is President of the Diyar Consortium and Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Palestine. His work has explored a hermeneutic of liberation in the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Among his publications are *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, *Bethlehem Besieged*, and *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation*.¹¹

Professor **Yaakov Ariel** is affiliated with the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. One of the focuses in his research is on evangelical Christianity and its attitudes toward the Jewish people and the Holy Land. He has published several books, including *On Behalf of Israel* and *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, as well as numerous articles.¹²

Rev. Dr. **Mae Elise Cannon** holds her PhD in American history with a minor in Middle Eastern studies from the University of California, Davis. She is also Senior Director of Advocacy and

10. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974); *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and *America, Amerikkka: Elect Nation & Imperial Violence* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2007).
11. *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); *The Invention of History: A Century of Interplay Between Theology and Politics in Palestine*, ed. Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2011); and *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Mitri Raheb (CreateSpace, 2012).
12. *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes Towards the Jewish People and Zionism* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991); "A Neglected Chapter in the History of Christian Zionism in America: William E. Blackstone and the Petition of 1916," in *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. Jonathan Frankel, Studies in Contemporary Jewry 7 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and *Philosemites or Antisemites? Evangelical Christian Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2002).

Outreach—Middle East for World Vision USA. She is the author of *Social Justice Handbook* and *Just Spirituality*.¹³

PhD candidate **Timo R. Stewart** is doing his dissertation in Political History at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He has been working with The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. He has published several articles.¹⁴

Professor **Gershon Greenberg**, who is based in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at American University, Washington, DC, is Dorsett Fellow in Orthodox Jewish Theology at Oxford University's Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. He is the author of *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought; Modern Jewish Thinkers from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig; Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust*, and of numerous studies on Jewish and Christian responses during the Holocaust.¹⁵

Dr. **George Faithful** is Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. At present, he teaches undergraduates. In his recent research, he has studied the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary in Germany.

Dr. **Robert O. Smith** is Area Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa in the Global Mission unit of the Evangelical

13. *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009); and *Just Spirituality: How Faith Practices Fuel Social Action* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).
14. "Kristillinen sionismi ja Suomen Kristillinen Liitto" [Christian Zionism and the Finnish Christian League] in *Ajankohta: poliittisen historian vuosikirja*, 2007; "Israelin siirtokuntien syntyminen Länsirannalle" [The Establishment of Israeli Settlements in the West Bank] in *Lähde: Historiatieteellinen aikakauskirja*, 2010; and "Siirtokuntien uhka Israelille" [Settlements as a Threat to Israel] in *Ulkopolitiikka* 4 (2012).
15. *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought, 1620–1948: The Symbiosis of American Religious Approaches to Scripture's Sacred Territory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994); *Modern Jewish Thinkers from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2011); and with Steven T. Katz, *Wrestling With God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust: A Source Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, IL. He serves as co-moderator of the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches and is the author of *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism*. He is also the author of several Lutheran responses to Christian Zionism.¹⁶

Dr. **Göran Gunner** is Researcher at Church of Sweden Research Unit and Associate Professor at Uppsala University. His interest in research has been divided between Christian Zionism, Christianity in the Middle East, and human rights. He is the author of *När tiden tar slut* [When Time is Ending] and *Genocide of Armenians through Swedish Eyes*, as well as numerous articles.¹⁷

Dr. **Robert O. Smith** and Dr. **Göran Gunner** are coeditors of this book as well as cochairs of the “Christian Zionism in Comparative Perspective” seminar in the American Academy of Religion.

16. *Christians and a Land Called Holy: How We Can Foster Justice, Peace, and Hope*, with Charles P. Lutz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); “Toward a Lutheran Response to Christian Zionism,” *dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48:3 (Fall 2009): 281–93; and *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2013).

17. *När tiden tar slut* [When Time is Ending: Changing Emphases in Swedish Evangelical Apocalyptic Thinking Concerning the Jewish People and the State of Israel] (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet 1996); *Genocide of Armenians Through Swedish Eyes* (Yerevan: The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2013); and “Apocalyptic Speculations and the War of Armageddon,” in *Gods and Arms: On Religion and Armed Conflict*, ed. Kjell-Åke Nordquist (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

