

The Pathology of Christian Zionism

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By:
Rev. Stan Moody, Ph.D.

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Most of you are from liturgical church cultures. I am an Evangelical from a little country church in Maine. The burden that I carry in my heart is the drift of American Evangelicalism toward an unholy merger of Caesar and God.

In every corner of this world, not the least of which are the human tragedies we call Gaza and the West Bank, we Christians are reminded of a grim reality – that Jesus Christ is missing from the most self-conscious wing of the Christian Church in America – the Evangelical Christian Right. He has been replaced by a god who now acts as a whimsical real estate agent. In the words of Christian Zionist, John Hagee, this god, the Grand Surveyor, set "...the original stakes into Judean soil and decreed that no one should ever change those property lines. The real estate contract and land covenants were signed in blood and stand to this very hour." [1]

You and I, however, have not been innocent bystanders in this drift toward a self-fulfilling prophecy of Armageddon. By our silence and our preoccupation with the mundane, we have permitted this movement to spread its tentacles into US domestic and international policy. I have coined a phrase to describe this widespread belief in Dominion Theology. That phrase is "Christian Atheism," [2] ownership of Jesus Christ as insurance against Hell but disbelief in a Sovereign God.

Christian Atheism is a Christianity that seeks converts rather than makes disciples – that tires of waiting for God to act in human history and decides to take matters into its own hands. Christian Atheism is a belief system that prefers dogma over doctrine, power over weakness, works over faith, law over grace and ease over suffering. Christian Atheism is the product of sloppy theology that rears its ugly head when the people of God become too comfortable and too proud. In a word, *Why waste time trying to discover the truth when you can so easily create it?*

That's the bad news. The good news is that, contrary to the opinion of political pundits these days, this is not a phase – a hiccup on the screen of human progress. It's not going to go away. It's going to get worse. You and I, as professing Christians, have been called by the grace of God to fix it.

I have had the good fortune of being immersed in several disciplines during my adult life – business, law, politics and theology. To my great surprise, they all suffer from the same disease – discovering shortcuts to creating their own truths in a quest for fame, power and fortune. That has left America, the leader of the free world, as an empty shell of smoke and mirrors. The American Dream today is in jeopardy, and the American church is fast becoming irrelevant to life in the fast lane.

In Bob Woodward's latest book, he quotes John McCain as saying, "It's all spin!" Sarah Palin, when asked by Catie Couric about Israel and Iran said something like, Israel is the "good guys," and Iran is the "bad guys. We need to help the good guys!" This is a woman who is drawing huge crowds of people who view education and the painful search for truth to be elitist.

Regardless of what happens in this election, this drift toward a pseudo-Christian theocracy is not going away. But by the grace of God, we can fix it.

I was asked to speak, however, on what "it" is that we are going to try and fix. So I titled my talk, "The Pathology of Christian Zionism."

Psychologist, Eric Fromm, left behind some very incisive gems that link the pathology of Christian Zionism to a culture of fear that gives rise to nationalism. Christian Zionism is the logical end-game of a Diasporas Christian community that has lost sight of Jesus' inauguration of the Kingdom of God as a homeland – the Promised Land, if you will – for the stranger and the alien in this world.

Redemptive history consistently holds out hope of a Promised Land, lurching back and forth from a physical place to a spiritual reality. That hope of a Promised Land is what originally gave birth to America as the incarnation of St. Augustine's "City on a Hill" but failed to survive the first generation of Pilgrims. The hope of a Promised Land is what gave rise to the modern nation-state of Israel. It also gave rise to the Third Reich.

Discouragement and disaster along the way render God distant and unresponsive, causing individuals and nations to seek other options for surrendering their identities. Religion becomes an identity to be protected rather than a victory to be lived. We begin to seek security within geographical and ideological boundaries rather than within the boundless presence of God with His people.

In a word, we become myopic and nationalistic at the same time. For nationalistic Christian Americans, their Promised Land is one that replaces the Constitution with the Bible interpreted according to their own fancy. For nationalistic Israelis, their Promised Land is less biblical than it is protection from anti-Semitism. And for nationalistic Palestinians, their Promised Land of the "Right of Return" is collapsing under the weight of Christian Zionist influence in America.

Under extreme pressure from the Christian Right and the Israeli lobby, the US Congress has officially ratified the illegal settlements and the Wall of

Separation while giving lip service to a two-state solution that has been isolated from reality by a 27 ft. concrete curtain higher and longer than the Berlin Wall.

Fromm dissects nationalism and finds within it pathology of narcissism (self love), three aspects of which are:

1. A common language...
2. A ghetto of shared ideas unchallenged by experience or history...
3. A common economic philosophy...

If we were to apply those three aspects of nationalism to the agenda of the Christian Right, it is easy to see how the movement has progressed (or digressed) from individual isolation, to the local church, to political activism, to nationalism and on to Dominionism, *talking* of God but denying His sovereign hand on human history.

Those of you who have been around long enough will remember a time when the Christian wing nuts were confined to the local church. They were relatively harmless there. I was raised as a Christian wing nut, which is why I began my protest against such expressions somewhere around the age of 10.

The rest of you may have been fat, dumb and happy in your ecclesiastical superiority. But before long, the local fundamentalist church joined with other local fundamentalist churches to form Para-church movements and lobbying organizations. They began to "focus on the white, middle class family," for example, and lost their focus on Jesus. Para-church movements led to the mega-church. The mega-church movement led to political action and the financial takeover of a Republican Party weakened by decades of knee-jerk liberalism in the US.

The Republican Party has since gone international with its constantly shifting "Axis of Evil," depending on who is the enemy-of-the-month. It has become the echo of its Christian base without its conviction.

The Axis of Evil with which we are deeply concerned today is a meandering concrete curtain and a policy of illegal settlements that not only have been applauded by the Christian Right in America but have received its financial and political support.

The common language that binds together these Christian Atheists are such terms as "Born Again," "saved" and "Rapture," metatags of language to qualify believers. "Talking the talk" carries with it the assumption that one is "Walking the walk." I work as a Chaplain at a maximum security prison in Maine and have been appalled by inmates getting "saved" again and again, waiting for the Rapture so they can fly out of there.

As a result of all this common language of faith, narcissistic con artists, whose faith runs no deeper than a platform for self-protection and self-advancement, abound within the Christian Right. These ghettoized Christians

become the self-proclaimed "real Americans" that Gov. Palin talks about. Study becomes sloppy and superficial. Core doctrines of the faith give way to idiom. Love of country trumps love of humanity, and love of family overrides love of neighbor. In a word, "I am wonderful because my group/race/class/family/nation is wonderful."

Even the words "God bless America" can degenerate into a statement that all other nations, including their citizens, are substandard, denying the universality of the Kingdom of God.

The Objective truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ evolves into a subjective faith – what's in it for me and mine – protection against an assault that usually never happens. Symbolism becomes the hallmark of faith. Any attack on symbols is viewed personally by the group as an attack on its beliefs. As the group comes under attack and develops a poor self image, the only way to get back on top is to join forces with other groups of like language and fight for the reinstatement of their common symbols. Belief becomes secondary to the *language* of belief.

School prayer, which really is not Christian prayer at all, is a symbol that must be restored at the expense of discrimination against others. Traditional marriage must be mandated at the expense of those who are in non-traditional lifestyles. Israel as the people of God becomes *Ha aretz* (theology of the land) as defined by the Grand Surveyor and His faithful interlopers into foreign policy. Love of self, then, overrides love of neighbor. Faith no longer trusts God but turns inward toward the group, the political party or the nation.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is set aside for another day. People no longer are "neighbors" but are objectified into enemies who lose their individuality and their human face. Since there is nothing explicit in the Bible about loving *groups* of neighbors, one can justify categories of liberals, terrorists and atheists as objects for extinction. Palestinians and Iraqis, for example, become "rag heads" and "terrorists:" "Better we should kill them over there than have them kill us over here" are words right out of the mouths of American Christians.

While the enemy grows, the narcissistic group battens the hatches and becomes the "good guys," while the rest of us become the "bad guys" or the evil empires.

So how does this apply to Christian Zionism? And what can we do about it?

The church has the option of becoming a fortress against foreign ideas, or it can become the living, breathing presence of the Kingdom of God *in* the world while not being wedded to the strategies and techniques *of* the world. That is, very simply, the task that faces us.

Elevating converts over disciples, whether by the liturgical church or by the fundamentalist church, leads us to where we are today – a shallow religion that has become too steeped in symbolism to mount an offensive against

heresy. The reduction of faith to a correct, audible Sinner's Prayer stands as a rebuke of the power of God to convict and regenerate.

Zeal breaks out into suspicion of other groups. Sex and corruption creep into the power structure. Christians with hope in their churches rather than hope in the *God* of their churches jump from one church to another and one disappointment to another. Hope in America as the protector of the language of faith begins to wane. Once it is decided that America is lost, the "faith of our fathers" cannot be recovered. The only thing left, then, is the Kingdom of God which, to the Christian Right, becomes its new Promised Land – *Ha aretz*.

The one remaining option to the creation of a theocracy here at home is forcing God to send Jesus back through an ingenious strategy of reviving physical Zion in order to inaugurate spiritual Zion. Tired of waiting for God to lead His people to triumph and success, it becomes the mission of the Christian Zionist to create such chaos in the Middle East that Jesus will have no other option than to return.

It never dawns on the Christian Zionist that Jesus has called him to be a stranger and an alien in the world.

Rather than point to *Jesus* as the remedy for human woe and alienation, the Christian Zionist points to the evening news as evidence of a deteriorating condition that he is obliged to fix at the expense of the very people he is obliged as a Christian to love.

If we are to turn this tide of unbelief, the confessing church must return to four core doctrines of the Christian faith:

1. The sovereignty of God
2. The authority of Scripture
3. The presence of the Kingdom of God
4. The Lordship of Christ

Author Sarah Posner sees the Christian Right as a "large and growing subculture" under the rubric of what she calls the "Word of Faith" movement. Here is what she says:

...the Word of Faith movement is continually expanding – and its rising stars have gained more than a measure of respectability. Money-grubbing, authoritarian, and plagued by scandal, they nevertheless seem invulnerable to doubt. Their followers live in a strange subculture of "Hebraic Christianity," end times prophecy and constant pressure to send in more money...They dismiss negative news reports concerning the lavish lifestyles and dubious conduct of their preachers as works of Satan.[3]

John Hagee, under the influence of what Posner calls "revelation knowledge," gives the impression of straining to get the attention of God by advocating for what he believes is His plan. Such policies as nuclear war with Iran and pushing the Palestinian people into Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is a strategy of impatiently backing God into a corner.

I leave you with two thoughts from the Scriptures today. The first is to resolve to take to heart the caution of Micah 6:8 as to what the Lord requires of His people – to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Those are familiar terms of endearment to the faith and sadly missing in the profession of the Christian Zionist.

I would, however, plead with you to resolve to obey another, tougher command from 2 Timothy 4 – resist accumulating for yourselves teachers to suit your own likings. Selfish, greedy people have heaped to themselves selfish, greedy teachers to lead them into myths.

As an Evangelical, I take my place alongside you and *with* you, regardless of your peculiar language of faith. Criticism from within the confessing church is the kind of *intifada* (protest) that will interrupt the American Christian Zionist movement.

By the grace of God, we can do it together beginning today.

I thank you for your attention.

[1] *Christian Zionism: Terror in Jesus' Name*, Yoginder Sikand, <http://www.countercurrents.org/us-sikand041205.htm>

[2] Moody, *McChurched: 300 Million Served and Still Hungry*, Just Write Books, Topsham, ME, 2006, p. 162.

[3] Sarah Posner, *God's Profits: Faith, Fraud, and the Republican Crusade for Values Voters*, PoliPointPress, Sausallito, 2008, p. xi.

Rev. Stan Moody, Ph.D.
POB 240
Manchester, ME 04351
207/626-0594
Cell: 207/607-3055

After a long career in business management and development, Dr. Moody pursued an education in Christian theology...He has served in the Maine State House of Representatives both as a Republican and a Democrat, pastors a small country church in Central Maine and serves as a Chaplain at the maximum security Maine State Prison...He has authored several provocative books on the state of the evangelical church in America, including *No Turning Back: Journal of an All-American Sinner*, *Crisis in Evangelical Scholarship: A New Look at the Second Coming of Christ* and *McChurched: 300 Million Served and Still Hungry*...

Moody sits on the Board of Advisors of *Jews-On-First* and *The Institute for the Study of Christian*

Zionism, is a featured contributor to www.Faithful Democrats.com and is a frequent speaker at Christian conferences and conventions...