THE INFLUENCE OF DISPENSATIONALIST THEOLOGY ON EVANGELICAL PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIMS POST-9/11

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ABSTRACT

The main hypothesis of this paper argues that dispensationalism, specifically dispensational pre-millennialism, has significantly impacted a segment of evangelical Christian attitudes toward Muslims in the post-9/11 era, primarily in a negative fashion. The central concept of this thesis depends on a comprehensive analysis of evangelical Christian attitudes toward Muslims and Islam post-9/11 and the influence of the evangelical interpretation of dispensationalism on these attitudes in the context of the history and development of millennialism and modern dispensationalism in Britain and the United States. Two factors are identified that contribute to the dispensational focus on Muslims by evangelical Christians: 1) Christian Zionism and its self-proclaimed mandate to contribute to the security of Israel in order to fulfill eschatological prophecy and; 2) the necessity of identifying a modern apocalyptic “scapegoat” - a country, group of countries or religion that is perceived to fit the description of the aggressor against Christianity during the Judgement dispensation. Furthermore, the research indicates that the impact of dispensationalism, in conjunction with the entry of evangelical Christians into the political realm, endangers the foundational concept of religious pluralism in American society. The concluding portion of this paper presents examples of evangelical congregations with moderate, non-dispensational, and peace-building theological beliefs
and will suggest avenues that evangelicals can take to develop a counterweight to the religious division and opposition to pluralism promoted by an overwhelming majority of dispensationalists.
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................... iii

INTRODUCTION.................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER I. IN THE BEGINNING: THE ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN DISPENSATIONALISM................................. 11

CHAPTER II. DER JUDENSTAAT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DISPENSATIONALISM............................................................... 36


CHAPTER IV. THE “AXIS OF EVIL”: DISPENSATIONALISM POST-9/11........................................... 74

CHAPTER V. A WAY FORWARD: PATHS TO MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11.................................................................. 95

CONCLUSION.................................................................................................................... 121

BIBLIOGRAPHY............................................................................................................... 123
INTRODUCTION

…I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

--Rev. 3:3 (NIV)

Dispensational pre-millennialism is a theological worldview with eschatological overtones, popular among some evangelical Christians. It has negatively influenced fundamentalist Christian attitudes toward Muslims for decades, becoming resurgent once again in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington. Pre-millennialism is based on the eschatological tradition of millennialism, defined as the belief in the millennium as described in the biblical book of Revelation. It refers to a period of 1,000 years during which Jesus Christ will reign on earth. Dispensational pre-millennialism is based on the Protestant tradition of dispensationalism, an understanding of God’s relationship to humankind as divided into periods, or dispensations, the final of which is the dispensation of Judgment heralding the Second Coming of Christ. Dispensational pre-millennialism, considered a heresy prior to the 19th century, has, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, represented an ever-increasing influence on evangelical Christian perceptions of Israel and its relationship with the Muslim world. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, during which Israel captured and occupied Jerusalem embodied the first significant linkage of dispensational theology with specific world events and spawned the first round of dispensational literature that reached a broader, more mainstream audience. Similarly, the period following 9/11 has witnessed a resurging evangelical Christian apocalyptic theology in
which militant Islam is once again the designated eschatological antagonist to Christianity, in this case replacing atheistic Communism. This preoccupation with eschatology in the context of the existence of Israel in modern times on the part of this subset of the Christian community raises questions that have import over Muslim-Christian relations. This paper will address such questions as: Has dispensational pre-millennialism influenced evangelical Christianity to take a confrontational stance toward the American Muslim population in the post-9/11 period and, if so, what effect might this conflict have on the acceptance of religious pluralism in the United States? What measures have evangelical Protestant denominations taken since 9/11 to counter the rising tide of Islamophobia in the United States?

Evangelical Christians who subscribe to dispensationalism are faced with somewhat of a theological dilemma when approaching the concept of dispensational pre-millennialism. An uncompromising belief in pre-millennialism, as represented by their particular interpretation of the biblical Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, tends to drive dispensational evangelical Christians toward encouraging developments that often have cosmic combative overtones, such as Israeli control of Jerusalem, that they believe herald the advent of the pre-millennial dispensation. The 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States resulted in the most dramatic increase in the amount of evangelical Christian literature devoted to forecasting the final biblical dispensation since the late 1960s and early 1970s that saw Jerusalem captured and America defeated in Vietnam by Communist forces. Much of the literature addressing dispensational pre-millennialism published since 9/11 has intensified in nature and crystallized the description of the role of Islam in the eschatological end-game, resulting in mistrust of and, in extreme cases,
hostility toward Muslims by many evangelical Christians. As a result, religious pluralism in the United States is facing a new, redoubled threat from evangelical Christian organizations and leaders that view Islam as a direct challenge, not only to Christianity in eschatological terms, but also the perceived right to Christian hegemony in the United States.

This paper will argue that dispensationalism, specifically dispensational pre-millennialism, has significantly impacted a segment of evangelical Christian attitudes toward Muslims, primarily in a negative fashion, in the post-9/11 era. Two underlying factors contributing to the dispensational focus on Muslims on behalf of evangelical Christians will be discussed: 1) Christian Zionism and its self-proclaimed mandate to contribute to the security of Israel in order to fulfill eschatological prophecy and; 2) the necessity of identifying a modern apocalyptic “scapegoat” - a country, group of countries or religion that is perceived to fit the description of the aggressor against Christianity during the Tribulation dispensation. The secondary hypothesis of this thesis will argue that the impact of dispensationalism, in conjunction with the entry of evangelical Christians into the political realm, endangers the foundational concept of religious pluralism in American society; however, evangelicals with moderate, non-dispensational, and peace-building theological beliefs offer a counterweight to the religious division and opposition to pluralism promoted by an overwhelming majority of dispensationalists.

The goal of this paper is not to support nor refute the merits of the theology of dispensational pre-millennialism; rather, it is, primarily, to identify the roadblocks to interfaith relations that dispensationalism presents and, secondarily, examine the effect of
the evangelical worldview on the understanding of religious pluralism and tolerance in the United States. Dispensational pre-millennialism is a theological viewpoint that should be respected as much as any other viewpoint. However, like other theological viewpoints, it harbors ingrained prejudices which manifest themselves in ways intended and unintended by its adherents, discoloring their views of the religious and cultural “Other.” An effort will be made to identify avenues by which to build trust and understanding between evangelical Christians and Muslims, overcoming the tunnel vision of dogmatic theology. Refusing to allow dogma to blindly lead with little regard for the practical implications of its influence was a primary theme of the ministry of Jesus Christ. The current evangelical Christian attitude of distrust of Muslims and Islam, driven by dogmatic interpretations of biblical prophecy, represents a significant and increasing deterioration of the foundation upon which Muslim/Christian relations has stood upon in this country.

The first chapter of this thesis will define dispensational pre-millennialism and explore the early development of this particular apocalyptic theology in 19th century Britain and its subsequent full-scale adoption by some American evangelicals. The influence of Irish evangelist John Nelson Darby (d. 1882), a leading figure of the evangelical group Plymouth Brethren considered to be the father of modern dispensationalism, as well as the subsequent promotion of dispensationalism among American evangelicals by Cyrus I. Scofield (d. 1921), and others will be examined in an effort to establish the origins of dispensationalism as a theological worldview popular on the fringes of mainstream Christianity. Following the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the role of dispensationalists in the early development of Christian
Zionism proved to be a monumental driving force behind the prominence of Christian Zionism in the political thought of post-World War I policy makers in Britain and America.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this paper will explore the influence of Christian Zionism on the creation of the modern State of Israel in 1948 and the identification of the first modern entity considered to be the eschatological aggressor described in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel – the Soviet Union. The presence of dispensationalist Christian political influence in the years prior to the creation of the state of Israel marked the first major impact of dispensationalism on relations between evangelical Christians and Muslims on a national scale in the modern era. The 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and her Arab neighbors, in which Jerusalem fell into Jewish hands for the first time in over 2,000 years and the resulting curiosity in eschatology based on the role of Israel in apocalyptic scripture, heralded the emergence of evangelical dispensationalist literature in the United States that appealed to a wider mainstream audience. Dispensationalist authors such as Hal Lindsey (b. 1929) and Dr. John Hagee (b. 1940) have published works that specifically target Islam as a player in the eschatological endgame and paint Muslims as the antagonist in the apocalyptic narrative.¹ American foreign policy decisions during this time period that were benevolent to Arab nations at the perceived expense of Israel, such as arms sales to Egypt in 1976 and to Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 1978 by the Carter administration, gave rise to the so-called “Christian Right,” an activist faith-based group, primarily comprised of dispensationalist evangelicals that favored

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support of Israel at all costs, including the subjugation of Palestinian Arabs. The influence of the Christian Right in American politics, hallmarked by dispensationalist theology, will be examined with respect to its relationship to Muslim-Christian accords in the United States.

This section of the paper will also address the resurgence in dispensational theology in media and literature since the 9/11 terror attacks and its influence over evangelical perceptions of Islam. Although Islam has consistently represented one antagonist to Christianity in the minds of dispensationalists, the fall of Communism in 1989 cleared the way for Islam to once again become the primary eschatological enemy of Christianity. Facilitated by this development, the post 9/11 era has witnessed an intensification of anti-Islamic sentiment and a conviction among an overwhelming majority of dispensationalists that Islam is the personification of the forces that will assault Israel at the Apocalypse. Terrorism on behalf of radical Islamic terrorists, not just in the United States but across the globe and a lack of understanding of the theological pillars of Islam have played a conjunctive critical role in turning evangelical opinions openly against Islam since 9/11. During this same period, a new emphasis on dispensationalist literature, as represented, for example, by the enormously popular *Left Behind* series of novels which glamorizes the dispensational pre-millennialist notion of the Rapture, has emerged contributing to an entrenchment of Muslims as the “religious other” in the evangelical Christian psyche in the post-9/11 era. Dispensationalist theology has also been widely misused in a non-fiction setting during this period to justify a marginalization of Muslims as an outsider group in American culture since 9/11. Deliberate campaigns of misinformation regarding the characteristics of Islamic theology
and the political and cultural intent of Muslims in American society have furthered this marginalization. “Islamophobia” has become the catchword of 24-hour news “talking heads” as fear-mongering among evangelical Christian groups and those in the public sphere that claim to be Christians has stoked racist attitudes against Muslims and, in some cases, violence against Muslims and Muslim interests. The ties between evangelical dispensationalist theology and the development of religious intolerance directed at American Muslims will be fully examined as part of the methodology of this paper.

Chapter 4 of this paper will appraise the impact of “Axis of Evil” politics in the immediate post-9/11 period on evangelical attitudes toward Muslims. Evangelicals’ participation in politics during the George W. Bush presidency took on an edgier tone, especially regarding Middle East policy. Despite calls for moderation by the Bush administration with respect to attitudes toward Islam, foreign policy decisions hailed by evangelical Christians, such as the Global War on Terror and its religious overtones and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, served to further alienate American Muslims, as well as Muslims worldwide. The historical emphasis on religious pluralism in the United States has begun to suffer as evangelical Christians and others equate Islam with terrorism and nefarious intent, as evidenced by the 2010 confluence of the Park 51 controversy in New York City, the threatened Qur’an burning by a Pentecostal denomination in Gainesville, Florida, and the 9th anniversary of 9/11. Dispensationalist theology’s role in driving some evangelical Christian opposition to religious pluralism under the context of the Global War on Terror will be investigated in this section. An argument will be made for the resistance to post-modernism and the increasingly pluralistic nature of American
society and religion as the actual catalyst for dispensationalist Christian resistance to American Muslim practice of religion in certain contexts.

The concluding chapter of this paper will consider paths to greater understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims in the post-9/11 era. The effectiveness of interdenominational Christian initiatives addressing evangelical Christian-Muslim relations, such as the Reconciliation Walk, as well as singular efforts of the more moderate evangelical denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Church and Baptist denominations (largely outside of the Southern Baptist Convention) will be explored. The impact of the “Common Word” letter from Muslim leaders to Christian leaders in 2007 will be discussed in terms of the responses it prompted from the above evangelical denominations. Some of the previously discussed theological and cultural misunderstandings and misperceptions that plague modern Muslim-Christian relations will form a backdrop for an analysis of peace-building efforts, specifically between evangelical Christians and Muslims, that have been undertaken focusing on what methodologies have proved successful. The thesis will conclude with a reassertion of the primary hypothesis of the paper and the factors that support it.

The central concept of this thesis depends on a comprehensive analysis of evangelical Christian attitudes toward Muslims and Islam post-9/11 and the influence of the evangelical interpretation of dispensationalism on these attitudes. Thomas Kidd’s 2009 book, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*, offers an analysis of the evolution of evangelical Christian perceptions of Islam culminating in a discussion of the influence of
extreme Islamist terrorism on evangelicals in the post-9/11 era. A significant characteristic of the eschatological thought of the evangelical dispensationalist focuses on the necessary occupation of the Jewish people of their ancestral home, Palestine. Victoria Clark details the rise of Christian Zionism and its alliance with the state of Israel in her book, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism.* She argues for the existence of a conscious mutually-beneficial link between evangelical Christianity and Israel and offers an analysis of Christian Zionism’s remaining influence on American foreign policy, especially policy toward Israel and the Middle East.

Dispensationalism in the post-9/11 evangelical theology has experienced resurgence and has, according to Husan Mohamad in his book chapter entitled “Protestant Evangelicals and U.S. Policy Towards Israel,” focused its attention on the safety of the state of Israel at the expense of fairness toward the Arab states of the Middle East. Mohamad and other authors, such as Carl Raschke, Stephen Spector, and Timothy P. Weber, imply the evangelical Christian resistance to post-modernism as a focal point to explaining their dispensational worldview. Many of these authors are highly critical of the evangelical pre-occupation with dispensationalism, at least when it is applied to

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views on foreign policy and cultural matters. Raschke, in his book *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, argues that this rejection of post-modernism threatens the very relevance of the Christian message in the context of dispensationalism.\(^6\) Finally, the conflict between evangelical Christianity and Islam based on eschatological understandings threatens the very fiber of toleration of religious pluralism in the United States according to Steven Salaita.\(^7\) Salaita has written extensively on what he views as anti-Arab racism in the United States based, in part, on the evangelical promotion of dispensationalism.

Misperceptions and ignorance are often at the root of current discord between evangelical Christians and Muslims. In *Peace-Building By, Between and Beyond Evangelical Christians and Muslims*, Mohammed Abu-Nimer argues that a deeper understanding of and interest in the religious Other will overcome interfaith conflict.\(^8\) Much of the literature addressing Muslim-Christian relations in the United States focuses on the role of Christians in coming to better understand Islam; however, Kate Zebiri, in her book chapter, “Muslim Perceptions of Christianity and the West,” makes an important contribution to the dialogue by approaching Muslim-Christian relations from the role of the Muslim in accurately understanding Christianity.\(^9\)

\(^6\) Raschke, *The Next Reformation*.


\(^8\) Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David W. Augsburger, *Peace-Building By, Between, and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians* (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2009).

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING: THE ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN
DISPENSATIONALISM

Now brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you
know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

--1 Thess. 5:1-2

The increase in the influence of fundamentalism in the United States during the
latter half of the 19th century into the 20th century provided the theological backdrop that
has facilitated the concepts of dispensationalism within American Protestantism since the
Puritan age. While fundamentalism is a term today that is popularly associated with
fringe religious movements outside of Christianity, it was originally coined to describe
Christians who desired to return to the “fundamentals” of their Christian faith in the face
of alleged liberalism, alternative interpretations of Biblical scripture, and evolutionism.1

Fundamentalism has increased in stature in the United States and worldwide due to
negative reactions against rapidly modernizing societies, the perceived encroachment of
science on areas of knowledge previously dominated by theology, and specific traumatic
incidents such as 9/11. Conditions and events such as these breed an “enclave”
mentality, one that seeks refuge against the perceived deterioration in societal mores.2
However, this mentality is not only a defense mechanism against secular influences on
religion; it is also directed toward guarding against the perceived encroachment and

1 Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, Strong Religion: The Rise of

2 Ibid., 26-27.
influence of other faith traditions. The “enclave” mindset is applied to retaining religious “purity” – in doing so, a defensive and, sometimes, militaristic position is taken to counter the “impure” pressure of alternative ideologies, including secularism.\(^3\) The dispensationalist Christian theology that developed as a result of 19\(^{th}\) century social anxiety and formed the ramparts of the “enclave” of Christian fundamentalism remains tightly woven into the fabric of Protestantism to this day.

Dispensationalism is representative, although not exclusively, of the broader vein of prophecy that has run through the religious life of American society for decades. A preoccupation with prophecy became indistinguishably intertwined with mainstream Protestantism in the latter half of the 19\(^{th}\) century. The rapidly changing societal values and new, unorthodox views of the world that brought about the “enclave” of fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, contributed to social anxiety among 19\(^{th}\) century Americans. This anxiety, in turn, influenced a return to a literal interpretation of Christian scripture among religious authorities that manifested itself most notably through the rise of millennialism. Millennialists of the 19\(^{th}\) century were able to win large numbers of adherents to their way of thinking through a return to a literal reading of Christian scripture, a reading that was simple, fairly easy to defend, and provided an answer to the perceived assault on traditional religious values. Meanwhile, their detractors continued to view scripture through a progressive lens that provided, to the fundamentalist, no comforting answers to societal change.\(^4\) Since literalism became a refuge for millennialists against the uncertain change of modernism, any threat toward

\(^3\) Ibid., 17.

this worldview was a threat against his or her base security. As a result, the typical millennialists became a zealous defender of his or her worldview to the point of, in many cases, intolerance toward other religious value systems.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Millennialism in the History of Christianity**

Millennialist theology emerged in the early Christian communities in Palestine and the Near East, influencing the Crusades and the development of European Protestantism, and can be found in American evangelical thought of the colonial period and into the 19th and 20th centuries. An emphasis on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ has been prominent in Christian thought since the death of Jesus; however, the millennialist concept of a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ was largely unremarkable in the early years of the Church.\footnote{Stanley E. Porter, "Millenarian Thought in the First-Century Church," in Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco, ed. Stephen Hunt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 64.} Instead, emphasis was placed on the imminent return of Christ based on the words of Christ as well as the writings of the Apostle Paul, a return that was often expected within the lifetimes of 1\textsuperscript{st} century Christians. However, evidence of early millennialism does exist. For example, Montanists, followers of Montanus of Phyrgia, a second-century preacher with millennialist tendencies, formed a millennial movement in the early Christian community. Montanus was an early charismatic, speaking in tongues and claiming receipt of new revelations directly from the Holy Spirit which he termed the “Third Testament.”\footnote{Frederic J. Baumgartner, Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 35.} In addition to the Montanists, evidence of
millennial thought in early Christianity has been identified extending into the 3rd century
codified by the introduction and development of a system of calculating the advent of the
Second Coming brought forth by Hippolytus of Rome and Cyprian of Carthage. This
system was based on various clues recorded in Hebrew scripture centered upon the
chronology of the life of Adam in relation to the birth and death of Jesus. Early in the
4th century, millennialism faded in importance with the conversion of Constantine in 312,
necessitating a de-emphasis on a literal reading of Revelation’s portrayal of Rome in a
negative connotation.

Millennialist concepts became resurgent during the High Middle Ages and were a
significant factor in the apocalyptic writings and theology of prominent Italian theologian
Abbot Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202). Joachim of Fiore frequently addressed what he
considered to be the imminent arrival of the Antichrist and the three ages of history
leading to the Apocalypse, similar to dispensations, in his writings. Each age of history,
according to Joachim, would be associated with one member of the Trinity with the final
age associated with the Holy Spirit and leading to the Second Coming and God’s
Kingdom on Earth. Although scholars such as Robert Lerner and Marjorie Reeves
disagree about whether Joachim could be identified as an early millennialist in addition to
an apocalypticist, the abbot’s view of Revelation as documenting the entire history of the
Church, past and future, in the context of historical ages was certainly a precursor to the

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8 Ibid., 40.
9 Anthony R. Cross, "The Bible, the Trinity and History: Apocalypticism and Millennialism in the
Theology of Joachim of Fiore," in Faith in the Millennium, ed. Michael A. Hayes (Sheffield: Sheffield
10 Ibid., 288.
theology of pre-millennialism, then known as chiliasm. Joachim was a central figure in the discussion of that time regarding millennialism, becoming an advisor to popes and kings, most notably Richard the Lionhearted, whose journey to the Third Crusade in 1191 included a visit with the abbot and a lively discussion about the Antichrist. Despite his theology’s link to pre-millennialism, Joachim’s understanding of the age of the Holy Spirit was one of Church reformation rather than wholesale destruction, differing substantially with the present-day understanding of pre-millennialism.

Martin Luther (d. 1546), the father of the Protestant Reformation, addressed apocalyptic theology extensively in his writings and, like Joachim of Fiore, did so in the context of his perception of the Roman Catholic Church as hopelessly corrupt. Luther was adamant in his belief in the papacy as the Antichrist of Revelation; his 1520 work, Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist, protested Pope Leo X’s Papal Bull against him and claimed the Bull was written by the Antichrist. Although it would be difficult to classify Luther as a chiliast due to the absence of specific references to pre-millennialism in his writings, the Augustinian monk believed he was living in the time of “apostasy” that would pre-date the Second Coming, a belief that indicated his understanding of the Tribulation as occurring before the Second Coming. Luther’s insolence toward Islam, represented by his belief that Islam was a religion inspired by Satan as initially outlined in his 1529 work Vom Kriege widder die Tuerken (On War with the Turks), led him to

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12 Baumgartner, Longing for the End, 63.

13 Ibid., 83.

14 Ibid.
identify the Islamic Ottoman Empire as the apocalyptic Gog and Magog referenced in Revelation.\textsuperscript{15} The advance of the Ottoman Turks into the Balkans and other areas of Eastern Europe during the early 1520’s, together with his view of the papacy as an agent of Satan, convinced Luther that he was living in what he understood to be the biblical Tribulation period.\textsuperscript{16} Although he ultimately was not fully convinced of the apostolic relevance of Revelation, Luther certainly understood Christian theology in the context of apocalypticism.

Luther’s grievances against the Catholic Church, collected in his \textit{95 Theses} written in 1517, encouraged millennialism to emerge from the religious underground during the early 1520’s as it had during other periods of religious upheaval. Despite the papacy’s abuses, its authority ultimately ensured that the major doctrine of mainstream Christian theology, of which millennialism was not a part, remained dominant. Luther’s rejection of the authority of the papacy, his belief in the right of Catholics to read the Bible for themselves, and his concept of the priesthood of all believers facilitated alternate interpretations of Hebrew and Christian scripture.\textsuperscript{17} His translation of the Bible into German from the typical Latin was a major point of departure in encouraging the commoner to develop his or her own opinions of the eschatological message of apocalyptic scripture. Thomas Muentzer, a Catholic priest who lived and ministered in Luther’s Saxony region, earned a degree in theology at the University of Wittenberg, inspired by Luther’s emphasis on the priesthood of believers. Muentzer himself

\textsuperscript{15} Adam Francisco, \textit{Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics} (Boston, Brill, 2007), 131.

\textsuperscript{16} Baumgartner, \textit{Longing for the End}, 83.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 84.
ultimately became severely entrenched in apocalyptic and millennial thinking as a result of his interpretation of Revelation, often coming into conflict with the authorities of the time and ultimately breaking with Luther due to Muentzer’s use of armed revolt as a precursor to his “millennium.” Muentzer eventually allied himself with the Anabaptists, a millennial sect scattered throughout Germany, who declared the German city of Muenster the “New Jerusalem” in 1534. It was in this tumultuous environment, characterized by the recession of the authority of the Catholic Church and the development of Protestant theology, that eschatological millennialism manifested itself and ultimately became a prominent Protestant theological concept.

Dissatisfaction with societal conditions in 17th century Britain and the perception of the Church of England as corrupt helped to drive the Puritans and their millennial worldview to the New World in the early 17th century. The Puritans of Massachusetts sought to establish the “city on the hill” that would be become the New Jerusalem promised in eschatological scripture. Similar to Luther, the primary driver behind the apocalyptic tendencies of the Puritans was discontentment with the hierarchical Church and, in the case if the Church of England, a perception that the Reformation of the English Church was not going to take root as it had on the European continent. The Puritan anticipation of God’s Kingdom established on Earth as described in Revelation led the Puritan colonies of Massachusetts to favor a theocratic form of government in

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19 Ibid., 261-271.

order to bring about the conditions to enact the Kingdom of God. The Puritan form of theocracy was characterized most prominently by the reservation of political power to those members of society that participate in the church, a scenario that was radically different from the rampant corruption in the public life of the Puritans’ native England. The Puritan millennial belief that its members were living in the end times justified the establishment of such a theocracy through its symbolism of the preservation of the covenant between God and the Puritans.21

The thread of millennialism that was pervasive in 17th century New England wound its way through the fundamentalist revival period of the Great Awakening and, subsequently, the Revolutionary War in America. In his article entitled “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution,” Nathan Hatch identifies a melding of theological millennialism with a belief in American as the new standard of liberty during colonial times, the combination of which he coins “civil millennialism.”22 Hatch credits the piety of the Great Awakening as well as the millennial theology of the New Light ministers of New England with paving the road toward the American Revolution.23 During the period between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, Hatch’s civil millennialism became civil by gradually replacing religious overtones with political ones. The tyranny of the papacy was replaced by the tyranny of England and, by association, the Whig political philosophy dominant in England during this time became the antichrist in the eyes of the

21 Ibid., 314.


23 Ibid., 410.
civil millennialists. These developments in the evolution of Hatch’s concept of civil millennialism represented an early link between political events and eschatology in the minds of American millennialists:

In the early 1770s, however, the intellectual and emotional force of civil millennialism, incorporating Whig political values, was brought to bear against England itself, as ministers linked apocalyptic vision to the cause of American liberty, identified the "fixed plan to enslave the colonies" with Satan's continuing conspiracy against God's people, and detected in the growth of arbitrary power, the corruption of placemen, and the ominous threat of standing armies the unabated malice of the Man of Sin.

**Evolution of Dispensationalist Thought**

Systematized dispensationalism is a biblical hermeneutic commonly credited to Darby and the Plymouth Brethren; however, the roots of dispensationalist thought can be found in earlier Christian writings. Dispensationalists are generally millennial and apocalyptic in their theology, but not all millennialists or apocalypticists are dispensational. For example, Joachim of Fiore, as discussed earlier, incorporated an understanding of biblical scripture as divided into ages. Although Joachim’s theology was not based upon dispensationalism as it is known today, his perception of God’s interaction with humankind as occurring in stages reflects the basic premise of dispensationalism. In his book *Dispensationalism*, Charles Ryrie credits other theological figures with demonstrating dispensationalist tendencies in their writings, such

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as Pierre Poirot (d. 1719), John Edwards (d. 1716), and Isaac Watts (d. 1748). Each of these men, like Joachim, developed a Darby-like pattern of ages or time periods through which God interacted with humankind, each of which was centered upon a biblical figure or event. These approaches are characteristic of Darby’s dispensationalism and reflected a similar worldview based on the progressive relationship of God and humankind based on God’s plan for the world. However, Darby’s form of systematized dispensationalism incorporates theology beyond simply the division of biblical events into stages. Systematized dispensationalism reflects the beliefs of Israel and the Church as separate and distinct entities that will be dealt with by God individually and the literal interpretation of biblical scripture.

Despite the evidence of dispensationalist thought in the first half of the 18th century, perhaps the most direct and convincing evidence of dispensationalism before Darby’s time manifested itself in the writings of Edward Irving and the content of the Albury prophetic conferences of 1826. The Albury conferences were a series of meetings involving prominent British millennialists of the time and featured in-depth discussions of prophetic scripture. The conferences were instrumental in initiating the revival of millennialism in the British Isles and served to consolidate and define the theology as well as lend some structure to its dissemination, much like the Niagara Conference of

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27 Ibid.

Edward Irving, a Scottish minister, was the driving force behind the Albury conferences and much of the content of the conferences was documented in *The Morning Watch*, a journal dedicated not only to the conferences, but also to Irving’s writings. The doctrine of the pre-Tribulational Rapture was developed during the Albury conferences which resulted in the conferences being credited with a significant amount of influence over the development of dispensationalism. In this way, Mark Patterson and Andrew Walker, in their article “‘Our Unspeakable Comfort’: Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pre-Tribulational Rapture,” argue definitively for credit as the “father of dispensationalism” to go to Irving and the participants of the Albury conferences. While Darby was clearly the first theologian to apply structure to the concept of dispensationalism and bring it to a wider audience, the aforementioned evidence demonstrates the influence of a variety of theologians, before Darby, on the development of the underlying concepts upon which dispensationalism is constructed.

**Missionary Perceptions of Arabs and Muslims**

In addition to millennialism and dispensationalism, a distinct brand of American orientalism influenced early American perceptions of Arab culture and religion. The dominant perception of the Near East was one of “pre-modern exoticism,” characterized by an understanding of Arab culture as underdeveloped, even filthy, yet intriguing.

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31 Ibid., 100.

Early American orientalism was influenced by domestic Arabian fiction, written by luminary authors such as Mark Twain, as well as pieces written by missionaries in the field. Actual experiences also had an impact on the American perception of the Arab, such as American encounters with the Barbary Corsairs of the early 19th century. Congruent with the emerging industrialization of 19th century America, the Orient was commoditized to an extent as evidenced by the increasing appearance of Near Eastern trinkets, novels and postcards predicated on Arab culture and, later in the 19th century, photographic exhibits. Although the American view of Christian relics was not as preoccupied as was the case in Europe, anything that provided a connection to the Holy Land was revered while the Arab inhabitants of the land of these relics were viewed with suspicion. American orientalist attitudes retained this point of division between the perceived character and Christian meaning of the Holy Land, especially Palestine, and the equally perceived shortcomings and deficiencies of the caretakers of that land.

Likewise, perceptions of the religion of Islam were a major factor in the development of many facets of American orientalism. The Arab culture was often idealized and held in high esteem by American intellectuals; however, the Islamic faith was viewed by some American orientalist evangelicals as a corrupting influence on the once-noble races of Arabia. Pastor Joel Hawes, a Hartford Connecticut Protestant

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33 Ibid.


35 Makdisi, “‘Anti-Americanism’ in the Arab World,” 540.

36 Ibid.
Christian, remarked of the Turks as a “naturally” noble people that had been sullied by
the Islamic faith. Pastor Hawes claimed that Islam had brought rampant intolerance, for
example, to the Arab treatment of women. Despite this “Ishmaelite intolerance,”
Presbyterian minister Henry Jessup postulated that Muslim women had brought about
such treatment due to their “uneducated, profane, slanderous [and] capricious…”
behavior. The biblical theme of the Arab as descendant of Ishmael, in fact, was a
prevalent negative influence on American Christian views of Islam. The Jewish
scriptures’ treatment of Ishmael as the lesser, illegitimate, son of Abraham cemented this
perception in place. Most importantly to evangelical Christians, however, Islam was
viewed by 19th century theologians in general as presenting a faith-based worldview that
was outside the possibility of salvation. Perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad, steeped
in medieval bias, as a fraud and an “agent of the Devil” persisted among American
Protestants. Such views of Near Eastern culture, stoked by profiling based on
perceptions of the Islamic faith, contributed to an overall American orientalism that
deniegrated Near Eastern cultures and people.

Many of these negative perceptions of Islam as a religion and, indeed, a socio-
political formula provided the backdrop for the first Christian missions to the Near East.
Protestant missionaries of the 19th century journeyed to Arab lands with these
conceptions in tow, representing the first meaningful contact between Americans and

37 Kidd, American Christians and Islam, 44.
38 Ibid., 48.
39 Jane I. Smith, “Christian Missionary Views of Islam in the Nineteenth and Twentieth
40 Ibid., 358.
Arabs. At the same time, liberal Protestantism in the northeastern United States was developing into a potent force threatening the evangelical worldview and persuading more conservative Protestants to reaffirm their literal understandings of Christian scripture and venture into foreign lands to demonstrate their allegiance to the biblical Great Commission of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{41} The advent of liberal Protestantism in America also coincided with the development of imperial colonialism in the rest of the Western world, thus formulating an approach to proselytizing that was coupled with the stated colonial goal to “civilize heathen” cultures.\textsuperscript{42} In this way, mission work was based on the premise of the backwardness and, arguably, vulnerability of Near Eastern culture along with colonialism. The rush to evangelize the Muslims on the part of 19\textsuperscript{th} century American Protestants as a result of their desire to shore up their own understandings of Christian scripture planted a negative seed of perception of the whole of Arabia that, even today, exhibits its presence in evangelical Christian attitudes.

Evangelical attitudes toward the Arab inhabitants of Palestine and other parts of the Near East were largely not softened by the exposure to native Arabian culture and peoples. The Arab inhabitants of Palestine, in particular, were acknowledged as existing; however, the evangelical view of Muslims and, to a large extent, Arab Christians as “impious Mohammedans” and “nominal Christians” pre-empted any serious consideration of the Arabs in a spiritual sense.\textsuperscript{43} Although the evangelical Protestants engaged the native Arab population in a way that had not been achieved by colonial

\textsuperscript{41} Makdisi, “’Anti-Americanism’ in the Arab World,” 540.

\textsuperscript{42} Smith, “Christian Missionary Views of Islam,” 358.

\textsuperscript{43} Makdisi, “’Anti-Americanism’ in the Arab World,” 540.
inhabitants, this “disinterested benevolence” was borne of an attitude of superiority on behalf of the evangelists and a “patrimonial” view of the Palestinian Arabs in particular.\textsuperscript{44} Palestinian Arabs were regarded as nothing more than the native population of a land that held no “real” spiritual significance to Muslims. The view of Islam as a perverted religion in the context of the Judeo-Christian worldview precluded any significant right that the native Muslims had to the Holy Lands of Christianity and Judaism. In fact, missionaries to the Near East in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century were more likely to have less respect for the indigenous faith tradition than their brethren in other mission locations.\textsuperscript{45} This perception of the Palestinian Muslim would carry into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and have a profound impact on the political future of the eastern Mediterranean region.

\textbf{Prophecy as Cultural Influence}

As the 19\textsuperscript{th} century progressed, pre-millennialism became the most prominent form of millennialism in the United States. During the latter half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Protestant revivalism began to take hold as Protestants from a wide background of religious beliefs sought unity against the perceived threat of modernity.\textsuperscript{46} From these revivals emerged various bible conferences at which millennialism became the most widely-preached theology.\textsuperscript{47} The Niagara Bible Conference of 1878, the brainchild of Presbyterian minister and dispensationalist James H. Brookes (d. 1897), can be argued as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 541.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Smith, “Christian Missionary Views of Islam,” 360.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Julie Scott Jones, \textit{Being the Chosen: Exploring a Christian Fundamentalist Worldview} (Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2010), 37-38.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 38.
\end{itemize}
the seminal event that demonstrated the burgeoning influence of pre-millennialists on religious thinking of the late 19th century in the United States. A large majority of the prominent millennialists of this time period attended the Conference at which pre-millennialism was given allegiance over other forms of millennialism.\textsuperscript{48} Pre-millennialists, disturbed by the encroaching influence of Darwinism, as well as liberal theology, social theology, and other forms of progressive religious thought, sought to systemize their opposition to these trends through the belief in the return of Jesus Christ before the end of history.\textsuperscript{49} These theological trends were viewed as precursors to an all-encompassing breakdown in public morality enabling the Tribulation and necessitating the pre-Tribulational Rapture to remove true Christians from the negative social conditions facilitated by liberal society and theological trends. Prompted by many of the same influences that brought about the rise of evangelical Christianity in America, pre-millennialism promised the eventual rescue of adherents from the evils of modernism, a comforting rescue that would be witnessed since it was to occur before the end of time. The eschatological drama played out in pre-millennialism encouraged evangelicals and pre-millennialists alike to view their relative isolation in American and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere with some semblance of meaning and understanding.\textsuperscript{50}

Dispensational theology has historically been relegated to the extreme fringes of mainstream theology; however, the track of its development indicates that it has made in-

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 134.

\textsuperscript{49} Paul S. Boyer, \textit{When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture} (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992), 93.

\textsuperscript{50} Timothy Marr, \textit{The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.
roads into the mainstream faiths since the 19th century and is described by some as a “theology of the people.”\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, the concepts defining this theology were developed outside of the institutions of traditional theology, causing mainstream theologians to view dispensationalism with skepticism and stigmatization.\textsuperscript{52} Even some evangelical Christians, such as some members of the Baptist denomination - who today are adherents to dispensationalism - initially considered the theology heretical. Despite its early position as a small, competing theology to mainstream Christianity, dispensationalism began to break the confines of its stigmatized position as early as the latter half of the 19th century. As societal conditions and values deteriorated and social liberalization flourished - in the eyes of conservative church-goers - more and more traditionally evangelical Christians moved toward a closer, defensive relationship with those who accepted dispensationalism.\textsuperscript{53} Ultimately, dispensational pre-millennialism captivated evangelicals because it offered a rock-solid escape from the direction of society through a literal interpretation of Christian scripture that seemed to effectively answer the negative developments perceived by evangelicals.\textsuperscript{54} Historical animosity between the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, appeared to be explained, even


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.


justified, by the combative imagery of dispensationalist interpretations of prophecy versus other, more mainstream, theologies.\(^{55}\)

**Development of Dispensationalism in Britain and the United States**

John Nelson Darby’s theology developed during the 1820s and 1830s, during which time he studied at Trinity College in Dublin Ireland and was influenced by faculty member, Dr. Richard Graves, an early dispensationalist who strongly believed in the literal interpretation of biblical prophecy.\(^{56}\) His travels to America, as well as his influence of the theological mindset of the Plymouth Brethren, whose members also traveled extensively to America, brought his interpretation of dispensationalism to the United States.\(^{57}\) Darby was quite convinced of the accuracy of his interpretation of biblical prophecy and often vigorously resisted challenges to his viewpoints. His theological dispute with one-time friend and confidante and an early leader of the Plymouth Brethren movement, Benjamin Willis Newton (d. 1899), was an early example of Darby’s intransigence and resulted in a split of the Brethren movement.\(^{58}\) Darby’s views became widely accepted throughout America during the late 19th century and constituted the primary focus of study and debate at many fundamentalist religious institutions, two of which, the Moody Bible Institute and the Philadelphia Biblical...

\(^{55}\) Marr, *The Cultural Roots*, 90.


\(^{57}\) Ibid., xxv.

University, were particularly influential during this time period. Due in part to the acceptance of Darby’s theology at these prominent organizations, dispensationalism became the dominant theological strain of Christian fundamentalism embraced by evangelicals by the end of the 19th century.

Darby’s version of dispensationalism was an interpretation that took some liberties with the historical dispensationalist theology developed in early 19th century Britain. The primary contribution made by Darby was the concept of the “secret rapture,” today known as the Rapture, of Christians from earth to heaven immediately preceding the Tribulation. Darby’s belief that this “rescue” would occur before the Tribulation and, therefore, could occur at any moment was the theological underpinning of the pre-millennial strain of dispensationalism. In fact, it was this belief in the imminence of the Rapture, heralding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ that was so attractive to evangelical Christians feeling more and more theologically and socially isolated in the United States. A competing theology prevalent at the time, “replacement theology,” or the belief that the Christian Church has replaced Judaism as the vehicle of God’s revelation to the world, was a concept foreign to Darbyite dispensationalists. Whereby some evangelicals and other mainstream Christian denominations had historically viewed Jews as a lost and forsaken people due to their disbelief of Jesus as the Messiah, Darbyite dispensationalists understood the protection of God through the

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60 Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 64.
Rapture and the Second Coming to extend to both Christians and Jews in parallel. Both Christians and Jews will benefit from Darbyite eschatological events - true believers in Jesus Christ as Messiah, including Christians and Jews, will be spirited to heaven during the Rapture and Jews will live in equality and justice under Jesus Christ during the millennial kingdom that will occur after the Tribulation. The eschatological timeline and process advocated by dispensationalists is anchored by the belief that God will not deal with Christians and Jews simultaneously. Exclusivity is an important component of the dispensationalist theological viewpoint since it is exclusivity that allows dispensationalists to attach meaning to events that seem to marginalize mainstream Christians. It is this strain of exclusivity, running so prominently through dispensational pre-millennialism that is the root antecedent of strained relations and conflict with other faith traditions.

Darbyite dispensationalism, which developed into the governing theological principle over millennialism in 19th century America, became the core concept channeling the appearance of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. The *Scofield Reference Bible* became, and continues to be today, one of the major institutions of evangelicalism. The Scofield Bible was developed by Cyrus Scofield, a member of the Kansas legislature with a checkered background of alcohol and failed marriages. Like Darby, Scofield’s belief in dispensationalism was unshakeable and often led to a level of

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62 Ibid.

arrogance on his behalf. Unlike traditional annotations, Scofield’s notes were intertwined with the biblical text itself and sometimes indistinguishable from scripture. The close proximity of Scofield’s annotations with the text gave his notes an air of authority that they might not otherwise have. 64 While adopting Darby’s theology as his own, Scofield participated in the 1888 Niagara Bible Conference which further cemented his allegiance to pre-millennialism through exposure to the formal application of the theology to preaching and missions work. The Darbyite concept of the Rapture was a prominent belief of Scofield and the subsequent ascension of the Scofield Reference Bible to a position of authority among evangelicals served to solidify the rapture theology as a central plank to the evangelical theology. 65 The influence of Scofield’s Bible is unmistakable - by 1937, 3 million copies of the Scofield Reference Bible had been sold and over half of the evangelical groups in existence in the United States were actively using it by the mid-1950s. 66 Pre-millennialism became so associated with Scofield’s Bible that the study of dispensationalism slowly discarded major references to Darby and became known instead as Scofieldism. 67

The widespread acceptance of the Scofield Reference Bible among American evangelical Christians ensured the unity of dispensational pre-millennialism and evangelical Christian theology on a broad scale. The dubious theological credentials of

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64 Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 98.


Scofield himself, as well as his omission of any citation or form of credit to Darby as the author of many of the concepts found in Scofield’s Bible, did not dissuade most evangelicals from taking Scofield’s notes as theologically sound. Scofield’s adoption and popularization of Darbyite dispensationalism presented an adaptable theology to a mass audience that was disturbed by the social changes that occurred between the end of the American Civil War and World War II and the rise of the “liberal” Social Gospel.68 Social upheaval such as the liberation of African-Americans from slavery and the difficulties of the re-integration of the South into the Union during Reconstruction, as well as the Industrial Revolution and the economic changes it brought to daily American life were factors sparking social anxiety in late 19th century Americans. In the early 20th century, the Great Depression and two World Wars, events that carried eschatological overtones, prompted many evangelicals to view the world in dispensational terms.

According to Charles Strozier, professor at the University of Chicago and author of *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America*, the Scofield Bible “is the inerrant text of God in the minds of many unsophisticated fundamentalist believers.”69 Emphasis on the genesis or source of this theology was diminished by the perception that it seemed to give a clear and needed understanding to current events, a tendency that can be seen throughout the years with respect to interpretations of prophetic scripture. In a society boasting an increasing rate of literacy, the *Scofield Reference Bible*’s emphasis on eschatology and single-minded interpretation of apocalyptic scripture appealed to its intended audience – the common church-goer uninterested in considering the complex

68 Ibid., 90.

and sometimes contradictory nature of Christian scripture. Scofield understood that his intended audience wanted assurance of their beliefs and would respond favorably to legalistic, unambiguous orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{70} His notes emphasized his interpretation of Christian eschatology as the method by which to draw closer to God. Conversely, the preoccupation with eschatology induced his devotees to de-emphasize concern for their fellow men and women due to the impending end of the physical world.\textsuperscript{71}

The impact of the \textit{Scofield Reference Bible} and its influence over evangelical Christianity would appear to be quite remarkable at first glance given its secular source and lack of any meaningful opposing interpretations; however, it can be argued that these two characteristics are precisely why Scofield’s Bible has persuaded so many evangelical Christians. The prophetic scripture found most prominently in the biblical books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation is mysterious and foreboding and speaks loudly to any believer seeking to get right with God. The complex nature of these verses easily induces the desire to obtain an interpretation by its readers, one that counters the basic nature of these books – unambiguous, simple, and straight-forward. The secular, indeed political, background of Cyrus Scofield may have influenced his ability to develop an interpretation that met these criteria. Many theologians, admittedly mainstream, have argued against the biblical grounding of Scofield’s theology; rather, they have argued that it is political in nature.\textsuperscript{72} Indeed, dispensational pre-millennialist worldviews have played a seemingly prominent role in political events through the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, as will be

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 98.

\textsuperscript{71} Clark, \textit{Allies for Armageddon}, 90.

\textsuperscript{72} Haiji, “The Armageddon Lobby,” 81.
explored later in this paper. Certainly, the political and social climate in which the Scofield Reference Bible emerged was fraught, as perceived by fundamentalist evangelicals, with social and theological liberalism and modernism, such as that represented by the rise of Socialism in Russia in 1917 and the debate over evolution versus creationism that emerged from the Scopes Trial of 1925. Scofield’s annotations addressed eschatology with a decidedly political overtone in terms of the fate of the political and theological powers that be – the Catholic Church, the antagonists of World War I, and fellow Protestants that espoused theology more geared toward social justice that judgment - and, as discussed earlier, brought some semblance of control over the ominous events of the day.

In addition to addressing political developments, Scofield’s Bible sought to explain biblical scripture in a way that portrayed dispensationalism as a bulwark against the rapidly advancing hordes of social change. Perceived theological liberalism that placed an emphasis on current social issues, such as the Social Gospel, countered the prominence of eschatology on behalf of fundamentalists and was viewed as a threat to “traditional” theology. The Social Gospel movement, a decidedly more compassionate theology than the legalistically-characterized dispensationalism and primarily post-millennialist, was spear-headed by theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch (d. 1918) who read the biblical Gospels with more focus on the social agenda of Jesus rather than a preoccupation of the dispensation of the soul after death and eschatology. Rauschenbusch’s theology posed an alternative view of the teachings of Jesus, one in which the responsibility of society was emphasized over individual responsibility, an
uncomfortable concept for dispensationalists.\textsuperscript{73} The Social Gospel’s centrality of society over individual is in natural conflict with the Puritan-based dispensational ethic of individual choice and responsibility that largely formed the bedrock of American society. The importance of individual choice and, by association, the status of one’s salvation as a function of personal choice surged among conservative Christians of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century in the face of these ideological threats. As a result, preoccupation with eschatology as a means of reinforcing fundamentalist beliefs against the usurpation of the individual by the greater society, as represented by the popularity of the \textit{Scofield Reference Bible}, became prominent once more.

\textsuperscript{73} Bawer, \textit{Stealing Jesus}, 95.
CHAPTER II

DER JUDENSTAAT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DISPENSATIONALISM

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

--Matt. 24:36

Against this backdrop of social and political upheaval, an influential movement with political overtones among dispensational pre-millennialists became resurgent during the early years of the 20th century – Christian Zionism. Jewish Zionism, a movement founded by the Viennese Jewish journalist Theodor Herzl (d. 1904) via his 1896 book Der Judenstaat, had been born as a political mobilization advocating the return of the Jewish people to Palestine. It was overwhelmingly secular in nature, paying little attention to the call of some, such as prominent Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook and Moshe Shmuel Glasner, for a theocratic Jewish state in Palestine. By contrast, Christian Zionism was overwhelmingly based on a dispensationalist interpretation of biblical scripture and held biblical motivations and goals, chiefly the right of the Jewish people to return to Palestine as defined in the Bible.\footnote{Maria Leppakari, Apocalyptic Representations of Jerusalem (Boston, Brill, 2006), 132.} Darby’s emphasis on the return of the Jews to Palestine as a prerequisite to the Second Coming directly influenced the development of Christian Zionism and gave Christian Zionism a distinct pre-millennial theological underpinning.\footnote{Ross Moret, “Potential for Apocalypse: Violence and Eschatology in the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” Journal of Religion and Society 10 (2008): 6.} The Scofield Reference Bible legitimized Christian Zionism among fundamentalists due to Scofield’s literal understanding of biblical references to the future.
nation of Israel against the backdrop of the developing Jewish Zionist movement. Due to the strong ties between Christian Zionism and dispensationalism, Christian Zionists can be characterized exclusively as fundamentalists and most evangelicals would fall into the camp of Christian Zionism.4

**Definition of Christian Zionism**

The confluence of the Jewish secular Zionist movement and Christian Zionism, which eventually resulted in a large number of evangelical Christians in the West joining the call for the Jews to return to Palestine, began with the partnership between Herzl and the dispensationalist Christian minister William Hechler (d. 1931) in the closing years of the 19th century. Hechler’s initial motivation for engaging Herzl on the question of Palestine was singularly dispensationalist in nature; however, as their friendship grew, each man realized the positive impact that the other’s worldview could have on the achievement of his goals. The relationship between Herzl and Hechler is representative of the type of relationship Jews and evangelical Christians have had through the decades since Herzl’s manifesto first caught Hechler’s eye: Herzl was somewhat suspicious that Hechler’s motivation for interaction was actually proselytization; Hechler viewed Herzl as the prototypical “lost” Jew who needed to be saved by being returned to Palestine in

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order to usher in the eschatological period.⁵ Early Christian Zionist reasoning for allying with secular Jewish Zionism was not based on any principles of justice, sympathy or guilt over past Christian injustices toward Jews as most Jewish Zionists of the time would have expected.⁶ Rather, the alliance, from the Christian Zionist perspective, was based purely on a desire to bring about events that supported a dispensational pre-millennialist understanding of biblical scripture.⁷

While the motivations of early Christian Zionists such as Hechler and William Blackstone (d. 1935), the author of the 1878 dispensationalist lexicon, _Jesus is Coming_, were primarily spiritually self-serving in nature, other Christian Zionists, represented most prominently by Reinhold Niebuhr (d. 1971), were supportive of the Jewish Zionist cause for reasons other than theological ones. Christian Zionists can generally be divided into two camps, Christian Restorationists and philo-Semites. The Christian Restoration movement of the early to mid-18th century viewed the purpose of the return of the Jews to Palestine as purely encouraging the arrival of the millennium and set the stage for the rooting of Darby’s dispensational pre-millennialism in America. By contrast, philo-Semites view the restoration of the Jews to Palestine as primarily a gesture addressing the righting of wrongs toward the Jewish people over the centuries. While Hechler and Blackstone fell into the Christian Restorationist camp, Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, was clearly philo-semitic.

⁵ Paul Charles Merkley, _American Presidents, Religion, and Israel : The Heirs of Cyrus_ (Santa Barbara, CA, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 24-25.

⁶ Ibid., 62.

in his acceptance of Christian Zionism. Niebuhr looked on the dispensational pre-
millennialists, as well as evangelical Christians in general, with disdain; revivalism,
personal witness, and liberties with traditional Christian theological concepts, borne of
the evangelical emphasis on personal interpretation of the Bible, were all traits of
evangelical Christianity that put off and, indeed, angered him. Niebuhr, as well as other
Christian Zionists of his time that could be considered philo-semitic in their view of the
Jewish question with respect to Palestine, discerned the pre-millennialist’s messianic
justification for a Jewish state in Palestine as appalling and self-serving.

Despite their differing motivations, restorationist Christian Zionists and philo-
Semites hold similar values regarding their view of Judaism, a fairly radical departure
from the traditional Christian view of Jews. Mainstream Christian denominations,
especially Catholicism, have historically had difficult theological relations with Judaism.
Jews have been characterized rather benignly as “lost” and stubbornly holding onto a
theology that is incomplete without Christ and, on the extreme end, as “Christ killers.”
These denominations have viewed the new Israel that is referred to often in
eschatological Christian scripture not as a Jewish political state as dispensationalists do;
rather, they believe that the Christian Church has taken over the role of “chosen people,”
a role biblically occupied by the Jewish people (Christian “replacement” theology). In
this way, mainline Christians have little incentive to desire a Jewish state in Palestine
and, by association, do not generally have a disproportionate level of support for Jews

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9 Ibid., 139.

10 Ibid., 141.
over other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{11} By contrast, Christian Zionists demonstrate overwhelming belief in and allegiance to the everlasting status of Jews as God’s anointed people despite characterizing past Jewish suffering as a byproduct of the failure of the Jews to adhere to God’s standards.\textsuperscript{12} The Christian Zionist theological understanding of the biblical references to the new Israel promotes a natural alliance between Christian Zionism and traditional Zionism which ultimately impacts the way in which Christian Zionists interact with Jews. However, according to Niebuhr and other philo-Semites, this “positive” interaction is rarely on a personal level; rather, the Christian Zionist benevolent view of the Jew is generally due to the Jewish individual’s simple membership in the Jewish race and has little to do with genuine empathy.

\textbf{1948 Founding of Israel}

The dispensationalist preoccupation with the return of the Jews to \textit{Eretz Israel}, defined in Genesis 15:18 as the territory from “the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates,” as a precursor to the end-times was and is based on an emphasis on interpretations of Old Testament prophetic scripture. Zechariah 14 is commonly cited as evidence of the central role of Jerusalem in the future of all nations:

\begin{quote}
I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city … Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Dittmer, “Of Gog and Magog,” 297-298.

The deeply-felt conviction among Christian Zionists that Jerusalem represents the central object of Christian prophetic scripture and is literal in nature has always demanded the repossessing of Palestine by the Jewish people. Ironically, the depth of this conviction can be demonstrated by specific criticisms of the Christian Zionist interpretation of scripture. The Rev. Dr. Stephen Sizer, in his article “The Bible and Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon?,” argues against the Christian Zionist position by specifically attacking the assumed theological importance of an earthly Jerusalem. Sizer views the role of Jerusalem as primarily spiritual and focuses on New Testament scripture, specifically Hebrews 12:22-23, in making his argument:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.13

Sizer cites the Apostle Paul’s criticism of what the author calls “Jerusalem dependence” in Galatians and argues that the Apostles never focused on occupying Palestine as a goal of the Jewish people.14 The Christian Zionist view of Jerusalem as central to God’s plan for the world is an understanding rooted in Old Testament scripture only – the New Testament offers little, if any, evidence of God’s will toward a continuation of this role.15 New Testament theology is considered by Christians to embody a new covenant between God and humankind through the example of Jesus Christ. Sizer’s argument is based on this central tenant of Christianity and his criticisms of the Christian Zionist position with

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14 Ibid., 127.

15 Ibid., 126-127.
respect to Jerusalem imply an agenda other than one based on a correct understanding of Christian theology.

Regardless of the motivation of Christian Zionist reliance on Old Testament scripture to make the case for the centrality of Jerusalem in eschatological thought, the pre-millennialist emphasis placed on the return of the Jews to Palestine as a precursor to the Second Coming was amplified dramatically with the 1948 creation of the State of Israel. This event marked the beginning of a period of events in the Middle East that gave dispensational pre-millennialists new ammunition in the Christian theological debates and brought their pre-millennial theology further into mainstream Christianity. Christian Zionists had been politically active in the United States and Britain in the years before 1948, striving to bring about the conditions that they believed would lead to the Second Coming. For Christian Zionists, historical Christian anti-Semitism had been replaced by a certain sense of commonality between Christian theological and Jewish political values. As a result, dispensationalist acceptance of the Jews and advocacy for the Jewish cause, albeit a reluctant one, reached its zenith following the horrors of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{16} Dispensational pre-millennialists argued that their theological interpretations of Christian scripture had been vindicated by the emergence of the state of Israel while philo-Semites, focused on the injustices suffered by the Jewish people through history, tended to attach very little theological significance to the event. However, due to the sway that eschatological Christianity held over evangelicals in the West as well as the “tabloid” attraction of dispensational theology, the pre-millennialist interpretation of the events of 1948 became the predominant understanding of the

\textsuperscript{16} Lahr, \textit{Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares}, 136.
meaning of the creation of Israel among an overwhelming majority of evangelical Christians.

**1967 Six-Day War**

The overwhelming significance of the role of Jerusalem in the dispensationalist interpretation of prophetic Christian scripture escalated the radicalization of pre-millennialists with the onset of the Yom Kippur War between Israel and her Arab neighbors in June of 1967s. The Six-Day War, as it was otherwise known, resulted in Jewish control of Jerusalem for the first time in approximately 1,900 years and prompted widespread interest in eschatology coinciding with the revival of religious fundamentalism in the United States.\(^\text{17}\) Israel’s victory became a watershed moment for both dispensational pre-millennialists and a burgeoning Jewish fundamentalist movement in Israel proper.\(^\text{18}\) The capture of Jerusalem was, according to dispensational evangelicals, a fulfillment of eschatological scripture which heralded the imminent return of Jesus Christ and represented a new opportunity to claim credit for dispensational theology. The religious fervor within the dispensational evangelical ranks that followed radicalized the Christian Right in the United States and initiated the period of significant and open evangelical involvement in American politics that continues to the present day. In addition to having a profound impact on American evangelicals, the capture of Jerusalem stimulated the resurgence of Jewish fundamentalism and evoked a messianic component of Jewish Zionism, a movement that, until this point, had been largely

\(^{17}\) McAlister, “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular,” 779.

dominated by political forces. This strain of Jewish fundamentalism would prove to be an important ally to dispensational evangelicals wishing to influence the secular Jewish government in matters regarding Jewish control over Jerusalem and other theologically significant areas of Israel as understood by Christian Zionists.

The renewed confidence in the truth of their interpretation of eschatological scripture gave fundamentalist Christians and Jews a “free pass” with respect to discrimination against Arab Christians and Muslims. Christian rhetoric placing the Islamic faith as an antagonist in the eschatological endgame that was allegedly imminent became more widespread and visible immediately following the Six-Day War. Conversely, the capture of Jerusalem was, of course, extremely traumatic for Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular and paved the way for the rise of political Islam over Arab secularism in the Middle East. Islamic movements in the region had little trouble in convincing swaths of Arab populations that political Islam was the only means by which to challenge Israel’s newfound hegemony over Jerusalem and the West Bank. Islam became a rallying point for Muslims in the region and set the stage for the centrality of religious beliefs in conflict that has hallmarked the Middle East since 1967. In fact, the Palestine question has become the primary focal point of Islamist politics in the region and elsewhere up to the current day, ripening the political atmosphere in such a way as to allow militant Islamic groups, such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip, to gain political

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 103.
Political Islam, often radical in nature, has given dispensational evangelicals further reason to demonize the Islamic faith; ironically, however, Islam’s incursion into modern Arab politics mirrors the political aspirations of the Christian Right in the United States with respect to the desired influence of religious beliefs over the governing process. The rise of radical religious groups, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish, not afraid of a foray into the political arena, has widened the gulf of religious understanding and intensified conflict rooted in religious background since 1967.

**Christian Zionist Focus on the Soviet Union: The Late, Great Planet Earth**

The evolution in the interpretation of political events through the lens of religion, especially radical religion, arrived at an important milestone in 1970 with the release of *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, an eschatological examination of current events from a dispensational pre-millennialist viewpoint. The widespread impact of this work cannot be over-exaggerated – the book sold over a million copies in its first month of release and has sold over 30 million copies since 1970 and has been translated into 54 different languages. The appeal of Lindsey’s interpretation of political events reveals the extent to which dispensational theology has woven itself into the psyche of mainstream America. At the time of its publication, the political climate, both in the United States and abroad, was becoming more uncertain, prompting many mainstream Christians to search for a broader range of explanations of the meaning of current events. The ongoing Vietnam War against the backdrop of American societal upheaval, the precipitous

\[\text{\textsuperscript{22}}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}}\text{Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{Clark, *Allies for Armageddon*, 155.}\]
existence of Israel among Arab neighbors calling for her destruction, and the specter of nuclear weapons provided a very volatile, anxiety-ridden atmosphere that was ripe for dispensational interpretations, such as Lindsey’s, to take center stage. Dispensational pre-millennialism pushed aside traditional mainstream Christian theological approaches to interpreting the meaning of existence for an increasing number of evangelical Christians.

Lindsey’s work provides a linear account of events generally understood by dispensationalists to comprise the Rapture, Tribulation, and the subsequent Battle of Armageddon and offers additional beliefs that today are the cornerstones of classic dispensationalist thought. His writing centers primarily on the violent events of the Tribulation and Armageddon, offering a detailed description of the Antichrist, the identification of the antagonists at the Battle of Armageddon, and maps of troop movements leading up to Armageddon. Lindsey devotes three successive chapters to who he believes will be the attackers of Israel at Armageddon, Russia, the Arab confederation, and China. A distinct thread of opposition to the concept of political and religious unity runs through his book as he identifies the new Babylon, the whore of Revelation, as the evil single religion that Lindsey believes will permeate the world to the detriment of Christianity. He is critical of the United Nations as a contributor to world peace, labeling the efforts of the world body toward peace as “noble thoughts.” All of the beliefs that Lindsey puts forth are interpretations of the major Christian eschatological

25 Ibid., 154.
26 Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, 169.
scripture found in the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. He characterizes his role in writing the book as simply to “step aside and let the prophets speak.”

Simultaneous to its advances into mainstream Christian thinking, dispensational pre-millennialism evolved theologically in its own right depending on who occupied the bully pulpit. The purveyors of dispensational pre-millennialism through the years took liberties in their interpretation of traditional theology, a position that drove the view of dispensationalism among mainstream Protestantism as heresy and enabled dispensationalism to become more and more “tailored” to political circumstances. Darby’s concept of the Rapture, for example, was largely unheard of prior to Scofield’s extensive references to the event exposed it to a wider section of mainstream Christianity. Darby’s understanding of the Rapture was based on a loose interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 15-17 that speak of the faithful meeting Christ in the air. Scofield further defined the dispensational Rapture as a means by which Christians will be spared the 7-year Tribulation, a period of catastrophic events referenced in Matthew 24, verses 29-31. Lindsey took the Rapture one step further and placed it in the context of political events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, interpreting Paul’s Thessalonians reference as an event that will spare Christians the horror of an impending nuclear war in the Middle East. The dispensationalism of Darby and Scofield predicted the destruction of Palestine and the annihilation of an overwhelming majority of the Jewish people that had re-gathered in Palestine during the Tribulation. Lindsey’s references to the Tribulation, however, soften the historically harsh language that characterized the fate of the Jews in the Holy Land, instead assigning to the Jews a redeeming role as the first to

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27 Ibid., 8.
recognize the identity of Christ upon His return. Lindsey’s “alternate ending” to the Tribulation story was probably developed in light of the recent immense suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialism in Western Europe and constituted a prominent example of the tailoring of dispensational theology to fit the development of current events.

Lindsey’s work vilifies Arabs as the aggressors against Israel at Armageddon and reveals a general ignorance of Arab values, culture, and contributions to the world. Lindsey’s assumption of the Arabs as playing the antagonist role in the eschatological end-times scenario is based primarily on Arab opposition to the creation of the state of Israel, a key eschatological event in Lindsey’s eyes, and the subsequent annexation by Israel of Jerusalem and the West Bank, events that displaced millions of native Palestinians. Lindsey exhibits a striking one-dimensional understanding of Arab, comparing his encounters with students at a large university’s “Arab Week” event with Lawrence of Arabia and referring to Muslim head coverings as “Arab-fashion.”28 His treatment of Arabs in his book reveals his strong Christian Zionist views and the influence that these views have had over his perception of Arab and culture and values, perceptions that are consistent with dispensational evangelicals largely due to the widespread exposure given to his book. The political ramifications of his interpretation of Christian eschatology was the locus of his book; he resisted the traditional fundamentalist notion of avoidance of “the things of this world” in favor of a call to Christians to pay heed to United States foreign policy, particularly with respect to

28 Ibid., 73.
Israel. His approach to convincing his readers of the accuracy of his interpretation of biblical prophecy was unusual – he strove to attract a young audience interested primarily in political events, but open to understanding these events in the context of Christian revelation. Lindsey’s approach paved the way for future prominent Christian evangelicals and fellow Christian Zionists, such as the Reverend Pat Robertson and the Reverend Jerry Falwell among others, to preach an attitude toward Muslims based purely on a prophetic understanding of political events in the Middle East.

**Christian Zionism in U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

Lindsey’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth* set the stage for the rise of the politically-active Christian Right in the United States during the 1980s. The exposure of dispensational pre-millennialist theology to a wider audience afforded by Lindsey’s book encouraged American evangelical Christians to become increasingly politically assertive and supportive of the state of Israel. The degree of the Christian Right’s ascendance during this time period was benchmarked by the establishment of the Moral Majority by the Reverend Jerry Falwell in 1979. Falwell’s Moral Majority was an organization devoted to advancing the political cause of evangelical Christians in the United States and featured as one of its hallmarks an unwavering support of Israel. The sixth entry on the Moral Majority’s list of political positions stated,

> We support the state of Israel and Jewish people everywhere. It is impossible to separate the state of Israel from the Jewish family internationally…one cannot belong to Moral Majority, Inc. without

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30 Ibid.
making the commitment to support the state of Israel in its battle for survival...no anti-Semitic influence is allowed in Moral Majority, Inc.\textsuperscript{31}

The political and financial support of evangelical Christians through the Moral Majority became the lynchpin in the budding relationship between American evangelical Christianity and Israel. Falwell and evangelical pastor Billy Graham were the first recipients of the Jabotinsky Centennial Medal, presented by Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1979. The award, named after the Israeli right-wing leader Vladimir Jabotinsky (d. 1940), is given to those that Israel considers life-long friends of the Jewish state. The presentation to Falwell and Graham has been considered by many to be the initiation of a formal alliance between Israel and American evangelical Christianity represented by the Christian Right.\textsuperscript{32}

The growth in the influence of the Christian Right in American politics was bolstered by the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Reagan, a self-avowed dispensationalist, brought socially-conservative politics back to the mainstream, thereby creating a political landscape ripe for the Christian Right to exert its influence. His theological conjecture, influenced in part by his reading of \textit{The Late, Great Planet Earth} in the early 1970s, was on display in several of his political exchanges and policy decisions in the years before his presidency and during his presidency itself. In 1971, Reagan described his belief in the Soviet Union as the eschatological Gog referenced in the Old Testament book Ezekiel in a conversation with James Mills, a fellow member of the California State Senate:

\textsuperscript{31} Clark, \textit{Allies for Armageddon}, 187.

\textsuperscript{32} Haija, “The Armageddon Lobby,” 77.
Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia…now it does [make sense], now that Russia has become communist and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly.33

He affirmed an interest in eschatology during an interview with Martin Kalb in 1984, referring to “a number of theologians” that believed “the prophecies are coming together that portend [Armageddon].”34 Reagan’s lean toward dispensationalist theology has often been cited as influential in his characterization of the Soviet Union as the ‘Evil Empire’ and his opposition of Nicaragua’s Sandinista government in the 1980s, no doubt due to his association of the extreme political left with “God-less” ideologies.35 Policy decisions during Reagan’s presidency also did not escape his fascination with end-times theology. The military buildup undertaken against the Soviet Union during his presidency has been linked to his notion of Russia as the possible Gog referenced in Ezekiel.36 Some members of the media during his presidency worried openly of the possible imprint of his theological underpinnings on his decisions regarding nuclear policy.37

The rise of the Christian Right in American politics revealed the extent to which evangelical political values influenced political leaders and policy decisions during this

34 Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More, 142.
37 Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More, 143.
time period. The standing of the Moral Majority and, certainly, the popularity of Ronald Reagan’s brand of conservatism was indicative of the inroads dispensational pre-millennialist theology had made into the mainstream psyche and belied the notion that it was the ideology of a fringe group. Following this development, increased support for Israel in the face of Middle Eastern strife became the instinctive political reaction of a majority of evangelical voters. Support for Israel was viewed by many evangelicals as the key to divine blessing on America. Dr. Michael Evans, founder of several pro-Israel evangelical groups during the 1980s and a frequent guest of and advisor to Israeli prime ministers and other top Israeli officials, argued that support for Israel was the “key to survival” for America in the post-modern world.

Alongside relentless support for the Jewish state, the historical antagonistic relationship between evangelicals and Muslims was brought to a wider American audience during the 1980s. Politically-active evangelicals rarely supported equal treatment for Palestinian Muslims in their call for the protection and financial support of the new state of Israel. Conflict between Israel and its Muslim neighbors was often perceived by evangelicals within a “David and Goliath” context – David (Israel) being the erstwhile hero while Goliath (the Muslim state) embodied evil and belligerence. Israeli Prime Minister Begin, in 1981, first contacted Pastor Falwell for support for Israel’s unilateral action against Iranian nuclear reactors, a significant indicator of Israel’s acknowledgement of the unqualified support of American evangelicals for Israel, given

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that this call came even before a call to the American government.\textsuperscript{40} Christian Zionism, inherent in the political philosophies of the Christian Right of the 1980s, exhibited a general perception of Muslims as standing in the way of the fulfillment of the end-times prophecies and, therefore, subject to marginalization. Even some present-day evangelical theologians, such as Don Carson, view the “War on Terror” as a civilizations conflict between the Judeo-Christian ethic of the West and Islam, a public characterization that was previewed in the assertion of the Christian Right into American policy development during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Haija, “The Armageddon Lobby,” 78.

\textsuperscript{41} Megoran, “Towards a Geography of Peace,” 387.
CHAPTER III


With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

--1 Pet. 3:8

Apocalyptic theology, while serving to inspire hope among the faithful in the ultimate victory of God over His enemies, carries with it elements of exclusivity and violence that can just as easily corrupt the positive nature of religion. From the Ottoman Empire during the American colonial era to the Soviet Union during the 20th century, Christian dispensationalist thought and literature sought to identify the Other with respect to the dispensationalist understanding of Judeo-Christian prophetic scripture. Geopolitical “othering,” as noted by University of California at Los Angeles Lecturer Tristan Sturm, serves to not only draw ideological lines between countries and regions, but also creates theological barriers.1 Othering is a term coined to define the process of marginalization and stigmatization of other cultures, ethnic groups, or faith traditions in order to justify, legitimate, or enhance the standing of one’s own group. While the Soviet Union represented the eschatological aggressor to dispensationalists for the better part of the 20th century, the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed a collective hardening of evangelical attitudes toward Islam as they sought to understand

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geopolitical global changes and, yearning for deliverance, searched for the apocalyptic antagonist that might signal the advent of the end-times.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was largely facilitated by the evangelical-supported foreign policy of the Reagan administration. Ironically, Reagan’s support of the mujahedeen fighters of Afghanistan against the Soviet-backed Communist Afghan government benefitted many of the same Islamic jihadists that dispensationalists perceive as evidence of Islam’s evil nature, including Osama bin Laden. Reagan’s support of the mujahedeen of Afghanistan, the Saudi Wahhabi movement, and Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran was a continuance of a history of American-Soviet proxy battles throughout the world that often placed Muslim societies in one camp or the other, stoking tensions and festering resentment toward the superpowers. The collapse of the Soviet Union at the dawn of the 1990s cleared the way for that tension and resentment to be directed at the one superpower remaining, the United States. Muslim anger and frustration with the United States borne of the American-Soviet chess game that often made pawns of Arab countries, was manifested and, in some cases, resulted in open American-Muslim conflict, such as the 1979 Iranian revolution and hostage crisis.

Evangelical approval of Reagan’s foreign policy in support of Muslims against the Soviet Union is, in historical context, the height of irony; however, it makes a compelling argument for the overwhelming need of dispensational pre-millennialist theology to identify an antagonist, no matter how curious the selection may be.

**Dispensationalist Focus Shifts to Islam: Final Dawn Over Jerusalem**

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Christian Zionist authors took advantage of Lindsey’s success in bringing dispensationalist literature into the American mainstream, intensifying the pro-Israel, anti-Muslim rhetoric as the Soviet Union receded into history and the year 2000 approached. One such author is John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, an evangelical Christian “mega-church” with over 19,000 members. Hagee’s writings reveal his interpretation of apocalyptic scripture as the story of the fate of those who oppose Israel. Hagee is very much an “eschatological activist” in that he believes in the necessity of good Christians to work to encourage political events that fall into line with dispensational pre-millennialist interpretation of apocalyptic scripture. While Lindsey’s *Late, Great Planet Earth* was simply an interpretation of political events through the lens of dispensational pre-millennialism, Hagee is representative of the rise of dispensationalist authors who, encouraged by events they believe are foretold in eschatological scripture, call for Christian political activism with respect to Israel. Hagee’s writings, as well as those by other Christian Zionist authors of the late 20th century, counter the logical assumption that pre-determined eschatological events, as understood by dispensational pre-millennialists, are destined to occur; therefore, there is little cause to work to bring about these events or resist developments that seem to oppose the march toward the Apocalypse.³

Hagee’s 1998 book, *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem* was the third in a series of three books authored by Hagee in the late 1990s that accomplished for Christian Zionist political activism what Lindsey’s *Late, Great Planet Earth* did for dispensational

³ Moret, “Potential for Apocalypse,” 7.
theology - exposing Christian Zionist politics and beliefs to a wider, mainstream Christian audience.  

4 The Beginning of the End, Day of Deception, and Final Dawn Over Jerusalem each appeared on the New York Times Bestseller Lists in the respective years they were published.  

5 Final Dawn Over Jerusalem, in particular, is an example of the extreme Israel-biased literature that would come to characterize the radicalization of the Christian Right in the 1990s with an eye toward the coming millennium.  This bias toward Israel by Christian Zionists tends to find its inspiration in the biblical notion that Israel has a divine right to the Palestinian territories.  Furthering this logic, secular Jews, who largely oppose Israeli settlements in occupied territories for example, are “persona non grata” in the eyes of dispensational Christian Zionists.  According to his biography on his ministry website at http://www.jhm.org, Hagee himself has founded “A Night For Israel,” an annual event accentuating Hagee’s belief that Christians are biblically commanded to support Israel and Judaism, as well as Christians United for Israel, an organization founded in 2006 and dedicated to encouraging all pro-Israel Christians to speak out for Israel in the context of “biblical” issues.  Hagee’s efforts in bringing attention to the state of Israel among evangelical Christians have earned him the recognition of the Jewish state, affording him the opportunity to meet with every Israeli Prime Minister since Menachem Begin.  

Hagee’s fervent pro-Israel rhetoric is naturally complemented and further legitimated in the eyes of fellow Christian Zionists by his anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments. Hagee’s writing reflects a strong disdain for the Islamic faith, a result of his latent belief that Islam is a false religion coupled with his strong, almost fanatical, Christian Zionist viewpoints. His view of Islam is much more antagonistic than Lindsey’s, who primarily targeted Arabs and seldom mentioned Islam or Muslims. Hagee employs stark “us versus them” language in all of his books when discussing Christianity’s place in the world alongside the other major religions. As is often the case, extreme bias toward one side results in a demonization of the other. Hagee’s *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem* reflects this type of rhetoric. Chapter 2 contains a section entitled “The Muslim Imperative” which seeks to establish as Islam’s primary goal the subjugation of all non-believers and the destruction of Israel. According to Hagee, “the existence of Israel flies in the face of Muslim theology. As long as Israel survives, their triumph-based theology cannot be affirmed.” Hagee’s dispensational interpretation of eschatological scripture pits Islam against Judaism and, by extension, Christianity. He describes with enthusiasm the events he envisions happening as a results of the pre-millennialist belief in the construction of the Jewish third Temple before the Second Coming:

And perhaps no greater blow (apart from the battles described in this chapter and the next) has ever been inflicted on [the Muslims] than what Israel will accomplish in the removal of the Dome of the Rock to build the third Temple. 

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7 Moret, “Potential for Apocalypse,” 8.
8 Hagee, *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem*, 141.
9 Ibid., 153-154.
The language of conflict, used by dispensational pre-millennialist leaders of churches around the country, is absorbed by members of their congregations, influencing their worldview toward acceptance and divine endorsement of strife between Islam and Judaism/Christianity. The attitude toward Islam perpetuated by Pastor Hagee and other dispensational radical Christian Zionist leaders is in many cases driven by personal theological interpretation and political agendas. In this way, their own theologies and agendas, replete with the endorsement of conflict, are passed down to their followers as divinely inspired.

**The Psychology of Prophecy: When Prophecy Fails**

The psychology behind prophecy that does not materialize, such as the failure of Communist Russia to assume the role of Gog, provides insight into the ready shift of evangelical focus from the Soviet Union to the Islamic world in their search for the eschatological aggressors of Ezekiel and Daniel. Leon Festinger, in his 1956 study of the impact of the failure of prophecy, *When Prophecy Fails*, argues that the failure of prophetic predictions to materialize does not often spell the end of prophecy; rather, it spurs the “prophets” in question toward a renewed intensity and vigor in their predictions, albeit with a different focus, target, or prediction.\(^\text{10}\) Festinger explores an interesting example that supports his thesis, the Millerites of the first half of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century. The Millerites, followers of New England farmer William Miller, believed that the Apocalypse was to occur in the year 1843 based on biblically-inspired time calculations.

Festinger notes an acceleration in proselytization as the year 1843 approached, disappointment as the year passed without the advent of the Second Coming, and, surprisingly, a resurgence in proselytization as the prophecy was proven false.\textsuperscript{11} Festinger uses the Millerite example to demonstrate an element of social psychology relevant to this discussion – the parallel nature of the level of importance of the central belief and its supporting ideology and what Festinger terms as “dissonance,” or the level of confusion and mental chaos that ensues when the belief is disconfirmed.\textsuperscript{12}

Festinger observes several poignant reactions on the part of believers to the disconfirmation of a closely held belief. The most logical reaction to disconfirmation, according to the author, would be to discard the belief as mistaken and resume what he terms a “more usual existence.”\textsuperscript{13} However, the belief is often so strong and closely held that the notion of giving up the belief is more painful to the believer than the actual dissonance itself. In an effort to quell the painful nature of the dissonance in the believer’s mind, he or she may attempt to cognitively rearrange or restate the belief in a way that re-opens the possibility of its fulfillment.\textsuperscript{14} In support, Festinger notes the efforts of the Millerites to reexamine their original prophetic date of the Second Coming and the resulting conclusion that their calculations had been incorrect thus justifying the calculation of a new date. The relevant concept to extract from Festinger’s example of the Millerites is the intransigence of the core belief itself, in this case the imminence of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 13-16.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 29-30.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
the Second Coming. It becomes easier for the believer to discard or recast some or all of
the specifics of the predictions associated with the core belief than to discard the belief
itself. Additionally, the dissonance caused by the original prediction’s failure can be
lessened by a shift in focus from the original prediction to the reformed prediction with
an accompanying increase in vigor and confidence of the new prediction’s correctness.\(^{15}\)

Festinger’s thesis acknowledges, however, the lingering effect of dissonance
caused by the falsehood of a prophetic prediction even when the prediction is reformed.
The role of proselytization in the psychology of prophetic prediction becomes important
at this stage. According to Festinger’s thesis,

> If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is
correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct. Consider the extreme
case: if everyone in the whole world believed something there would be
no question at all as to the validity of this belief.\(^{16}\)

Therefore, proselytization becomes an important component to convincing the actual
believer of the validity of his or her own beliefs. Often, the success of proselytization in
this context is hinged on being able to identify an existing condition that supports the
core belief. In the case of this discussion, that condition, during the Cold War era,
became the ideology and behavior of the Soviet Union. During the decade leading up to
and after the 9/11\(^{th}\) terror attacks in the United States, the supporting condition on behalf
of dispensationalist believers became the ideology and behavior of radical Islam. The
very nature of belief in biblical prophecy, i.e., the belief in events characterized as cosmic
and other-worldly, requires irrefutable support, as perceived by the believer,

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
demonstrated by current events. Furthermore, the combative nature of dispensationalist
prophecy calls for the identification of an eschatological aggressor in the context of
current events to support the prophetic belief. The strong focus on prophecy, particularly
apocalyptic prophecy, as a means of belief validation on behalf of dispensationalists has
required this subset of evangelicals to turn their focus on an existing competing ideology
as the Other in the eschatological endgame.

Festinger’s thesis is effective in describing the reasons behind the seemingly
contradictory nature of firming one’s belief in an eschatological scenario from a position
of vulnerability; however, the same reaction can occur from a position of confidence and
strength as well. The period between the fall of Communism in 1989 and the 9/11 terror
attacks was a period of prosperity and relative calm in American society. The Cold War
against the former Soviet Union had been won and American economic prowess was on
the upswing. Festinger’s thesis would suggest that a focus on eschatology recedes in
such a situation; however, American apocalyptic literature during this period continued to
thrive, albeit with a return to a full preoccupation with Islam as the apocalyptic
antagonist. Despite the relative calm of the 1990s in America, the role of the United
States in global issues and conflicts came under increasing criticism, especially with
respect to its role in conflicts involving Muslim societies and nations. Relations between
Palestinians and Israel as the 1990s dawned worsened, represented by the first Palestinian
intifada from 1987 through 1993, and dissatisfaction with the American alliance with
Israel among Arab nations intensified. The Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, as wars
inevitably do, linked the United States to alleged war crimes, such as the widely-
publicized “Highway of Death” incident in which a retreating convoy of Iraqi military
vehicles was attacked on the road to Basra, Iraq, resulting in a 60-kilometer stretch of
destruction. The association of the United States with aggression against Arabs and, by
extension, Muslims, was one factor fueling the intensification of radical Islam during this
period which, in turn, continued to provide fodder for eschatological tendencies within
Christianity in the United States. Therefore, despite American society experiencing
relative strength and confidence during this period, the increasing “global” effect of
world events outside of American society and the perception of the role of the United
States in these events continued to facilitate an atmosphere of a perceived cultural
conflict between Islam and Christianity.

Islam Replaces Communism as Eschatological Aggressor

Scott M. Lewis, S.J., in his article “Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?,”
draws on Charles Kimball’s 2002 book *When Religion Becomes Evil* to develop three
insightful scenarios in which eschatology becomes a corrupting influence on religion.  
First, Lewis remarks on a very common reaction to religious violence – comparing a
glorified version of one’s own religion to the worst aspects of another. Lewis denotes the
strong “saved versus unsaved” theme that is woven into interpretations of apocalyptic
scripture and its potential to reinforce a group identity in the face of change:

This tendency has fed into anti-Semitism, sectarianism, religious bigotry,
as well as pogroms and crusades of all varieties. This group identity can
also be turned inward and used to marginalize elements of one’s own
group such as women, laypeople, dissidents, or gays.  

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18 Lewis, S.J., “Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?” 42.
Second, such behavior may be deemed warranted or justified by a charismatic authority figure claiming that such justification comes from God:

But when this obedience is amplified by someone’s claims to be the channel of privileged communications from God or special interpretive insight into the hidden meaning of apocalyptic symbolism, disaster and tragedy are often not far behind. The tragedies of Waco and Jonestown were the result of narcissistic spirit-inflated egos attempting to enhance their own claims to power and absolute control over others.\(^{19}\)

Finally, Lewis cites the desire to invoke a romanticized era in the life of the Church, either in the past or the future, as a negative influence on Christianity.\(^{20}\) In the context of dispensationalists, the desire is to bring about the future apocalyptic era; however, this desire is often influenced by the perception that Christianity has moved away from its true bearings, emphasized in past teachings and dogma:

As a further sign of unhealthy religion many attempt to establish an ideal time, either in the past or in the future. In Christianity this might take the form of attempting a return to some idealized and pristine state of the Church in the distant past. But apocalyptic presents another possibility: rushing headlong to a time in the future in which God’s intervention has destroyed evil and ushered in God’s kingdom of peace and prosperity. The problem is that often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some decide that God needs a helping hand…\(^{21}\)

Due to the adversarial nature of apocalyptic theology, this desire to “assist” God in bringing about the conditions and events that dispensationalists believe will herald the Second Coming often results in turning a blind eye toward violence. As Lewis smartly

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 42-43.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
suggests, this attitude is borne of a belief that such violence, because apocalyptic literature is violent in nature, is somehow pre-ordained or approved by God.\textsuperscript{22}

The rise of the Soviet Union and the threat that it posed to Israel and the West, as well as its perceived bias toward the Arabs against Israel, represented a brief respite from placing Islam in the role of eschatological antagonist. While the historical animosity between Christianity and Islam had been a quarrel based on theological differences that were difficult to reconcile, the Soviet Union briefly epitomized atheism as the end-times enemy. The ascent of the Soviet Union on the world stage came on the heels of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the previous “Gog and Magog;” the fact that it lay to the north of Israel (Ezekiel prophesied the attacker of Israel during the Apocalypse would come from north of Israel) made it easier to temporarily view atheism as the enemy of Christ defeated at Armageddon. The competing worldviews of communist Russia and the capitalist West formed a platform from which religiously-toned conflict could launch just as the clash between the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe had done centuries earlier. Islam, however, was never relegated to complete irrelevance during the era – dispensationalist writers of the 1960s and 1970s viewed Islam as joining the Soviet Union in an attack on Israel. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the Middle East, capped by the American hostages held in fundamentalist Iran in 1979, in conjunction with the economic threat posed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) against the West, ensured that Islam would continue to be viewed in villainous terms.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Boyer, “The Middle East in Modern American Popular Prophetic Belief,” 327.
The waning influence of the Cold War on dispensational pre-millennialist interpretations of eschatological scripture occurred in juxtaposition with the rise of Islam as the eschatological aggressor and featured some mix of the two. Of course, this had much to do with the exit of Soviet atheism from the world stage and the accompanying need to identify another adversarial ideology to justify dispensational apocalyptic assertions. Although the Soviet Union occupied a greater role in the Apocalypse as understood by dispensationalists, Russia retained an important capacity in the coming battle of Armageddon, largely because she still occupied the most logical location for the biblical Gog that would lead an attack against Israel prior to the Second Coming. The necessity of re-interpreting eschatology based on changing geopolitical realities led dispensationalist thinkers to, at first, label the thaw in East-West relations as a “false peace” and the fall of the Berlin Wall as purposeful deception on the part of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.24 In 1991, Pat Robertson claimed that the recent coup by the Russian KGB that thrust Boris Yeltsin into power was a ruse designed to put to rest any remaining doubts about the validity of Gorbachev’s liberalizing Glasnost policies in hopes that ensuing Western aid to Russia would enable her to re-arm and strike the West.25 The dispensational pre-millennialist understanding of the at-first benign nature of the Antichrist only encouraged some to view Gorbachev as, indeed, the possible Antichrist of Revelation.26 Hal Lindsey himself was forced by geopolitical changes to make changes in his interpretation of apocalyptic scripture, explaining the collapse of the


25 Ibid., 152.

26 Ibid.
Soviet Union as reflecting the will of God to not allow the Kremlin, as representative of a wide slice of ethnicities under the Soviet Union, to play the role of Gog; rather, it should be ethnic Russians that occupy this position.27

At the same time, geopolitical change forced variations of the role of the Arab world in dispensational pre-millennial interpretations of prophecy. The rise of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as the epitome of the Arab strongman dictator and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait introduced new Middle East-centered geopolitical overtones to the interpretation of prophecy. These overtones were, in many ways, more conducive to the pre-millennialist argument for the impending nature of the events of apocalyptic scripture due to the fact that many of the power-player cities and countries of the Middle East are known by name to Christians familiar with biblical literature.28 An example of this was Saddam’s stated intention to rebuild the ancient city of Babylon, a city mentioned in apocalyptic literature as the center of inequity and hatred toward God and Israel. Dispensationalists viewed Babylon, as they did with most apocalyptic elements, in literal, physical terms, in contrast with the traditional interpretation of Babylon as the embodiment, although not necessarily physical, of Satan’s religion.29 This interpretation of Babylon as representing a physical city existing on the present plane lent itself to the ability of dispensationalists to cast Saddam as the possible embodied Antichrist. The Iran Hostage Crisis, in conjunction with the alliance between Iran and the Soviet Union, was

27 Ibid., 154.
29 Ibid., 145.
another crossing point from Communism to Islam on the journey toward realizing the true eschatological anti-Israel forces.

Since the 9/11 terror attacks which traumatized the United States, Islam has once again assumed the primary role of antagonist in the eschatological end-game according to many dispensational pre-millennialists. However, to be accurate, the antagonism between Christianity and Islam had existed long before 9/11 and had generally exhibited an apocalyptic undertone through the centuries. Christians often viewed various forms of Muslim aggression, such as in the persona of the Saracens, the Barbary Pirates, and the Ottoman Empire, as indicative of the overall violent slant of Islam toward Christianity. The role attributed to Islam in apocalyptic prophecy, however, evolved from one that represented prophetic events in real time, e.g. the Colonial-era Protestants’ fear of the Ottomans as the locust plague of Revelation 9:2-3, to one that was to take its form in the future.30 Dispensationalists of the 19th century were largely responsible for encouraging this shift, viewing the growing interest in a Jewish homeland, though not necessarily in Palestine, as a sign of the imminence of the Apocalypse. This evolving interpretation of current events in the Middle East as heralding the advent of the eschatological era rather than actually representing the events of prophetic scripture made the 9/11 attacks easier to perceive as a further implication of Islam as the eschatological antagonist. In the wake of 9/11, new accusations surfaced claiming Muslims as destined aggressors against Israel.

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and its allies, Arab nations as joining the Gog and Magog attack against Israel prophesied in Revelation 20, and the messianic Shi’a Mahdi as the Antichrist.  

The fall of the Soviet Union and worldwide Communism in general in the late 1980s prompted evangelicals to once again place Islam at the epicenter of apocalyptic prophesy. The focus on the Soviet Union as the Gog and Magog of prophecy proved to be a temporary respite from the historical “forerunner of the Antichrist.” Long-held evangelical notions of Islam as an aggressive religion and one that calls for the subjugation of non-believers, encouraged by Islamic fundamentalist terrorism against Israel and the West during the 1980s, played a role in the re-emergence of prophecy “popularizations” during the 1990s with Islam at the forefront. Dispensational authors, writing in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, turned their attention back to Islam as the eschatological antagonist, often with renewed vigor and confidence in the correctness of their assertions. The role that Jerusalem would play in the dispensational understanding of the Second Coming, one that featured a rebuilt Temple on the mount where the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam’s holiest shrines, now stands, facilitated the demonization of Islam among these writers. Although they associated their statements with simple biblical prophecy, dispensationalists exhibited a clear undercurrent of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim bias in their post-Communist era writings. The often-bitter theological underpinnings of the Christian-Muslim relationship was a major factor in the

31 Ibid., 51-52.
33 Boyer, “The Middle East in Modern American Popular Prophetic Belief,” 328.
34 Ibid., 319.
dispensational view of Islam as the producer of the “Antichrist” – an assertion rarely made regarding the former Soviet Union.

**Dispensationalism’s Advance: The *Left Behind* Series**

Perhaps the most prominent literary example that demonstrates the extraordinary thrust of dispensational pre-millennialism into mainstream Christianity as well as mainstream American theological thought in general is the incredibly popular *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic fiction books. *Left Behind*, inaugurated in 1995, is the brainchild of evangelical minister and author Tim LaHaye. LaHaye and co-author Jerry Jenkins, both self-described as dispensationalist Christian Zionists, have written twelve volumes of the series, beginning with 1995’s *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* and concluding with 2007’s *Kingdom Come: The Final Victory*. LaHaye’s dispensationalist background and deep alliance to the Christian Right is evidenced by his former position as a board member of Falwell’s Moral Majority and his gift of $4.5 million to Falwell’s Liberty University in 2001.35 The popularity of the *Left Behind* series is undeniable – the total sales of the entire Left Behind series has totaled over 63 million copies and six of the twelve volumes have reached the number one position on the *New York Times Bestseller* List according to the series’ official website, http://www.leftbehind.com (accessed January 23, 2011). The series’ appeal has extended beyond the logical audience for dispensationalist literature – a May, 2001 study found that 24 percent of all American adults had heard of the series and 3 million “non born-again adults” had read at

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least one installment of the series.\textsuperscript{36} Although the series is billed as fiction, the popularity of the series has assured the subtle influence of dispensational theology on a wider slice of the American public, including non-evangelical Christians, non-practicing Christians, as well as those that would classify themselves as agnostic.\textsuperscript{37}

The \textit{Left Behind} series encapsulates social and political messages that are consistent with a dispensational pre-millennialist view of the world, a factor that is important to the thesis of this paper. Perhaps the most obvious message that is sent by the series is the distrust of and opposition to efforts to bring about world unity. LaHaye and Jenkins write from a belief that world institutions, such as the United Nations and its forerunner, the League of Nations, are corrupt and pave the way for the ascension to power of the Antichrist. Efforts toward world peace in the form of treaties, disarmament talks, and other forms of cooperation between nations is suspect in the eyes of dispensationalists and this suspicion is reflected in the Left Behind series.\textsuperscript{38} Distrust in official domestic government institutions is also evident in the series, as evidenced by LaHaye and Jenkins’ view of the United States government as the first to fall to the Antichrist due to moral decline.\textsuperscript{39} This view of government is extremely prevalent among evangelical Christians in the United States today and dovetails with the description of the evils of the One World Government offered by LaHaye and Jenkins. In fact, the historical pre-millennialist doctrinal belief in the Rapture as pre-Tribulational

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 5-6.

\textsuperscript{38} Amy Johnson Frykholm, \textit{Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 121.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 134.
was borne of a perception among evangelical Christians that the modern destruction of social and political barriers, which has only accelerated in this day with the advent of new technologies, was leading to chaos and a breakdown of morality.\(^40\) In other words, contrary to post-Tribulationists, who believed in humankind’s obligation to work to bring about the millennium of peace and prosperity, pre-Tribulationists, including LaHaye and Jenkins, believed that humankind is incapable of achieving peace and, therefore, such actions are futile and, in some cases, diabolical.

An unfortunate by-product of the distrust of efforts of nations to work together in various capacities, including the capacity to bring about peace, is the series’ treatment of the Palestinian problem. Melani McAlister, in her article “Prophecy, Politics and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism’s New World Order,” debates the significance of the lack of visibility given to Palestinian Arabs in the \textit{Left Behind} installments. Palestinians are not mentioned in any installment of the series which is significant, according to McAlister, given that most of the series takes place in Israel and Palestinian territories.\(^41\) The marginalization of the Palestinian people by LaHaye and Jenkins is reflective of the attitude toward the native inhabitants of the Holy Land that is generally held by dispensationalists. The displacement of the Palestinians by the 1948 creation of Israel was an event that has little for the God of the dispensationalists. The success of the \textit{Left Behind} series has exposed a general lack of sensitivity toward Palestinian Arabs to a wider audience; by association, the Palestinian culture, including its Muslim heritage, has become disenfranchised by the

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{41}\) McAlister, “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular,” 791.
dispensationalist theological viewpoint. In this way, according to McAlister, Palestinians are dehumanized to the point where dispensationalist attitudes toward Muslims, such as Pat Robertson’s insistence that Israel cede no land designated as occupied by the United Nations, gain sympathy among a wider section of the American public than perhaps was previously possible.\textsuperscript{42} The subtle influence of LaHaye’s and Jenkins’ catalogue of novels demonstrates the ways in which the worldview embraced and exemplified by the Left Behind novels links biblical literalism and a traditional Christian Zionist interest in prophecy to a broader, even liberalizing sensitivity – more sophisticated, more multicultural, and certainly more consciously ‘modern’ than anything that has come before.\textsuperscript{43}

In this manner, the \textit{Left Behind} phenomenon has brought a level of legitimacy, in the context of a modern, sophisticated view of the world, to the institutional acceptance of the marginalization of Muslims and Muslim culture.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 778.
CHAPTER IV

THE “AXIS OF EVIL”: DISPENSATIONALISM POST-9/11

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.

--Mark 13:35

Dispensational pre-millennialist theology experienced resurgence in the aftermath of the terror attacks in New York and Washington on 9/11, 2001. Although the last decades of the 20th century certainly witnessed an evolution of dispensationalism with respect to its inroads into the American political debate, the post-9/11 era has witnessed a focus on pre-millennialism and apocalypticism that mirrors the same phenomenon in the months after Israel’s conquest of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War.\(^1\) The Bush administration’s “Global War on Terror” reflected the fear of apocalyptic conflict that seemed to be embodied in acts of terror in the context of 9/11.\(^2\) Terrorism, specifically terrorism carried out by Islamic extremists, appeared to exhibit the hallmarks of prophetic apocalypse as interpreted by dispensationalists. The terrorism of 9/11 was perceived to usher in a new form of “mass” violence that portrayed an intense contrast to the fairly localized terror acts of previous decades.\(^3\) Dispensationalists became convinced that the capability of Islamic terrorists to inflict mass destruction, as well as the prospect of violence multiplied many times over in the event of nuclear weapons falling into the


\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
hands of such terrorists, was indicative of the advent of the end-times. The Islamic perpetrators of terrorism, as recognized by dispensationalists, coupled with the perennial threat against Israel that dispensationalists believed her Arab neighbors posed, vilified Islam and associated it with the apocalyptic forces of evil in the eyes of dispensational pre-millennialists. The difficulty among evangelicals in disassociating Islam as an Abrahamic faith with close connections to Christianity and Judaism from the extremists that sought to highjack Islam for their own criminal purposes post-9/11 set the stage for a deterioration in Muslim-Christian relations that many have characterized as civilizational in nature.

**Resurgence of Dispensationalism Post-9/11**

Dispensational pre-millennialism experienced an increase in interest in the aftermath of 9/11 as the realities of terrorism sank into the collective American consciousness. Many evangelical Christians, predisposed to viewing world events through the lens of eschatology, sought to find some meaning or purpose in the events of that tragic day through their understanding of biblical prophecy. For them, dispensationalism offered a logical counterweight to the specter of terrorism in the modern world in the form of a level of comfort associated with the assumed Rapture and the subsequent millennial reign of Jesus Christ. In doing so, dispensationalism lent some sense to the seemingly chaotic and meaningless character of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. According to the dispensationalist worldview, 9/11 was the latest in a series of events, beginning with the 1948 creation of Israel and continuing with the Israeli capture

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5 Ibid.
of Jerusalem in 1967, that eventually would culminate in the onset of the Apocalypse. Pre-millennialists perceived a link between the Islamic component of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their belief that Islam represents the threat against Israel implied in Christian eschatological scripture. In this way, an attack against the United States associated with Islam, as the 9/11 attacks were, has been understood by dispensationalists to be a threat against them and, by proxy, Christianity.⁶

The dispensationalist interpretation of radical Islam as a threat to their interpretation of Christianity, as represented by the 9/11 attacks as well as other attacks by radical Islamists throughout the world, can easily evolve into an endorsement for violence against Muslims. In keeping with their dispensationalist worldview, Robertson, Falwell, and Hagee have each at times advocated the removal of Palestinians, if necessary by force, from Israeli territories considered by dispensationalists to be divinely granted to Israel.⁷ Falwell famously appeared on Robertson’s broadcast, The 700 Club, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and compared the collective Palestinian people to Hitler due to their desire, in his opinion, to “drive Israel into the sea.”⁸ Combative language, such as this, from evangelical dispensationalist Christians suggests a basic disregard for the welfare of Arabs in general and the Palestinian people in particular in favor of Israel.⁹ Dispensational Christian Zionist views of the native Palestinian people as a casualty of the state of Israel’s divinely sanctioned hegemony over the region can be

⁶ Moret, “Potential for Apocalypse,” 3.
⁷ Ibid., 6.
⁸ Ibid., 8.
⁹ Ibid., 6.
linked to the role of Islam in the dispensationalist interpretation of eschatology.

Unfortunately, the resulting dehumanization of Muslims due to their adherence to a faith considered the antagonist in dispensational eschatology allows the above types of combative statements to be both made and accepted by dispensationalist leaders and followers. Robertson, Falwell, and Hagee have each relied on a very stark “us versus them” type of mentality in which the Other, in this case Middle Eastern Muslims, is external to the divine graces of God and, therefore, subject to prejudice.\(^\text{10}\)

The period after 9/11 witnessed a new wave of evangelical literature that sought to place Islam in an increasingly marginalized setting justified by the assertion of the representative role of radical Islam over all of Islam. Richard Cimino’s 2005 article “No God in Common” presents a thorough and enlightening review of evangelical literature since 9/11 and compares it to the tone of similar literature in the years leading up to the 2001 terror attacks.\(^\text{11}\) Cimino cites works such as Unveiling Islam: An Insider’s Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs, Secrets of the Koran, and The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad and compares them with pre-9/11 literature such as Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab’s View of Islam, The Last of the Giants: Lifting the Veil on Islam and the End Times, and The Facts on Islam.\(^\text{12}\) Cimino concludes that the post-9/11 evangelical

\(^\text{10}\) Ibid., 9.


literature “draws sharper boundaries between Islam and Christianity and asserts that Islam is essentially a violent religion.” While pre-9/11 evangelical literature was replete with references to Islam as a false religion, the tone of post-9/11 evangelical literature had taken, according to Cimino’s conclusions, a strong turn toward demonizing Islam. In *Secrets of the Koran*, Don Richardson, an evangelical Christian missionary, presents a logic common among evangelicals that seeks to censure Islam while acknowledging “peace-loving Muslims” who will “surely need to reexamine their own faith once they have the facts.” This is representative of the common evangelical emphasis on hating the sin while loving the sinner; however, this attempt to placate critics of judgmental evangelicalism often is met with distrust and suspicion. Richardson questions the peaceful nature of the holy book of Islam characterizing it as a “threat to world peace.” He typifies his view of Islam as “objective,” arguing against opinions that seek to describe Islam as an honorable and great religion, such as those of President George W. Bush shortly after the 9/11 attacks, describing them as “naïve.” These narrow views of Islam are illustrated throughout the book in the context of the 9/11 attacks, using the attacks to justify Richardson’s understanding of Islam as a violent religion. Richardson’s book is one of many examples of a sharper attack against Islam demonstrated by post-9/11 evangelical literature supporting Cimino’s thesis.

**Impact of Dispensationalism on U. S. Politics Post-9/11**

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13 Cimino, "No God in Common," 162.
14 Richardson, *Secrets of the Koran*, 20.
15 Ibid., 64.
16 Ibid., 223.
The policies of the Bush administration, post-9/11, exhibited a decidedly pro-Israel bias, often in the face of Israeli military actions against Palestinian leadership and citizenry, encouraged by the dispensationalist Christian Zionist voting bloc that was instrumental in Bush’s election in 2000. Bush’s attempt, in the weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to characterize “Islam as peace” in public statements and differentiate moderate Muslims from Islamic terrorists was met with concern and, in some cases, outright contempt by prominent Christian Zionists. Pat Robertson, for example, openly disagreed with Bush’s statement, insisting that Islam is not peaceful:

But, ladies and gentlemen, I have taken issue with our esteemed president in regard to his stand in saying Islam is a peaceful religion. It's just not. And the Koran makes it very clear, if you see an infidel, you are to kill him.  

Other evangelical leaders, such as Franklin Graham, son of the prominent evangelical pastor Billy Graham, and Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, also clearly disagreed with Bush’s assertion, making derogatory comments concerning Islam and the Prophet Mohammed subsequent to Bush’s speech. The influence of these leaders of the evangelical community on evangelical voters was not lost on the Bush administration. As a result, “neo-conservative” elements within the Bush administration, represented by Vice President Dick Cheney, senior policy advisor

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Karl Rove, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, among others, allied themselves with the New Christian Right (NCR), represented largely by the aforementioned evangelical leaders.\(^{20}\) Neo-conservatives or “neo-cons” are traditionally conservative; however, they exhibit a particularly militaristic, unilateralist foreign policy stance which naturally dovetails with the Christian Zionist foreign policy purpose advocated by dispensationalist evangelicals.\(^{21}\) The neo-conservative agenda found a convenient ally in the NCR and took advantage of the opportunity to promote its pro-Israel bias. Unfortunately for Muslims, the alignment of neo-cons with the NCR for purely political purposes ensured American bias against Islam and Muslims in many cases and influenced public opinion of Islam in the United States.

The rhetoric of the Bush administration, post-9/11, assumed a more confrontational tone with allusions to a worldview colored by the influence of evangelical religion. Bush’s speeches addressing terrorism often reflected a “good versus evil” mentality revealing the influence of theological absolutes on the President’s perception of the events of 9/11.\(^{22}\) His referral to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as “an axis of evil” in 2002 indicated that his “good versus evil” worldview extended beyond the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks to regimes and ideologies that were counter to American values.\(^{23}\) Bush understood terrorists as embodying only one purpose and one goal – the imposition of


\(^{22}\) Dittmer, “Of Gog and Magog,” 297.

violence and destruction due to hatred toward the freedoms and prosperity Americans enjoy.24 Bush’s intent to protect American citizens was honorable; however, his inexperience in foreign policy issues, tested by one of the gravest international threats faced in the history of the United States, led him to regress to considering external aggression in the simple context of good and evil in a religious context.25 His belief in the perpetual struggle between good and evil and the nature of that struggle as terminal – concluding with the Battle of Armageddon - was theologically dispensationalist. While it is mere speculation to attempt to quantify the influence of eschatology on Bush’s foreign policy decisions, Bush chose as his spiritual advisors evangelical leaders that were dispensationalists – Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Billy Graham.26 These dispensationalist evangelicals advised Bush during some of the most trying times of his Presidency. The assumption that the dispensational theology adhered to by these advisors and, most likely, discussed with Bush influenced Bush’s worldview with respect to foreign policy would not be out of the question.

The subtle influence of dispensational pre-millennialism can be detected in the Bush administration’s decision in 2003 to invade Iraq and depose the regime of Saddam Hussein. Bush’s trust in pre-millennialist spiritual advisors, as well as his elevation of key appointees at the Pentagon who professed a dispensationalist theological bent, opened the door for the dispensationalist worldview to impact U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq during this period. The biblical boundaries of the land promised to Abraham in

25 Ibid., 49.
Genesis 15 include the Euphrates River on the northern edge of the territory, today in modern Iraq. Saddam’s stated desire, during the 1970s, to rebuild the ancient city of Babylon, referred to as the “great whore” in Revelation, was perceived as a possible clue to the identity of the Antichrist. The firing of Scud missiles by Iraq toward Israel was also viewed in an eschatological context by dispensationalists, a view that was only encouraged by the proximity of the missiles’ landing points to the biblical location of the Battle of Armageddon.27 Dispensationalist authors of the 1990s first suggested Saddam’s role as the Antichrist, thereby introducing the notion to a wider section of dispensational evangelicals and their leaders.28 Many evangelicals at the time of the invasion voiced their support of Bush’s action. For example, Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a Bush appointee to the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, issued a pro-war statement and obtained the signatures of consent of several evangelical leaders.29

The Bush administration’s “Global War on Terror” (hereafter referred to as the “GWOT”), declared immediately following the 9/11 terror attacks, was perceived by some members of the dispensational evangelical elite as, ultimately, a war on Islam despite the administration’s denial. The Iraq War was justified by the administration as a key battle in the GWOT, linking the regime of Saddam Hussein to the terrorist organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda, as well as decrying the alleged


29 Durham, “Evangelical Protestantism and Foreign Policy,” 154.
intent of Iraq to use weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) against Israel.\textsuperscript{30} The rhetoric surrounding various facets of the GWOT, including the invasion of Iraq, carried religious connotations and suggested a holy war, from Bush’s use of the highly inflammatory word, “crusade,” in his stated policy goal to confront terrorism, to the “good versus evil” characterization of the struggle against terrorism. Dispensational evangelicals have characterized the GWOT as a just war, with appropriate restraints and an absolute justification, and Islamic \textit{jihad}, conversely, as a violent and indiscriminate struggle, featuring a purpose that is evil.\textsuperscript{31} Ironically, some have pointed to civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, the sanctioned use of interrogation methods considered torture by many, and the detention of combatants without trial at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in Iraq as evidence of the lack of restraint in the “GWOT” that is characteristic of a holy way.\textsuperscript{32} A specific by-product of the Iraq War that, again, suggests a holy war mentality to the “GWOT” was the opportunity taken by some dispensational evangelicals to evangelize Iraqis motivated by a hostile desire to chip away at the Islamic faith.\textsuperscript{33} Mark Juergensmeyer, his book \textit{Terror in the Mind of God}, describes the reaction to a wayward, secular lifestyle professed by one of the terrorists jailed for the 1992 bombing of the World Trade Center, Mahmoud Abouhalima. Juergensmeyer recounts Abouhalima’s comparison of his rediscovery of Islam to a lion cub raised by sheep – Abouhalima


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 87.
realized with defiance that he is “a Muslim, not a sheep.” Abouhalima’s intense, rebellious reaction to the secularism of the West – the justification of violence – can be compared to the dispensational evangelical support of the GWOT in a religious context. Dispensationalists have exhibited a strong reaction against a modernizing, liberalizing society, often seeking to return to a simple, fundamentalist worldview even on a global scale justifying conflict, such as the GWOT, to advocate traditional values.

The re-assertion of dispensational pre-millennialist theology post-9/11, both in the faith and political communities, has been accompanied by an increase in the misuse of dispensationalist theological concepts for specific political agendas. Fundamentalist Christianity is a natural antagonist to the post-modern society, which casts doubt on the existence of any form of absolute truth. The tug and pull of fundamentalism, in any religious tradition, toward the separation from other religious traditions as a reaction to the perceived erosion of absolute truth has resulted in efforts among some evangelical Christian communities to erect barriers between their faith and other theologies rather than work toward common ground. In many cases, the elements of post-modernism and religious pluralism have driven evangelical Christians, particularly dispensational pre-millenialists, toward leveraging distorted principles of Christian theology in justifying discrimination against members of other faith groups, particularly Muslims.

**Evangelical Rejection of Post-Modernism Post-9/11**

The fundamentalist strains of any faith tradition have historically been at odds with post-modernism with dispensational Christianity being no different. Post-modern

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society is characterized first and foremost by the denial of absolute truth – in the post-modernist mindset, absolute truth simply does not exist. Fundamentalism has become newly ascendant across the globe due partly to the development of post-modernism and the resulting secularization of many societies. In fact, fundamentalism could not exist in a culture that had not experienced the polarizing forces of modernization and secularization.35 Modern society is perceived by post-modernists as a grand undertaking achieved by the rational interaction of members of that society, thus squeezing out the “irrationality” of religion.36 Religious beliefs are “relativized” in a post-modern culture characterized by religious pluralism such as that found in the United States today. The absence of absolute truth in such a society lends itself to the proliferation of competing faith traditions and worldviews, not to mention moral norms. The march of the post-modern society alienates those whose interpretations of theology rely on the perception of truths that cannot be questioned, doubted, or challenged and cannot be found in any other faith tradition. Post-modernism strips away mystery and presents new social mores based, in part, on new perceptions of the world based on scientific discovery in a way that some find traumatic and shocking, if not wholly unacceptable.37 Fundamentalist believers choose not to accept new understandings of morality or modern explanations of our environment; rather, they form a new “counter-culture” to post-modern society


seeking to re-assert traditional beliefs. 38 Fundamentalism becomes the “armor” that the believer dons to fend off post-modern understandings of the world, other faith traditions, and competing ideologies, even from within one’s own faith tradition.

Dispensational pre-millennialism’s relationship with modernism in Darby’s day and post-modernism today reflects the same siege mentality when faced with societal change. Millennial strains of religious beliefs have arisen throughout recent history in a variety of societies when societal values modulate and old, familiar structures such as traditional morality and social norms are marginalized. 39 In American society, dispensationalists, in particular, have reacted strongly and, in some cases, with rage to the perception of the encroachment of alien values, as well as the aggressiveness of the pace of modernization. 40 Rather than investigating these new values, especially differing religious values, and drawing conclusions based on inquiry, the dispensationalist response is a further retreat into their own religious interpretations, often resulting in an extremist viewpoint. Bruce B. Lawrence, professor of Islamic Studies at Duke University describes this retreat as predicated upon the

affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced. 41

38 Ibid.

39 Clark, Allies for Armageddon, 4.


41 Bruce B. Lawrence, Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age (Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 27.
The *Left Behind* novels discussed earlier, offer an intriguing example of the appeal of a religious worldview simplified in the face of the perceived encroachment of post-modernism. Through the series, LaHaye and Jenkins illustrate a dispensationalist-based fantasy to which the reader can escape the uncertainties and anxieties of a world seemingly out of control. Competing ideologies, as well as fearful current events, such as terrorism, fade as the reader enters a “compensatory solution” described by the novels.\(^{42}\) The blur of post-modernism is countered by what some critics have called the “anti-intellectualism” of the series – the novels are not complicated and offer an entertaining alternative to the mainstream institutional Christian structure that often fails to confront post-modernism strongly enough.\(^{43}\)

The reaction to post-modernism on behalf of pre-millennialists implicates a concurrent reaction against Islam as one of many “alien” religious traditions that are a hallmark of post-modern society, resulting in the “religious othering” of Muslims. Theologian Marc Gopin, in his book *Between Eden and Armageddon*, writes at length about the role of othering in religion-based conflict. Gopin points to the absolute necessity of humanizing the Other as a method of religious conflict resolution, a position that indicates the destructive nature of othering in a religious context.\(^{44}\) As a result of the dispensationalist suspicion toward Islam as the eschatological enemy of Christianity, Muslims in American society experience religious othering by pre-millennialists, and fundamentalists in general, that dehumanizes them and demonizes their faith. When the

\(^{42}\) Chapman, “Selling Faith Without Selling Out,” 159.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 163.

Other is dehumanized as Muslims often are in the eye of dispensationalists, conflict is facilitated, resulting in combative language and, in some cases, violence toward Muslims. Othering of Muslims is further facilitated by the pre-millennialists’ belief in the absolute truth of dispensationalist theology, linking the reaction against the pluralism of post-modern society – an emphasis on the existence of an absolute truth – to othering-based conflict.

Misuse of Dispensationalist Theology among Evangelicals Post-9/11

The post-9/11 period has witnessed the misuse of dispensationalist theology, whether subtle or overt, in forming attitudes toward Muslims and, in many cases, justifying discrimination against Muslims and the erection of a distinct othering mindset among many evangelicals. The labeling of Islam by dispensationalist theology as the eschatological aggressor against Christianity, despite the absence of any specific identification of this aggressor in apocalyptic scripture, has set the stage for the demonization of Islam in a variety of settings. The insertion of the dispensationalist worldview has become recently more prevalent in the political world, especially during the Bush administration, as Christian fundamentalists sought to influence the rapidly changing world in faith-based terms. Political events were perceived as being influenced by a divine presence, altered by a divine Will, thereby confirming the correctness of the outcome while at the same time legitimating the particular faith of the perceiver.45

Christian Zionism has misused dispensational theology to legitimate the Israeli claim to Palestinian lands as well as the wholesale discrimination of Palestinian Muslims and, ironically, Christians living in the Occupied Territories. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

demonstrates how the political use of religion can devolve into the misuse of religion for political purposes.\footnote{46} In this process, the aspects of the Christian faith that promote compassion, tolerance, and love become perverted into indifference, intolerance, and rage.\footnote{47} The dispensationalist view of Islam as Christianity’s apocalyptic aggressor ensures that these principle perversions, resulting in a combative stance, will be directed, in part, toward Muslims.

Several examples exist of the link between dispensationalist Christian worldviews, the perceived assault upon Christian values posed by post-modernism and religious pluralism, and negative stereotypes of Muslims in American society. Email chains have become a particularly efficient method of spreading a particular worldview, especially with respect to political viewpoints in the context of religious beliefs. Lt. Gen. (Ret.) William G. Boykin, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence during the Bush administration and a fundamentalist evangelical Christian, sponsored an email sent via ConservativeActionAlerts.com and received September 1, 2010 which claims Muslims in the administration of President Barack Obama were intent on working toward the imposition of Islamic *Shari’a* Law in the United States:

> The Obama Administration's Department of Homeland Security recently swore in two devout Muslims in senior posts. Arif Alikhan -- a devout Muslim, as Assistant Secretary for Policy Development. DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano swore-in Kareem Shora, a devout Muslim, who was born in Damascus, Syria, as ADC National Executive Director as a member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council (HSAC). Was it not "Devout Muslim men" that flew planes into


U.S. buildings 9 years ago? Was it not a Devout Muslim who killed 14 at Fort Hood?

Lt. Gen. Boykin, one of several dispensational pre-millennialist policy-makers in the Bush administration, spoke of the GWOT often in terms of a holy war against Islam. The fundamentalist nature of Lt. Gen. Boykin’s interpretation of Christianity, in the context of current events, is clearly influential over his perception of Islam:

Thank you for taking time to genuinely care about this world-altering situation that we are confronted with. I pray that you, too, will have the compassion of Christ.

Lt. Gen. Boykin’s emailed remarks illustrate the profound impact that a dispensationalist worldview can have on policymakers and, in some cases, the policymaking process. In this case, Lt. Gen. Boykin’s use of religious language to make his point regarding his perception of the intent of Muslims in government in the United States argues divine sanction over his discriminatory comments and is, therefore, a misuse of dispensationalist theology for political ends.

A much more highly-publicized example of the use of dispensationalist theology to justify Christian conflict with Muslims came in the form of Dr. Terry Jones’ threat to burn copies of the Qur’an on the 9th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. Dr. Jones, senior pastor of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, FL, a charismatic congregation with ties to the Pentecostal Apostolic Church movement, holds a dispensational pre-millennialist theological worldview consistent with the Pentecostal movement. Under Dr. Jones’ leadership, the Dove World Outreach Center has espoused a decidedly anti-Islam doctrine, posting signs claiming that “Islam is of the Devil,” pictures of which were posted on the congregation’s website,
http://www.doveworld.org/the-sign as of February 1, 2011. The specific theological support for the position of the Dove World Outreach Center is unclear; however, the timing of Dr. Jones’ “International Burn a Qur’an Day” seemed to exploit the controversy emerging at that time in New York City over the Park51 project, the planned construction of an Islamic mosque and cultural center near the former site of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. Dr. Jones and his congregation leveraged anger and resentment over the 9/11 attacks to draw attention to their fundamentalist beliefs in a manner that was confrontational and combative. Dr. Jones’ belief in the absolute truth of his dispensationalist interpretation of Christianity has enabled him and his congregation to confront with language that is inflammatory and offensive to Muslims, as represented by examples on the church website. The dispensational pre-millennialist theology of the Dove World Outreach Center pre-supposes eschatological conflict between Muslims and Christians, encouraging Dr. Jones and members of his congregation to confront with an extreme level of insensitivity toward Islam.

**Effect on Religious Pluralism in the United States**

The dispensational pre-millennialist attitude toward Islam is representative of a wider resistance to the traditional American value of religious pluralism in the United States. Democracy, as an institution, inherently supports religious pluralism since a democratic society relies upon debate and consensus rather than the monolithic approach of reliance on an external, absolute authority. Dispensationalism’s rejection of post-modernism and its retreat to fundamentalist stances on questions of religion reveals its adherents’ desire to remake society in their own moral and religious image. The pre-

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millennialist’s concern with the direction of society and failure to perceive pluralism as a moderating force rather than a threat reiterates the need, in the eyes of the pre-millennialist, to revert to isolationism. The most effective tool to achieve isolation, which is ultimately defined, in this context, as surrounding oneself with like-minded people, is to oppose the pluralistic society by insisting upon the absolute truth of the pre-millennial interpretation of Christian scripture. Separation is viewed by dispensationalists as the mechanism by which to distance themselves from secularists as well as liberal Christians, thereby reasserting their belief in the absolute truth of their religious views.\textsuperscript{49} Opposition to religious pluralism on behalf of dispensationalists is evident in American society post-9/11, likely influenced by distrust and suspicion of any faith tradition alternative to Christianity coupled with the uninformed linking of radical Islamists with the core tenants of the Islamic faith. Religious pluralism, to this day, is still in competition in American society with the understanding that the United States was founded as a Christian nation.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, an element of the Christian ethic throughout history, the belief in the absolute truth of Christianity, was a motivating force behind much of American colonialism and expansion westward during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Today, only 16\% of Americans polled have a favorable view of Islam, 60\% advocate gathering intelligence on Muslim groups in the United States, and 38\% sanction tightening the restrictions on Muslim immigration to the U. S.\textsuperscript{51} It can be argued that

\textsuperscript{49} Armstrong, \textit{The Battle for God}, 356.


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 158-159.
these attitudes are a direct result of the 9/11 attacks; however, statements from dispensational Christians questioning the value of the separation of church and state, as well as the desire to incorporate Christian symbols in public settings point to the tendency of many Christians, generally fundamentalist, to advocate restrictions on religious pluralism.

The dispensationalist opposition to religious pluralism in general and any meaningful role for Islam in American society carries with it the threat of violence just beneath the surface. Human history is characterized by the flourishing of a multitude of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups – America herself has been known for years as the “melting pot.” Attempts to run counter to this basic characteristic of human existence or to deny its reality bring the specter of violence closer to the surface. Violence is the only means by which settle such a conflict of values. This is particularly true when one or more of the values in conflict is reinforced by the perception of absolute truth. The dispensationalist preference for a religiously-homogenous society naturally comes at the expense of other faith traditions, particularly Islam, as Judaism is considered part and parcel of the American Judeo-Christian ethic. However, the pre-millennialist advocacy of an American society in which Christianity, the pre-millennialist interpretation of Christianity, also serves to distract from the potentially difficult process of being exposed to other faith traditions and having to consider their influence. This form of religious pluralism challenges the dispensationalist desire for a “rightly-ordered” and “normative” society while forming an impediment to efforts to bring about the dispensationalist-


favored pre-modern societal ideal of one religion.\textsuperscript{54} Demonization and, ultimately, restriction of the religious Other is the path of least resistance to those Christians who struggle with the meaning of post-modernism and change in American society.

CHAPTER V

A WAY FORWARD: PATHS TO MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11

O human beings, we have created you from male and female, and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other.

--Qur’an 49:13

Despite the tensions between evangelical Christians and Muslims in the post-9/11 era, promising advances have been made during this period toward better Muslim-Christian relations through the fostering of mutual respect for differing theologies by evangelical and Muslim groups. Many interdenominational Christian groups, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), feature voices opposed to the combative rhetoric of dispensationalists. These more moderate viewpoints are borne of the willingness to be exposed to other faith traditions and learn from them. Interdenominational groups have been the driving force behind many events designed to draw attention to the issue of Muslim-Christian relations and have made headway in healing the wounds caused by interreligious conflict of the past. Muslims have reached out to Christians in the aftermath of 9/11 to build bridges of understanding and to counter prejudicial language engaged by leaders of the Christian community. The highly-publicized “A Common Word” letter written to the worldwide Christian community and featuring over 100 Muslim leadership signatures sought to identify areas of morality and ethics that are common to both Christianity and Islam. This unprecedented engagement of Muslim and Christian leaders has prompted some moderate evangelical congregations, such as those
comprising the World Baptist Alliance, to engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue in response to the “Common Word” initiative.

Evangelicals are described as those persons for whom the Great Commission of Jesus Christ is of paramount importance; however, not all evangelicals are dispensationalists. For example, members of three of the most prominent evangelical Christian congregations, Presbyterians, Methodists, and progressive Baptists (those Baptists largely outside of the Southern Baptist Convention), do not consider themselves dispensationalists with respect to official church doctrine. Each congregation has individually sponsored efforts to bridge the divide between Christians and Muslims exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks as will be discussed below. Other self-described evangelical denominations, such as conservative members of the Lutheran Church and the Episcopal Church, Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, and others, also do not officially subscribe to dispensationalist theology and are largely sympathetic to interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. These denominations are often members of larger interdenominational organizations, such as the aforementioned WCC, in the interest of promoting interfaith unity and dialogue.

The efforts of Presbyterians, Methodists and progressive Baptists that will be described hereafter are built on a foundation of understanding, mutual respect, and, ultimately, admiration of certain facets of the faith of the “religious other.” Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, in their 2006 book *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, identify several important obstacles to interfaith dialogue that reveal the conditions necessary to facilitate the peacemaking efforts detailed below. Fitzgerald and Borelli classify religious self-sufficiency, the perceived lack of religious knowledge, prejudice,
and a lack of religious freedom as prominent conditions that inhibit meaningful interfaith
dialogue.\(^1\) An attitude of self-sufficiency steers one toward believing that there is nothing
of worth that can be learned from another faith. Similarly, a perceived lack of religious
knowledge or religious confidence can coax one toward resisting exposure to other faith
concepts in order to protect one’s limited view of the world. Prejudices, ingrained from
culture or familial upbringing, often contaminate one’s understanding of the other in a
way that precludes any desire for understanding. Finally, the absence of religious
freedom, whether real or perceived, may cause individual faith groups to turn inward,
thereby again resisting exposure to other faiths. Antidotes to these conditions facilitate
an atmosphere of genuine curiosity, leading to mutual respect, and, finally, admiration for
aspects of the other’s faith.\(^2\) The initiatives explored below are each characterized by,
first and foremost, legitimate curiosity about the other’s faith, sensing the presence of
morality that can be learned from. In many of these cases, curiosity has certainly led to
respect for the faith traditions of the other and a true appreciation and admiration for
these traditions and, by association, the religious other.

**Muslim Outreach and Christian Response: “A Common Word between Us and
You”**

Contrary to the portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence by some American
media outlets and conservative commentators, Muslim peacemaking efforts have actually
been quite numerous since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and are perhaps best represented by
“A Common Word Between Us and You” an open letter to Christians worldwide released

\(^1\) Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View* (Maryknoll, NY,

\(^2\) Ibid., 148-149.
in October, 2007.³ “A Common Word” was signed by 138 of the leading Muslim scholars of the Islamic world from all walks of Muslim life and traditions – Sunni, Shi’a, Sufi, and others. The purpose of the letter was to reinitiate dialogue between Muslims and Christians with the discernment of concepts of theology and morality that the two faiths have in common. This call for dialogue was built around the commonality of what the letter referred to as the two greatest commandments in both Islam and Christianity – the love of God and the love of neighbor (http://www.acommonword.com, accessed February 26, 2011). The letter was received by over 300 Christian leaders, several of whose denominations subsequently issued favorable responses to the outreach as discussed below. Since the release of the letter in October, 2007, three major conferences, based on the “Common Word” initiative, have convened to explore and discuss Muslim-Christian relations, the most recent being at Georgetown University in Washington, DC in October, 2009.

“A Common Word” is based on an Islamic call to dialogue found in the Qur’an. The verse from the Qur’an that forms the theological underpinnings for “A Common Word” is found in Sura 3:64:

Say this [O Muhammad]: ‘O People of the Book, come to a common word between us: that all of us worship none but God, that we ascribe to God no partners, and that we take no one as Lord except God.’ If the people reject your invitation, you shall say to them, ‘be witness, then, that we [believers] are submitting ourselves to God.’

The call to dialogue offered by Muslim leaders is differentiated from previous attempts at Muslim-Christian dialogue in that it is not simply a call for tolerance and an end to

interfaith violence. “A Common Word” is a scripture-based challenge to Christians to seek deeper dialogue on theological issues with Muslims based on the acknowledgement of a common starting point of morality.\(^4\) However, the Qu’ranic tradition, as interpreted by some Muslim commentators, does not advocate limiting dialogue to the two commandments noted above. The special nature of “A Common Word” is found in the interpretation of this verse, on behalf of the signatories to the letter, as opening the door to discovering deeper common ground through wider dialogue.\(^5\) The conferences that followed the release of the letter, at Georgetown University, Yale University, and the University of Cambridge, sought to fulfill this particular interpretation. As a result, deeper theological differences between the two faiths were broached and explored at these conferences, resulting in closer relations between the participants. At a macro level, a Judeo-Christian-Islamic ethic, an acknowledgement of the shared Abrahamic principles of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, began to be recognized and emphasized by conference participants.\(^6\)

**Interdenominational Evangelical Voices for Change**

The Reconciliation Walk, a 1996 Christian interdenominational initiative, was organized to offer an apology for the Crusades to Muslims and Jews alike and constituted an important milestone in the Christian-Muslim reconciliation process. According to the

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\(^6\) Ibid., 9.
official website of the Reconciliation Walk (http://www.crusades-apology.org, accessed February 22, 2011), the mission of the Walk was to “bring Christians face to face with Muslims and Jews with a simple message of regret and confession.” The Walk began in the German city of Cologne on the 900th anniversary of the commencement of the First Crusade ordered by Pope Urban II in March of 1096 and traveled through parts of Europe in which atrocities against Jewish inhabitants were committed by the first Crusaders. Walks were embarked upon during the two subsequent years marking the 900th anniversaries of the establishment of the first Crusader kingdom at Edessa in 1097 and the fall of Antioch to the Crusaders in 1098. The Walk concluded in July of 1999 in Jerusalem, marking the 900th anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders. Participants were received throughout the Walk’s route with appreciation on behalf of members of the faith groups targeted by the Crusaders. The enthusiasm of the response is indicative of the perception of the Crusades that still exists among Muslims and Jews in Europe and the Middle East, a perception that continues to cast a shadow over Christianity among members of these faith groups. Western Christians, in particular, are perceived by Middle Eastern Muslims as coveting a domination of the Middle East economically, politically, and militarily – this perception has its roots in the wounds inflicted by the First Crusade.7

The impact of the Crusades on Christian-Muslim relations is often overlooked or underestimated by dispensational Christians, resulting in interactions between some evangelicals and Muslims that are still marked by Christian insensitivity toward the sins

of the past. The unfortunate use of the term “crusade” by President Bush in his first State of the Union address subsequent to the 9/11 attacks is illustrative of the lack of understanding of the continued meaning of the word to Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Jews to the present day.\textsuperscript{8} There is a significant lack of understanding of the historical events that the Crusades encompassed, among dispensationalists, as well as the brutality of the Crusaders’ treatment of Muslims and Jews. The prevalent perception among dispensationalists, as well as other evangelicals - that Islam is a religion of violence – indicates a troubling unwillingness to acknowledge the violence committed in the name of Jesus Christ during the Crusades and at other points in history. The Reconciliation Walk itself exposed evangelical Christians to Muslims and Jews as fellow human beings, thereby overcoming the religious othering of the past that contributed so deeply to difficult relations between Christians and Muslims. Evangelical participants in the Reconciliation Walk found themselves repudiating the Christian Zionist viewpoint in favor of an understanding of the Middle East that was more reflective of the true dynamics and complexities of the region.\textsuperscript{9} These experiences revealed a new approach to Christian-Muslim relations on behalf of evangelicals that was not centered primarily on the goal of conversion; rather, a true understanding of the Other, not predicated on whether they came to agree with evangelical beliefs, was sought by participants of the Reconciliation Walk.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{9} Megoran, “Towards a Geography of Peace,” 393.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
Evangelical interdenominational national and global organizations, such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), have assumed more moderate attitudes toward Muslim-Christian dialogue and have been generally supportive of interreligious dialogue initiatives. While the ecumenical model of encounters with other faith traditions is the model of choice for mainstream Christian organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the NAE and WEA have favored an approach that seeks to eliminate the combative rhetoric while continuing to engage in evangelization. Richard Cizik, former vice-president of Government Affairs for the NAE, has decried the anti-Islamic stance of some evangelicals, while simultaneously maintaining the NAE’s commitment toward dialogue that does not, in the NAE’s opinion, compromise the evangelical focus on Jesus Christ as the only path to salvation.\textsuperscript{11} The NAE has focused on interfaith dialogue as a primary means of opposing the heated rhetoric toward Islam and Muslims that frequently emanated from the dispensationalist camp. However, the organization has been careful not to foray into the waters of ecumenism for fear of “relativizing” Christianity. Similarly, the WEA has stated publicly its preference of dialogue over proselytization while maintaining theological separation with other faiths. Geoff Tunnicliffe, the chief executive of the WEA, publicly implored the Dove World Outreach Center to renounce their planned Qur’an burning if for no other reason than to not damage evangelical missionary efforts. In an interview regarding his efforts to reach out to Dr. Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center, Tunnicliffe stated, “I tried to talk about the impact this would have on

\textsuperscript{11} Jane I. Smith, \textit{Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue} (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 109
his own stated goals of taking the Gospel to the world.\footnote{12} The WEA’s emphasis on reasonable and respectful dialogue reflects a concept that is well-known in the missionary world – one cannot hope to influence another’s theological worldview if he or she does not respect the religious other first.

The 9/11 attacks and the resultant increase in anti-Islam sentiment in the United States has prompted the emergence of the “New Evangelicals,” a new breed of evangelical leader seeking to emphasize respectful dialogue with other faith leaders rather than resorting to proselytization through denigration. These leaders have challenged the traditional positions of the dispensationalist Christian Right, favoring a focus on environmental responsibility, interreligious dialogue, and greater justice for Palestinians, including a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Bob Roberts, pastor of NorthWood Church, an evangelical church in Keller, Texas, is a self-described former dispensationalist who is now heavily involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue. Roberts believes the dispensationalist worldview is contrary to what Jesus taught in that it tends to be exclusivist, describes the apocalyptic kingdom of God on earth as a physical kingdom rather than the spiritual kingdom that Jesus referenced in his ministry, and undercuts the Great Commission through the vilification of other faiths, particularly Muslims.\footnote{13} Roberts views the controversy between fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalists Muslims as one characterized by the unwillingness or inability of either

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\footnote{13} Bob Roberts, interview by author, Vienna, VA, September 23, 2010.
party to de-emphasize his or her theology in the interest of avoiding conflict. According to Roberts, as well as many other New Evangelical leaders, respectful dialogue facilitates evangelizing with the intent of presenting the Christian faith with love rather than forcing the Christian faith through the tearing down of alternative faiths. Dr. Joel Hunter, pastor of Northland Church, an evangelical church in Orlando, Florida, has also been consistently involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue with similar motivations as Roberts. Hunter is an activist in a variety of political and social areas traditionally dominated by the Christian Right; however, his stance on these issues has been anything but traditional for an evangelical pastor. Hunter has attended the U. S. – Islamic World Forum multiple times and his experiences at the Forum prompted him to write a letter on behalf of himself and like-minded evangelical leaders to President Bush advocating a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Roberts and Hunter are both representatives of evangelical leaders that are recognizing that the old standard of isolation and religious exclusivism in the face of pluralism and post-modernity is a failed methodology.

**Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Presbyterian Church, USA**

The 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA approved for distribution to its member churches the 2008 study “Toward an Understanding of Christian-Muslim Relations” (http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/interfaithrelations/pdf/toward_an_understanding_o

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14 Ibid.

This document illustrates the official position of the Presbyterian Church, USA with respect to Christian-Muslim dialogue as resting on the principles of mutual respect, theological understanding, and historical awareness. In its introductory section, “What Compels Us to Understanding?,” the report emphasizes the importance of the role of study of other faith traditions in interfaith relations:

Because Muslims and Christians have lived side by side for many centuries in much of the world, the history of the interaction of the two religious traditions is long and varied. Both Muslims and Christians carry historical wounds that affect contemporary relationships. These need to be understood, and addressed.

The report’s approach to reaching a theological understanding between Christians and Muslims, an approach that is often eschewed by dispensationalist evangelicals, is based upon the principle of identifying common theological ground from which to begin. The identification of areas of theological agreement between Christianity and Islam is vital to improving relations between the faiths, according to the Church. In the section entitled “Toward Theological Understanding,” the Presbyterian report advocates two points of departure in finding theological common ground: God’s revelation and the nature of God. The position of the Presbyterian Church, USA, as stated in this report, asserts that both Islam and Christianity acknowledge that revelation communicates the nature of God, and agrees that this nature is not fully communicable. Limited human intelligence cannot know God's essence fully. Though it can be glimpsed in God's attributes, contemplated in God's names, and is revealed in the Qur'an, God’s nature is not revealed in its fullness. God is greater than what can be communicated to humanity in revelation. Thus both faiths affirm the human inability to express or understand the fullness of God.
Common ground can be built upon the commonality of the understanding of the nature of God in both faiths. The concept of God as not fully knowable can be leveraged to develop a base of understanding between Muslims and Christians engaged in interfaith dialogue asserting that each faith tradition can learn from the other. Along the same lines, scriptural illustrations of God as one being, although understood differently by Christians and Muslims, can represent a common denominator between the faiths underpinning interfaith dialogue: “For both Christians and Muslims, each in our own way, God is one—unique, infinite, immutable, eternal, and omnipotent—and to deny this in any way is a grievous transgression.” Mutual understanding of God as one being, “unique, infinite, immutable, eternal, and omnipotent,” serves to provide a like-minded perception of God as sovereign in all facets of life. Just like a mutual acknowledgement of God as not fully knowable, this acknowledgement of the oneness and uniqueness of God calls for testimony from both Muslims and Christians that the one and the same God is sovereign over both faiths.

In the days approaching the 9th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a period in which the threatened Qur’an-burning dominated the news, the Presbyterian Church, USA issued a much-needed call for a renewal in Christian-Muslim understanding. “Swords into Ploughshares,” an online blog sponsored by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, featured an entry entitled “A Call for Respect for Muslim Neighbors” on September 1, 2010 which sought to emphasize the Church’s opposition to the anti-Islam sentiment of the time (http://presbyterian.typepad.com/peacemaking/2010/09/a-call-for-respect-for-muslim-neighbors-.html, accessed February 24, 2011). The entry’s declaration of support for the
Park 51 project reflected the Presbyterians’ belief in the separation of radical Islam and the Islamic faith:

We stand with the majority of Muslims—including American Muslims—who are working against such radical influences in their communities. They have our support for building the Cordoba House as a community center dedicated to learning, compassion, and respect for all people. Their effort is consistent with our country’s principle of freedom of religion and the rights all citizens should enjoy.

A refusal to view Islam through the lens of the acts of radical terrorists that falsely claim to act under the dictates of Islam is crucial to approaching Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue with a mindset free of prejudice. The Presbyterians’ acknowledgement of the distortion of the core teachings of Islam is in stark contrast with the dispensational view of radical Islam as representing the essence of the Islamic faith—an assertion that supports the dispensationalist search for the eschatological antagonist to Christianity. However, it is important to understand the impact that equating the actions of terrorists with true Islam has on interfaith relations and, more importantly, the perception of Christians in Muslim cultures. The command to be disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the world becomes a difficult undertaking when other faith groups view Christians as hypocritical in light of the many unfortunate instances of violence in the name of Christianity throughout history.

The Presbyterian Church, USA has also taken positions in opposition to the traditional Christian Right stance with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. A September 2, 2010 letter to President Barack Obama from the Reverend Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church, USA thanked the Obama administration for its encouragement of new Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that same year.
and made note of the 60-year support the Church has lent to efforts to negotiate an equitable peace among Israelis and Palestinians.

(http://presbyterian.typepad.com/files/letter-to-president-obama-on-middle-east-peace.pdf, accessed February 25, 2011). More recently, in February, 2011, the Church called for support of a pending United Nations resolution that would affirm the illegality of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and identify Israeli settlements in disputed territories as an obstacle to peace

(http://presbyterian.typepad.com/peacemaking/2011/02/tell-president-obama-to-support-un-security-council-resolution-on-israeli-settlements.html, accessed February 25, 2011). These actions signify the Presbyterian Church’s willingness to challenge the pre-millennialist theological understanding of the eschatological significance of the modern state of Israel. The Church does not dispute Israel’s right to exist; however, the official position of the Church in advocacy of peace between Palestinians and Israelis eschews the dispensationalist belief that opposition to Israel, in any form, constitutes opposition to God’s eschatological plan as interpreted by dispensationalist theology. The Church’s more centered position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more conducive to the facilitation of Christian-Muslim relations than the divisive dispensationalist approach.

Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA, issued a brief response to the “Common Word” letter in which he, first and foremost, agrees with the letter’s statement that peace among Christians and Muslims is the key to world peace (http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=12, accessed December 10, 2010). The acknowledgement of the necessity of peace between Christians and Muslims on behalf of the evangelical Presbyterians offers an alternative
approach to Christian-Muslim relations than the dispensationalist approach that leans toward conflict. Kirkpatrick writes,

> We might especially heed the letter's appeal to Christians and Muslims to cooperate for peace since, as its writers' note, ‘our common future is at stake,’ and the relationship between our two religious communities may be ‘the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world.’

Kirkpatrick’s response, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church, goes on to call for the continued engagement of Presbyterians and Muslims through building bridges of mutual understanding and respect:

> I urge Presbyterians to read this letter from the Muslim community, to continue to build honest, searching, and respectful relations with Muslims in our local communities and in our nation, and to seek opportunities for common action where compatible means and ends exist.

Kirkpatrick’s letter is an example of the type of engagement that is healthy and necessary for Muslim-Christian relations. It reflects a basic assumption of the Presbyterian Church that there exist “teaching moments” between faiths - that every faith can learn from another while adhering to their own faith’s guiding principles and acknowledging that differences do exist but do not have to represent a barrier to mutual respect.

**The United Methodist Church’s Engagement of Muslims**

The United Methodist Church (UMC) has a long and rich history of interfaith relations with Muslims and, in the post-9/11 period, has expressed its solidarity with Muslims worldwide against religious bigotry and persecution. The UMC’s 1992 (amended 2004) policy statement, entitled “Our Muslim Neighbors,” sought to define the UMC’s emphasis on Christian-Muslim relations as an important facet of its ministry
The document’s reference to verses in the Qur’an and the notation of the Church’s belief that these verses illustrate similar values and morals to Christianity was an important point of departure toward improved Methodist-Muslim relations. The UMC’s willingness to study the Qur’an with an eye toward identifying common ground between Christians and Muslims contrasted with the reluctance on behalf of the Christian Right and its associated denominations to consider the merits of Qur’an due to prejudice against the Qur’an as inferior to Christian scriptures. Methodists have officially adhered to a rejection of the religious “self-sufficiency” that Fitzgerald and Borelli have identified as a major impediment to interfaith dialogue. “Our Muslim Neighbors” demonstrates the UMC’s acknowledgement of the morals and values of Islam as being worthy of consideration and discussion and, more importantly, learning from as evidenced by the document’s call for Methodists to study the Qur’an and bring themselves to understand the core tenants of Islam. The “Action Statement” of the document calls for dialogue and engagement between Methodists and Muslims, stating,

Local congregations and United Methodist agencies are encouraged to develop ongoing relationships with Muslims and their respective organizations. They are urged to initiate conversations, programs, and dialogues leading to the understanding of both Islam and Christianity, and appreciation of their particular gifts, while discovering commonalities and differences; and seeking areas of mutual cooperation. They are also urged to exchange information and discuss ways to cooperate when they address common problems and concerns.

The approach to interfaith dialogue fostered by the UMC is consistent with and reflects the heritage of putting faith into practice – a heritage that originated with John Wesley and the early Methodists.
The response to the “Common Word” letter on behalf of the Council of Bishops of the UMC reflected the same principles as the UMC’s policy statement on Methodist-Muslim relations (http://www.acommonword.com/downloads/United_Methodist_Council_of_Bishops.pdf, accessed February 25, 2011). The UMC’s response highlights the importance placed upon positive interfaith dialogue as a natural result of a commitment to the principle that all humans are creatures of God and, as such, are accorded the right to be treated with dignity and respect:

We are eager to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths so that we may learn from each other’s distinctive beliefs and practices. As all persons are created in the image of God, we believe that it is important to affirm what we have in common with people of other faiths.

This principle reveals the Church’s belief in the worth and dignity of other faiths based on the understanding of all beings created in the image of God – a tacit rejection of the notion of exclusivity that has so often constituted a barrier to interfaith dialogue. While the UMC’s response does acknowledge that differences exist between the two faiths, the letter affirms the common ground between Christianity and Islam that is formed by the commandments to love God and neighbor. In doing so, the Methodist response also reflects the desire to use this identified common ground as a launching point to a deeper mutual understanding of the other’s faith in an effort to find deeper common ground: “While acknowledging differences, we also seek to identify shared theological concepts, moral teachings and spiritual disciplines.” The reciprocated aspiration on behalf of the UMC to continue to seek areas of moral reconciliation between Christians and Muslims
reflects the emphasis placed on positive engagement with Muslims that the UMC has indoctrinated in its teachings.

In addition to developing policy statements that define the UMC’s position with respect to anti-Muslim bigotry, UMC leaders have also put their faith into action by expressing their support and solidarity with other religious leaders in opposing anti-Islamic rhetoric that has surfaced anew in the United States in the post-9/11 period. Trinity United Methodist Church of Gainesville, Florida and its pastor, Dan Johnson, were at the forefront of local efforts in Gainesville to attempt to dissuade the Dove World Outreach Center from burning copies of the *Qur’an*. In doing so, Johnson has stated that his church’s doors are open to people of all faith including Muslims.\(^{16}\) UMC leaders joined other spiritual leaders in denouncing anti-Muslim speech as the controversy involving the Park51 project in Manhattan deepened in the fall of 2010. Jim Winkler, leader of the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, and Bishop Neil Irons of the UMC’s Council of Bishops attended an emergency summit called by the Islamic Society of North America to demonstrate interfaith solidarity against the anti-Islam atmosphere that was being encouraged by the Park51 controversy. Bishop Irons attributed the controversy surrounding the planned construction of the Cordoba House to the willful and singular association of the 9/11 terror attacks with a true expression of the beliefs of Islam.\(^{17}\) Local UMC congregations developed opportunities to engage in

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interfaith dialogue with Muslims, not as a result of a perceived injustice, but rather simply for the sake of educating their members about another major world religion. Women Methodists in Gilroy, CA, for example, initiated a series of interfaith meetings with Muslim women entitled “Creating Interfaith Communities” with the stated intention of learning about Islam independent of the slant imposed by the media.18

**Baptist Approaches to Christian-Muslim Relations**

The Baptist denomination has experienced a bit more difficulty in galvanizing its congregations to engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue than its evangelical Protestant counterparts; however, examples of Baptists’ entrance into Christian-Muslim dialogue, both on an individual and organizational level, do exist. At their 20th World Congress in August, 2010, the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), a loose confederation of Baptist churches worldwide, regretted the rising tide of Islamophobia in the United States and exhorted its members not to stereotype Muslims according to the actions of self-described Islamic terrorists. Robert Sellers, professor at Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, commented on his concerns about Muslim-Christian relations in the United States by stating,

…and as an American and a Christian, I am alarmed by the growing marginalization of Muslims in the United States --and especially disturbed that American Christians do not defend our Muslim neighbors more courageously.19

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The professed necessity of active engagement by Baptists in Muslim-Christian dialogue, while speaking out against the vilification of Islam in the American media, was a prominent theme at the Congress. Nabil Costa, executive director of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development and an associate of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon, noted his belief, based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, on how Christians should respond to Muslims:

If they are our enemies, Jesus said we are to love them. If they are our neighbors, Jesus said we are to love them. So, either we love them as enemies or love them as neighbors. That’s our only choice.20

The BWA, along with other Baptist organizations with social justice concerns such as the American Baptist Churches (ABC) and the Alliance of Baptists, actively supports Muslim-Christian dialogue in the United States and works to counter statements and actions that are potentially harmful to Christian-Muslim relations. The BWA joined other evangelical leaders in denouncing the Dove World Outreach Center’s planned Qur’an-burning and the ABC has acknowledged the role that prominent Baptists have played in the past in demonizing Islam, pledging to work to disassociate the “social justice” Baptists from their more conservative brethren.21

The BWA released two letters in response to “A Common Word,” one in October, 2007 from BWA President Rev. David Coffey, and a second, more in-depth response endorsed by the entire BWA organization in December, 2008. Coffey’s letter was a personal response that was drafted due to Coffey’s appearance in the list of Christian

20 Ibid.

leaders addressed by “A Common Word.” The December, 2008 letter constituted a response from the entire BWA organization and featured affirmations of the content of “A Common Word” as well as commentary on the major factors influencing Christian-Muslim relations today (http://acommonword.com/ACommonWord-Baptist-World-Alliance-Response.pdf, accessed November 23, 2010). Like the Presbyterian and Methodist responses to “A Common Word,” the Baptist response emphasizes the “common ground” of love of God and neighbor between Christianity and Islam. However, the Baptist response reflects a full consideration of the content and implications of the Muslim letter and corresponding commentary on the Baptist response to that content. Unlike the Presbyterian and Methodist letters, the Baptist letter addresses the most prominent area of theological disagreement between Christians and Muslims, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity:

However, when we speak of the love and mystery of God we must open out an area of belief that we know will be troubling to you, but which is absolutely essential for us in confessing the Oneness of God: we mean the doctrine of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Baptist response takes advantage of the opportunity to clarify the concept of the Trinity as supporting the notion of the Unity of God:

We want to make clear that in holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian church has always denied that there are any other beings alongside the One God. In using the traditional word ‘person’ (hypostasis or ‘distinct reality’) of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the church has never thought that it is speaking of three personal beings like any persons we know in the world… rather, the church is attempting to express the truth that there are mysterious, unknowable depths to the personal nature of God.
While the Presbyterian and Methodist congregations chose not to breach the sensitive subject of the Trinity out of a desire to maintain a positive, non-confrontational spirit, the Baptist response clarifies the Christian understanding of the Trinity as One Being in a way that is respectful of the Muslim perception of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In addition to moderate Baptist organizations, prominent denominational leaders that advocate a greater emphasis on interfaith relations have taken steps to increase the inclusivity of the Baptist tradition. President Jimmy Carter (b. 1924), the 39th President of the United States, is a self-proclaimed evangelical Baptist Christian and has advocated strong Christian-Muslim relations since he left office in 1981. Carter was named Nobel Peace Laureate in 2002 for his work in defusing international conflicts, many of which were rooted in religious conflict, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the conflict between Christians and Muslims in Sudan. Carter has been particularly critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, a position that runs counter to his faith’s traditional Christian Zionist orientation. His 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, is highly critical of the continued construction of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and notes the continued efforts of Israel to “confiscate and colonize Arab land.”

Predictably, Carter came under scathing criticism by Christian Zionist figures such as John Hagee who labeled Carter as Israel’s “enemy in America.”

Carter’s discontent with the Southern Baptist Convention’s (SBC) increasing foray into the political arena was one factor the former president cited in explaining his split with the

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the Convention in 2000. Carter also took exception to the SBC’s removal of a clause in the Convention’s 2000 doctrinal statement referring to the place of the figure of Jesus Christ as “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted.” The elimination of this statement, according to Carter, effectively relegated scriptural interpretation to individual pastors and churches, a development that facilitated the use of scripture to justify political positions that otherwise are contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Carter’s concern with the SBC’s involvement in conservative politics and its associated bias against Muslims, along with his opposition to Christian Zionist-supported Israeli policies regarding Palestinian land, demonstrates his disagreement with the traditional dispensationalist theology regarding Muslims and Islam.

The Baptist Center for Ethics produced a 2009 documentary that chronicles various interfaith initiatives between Baptist and Muslims in the United States entitled “Different Books, Common Word.” The documentary was developed in the context of a Baptist response to the “Common Word” initiative and sought to build upon the progress made by that initiative and the response to the letter from the Baptist World Alliance. Robert Parham, the center’s Executive Director, is a frequent columnist and blogger on Christian-Muslim relations and often seeks to offer an alternative approach to Islam and Muslims than the Baptist denomination traditionally has done:

We take another approach. We believe the Bible calls us to love our neighbors, not as a means of conversion, but because it's the right thing to do. And the right thing for goodwill Baptists to do is to speak up for


25 Ibid.
Muslims in our culture of anger and to reach out with a hand of partnership.26

“Different Books, Common Word” offers several examples of Baptist-Muslim interfaith relations in the United States that do not correspond to the common perception that both faith traditions are fundamentalist and, therefore, extremist and cannot possible find areas of common ground. The featured interactions are set against the backdrop of tragic events that carried the potential to incite religious conflict – the 1996 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the 2008 firebombing of a mosque in Columbia, Tennessee.27 In each scenario, the documentary records how Baptists and Muslims reached out to one another during difficult times to lend support purely out of the desire to help a fellow human being. In the course of doing so, these community religious leaders discovered the common thread they have in seeking to love and honor God and neighbor.

The commandment to love one’s neighbor is particularly emphasized throughout the film and forms the foundation of each interaction of Baptist and Muslim, two of which are explored here. Kenny Anderson, pastor of Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in Columbia, Tennessee developed a relationship with Daoud Abudiab, president of the Islamic Center of Columbia, firebombed on February 9, 2008. Anderson recounts the teachings of Jesus Christ in commenting, regarding his congregation’s response and outreach to the Islamic Center in the wake of the firebombing, “they will know we are


Abudiab’s adherence to the knowledge that the Bible does not teach violence, despite the fact that a Christian extremist organization was ultimately found responsible for the arson of the Islamic Center, and his subsequent befriending of Anderson demonstrates the power of refusing to define the Other’s faith solely in the context of extremist acts:

You shared what you believe about Christianity and about the teachings of Christ. You more or less witnessed to us, about the love that’s within the church according to the teachings of Christ…we appreciate every Christian who acted Jesus-like. I also would encourage Christians to see that we also acted Jesus-like. We didn’t point fingers. We didn’t demonize the Bible. We didn’t demonize Christians.29

Sam Tolbert, pastor of Greater Saint Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Lake Charles, Louisiana developed a relationship with Farhana Swati, managing director of Pak Oil in Port Arthur, Texas. Tolbert reached out to Swati for assistance in financing a church in Orange, Texas whose pastor was having difficulty obtaining a bank loan and Swati arranged the financing through her company’s bankers. Raymond Young, pastor of Greater St. Paul Christian Fellowship in Orange, whose congregation was the benefactor of Swati’s generosity stated,

when that happened [Swati’s assistance in arranging financing], it basically changed my whole perception on things because I felt like that was God’s way of saying, ‘You’re not here alone.’30

The examples throughout the documentary of Baptists and Muslims putting their faith into action, without prejudice or the motivation of conversion, illustrates the alternative

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
approaches some Baptists are undertaking to relate to Muslims peacefully and respectfully.
CONCLUSION

The relationship between Christians and Muslims has been fraught with difficulties throughout the histories of both faiths. Fundamentalism has often been the spark that ignites conflict by creating blindness toward the positive nature of other faiths. Christian dispensationalism has been an underlying factor in many of the quarrels between Christianity and Islam, ranging from the Crusades, to Martin Luther, to colonial America, and, finally, to 9/11 and the period following. Dispensationalism has often represented a coping mechanism for some Christians to make sense of a changing, modernizing world. In order to reinforce belief in dispensationalist theology, dispensationalists scour eschatological scripture to attempt to find the identity of the combatants at Armageddon, often coming to the conclusion that Islam must represent the aggressors against Israel in the final days. The dispensationalist viewpoint takes for granted the absolute truth of its theology, often comparing the worst of Islam to the best of Christianity to make its point. In the process, a mindset characterized by attempts to fortify the Christian faith against the perceived attack of other faiths emerges, carrying with it a desire to return the United States to its “Christian roots.” Religious pluralism, therefore, becomes the enemy to the dispensationalist, as well as a perceived source of the decline of society in America.

Despite the challenges presented by fundamentalist dispensationalism to inter-faith relations, evangelical denominations that have eschewed an emphasis on dispensationalism and Armageddon have emerged as leaders in efforts to mend fences between Christians and Muslims. Presbyterians, Methodists, and progressive Baptists, as
well as other historically evangelical Christian denominations have developed interdenominational and denominational efforts to bridge the gap between Christianity and Islam. The “Common Word” letter, sent to Christians on behalf of Muslims worldwide represents an extraordinary opportunity for improvement in Christian-Muslim relations and the aforementioned denominations are leading the way in responding favorably and positively to this initiative. As in so many other conflicts, ignorance and misunderstanding lie at the root of the conflict and the same can be said for Christian-Muslim aggression. Given this reality, the documentary produced by EthicsDaily.com, featuring positive interactions between Muslims and Christians throughout America, demonstrates the goodwill that can be generated by faith groups simply stopping to know each other better and understand the struggles of the religious Other. *Different Books, Common Word* presents an extraordinary opportunity for Christians and Muslims to learn the building blocks of better inter-faith relations. More importantly, the film demonstrates that a denomination that historically has been one of the most antagonistic toward other faiths and Islam in particular can produce heartwarming episodes of understanding and learning between Baptists and Muslims when the temptation toward fundamentalism as a bulwark against other ways of life and faith, is resisted.
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