

Darby Made 'Christian Zionism' for the Empire

by Mike Minnicino

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of American Christians have now publicly pledged to uncritically support the state of Israel in any policy it chooses, including the juridical annexation of its occupied territories, and the expulsion, or worse, of the Palestinian population. It is perhaps pointless to explain to them that such Israeli actions would surely plunge the Mideast into chaos and deeper violence, and could easily escalate into World War III. For these Christian Zionists, World War III is not a deterrent. It is a longed-for goal.

It might be objected that, however scary this state of mind may appear, these are actually matters of individual religious belief, and, thus, none of our business. The purpose here is not to debate doctrine. We wish only to firmly locate this belief in the context of certain, undeniable historical facts. The reader then may decide whether we are dealing with questions of theology, or national security.

Creation of British Foreign Office

The first such historical fact is that modern Christian Zionism was created less than 200 years ago as a covert initiative of the British Foreign Office. At the time, it had a lot less to do with the Scripture, than with the geopolitical needs of the emerging British Empire.

The beliefs under consideration are based on a theology most broadly known as Millennialism. Although there are many distinctions between them, Millennialists share a belief that the Bible has literally prophesied all the phases (or "dispensations") of human history, and that we have entered, or are entering, the last phase. The "end times" entail, most notably, the physical playing out of the scenario described in the apocalyptic Revelation of St. John, including the rise of the Antichrist, the cataclysmic battle of world armies on the plain of Megiddo ("Armageddon"), the Second Coming of Christ; in short, the end of the world. Thus, for instance, this belief structure apprehends attempts by some Israeli fanatics to rebuild Solomon's Temple, not as a dangerous provocation, but as furthering the will of God.

All types of Millennialists, whether they know it or not, derive from a single source: the theories of British clergyman John Nelson Darby (1800-82). Today in America, ideas like "the Rapture," or "the Tribulation," are discussed everywhere: by televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, in the hugely popular "Left Behind" series of novels and films, on bumper stickers, and on hundreds of websites. All of it



1840s "Millennialist" preacher John Nelson Darby became the "tongue" for Foreign Office operatives who hijacked Zionism, and made it "Christian Zionism"—a scheme for controlling the Mideast for the Empire, or for blowing it up in religious war. All American "fundamentalists" use or believe Darby's fantasies.

started with Darby.

Darby had middle-class Irish parents and one famous relative, an admiral who served with Lord Horatio Nelson, after whom young John was named. After ordination in the Church of Ireland, Darby became fascinated with Biblical prophecy. In the 1830s, Darby abandoned all institutional churches, and founded a sect in England that eventually became known as the Plymouth Brethren.

The Brethren never had more than a few hundred members at any time, although two of them later became well known: Sir Robert Anderson, the head of Criminal Investigations for Scotland Yard and the man who ran the notoriously ineffectual Jack the Ripper investigation; and Aleister Crowley, a devout child who became the world's most famous Satanist. Darby's impact was not based on the numbers of his immediate followers, but on the widespread influence of his evangelical tours throughout Europe and America, his books, and especially, the sponsorship of the highest levels of the English aristocracy.

Darby's emphasis on Biblical inerrancy and prophecy was not new. Even his apocalypticism was part of mainstream Christianity, although it was never very influential, due to the Fifth-Century efforts of Church Father St. Augustine, who strenuously argued against the attempt to make time, as understood by men, commensurable with Time in the mind of God.

Darby Hijacks Zionism for Empire

What was revolutionary was Darby's assertion that certain current events were actually specific, prophesied signposts leading to the End of Times. In one of the most important instances, "Gog," described in the book of Ezekiel as the great power that attacks the people of Israel from the north, was really, said Darby, Russia. (Fans of the "Left Behind" series will here realize, if they don't already know, why the fictional Antichrist is portrayed as a Russian United Nations official.) What makes it all work is Darby's creation of Christian Zion-



Is your Attorney General a Moonie, or only a Darbyite? John Ashcroft has some strange bedfellows. He was the major speaker at the first Christian Zionist events on Capital Hill, organized by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, who specializes in fundraising from fundamentalist Christians for right-wing Israeli projects. And Ashcroft, as guest of honor, joined Rev. Sun Myung Moon, at the Interfaith Inaugural Prayer Luncheon, Jan. 21, 2001, hosted by the Washington Times Foundation, a Moonie front.

ism—of which he absolutely must be acknowledged the founder.

Theretofore, the Jewish people (the actual living Jews, not the bad-metaphorical “people of Israel”) accounted for next to nothing in the European corridors of power, except as sources of credit or targets of socially useful pogroms. Theologically, Christians (with notable courageous exceptions) could justify their contempt for Jews with the belief that God’s covenant with Israel had been superceded by Jesus’ new covenant.

This was wrong, Darby claimed, but for very strange reasons. Rather, the Christian churches were a mere “parenthesis” in God’s fore-ordained progression of dispensations; the final dispensation would not see the Christian church supercede Israel; it would see Israel supercede the Church! This would be so because, at the literal last moment, the Christian elect would be physically gathered into Heaven in the Rapture a concept first popularized by Darby. Then the Jews, most of whom would ultimately see Jesus as Messiah, would join forces with those wavering Christians who were left, to battle the forces of the Antichrist before the ultimate triumph of God. Thus, for Darby, the physical return of the actual people of Israel to their historic homeland in the Middle East, including their gathering strength and their rebuilding of the Temple, was the fulfillment of God’s will.

It so happens that key elements of Darby’s new theology corresponded exactly to the foreign policy requirements of the British oligarchy at that particular moment. In the 1840s and 1850s, as Darbyism was beginning to take hold, the British East India Company (then, for all intents and purposes, the British Empire) was conducting what can only be called a World War to develop its hold over South Asia. The 1840s saw the British gain suzerainty over large parts of India, in-

cluding the still-contested Kashmir.

In 1842, an East India Company-run Anglo-Indian army of 16,000 men was massacred in an attempt to subdue Afghanistan. By the 1840s, two things were abundantly clear to the imperialists. First, in terms of profitability and manpower, the center of the empire must become India. This meant that all of the flanks of India (e.g., Afghanistan, Burma) must be consolidated; and, more importantly, the trade routes connecting South Asia with England must be protected; all the most efficient of those routes went through the Middle East. Second, the only serious threat to England’s Asia empire was no longer the historic enemy France, but Russia, which had begun serious discussions with the Ottoman Empire for a stronger presence in the Mideast.

In 1853, this geopolitical assessment led to the Crimean War, in which England put together a coalition of France, the Ottomans, and the Kingdom of Sardinia to definitively humble Tsar Nicholas I’s ambitions. The three-year conflict was a bloodbath (the “Charge of the Light Brigade” was typical of the blundering on both sides). So, when Darby surprisingly specified Russia as the source of evil in the world, one must entertain suspicions. Darby’s Russophobia was, by all accounts, one of the great appeals of his evangelical tours, and of his books and the books of his followers. For instance, coinciding with Darby’s tour of the United States in 1857, a sympathetic Washington pastor named Fountain Pitts preached a sermon to the U.S. Congress, warning that Russia was preparing to invade America, and that the final battle against the Antichrist would take place in the Valley of the Mississippi, which, Pitts asserted, was what Scripture meant by the “valley of Megiddo.” As can be imagined, Darby’s warnings were widely used to discredit President Lincoln’s Civil War alliance with Russia’s Nicholas I.

The Creation of Christian Zionism

In addition to Russophobia, what the East India Company needed most was a bastion to protect the Western approaches to the India trade routes—smack in the middle of someplace like, say, Palestine. Direct colonization was diplomatically impossible, but an indirect takeover was thought feasible. Thus, the English hit upon the idea of having the Jews, led by English Jews, return to their Palestinian homeland. It should be noted that, up until that point, there had been several projects for the creation of a Jewish homeland, most of which did not envision Jews returning to an undeveloped area like Palestine. M.M. Noah, the most famous Jew in the early United States, bought vast tracts of land in upstate New York as part of a plan for new Zion. However, the big campaign to relocate Zion in “the lands of the Bible” came from Gentiles in England in the 1840s.

The effort to hijack Zionism started in 1839 with two articles. The first was by Darby, “The Hopes of the Church of God in Connexion with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations as Revealed in Prophecy,” which laid out his thesis of God’s plan for the Jews. The second was “State and Prospects of the Jews,” by Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.

Shaftesbury was an evangelical not officially connected to Darby; the Shaftesburys were one of the realm’s first families, providing ministers of state for generations; the Third Earl, for instance, sponsored John Locke. Shaftesbury called upon the Crown not to grant full citizenship to England’s Jews, but rather to encourage them to emigrate to Palestine where they could fulfill the Divine plan. He simultaneously began agitating for the creation of an Anglican bishopric in Jerusalem to counteract the influence of the Roman Catholic (French) and Orthodox (Russian) ecclesiastical presence already established in that area.

By 1845, the Shaftesbury-Darby agitation was such that the Colonial Office produced a confidential report proposing “the establishment of the Jewish nation in Palestine; as a protected state under the guardianship of Great Britain,” which would place England “in a commanding position in the Levant from whence to check the process of encroachment, to overawe our enemies, and, if necessary, to repel their advance.”

In 1865, Shaftesbury was instrumental in the founding of the Palestine Exploration Fund, which brought the Darbyites and other evangelicals, wealthy Jews like the Rothschilds and Montefiores, together with the highest levels of English aristocracy, to officially claim Palestine for the Empire. At the Fund’s founding ceremony, no less than the Archbishop of York sermonized: “This country of Palestine belongs to you and me; it is essentially ours. It is the land toward which we turn as a fountain of our hopes; it is the land to which we may look with as true a patriotism as we do this dear old England.”

The Will of God had finally been brought into conformity with English foreign policy.