

## INTRODUCTION

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.”*  
--Psalm 122:6

*“You defy all my expectations, all the time, especially you, my good friend Pastor Hagee.”*  
--Benjamin Netanyahu, 2012 Speech to Christians United for Israel<sup>1</sup>

*“Religious terrorism is the communism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most serious international threat to human rights, liberty, democratic government, and Christian faith we now face.”*  
--Christianity Today, October, 2001<sup>2</sup>

*“What happens ‘way over there’ in the Middle East matters to us over here...the same radical Islamic forces that seek to wipe Israel off the map have placed a bullseye on the United States. Israel is the first line of defense for Western civilization in the battle against violent radical Islam...In fact, it is precisely because we share the same values, that we share the same enemies.”*

--Erick Stakelbeck, Christians United for Israel Television Host, 2015<sup>3</sup>

Until recently, it has been rare for evangelical Christians and Jews to collaborate on anything given the history of mistrust between them. As with most other non-Christian groups, evangelicals’ main approach to Jews has traditionally been attempted conversion—for many this is still the case. Groups like the American Board of Missions to Jews or Jews for Jesus date from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century but remain as well-funded as ever today.<sup>4</sup> Often, conflict among the two has gone much further than theological dispute, as Christian violence against Jews dates back millennia. Despite this history, the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu stood before a group of evangelicals in 2012 and thanked them for their “tireless” work “on behalf of Israel and

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, “PM Netanyahu’s Speech at CUFI Conference 2012, (speech, March 19, 2012), IsraeliPM, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqgDKbGUdT0>.

<sup>2</sup> *Christianity Today*, October 22, 2001, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Miller, “CUFI: awareness is key to pro-Israel group surpassing 3 million members,” *Jewish News Service*, May 5, 2016, <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2016/5/5/cufi-credits-awareness-as-key-to-pro-israel-organization-surpassing-3-million-members#.VyuuvqMrJTZ>.

<sup>4</sup> Jews for Jesus, headquartered in San Francisco, had a budget was in excess of \$20 million in 2014. <http://www.ecfa.org/MemberProfile.aspx?ID=6322>

the Jewish people.” Even more surprisingly, Netanyahu referred to their leader, a man who has been criticized as anti-Semitic on more than one occasion, as a personal friend. For this particular group of evangelicals, their advocacy on behalf of the Israeli state had come to trump the transgressions of their Christian forebears.

The organization was Christians United for Israel (hereafter CUFI) and the man was Texan John Hagee, pastor to 5,000-member evangelical Cornerstone Church and owner of multiple Christian broadcasting outlets. Upon formation in 2006, CUFI’s goal as described by its Executive Director David Brog, “was taking present day deep support for Israel in the Christian community and organizing it.”<sup>5</sup> Now well-established, its goals have shifted towards education of a new generation of pro-Israel evangelicals, as exemplified by their expanding “CUFI on Campus” university outreach group. Rhetorical shifts have also been striking over the past decade. The quote above from Erick Stackelbeck— “we share the same values” —encapsulates how pro-Israel arguments whose bases were previously theological have adjusted to emphasize a cultural, values-based alliance. Explaining these shifts is one of the main goals of this paper. However, the most obvious change within CUFI has been its booming membership figures. It took six years—until 2012—for CUFI to reach one million dues-paying members. By 2015, that number had grown to two million and within another year, they reached three million. Quite literally, the growth of the organization has been exponential.

A small number of its members may not identify as such, but CUFI is largely comprised of Protestant, evangelical Christians.<sup>6</sup> It is essential to note that, while the term ‘evangelical’ is widely used in contemporary discourse, it means vastly different things depending upon who

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Rubin, “Christians United for Israel hits 2 million,” *Washington Post*, Jan 7, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/01/07/christians-united-for-israel-hits-2-million/>.

<sup>6</sup> Talya Zax, “New Poll Reveals Evangelical Christians Fuel Republican Support for Israel,” *Forward*, December 21, 2015, <http://forward.com/news/327697/new-poll-reveals-evangelical-christians-fuel-republican-support-for-israel/>.

uses it. Polls about the prevalence of evangelicalism within America are an excellent indicator of this ambiguity. Within the last ten years alone, one prominent survey concluded that evangelicals comprise 47% of the population, another only 7%, with many others producing intermediate figures.<sup>7</sup> At the most permissive end of the spectrum is Gallup, who simply asks respondents whether they self-identify as evangelical or born-again Christians, the latter referring to a specific conversion experience. At the other end of the spectrum, the most restrictive method is to classify evangelicals by adherence to a specific set of beliefs. This has been used by the Barna Research Group, who self-identify as evangelical, to show a much more limited prevalence of evangelicalism. They consider evangelicals to be a subset of, rather than synonymous with, ‘born-again’ Christians.

Barna seems to have identified the group that most closely resembles the founders of the modern-day evangelical movement, the National Association of Evangelicals. Founded in 1943 by a group of seminary-trained ministers and theologians, they issued a Statement of Faith in their first active year that nearly parallels the qualifications for evangelicalism used by Barna. The beliefs conveyed in their Statement can be distilled to four main ideas: conversionism, the belief that one must have a born-again experience; activism, engagement in missionary and other evangelistic activity; Biblicism, a literalist view of the Bible as divinely inspired; and crucicentrism, the idea that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross made man’s salvation possible.<sup>8</sup> As should become clear later in the essay, the upholding and implementation of these specific beliefs has changed significantly since the NAE first defined them. Indeed, one of the goals of this essay is to problematize the term ‘evangelical’ and elucidate some of its many defining characteristics. As a starting point, however, I consider the NAE’s belief structure to be

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<sup>7</sup> Hackett, Conrad and D. Michael Lindsay, “Measuring Evangelicalism: Consequences of Different Operationalization Strategies,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 47 (2008): 499.

<sup>8</sup> National Association of Evangelicals. “What is an Evangelical?,” <http://nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>

indicative of evangelical orthodoxy. The most important thing to note about this orthodoxy is that three of its tenets—crucicentrism, activism, and conversionism—have been flouted by Hagee in his theological adaptations.

Therein lies the apparent paradox referenced by the title. Evangelical adherents to CUFI's Christian Zionism support Jews while therein denying their call to evangelize, a central tenet of evangelical Christianity. CUFI is emphatic that its members support Israel and Jewish causes as they are, not contingent upon any shift in their religious practices. Not only are evangelicals working with a group who they have traditionally denounced or tried to convert, but this deviation from orthodoxy continues to gain support. Hagee personally has made incredible strides in redefining evangelical conventions, denying the importance of Jesus' divinity for all those of Jewish heritage. He is undoubtedly a controversial figure within the greater evangelical community, and yet has been able to remain a centerpiece of the increasingly popular Christian Zionist movement. How is it that Hagee has managed to appeal to evangelicals with such an unorthodox message? In short, it is because the evangelicalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the same as the version defined by the NAE in 1943. The movement and its greater political context have undergone substantial changes since that time, changes that I contend are essential to understand in order to fully appreciate Christian Zionism in the present.

This essay is divided into two parts. In Part One, I highlight four trends within 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelical development that are reflected in CUFI. Without these, Christian Zionism likely would not have near the amount of contemporary support that it does. After briefly discussing the roots of modern evangelicalism, I analyze the Cold War context of the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, the links between religion and American nationalism were strongly emphasized and embraced by members of the growing evangelical movement. CUFI expresses

an understanding of American identity and the identity of its enemies that draws from the Cold War lexicon. Next, I will address Billy Graham, revivalism, and the growth of evangelical popularity during this same period. Preachers like Graham, as well as radio and television media outlets, swelled evangelical numbers and acceptance. The late 1970s and 1980s were a turning point for evangelicalism in America, when its adherents, encouraged by figures like Jerry Falwell, actively reconsidered political disengagement and began to organize as a voting bloc for the first time. The result of this movement was the so-called “new Christian Right,” which altered the political positions of evangelicals and the secular right both. Political mobilization came in response to a number of Supreme Court decisions such as *Roe v. Wade*, but was also encouraged by the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Despite claiming to be a born-again Christian, he was viewed by many evangelicals as as theologically insubstantial. Finally, I address evangelical approaches to understanding Islam, as well as the effect that the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> had on this understanding. I argue that these were developed largely as a result of missionary interactions. There are a few key stereotypes of Islam which have become foundational to the narrative that CUFI uses in defining it as a common threat to America and Israel.

In Part Two, I discuss Christian Zionism and CUFI pointedly, showing how the organization is reflective of and responsive to the 20<sup>th</sup> century trends discussed in the first part. First, I give more background on the organization and discuss its structure. CUFI bears great resemblance to political organizations in the 1980s, particularly Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. I then consider the theology unique to Christian Zionism, especially understandings of end-times. One of the most interesting aspects of CUFI and Hagee’s interaction with the organization is how the theological underpinnings for Christian Zionism have been reinvented by Hagee in response to political pressure. Next, I discuss the relationship of Jewish political figures with

American Christian Zionists. Israeli leaders since Menachem Begin have recognized evangelical beliefs regarding Israel and actively courted their support. Finally, I address CUFI leaders' attitudes towards Islam, which represent a heightened form of previous stereotypes. Throughout the life of the organization, CUFI has become increasingly focused on conveying an adversarial relationship between Judeo-Christian and Islamic societies. This argument based upon an idea of civilizational unity represents an attempt to be more accessible to Christians, even evangelicals, who do not subscribe to Hagee's peculiar theology. Throughout the second part, I aim to show that CUFI is a savvy, adaptable organization that has identified and responded to the predispositions and convictions of its potential support-base. Tendencies to political activism, particular understandings of religious and nationalistic morality, attitudes towards Islam—each of these were developed among evangelicals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, CUFI capitalizes upon these and other trends to maximize, even grow, Christian support for Israel.