Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Confronting the "Axis of Evil": Christian Dispensationalism, Politics and American Society Post-9/11

GRAYSON R. ROBERTSON, III

Abstract

This article addresses the question of the level of influence dispensational pre-millennialism as a theology has had over evangelical attitudes toward Islam since the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington. The theological concepts that comprise dispensational pre-millennialism experienced a significant increase in interest in the aftermath of 9/11 as the realities of terrorism sank into the collective American consciousness. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, a new wave of evangelical literature appeared that sought to frame Islam in an increasingly marginalized setting justified by the claim that radical Islam is representative of the whole of Islam. Dispensational pre-millennialism offers the evangelical Christian an escape from a post-modern, inclusive society that is increasingly at odds with the evangelical exclusivist view of religious truth. As a result religious pluralism, a traditional, core tenet of the American democracy, has come under fire from dispensational pre-millennialists who view religious pluralism as a threat to America's identity as a "Christian nation". The rapidly changing, post-modern, pluralistic world, in which the influence of other religious traditions must be considered, drives the pre-millennialists to seek theological positions that provide shelter and encourage religious isolation, such as that offered by dispensational pre-millennialism

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 (NIV))

Introduction

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 September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the USA 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, a period 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 USA is facing a new, redoubled threat from evangelical Christian organizations and leaders who view Islam as a direct challenge, not only to Christianity in eschatological terms, but also the perceived right to Christian hegemony in the USA.

Although Islam has consistently represented one of many antagonists 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 USA 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.

Dispensational pre-millennialist theology's influence on the American political debate became resurgent in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 9/11. Although the last decades of the twentieth 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", hereafter referred to as the "GWOT", reflected the fear of apocalyptic conflict that seemed to be embodied in acts of terror in the context of 9/11.[2] Terrorism, specifically acts of 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 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.[4] In doing so, dispensationalism lent some sense to the seemingly chaotic and meaningless character of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.[5] 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 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 USA 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, prominent evangelical leaders Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and John 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 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.[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.[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*.[12] Cimino concludes that the post-9/11 evangelical literature "draws sharper boundaries between Islam and Christianity and asserts that Islam is essentially a violent religion".[13] While pre-9/11 evangelical literature was replete with references to Islam as a false religion, the tone of the 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".[14] 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".[15] 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".[16] 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 the post-9/11 evangelical literature supporting Cimino's thesis.

Impact of Dispensationalism on US Politics Post-9/11

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 President George W. 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.[17] 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.[18]

Other American 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.[19] 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 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 USA.

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 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 USA, 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 who were dispensationalists—Falwell, 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 US foreign policy toward Iraq during this period. The biblical boundaries of the land promised to Abraham in 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 US 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 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 intent of Iraq to use weapons of mass destruction against Israel.[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 *jihad*, conversely, as a violent and indiscriminate struggle, featuring a purpose that is evil.[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 war.[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.[33]

Mark Juergensmeyer, in his book *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 realized with defiance that he is "a Muslim, not a sheep".[34] 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-based 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-millennialists, 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 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 USA 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]

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 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.[46] In this process, the aspects of the Christian faith that promote compassion, tolerance, and love become perverted into indifference, intolerance, and rage.[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 1 September 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 USA.

> 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. Was it not "Devout Muslim men" that flew planes into US buildings 9 years ago? Was it not a "Devout Muslim" who killed 14 at Fort Hood?[48]

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.[49]

Lt. Gen. Boykin's emailed remarks illustrate the profound impact that a dispensationalist worldview can have on policy-makers and, in some cases, the policy-making 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 USA implies divine sanction over his discriminatory comments and is arguably 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 ninth 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.[50]

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 USA

The dispensational pre-millennialist attitude toward Islam is representative of a wider resistance to the traditional American value of religious pluralism in the USA. 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.[51] 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-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.[52] 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 USA was founded as a Christian nation.[53] 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 eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, only 16% of Americans polled have a favorable view of Islam, 60% advocate gathering intelligence on Muslim groups in the USA, and 38% sanction tightening the restrictions on Muslim immigration to the USA.[54] It can be argued that 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.

Conclusion

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 to settle such a conflict of values.[55] This is particularly true when one or more of the values in conflict are 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.[56] 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.[57] 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.

NOTES

1. Derek Daschke, "Millennial Studies for the New Millennium", *Novo Religio*, Vol. 12, 2009, p. 106.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Jennie Chapman, "Selling Faith Without Selling Out: Reading the *Left Behind* Novels in the Context of Popular Culture", in *The End All Around Us: Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture*, eds. John Walliss, et al., London: Equinox, 2009, p. 162.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Ross Moret, "Potential for Apocalypse: Violence and Eschatology in the Israel-Palestine Conflict", *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 10, 2008, p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
11. Richard Cimino, "No God in Common: American Evangelical Discourse on Islam After 9/11", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 47, 2005, pp. 162–174.
12. Ergun Mehmet Caner, Emir Fethi Caner, and Richard Land, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002; Don Richardson, *Secrets of the Koran*, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003; Hal Lindsey, *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad*, Murrieta, CA: Oracle House Publishing, 2002; Anis Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001; George Otis, *The Last of the Giants: Lifting the Veil on Islam and the End Times*, Ada, MI, Chosen Books, 1991; John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Islam*, Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.
13. Cimino, "No God in Common", *op. cit.*, p. 162.
14. Richardson, "Secrets of the Koran", *op. cit.*, p. 20.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
17. George W. Bush, "Remarks at the Islamic Center of Washington", (17 September 2001), *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush* (2001, Book II), http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2001-book2/html/PPP-2001-book2-doc-pg1121.htm, accessed 4 February 2011.
18. Alan Cooperman, "Robertson Calls Islam a Religion of Violence, Mayhem", *Washington Post*, February 22, 2002, A.02.
19. Franklin Graham, Comments at North Carolina Chapel Dedication, *NBC Nightly News*, 16 November 2001; Jerry Vines, Remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention's Pastor's Conference, 14 June 2002.
20. Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and International Relations After '9/11'," *Democratization*, Vol. 12, 2005, p. 408.
21. Anas Malik, "Selected Reflections on the Muslim World in the Aftermath of 9–11", *Alternatives: The Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, 2002, pp. 202–203.
22. Jason Dittmer, "Of Gog and Magog: The Geopolitical Visions of Jack Chick and Premillennial Dispensationalism", *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, Vol. 6, 2007, p. 297.
23. George W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union", (29 January 2002), *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush* (2002, Book I), http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2002-book1/html/PPP-2002-book1-doc-pg129–3.htm, accessed 5 February 2011.
24. Andrew J. Bacevich and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, "God is Not Neutral: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy After 9/11", *Orbis*, Vol. 48, 2004, p. 48.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
26. Tony Campolo, "The Ideological Roots of Christian Zionism", *Tikkun*, Vol. 20, 2005.
27. R. Scott Appleby, "History in the Fundamentalist Imagination", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, 2002, p. 501.
28. Paul S. Boyer, "John Darby Meets Saddam Hussein: Foreign Policy and Bible Prophecy", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 49, 2003, p. B12.
29. Martin Durham, "Evangelical Protestantism and Foreign Policy in the United States after 9/11", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 38, 2006, p. 154.
30. Kevin R. den Dulk, "Evangelical 'Internationalists' and U. S. Foreign Policy During the Bush Administration", in *Religion and the Bush Presidency*, eds. Mark J. Rozell, et al., New York: MacMillan Palgrave, 2007, p. 224.

31. David A. Bosworth, "American Crusade: The Religious Roots of the War on Terror", *Barry Law Review*, Vol. 7, 2006, p. 72.
32. *Ibid*., p. 73.
33. *Ibid*., p. 87.
34. Mark A. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, p. 67.
35. Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman, "The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 32, 2006, p. 127.
36. Charles Davis, "The Political Use and Misuse of Religious Language", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 26, 1989, p. 491.
37. Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003, p. 13.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 4.
40. Paul Collins and Nada K. Kakabadse, "Perils of Religion: Need for Spirituality in the Public Sphere", *Public Administration and Development*, Vol. 26, 2006, p. 112.
41. Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995, p. 27.
42. Chapman, "Selling Faith Without Selling Out", *op. cit.*, p. 159.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
44. Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 132.
45. Davis, "The Political Use and Misuse of Religious Language", *op. cit.*, pp. 487–488.
46. David Wetherel, "The Use and Misuse of Religious Language: Zionism and the Palestinians", *Holy Land Studies: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 4, 2005, p. 77.
47. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, p. 366.
48. Nicholas F. S. Papanicolaou, "Defender of the U.S. Constitution, the Obama Administration's Department of Homeland Security recently swore in two devout Muslims in senior posts". ChristianNewsToday.com. http://www.christiannewstoday.com/Christian_News_Report_107.html# (accessed 22 January 2014).
49. *Ibid.*
50. See http://www.doveworld.org/the-sign as of 1 February 2011.
51. Davis, "The Political Use and Misuse of Religious Language", p. 494.
52. Armstrong, The Battle for God, *op. cit.*, p. 356.
53. Robert Wuthnow, "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': American Identity and American Democracy", in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 160.
54. *Ibid.*, 158–159.
55. Davis, "The Political Use and Misuse of Religious Language", *op. cit.*, p. 494.
56. Peter Berger, "Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle," in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 23.
57. John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *Religion and Globalization: World Religions in Historical Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 543.