

ment, extremists are hijacking the Middle East with their polarized visions. No one religion has a monopoly on extremism. We all have extremists, and it is our prophetic call as faith leaders today, to stand up clearly and persistently to say that any violence done in the name of religion is blasphemy and is against God's loving intention for humanity. Religion is based on the love of God and of all human beings, and should promote the respect of the rights of the other in order to achieve the common good and what is righteous for all people. When religion is twisted to fit a political agenda based on violence, hate and war, it is an abuse of religion.

In some Christian churches, the whole Bible—Old and New Testaments—is used in an eschatological way, using the apocalyptic books to justify the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and building a Third Temple, as a way of hastening the Second Coming of Jesus and the Armageddon War. I emphasize this type of Christian extremism because we Christians must clean our own house before we criticize others. With all modesty, I am afraid and ashamed that these sick ideologies, grounded not in grace but in fear, masquerade as Christianity. The Catholic bishops in Illinois in 2003 called this theology “false teachings.” I call it heresy.

Toward a Just Peace

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is primarily a political problem, not a religious one. Religion can, however, contribute positively to the search for a solution, and not inflame the situation further. For example, I very much respect the *Mea Culpa* prayer which his Holiness, Pope John Paul II, has made in confessing the sins of anti-Semitism of some members in the Roman Catholic Church. When we have the courage to be prophetic within our own religion, we contribute to the healing of the brokenness. This attitude of the Pope should encourage politicians, governments and leaders to recognize and confess the injustice being done to the Palestinians.

The religions have not done enough to bring about a just peace and reconciliation. All three religions have allowed extremism to grow and have a loud, influential voice. The truth is that God calls us to see the divine image not only in our own religion, but also in the others, whose faith is different from our own. When we accept the otherness of the other, we can then mutually recognize each other's human, civil, religious, national and political rights.

Religion is the art of teaching human beings not only to love God but also to love their neighbors. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught us noble principles to love your neighbor as yourself and—to bless your enemy. Each of the three religions has teachings and values to support these principles and teach people to practice them. This is peace education: to renounce hatred and violence that separate us and return to

God's love and peace that bring us together. We as religions are to teach equality, tolerance, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness. We must practice it as the true religion teaches us and as it is written in the Holy Writings. . . .

Dr. Gary M. Burge

America's New Religious And Political Convergence

Dr. Burge, Ph.D., is professor at Wheaton College and Graduate School. He gave this speech to the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation in Washington, D.C., Oct. 22-24. Subheads have been added.

I am a conservative evangelical. I teach at Wheaton College, named by some as an evangelical flagship. And I fear that sometimes our “house” may no longer be serving the goal of peace. We have become an obstacle, an important obstacle. But let me explain.

Since the tragic events of 9/11, American Christians have gained a new word: jihad. Those of us who are acquainted with Islam, have known this word and its sublime meanings for a long time. But for others, it has come to represent a militancy, a strident and negative force inside a religion that is dangerous.

In this view, here is what jihad sounds like:

There will be a final climactic war in which the forces of Islam are arrayed against the paganism of the Christian West. And in the midst of terrible and heroic fighting, when all seems lost to the enormous Western armies, the Lord returns in order to validate the truth of Muhammad and protect his followers. He will also lead a conquest that will purge the Holy Land of infidels. He descends with a cry and immediately horses and animals alike explode where they stand. Just the words of his mouth superheats their blood and it explodes through their veins and skin. The slain pile up everywhere and the stench is unbearable, but the purging must go on. A cry goes out from his heralds:

“It is a righteous thing with Allah to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest. I have taken vengeance on those who do not know Allah and who do not submit. They shall be punished with everlasting destruction.”

Horsemen try to evade the onslaught. Their riders leap from their steeds and try to control them with their

reigns, but they struggle, and quickly the flesh of both men and horse are dissolved, melted away. Their flesh tears, their eyes melt, their tongues dissolve. Skeletons are stacked everywhere in the wake of the Lord's conquest. Millions upon millions die by his judgment and this—while the true servants of God rejoice.

This is a breathtaking scenario. And I imagine that if it were published in Arabic somewhere in the Middle East, many in our ranks would use it as another stunning example of Islamic violence and jihad. Proof again why we must defeat Islamic terrorists wherever we find them.

But there is only one problem. These three paragraphs I have read are evangelical Christian—or more accurately, Christian Zionist. In my paraphrase, I changed only a handful of words, critical words of course, and lifted them from the final 12th volume of Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins's runaway bestseller series, *Left Behind*. Here is another bit of the book, now unaltered:

Jesus merely raised one hand a few inches and a yawning chasm opened in the earth, stretching far and wide enough to swallow all of them. They tumbled in, howling and screeching, but their wailing was soon quashed and all was silent when the earth closed itself again.

This brings the final demise of those who resist Jesus on earth. . . .

Oddly enough, the very caricature Christian Zionists have had for jihadist Islam, now describes their own literature. Jenkins and LeHaye likely do not know it, but they have written a script that mirrors their very nightmare. It is properly called apocalyptic. And it is wonderfully comforting in a time of political upheaval, war, and uncertainty.

A Messianic Course

Permit me to set out my thesis plainly: Today we are witnessing a confluence of religious conservatism with a political outlook that is on a messianic course to purge evil from the world. As I hope to show, preemptive warfare is now a divine agenda pushing us to the End of Time, when God will join our battle and bring his victory. And all of this is focussed on the Middle East. Will such an outlook impede efforts toward understanding and peace? Absolutely. . . .

The first test of righteousness in this dangerous era is to align oneself with God's litmus test, the rebirth of Israel. One conviction is always held aloft: God blesses those who bless Israel and curses those who curse Israel. Hence nations will stand or fall based on this one creed. Thus it is not surprising that hundreds of Christian leaders attend prayer breakfasts at the Israeli Embassy in Washington. At last year's breakfast on May 2, Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission,

spoke to 800 in attendance. As an American, Land said, he supports Israel because "I know a fellow lover of liberty and freedom and a believer in human dignity when I see one, and I see them in the Jews and in the nation of Israel." Land continued, "And I want God to bless America. America needs to support Israel more than Israel needs our support, because Israel has an ally far stronger than the United States of America. He is called the Lion of Judah." God "blesses those who bless the Jews, and God curses those who curse the Jews," Land said.

Note the connection here: God will measure America by our fidelity to Israel's political survival. It is for this reason that this month thousands of Christians were marching through the Old City of Jerusalem at Tabernacles, waving Israeli flags. This is the ideological imperative of every American Christian. The birth of Israel has now set the stage for the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. Therefore any national agenda that would jeopardize God's plan, any peace overture that will weaken Israel's hold on the land (such as the promise of a Palestinian state), any decision that stands in the way of this dramatic stage-setting, is not a plan blessed by God. . . .

A Guarantee of Continued Conflict

This is not a formula for peace and reconciliation. It is instead a guarantee of continued conflict that will spill from Jerusalem to Baghdad. But this is acceptable by this view. The entire Middle East is God's stage for his final curtain call. Jerusalem will be the focal point. And as God's armies align themselves, we will seek assurances that our army is his.

Will such a view become an obstacle for peace? Absolutely.

Will such a view have consequences that spill from the U.S. to Ramallah and Beit Jalla? Absolutely.

Does such a view have any room for reconciliation with those who may be different, who may have a different vision for life and faith? No.

Surely there are obstacles on the ground in Israel/Palestine that impede the growth of peace. But these may be minor compared with the tremendous influence American political and religious culture has on the region. John Hagee is a television preacher and pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Imagine a pastor as key speaker at the Israeli Embassy uttering these words: "Palestine has never existed as an autonomous entity." "The Palestinians [have] never owned the land and have no legitimate claim to the land now."

Evangelicalism is not monolithic. There are evangelicals who embrace this type of merger of end times scenarios with politics. And there are many, many evangelicals who reject it completely. But politics and religion are witnessing a dangerous convergence in our time. And those of us in the church—particularly those in the evangelical camp—need to rediscover our voices and alert the church.