

## *With God on Our Side: An Analysis*

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### Executive Summary

- *With God on Our Side*, a 2010 movie produced by Rooftop Productions, portrays Christian Zionism as a dangerous political movement in the U.S. and a spoiler to the peace process between Israel and its adversaries in the Middle East.
- In addition to the message provided above, the movie offers two other narratives. The first narrative depicts Israel as founded in original sin, guilty of acts of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people. In this narrative, Arabs and Muslims play no role in the ongoing existence of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The second narrative is a more personal one in which young Bible-believing evangelicals can embrace anti-Zionism in good conscience.
- The movie also portrays Palestinian suffering as a question of theodicy. In other words, it asks how God would respond to the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 given its impact on the Palestinian people. By focusing exclusively on Palestinian suffering and omitting any responsibility Arab and Muslim leaders have for this suffering, *With God on Our Side* portrays Jewish sovereignty as a particular affront to the goodness of God that no responsible Christian could support.
- *With God on Our Side* also exaggerates the influence of Christian Zionism on American politics and Israeli policy, portraying the movement as an obstacle or “spoiler” to the peace process.

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*With God on Our Side*, produced by Rooftop Productions in 2010, purports to be a documentary about Christian Zionism and its impact on the prospects for peace between Israel and its adversaries in the Middle East. The movie, directed by Porter Speakman, Jr., fails as a documentary for a number of reasons, most notably its reliance on a distorted depiction of Jewish and Israeli history. As a piece of propaganda however, the movie succeeds spectacularly. Not only does it portray Israel as born in original sin and singularly responsible for the Arab-Israeli conflict but it provides a model by which young Evangelical Christians in the United States can break ranks with their faith community and become ardent anti-Zionists in good conscience.

The centerpiece of the movie is its narrator, Christopher Harrell. Harrell, a twenty-something graphic designer, plays the role of an ersatz Dante as he is lead by various Virgil-like commentators through the hellish aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In his journey, Harrell is purged of his juvenile and unreflective support for the Jewish people and the modern state of Israel – which he got from his family. In Harrell’s first few scenes, he is shown undergoing a dark night of the soul, struggling with his conscience and incomplete understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict with a stained glass window in the background. Then he goes on a journey where he meets a number of so-called experts to learn about the history of the conflict. Harrell also travels to the West Bank to see for himself the crimes the Israelis have perpetrated against the Palestinian people – most notably the security barrier.

At a certain point, he has an epiphany in which he understands that Christians should not fan the flames of the Arab-Israeli conflict – the way Christian Zionists do – but should act as peacemakers.

At the end of the movie, Harrell is portrayed as having arrived at a mature understanding of his Christian faith and how Christians should respond to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The second-to-last scene of the movie shows the hip, slick, and cool Harrell walking alongside the concrete security barrier confident in his newfound understanding of the conflict he is called to help end. One half expects Harrell to quote 1 Corinthians 13:11 to the audience: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up my childish ways.” The childish ways of course, are guilt over the Holocaust, unreflective support for the Jewish people and indifference to Palestinian suffering. The irony is that the movie encourages its viewers to embrace the mirror image of this outlook – guilt over Palestinian suffering (as if it represents a great insuperable wound on humanity and challenge to the Christian faith in a manner akin to the Holocaust), unreflective support for the Palestinian cause and indifference to the safety and well-being of Jews.

The film’s commentators explicitly say that Christians should be peacemakers, but it offers another implicit message that good, well-meaning and knowledgeable Christians should always side with the oh-so-innocent Palestinians and avert one’s eyes from the unpleasant aspects of Arab and Muslim ideology and behavior. As far as one’s obligations to the Jews, Christians do need to ask forgiveness for Christian anti-Semitism and that nasty bit of history – the Holocaust – before telling them that if they can’t embrace Christianity, they at least need to do a better job of living up to the ethical demands of their faith (such as it is).

This is a pretty malevolent message to offer, but there’s an even more sinister message lurking underneath this one – the notion that good Christians can ignore Muslim and Arab hostility toward Jews and Israel because of the crimes Israel has committed against the Palestinian people. In short, Jews are alone in their fight against Muslim extremists because,

well, they deserve to be punished given what they've done to their Palestinian neighbors, whose misdeeds go unacknowledged in this movie.

This may seem like a harsh assessment, but it stands up. The only people in this movie who speak directly about hostility toward Jews and Israel in the Middle East are Christian Zionists such as John Hagee from Christians United for Israel and Malcolm Hedding from the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, who are portrayed as fear- and war-mongering nut jobs whose testimony about such things cannot be trusted. No one else speaks a word about Islamist hostility toward Israel and Jews in the Middle East, as if it's not worthy of discussion by responsible Christians.

Harrell makes his entrance by describing how as a pastor's kid he was encouraged to support Israel and love the Jewish people. His family was surrounded by people who "romanticized" and "idealized" Jewish culture. "There was even one year," Harrell reports, "when we celebrated Hanukkah. I'm not sure why we did that. We're not Jewish. We're just this normal American Midwestern family."

Harrell gets his answers in a following scene where his parents respond to this line of questioning with answers that can be boiled down to a simple, "Well, that was what we all did back then." These responses don't provide any sense of the intellectual or theological underpinning for Christian support for Israel, but portray it as a thoughtless act of mimicry.

Harrell is subsequently shown struggling with his conscience with a stained glass window in the background to indicate that his personal struggle has relevance for the wider church. Harrell says "Of course we should be thankful to the Jewish people because they gave us our scripture and our savior, and our faith, and I think that's why it's so painful to see the current conflict and

the terror. It seems that there's so many people against Israel, it seems like that as Christians, we should stand by Israel.”

The underlying issue that Harrell struggles with is not Christian attitudes toward the Jewish people but of theodicy, or the question of how one reconciles suffering with the existence of a kind and loving god who cares for humanity. For Harrell, the question that evolves during the course of the film is how God could endorse the creation of the modern state of Israel the way Christian Zionists say He does, despite the impact it has on the Palestinian people.

Saleem Munayer, a Palestinian Christian featured in the movie, raises the issue poignantly when he complains of Christian Zionists wanting to have nothing to do with him because as a Palestinian, he does not fit into their end time theology, which requires the in-gathering of Jews to make way for Christ's return.

“So an average Palestinian Christian says, ‘Wow, I’m an obstacle for the salvation of the world? I’m an obstacle for the Second Coming of Jesus? What’s going on? God doesn’t love us?’” Munayer reports, concluding “That if [Palestinian Christians] accept this theology [it] is to commit suicide as a people group.”<sup>1</sup>

As the movie proceeds, Harrell responds to the challenge posed by Palestinian suffering by slowly abandoning his dew-eyed, naïve and juvenile support for Israel in favor of a more putatively “balanced” understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This process takes place as he embarks on a cinematic journey that brings him into contact with commentators – both Christian and Jewish – who offer a different narrative about the Arab-Israeli conflict than the one offered by Christian Zionists.

In one scene, Harrell is seen walking alongside Ben White, a British journalist. Judging from appearances White is just a few years older than Harrell and appears to be the perfect role

model for the man struggling to come to terms with the Arab-Israeli conflict. When he's interviewed on screen, White seems like the perfect gentleman. Finally, Harrell has found the mentor he needs who can lead him away from the bad influence offered by those aging Christian Zionists who spout bible verses and talk in such apocalyptic terms about Israel and its adversaries. Those guys are just so uncool, and White, he's so dreamy!

There's just one problem. Ben White has a troubling animus when it comes to Israel that makes him a completely unreliable source of information and commentary about the Arab-Israeli conflict. For example, in a 2002 article published in CounterPunch,<sup>2</sup> White asserted that comparisons between Israel and the Nazi regime are "unwise and unsound" but are not necessarily anti-Semitic. He also stated that while he does not consider himself anti-Semitic, he can understand why some people are. "There are in fact a number of reasons," why someone would be anti-Semitic, he writes.

One is the state of Israel, its ideology of racial supremacy and its subsequent crimes committed against the Palestinians. It is because Zionists have always sought to equate their colonial project with Judaism that some misguidedly respond to what they see on their televisions with attacks on Jews or Jewish property.

This is the true face of the fellow our innocent protagonist has fallen in with – a polemicist who blames the modern state of Israel for the anti-Semitism that predated its founding in 1948. The establishment of this state answered a very important question: Where are the Jews to live? After enduring centuries of subjugation in both Europe and the Middle East, Jews finally got a state of their own. They achieved this state only after they were murdered *en masse* by the Nazi regime in the 1940s, which sadly was able to transmit its hate to the Arab Middle East before it was defeated by the Allies in 1945. For White to reduce Israel to a colonialist enterprise motivated by racial supremacy and to portray its alleged "crimes" against the Palestinians as an explanation for why anti-Semites hate Jews is, to say the least, an un-Christian response to

Jewish suffering and history. To be sure, White offers no hint of this madness in his on-camera appearances in *With God on Our Side*, but it is part of his *oeuvre* so to speak, and it raises serious questions as to why Speakman would include him in the movie. To people familiar with his work, White's appearance in the movie is a sure clue that Speakman is not interested in creating a responsible documentary, but is intent on creating a nasty bit of anti-Israel propaganda in which harsh anti-Zionists can portray themselves as peacemakers to an unsuspecting audience. These commentators include the aforementioned Ben White, Gary Burge, author of the factually-challenged and hostile text *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are Not being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Pilgrim Press, 2003); Stephen Sizer, who has railed against Israel and the United States on Iranian state television, and Norm Finkelstein, a Jewish hater of Israel and his fellow Jews who has referred to Abe Foxman, the leader of the Anti-Defamation League as "the Grand Wizard," a title usually applied to the leader of the Klu Klux Klan.

These are some of the people Speakman has unleashed on the evangelical community.

### **Distorted History**

Another obvious clue that demonstrates that *With God on Our Side* is a piece of dishonest propaganda is its use of a quote attributed to David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister. In a particularly jaundiced and one-sided summary of Israeli history that makes no direct mention of the Holocaust or Muslim hostility toward Jews or Israel, Harrell reports that in a 1937 letter to his son, Ben-Gurion wrote "The Arabs will have to go, but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as war."

It's a compelling quote but it's a fabrication that was debunked several years before the movie's 2010 release. In 2006, Benny Morris described the quote as "an invention, pure and

simple.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that the quote is a fabrication did not prevent Speakman from splashing it across the screen alongside a profile shot of Ben-Gurion himself.<sup>4</sup> Speakman’s use of this fabricated quote fits in nicely with the jaundiced and one-sided historical summary of the Arab-Israeli conflict he offers in *With God on Our Side*. The fact that it is uttered by Harrell, who lamented his lack of knowledge about the Arab-Israeli conflict before summarizing its history, reveals just how much of a corrupting influence the movie will have on viewers who trust the narrative it offers.

Speakman provides confirmation that he is not an honest documentarian when he highlights the impact of Israeli security measures on Palestinians without providing his audience the information it needs to understand why Israeli imposed these security measures in the first place. For example, Speakman uses a young Palestinian man – Ayman – to tell viewers that the Palestinians are not the terrorists the world believes them to be. “We are trying to convey to the world that we are a people who really want peace,” Ayman says.

Such an idealized generalization about the Palestinians is a strange turnabout in a movie whose narrator questioned the idealized and romantic view of the Jewish people he received as a child. This does not describe the violence that Israelis endured during the Second Intifada motivated by genocidal and hateful ideologies espoused by groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. These organizations routinely deny Israel’s right to exist and have perpetrated hundreds of attacks against Israeli citizens over the past several decades. To be sure, these groups may not represent all of Palestinian society, but the fact remains, anti-Jewish incitement has been a persistent aspect of Palestinian mass media for decades. If Speakman were an honest documentarian, he might have asked Ayman to address this reality, but if he did, it didn’t make it in the final cut.



At one point during the film, Harrell speaks with Saleem Munayer, a Palestinian Christian who leads a reconciliation group, *Musalaha*, who falsely suggests Palestine was effectively free of Jews since the sacking of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. He does this with the following narrative:

The whole idea was like this: Two thousand years ago the Jewish people left this land and they're not here and they're coming back. Well, coming back to what? Two thousand years is a long time. In reality there are people living [here].

The irony is almost laughable. In an a reasonable attempt to discount the false notion that Palestine was a “land without a people” prior to the arrival of European Jews in the late 1800s, Munayer posits a falsehood of his own – that no Jews lived in Palestine prior to the founding of modern Zionism. Jews have had an uninterrupted presence in the land of Israel for the past 4,000 years.

After Munayer is allowed to erase thousands of years of Jewish history, Norman Finkelstein (the man who called Abe Foxman “the Grand Wizard”) appears on screen to distort the historical record about the negotiations that took place between Israel and the Palestinian Authority at Camp David in 2000. When recounting a debate with Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben Ami, Finkelstein quotes Ben Ami as saying “If I were a Palestinian I would not have accepted what was offered at Camp David.” It sounds like a pretty damning quote until one realizes that Ehud Barak’s offer at Camp David during the summer of 2000 was an opening gambit and that Arafat brought Camp David to an end by refusing to make a counter offer in response and refused to accept the Clinton Parameters offered in DC. These actions led Ben Ami – the man Finkelstein was quoting – to conclude that Arafat had no interest in negotiating in good faith during the peace process. On this score Ben Ami is quite clear. In a 2005 interview with Ari Shavit Ben Ami stated:

Never, in the negotiations between us and the Palestinians, was there a Palestinian counterproposal. There never was and there never will be. So the Israeli negotiator always finds himself in a dilemma: either I get up and walk out because they aren't ready to put forward proposals of their own, or I make another concession. In the end, even the most moderate negotiator reaches a point where he understands that there is no end to it.<sup>5</sup>

No honest documentarian would omit this reality, but Speakman does.

Some of the most troubling testimony comes from Deana, a young Palestinian mother living in the West Bank who complains about the impact of the security barrier on her life and the life of her friends. She tells the audience:

Every day we pass by the wall and it's in front of us. It represents a hundred slaps. Whether there is an Israeli standing before it or not it is confirmation that we have no say, we own nothing, we own no land we have no authority and we have no self-respect. Even the Israeli soldiers are not there, the wall is. I see it every day when I come and go to the office. The soldiers no longer need to just stand there and watch us to receive their salaries. They know what they are doing. They are clever. Job well done.

Later, Deana complains of being delayed at a checkpoint into Jerusalem before giving birth to a child, describing how the male soldiers sent for a female soldier to determine that she was in fact pregnant before letting her through. She also complains that her permit to enter into Jerusalem was only good for the day before she was supposed to give birth to her child. She reports that one woman died in childbirth at a checkpoint. Clearly, the barrier has had a negative impact on her life. The impact is summarized as follows:

Most of my work used to be in Jerusalem. All the seminars I gave were in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Not one day passed without me traveling to Jerusalem. I never expected in my lifetime that I would not be able to go have a medical exam when I was in an emergency situation, or before I gave birth. But you don't have a choice anymore. You have to accept anyone who that works here [in the West Bank]. Suddenly you found this country of yours was gone, you have nothing. What? There is no mind that can comprehend what is happening here.

With her testimony, Deana exhibits a profound contradiction that she makes no effort to resolve. On one hand, she hates Israel, but on the other hand, she expresses an unrealistic sense of entitlement over access to its hospitals. The security barrier and the checkpoints that limit her

access to Israeli health care were not built in a vacuum but in response to the Second Intifada that cost more than 1,200 Israelis their lives. Prominent Palestinian leaders have vowed to bring Israel's existence to an end and have followed up on these vows with periodic attacks on Israeli civilians. And Deana still expects to have easy and regular access to Israeli health care.

The presence of Gary Burge and Stephen Sizer in *With God our Side* is also very troubling. Gary Burge is the author of *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* published by Pilgrim Press in 2003. This text is a stunning collection of misstatements of fact. For example, in *Whose Land Whose Promise*, Burge falsely asserts that Arab-Israelis are denied access to political parties, military service and union membership in Israel. And like the movie in which he appears, Burge himself has put words into David Ben-Gurion's mouth that he did not speak to demonstrate that the Israeli leader was intent on perpetrating an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Burge writes: "In a letter to his son in 1937 he [Ben-Gurion] wrote, "We will expel the Arabs and take their place." It's a compelling quote, but it's fake, just like the one described above.

Burge's application of scripture to the Arab-Israeli conflict is also deeply troubling. For example, his exposition of John 15:6<sup>7</sup> states that "The people of Israel cannot claim to be planted as vines in the land; they cannot be rooted in the vineyard unless first they are grafted into Jesus. Branches that attempt living in the land, the vineyard, which refuse to be attached to Jesus will be cast out and burned."<sup>8</sup> Polemics such as this are simply inexcusable and would in most instances, disqualify one as a legitimate commentator on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but not in Speakman's movie.

Stephen Sizer's presence in the film is also a shock given that he has appeared on state-supported television in, of all places, Iran, to recount the evils of Christian Zionism. In one

instance, Sizer, an Anglican priest, appeared in Press TV's studio in Tehran. At the opening of the show, the English-speaking host stated blithely that “No religious persuasion has ever been more clearly responsible for so much bloodshed and destruction as has Christian Zionism. This 100-year-old offshoot of fundamental Christianity, has almost single-handedly legitimized wars in Arab states since January 1991.”

The absurdity of this statement (which apparently, Sizer did not challenge) is self-evident. America attacked Iraq and liberated Kuwait in 1991 with the support of Saudi Arabia, and most of the bloodshed in the Middle East has been the result of conflict between Muslim and Arab countries which cannot be blamed on Christian theology in any way, shape, or form. With his presence and apparent acquiescence, Sizer legitimized a narrative that demonized his fellow Christians.

Rev. Sizer also appeared on the Press TV show “Hart of the Matter” hosted by British journalist Alan Hart who lionized Yassir Arafat in his 1985 book *Arafat: Terrorist or Peacemaker*, which was reissued in the U.S. in 1989 under the title *Arafat: A Political Biography*. (Hart also authored a 2009 text titled *Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews*.)

On Hart's show (a 13-segment series which aired between October 2008 and January 2009), Sizer asserted that Israeli Jews are being set up for another exile because of their inability to make peace with the Palestinians.

And in May 2008, Sizer participated in an anti-Zionist conference that took place in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Indonesian Society for Palestinian Freedom (also called the Voice of Palestine), the organization that sponsored the conference, calls for a one-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict – in other words the destruction of Israel.

This event proved to be a font for anti-Zionist Hezbollah members, and terrorist supporters. According to a Voice of Palestine video posted on YouTube, the Neda Institute, an Iranian group that helped organize the Holocaust denial conference sponsored by the Iranian government in December 2006, sponsored the event. The list of speakers for the conference indicates that members of Hezbollah spoke at the conference, as did a representative of from the Neda Institute.

Other speakers at the conference included Dr. Zahra Mustafawi, a daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini who sent an open letter of support to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah during the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006. In her opening remarks to the conference at which Rev. Sizer spoke, Mustafawi made the following statement, which is emblematic of the hostility toward Israel expressed by Islamic extremists throughout the Middle East:

These days the Zionists in an illegal state called Israel, are celebrating the 60th year of their aggression against the nation of Palestine as well as the crime of occupying their land, killing them and obliging them to leave their land. They are celebrating the cruel attacks they had against Palestinians and many old people, children, women and innocents were killed and a lot of orphans are left, so, this is their nature to celebrate the crime and at the same time expecting Germany to be ashamed of so called Holocaust.

Palestine is the holy land of all the religions and due to the aggression of the Zionists its oppressed people have either been martyred or rendered homeless and displaced from their home and hearth or are enduring suffering and hardship due to the pressures exerted by the usurping Zionists. There is not a single day when we don't hear the news about the genocide of the innocent Palestinian people, civilians, children and women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Later in her statement, Mustafawi makes her intentions for the conference perfectly clear – the creation of an umbrella organization for anti-Israel and anti-Zionist groups that will work together to “increase the vulnerability of Israel.”

If Sizer truly is committed to peacemaking as he says in *With God on Our Side*, what exactly was he doing at a conference such as this? And what was Speakman thinking when he

allowed Sizer to appear in his film given his willingness to appear at a conference organized by Holocaust deniers?

There are a number of other contradictions in *With God on Our Side* that undermine its credibility as an honest documentary. First off, in its anxious treatment of Christian Zionism, WGOS emphasizes the power of religious belief to promote conflict. Of course, religious belief *does* promote conflict, but the movie itself does not provide any instances in which Christian Zionism has caused any acts of violence. And at the same time it ignores the manner in which Islamist extremism has been used to justify hate and violence toward Israel and Jews in the Middle East.

What makes the movie's failure to address the issue of Muslim anti-Semitism so troubling is the manner in which its commentators heap moral and ethical claims on modern Israel (and not its adversaries) because of the connections of the Jewish people to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish religion and Jewish history. Canadian scholar Ron Dart begins this process early in the film when he reports that Judaism is not merely about the promise of land, but the ethical obligations that come with it. In particular, Dart reports, Judaism obligates its followers to respect the rights of foreigners and outsiders. Later in the movie, Dart states "it's important to understand the Jewish (sic) have gone through thousands of years of suffering. That has to be understood." He continues:

But from that two paths can be taken. The path of deeper compassion, of mercy and justice and peace or the tradition of Berlin walls that exclude people who are not like us.

The implication is that Israeli Jews have disregarded their religion and their history of suffering by oppressing the Palestinian people and as a result, have invited their own punishment. Dart does not say this punishment is the result of God's wrath, but does suggest that whatever violence they've endured at the hands of the Palestinians (which is given short shrift in

the movie), is the logical consequence of Israeli policies. This message comes across when Dart says “If you put your heel on someone’s head, there’s going to be a reaction. Eventually it will come. The tinder is there for a fire.”

Dart will not want to admit it, but this narrative gives Palestinian and Arab terrorists sanction to commit further acts of violence against Israel. It also ignores a number of other realities, including the fact that Israel has been attacked from nearly every bit of territory from which it has withdrawn since the Oslo Accords and that Lebanese and Palestinian terrorists have received substantial support from Iran, who cannot assert in any way shape or form that they have been oppressed by Israel. The fact is that there is an anti-Semitic and ideological component to Arab and Muslim terrorism that cannot be blamed on Israeli policies and yet, neither Dart nor any of the other commentators in this film can be bothered to address this reality.

Another central messages of *With God on Our Side* is the assertion that God’s blessings and promises as outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures no longer accrue to the Jewish people and should not be used to justify or legitimize Christian support for the modern state of Israel. This argument is made in response to the Christian Zionist use of Genesis 12:3 to explain their support for the modern Jewish state. Burge questions whether modern day Jews can claim their lineage to Abraham in light of the New Testament, which “raises the question that not all those who claim to be descendants of Abraham might be descendents of Abraham because the lineage is not determined by genetics or bloodline, necessarily, but it is a spiritual disposition.” Elsewhere in the film, Ron Dart imposes ethical demands on the modern state of Israel (and not its adversaries) because Israel is a Jewish state, but here, Burge seeks to challenge the Jewishness of its Jewish inhabitants based on their “spiritual disposition.”

According to Sizer, the application of the phrase “chosen people” to the Jewish people leads people to ignore the human rights abuses perpetrated by the modern state of Israel against the Palestinians. “They are given a free pass for that because they are God’s chosen people,” he says.

The notion that Israel has been given a “free pass” is laughable. While Israel’s Christian supporters in the U.S. are much more willing to acknowledge Israel’s legitimate security concerns than the commentators in *With God on Our Side*, the fact remains that Israel has been the target of a long-standing campaign to demonize the Jewish state. The fruits of this campaign, which has its roots in the Middle East can be seen at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the World Council of Churches, and sometimes, the gatherings of mainline Protestant churches. By way of comparison, these very same bodies have largely ignored the ongoing mistreatment of Christians by Islamists in Muslim-majority countries throughout the Middle East. The historical narrative offered in *With God on Our Side* seems designed to encourage young evangelical Christians in the U.S. to participate in this campaign of demonization.

The film offers a number of other messages that need to be unpacked.

The movie attempts to portray Christian Zionism as a spoiler to the peace process through its support for American politicians who unreflectively support Israel and the right wing of Israeli politics. There are a number of problems with this depiction. First, the outcome of the 2008 presidential election and President Barack Obama’s policies regarding Israel demonstrates that Christian Zionists do not have anywhere near the power attributed to them by their critics.

Secondly, the Israeli government does not take directions from Christian Zionists in the U.S. Over the objections of Christian Zionists, Israeli leaders have engaged in ongoing negotiations with the Palestinians under a land-for-peace rubric that clearly violates John



Hagee's dictum offered in *With God on Our Side*, to not divide the land. Hagee has warned against negotiations and withdrawals from territory, yet these policies have proceeded under a number of different Israeli leaders. Secondly, the voting public in Israel does not take its cues from the Christian Zionist movement. Israelis have not soured on the peace process because of anything said to them by John Hagee or Malcolm Hedding, but because of the violence of the Second Intifada and the wars with Hamas and Hezbollah in the years since. This violence cannot be laid at the feet of Christian Zionists.

Lastly, American support for Israel in the U.S. cannot be attributed entirely to the Christian Zionist movement, but is in fact part of America's civil religion. American civil religion is a conglomeration of beliefs regarding the American people and the role they are called to play in human history. These beliefs include a sense that the American people are "an almost chosen people," who live under the providential care and judgment of God and consequently have a positive role to play in the course of human history. These beliefs, which are obviously rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, portray America as the "New Israel." While this civil religion is periodically assailed, with some justification, as a form of idolatry used to justify bad acts such as the extirpation of the Native Americans under the rubric of manifest destiny, these beliefs have, in other instances played an important role in sustaining the American people as they withstood the onslaught of Nazism in the 1940s and Communism in the aftermath of World War II.

The impact of this civil religion on American history cannot be underestimated. During times of crisis, presidents have invoked aspects of this religion to invigorate and direct the American people. For example, Abraham Lincoln relied on the notion of God sitting in judgment of the American people to give meaning to the battles of the Civil War that cost thousands of

people their lives. Declaring that slavery was a great national sin, Lincoln characterized these battles as part of the price that the American people had to pay for tolerating slavery in their midst.

Given the role Hebrew scriptures have played in establishing, sustaining and correcting the actions of this civil religion, it should come as no surprise that the United States has a special relationship with both the Jewish people and their homeland. The American people derive no small measure of their self-understanding from the Hebrew scriptures, and as a result have a special relationship with the Jewish state whose historical roots also go back into these scriptures. This relationship is further underscored by the role the U.S. played in defeating the Nazis and assisting in the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Given this history, America has a huge stake in the continued safety and well being of the Jewish state and its destruction would pose a serious threat to the credibility of American civil religion.

And ultimately that is the point of *With God on Our Side* – to assail and undermine those aspects of American civil religion that contribute to America’s willingness to support Israel. In the narrative offered by this movie, the American people have no obligation or stake in making sure the Holocaust, which began in earnest in 1942 and came to an end in 1945, does not restart again in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To the producers of *With God on Our Side*, the only people who have any real stake in preventing a restart of the Holocaust are the Jews themselves and whatever moral claims they can make on the rest of humanity are weakened or attenuated by Israel’s crimes against the Palestinians.

If the American people were to embrace this understanding and stand idly by as Islamists assail, and God forbid, destroy the Jewish state, it would have a hugely demoralizing impact on

America's civil religion, just as the Holocaust undermined the credibility of Christianity in Europe.

What would replace it is anyone's guess.

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Palestinian Christians are not the only people group who are faced with such a scenario. As a matter of fact, Israeli Jews are also the target of similar end time beliefs held by Muslim extremists in the Middle East who, unlike Christian Zionists, have killed people in the service of their beliefs. The impact of these beliefs on Jews would, in most instances, raise questions about the goodness of God, as would the historical oppression of Jews in Christian Europe and the present-day oppression of Christians in the Muslim Middle East.

Speakman leaps over these obstacles with ease and as a result, *With God on Our Side* manipulates the issue of theodicy to assail the Jewish state with great effect. The movie communicates to its audience that the Holocaust is not the challenge to the Christian faith we think it is and that really, Palestinian suffering is actually a bigger deal. If this gambit succeeds, it will be in part because the film's audience is ignorant of the role Christian theology played in laying the ground work for the Holocaust.

There will be another contributing factor if this gambit succeeds, however: A refusal to address how Muslim theology has been used to oppress non-Muslims throughout history. During the second half of the 20th century, the great challenge of theodicy was how Christians could affirm the salvific power and legitimacy of their faith after baptized Christians in Europe were responsible for the murder of European Jewry. One would think that in the 21st century, the great challenge of theodicy would not be posed by Palestinian Christians and their allies who blame Israel for their suffering, but by Christians living under Muslim rule throughout the world who have been murdered and oppressed by Muslim extremists throughout the world "in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." The one question they could posit is how God, if He is indeed sovereign, compassionate and merciful, allow such outrages to proceed?

But these questions are beside the point for *With God on Our Side*, because the movie, like a lot of other materials related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, is concerned with suffering that can be blamed on the Jewish state, and by extension, the Christian Zionists who support that state. For some reason, suffering that is laid at the feet of the Jewish people and their state is some how qualitatively worse than suffering caused by other nations and political movements, even when the suffering caused by these other movements is, on a quantitative level, several degrees of magnitude greater raising the possibility that the real challenge of theodicy is not Palestinian suffering, but Jewish power and statehood. Given the supersessionist impulse so evident in both Christianity and Islam, one question common to both faiths is: "A Jewish state? How could God let such a thing happen?"

<sup>2</sup> Ben White, "Is it Possible to Understand the Rise in Anti-Semitism," CounterPunch, 18 June 2002, accessed 8 September 2011, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/06/18/is-it-possible-to-understand-the-rise-in-anti-semitism/>.

<sup>3</sup> For more background see Dexter Van Zile (DVZ), Rotoop Productions Uses Fabricated Ben Gurion Quote in Movie," Snapshots, June 08, 2011, Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, <http://blog.camera.org>, accessed 9 September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The error was uncovered and publicized by this author in early June 2011, but as of this writing, (Sept 4, 2011), Speakman has made no effort to acknowledge or retract the use of this quote.

<sup>5</sup> Ari Shavit, "End of a Journey," Haaretz, 5 December 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The film provides no information as to what type of seminars Deena ran in Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> "Whoever does not abide with me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

<sup>8</sup> Burge, 2003, 176.

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**LIAISON COMMITTEE** The Liaison Committee was first established in 1986 as an informal Jewish-Christian initiative to foster mutual respect and understanding between local Jews and Christians in a congenial atmosphere and as a platform for raising and resolving issues that impact on both communities. *The Liaison Committee* was recently reactivated on the same foundations by the *Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel and the B'nai B'rith World Center*-Jerusalem. Members of the LC include religious, civic, academic and political figures in Israel who seek to conduct frank discussion with no political or religious bias. The ambience is conducive to liaison and personal communication, where problems can be raised and discussed in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality. Since the Liaison Committee was reinstated, meetings have been held on a number of issues vital to both faith communities in the Middle East: on The state of Christian communities in Israel and the Palestinian Authority (November 2009); The Kairos Declaration (January 2010). The first full meeting of the Committee with Jewish and Christians participants was held on April 21, 2010 and focused on the *Lineamenta (guidelines)* for the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops; The report of the Middle East Study Committee commissioned by the Presbyterian Church (June 2010); The Sumela Monastery in Modern Turkey. A Greek Orthodox Perspective (November 2010); The Rabbis' Letter: Halacha and Practice (February 2011). Invitees to the re-instated LC include Israeli government ministers, members of the Chief Rabbinate and other rabbinic figures, MK's, officials of the Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, and Interior Ministries, representatives of the Jerusalem Municipality and other local authorities, leaders of various churches in Israel, representatives of Christian institutions, theologians and academics.

**ECUMENICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH FRATERNITY IN ISRAEL (ETRFI)** was founded in Jerusalem in February 1966 by a group of clergy and theologians living in Israel. They shared the feeling that recent history demanded a fundamental consideration of Christian attitudes towards the Jewish faith and people, and that the State of Israel offered a unique setting for facing this task together. The objectives of the ETRFI is to deepen the Christian relationship with Jews, Judaism and Israel, to draw together the different Christian traditions into a theological fraternity and to be a catalyst in Christian-Jewish dialogue and reconciliation world-wide. Today, ETRFI is the recognized roof-organization for Christians engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue in Israel. It is also the ecumenical group containing the widest range of members from all the historic churches. ETRFI collaborates with a very great range of organizations and institutions in Israel, including all Christian institutions and many Jewish ones, such as: American Jewish Committee, B'nai Brith, Hebrew University, Jerusalem Foundation and Shalom Hartman Institute.

**B'NAI B'RITH WORLD CENTER** The B'nai B'rith World Center was established in 1980 as a poignant response to U.N Security Council Resolution 487 that called earlier that year on all member states to remove their diplomatic missions from Jerusalem. Since then the World Center serves as the permanent and official presence of B'nai B'rith International in Jerusalem and the organization's public affairs arm in Israel. Through its myriad educational programs and well-established relationships with political leaders across the spectrum, with the diplomatic corps and with leading academic institutions, the World Center strengthens Israel-Diaspora relations, fortifies Israel's sovereignty on Jerusalem and interprets developments concerning the Jewish state for B'nai B'rith members and Israel supporters around the world. Among its projects: "Jerusalem Address", "Award for Journalism for Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage", hosting artists and scientists in Israel, international humanitarian activities, Israel Emergency Fund. B'nai B'rith International (est. 1843) is the world's largest and oldest Jewish organization. B'nai B'rith International established organizations that became inalienable assets in the Jewish world such as: "Hillel", "ADL", "Presidents Conference", World Jewish Congress etc. With more than 150,000 members and affiliates in more than 50 countries including Israel, here was established the first lodge in 1888.