

Blinded by Belief: Faith versus Freedom, the Opening Crusade of the 21st Century

William A. Cook, Department of English ,University of La Verne

The hotel television set glowed eerily in the dark room as we settled in for the night, having arrived from Los Angeles late in the day on the 20th of March, 2003. Our hotel, a short distance from St. Nicholas's Church on the Mala Strana side of the Moldau River in Old Prague, offered satellite reception all the way from home, for the TV channel was decidedly American, the Trinity Broadcasting Network. There on the screen, we witnessed dozens of the faithful crowded around a huge American flag stretched horizontally to the floor, held on each side by chanting, bowing and weeping Christians, faces lifted to the Lord, eyes shut, right arms held high while others pushed from behind to touch the sacred relic. The singing reached a crescendo as they ever so gradually lifted old glory above their raised heads, tears cascading from their eyes, calling upon God Almighty to protect America on this eve of battle, for, on an accompanying channel, the green inscrutable screen of "Shock and Awe" was underway.

No stranger broke in on this homage to war, no servant of God appeared to utter the second prayer:

O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their offending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for refuge of the grave and denied it – for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage ... We ask it ... of Him who is the Source of Love ... Amen. (Mark Twain)

Mark Twain dictated "The War Prayer" in 1904, 99 years before Shock and Awe. He opposed the Philippine-American War that ended in 1902. But now, as then, power uses religion to mobilize the masses to accomplish ruthless ends. Six months before Shock and Awe, I published an article in SUNY's *Crossings: a Counter Disciplinary Journal*, titled "The Destructive Power of Myth," a theme volume devoted to the "Uses of Religion" (Cook). Since

then, I have written numerous articles that touch on the investment the Christian Zionist movement, most significantly the end-timers, the Dominionists, have in promoting war in the Middle East, and most especially in Palestine. They, like Twain's fictional congregation, appear oblivious to the second prayer.

What drives these people theologically or doctrinally? What forces in the secular realm, if any, influence them? Is this a new phenomenon or, as Twain implies, is it only the most recent example of the use of religion for political and secular ends? These are rhetorical questions with full answers far beyond the limitations of this presentation. Let me, therefore, focus the discussion: the Christian Zionist movement in the United States believes in a divine plan based on the Book of Revelation that calls for the existence of the state of Israel to usher in the second coming as prophesied therein, as a consequence of which they have joined with Israeli Zionists and Neo con followers of Leo Strauss' political theories to control the policies of the United States in the Middle East by manipulating the beliefs of their faithful for political ends. This yoking of religion and nationalism demonstrates how the current global conflicts in the mid-east arise out of manipulation of a religious term into a political battle cry. Needless to say, this is not the first effort to use Armageddon to control political power in a state or in a religion. Literature, both fiction and non-fiction have played a major role in this control.

Selling Rapture:

Over the centuries Christian demagogues have predicted the end of time as revealed by God in the book of Revelation, but none with the impact and enthusiasm of recent proselytizers, most especially Tim LaHaye, Michael Evans, and Hal Lindsey. Given the limitations of time, we will concentrate on LaHaye's novels only with some reference to Evans' evangelicalism in the political arena and leave the impact of Lindsey for an expanded paper.

LaHaye's *Left Behind* series of novels, co-authored with Jerry Jenkins, (12 published with more on the way) has sold approximately 70 million copies, worth \$1 billion in sales in 1980 to \$4.2 billion in 2002 (Shepherdson) followed by a four book contract with Bantam Dell for \$18 million, the first of which, *Babylon Rising: the Secret of Ararat*, appeared in 2003 and the second available now, *Babylon Rising: The Edge of Darkness*. To understand the impact of this spectacular success in selling the message of Rev. Tim LaHaye's interpretation of the Book of Revelation, we must look at what he sells in ideas, how he connects these ideas to current

politics in the United States and in Israel, and the consequences of this yoking of religious belief to national goals.

The Christian Zionist message can be summed up in these words, “Every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God, and should be condoned, supported, and even praised by the rest of us” (Halsell). Tim LaHaye echoes these sentiments when he says, “...world events are pointing to the Middle East in general and Israel in particular as the center for prophesied future world events” (Allie Martin). In his series, LaHaye’s “bad guys” just happen to be “... the United Nations, the Europeans, Russia, Iraq, Muslims, the media, liberals, freethinkers, and international bankers who team up with the Antichrist, who ends up heading the UN and moving its headquarters to Babylon, Iraq” (Dreyfuss).

More importantly perhaps has been LaHaye’s engagement with choosing the Republican candidate for President in 2000. Dreyfuss wrote about this meeting in “Reverend Doomsday.” “Five years ago, as Bush was gearing up his presidential campaign, he made a little-noticed pilgrimage to a gathering of right-wing Christian activists, under the auspices of a group called the Committee to Restore American Values. The committee ... was chaired by LaHaye. ... LaHaye grilled the candidate ... When the meeting with Bush ended, LaHaye gave the candidate his seal of approval.” What does that seal mean to Bush and the Republicans? Consider this observation by Michael Standaert:

A new and specifically nationalist American religion, the Religious Right, has been established, but has so far failed to recognize it needs its own churches under the banner. The *Left Behind* books have been called one of the greatest modern proselytizing tools at the disposal of those who actively seek to convert their fellow citizens to ‘come to Christ.’ ... be that as it may ... (they) are not simply proselytizing for a particular form of ‘Christianity’ but for a conservative political ideology as well ... converting minds toward a religious doctrine as well as a political doctrine ... (“The Novel, *Left Behind*”)

Add to this the impact of the Rev. Michael Evans, who claims to have visions from God, who wrote in *Beyond Iraq: the Next Move – Ancient Prophecy and Modern Conspiracy Collide*, (Whitestone Books, FL, 2003) the design of a grand global war that includes as key players the CIA, the American government and army, and Israel. Evans is one of the most prominent preacher politicians active in the Christian Zionist movement. “Christians,” Evans argues, “have no choice. If they are true to their faith ... they must join hands with America in its

war for ‘defending Israel,’ and must ‘support Israel in every possible way.’” “Given this supposed divine backing, Evans exhorts America to invade and subjugate all countries opposed to Israel, specifically naming Lebanon, Syria, and Iran.” (Sikand).

These Christian Zionist ideas, conveyed in pseudo-novel form, depict “... mainstream American public life and civic leaders ... as degenerate, irrelevant, useless, and ready to crumble. Democratic institutions play no role at all” (Cohen). In short, the novel form as used by LaHaye and Evans is being used to entice millions of people to accept “... that passionate commitment to upholding democratic institutions, to making them work – to getting along with those from whom one is different or with whom one disagrees – are false, futile, sinful, discredited values” (Cohen). In these works, the devastation wrought on others, is welcomed, indeed, embraced as fulfillment of God’s prophecy. No guilt attends the havoc brought against those of different faiths or nationalities or race. Ironically, the alleged most democratic nation on the planet becomes the vehicle of a small group who work with those in power to create a Pan-Americana that is by virtue of its faith driven policies a totalitarian theocratic monarchy.

Managing Belief

But this, after all, is fiction with little or no impact on the real world of politics in the United States or the world. The fact is it has had an impact, a slowly rising impact since the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Donald Wagner estimates that 100-130 million Americans adhere to fundamentalists’ beliefs, and, of that number, about 25% are hard core Christian Zionists (Rogers). Despite what might appear to be relatively small numbers, the Christian Zionist movement can distribute 70 million voter guides in a national election and call upon numerous congressmen and the Israeli Zionist groups to push its agenda (Shepherdson).

Margot Patterson writes,

In September (2002), thousands of Christian Zionists met in Jerusalem for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot to cheer on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and to declare their unconditional support for the state of Israel. Organized by the International Christian Embassy, the meeting appeared to be a love-in as much as a rally. ‘Walking here, I heard many times, and many people said, ‘We love you, we love Israel,’’ said Sharon. ‘May I tell you we love you. We love all of you.’ (Patterson)

Such meetings galvanize the two groups and cement political relations between the Israeli ultra conservative governments of former PM Sharon and the current Olmert government with

the Bush administration's pro-Israeli Neo-con activists. Even the *Wall Street Journal* acknowledges the impact in an article by Tom Hamburger and Jim VandeHei, "How Israel Became a Favorite Cause of Christian Right" which covers the effects on U.S. foreign policy of this alliance (Patterson). And that brings us to the Israeli Zionist position that complements the premise of the Christian Zionist ideology. Dr. M. Shahid Alam makes this telling point about Zionism in Israel:

No idea has played a more seminal role in the recent history of Jewish and Christian Zionism than the Jewish doctrine of divine election or chosenness. Since this doctrine is the cornerstone of Zionism, divine sanction for Jewish uniqueness has been inseparable from Israeli exceptionalism and Israeli history. ... it was the theological doctrine of chosenness that would most convincingly settle the morality of Zionist claims to Palestine (Alam).

Jewish Zionism became a messianic ordained right to reclaim lands given to the chosen by God Almighty. Christian Zionism, as we have seen, shared this view, albeit for different reasons. Each had a rationale that gave them license to claim the land of Palestine as theirs and to, if necessary, ethnically cleanse the land of Palestinians. For Christian Zionists, God's prophecy demanded it; for the Jewish Zionists, their Jewish chosenness justified their actions as the Jewish prerogative. In either case, International Law, the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Accords are irrelevant to their respective truths. Both sides understand what they are doing. LaHaye noted "I realize that our message is inherently offensive and divisive, especially in this new age of tolerance. Especially since 9/11. I understand how that sounds. But I'm telling you this 'cause I really do believe it" (Rise of the Righteous Army).

As early as 2001, Grace Halsell cautioned "I hold that Christian Zionism threatens not just the lives of Palestinians and other Arabs, but the very existence of the United States. Because of the cult of Israel, we have become a nation that does not have its own Middle-East policy, but the policy the government of Israel tells us to have" (Halsell).

Manipulating Metaphors

It's imperative now to consider how this movement has used language to manipulate millions to their ends. The title of this presentation, "Blinded by Belief: Faith versus Freedom," suggests that the Christian Zionist faithful act blindly because they believe in a cause that is

contradictory to the teachings of Christ. Secondly, it suggests that their faith is confrontational with the definition of freedom. These suggestions would appear on the surface to be paradoxical with the generally accepted understanding of Christian thought. We need to explore the meaning of Belief and Faith as taught by the Christian Zionists to comprehend how this movement has forced allegiance to ideas that are antithetical to traditional Christian thought.

Chris Hedges, in his very recent book, *American Fascists*, points to the way in which the followers are locked inside a “closed system of information and indoctrination that caters to their hates and prejudices” (26). He points to tens of millions who rely on Christian broadcasters for all their news, entertainment and personal needs like health. In turn, they are recipients of crafted political views and voting suggestions that fulfill the teachings proffered by their ministers. “These believers are encased in a hermetic world. There is no questioning or dissent. There are anywhere from 1.1 million to 2.1 million children, nearly all evangelicals, now being home-schooled. These children are not challenged with ideas or research that conflict with their biblical worldview” (26). Hedges put it succinctly, “They are taught, in short, to obey.”

Hedges spent two years researching the movement, concluding as a result of his time spent with the proselytizers at their conferences and recruiting sessions that Dominionists seek to politicize faith by teaching that “American Christians have been mandated by God to make America a Christian state ... America becomes ... an agent ... of God ... and all ... opponents ... as agents of Satan” (11-12). LeHaye’s novels aid in setting this mind set. Many of his works have been reproduced for children. There is an indoctrination happening, ironically an indoctrination more effective than that condemned by the Christian Zionists as being perpetrated on children in Palestine. The world, according to their beliefs, “is to be subdued and ruled by a Christian United States. Those considered by the Christian state to be immoral and incapable of reform are to be exterminated” (13).

To achieve their ends, Dominionists redefine terms so that they contradict the accepted definitions in the secular field, terms like liberty, faith, wisdom, truth, life and love. Liberty means acceptance of and obedience to Jesus Christ; love refers to “unquestioned obedience to those who claim to speak for God”; wisdom enjoins the faithful to commitment and obedience to the Dominionists’ system of belief; life and death mean life in Christ or death to Christ, signifiers of belief or unbelief in the risen Lord; truth is the word of God as interpreted by the true ministers of God based on a literal understanding of the Bible. Faith no longer “presupposes that

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we cannot know,” it means now total acceptance of God’s word as literally defined by the church, the Pat Robertson’s, Jerry Falwell’s, James Dobson’s, John Hagee’s, Benny Hinn’s, Franklin Graham’s, and many others who claim to know what life means according to God.

To instill their message, Christian fundamentalists lather their rhetoric with war terminology and call upon the faithful to be as soldiers for Christ in His battle against the forces of evil. In the novels, as in the message, the world is seen in black and white, good and evil, hence the characters are strangely one dimensional through out, and the ultimate end is foreordained, good wins because God has so prophesied. And in the novels, as in the message, the bad guys are Muslims, liberals, freethinkers, Europeans, the UN and the media. LaHaye has turned the metaphors of the revelation prophecies into present day reality by converting its images into immediate objects of recognition: locusts into helicopters, the mark of the beast becomes a computer identity chip, and the occult rapture into an event that happens on a 747 flying to Heathrow from the U.S. Ancient mysteries become instantly comprehensible with the enemy present in the now and the forces of good aligned with God against Satan.

Indoctrination includes capturing the minds of children. Indeed, many children attend “Jesus Camps” or “Battle Cry,” a fundamentalist youth movement that has attracted more than 25,000 people to Christian rock concerts. “Ron Luce, who runs it, exhorts the young Christians to defeat the secular forces around them. ‘This is war,’ he has said. And Jesus invites us to get into the action, telling us that the violent – the ‘forceful’ ones – will lay hold of the kingdom” (Hedges 30). Since those slaughtered in this war have brought about their own end by not accepting Christ, no guilt is attached to aiding in their destruction. Falwell and Robertson even sanction the use of nuclear strikes against those they condemn as enemies of Christ. Such rock concert spectacles, like the Armageddon preaching, close down the minds and conscience of the laity making them obedient to the male dominated ministry.

The mind set proclaimed by the Christian Zionists of Israel’s right to all the land of Palestine is echoed by the Neo-cons who hold prominent positions in the Bush administration: Richard Perle, onetime chairman of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board, has stated “Israel should insist on Arab recognition of its claim to the biblical land of Israel ...”; Douglas Feith, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, argues “ ... that Israel has as legitimate a claim to the West Bank territories seized after the Six-Day War as it has to the land that was part of the U.N. mandated Israel created in 1948.”; and even Donald Rumsfeld contends “There was a war

... and they (neighboring countries) lost a lot of real estate to Israel because Israel prevailed in that conflict.” These voices justify the beliefs proffered by the Christian Zionists thus confirming the belief that America has a right to support Israel’s aggression against the Palestinians. (*Tracking Deception* 58).

These politicians do not express such views in isolation from the religious right. Irving Kristol, a student of Leo Strauss and a major architect of the current Republican conservative party, encouraged the embracing of Christian Zionists as a political base to offset the drastic impact of liberalism that infests America. He encouraged this alliance not because he is Christian but because as a Straussian he believes that religion must be used to solidify the masses, and, in America, it is the Christian faith that dominates, especially the Christian Zionists who are the most vehement against the nihilism Strauss feared as dominating American intellectual life (Drury 22). It is fair to say that Kristol’s views and those of neoconservatives generally echo the views of Leo Strauss. It is also fair to say that the strategies employed by the neoconservatives and the leaders of the Christian Zionists and the Israeli Zionists are similar and directed toward the same end with belief and faith the primary means to that end, control of the Middle East on behalf of Israel.

Drury demonstrates that Strauss contends that “politics is the key to the ‘meaning and purpose of prophecy’.” Indeed, prophecy has a “political mission.” Since Strauss taught that nature’s determinism thrust the “wise few” into positions of leadership over the “vulgar many,” and since virtue is defined by the elite who rule, and since morality does not exist, and since justice is merely the interest of the stronger, and since the rule of the wise is absolute, authoritarian and unquestionable, and since religion is “the glue that holds society together,” using religion for political ends, like lying, deception, secrecy, and intimidation, is a good necessary to achieve the determined goals of the government. That same mind set exists in the leadership of the religious right and the Israeli Zionists, as we have seen.

Manipulation of the “vulgar masses” becomes an end in itself and the distortion of words and concepts becomes the means to that end.

Roots that Bind Belief

We arrive now at the precursors of today’s prophets of doom, former users of belief and faith for political ends. There have been many. I researched in some depth the activities of Innocent III and his crusade against the Cathar sect in Provençal in the early 1200s. But one can

note in passing the Puritans in 1636 and their extermination of the Pequot tribe which I also researched, or the conquistadors and Franciscans in 1525 in Central America. But I'd rather begin at the beginning, the years following the death of Christ and the battle between the organized church of the disciples and the renegade Gnostics, when the first crusade in the first century erupted pitting a politicized use of belief against an introspective, self-fulfilling relationship with Jesus' teachings.

We are now witnessing the first crusade of the 21st century instigated by yet another group of Christian fanatics using many of the same tactics:

1. **Build allegiance of the faithful to a belief system based on an “absurdity,”** otherwise there is no need for an organization: the idea then, the bodily resurrection of Christ; the idea now, fulfillment of God's prophecy in Revelation through the establishment of the state of Israel. Both fulfill an essential political function, the legitimization of the authority of certain men as the exclusive guides to truth, the secrets Jesus bequeathed to the original disciples and their successors and the ministers of the Christian Zionists who lay claim to the visions and dreams of God in interpreting the book of Revelation.
2. **Use Faith as the essential ingredient that necessitates obedience to ministers who have the key to Christ's teachings,** making those who deny belief in the resurrection or deny the impending Armageddon heretics that must be exterminated for denying Christ. Faith requires acceptance of a system and the authority of the ministers of that system if the promise of the Almighty is to be attained. That promise is the reward of a life in the hereafter. This understanding of faith makes anathema the Gnostic's understanding of belief that the resurrection symbolized how Christ's presence could be experienced in the present (Pagels 11).
3. **Create political forces internally in the organization and join with secular political forces to advance the organization and its teachings.** Prior to the organized church becoming both the secular force as well as the religious following the fall of the Roman Empire, in the early days, Clement, Bishop of Rome (c.70-100), wrote “The God of Israel rules all things; he is the lord and master whom all must obey; he is the judge who lays down the law, punishing rebels and rewarding the obedient ... God delegates his ‘authority of reign’ to ‘rulers and leaders on earth’ ... that are the bishops, priests, and deacons ... whoever refuses to ‘bow the neck’ and obey the church leaders is guilty of

insubordination against the divine master himself ... whoever disobeys the divinely ordained authorities 'receives the death penalty'" (Pagels 34). Now we have the authority as delineated by Michael Evans, Gary Frazier, Timothy LaHaye, John Hagee, and many others who claim "America ... is ruled by evil, clandestine organizations that hide behind the veneer of liberal, democratic groups. These clandestine forces seek to destroy Christians. They spread their demonic, secular-humanist ideology through front groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Organization for Women, ... the United Nations, 'the left wing of the Democratic Party,' Harvard, Yale and '2000 other colleges and universities.'" Because of this insidious reality, "The nation must swiftly dismantle the barriers between church and state and bring God back into the schools, the government, the media ... America must become submissive and heed God's prophets or be destroyed..." (Hedges 191-192).

4. **Mobilize to gain control of the faithful and of the ballot box.** Clement, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and later Augustine condemned and belittled the Gnostics eventually citing them as heretics, agnostics, even atheists, forcing them from the church and into exile or even to death. Today the Christian Zionists have mobilized their faithful with the forces of Israeli Zionism and the Neo-cons of the Bush administration to solidify control of American policy in the Middle-East to accomplish their ends.

Blinded and Enslaved

5. **Use Belief to engender fear.** Consider if you will the consequences of this abdication of self to the authority of self-described interpreters of God's word. In the words of Chris Hedges:

They are manipulating Christianity, and millions of sincere believers, to build a frightening political mass movement with many similarities with other mass movements, from fascism to communism to the ethnic nationalist parties in the former Yugoslavia. It shares with these movements an inability to cope with ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty. It creates its own 'truth.' It embraces a world of miracles and signs and removes followers from a rational, reality-based world. It condemns self-criticism and debate as

apostasy. It places a premium on action and finds its final aesthetic in war and apocalyptic violence. (35)

Contrast that outcome with the perspective from the *Testimony of Truth*, one of the Nag Hammadi texts: "... the gnostic becomes a 'disciple of his (own) mind,' discovering that his own mind 'is the father of truth.' He learns what he needs to know by himself in meditative silence. Consequently, he considers himself equal to everyone, maintaining his own independence of anyone else's authority: 'And he is patient with everyone; he makes himself equal to everyone, and he also separates himself from them.'"

Gnosticism, according to Pagels, concerns itself with the internal significance of events, the orthodox tradition depends upon the events of "salvation history – the history of Israel, especially the prophets' predictions of Christ." She then notes: "But according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus dismisses as irrelevant the prophets' predictions: "His disciples said to him, 'Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you.' He said to them, 'You have ignored the one living in your presence, and have spoken (only) of the dead.'" (Pagels 132)

Blinded by belief as imposed by our current ministers of war imbues in its adherents acceptance of violence and slaughter in the name of Jesus, the God of peace; negates gentleness, charity, forgiveness and active love in the name of Jesus, who preached the Beatitudes; divides all people into two camps, the chosen and the excluded in the name of Jesus, who said "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and "Love thy enemy"; relies on lying, deception, secrecy, mystery and authority as the way to Jesus, who taught love, compassion and humility; enslaves the mind and conscience of those it claims to free in the name of Jesus, who said in the *Gospel of Thomas*, "There is a light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness"; it is "one's inner capacity to find one's own direction that brings freedom." (Pagels 120).

For ministers to stage the faithful prancing around the American flag, chanting hymns of war on the eve of Shock and Awe, is to negate the meaning of the faith they pretend to exhort. "Faith-based fanatics offer no humility only arrogance, no reverence only hypocrisy, no gentleness only castigation, no charity only self-indulgence, no forgiveness only condemnation, no faith only fear, and no love only hate."

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