



APOCALYPTIC MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

Christian and Jewish Zionism

CARLO ALDROVANDI



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Carlo Aldrovandi

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

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To Maria Antonia Calderan and Enrico Aldrovandi, with love

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Introduction

Political Religions and Theo-Politics

The intellectual background of this book is three years of research into the cultural origins of fascist ideology, which I conducted at the Faculty of Political Science at Bologna University. This area of research is perhaps the object of one the longest ongoing scholarly debates in the field of modern history and political studies. I understood the complex phenomenon of fascism as a form of 'political religion', drawing on the groundbreaking work of Emilio Gentile.

Particularly compelling was Gentile's contention that fascist ideology was not exclusively animated by pure 'negativity', that is, the desire to put an end to the existing liberal institutions and their values. Rather, for the Italian historian, fascism was underpinned by a creative ambition: the idea that in order to resolve Italy's postwar crisis and longstanding deficiencies as a modern nation, it was necessary to have an all-encompassing anthropological revolution, whose ultimate goal was the regeneration of the liberal institutions and society with the creation of a new Fascist man and civilization. According to Gentile, the prospect of national rebirth under the Fascist aegis was key to Benito Mussolini's ideology and its success. That idea of ultimate renewal fascinated not only the 'true believers', but also the more moderate minds within Italy's Fascist Party. It equally beguiled rank and file and theoreticians. Further, it captivated well-respected Italian intellectuals and public figures with prominent roles in the liberal society and state. According to many historians, Mussolini's vision for a 'New Italy' also established a mass resonance, although it remains impossible to ascertain duration, exact extent and fluctuations of this spontaneous popular adhesion to the Fascist regime over its 20-year life span.¹

Needless to say, Gentile's hypothesis went against the grain of mainstream historiography, whose interpretative approaches traditionally

deprived Fascist ideology of any positive formulation. Mussolini's creed was understood mainly as 'a mix of demagogic improvisation, mystifying aspirations and initiatives, in any case irrelevant to its knowledge and understanding'.² On this ground, Fascism could only be an epiphenomenon with no historical subjectivity on its own: be it a mob of pseudo-intellectual opportunists, ignorant adventures or brutal criminality entirely subservient to large capitalistic interests; 'il braccio armato' (the enforcer) of the nationalist-bourgeois reaction against the mounting tide of Bolshevism; or, following Benedetto Croce's comment, a 'mere parenthesis': a moral disease due to the sudden irruption of irrational forces, a 'hiccup' that temporarily delayed the ascending trajectory of human civilization.³

Gentile was neither the first nor the only scholar to challenge this consensus of opinion. From extensive reading of authors like George Mosse, Uriel Tal, Ze'ev Sternhell, Stanley G. Payne, Roger Griffin and many others,⁴ I soon appreciated how Fascism did have a coherent ideological apparatus, one playing a crucial part in Mussolini's seizure and control of power. Further research revealed that the vitality of the ideology largely depended on its syncretic character. Indeed, the Fascist creed was a heterogeneous compound drawing on a vast cultural repertoire that, ironically, included even democratic ideals belonging to the tradition of the Italian Risorgimento.⁵

As far as I was concerned, the most fascinating contribution of this historiography was nevertheless to shine some light on the formidable and often underestimated role that religious ideals, myths and archetypes have in the formulation of modern politics – or, as Gentile puts it, in the processes of 'sacralization of politics'. It was also the first time that I fully realized how political action might merge with religion to the extent of blurring their respective boundaries. In keeping with Gentile's reading, Fascism would provide a paradigmatic example of 'political religion'. Mussolini along with other intellectuals studiously appropriated a set of religious beliefs, dogmas and liturgies, but only to bestow an aura of sacredness on their movement's legitimacy, symbolic universe and intra-historical ambitions. Otherwise put, as a secular entity, Fascism 'sacralized' itself by incorporating constitutive elements of established religions – namely Judaism and Christianity, whilst reducing them to a subordinate and auxiliary role.

The Fascist project of ultra-nationalist renewal profoundly altered the modes of collective action, but also broadened the horizon of cultural and political possibilities. In particular, the advent of Mussolini's regime set an important precedent for other totalitarian experiments

of sacralization of politics that crowded the history of the past century. With Fascism, Soviet Communism, National Socialism and Maoism are perhaps the most notorious attempts to build secular deities in their own right. The rise to power of these new 'totalitarian churches' entailed substituting an omnipotent divine being with an infallible but nonetheless human charismatic leader, to whom the masses had to be obedient and show their allegiance. Accordingly, all the traditional faiths aiming for the individual's spiritual allegiance became dangerous competitors, which needed to be swallowed by the political sphere and thereby be obliterated.⁶

Fascism pursued its revolutionary programme through what philosopher Ernst Cassirer called 'the explicit and solemn enthronement of myth'.⁷ In opposition to the positivist doctrines and classic liberal thought that defined the intellectual tone of the nineteenth century, Mussolini's creed overtly appealed to the irrational as a primary source of political legitimacy and mobilization. In October 1922, 'myth-based thought' was officially brought to power as 'the only form of collective political culture suited to the masses, which, according to Mussolini, were by their very nature incapable of any form of self-government'.⁸ Fascism tragically confirmed that, under particular socio-historical circumstances, sacralization of politics can indeed lead towards an antidemocratic culture, whose chief goal is to subordinate the whole society to an unyielding will to power, whilst promoting persecutory measures against those who refuse to convert or are regarded as enemies or racially inferior.

Since my arrival in the UK for my postgraduate research at the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University, I have tried to widen my intellectual compass to include the political dimensions of religion. I almost immediately recognized in the mundane engagement of various religious fundamentalisms a significant counterpoint to the processes of 'sacralization of politics' that I had studied in Italy. If, until the demise of communism in 1989, the twentieth century was recognized as 'the age par excellence of political faiths, of secular salvations offered on a national or universal scale',⁹ the rise of political Islam and that historical watershed represented by the events of September 11 reordered almost all research priorities towards the other side of the coin: the radical politicization of religion.

The twelve months following September 11 saw the publication of 800 texts (in English alone),¹⁰ which attempted to understand what al-Qaeda's spectacular attacks against the loathed symbols of Western culture really meant and which place they should occupy in the theories

and taxonomies of political scientists. Some identified in al-Qaeda's ideology and actions the natural offspring of Islam, accordingly epitomized as 'the most fundamentalist' of the Abrahamic faiths. Others stressed instead how the Islamist call for a worldwide Jihad had nothing to do with Islamic theology and culture, representing rather a mere religious 'sugar-coating' for non-religious purposes.¹¹

A different strand of scholarship, perhaps more oriented towards the history of ideas, pointed to the idea that September 11 brought to the fore nothing but an already ongoing process. Long before that unforgettable landmark, modernity and the thrust towards globalization had a huge effect on all world religions – namely, by eroding their traditional frameworks of meaning and challenging their sources of hierocratic authority. Contact with strangers and strangeness, the pervasiveness of secular Western culture and, more generally, abrupt changes in existing social orders seemed to plunge believers into what French sociologist Émile Durkheim defined as a state of 'anomie'. This, in turn, encouraged within some of the embattled religious communities unprecedented forms of political militancy, sometimes imbued with apocalyptic or messianic overtones.¹²

What I often found forgotten or neglected about these revivalist phenomena are their adaptability and inventiveness. Although many of them reach back in their ancient history for images and concepts that give them credibility and sense, these are not simply efforts to reinstate or resuscitate old patterns of belief and practise. Drawing on the repertoire of the 'traditions' is indeed a way to meet present-day spiritual and social needs. The most intriguing 'oddity' about these phenomena is nevertheless raised by Faisal Devji in his thought-provoking essay *Landscapes of the Jihad*: whilst condemning the corruption and relativism of values modernity brings about, a revivalist movement like al-Qaeda proved capable of coming to terms with it in a truly creative fashion. As an ideology with global purchase, contemporary jihadist thought incorporates some strands of the alien Western culture it claims to reject and resist, but to recombine them with equally selected elements of the Islamic tradition. According to Devji, the end product of such a syncretism would be an unprecedented 'whirlpool of contradictions', a cultural compound resulting from heterogeneous and apparently incompatible constituents. In the eyes of believers, however, this reality *sui generis* is able to cut a 'revolutionary path' through the engulfing anomie of the present and towards the restoration of a meaningful order of existence.¹³ In keeping with Devji's analyses, other attentive scholars contended that many revivalist phenomena that today stem

from Judaism, Christianity and Islam should be seen not as tribal reactions against the snares of modernity or the lure of Westoxication, but rather as 'modernist anti-modernization' paradoxes.

In this last aspect I immediately recognized a spurious yet most indicative kinship with fascist ideology. As Gentile showed in his innovative scholarship, inasmuch as fascism represented first and foremost a countercultural response to the malaise and challenges put in place by modernity, that response nevertheless flourished by drinking directly from modernity's fruitful springs. Rather than attempting to return to the past or halt the modernization processes, those who voluntarily embraced the Fascist solution aimed at solving the 'sense-making crisis' engulfing them 'by jumping into a construction of a new future, and into the creation of a new civilization'. They waged their crusade against modern decadence by proactively and creatively engaging modernity and its culture, believing they possessed a formula to give humanity 'the power to change the world that [was] changing them, to make their way through the Maelstrom and make it their own'.¹⁴ By giving anti-modernism its most modern expression, I believe that both fascism and contemporary forms of religious revivalism have penetrated to the core of modernity's own contradictions.

Having studied the processes of sacralization of politics in depth encouraged me to uncover interconnections and similarities in fascism and present-day religious revivalism, but at the same time allowed me to address key differences between the two phenomena. For the purpose of this book, it is necessary to note that, insofar as the ideal typical category of political religion is concerned, the ultimate goal of collective life and the highest source of truth are not located in the transcendental realm. Following the conceptualization first introduced by Eric Voegelin, all the major revolutionary and totalitarian movements of the last century drew on religious ideals and imageries, but they did so by 'immanentizing the Eschaton'. In his pioneering work *The New Science of Politics*, the political philosopher charged that, by subordinating God to secular ends (the nation, the race, the blood, the class, the party and so on), the new political religions were transposing the soteriological dimension of transcendence into the plane of history. Quite poignantly, Voegelin added that '[the] more fervently all human energies are thrown into the great enterprises of salvation through world-immanent action, the farther [humankind] moves away from the life of the spirit, and, in so doing, murders God'.¹⁵

More often than not, politicized forms of religion would aim at the very opposite goal: they act intra-historically, but only to affirm their

own sacred ideals, codes and aspirations in the secular society and state. An illustrative example is perhaps offered by those Islamist movements fighting politically for the establishment of a theocratic state organized around Sharia law. Some may argue that, even in this case, the Eschaton remains still partly subject to a process of immanentization, as these politicized forms of religion have a mundane commitment to fulfil, a commitment that obliges them to use history as a channel of realization. This notwithstanding, I would submit that their ultimate purpose remains that of bringing down a piece of true transcendence (what Mircea Eliade defined as ‘the perfection of the world above’¹⁶) and implementing it on earth.

Despite glaring differences, it was almost impossible not to notice a convergence between the two modalities of merging politics and religion: the myth of palingenesis. As historian of ideas Griffin details in his seminal study *The Nature of Fascism*, the religious archetype that Mussolini’s movement and other political religions most obsessively deployed in the construction of their consensus was that of complete rebirth or palingenesis. In its countless permutations, this archetype would allow humankind to cleanse itself of a period of real or perceived anomie and moral decadence, with a new beginning in a restored and perfected world order.¹⁷ Mussolini’s nationalist revolution derived this idea directly from the apocalyptic import of the Great War: the first ‘total’ and ‘global’ conflict that, since its outbreak in August 1914, was hailed by many Italian intellectuals and politicians as a catastrophic watershed between two qualitatively different aeons, and the beginning of a ‘metanoia’ that was meant to regenerate the whole of Italian society.¹⁸ To Griffin, the idea of palingenesis can express itself in both religious and secular forms without being bound up to any particular source or tradition.¹⁹ Despite such a claim, I found this archetype of human mythopoeia featuring prominently in ancient forms of apocalypticism within the Abrahamic spectrum, and at the same time having strong political application at present, not only in jihadist Islam, but also in US Evangelical millenarianism and Israeli Jewish messianism. Perhaps in a way not entirely contrary to Griffin’s views, it seemed that the myth of palingenesis was able to draw a sort of historical trajectory, from its origin within the bosom of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, through Western philosophy into modern political religions and totalitarianisms. With the return of this myth to its religious moorings, the trajectory seemed to have completed a full circle. The fascinating discovery that the ideal of a new beginning in a flawless order of existence was still ‘alive and kicking’ and significantly impacting on politics and

societal orders soon became the major stimulus to undertake further research on two relevant case studies.

The present book focuses on the theo-political nature and regenerative ambitions of Israeli Religious Zionism and US Christian Zionism. The intricate relationship between religion and politics has been a topical theme for at least three decades. However, if political religions have received in-depth and systematic scholarly treatment, in my opinion there are still few compelling analytical statements on organized forms of politicized religion. The selection of these two case studies is motivated by the evidence that, as a result of the September 11 aftershock, political Islam has received almost exceeding academic attention, whilst this subject remains under-researched and under-theorized for what concerns politicized religious identities and movements within Judaism and Christianity. The terminological choice of 'theo-political' is meant to acknowledge that these sociocultural phenomena use politics as a means to foster transcendental aspirations and goals centred on their respective salvational agendas. Otherwise put, the sacred is not simply a source of legitimacy and mobilization for non-religious purposes, but the main and absolute issue at stake.

A contention that will often be raised in the following pages is that, although in everyday tactics and practices they might present a more moderate and pragmatic side, the ideal that propels both phenomena – one rarely exposed to public scrutiny – is inherently palingenetic and it is so in the originally religious meaning of that ideal. After extensive reading on the existing literature, I found that many studies of contemporary Christian and Jewish religious fundamentalism tend to underestimate, or sometimes even ignore, the fact that their source of consensus and style of political participation is underpinned by the urge to regenerate the respective societies according to cosmically ordained imperatives. What really caught my attention was the fact that, aside from their seemingly irreconcilable doctrinal differences, US Christian Zionism and Israeli Religious Zionism converge on one critical point: their worldly engagement is aimed at solving the deficiencies and flaws hindering the current secular order through the establishment of a theocratic rule in which 'difference' is not contemplated. In these circumstances, secular institutions, society and culture need to be absorbed by the religious sphere and thereby be obliterated. In a way strikingly similar to the totalitarian projects and sacralized ideologies that I had previously investigated, these millenarian and messianic phenomena are animated by compelling monistic goals, and also demonize their out-group counterparts in a fashion that can sometimes elicit violence against them.

The difficulty that I confronted since the beginning of my research is that although US Christian Zionism and Jewish Religious Zionism have attracted dedicated and considerable scholarly attention, much of it remained narrowly underpinned by the approaches of the social and political sciences. At best, these approaches categorized such religiously inspired forms of militancy as the outcome of the desperation of socially disenfranchised fringes. At worst, they stigmatized these phenomena as inherently paranoid or pathologically destructive forms of collective deviance. Indeed, one could infer a causative link between the secularist biases of a scholarship lacking a sound 'religious literacy' and its interpretative shortcomings. However, in the few times in which the same subject was engaged theologically, I sometimes noted a misconception or underestimation of its political implications. Some theological approaches also tended to downplay or even turn a blind eye to the most contentious aspects of this kind of messianic and millenarian mindset – most notably, the inclination towards exclusionary thinking and the justification of redemptive violence as a means to gain transcendental fulfilment.

As a researcher trained in the field of political sciences, but extremely fascinated by the history of ideas, theology and religious studies, I decided that my humble and incremental contribution to the debate on politicized religions was that of trying to rectify these lacunae by applying what historian George Mosse called 'methodological empathy'.²⁰ The underlying purpose of this book is therefore to address and compare two modern theo-political manifestations of the enduring myth of palingenesis not just empirically, but also and foremost 'phenomenologically': that is, with a serious, in-depth and systematic treatment of the religious beliefs, texts, worldviews and meaning systems that triggered and continue to motivate the believers' involvement in world politics.

The main argument here is that religions have always interacted with their surrounding societies in a highly dynamic and complex fashion that cannot be easily grasped in its full scope, let alone by relying solely on the epistemological and analytical stand informing secular scholarship. Among the latter, there is still a rather consolidated opinion that the methods of rational choice and critical thinking are conducive to the creation of a stable and peaceful civil society, whereas intrinsically inferior emotional constructs like religion are bound to fan unrest, intolerance and violence. As Marc Gopin succinctly puts it, the post-Enlightenment approach celebrating the centrality of rationality as a primary marker and maker of human identity, needs, aspirations and

action finds little resonance in a believer's mind. This especially appears to be the case in moments of crisis, when what is all too often negatively dismissed as 'sacred passion' defines and connects the inner and public life of those who embrace it.²¹

Given the multiple and diverse pressures that converge on that sensitive geopolitical map, extensive and valuable scholarly work has already been conducted on the subject of religious fundamentalisms with vested soteriological interests in the Holy Land. However, a heuristic framework interfacing theology with social and political sciences has rarely been applied to contemporary forms of Jewish messianism and Christian millenarianism and, to my knowledge, never in comparative terms. As politicized religious movements, Israeli Religious Zionism and US Evangelical Zionism have a clear line of historical antecedents. Nevertheless, once their current earthly involvement is taken into account, these phenomena represent unprecedented and unique hybrids between religion and politics. Both movements deserve academic attention in view of the exceptional prominence and outreach that they have recently acquired in the respective domestic domains and internationally; their remarkable organizational, communicational and mobilizing skills and resources; and, finally, considering the fact that the implementation of their messianic and millenarian agenda in the Occupied Territories interferes considerably with the creation of a Palestinian state as a viable solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, whilst providing a *casus belli* for the propaganda and action of various Islamist movements.

This book is concerned with two overarching analytical assumptions, which I try to present here in the most synthetic form.

First, insofar as Israeli Religious Zionism and US Evangelical Zionism are concerned, one can notice a causative link between religious ideals and politics. Therefore, the modes of mundane engagement cannot be fully grasped without a thorough appreciation of the theological aspirations and goals, which in our case derive from a complex corpus of eschatological thought stretching back at least to ancient Zoroastrianism. Sacred aspirations and goals must be approached seriously, granting them the same coherent standing that they possess in the eyes of the activist believers. Further, not only should one account for these phenomena in view of the their negative formulations – that is, the desire to put an end to the existing secular order – but the creative side of their utopian visions should also be factored in. I will contend that the mobilizing force of the millenarian and messianic appeal resides in both aspects.

Second, I also hope to show how, within these particular forms of politicized religion, eschatological ideals and historical reality are dialectically interrelated. If a more apparent contention is that messianic and millenarian beliefs impact on politics, the hypothesis that being actively involved in the political arena implies to some extent abiding or conforming to its rules will be also addressed. Especially in the long run, this eventuality might impinge considerably on or even alter the religious identity, values and goals of the theo-political movement. In so doing, I will argue, earthly involvement may generate the premises for inner spiritual crises, which, in turn, might lead to a redefinition of the political agenda of the movement. On this ground, I consider eschatology and historical reality as two foci in the same 'magnetic field', wherein both poles relentlessly react and adjust to the variations of the other.

The first section of the book discusses, in a selective and concise fashion, key theological ideas and themes related to Jewish and Christian eschatology. This sets out the conceptual premises for the second section, in which the case studies are treated in detail, also relying on the analytical tools of social and political science. I shall take a great deal of care in addressing various aspects of the apocalyptic, millenarian and messianic tradition since many of them, although not in their original shape or spirit, still feature in the mindset of Christian and Jewish Zionists. I wish to demonstrate that the modalities whereby these two movements are currently operating in the US and Israeli political arenas are heavily contingent upon their idiosyncratic interpretation of long-standing religious hopes and ideals concerning the End Time.

1

Meaning at the End

So as to represent the phenomenal experience of time, two different and seemingly contradictory concepts are often employed. Time may be experienced as a mere repetition of identical occurrences as moon cycles, seasons or 'red days' in a calendar. The second and more worrisome understanding of time points at the irreversibility of its passage.¹ In Greek mythology, one of primordial deities symbolizing the idea of time's irreversibility was the tyrannical Kronos, a titan known to the Romans as Saturn. In 1815, the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya portrayed Kronos in the guise of a sharp-toothed ogre devouring his own children.² That image brings out the essence of what it means, and will always mean, to be human: defenceless exposure to realities of chance, change, decay and death. Throughout the world, religious mythopoeia are concerned with finding a solution to entropic time. The necessity to 'climb beyond' the limits of an ephemeral and transient life accounts for the tight link between man's experience of time and that of the sacred.³

Ancient civilizations in the Near East and Orient understood time as being 'self-enclosed' in a circle. Everything happening within the 'cosmos' was thought to unfold, and return perpetually on itself, by means of an infinite repetition of identical stages of creation, deterioration, destruction and re-creation:

Generation and decay develop in a circle or according to an indefinite succession of cycles, in the course of which the same reality is made, unmade and remade, in conformity with an immutable law. Nothing is created, nothing is lost. No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once. Every event which has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted again. Cosmic time is repetition and eternal return.⁴

The classic idea of time was meant to reflect the unchanging perfection of the universe: neither direction nor goal, but a rhythm shaped on astral movements and natural cycles. Without the existence of a significant relation of before and after, nothing 'absolutely new' could arise from the historical horizon. In the eternal succession of cycles, one event was hardly distinguishable from the other. According to Karl Löwith, a temporal understanding devoid of significant points of reference also accounts for the Greek inability to develop an authentic 'philosophy of history' – a term referring to a 'systematic interpretation of history in accordance with a principle by which events are unified and directed to an ultimate meaning'. A future without direction implied a simple rerun of the past: neither progress nor decline, but a recurring gain and loss. Human action and fate appeared to be regulated by the alternation between *hubris* and *nemesis*, a retributive law that time and again restored the equilibrium of forces. The rationality of the cosmos left no room for any hope in a divine providence. The human condition was not perceived as perfectible, but instead crushed by a tragic fate: 'all nations, cities, and authorities must, like men, meet their end'.⁵ In an awareness of the mutability of fortune, the best course was to resign oneself with virile assent. Even Olympus' gods submitted to the inexorable laws of the universe.

Within that scheme, argues Mircea Eliade, humankind could nevertheless find relief from the 'burden of chronicity'. This was possible through the very patterns of recurrence, constancy and immutability. The passage of time – and all the unremitting suffering carried with it – could be momentarily abolished by the repetition of the 'cosmogony': the act of creation of the whole universe charged with generative power and meaning. By ritually re-enacting the favourable circumstances of the beginning in which the forces of order triumphed over those of chaos, man was offered a chance of revitalization. That kind of renewal allowed man to be projected *illo tempore*: the paradigmatic and atemporal moment in which all reality was created. To become contemporary with the work of God implied being granted a fresh start with all forces intact. Life's finitude and tragedies became sufferable as they were inserted into an overarching, consoling system in which birth follows death, just as death follows birth. Human fate resonated with a cosmic pattern in which every end was never definitive, but always connected with a brand new beginning.⁶ Classic civilizations were able to neutralize the reality of the second aspect of time (irreversibility) by equating it with the first (repetition). Through eternal recurrences, one was periodically empowered by that sense of 'unlimited possibility' associated with the mood of being on the threshold of a 'just-born' world.

The eschaton

Consciousness of history has its origin in Israel with the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus is conceived of as a historical occurrence that constitutes an irreversible 'before' and 'after', because in this event a new spiritual truth is experienced that is superior to the truth of cosmological myth and that at the same time gives new meaning to the existence of the people of Israel: Yahweh, who led Israel from Egypt, is revealed as the God beyond the cosmos and the intra-cosmic world of the gods; thus, the Exodus from Egypt becomes, in the self-understanding of the people of Israel, the exodus from cosmological civilization, and Israel becomes a people that has a history in the presence of the transcendent God.⁷

It is commonly accepted that the first and substantial rupture in the cyclical understanding of time occurred within the Hebrew religious tradition. The prophets Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel introduced a notion of temporality hitherto unknown to the surrounding Near Eastern civilisations – a view in which time no longer revolves in an infinite sequence of circles, but flows linearly towards a future single ending.⁸ Much of the persuasive force of eschatology or the 'Doctrine of the Last Things', resides in its holistic approach, combining and providing an explanation to matters of ultimate significance: the nature of time, the destiny of humanity and the cosmos, the source of spiritual authority, human suffering and evil.⁹

Eschatology imposes a teleological structure on our experience of time suggesting that all that happens is designed for or directed towards a final end, which gives reason to what existed before. Within that scheme, the whole meaning of history becomes intelligible only from the standpoint of its conclusion. It is not by a fortuitous coincidence that, from the prophetic tradition onwards, the terms 'end', 'goal', 'purpose' and 'meaning' can be used interchangeably in the Western lexicon:

History is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is also a goal. ... To venture a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible only when their *telos* becomes apparent. When a historical movement has unfolded its consequences, we can reflect on its first appearance, in order to determine the meaning of the whole. ... If we reflect on the whole course of history, imagining its

beginning and anticipating its end, we think of its meaning in terms of its ultimate purpose. The claim that history has an ultimate meaning implies a final purpose or goal transcending the actual events.¹⁰

To regard meaning in terms of a future goal transcending present events represents a real break with the rationales of the Eternal Return. To the Greeks, historical occurrences had import and sense, but these were not interpreted in view of an expected fulfilment finalizing the whole course of time. An approach in which past and present are a meaningful preparation for the future was lived intensively by the Hebrew prophets as a hope for final redemption. In the prophetic books of the Torah, every instant appeared to be precious in so much as it was ordained by God's purposeful plan, beginning with the first breath of creation and ending with deliverance in the Promised Land. History might have seemed a mix of drift and disaster, but it was unfolding under divine guidance. The prophets taught their followers 'to look forward with confidence to a time when, under God, they would be lord of a fertile, prosperous world, and when their enemies would be finally subdued, never to rise again'.¹¹ Past and present evil was to be endured in the light of the Kingdom of God: a futuristic order in which man would be fully integrated and free from oppression. By the eschatological valorization of time, Israelites learnt how to live and suffer in terms of tomorrow, fascinated by what does not yet exist.

The abolition of history

The cyclical understanding of time enabled the members of the traditional civilizations to regenerate themselves by a re-enactment of the 'beginning'. To actualize again the instant in which the cosmos was created implied the recovery of a pure existence, imbued with virgin possibilities. On the threshold of each new birth, the celebrant was projected into a mythical dimension, benefiting from a momentary yet repeatable 'measure of eternity'. Through that renewal, the vicissitudes generated by the passage of time were transcended, but not definitively. It is worth noting that the Myth of Eternal Return was 'ahistorical' in character, without meaningful 'points of reference' in time, one lived in the distinctive 'continual present' of rituals.

With eschatology, human regeneration is no longer accomplished by endless re-enactments of the cosmogony. The cycle in which beginnings follow endings is broken, unravelled into a limited temporal duration. Periodic rebirths are replaced by a single, definitive renewal that

will occur at the end of that duration. Suffering in time is tolerated in light of a redemptive plan that would extirpate it once and for all. The archaic world appears to be indifferent to historical time, whereas the Hebrew civilization is interwoven with it. Events are 'situations in respect to Yahweh, and, as such, they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them'.¹² Yet, the emphasis on the value of history appears to be only cursory, since all events are subordinated to an ultimate fulfilment, outside its course. What happens in time is part of a transition ushering in a final age in which 'time shall be no more'. The kind of regeneration pursued by eschatology 'irrupts suddenly and puts an end to everything, slashing the fabric of time like a sword'.¹³ In light of this conclusive anti-historicism, Hebrew resistance to death, decay and suffering turns out to be far more determined than that of the archaic mind. The terror of Kronos can be endured only because it is known that, one day or another, it will cease forever.

It is worth mentioning that both Judaism and Christianity maintain, within their doctrinal culture, the cyclical view of pagan civilizations, by combining the eschatological conception of time with that which governs their liturgical calendar, rites and ceremonies. Many examples may be quoted here to support the idea that, within the two faiths, to 'commemorate' implies to repeat and re-actualize a primordial archetype and, as a result of that, to regenerate time. In Judaism, the Sabbath rest ritually re-enacts the 'the primordial gesture of the Lord, for it was on the seventh day of Creation that God rested from all his work which he had made'. Further, the observance of the Passover remembers and transposes in the present the experience of the Egyptian bondage and that of the deliverance by the hand of Yahweh. Similarly, the Christian liturgical year is organized upon 'a periodic repetition of the Nativity, Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, with all that this mystical drama implies for a Christian'.¹⁴ Indeed, history may be abolished and renewed countless times before its irrevocable End is reached.

The everlasting Covenant

The meaning of Jewish eschatology becomes fully intelligible only when interpreted within the normative framework of the Covenant (*berit* in Hebrew). The first prophets were members of the 'Yahweh alone' tradition: a religious movement marked by a stern denunciation of Near Eastern polytheistic practices and by the insistence that Israelites should exclusively worship Yahweh, the patron divinity of

Israel. From the time of the Prophets onwards, Yahweh came to represent a 'Lord of History': an interventionist God acting in the historical plane with an intensity and purpose that were unknown to previous religions. This appears to be the case when the Hebrew divinity battles against Israel's foes, the polytheistic tribes of the Land of Canaan. The Yahweh alone movement was the cultural milieu out of which the first monotheism developed, an idea that cannot be dissociated from that 'deal' binding God to His chosen people. The scholarly and theological literature surrounding the idea of 'Covenant' is so wide and complex that it might easily overshadow its contractual nature. The caveats of the deal, argues Donald H. Akenson, shift over time, but its kernel does not:

If Israel will be His people, Yahweh will be their God. This, though easily stated, is as profound a commitment as any set of human beings can make. This is the opposite of the Faustian deal, but it has one element in common with it. Whereas the Covenant is a collective, not an individual bargain, and it is with the Almighty rather than with the Devil, it is identical in this regard: once you sign on it, you belong to him. The contract is Israel's enlistment in the divine army; it binds the entire nation and does so generation after generation from time unto eternity.¹⁵

In its early formulation, the Covenant contained a set of basic promises, with no apparent condition attached. God would increase the number of Israelites and make them into a great nation, bless those who bless His Children, and extend such divine rights to Abraham's descendants. For our purposes here, it is crucial to note that the primary derivative of the bargain was that 'gift of grace' represented by the everlasting possession of the Land of Israel – in Hebrew, 'Eretz Yisrael'. As will be shown, that exclusive territorial right is still perceived by many Orthodox Jews as being heavenly endowed:

God alone is Lord and possessor of all lands; He alone distributes land to peoples. This article of faith is epitomized by the highly authoritative commentary of Rashi to Genesis 1:1, in which he states: 'should the nations of the world question the validity of Israel's title to the Holy Land by saying: you are robbers in that you have overrun the territories of the seven Canaanite nations that have occupied the Land previously, Israel can resort: the whole world is the Lord's. He created it and gave it to whomsoever He saw fit'. The

absolute perpetuity of the Covenant eliminates the possibility that God can relocate the Land permanently to any other people.¹⁶

The Land of Promise, however, as every other sacred trust granted by the Covenant, is not to be considered an end in itself, but rather a means to an ultimate and universal end. The fulfilment of God's promise – the Jews' deliverance in their Land as 'a Kingdom of Priests, a Holy Nation' – is seen as necessary to hasten global salvation. The Jewish restoration to Zion is accordingly a blessing to all the families and people of the earth. Divine election entails being singled out from a multitude for a special task and, therefore, to stand in an exclusive relationship with the deity. In light of their collective commitment to the Covenant, the Jewish people become the 'instrument' whereby God advances His plan about the future of the cosmos.¹⁷

An analysis will be made of how the Covenantal doctrine harmonizes Israel's election with eschatological hope and at the same time harnesses universalism to particularism. The Jewish exile is rendered into 'the exile of the world', and the Jewish redemption into a cosmic redemption. On the fate of a few people hinges that of the whole of creation.

Despite the injunction of circumcision and a vague caution to remain pure, the Abrahamic Covenant is a straightforward and unconditional pact. There is as yet no clear set of positive rules, no 'if-then' casual relationship.¹⁸ With the renewal of the Covenant mediated by Moses at Mount Sinai, an act concluding the Egyptian Captivity and the Hebrew wanderings in the wilderness, some principles of conditionality were introduced and the human contractors became immediately accountable to their patron divinity. What was offered to Abraham as an outright gift is now turned into a conditional loan: Yahweh will continue to favour and bless the Chosen, provided they obey His commandments and sacred law. To be entrusted as a vessel of global salvation, a path of righteousness needs to be followed, inasmuch as to be a holy nation entails sharing in purity with God, that purity must be safeguarded by observing a set of religious admonitions and prohibitions against different sources of pollution. The pursuit of these statutes and rituals of purity is intended to set the religious identity of the Chosen apart from that of Gentiles, marking at the same time their holiness.

The transgression of the hallowed ordinances is considered a moral failure, which contravenes the perpetual agreement. With the Mosaic restatement of the Covenant, the communion between Israel and Yahweh acquires the emotional intensity of a marriage. The prophets

repeatedly warn that God acts as a passionate and jealous husband. His love may acquire a resentful form, whenever the Chosen wander off the righteous path that they had assented to heed. In order to enforce the moral economy of the Covenant, not only is the Lord of History capable of suspending His favour, but also of rendering blessings into scourges. If the obligations are not honoured, the gift of the Land might be taken away, the Israelites would be dispersed amongst the nations, and the very heathen tribes Yahweh helped to defeat in battle can now be turned into the agents carrying out Israel's chastisement. This does not imply that the original entrustment is jeopardized, but that certain elements of the special relationship are granted on the understanding that they may be temporarily derogated if Israel is deemed 'unfaithful' to her God.

As a belief system, the Covenant produces two interwoven outcomes, which buttress Israel's kinship with God and her self-understanding of having been singled out with an ultimate purpose to serve. The conditional thinking at the heart of the holy bargain holds that if the Chosen 'walk in the statutes and keep the commandments',¹⁹ their patron deity will provide them with virtues, power and prosperity. But, in times of fortune, the 'if-then' mode may be easily reversed: the possession of political or military might can be claimed as evidence that one is morally right and divinely entrusted.²⁰ At a deeper level of understanding, the conviction of having been appointed to implement a divine mandate may also be reconciled with an opposing reality of powerlessness and misfortune. If every disaster or moment of hardship is interpreted as a punishment inflicted for having fallen away from the Covenant, the magnitude of that suffering may be offered as a 'conclusive evidence' of Yahweh's (betrayed) love. After God has visited woes on His chosen, but fallible people, they are demanded to repent humbly, pray and endorse a more righteous code of behaviour. Given the perpetuity of the deal and the universality of Israel's redemptive role, Yahweh would no doubt restore His original favour.

Both the Covenantal system and eschatology were religious responses to a moment of permanent insecurity and political decline. A series of misfortunes, disappointments and persecutions led to their articulation: the prophetic idea of having been called into being for a purpose for the world's history acquired momentum as Israel lost its status of nation. It was the very absence of an acceptable meaning in history that encouraged an anxious quest for a triumphant future. Comparable to the compass, the Covenantal promise of an ultimate restoration in the Holy Land provided the Jewish people with a means of orientation in space.²¹ By pointing to the Messianic Age, eschatology instead provided them with an orientation in time. The notion of the irreversibility of

time – that is, the awareness that Kronos wastes everything away and devours its own creatures – was endorsed by the Hebrews, but endowed with a futuristic hope that was meant to neutralize once and for all the distress caused by it. Part of this hope concerns the fact of having been chosen in order to lead a redemptive plan solving the historical condition of suffering, death and decay. With Hebrew theology, moments of hardship generated by the passage of time acquire an unprecedented weight in terms of theodicy. On the one hand, adversities have to be tolerated since they directly emanate from God's will; on the other hand, they become steps necessary to bring about a 'new heaven and a new earth'. Each event is to be seen within the greater, comprehensive pattern of salvation in which Israel plays a protagonist role. Suffering is no longer a human purposeless prerogative, as it was in the Greek tragic sense. It turns out to be the basis of an unprecedented investment in the future. This hope in a fulfilment to be accomplished at the end of history was taken up and intensified by Christianity.

'Now already,' but 'not yet'

As a new and not yet established religion, Christianity had to furnish 'proof of authenticity' by creating continuity with a suitable past. For this reason, the Fathers of the Church did not break with the pre-existing religious tradition and affirm the absolute novelty and originality of the Gospels. Rather, they situated them 'at the end of a long preceding development of Jewish history'. The advantage of a construed lineage between the Old and New Testaments was twofold. On the one hand,

Christianity was enabled to represent itself as the oldest, most pristine of religions, having its sources and seeds in an age far predating the most ancient events narrated in the profane annals of the classical, Babylonian or Egyptian civilizations.

On the other hand,

the sacred literature of Israel provided the Christian apologists with the testimony they required in order to prove that the coming of Jesus had been foreshadowed, foreseen and prophesied in the past.²²

The second accomplishment appears to be contingent upon the plausibility of the first one. In order to press the Hebrew eschatological speculations into the service of the Christian ones, and claim that what was

promised to Israel found its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus, it was deemed necessary to appropriate, as complementary, a sacred tradition stretching back to the assumed beginning of time – the creation of the world as recorded in Genesis.

Building on the pretention that the advent of Jesus was prepared and prefigured by the Torah, post-Apostolic Christendom was able to present itself as the new Covenantal recipient of the promises originally addressed to the Hebrews, through Abraham and Moses. The Church thus came to symbolize the true 'light to the nations', taking over Israel's role in the working out of God's redemptive plan, completely and permanently. A milder but not substantially different variation of this 'replacement theology' consists in the idea of 'progressive revelation': God has been manifesting Himself gradually to the Israelites over a period of many centuries, yet Jesus represents the climax of that revelatory process. It goes without saying that according to this idea, the fullest understanding of God's purposes would never have been attainable at the time of Abraham, Moses or David.²³

However, if Christianity superseded Judaism, it did so by harmonizing its hopes into a quite different eschatological plot. Frank Kermode argues that the strength of that plot resides in its 'fictive character', one that creates a concordance between beginning, middle and end. The Christian Scriptures follow a familiar narrative mode that

begins at the beginning ('In the beginning') and ends with a vision of the end ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus'); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse. Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure: the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with the beginning and end. The end, Apocalypse, is traditionally held to resume the whole structure, which it can only do by figures predictive of that part of it which has not been historically revealed.

According to Kermode, we are creatures rushing 'in between time'. So as to make sense of our lifespan, we all need 'fictive concords with origins and ends'.²⁴ The Bible's narrative structure would indeed provide believers with such 'fictive concords' and, in so doing, help them withstand the test of time. By realizing a consonance between past, present and future, the Christian Canon would put the whole history into meaningful perspective: a straight line marks the march from the initial Fall to the final Redemption.

In keeping with the Hebrew understanding of time, Christianity's sacred plot becomes intelligible in light of its finalization. It is from

the privileged 'standpoint of the end' that man will be able to know the purpose for which God has conceived for him and all creation.²⁵ Yet, in spite of this emphasis on the eschaton, the first point of reference of Christianity, the one holding its sense as a religion, stands within the limits of its sacred history and not at its end. The First Coming is a moment in time in which God revealed Himself by incarnating into a man who lived and died 'historically'. The events commonly compounded into the 'life of Christ' – Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection – represent a catalyst so pregnant with meaning that, in light of it, all that precedes and follows is to be ordered and explained. With Christ, argues Henri-Charles Puech, history has crossed 'an essential threshold':

The Greek mind was virtually unable to develop a philosophy of history, because it had no absolute centre or fixed point of reference by which to order and interpret historical events. Christianity possesses such a centre in the coming of Jesus. This concrete, datable event binds and unbinds the entire perspective of human history. It divides this history into two periods which at the same time it joins together: a preliminary period, ushered in by the Creation and the Fall, converging towards the First Coming, which it prepares and prophesies; and a second period, of restoration and accomplishment, leading to the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ in glory.²⁶

Jesus represents the historical 'midpoint' from which the web of time can be woven backwards as well as forwards. That central event not only organizes Christianity's 'time-reckoning', but also the different phases of its philosophy of history, which is at the same time a 'theology of history', since the path it draws through time climaxes with a universal salvation led by Christ as a saviour. The redemption of the entire world no longer hinges on the fate of the Jewish people, but on a single individual.

A difference distinguishes the Hebrew eschatological orientation from the Christian one, whilst revealing the implausibility of a shared 'Judeo-Christian tradition'. The Jewish people's faith is based on a perseverant waiting and hope, because the key eschatological fulfilment, the coming of their Messiah, still belongs in the future. Christian hope appears instead to be resting on the undeniable truth of an already accomplished fact. In this sense, in view of the First Coming of Jesus, Christianity becomes a 'partly realized' eschatology. A preliminary fulfilment assures the believer about the certainty of its final outcome: 'the

Kingdom of God is already at hand, and yet, as an end, still to come; the time is already fulfilled but not yet consummated'.²⁷ This radical tension between 'now, already' and 'not yet' is essential to interpret all history after Christ. A saviour came once, but he would come again in glory to redeem the world, and bring it to perfection. In the New Testament, one verse out of four deals with this very expectation. So as to illustrate the bearing of that temporal tension, the theologian Oscar Cullmann used a metaphorical image relating the decisive battle in a war to the V-Day, the final day of victory:

In the course of a war the decisive battle may have been fought long before the real end of the war. Only those who realise the decisiveness of the critical battle will also be certain that victory is from now on assured. The many will only believe it when the Victory Day is proclaimed. Thus, Calvary and the Resurrection, the decisive events in the history of salvation, assure the believer of the Day of the Lord in the ultimate future. ... The outcome of the crucial battle suggests that the end is already near, and yet it is still indefinitely remote, for one cannot safely foretell what exertions the enemy might be able to make to defer his final defeat.²⁸

In the believer's eyes, the most critical act of human redemption has already been fought and won in Christ. This awareness is not shaken by the fact that the final defeat of the enemy may still require its time. That the enemy has been mortally wounded but has not yet died is confirmed by the amount of evil that is still circulating in the world.

Defining the Apocalypse

Defining unequivocally the term 'Apocalypse' and its related adjective 'apocalyptic' will always remain an inconclusive ambition. Current and past scholarly debate on the subject is distinguished by endless disagreement, lack of necessary clarification and, above all, terminological confusion. The absence of a unanimous definition should not come as a surprise. Indeed, having been deployed over the centuries with countless different imports, the Apocalypse comes to us as sounding all the echoes of that irreducible complexity. Only in common parlance, the term seems to have reached that unity of meaning that scholars are still debating for: the word 'Apocalypse' is instantly associated with doomsday scenarios, images of cosmic battle between good and evil and final annihilation.

Once interpreted from the standpoint of its etymology, however, the Apocalypse does not lay its emphasis on the cataclysmic circumstances leading to the end of the world but, rather, on its revelatory nature and function. The Apocalypse is a divine message, 'over and above received tradition of human reasoning', which 'uncovers' or 'reveals' secrets and prophecies about the unfolding of future events.²⁹ In keeping with a 'systematic definition' put forward by the biblical scholar John J. Collins, the first distinctive feature of such a message consists in its literary format. The Apocalypse would be 'a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework' in which

a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.³⁰

Jewish and Christian apocalypses purport to unveil to human beings, often by means of the mediation of a revered seer, secrets hitherto known only in heaven. The hidden information announces, in an exoteric and coded fashion, that the world as we know it stands on the brink of an all-encompassing transformation.³¹ It is worth underscoring that eschatology and apocalypse, despite being frequently deployed as interchangeable concepts, retain quite different meanings. The latter should be considered as a 'branch' or, more precisely, a 'qualifier' of the former. Insofar as eschatology focuses on the end of time and the final destiny of humankind, the Apocalypse goes a step forward, by stressing that such an end, however conceived, is imminent. Humanity is living the last days of its present history and approaching a new and essentially different level of existence.³²

In the Hebrew and Christian tradition alike, apocalyptic writings are characterized by a strong sense of periodization and determinism. History's unfolding is schematized into a sequence of aeons, wherein every single event follows God's foreordained plan, even when that does not appear to be the case. As a literary genre, the Apocalyptic reinvigorates the eschatological precept according to which history is not a play of blind contingencies but, rather, a linear trajectory endowed with meaning. God fixed its unravelling, which is now close to its dénouement.

It is commonly held amongst scholars that all the apocalypses were compositions born out of a 'sense-making' crisis. Their primary purpose

was that of offering the community an 'interpretative prism' to address the unsettling idea that the world was out of joint:

[Apocalypses] are intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation, by divine authority. [They] have been written for a group in crisis, if only because the entire Jewish and Christian people can be said to have been in crisis in all the period in question. The visionaries looked to another world, either in the heavens or in the Eschatological future, because this world was unsatisfactory.³³

As a literary genre, the apocalyptic cannot be understood without considering the historical circumstances in which it first arose. It grew and acquired coherent structure during Second Temple Judaism, a period demarcated, as 'terminus a quo', by the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE and, as 'terminus ad quem', by its destruction by hand of the Romans in 70 CE. During this lapse of time, a succession of oppressive rulers – Hellenistic, Hasmonean and Roman – caused the Jews suffering and estrangement, but at the same time engendered an impellent quest for spiritual meaning. In the guise of a 'new response of faith', the apocalyptic was indeed called forth to assuage the plight of the day. Its birth and success, submits Norman Cohn, was largely dependent on its symbolic function. The genre enabled the Jews to come to terms with the painful contradiction between the foreign subjugation that they were facing and the hopes for national grandeur inscribed in their Covenantal status:

Precisely because they were so utterly certain of being the Chosen People, Jews tended to react to peril, oppression and hardship by fantasies of the total triumph and boundless prosperity which Yahweh, out of his omnipotence, would bestow upon his Elect in the fullness of time.³⁴

The chasm between reality and aspirations was bridged by the idea of a 'delay of vindication'. God did not abandon the Jews. His intercession was not manifested in the present but, rather, was to be seen as deferred to the 'fullness of time'. For the faithful, the apocalyptic could anticipate in the present dismay a reversal of fortunes, culminating in divine deliverance and judgement. In the End Days, wrongs caused by the wicked would be corrected and vindicated, both on an individual and national scale. Hope in future fulfilment and triumph stands as the

basic ingredient of every apocalypse, a kind of hope that 'irrupts into the present from a God who is always ahead'.³⁵

The Book of Ezekiel, a literary outcome of the Babylonian Diaspora, prefigures the return of the whole House of Israel to the Promised Land and the annihilation of future invaders by the hand of Yahweh himself. In the famous vision of 'the army of dry bones', the assurance of Israel's national restoration and triumph over its foes is compounded with personal survival beyond death in the form of resurrection. Experiences of suffering and persecution led Ezekiel's authors towards the conviction that God would not allow the faithful to perish, but would rather receive them in His everlasting Kingdom.

The cryptic prophecies crowding Daniel, the first apocalyptic text to be recognized as such, are parts of another attempt to recontextualize, by an eschatological postponement, the political and social unrest generated by the Seleucid-Hellenistic rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE) and by the revolt that Judas Maccabeus led to overthrow the foreign tyrant. The underlying purpose of Daniel remains that of encouraging the faithful to withstand the test of time. By reading the prophecies unfolding in Nebuchadnezzar's dream or those related to the four beasts coming out of a tumultuous sea, one may comprehend that the current foreign oppression is part of a historical continuum that has already been foreordained in the 'heavenly book'. The narrative plot deterministically leads to the heroic victory of the chosen and holy ones. Akin to the previous imperial powers that have ruled over the Jews, the dominion of Antiochus is also doomed to crumble, leaving the ground to the righteous Kingdom of the Israelites. This, after the final victory over the heathens, will never be destroyed nor pass onto another people.³⁶

Not only is the Book of Daniel deeply concerned with the end of the world, but it is also the only Jewish apocalypse that actually attempts to calculate the number of days dividing the faithful from that ultimate event. The confidence that future occurrences might be foretold in advance springs out of Daniel's division of the historical duration into a set number of periods or epochs. Through this timetable, the historical horizon can be scrutinized in search of the fulfilment of key prophetic signs announcing the last aeon before the End. As will be shown, Daniel's predictive schemes would have a profound influence on millenarian movements down to our days.

After having acquired canonical status, Daniel became a reference point for further developments. Divine intervention against the oppressive empires, calculus of the End, final victory of the righteous over the

heathens and salvation as a reward for present suffering are all themes that would later be reprised in the accounts written by Jesus' followers. Daniel no doubt represented a source of inspiration for John, the author of the Book of Revelation, by far the most famous of all Christian apocalypses, a text that has considerably influenced the entire Western thought and culture. In spite of the fact that many doubts are cast on its apostolic authorship, Revelation is more frequently cited than any other book in both Testaments. With its language imbued with dense imagery, cryptic allusions and complex End Time chronologies, Revelation challenged and enchanted scores of more or less learned interpreters. Its words sound more incisive for being so enigmatic. The final book of the Christian Scriptures represents 'a glassy pool in which expositors find mirrored their own interpretative preconceptions'.³⁷ Given the endless hermeneutical opportunities that it affords, John's apocalypse transfers full ownership to the readers, 'who can with impunity discover in its pages the message they themselves put there'. On these grounds, the meaning of Revelation is 'almost uniquely identical with its various applications'.³⁸

Revelation underscores the idea that the present situation does not make sense on its own but, rather, needs information from the divine realm in order to be fully understood. Such information would solve the painful contradiction between God's just rule over creation and the apparently unchecked dominance of evil within it. Once more, John's Apocalypse has to be understood in the light of the historical circumstances that gave it birth. It stands as an epic of Christian hope, 'the victory song' of a persecuted religious community. The book was written from a deeply anti-Roman point of view so as to strengthen faith and determination within the infant Church. Akin to the Jews, the early Christian communities suffered persecution and responded to it, 'by affirming ever more vigorously, to the world and to themselves, their belief in the imminence of the Messianic Age in which their wrongs would be righted and their enemies cast down'.³⁹ Revelation, however, in line with many other Jewish apocalyptic writings, does not encourage violent rebellion but, rather, advocates passive resistance during trying times.⁴⁰

From the opening statement about its nature and purpose, the book is centred on the figure of Jesus Christ. The key difference detaching Revelation from previous apocalyptic writings concerns the pivotal role given to the historical rooting of Jesus, more precisely to the redemptive meaning of his death on the Cross. Revelation celebrates the victory over the forces of evil, which the Christian Messiah is believed to have already defeated on every level, whilst envisaging His return as agent

of God's judgement and rule. The 'theology of hope' of Revelation depends by and large on the idea that Christ's martyrdom eventually progressed into His resurrection, the final triumph over death and His persecutors.⁴¹ Revelation promises that, at the end of time, the same act would be replicated on all the faithful Christians.

However, it is hard to deny that all Jewish and Christian predictions about the impending End did not come to pass and were subject to disconfirmation (otherwise we would not be here). These disconfirmations notwithstanding, the apocalyptic survived as a key theological-religious ideal through the ages. Reinterpreted time and again to fit ever changing historical circumstances, these writings affected the perceptions of generations of believers. The resilience of the genre can be explained in view of its ability to render a moment of hardship into a reason for being optimistic about the future. However intended, apocalyptic prophecies indicate that current suffering, meaninglessness and upheavals are part of God's designs, leading to a final age in which old scores are settled and the righteous immeasurably compensated.

The Zoroastrian lore

The apocalyptic discourse is a chiaroscuro representation of reality in which every complexity is reduced to a bold contrast dividing a positive pole from a negative one. The groundwork for a thoroughly dualist theology was laid for the first time by the Prophet Zoroaster between 1500 and 1200 BCE. The Persian prophet put forward the innovative idea of a cosmic confrontation between Ahura Mazda, a supreme personification of the principles of order, wisdom and benevolence, and his counterpart Ahriman, a dark force embodying the principles of chaos, falsehood and wickedness. The former was viewed as the divine guardian of the cosmic order, whereas the latter as the 'great liar and deceiver', incessantly at work to turn that order into a noxious ruin.⁴² The clash between the twin principles was a progressive drama unfolding within a 'limited time'. Its conclusion would have marked Ahriman's defeat and ushered in an unlimited aeon of peace and harmony, forever rid of chaos and corruption. Pivotal to the Zoroastrian religion was also a notion of agency. Humankind was by no means a spectator in the clash between darkness and light. The destiny of every individual and that of the cosmos were interlocked concepts. One could actively contribute in accelerating the overthrow of evil, by taking the side upholding virtue and holiness – that is, by becoming Ahura Mazda's ally in the process of world purification.

In keeping with such principles, the whole cosmogony could be seen as a 'trap' put in place to wage a concerted war against Ahriman, reduce him to nothingness, and allow Ahura Mazda to reign eternally uncontested. Indeed, the binary confrontation was beneficial to only one of the two principles. Zoroaster introduced a religious understating in which all historical developments are generated by a dynamic tension dividing two contraries. The tension is meant to consume and annul itself, producing, at the end of a limited period of time, a state of 'homeostasis': an unalterable state of equilibrium without oppositions. The prospect of a final stage of no longer perfectible harmony would be appealing to both Hebrews and Christians, as a theodicy reconciling the most glaring contradiction inherent to their monotheism: the notion of an all-powerful and all-good single divinity and a vast and terrifying quantity of evil still circulating in the world. Drawing upon Zoroastrian eschatology, the Hebrew and Christian apocalyptic writers were able to portray the cosmos as a battleground in which God's unity and omnipotence were disputed, but only to be reaffirmed in their fullness, at the end of history. Indeed, the forces of evil are permitted to roam freely, but just until the Messiah comes to imprison them forever and establish the dawn of a renewed order in which

every imperfection will have been eliminated; a world where everyone will live forever in a peace that nothing could disturb; an eternity when history will have ceased and nothing more can happen; a changeless realm, over which the supreme God will reign with an authority which will be unchallenged forevermore.⁴³

A principle of absolute goodness cannot be easily brought forward without its antagonist 'double'. In every plot leading to the final victory of order over chaos, an idea of radical evil plays an essential role. Within the biblical tradition, the ontological enemy displays remarkable chameleonic abilities, featuring as a serpent, Devil, Demon, Satan, Belial, Beelzebub or Mephistopheles. In Christian apocalyptic imagery, appellatives such as the Beast, the Dragon, the False Prophet or the Antichrist, although very different in origin and meaning, are often employed interchangeably so as to indicate evil's chief emissary appearing in the last days, to deceive humankind and lead a final rebellion against the forces of good.⁴⁴ The Antichrist, whose figure has captured the popular imagination since the earliest times, and still factors in modern millenarianism, is an elusive and powerful representation of radical evil, which may either assume individual or corporate personifications. In

himself the 'epitome of opposition', since his charisma, powers and identity mimic and counter those belonging to the End Time saviour, the Antichrist is the last obstacle between humanity and divine fulfilment – a sort of 'catalyst' of all evil and corruption accumulated by the passage of time, there, at the end of history and on the threshold of a new age. Before realizing the fullness of God's reign on earth, the returning Messiah would have to confront and defeat his negative 'mirror image'.

Over the centuries, the thought of Antichrist's appearance has nonetheless triggered ambiguous reactions amongst believers. His false dominion's advent is meant to bring catastrophes and lead humanity astray, but as well signals that the Kingdom is at hand. The Antichrist's rule is part and parcel of that scheme of things known as the 'Apocalyptic syndrome', a scheme according to which the entire cosmos, before being rejuvenated, must necessarily relapse into the primeval chaos.⁴⁵

Birth pangs

The hope for a new order of existence invariably arises from historical circumstances that do not seem subject to improvement. Pessimism towards the current situation is thus another key feature of the apocalyptic genre. As Christopher Rowland points out, redemption can come only 'from' and 'in' a dimension 'beyond', since the mundane sphere is bleak and irremediably corrupt:

So bad is the state of the present age and so corrupt its inhabitants, that the Apocalyptic outlook cannot envisage history as the stage of perfecting of man and society. There arises the hope for a direct intervention of God to bring about a new order of existence. Despair about the present historical circumstances in which God's people find themselves, and the conviction that redemption can come only from and in the world beyond are usually cited as the characteristics of the contents of the Apocalyptic literature.⁴⁶

God's rule 'disrupts' and 'intrudes' into the unfolding events from outside, substantiating a caesura that separates two qualitatively different ages: the Messianic and the preceding historical one. Yet, that caesura immediately disappears since, by encompassing it, the former annuls the latter. Within the Hebrew tradition, the devaluation and loss of history represents the 'cornerstone concept' marking the passage from

the prophetic to the apocalyptic outlook. From the postexilic period onwards, the idea that the fulfilment of God's purpose can be achieved within the plane of history is gradually replaced by confidence in an imminent and supernatural intervention, which rather tears that plane into pieces. Henry H. Rowley captured the spirit of that shift in paradigms and attitudes amongst the Hebrews with the following words:

The prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the Apocalypticists foretold the future that should break into the present. The Apocalypticists had little faith in the present to beget the future.⁴⁷

In its origins and by its very essence, apocalypticism represents a theory of catastrophe: a theory emphasizing the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transit from the present stage to the messianic one. Before being dislodged and destroyed by divine intervention, history is devalued to its lowest degree. The dreadful 'birth pangs' of the Messianic Age are portrayed, through all sorts of graphic images, in almost every Jewish and Christian apocalypse. The imminence of the end is signalled by a long list of calamities such as wars, upheavals, earthquakes, epidemics, famine and social breakdowns. In the visionary literature of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah, the Day of the Lord, the day on which history is brought to its end, whilst God destroys the sinners and rewards the saved for their unjust suffering, is heralded by climatic events shaking the world at its very foundations. It is written in Daniel that the distress of that day would exceed anything that has befallen Israel since it became a nation: 'redemption will come after a terrible fall, when Jewry is at its lowest ebb'.⁴⁸ Emphasis on the dreadful afflictions accomplishing the miraculous metamorphosis of the world into a divine kingdom also imbue the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha writings – the Assumption of Moses, the Book of Enoch, Twelve Patriarchs and Jubilees, all Apocalyptic compositions that became key points of reference for the Jewish readership of that time. Further, on the apocalyptic eve, heresy, apostasy and the desecration of God's name are also expected to engulf human society. The kind of salvation that the Messiah brings about not only breaks out from the depth of material degradation and distress, but also from the pits of spiritual disintegration. Especially within Judaism, the 'pervasiveness of sin' stands as a key harbinger of redemption. In the last days, the law of the Torah would be forgotten and despised to the point of subverting the moral order. In the eyes of many rabbinic sages, redemption's drumbeat springs forth

from such despair that it is preferable not to be around when the saviour comes.⁴⁹

Several passages of the Gospels reprise the logic that prior to the advent of the Messianic light, the power of darkness would grow. That is particularly evident in the self-contained eschatological drama of Mark 13, one commonly known as the 'Little Apocalypse', and also considered as the last testament of Jesus before the Golgotha. The prophecies climaxing with the 'abomination of desolation' predict, amongst the trials and tribulations preceding the end, the profanation and destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, that is, the 'axis mundi' of first-century Palestine:

This little passage of Christian Apocalyptic makes some points very clearly. The permanence, solidity, finality of the Temple as the sign of the religious and political order is denied. Faithfulness will be very hard, for false Messiahs and false ideas will crowd around. Violence and wars will abound, along with vast natural catastrophes. These are not signs of the impotence or the absence of God, but they are the context in which God is working out his project for good. They are, paradoxically, signs of hope, the beginning of the birth pangs of the new order that God will establish.⁵⁰

John's Revelation, like any other apocalypse, envisages a 'quantum leap' from present deficiency to ultimate fulfilment. That leap necessarily demands 'the complete repudiation of history as it is, placing all human hope in a future whose realization can only be brought about by the destruction of the old order'.⁵¹ From this standpoint, apocalypticism would cancel out the possibilities for gradualist reform and therefore stand against any evolutionary philosophy of history. Due to its inherent corruption and in sight of its impending demise, history cannot be the channel through which perfectibility of humankind is progressively pursued.⁵²

That the apocalyptic genre devalues history would be implicitly confirmed by one of its key structural features, which Klaus Vondung characterizes as the 'reversal between beginning and end'. While any historical account moves from the beginning to an end, the apocalyptic vision distinctively begins by describing the events surrounding the End and terminates with the dawn of a new and perfect existence that continues into timeless eternity. In keeping with this narrative, adds Vondung, 'only the End is important, while previous history is lost in the darkness of disinterest because of its meaninglessness'.

Nevertheless, one should not forget that the apocalyptic logic is not merely annihilative, but also presents a crucial regenerative side. The End Time fixation on destruction mimics an equally obsessive longing for that harmony that is so sorely lacking in the present dispensation. As Gershom Scholem put it, the nature of redemption is essentially Janus-faced. It consists, on the one hand, of destructiveness and, on the other, of the utopianism related to that 'new beginning' ushering in the Messianic Age.⁵³ The idea of 'creative destruction' represents the revolutionary charge that apocalypticism is laden with. The 'Messianic tongue', warned Scholem, being 'brimful of explosive material', constantly threatens to blow up the historical continuum. In keeping with the original formulation of the Apocalyptic doctrine, the blasting of history strictly depends on divine fiat rather than human agency. It is only God who can annihilate His creation so as to renew it.⁵⁴

Origins is the goal

Redemption can be seen as an 'apokatastasis' or *restitutio in pristinum statum*: a final recovery of the lost harmony of the beginning.⁵⁵ Apocalyptic eschatology presses forward so as to renew the world. Yet, its visionary force is not merely futuristic. It simultaneously points backwards, to the re-establishment of an original state of things that comes to be felt as ideal, the so-called 'Golden Age'. Although of a contradictory nature, both tendencies are deeply interwoven. The content of an idealized past delivers the utopian basis for humankind's future. Salvation is thus a return to a flawless and harmonious world, whose image lies both in the past and the future. This correspondence is most succinctly captured by Karl Kraus's dictum 'origins is the goal'.⁵⁶

That redemption brings back the harmony that had been lost is a central idea to Judaism, where the Messianic Age is nothing but an ultimate homecoming: a restoration in fullness to Zion, after the experience of utter deficiency represented by the exile. Redemption, so intended, remains a worldly process, since it is meant to repeat, for the last time, the actual return journey towards the Promised Land – a journey on which the Chosen already embarked twice: the first time coming out of the Egyptian bondage; the second, out of the Babylonian captivity. Like Adam and Eve, the tribes of Israel were given an Eden in the Land promised by their everlasting Covenant, only to lose it as a result of their disobedience against God's will. However, the parallel between those two 'falls' from divine grace is drawn with a crucial difference. Adam and Eve lost Paradise, never to return, whereas Israel,

guided by the Torah, would atone for its sin and eventually recover the original loss.⁵⁷

That emendation is fulfilled at the last stage of the redemptive process: the eternal Sabbath, in which time ends and God's rule commences, recapitulates the initial integrity and perfection of the Garden of Eden, as depicted in Genesis. After having been scattered among the nations, the just shall sit again under their own vine or fig tree, and there shall be none to make them afraid or suffer.⁵⁸ For the Jews, not only is salvation associated with the return and repossession of the Land of the Fathers, but also, and at a deeper level, with being included in one's own sacred space. The symbolism of the Israelites' final ingathering stands in stark contrast with that of their Diaspora. The former entails the mystical experience of being centred into a solid fabric of meaning and belonging, contained within a secure perimeter, in the proximities of the Holy Temple, according to Eliade, the ordering epicentre of the Jewish sacred space. The latter, instead, equates to being stranded in the wilderness: a life fully dominated by chaos, oppression and fear. That of exile is an existence in deferment, in which nothing worthy can be ever accomplished.⁵⁹

If, for traditional Judaism, messianic expectations remain anchored to the natural and physical sphere, the Christian ones betray more otherworldly sentiments and ideals. Jesus is a 'not of this earth' messenger, sent by His Heavenly Father so as to rescue corrupted souls and raise them up to the divine abode. Christian redemption represents a pilgrimage towards a more spiritual abundance and plenitude, gifts finding their furthest expression only in the transcendental realm. This notwithstanding, a similar equation between what was in the origins and what will take place at the End may also be observed in Christian apocalypticism. Given that God the Creator and God the Redeemer are the same agent, the correspondence 'arché-eschaton' appears to have been prepared beforehand. What has already been willed and planned at the time of Genesis, will be finally redeemed, rectified and restored. This re-creationist motif is particularly evident in the idea of the Millenarian Kingdom, which many see depicted in John's Revelation:

The heaven and the earth that God in the beginning had created He ends by recreating. Adam and Eve, who have fallen, are replaced by the Lamb and his redeemed Bride. The Paradise which has been lost recurs in an equivalent state which includes the Edenic properties of the 'river of water of life' and 'the tree of life'. Men and women shall in the end regain their original innocence and its attendant felicity,

for 'there shall be no more course', hence 'no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying nor any more pain'.⁶⁰

Following a circuitous logic, both Hebrew and Christian eschatology, rather than a linear trajectory, would draw 'one great detour to reach in the end the beginning'.⁶¹ However, in both traditions, the final recapitulation implies something more than the mere restoration of a lost Golden Age. Jewish messianism does not look forward to a repetition of the same process, but to a restoration of the primeval harmony on a higher plane that precludes all further disturbances:

The analogy of First Days and Last Days possesses living reality. But it does more than that. For already in the Messianic utopianism of Isaiah we find the Last Days conceived immeasurably more richly than any beginning. The condition of the world, wherein the earth will be full of knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, does not repeat anything that has ever been, but presents something new. The final reconstituted harmony does not at all correspond to any condition of things that ever existed even in Paradise. The Last Days realize a higher, richer, and more fulfilled condition than the First Days.⁶²

The same qualitative difference between the First and Last Days may as well be noticed in Christian eschatology, where the blissful perfection brought about by the Paradise 'regained' surpasses that of the Garden of Eden. Neither progression nor regression is expected beyond that point, only the stillness of eternity.

Eternity, perfection and purity, prerogatives belonging only to God, are the final fruits of a three-stage redemptive process that was set in motion by the very expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In the Book of Genesis, the Fall is described as something that took place. It refers to an initial degradation: the loss of the infinitely superior condition of unity with God that was given during Creation. The perfection of the beginning was compromised by human decision to embrace evil or, better, not to resist its seductive power. Everything is concentrated in that single instant. The original act of disobedience to God determines, along with the transition from innocence to sin, man's exile into the domain of Kronos, his becoming mortal, impure, subject to historical time and all the suffering associated with it. The current, mundane aeon is thus to be seen as 'a middle stage of disunity' in which the two principles of good and evil intermingle, struggling

for the ultimate control of both human soul and the entire world. The trajectory towards the third and final stage of paradisiacal unity with God is also a circular catharsis: 'a movement from a unitary felicity, through self-alienation, sin, exile, and suffering, back to the original felicity'.⁶³ Humankind enters historical evil, falsehood and suffering so as to purge itself of them once and for all. It is in light of this purification that the harmonious unity achieved at the end exceeds that of the beginning. It has higher status since all intervening divisions and oppositions have been overcome, yet preserved in an organized form. Paradise 'regained' is a no-longer-perfectible harmony, including not less than everything.⁶⁴ On this ground, John Milton declared that our 'fall into history' was a *felix culpa*: the first Eden was simply inherited, whereas the final Kingdom will have been earned.⁶⁵

That salvation may be equally attainable by gradual refinement into an absolute state of truth and purity points at the progressive side of eschatology. According to this understanding, redemption is no longer the outcome of a catastrophic event slashing the fabric of time, as it was in the original understanding of apocalypticism but, rather, a development whereby the divine manifests itself in time. The whole of history cannot be abolished since, as Saint Augustine would put it, it is a necessary 'interim' of probation and discrimination in which the 'genuine oil' must be separated from the 'dregs'.⁶⁶ That proves that the transition from the flawed to the perfect state may also be accomplished avoiding the birth pangs of the Messiah. His appearance at the End of Days, rather than being entirely dependent on God's definitive intervention, would stand as a symbol for the completion of a process, a testimony that the world has been amended by human discernment between good and evil.⁶⁷

2

Millenarianism, Messianism and Absolute Politics

In various eschatological traditions, the Apocalypse may as well involve the expectation of the 'Millennium': an earthly state of perfection, beyond historical time and before eternity, in which the salvation of a few elected would be accomplished. As a symbol of ultimate perfection, the millennium entered the language, the mindset and the store of common references of millions of people. In its various permutations, it represents a 'focal point' in the future, promising all the harmony that human contingent existence may lack in the present.

Millenarianism, that is, the doctrine in which the expectation of the millennium features eminently, can be defined either in a narrow or broad way. Adopting a conceptual and etymological approach, millenarianism refers to the biblical millennium, an earthly 1000-year kingdom of plenty and peace following the Second Coming, which is prophesied in one passage of the Book of Revelation.¹ The biblical millennium represents a bridge between history and eternity, a limited episode that marks a transition towards something new and better, a perfect order that is timeless and changeless. In this intermediate phase in which Satan is bound in a lake of fire, the 'martyrs', a small number of faithful who suffered because of their unwavering faith, would be resurrected to reign with Christ until the Last Judgement. As a reward for their steadfast loyalty, these selected ones will not only be redeemed from death with eternal life, but also vindicated from past oppression: 'those who had once suffered would receive justice, and the poor and the powerless would gain what had been formally withheld from them'.² Salvation in an earthly society in which all conflicts are resolved and all injustices removed is to be seen as a necessary prelude for that complete transfiguration of reality that is supposed to take place after the Last Judgement – the irruption of God's all-transforming rule in

the 'New Heaven and a New Earth', with the 'New Jerusalem' descending from heaven. Paradoxically, according to such strict criteria, early Christianity, itself a movement with a deep expectation in an imminent redemption, would fall short of being categorized as 'millenarian'. In the New Testament, apart from the aforementioned passage, there is no other plain reference to an intermediate 1000-year Kingdom of Christ.

Loosing the literal ties to the Book of Revelation, the term 'millenarianism' may be more broadly used to designate a systematic speculation about history that envisions a final condition of ultimate perfection, harmony or happiness, either on this earth or in heaven.³ The idea of a changeless state of perfection to come represents the core archetype of all millenarian visions – even when these visions have no relation whatsoever to the Hebrew and Christian tradition or have long departed from such theological moorings. From a purely anthropological perspective, Kenelm Burridge submits that:

the Millennium is equivalent to salvation and redemption itself. Through and behind the variety of cultural idioms in which it may be expressed, the Millennium points to a condition of being in which humans become 'free-movers', in which there are no obligations, in which all earthly desires are satisfied and therefore expunged. A new earth merges into the new heaven.

To Burridge, final salvation in the millennium equals 'unobligeness' or 'release from all obligations'. If human life is an experience of 'general indebtedness' given its finitude and inherent deficiencies, millenarianism aims at redeeming that condition by envisaging an order in which every individual becomes 'completely unobliged, without any obligation whatsoever – a free-mover in heaven'.⁴

The classificatory criteria of millenarianism as a mode of thought intermingle with those defining a millenarian group belonging or activity. In her pioneering work published in 1966, Yonina Talmond defined as millenarian those movements that expect 'imminent, total, ultimate, this worldly, and collective salvation'. Such a salvation is supposed to be accomplished in an order of things that is not subject to further improvement.⁵ Norman Cohn's classic definition, one quoted in almost every study on the matter, reprises all Talmond's canons, but adds the observation that salvation is to be brought about by miraculous means. Iain C. Jarvie argues in favour of four basic attributes as common to all millenarian movements: the promise of the imminent establishment of heaven on earth; the overthrow or reversal of the present social order;

an extraordinary discharge of emotional energy; and a limited lifespan of the movement in its original form. Finally, John G. Gager adds to Jarvie's classification a fifth trait concerning the critical role that is played within the movement by the charismatic, prophetic or messianic leader.⁶

Messianism

The term 'messianism' was coined at the beginning of the nineteenth century to describe Jewish eschatological speculations. In its original form, messianism expresses the hope in a decisive and radical leap from deficiency to fulfilment, which would take place in the life conditions of the religious community. As already pointed out, that hope compounds transcendental longings with concrete historical ambitions:

The day would come when the Jewish people, the whole Congregation of Israel, would reassemble as one in an undivided Land of Israel, reconstituting its life there in all its aspects. The Jewish people would free themselves completely from their subjugation to the great powers. They would bring about the redemption of the world as a whole.⁷

The End of Days breakthrough leading all at once to the Messianic Age is meant to fully realize the Covenantal promise by bringing the exile of the Chosen to an irrevocable conclusion, to defeat the hostile foreign rule and to restore a Torah-centred kingdom in its integral biblical territory. Further, the fate of humankind and the entire cosmos is seen as being contingent upon such historical realizations. In its essence and meaning, messianism is therefore an all-encompassing and hyperbolic 'dream of perfection'.

Despite different approaches to the idea of redemption, Jewish eschatological speculations are often made to correspond to those animating Christian millenarianism. If messianism and millenarianism, along with their respective adjectives, are deployed interchangeably in the scholarly lexicon, this happens in view of that idea of absolute perfection, which lies at the heart of both conceptions. With a more discriminating eye, messianism may nonetheless emphasize the centrality of a 'prophet' or 'charismatic leader' as agent of the salvation agenda. In this case, messianism, rather than referring to the expectation of a revolutionary change, would foremost denote a movement, or a system of beliefs and ideas, centred on the expectation of the saviour, who is supposed to bring that change about.⁸

Although the most recent amongst the eschatological terms discussed here, messianism relates to one of the most ancient religious ideals. Indeed, the notion of an extraordinary figure around which the act of cosmic reconstruction revolves can be traced back at least to the Zoroastrian tradition. In the Avesta, the Saoshyant is a master of righteousness and miraculous powers, who conducts the armies of his human and angelic supporters in an End Time confrontation, culminating with the destruction of evil and the restoration of the primeval and lasting order.⁹

In keeping with many chiliastic expectations, the saviour is meant to emerge in times of bewilderment or disruptive change, to restore a sense of purpose and vision for a future, which would otherwise remain indeterminate. His message of radical renewal and reversal of fortunes entices the disoriented, disenfranchised and voiceless, turning their present despair and indignity into glorified hope. As Luciano Cavalli explains, the messianic leader acts as catalyst for 'new individual and social integration'. He does so by lifting an entire community 'from a state of regression towards the dimension of the extraordinary and the divine, from where true values and norms guide life, endowing it with complete meaning'.¹⁰

Insomuch as messianic leadership is largely built upon the promise of an order of things that transcends reality and breaks with the status quo, it is worth remembering that that very order does not yet exist. So as to gather acolytes and arouse their hopes, it is necessary for the prophet to render the contours of the future age already 'visible' in his persona.¹¹ Burridge contends that the prophet must embody in his flesh the very regenerative 'myth-dream' he projects onto the community:

The prophet personifies the myth-dream, and is the channel through which the contents of the myth-dream may be realized. He it is who articulates the myth-dream; whose activities nourish and refine the content of the myth-dream; who stands for the new man. ... In a certain sense, if only temporarily, such a charismatic figure, a single individual, is the myth-dream.¹²

Etymologically, messianism is derived from 'Messiah', an English transliteration of the Hebrew word *Mashiah* ('the anointed one'). In the earliest Jewish tradition, it is recounted that objects, buildings and especially people, were consecrated to a relevant office or role within Israel, by a rite of anointment with oil. The solemn ceremony was primarily performed on the occasion of a king's enthronement or a high priest's

investiture, conferring a sacral gloss on the recipients.¹³ The figure of the Messiah therefore emerged with a distinctive twofold nature, the 'kingly' and 'priestly', to indicate the divine appointment of political or religious leaders.

In a much later historical phase known as 'intertestamentary period',¹⁴ one distinguished by oppressive foreign rule and social unrest, messianism would take an altogether different direction, with the Jewish anointed increasingly assuming an apocalyptic role. In the Psalms of Solomon, for instance, the Messiah is depicted as an End Time leader smiting the godless nations to deliver the Chosen from their yoke. Yet, this crucial eschatological development occurred without solving the ambiguity surrounding the saviour's identity. On the one hand, the Messiah is expected as a 'warrior king': a fully human and political figure, who would militarily defeat Israel's enemies, restore the Davidic dynasty from which he descends, ingather the exiles, rebuild the Temple and reign forevermore, in righteousness and wisdom, as Yahweh's vicar.¹⁵ On the other hand, the redeemer also stands as the 'Son of Man': a semi-divine prophet, appearing at the End Time to save and vindicate the righteous from the dominion of the wicked, judge the living and the dead according to their deeds and usher in the Messianic Kingdom in which the faithful would live in peace and happiness. Despite the lack of an agreed synthesis of the Messiah's various features and roles, one can easily note that the transcendental and earthly intermingle in his agency. Indeed, as many pointed out, the Jewish saviour thinks religiously but acts politically.

Early Christianity, a movement that anxiously awaited the return of Jesus ushering in the Kingdom of God, may to that extent be viewed as either millenarian or messianic. The most obvious divergence between Christian and Jewish messianism is that the former waits for its saviour not for the first time, but for the second time. Nevertheless, other relevant matters should be mentioned here, so as to differentiate between the two belief systems and, at the same time, make sense of Christian messianism as a whole. In several of its passages, the New Testament refutes the political messiahship characterizing the Jewish eschatological expectations. Despite having been accused of pretending to be the 'King of the Jews', and eventually having been crucified for that reason, Jesus of Nazareth deliberately avoids any self-reference by using the term 'Messiah'. Given the implications of being identified as the 'anointed', he opts for the more apolitical designation of 'Son of Man'.¹⁶ Only the redactors of the Gospel of Matthew appear to uphold Jesus' political messiahship by making a 'straight equation' between him and the King of

the Jews. So as to establish him as the legitimate redeemer whose advent was foretold by the writers of the Old Testament, Jesus is repeatedly addressed as 'the Son of David' or 'the Christ', titles evoking a direct lineage from the Davidic dynasty. Yet, as some theologians argue, the kingly messianic status, rather than being political, should be interpreted in light of Jesus' compassionate action in favour of the needy and marginalized. On this ground, Jesus is often hailed as the 'Messiah of the poor'.¹⁷

Having acknowledged the multifaceted character of the Christian Messiah, it is worth concluding this section by addressing a final but crucial ambiguity concerning this figure. In the New Testament, two seemingly contradictory images of Jesus, and two distinct redemptive approaches associated with those images, stand beside each other, in uneasy union: the idea of the 'suffering Messiah' promoted in the Gospels, and that of 'the Lamb' depicted in John's Revelation. The former notion, which was key to the later development of Christianity, would represent a sheer contradiction in terms for Judaism. According to the messianic expectations of first-century Palestine, the End Time saviour was expected to come in glory and deliver the Children of Israel from the foreign powers, rather than being humiliated and crucified by them. There is no doubt that Jesus' Calvary at Golgotha represented not only a major obstacle to the conversion of many Jews to Christianity, but also a shocking disconfirmation to the members of that movement: 'insofar as the followers of Jesus shared the views of their time, they were unprepared for the death of the one whom they believed to be the fulfilment of their Messianic dreams'.¹⁸

The early Church had thus to produce a substantial effort in terms of scriptural rationalization so as to convince others and itself that Jesus' suffering and death were both 'beneficial and necessary'. In the passages of Mark, Matthew and Luke, that glaring refutation of the Hebrew prophecies is turned into supporting evidence. Truthful interpretations of those prophecies demonstrate that, since the very beginning, it was intended that the Son of Man needed to suffer and die before receiving dominion from God, His father. Consistent with such Christological view, the human redemptive process would depend primarily on the bearing of the Cross – that is, Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. Peter Berger contends that, at the basis of Christianity's success as a world religion stands the remarkable appeal of its 'masochist theodicy', a theodicy whose plausibility relies on the historical evidence that the incarnate God is also a man who suffers and dies so as to be resurrected.¹⁹

Insofar as the Gospels' idea of a suffering Messiah breaks with the Hebrew eschatology and its triumphalism, the 'Lamb' depicted in the

last book of the Christian canon restores such visions to their utmost intensity. In spite of the fact that Revelation was written so as to encourage peaceful resistance against unjust rulers, violent imagery crowds its pages. Themes, symbolism and language deployed here are those characterizing the 'combat myth' of Middle Eastern civilizations: an ancient paradigm of cosmic duel envisaging God's final and total triumph over the forces of evil. As future saviour who engages in battle on behalf of his community, the Christ of the Apocalypse is in perfect continuity with Israel's tradition of Holy War – a tradition in which the Davidic Messiah embodies a divine warrior leading his armies to a conclusive victory.²⁰ The avenging Lamb rides on a white horse, at the head of a host of angels and saints, to cleanse once and for all the world of Satan's progeny and establish his Millenarian Kingdom on earth.

With such graphic prophecies, the Book of Revelation stands at the end of the Christian canon, placing its stamp on the entire document of God's self-revelation. When interpreters read the whole Bible through the lens of its epilogue, the message of forgiveness and non-violent resistance contained in the Gospels may be easily overtaken by the redemptive wrath of the Apocalypse. No matter how destructive the battle against the demonic forces becomes, the Lamb and his faithful community will prevail both in this world and in the next one to come.

Palingenesis

Palingenesis represents a 'paradigmatic myth' of renewal and regeneration, which manifests itself under countless cultural guises, but acquires an explicit role in apocalyptic, millenarian and messianic discourses. The meaning and bearing of the myth can be inferred from the semantic construction of the word 'palin-genesis':

Palingenesis is derived from the Greek verb *gennaō* (active: 'to give birth to'; passive: 'to be born') and the adverb *palin* ('again, once more'). Consequently, the term palingenesis is etymologically related to the idea of rebirth. The significance of the word, therefore, arises from the metaphor contained within it. Palingenesis refers to a spiritual rebirth, regeneration, revitalization, the transaction that brings the believer into intimate relationship with God and its attributes.²¹

The symbolism of palingenesis features in several prophetic and messianic passages of the Torah. In mainstream Christian traditions, it pervades the theme of Jesus' Resurrection and the Pauline writings.

With regards to Catholicism, images of new birth and spiritual regeneration also inform the sacramental rite of Baptism and that of Holy Communion. The idea of palingenesis is perhaps the most explicitly stated in John 3:3–7, a set of verses in which Jesus tells an enquirer, a Pharisee called Nicodemus, that he must be ‘born anew’ before entering into the Kingdom of God. In some contemporary Evangelical denominations and churches, such a precept receives much attention in connection to rituals of charismatic renewal. Here, the experience of being ‘born again’ appears to be grounded on a cathartic process replicating that already described template wherein a new beginning follows a period of crisis and decadence. Before salvation can be attained in a novel existential stage, the believer must repudiate his or her previous background by means of a ritual dramatization, which may possibly assume a traumatic pitch. The ‘sinner’ is purposively launched into a conscious re-enactment and consideration of the past sinful lifestyle. A full descent into evil is staged in order to cleanse the believer’s soul and reach God’s forgiveness. Hence, the individual, who was considered ‘morally dead’ before accepting Jesus as a beacon, can be regenerated, that is, brought into a new and qualitatively different life.²²

In its countless variations, the apocalyptic narrative adheres to a not too dissimilar plot: a phase of general decay, anomie and turmoil culminating in a final catastrophe is understood as the herald of a new dawn of perfection and harmony. In the two following chapters, the myth of palingenesis bestows a major mobilizing force on contemporary forms of Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism. Historian of ideas Roger Griffin contends that that the ‘primordial archetype of existential renewal’ is likely to acquire momentum in bewildering ‘periods of transition’, that is, whenever contemporaries are going through what they perceive as

a sea change, watershed, or turning point in the historical process. The perceived corruption, anarchy, oppressiveness, iniquities or decadence of the present, rather than being seen as immutable and thus to be endured indefinitely with stoic courage or bleak pessimism, are perceived as having reached their peak and interpreted as a sure sign that one era is nearing its end and a new order is about to emerge.²³

Embracing the conceptual framework that Griffin’s innovative scholarship introduced in the realm of social and political sciences, many millenarian and messianic movements might be categorized, especially in their constitutive phase, as ‘palingenetic communities’. Griffin argues

that, in moments of systemic crisis, 'a spontaneous palingenetic community may emerge and be based on that peculiar symbiosis between the official palingenetic vision and longings from below to participate in the process of renewal and regeneration'. Otherwise put, a 'community of belief' would take form as a result of a creative encounter between a 'demand' and an 'offer' of orientation, meaning and, foremost, existential regeneration. On the one hand, a given social community would project its expectations of renewal onto 'a movement that offers a comprehensive diagnosis of the current crisis, and presents the revolution it has undertaken as a panacea of its ills'. On the other hand, the palingenetic vision would find a 'resonance' not in the entire population, but only in those of its strata that are particularly receptive to that sort of appeal.

In keeping with Griffin's hypothesis, millenarian and messianic consensus should be considered not as the outcome of 'brainwashing' or 'exploited passivity', but rather as the product of an authentic identification with the myth of rebirth. Griffin's ideas offers a valuable starting point for a necessary revision and reconceptualization of traditional paradigms of consent and legitimacy, one that will acquire particular relevance to address the political engagement of Christian and Jewish Religious Zionism. In keeping with the heuristic criteria informing the conventional approaches of social and political sciences, consensus and legitimation processes are based on the principles of 'rational choice'. Individual and social action would accordingly rely on gradualism, compromise and, most of all, pondered calculus between costs and benefits.

Within a framework of understanding assigning to the idea of rational choice the main or exclusive responsibility for the pursuit of self-interest, a movement expecting the world's imminent end or transfiguration cannot help being mapped as an exemplary case of 'anti-culture' or, in Griffin's words, a 'grotesque parody of the real article'.²⁴ On the part of the leaders, millenarian and messianic consensus would be deemed as depending on deception, anaesthetization or cynical manipulation of believers' genuine feelings. On the part of the followers, the decision to embrace and hold that kind of belief system would be seen, at best, as a consequence of fear, impulsiveness and anxiety or, at worst, as a psycho-pathology. By blurring the faculty of reasoning, such counterproductive 'emotions' would inevitably lead individuals to behaviours that are out of keeping with their self-interest.²⁵ In light of such unwarranted heuristics, social and political sciences never stopped reading and stigmatizing millenarianism and messianism ideologically – that is, through the lens of that stereotypical contrast opposing the

'genuine' consensus of open, pluralistic societies, endowed with reason, and the 'coerced and manufactured' consensus of fundamentalist congregations, cultic milieus set apart and opposing any movement towards freedom and intellectual emancipation.²⁶ This view would not only perpetuate the same Manichean attitude distinguishing the so-called 'apocalyptic mindset', but also fall short in comprehending key elements at the heart of its long-standing appeal.

Messianic and millenarian believers are neither passive dupes of an oppressive system nor members of a lunatic fringe, but individuals who are actively and imaginatively engaged with cultural patterns that are directly related to their spiritual needs and everyday lives. They use religious myths, archetypes and symbols to analyze and interpret reality. Whoever wishes to investigate past and present chiliastic phenomena should address that level of imagination in which what is conventionally recognized as 'irrational' represents per se a driving force. As far as Christian and Jewish Religious Zionists are concerned, that force also impacts on national and international politics.

Much of the persuasiveness of the messianic and millenarian appeals (that is, their form of received 'rationality') resides on the creative side of their mythic structure. Palingenetic movements are not simply bound to destroy the existing society and political culture, but rather aim at transforming them in order to realize the utopian vision of a purified community based on a new type of human being.

Pre- and postmillennialism

The task of defining essence and main features of the final Millenarian Kingdom confront scholars, theologians and believers alike as one of the most divisive and controversial matters. From the nineteenth century onwards, two ideal typical scenarios nonetheless emerged: 'premillennialism' and 'postmillennialism'. As the suffixes 'pre-' and 'post-' might already suggest, the explanatory categories primarily discriminate in light of the Second Coming's temporal position. The former holds that Christ's physical return would precede and actually inaugurate the 1000-year period of peace, bliss and holiness; whereas the latter advocates a hermeneutic in which the Parousia follows the Millennium, as its expected outcome. Considered as articles of faith, both outlooks express confidence in that providential design leading towards the final state of perfection and harmony. Yet, viewing Christ's glorious reappearance either as the initiating cause or the direct consequence of the Millennium generates two quite different theologies.

Premillennialism represents the historically predominant and most commonly studied pattern of religious chiliasm. Being embedded in a literal understanding of Revelation 20–21, this scenario faithfully reproduces apocalypticism's original rationales, first of all its inherent pessimism and sense of impending doom. Premillennial prophecies always read the current situation as 'beyond repair'. Christ's return must be preceded by rising turmoil and tribulation: 'the birth pangs' in which evil temporarily prevails and humanity touches its lowest ebb. Great apostasy, wars, famines, earthquakes and the tyrannical stronghold of the Antichrist are the 'signs and wonders', assuring the faithful about the imminence of the Millenarian Kingdom. According to the premillennial plot, the ultimate reign, rather than being established by human endeavour, is supposed to come about as a result of God's sudden and overwhelming intervention. A purifying fire destroys what is unredeemable by men, rectifying and regenerating it into a new level of existence. The Millennium initiated by the Parousia represents an intermediate and limited phase of terrestrial felicity and peace, which is geographically circumscribed to the sacred perimeter developing from that *axis mundi* represented by the Temple of Jerusalem. In this Paradise regained, the firstly resurrected 'saints' – an elitist group of believers who suffered martyrdom as a result of their unwavering faith – will have, under the dominion of Christ, exclusive residence. During this blessed age lasting 1000 years, Satan and his emissaries, however, do not cease to exist, nor are they necessarily decreased in number. They are temporarily held in check, kept sealed inside a bottomless pit by Christ's rod-of-iron rule. At the end of the Millennium, the forces of evil will be loosed from that imprisonment 'for a short time', to break out, with the auxiliary armies of Gog and Magog, in a last, but unsuccessful assault on the saints and the Holy City: the battle of Armageddon. After the definitive cosmic victory over Satan, a second resurrection would summon forth 'the dead, great and small' for the Last Judgement. Those whose name is 'not found written in the Book of Life' will be sentenced to 'the second death' and cast into a lake of everlasting fire. The premillennial ordeal concludes felicitously for the righteous: once evil and death, that is, humankind's foremost enemies, are permanently subdued, 'a New Heaven and a New Earth' would descend from heaven, so that 'the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God'.²⁷

To summarize: premillennialism is embedded in a tragic reading of the structures of time, placing the End as imminent, predestined and catastrophic. With evil and sin prevailing everywhere, the present

dispensation is understood as not being amendable by human agency because wholly dominated by demonic powers. Only a divine intervention can put such degeneration straight. God will soon close history out by a cosmic ordeal and bring the earth and its inhabitants to final judgement. Taking into consideration its emphasis on God's full sovereignty over human life and fate, inherent individual and societal sinfulness, sense of predestination and election, premillennialism is often seen as an 'ancillary' to Calvinism – a theological doctrine according to which God foreordained the course of history, prophecy revealed an unalterable future of degeneration and disintegration, society and human soul are not subject to reform, salvation would be entirely contingent upon 'divine grace' and hence beneficial to a limited group of chosen.

Postmillennialism maintains the apocalyptic doctrine's defining goal (perfection and harmony at the end). However, it breaks away and discredits the catastrophic modes of its accomplishment. The Millenarian Kingdom is no longer a sudden and violent breach into the absolute deficiency of history, but the outcome of a progressive and evolutionary development, which necessitates history as its primary medium. Put differently, the world as we know it cannot be annihilated by an apocalyptic fire since it represents the privileged channel through which the divine providence redeems humankind, by leading its spiritual and material advance.²⁸ In the postmillennial reading, the perfectibility of the individual soul and that of the societal order are intertwined targets, whose attainment largely depends on the reforming zeal of the Christian community – and not upon the will of an interventionist God. Christ's final reappearance is the 'crown' placed on humankind's head, the end result of a long-standing and unwavering involvement in working out its own salvation:

Postmillennialism is that view of the Last Things which holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the Millennium. The Second Coming will be followed immediately by the general resurrection and that final judgement, which introduces heaven or hell in its fullness. The millennium to which postmillennialists look forward is thus the Golden Age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the present age. This has to be brought about through the forces now

active in the world. It has to last an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand year. The charged character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind. ... Evil in all its many forms will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world. ... The redemption of the world is a long and slow process, extending through the centuries, yet surely approaching. We live in a day of advancing victory although there are many apparent setbacks. Periods of spiritual advance and prosperity alternate with periods of spiritual decline and depression. But as one age succeeds another, there is progress.

On postmillennial principles, the period of peace and prosperity depicted in Revelation 20 is intended as a mere extension of the current historical dispensation, and therefore not essentially different from it. The present stage would eventually merge with and disappear in the Millennium, as an increasing proportion of the world's inhabitants is exposed to and converted by Christian teachings.²⁹

The Millenarian Kingdom is not interpreted as Christ's personal and earthly rule in Jerusalem, but as the general awakening of society to the divine. It is further held that the universal proclamation of the Gospel – that is, 'witnessing to the nations' in the present dispensation, and under the Holy Spirit's inspiration – is a normative precept stemming from the word of Christ Himself, as recounted in Matthew.³⁰ Consistent with this hermeneutical approach, any literal understanding of prophecies predicting an impending cataclysm is downplayed in favour of a more allegorical interpretation. Advocating duration over disruption, postmillennialists endow established religious institutions with meaning and authority. The Church, with its set of codified dogmas, sacraments and practices, assumes a key role in supervising and directing the believers' effort to reform and cleanse society in preparation for Christ's return. Evil and sin, however, will never be fully eradicated from this world. Insofar as Christian righteousness grows, they will be reduced to a risible minimum. Postmillennial reading contrasts the theological tenets of strict predestination and God's omnipotent control with optimistic confidence in man's free will³¹ – most notably, his ability to bring about lasting social progress, fence off the tide of evil, proselytize and convert the masses. Given the scale of the spiritual advancement envisaged, that is, the extent to which the world would be Christianized, salvation is deemed to lose much of its elitist character and become an almost universal privilege.

Apocalyptic and naturalistic messianism

Similar to the debate on Christian millenarianism, no other subject has been more disputed in Judaism than defining the messianic ideal and its modes of realization. The most common disagreements occur around key issues such as ascertaining the exact balance between human and divine prerogatives in the advancement of redemption, whether the final era would become manifest gradually or break forth all at once through a wondrous transformation and, last but not least, establishing the identity and role of the Messiah as a saviour of Israel. Another matter of dispute is the relationship between present reality and the ultimate messianic promise. Even in this circumstance, for the sake of clarity, complex and divergent theological conceptions have been systematized into two overarching ideal types: apocalyptic and naturalistic messianism.³² The two scenarios reflect sharply divergent perceptions of historical reality but, in turn, they can shape believers' attitudes toward the outer world and, eventually, determine their withdrawal or involvement in it. The apocalyptic–naturalistic classification is informed by criteria similar but not analogous to those differentiating premillennial attitudes from postmillennial ones. It is therefore necessary to unpack these two Jewish redemptive patterns.

Not only is apocalyptic messianism strictly incumbent upon miraculous and supernatural fiat, but it also requires 'a profound transformation of the cosmos, amounting to its very demolition and reconstruction'. Apocalyptic messianism is embedded in a literal hermeneutic of the biblical, Talmudic and Midrashic sources prophesising the Day of the Lord – as already explained, a final moment of reckoning, judgement and reprisal against the heathen nations, an act of divine retribution for the suffering they caused the righteous Jews. Akin to its premillennial counterpart, such an eschatological approach has no faith whatsoever in the prospect of bringing salvation to the Chosen in this world, and instead invests all its hope in the next age to come. Apocalyptic messianism posits

a visionary anticipation of Divine upheaval: an abrupt supernatural transformation of the existing political–religious order, which brings instant glory to Israel's faithful and destruction upon her enemies. Extraordinary transmutations of nature accompany the termination and supersession of the historical process. ... The Apocalyptic view puts no stock in the possibility of the rectification, within the historical context. ... This Messianic position sees the inimical forces at

play in the human drama it confronts, both within the community and without, as intractable. Jewry will not redeem itself collectively through resourceful effort. ... The direct providential manipulation of events is clear, reflected in the depiction of both hero and villain as fated characters in a predetermined Divine script. Indicative of the Apocalyptic Eschatological genre is the simplicity of its typology. Evil at the ultimate moment is instantly vanquished. The sinful of Israel will perish along with the wicked of the nations, whereas the righteous will survive in the perfection of their virtue.³³

Distinctively, the apocalyptic reading emerges and thrives in moments of utter despair. Present reality is antithetical to the messianic ideal. The sense of impotence is so overwhelming, that any attempt at earthly rectification is seen as futile. Rather, consolation is provided by those visionary passages in the Jewish Scriptures anticipating the catastrophic renewal of the cosmos and the summary destruction of evil on an imminent Judgement Day. The perfect unity of the redeemed world will come into being all at once, through divine intervention at the End of Days, transfiguring the current aeon into a qualitatively different one. Before being regenerated, the present state of affairs must reach its lowest ebb. The crisis is thus welcomed in its extreme consequences, as the birth pangs are the necessary interlude hailing the shift from historical deficiency to transcendental fulfilment. In light of this apocalyptic caesura, there cannot be direct continuity between the present and the next age: 'before the Messiah manifests himself, the weeding out of being in the world will take place, for every new being is the ruin of the being preceding it and only then [with the ruin of the old] will the new being begin'.³⁴ Directly from this understanding of the messianic promise stems the passive and detached stand that believers adopt towards reality. When faith in divine intervention supersedes human initiative, there is no cause-and-effect nexus linking material effort and forthcoming result. Despite maintaining a 'threshold involvement in life's exigencies', those Jews who subscribe to the apocalyptic school, and thus await patiently the coming of the Messiah, are either oblivious or indifferent towards what happens outside their enclave. The secular society at large, with its corrupted political, economic and cultural life, is meaningless and will soon vanish.

Traditional rabbinic sources purport that atonement (repentance through strict observance of the Torah and its commandments) represents the only 'active task' that the pious Jew might embark on so as to solicit God's drastic intercession within the fabric of history. Complete

earthly redemption is preceded by complete repentance. In the vocabulary of apocalyptic messianism, repentance and redemption are therefore synonymous. When Jews return to God and His Law, God returns to the Jews. Although salvation will come after each and every Jew has accepted the Torah as a spiritual guide, the timing of the final realization (marked by the end of the Exile, the ingathering of the Diaspora and the establishment of a Jewish national home in Eretz Yisrael) remains entirely dependent on the all determining and providential divine hand.

In contrast to the apocalyptic supersession stands the historical valorization undergirding the naturalistic view. This mode belittles the assumption that a catastrophic ending sparked by divine intervention represents the sole and necessary route towards fulfilment. Rather than on its collapse, the Messianic Age is believed to materialize within the present dispensation. On naturalist principles, salvation is no longer a sudden twist towards the transcendental realm, but the outcome of a gradual and earthly process of repair. Further, the pious Jews are invited to play a dynamic role in the pursuit of the messianic end. Through their mundane commitment to the cause of Eretz Yisrael, they can step by step advance what God will eventually complete. Aviezer Ravitzky argues that the political potential inherent in the naturalistic outlook stems from differentiating between the redemptive process and its final goal:

A clear distinction is drawn between the Messianic process, which is a concrete historical development, and the Messianic goal, a Utopia that transcends history. Although redemption moves forward along a natural, human course – the gradual ingathering of the exiles and resettlement of the Land – it is to be completed with a miraculous divine revelation that bursts beyond the boundaries of both man and nature. This distinction between the ongoing process and the final goal allows the believer to regard the present as an open field for mundane human activity and voluntary communal initiative, and it sparks a decidedly activist element within the traditional Messianic faith.

On naturalistic grounds, the Messianic Age is therefore the ‘crowning achievement’ of a resourceful and down-to-earth initiative on the part of the Jewish people. A decidedly optimistic stand towards historical events replaces the apocalyptic doom. History can no longer be shattered, uprooted or abolished. By necessity, the messianic process maintains an organic link to history, being the latter the privileged channel of its accomplishment.³⁵ The outcome of progressive and intra-historical redemption consists in blurring mundane means with transcendental

ends. Within the apocalyptic mode the contrast between the current dispensation and the one to come is remarkably stark, whereas in the naturalist mode that contrast tends to fade. With the advancement of redemption, history gradually merges into the Messianic Age.

An eschaton beyond reach

We interpret eschatology as one of the most empowering symbolic means to seek unity of meaning out of chaos. It tames what appears as threateningly opaque with definitive answers, whilst orienting human hopes in the future, towards 'focal points' of devotion such as the apocalyptic reversal, the Messianic Age and the Millenarian Kingdom. In so doing, eschatology endows human suffering with a purpose and, at the same time, curtails that feeling of powerlessness and insecurity that constantly haunts us. The assertion 'at the end, it must have meaning' is therefore the quintessential cultural antidote to that existential imbalance, ceaselessly pushing humankind into the quest for new and, if possible, better equilibrium.

On premillennial principles, which reprise the cardinal rationales of apocalypticism, that quest points towards an extramundane dimension. The current age is perceived as utterly insignificant and thus is consigned to annihilation by divine fiat. Meaning is expected out of a cosmic upheaval, which shatters the world so as to renew it into a state of celestial perfection. Postmillennial logic is instead based on a process of 'historicization' of the earliest precepts of the Apocalypse. By aiming at a state of ultimate equilibrium, postmillennialism envisions the same kind of renewal, but pursues such a goal within the fabric of the present dispensation. The flow of history cannot be abruptly abolished since it represents the temporal dimension through which meaning is created out of divinely inspired human action. Insofar as premillennialism offers a fulfilment that is both immediate and catastrophic, the post-millennial plan for salvation rests on a linear, continuous and onward-looking movement towards homeostasis. Yet, argues Stephen O'Leary, that final stage of equilibrium relentlessly recedes as it is approached:

[Premillennialism] dangles the Messianic Kingdom – the end of war and poverty, the attainment of earthly bliss, the certainty of divine Truth, the vindication of the righteous, and the punishment of the unjust – as a sort of carrot before humanity. The history of [premillennial] interpretation is a series of attempts to declare, with tragic finality, that the millennial carrot is within our grasp.

Postmillennialism, on the other hand, places that carrot perpetually just beyond human reach. Millenarian perfection is never absolutely achievable within history, and can at best be approximated through the humility that follows from measuring one's fallible self against an absolute divine standard. Perfection seems to be achievable if only people would try just a little bit harder and have just enough faith. While premillennialism claims possession of the object of pursuit, postmillennialism offers a goal that recedes even as it is pursued, and harnesses this pursuit as an engine of social change.³⁶

By indefinitely postponing the Messianic Age to a distant and unforeseeable future, postmillennialism aspires to the eschaton 'asymptotically', that is, by a process of incremental approximation to a final act, which, by assumption, cannot ever be attained: 'the carrot is perpetually just beyond human reach'. Paradoxically, it is this impossibility to achieve the Utopian reign of God to spur human zeal in preparing its advent, by reforming and improving the world according to Christian values. On postmillenarian principles, the historical transition from deficiency to fulfilment turns to matter more than the absolute goal towards which that transition moves. Many contend that, once entirely historicized, the paradox inscribed in postmillennial eschatology would represent the ideological backbone of the myth of progress: a secular idea of developmental growth, whose dictum 'more than yesterday and less than tomorrow' portrays the faith in an irreversible historical trajectory towards harmony and perfection, in which humans have a purposive and creative role. That trajectory, made of a set of gradual, inevitable steps towards a secular heaven, is distinctively intra-historical and without an end.

Something similar can be convincingly argued in regards to the Jewish messianic counterpart. The naturalistic mode removes the apocalyptic 'sting' from the redemptive process. Once advanced intra-historically and through human agency, this process takes precedence over the expectation for the Messiah as a Jewish personal and national saviour. The naturalistic mode, argues Ravitzky, represents a paradoxical form of 'Messianism without the Messiah'. It is not the Messiah who will bring about the miraculous outbreak, but, on the contrary, it is the redemptive process, set in motion and promoted by the faithful, that will give birth to the Messiah:

A personal Messiah will certainly come but, contrary to the common conception, it is not he who will bring about the historic turn, nor

will he, with his own hands, set in motion the redemptive process. On the contrary, this turn and this process will give birth to him.³⁷

History being the privileged channel for the naturalistic pursuit of redemption, its abrogation can hardly be imagined, even when that process reaches its culmination. The Messianic Age is often portrayed by many Talmudic sources as a mere continuation of the historical aeon, although on a qualitatively improved level of existence. Put differently, within the naturalist understanding of redemption, the Messianic Era leaves history as open-ended as ever. The boundaries between the mundane and extramundane are extremely blurred, and sometimes the dimensions lie along the same continuum.

A creative tension

Calling for 'a more readily understandable terminology' so as 'to enhance clarity of communication between scholars, and between scholars and the general public', Catherine Wessinger recently recommended replacing the conventional but obscure distinction pre- versus postmillennialism. For Wessinger, the primary definitional emphasis should be posed, rather than on the time of Christ's return, on how the Millennium will be accomplished. The 'catastrophic mode' would thus underscore the necessity of a tragic finale as prelude to the post-historical phase posited as no longer perfectible, whereas, according to the 'progressive mode', that phase would arrive gradually by way of human cooperation with divine or superhuman will.

By detaching millenarianism from its initial theological moorings, in particular, from the timing of the Second Advent, such a definition should also broaden the analytical spectrum towards the inclusion of secular and non-Christian manifestations – especially those based on a cyclical rather than linear temporality. Yet, despite her effort to deepen the debate surrounding the subject, Wessinger seems to alter the terminology, but not the substance of it. The distinctive features of the newly devised analytical categories of catastrophic and progressive millennialism reproduce, without noticeable addition, those articulating the classic, religiously embedded, differentiation pre- versus postmillennialism.³⁸

As I hope to show, evidence drawn on our two case studies suggests the following hypothesis: the features of millenarian and messianic phenomena are more complex than any classification might ever acknowledge. Further, in view of the fact that they both point at the same stage of absolute perfection, bliss and prosperity, the two ideal types cannot

be mutually exclusive. Rather, they stand in a sort of creative tension and, under certain circumstances, they might also exchange, overlap or combine many of their respective symbolic resources. The catastrophic and progressive modes, observes Wessinger, can be visualized as the two polarities on a continuum of ever shifting eschatological attitudes, which, over time, constantly respond and adjust to historical circumstances or other various external factors. Not only can millenarian-messianic ideas shape events by influencing human perception and action, but also events, once filtered by human perception, might alter such ideals of ultimate religious fulfilment.³⁹ On the one hand, a period of political unrest, an economic breakdown or, more generally, a societal crisis may alienate a postmillennial-naturalist attitude from its distinctive optimism and simultaneously generate amongst believers a shift towards a more catastrophic stance. The apocalyptic prism might then gain momentum as the most effective rhetorical remedy, because it is capable of endowing unsettling feelings of impending doom and anomie with ultimate meaning. On the other hand, an epoch of general stability, economic growth or scientific-technological discoveries may prompt the re-evaluation of human civilization within the present historical aeon, and therefore diffuse those facilitating circumstances amongst which apocalypticism usually thrives. The argument that society and humankind are beyond repair and that the old must be catastrophically swept away, losing much of its plausibility, might as well be replaced by a more progressive reading. As a venerable symbolic pattern to reach unity of meaning out of chaos, the millenarian-messianic tropes display remarkable chameleonic skills. Their adaptive stratagems are countless, and not susceptible to negation through rational criticism.

Forcing the End

In the biblical passages serving as the basis for the formulation of the messianic or millenarian ideal, it is nowhere stated that salvation might rely on human initiative. In the Jewish tradition, many are the warnings and injunctions against human speculation, let alone undertaking, aimed at the accomplishment of the ultimate age. An angel exhorts the author of the Book of Ezra not to dare 'to hasten more than the Creator'. In the Gospels, Jesus seems to endorse a similar stance: despite announcing the Kingdom's arrival as imminent, he repeatedly warns his followers neither to set a date for it nor speed up its advent. This notwithstanding, the enticement to action, the call for a man-led fulfilment is part and parcel of countless chiliastic movements. Since

the age of eternal bliss and perfection has been promised at the end of time, many thought it possible to 'short-circuit' the Messiah, bringing forward that goal. The final denouement was to be induced, given the entity of the spiritual and emotional investment: had the prophesied transfiguration failed to materialize, the believers' hopes would have revealed their illusory nature.⁴⁰ Any human endeavour to make God face His responsibilities, those lying beyond the end of history, is nevertheless doomed to failure because none proved capable of such an action. Ironically enough, the transformative charge of the Apocalypse resides by and large in that fiasco announced beforehand. By virtue of its intensity and pervasiveness, the call to realize the unrealizable is at the highest degree 'political'. It draws the faithful together, making them cling to their own expectations so tightly that they might become willing to kill or die for them.

The deep cleavage of opinions with regard to the possibility of forcing the End reflects the unsolvable theological dispute about the mutually limiting relationship between the principles of divine omnipotence, omniscience and predetermination and the scope of human free will. The militant character of messianic and millenarian movements can hardly be reconciled with the idea of a deterministically ordained course of history. Common sense would in fact suggest that it is neither necessary nor worthwhile to intervene in order to hasten the End, inasmuch as this already represents a comic necessity whose materialization is most of the time perceived as imminent. Even so, historical evidence shows that the belief in an impending messianic or millenarian transfiguration can either go hand in hand with passivity or, quite the contrary, serve to overcome inhibitions and spur activism:

Those who believe they know the future want to be the first to announce it. They want to appear as the vanguard leading the march to the drumbeat of history. They want to be part of the flow and to help it towards its destined goal. Whatever their social or numeric weight, they see themselves as playing a central role in the unfolding of events. We should not therefore identify the belief in historical necessity with fatalism and passivity. One that has deciphered the secret, redemptive direction of history has no fear of failure. One feels called upon into the breach, to take matters in hand, to press onwards, to join the wave of the future.⁴¹

On this view, it is not the believers who are forcing the End, but rather it is the End than impinges on them, spurring their actions towards a new beginning. Believers cut the 'Gordian knot' concerning the exact balance

between divine and human prerogatives by purporting that God called upon them to intervene on the historical plane. In other words, human intensified activism to advance the redemptive process becomes valid and legitimate inasmuch as it is presented as emanating directly from a divine source. Conversely, critics or cautionary voices respond to that claim by arguing that whoever appropriates the 'vox dei' in such a fashion does not engage in theological or spiritual matters, but rather plays politics and power. What is in reality affirmed in hastening more than the Creator is 'the supremacy of the human will, unwittingly following the madman in Nietzsche's story who proclaimed the Death of God'.⁴²

Every hierocratic authority seeking to establish or maintain itself intra-historically must inevitably limit, neutralize or harness in its favour the destabilizing appeal that the palingenetic myth exerts over the faithful. Many and different are the strategies that Orthodox Judaism, Christianity and Islam have deployed over the centuries in order to 'de-eschatologize' apocalyptic tropes and symbols belonging to their respective canons or traditions. In light of the social unrest and persecutions ensuing several messianic outbursts, the rabbinic authorities issued binding injunctions in a bid to discourage Jews from mastering their own future. As a burned child must fear the fire, so the faithful must learn how not to take direct action to force the End, diverting all energies towards observance of the Torah and its Mitzvot. Redemption in the sense of an ultimate act of deliverance is to be left to 'God alone'. In the last chapter of his Code devoted to eschatological concerns, Moses Maimonides defines redemption as 'a reality transcending any existing state, which one can never reach but towards which one should always strive'. Taking this principle to the extreme, Yeshayahu Leibowitz claimed that, 'a Messiah who actually comes is a false Messiah'. 'Having no insight into the designs of Providence', the Jewish people must therefore 'exercise utmost caution before proclaiming of the nature of military victory or national political deliverance as the "dawn of redemption"'.⁴³

As a social phenomenon, the 'Jesus movement' emerged out of one of the most sustained periods of messianic expectations in Judaism. In spite of this, as soon as Christianity changed from a chiliastic sect into an 'institution of salvation' focused on temporal interests, normative fences were erected so as to contain the revolutionary impulses of the Apocalypse. Drawing on Saint Augustine's magisterial work *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, Catholicism attempted to 'de-eschatologize' the Book of Revelation, mainly by interpreting its prophecies in an allegorical rather than a literal fashion, and by positing the Millennium as already begun with the birth of Christ. After the Reformation, several Protestant denominations embraced similar exegetical countermeasures

to move the Kingdom of God out of the sphere of future expectation, whilst placing the redemptive emphasis on the present experience of faith, as codified by a set of dogmas. In the eyes of many theologians, purporting the Messianic Kingdom as already and fully 'realized' in the teachings of Christ's lifetime, Passion and Resurrection would have rendered any attempt to force its coming pointless. As Rudolf Bultmann observes, mainline Christian denominations came therefore to be founded on 'the paradox of a transcendental eternity of the end of history continuously anticipated and enacted within history as an Eschatological present'.⁴⁴ History could no longer be abolished by inducing its catastrophic end as the utmost degree of soteriological meaning was extracted by believers, through the mediation of institutionalized churches operating 'diachronically' within the temporal plane. Despite all the efforts undertaken to tame it, the enticement to force the End did not wither away. At present the apocalyptic spark seems far from being extinguished in the Abrahamic spectrum, as it continuously sets in motion new cycles of challenge and dissent. Especially in times of tribulation or anomie,⁴⁵ the myth of palingenesis will always provide a cultural conduit for antinomian or sectarian movements bent on triggering that violent outburst from which the status quo is to emerge totally purified and renewed.⁴⁶

This chapter will be concluded with a discussion about how apocalyptic worldviews are particularly well suited for moments of 'revolutionary liminality': turning points in history wherein neither boundaries nor limits are set to human enterprise and all aspects of the social and normative order are perceived as transformable through militant activism.⁴⁷ Once that threshold is reached, the current state of affairs can no longer be identified with the received structures of meaning and authority. Rather, it requires a radical break aiming at its complete destruction and reconstruction. In light of their palingenetic charge, both Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism might generate a substantial stimulus to what has been defined as 'absolute politics': an active involvement into a God-led revolution to redefine society.⁴⁸

The transitional phase

The apocalyptic root of Western revolutionary thought and practice has often been located in Joachim of Flora's writings and thought. By putting forward a prophetic system dividing the history of salvation into three successive epochs, the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot provided a key doctrinal foundation for the spread of religious and secular millenarianism. As Bernard McGinn noted, it is almost impossible to reduce

Joachim's schemes to a simple and organic formula. The abbot, truthful to the apocalyptic style, expressed himself through symbolic codes and imagery, rather than a systematic programme.⁴⁹ However, his idiosyncratic ordering of world history, which Joachim extrapolated directly from his mystical visions, revolves around the Christian pattern of the Trinity, as each of the stages that he devised is presided over by one of its figures. According to Joachim, the Age of the Father was the primeval phase under the aegis of the Old Testamentarian Law, distinguished by extreme fear and oppression for all humanity. That stage gave way to the Age of the Son or of the New Testament: the current dispensation controlled by the Christian Church and characterized by faith and filial submission. The apex of the abbot's predictive speculations remains the shortly-to-be-inaugurated Age of the Spirit, the *tertium status* flourishing under the Everlasting Gospel.⁵⁰ The third and last era was supposed to regenerate the historical dispensation from its current deficiencies by ushering into the 'Spiritual Church', a communitarian polity in which 'knowledge of God would be revealed directly in the hearts of all men'.⁵¹

In short, the final stage can be easily viewed as one of the countless permutations of the paradigmatic earthly Millennium or Messianic Age, a perfect and equalitarian society redeemed from oppression and exploitation, at the foundation of which is 'the idea of justice as a natural manifestation of God'.⁵² It is worth noting that the distinctiveness of Joachim's eschatological approach resides in his assumption that the new stage supersedes the old one, yet without abrogating it entirely. Rather, the supersession subsumes and renews the previous state of affairs, by bringing it to the furthest level of completeness and harmony – a final synthesis comprising all the preceding antitheses. Quite strangely, despite the heretical–revolutionary tendencies inherent to his 'calendrical and numerological calculations' about the timeline of the Apocalypse, Joachim of Fiore lived and worked under the auspices of the Roman religious authorities. Only after his death in 1202, were the abbot's eschatological lucubrations banned as theological errors. Indeed, by realizing everlasting love and justice on earth, the final Age of the Spirit would have negated 'any further need for the institution of the Church'.⁵³

Joachimism stands as a meliorist philosophy of history – one that deterministically progresses forward, marking at each step an improvement over the past. Nevertheless, the abbot's prophetic system also draws on the catastrophist side of the apocalyptic discourse, according to which crisis and decadence precede and at the same time signal the new advent. For Joachim, evil always gives good cause for hope. Even and especially in the darkest days, its emissaries carry the banner of God. During his lifetime, the abbot recognized the indisputable proof of

the imminent millenarian outbreak in the resurgence of Islamic power led by the 'Antichrist' Saladin.

Whilst the majority of the interpreters traced Joachimitism's revolutionary charge in the visions concerning the third status, Frank Kermode focuses his attention on the 'transitional phase' leading to it. The literary critic contends that the ultimate source of Joachim's everlasting appeal amongst revolutionaries of all ages and kinds resides in suggesting that humanity might be crossing a 'limen' (threshold) separating the penultimate historical stage from the ultimate millenarian one. Under the spell of Joachim's triadic prophecy, adds Kermode, it is almost inevitable to read the present as a 'transitus': a period that 'does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* [the historical eon] preceding it'.⁵⁴ Whoever subscribes to the idea of standing on the limen between historical time and transcendental perfection might respond passively, and therefore wait for God's miraculous intervention. But, one might also endorse the opposite stand, and attempt to hasten the End, in order to complete the transition into the last and ultimate age. It will be seen in the following pages that this act can be pursued either progressively or catastrophically.

Joachim's paradigmatic sense of transition displays striking resemblances with living in the proximity of the 'no man's land' dividing two battlefronts. In his fascinating study about the combatants' identity during the First World War, Eric J. Leed viewed that conflict as a gigantic and sanguinary 'rite of passage' between two symbolic orders of existence, and the 'trenches experience' as quintessentially 'liminal'. Once 'beyond the outer boundaries of social life', the combatant becomes fully 'dissociated' from the old order. However, the 'tissues of symbolic connectivity' are lacerated without him having yet reached 'the new and stable status, with its own new rights and obligations'. Being stranded 'betwixt-and-between' orders implies the 'structural death' of one's 'cherished categories and classifications', and 'a vacation from normalcy into a more permanent estrangement'.⁵⁵ Here individuals or groups face defencelessly the realm of the unfamiliar and the uncanny. Notwithstanding being imbued with the utmost degree of unsettling ambivalence and anomie, the liminal condition nonetheless offers remarkable creative potentials to those who are lost in its midst. What might appear as a shattering loss of *nomos* can conversely be seen as a cathartic liberation: a vehicle for self-actualization and regeneration from all the constraints, narrowness and pettiness of the preceding life. According to Leed, moments of liminal transition open gaps in historical time that is often filled with 'images of something new'.⁵⁶ As Mary

Douglas famously pointed out, chaos is an overwhelming maelstrom in which no stable pattern of order can be envisaged, but also a condition wherein the opportunities for patterning are unlimited.⁵⁷

Joachim of Flora converted canonical apocalyptic passages into a predictive scheme capable of directing human action towards a utopian future and, in this manner, he left an indelible mark on Western history and philosophy. The Joachimite triad immediately received political application, mainly in religious movements and sects aiming at the subversion of the status quo. The Christian Church's normative stand about the Apocalypse – a stand as already argued informed by Augustinian theology – could barely withstand the revolutionary waves that shook the Middle Ages and post-Reformation Europe. The remarkably enduring influence of the 'myth of transition' has been traced by historians in the Girolamo Savonarola's theocratic rule of Florence, the Peasants' Revolt led by visionary prophet Thomas Müntzer, the Anabaptist Rebellion in the German town of Münster, the anarco-communist fantasies of sectarian groups such as the Taborites in Bohemia or the Ranters during Cromwell's Commonwealth and, in more recent times, Adolf Hitler's dream of establishing a third Millenarian Reich. Leaders and members of these very different movements shared the same impression of living at a turning point in time. Radical involvement was necessary to force a closure, as the End was felt as impeding, and a new order was about to break in.⁵⁸

In light of these considerations, it stands to reason that the Apocalypse may easily be shifted out of its conventional predictive–prophetic register. In his recent study about the mutual reinforcement between countercultural forms of chiliasm and modernity, sociologist John Hall charges that, rather than referring to an absolute and final End (of the world) fixed in an indeterminate future, the 'forward-looking sense of destiny' distinguishing apocalypticism as a genre might find direct application in the present, mainly as a symbolic remedy addressing and resolving moments of anomic crisis. Whenever history is perceived as an extreme 'social or cultural disjuncture' but at the same time as a limen between qualitatively different ages, symbols and archetypes of renewal might empower those who charismatically invoke them. Once the connection between myth, reality and action is realized, committed believers can enact the idea of a new beginning into the vivid present. The radical militancy of such paligenetic communities can in turn amplify a generalized 'transitional mood'.⁵⁹

3

Jewish Religious Zionism

As widely reported at the time by mainstream press and media, the new Democratic administration taking power in the White House was determined to instantiate a 'wave of change' in US foreign policy towards the Middle East. In his hallmark speech 'A New Beginning', delivered at Cairo University on 4 June 2009, the newly elected president Barack Obama spoke about the 'intolerable humiliations' endured by the Palestinian people, whilst promising that America 'will not turn her back on their legitimate aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own'. With that purpose in mind, Obama pledged to work assiduously towards the diplomatic goal of a 'two-state solution': a shorthand for a final settlement envisaging the establishment of an independent state of Palestine within pre-1967 borders in the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem – a state alongside which Israel would live in peace and security. In the same speech, the president made it clear that 'the United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.'¹ According to many commentators, Obama's rhetoric signalled, with its decisive tone and straightforward message, a true break with the past, suggesting that a divergence might exist between American and Israeli interests in that area – a possibility that had been considered a 'virtual taboo' since the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, Obama reassured his audience about America's alliance with Israel, celebrating their mutual bond as 'unbreakable'. Nevertheless, the assumption that peace in the Middle East has been negated by the Jewish presence in the Occupied Territories was unashamedly embraced as well and, at the same time, put at the centre of Obama's endeavour to reach out towards the Islamic world, in his 'new beginning' after the

sombre years of the Global War on Terrorism. In General David Petraeus' opinion, no overtures towards the more moderate Arab regimes could be thought of, let alone undertaken, as long as the Israeli government 'pokes the Islamic world in the eye' by building more houses in East Jerusalem or expanding its network of settlements in the West Bank. The head of US Central Command also pointed out how the Israelis' indiscriminate conduct in the Occupied Territories turned the Zionist state from an essential ally into a dangerous liability:

Israeli–Palestinian tensions over the Occupied Territories foment anti-American sentiment, as a result of a perception of US favouritism towards the Zionist state. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of US partnerships with governments and peoples in the region, and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilise support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas.²

Some journalists, scholars and foreign affairs analysts indict *tout court* Benjamin Netanyahu along with his right-wing governmental allies as solely responsible for the current stall in the peace talks with the Palestinian authorities. British–Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, for instance, dismisses Netanyahu's diplomatic pledge to trade land for peace as a disingenuous ploy, labelling the Likud Party leader as 'a man who, while negotiating the division of a pizza, continues to eat it'.³ On a similar tone, a 2011 report issued by the liberal NGO Peace Now went as far as to claim that, during his several terms as prime minister, Netanyahu disclosed 'a clear intention to use settlements to systematically undermine and render impossible a realistic, viable two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict'.⁴ Just prior to the 2013 general election, Netanyahu ruled out dismantling any of the already existing settlements in the following four years, were he again to be appointed as prime minister. At the same time, his government unveiled a plan to construct thousands of new 'Jewish homes' in an area of the West Bank known as 'E1' – 'one of the most contentious pieces of land in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict'. The two-tier announcement created even more strains between Israel and the international community (mainly the Obama administration and the UN), as a further Jewish development in E1 would by all means entail cutting off 'East Jerusalem and other parts of Palestinian land from each other', thereby 'denying the possibility of an unbroken future Palestinian state'.⁵

More nuanced analyses, towards which the author of this book is inclined, would see Netanyahu as being caught in a kind of political 'double bind'. On the one hand, the Israeli prime minister must to some extent comply with Obama's demands as he cannot risk compromising the 'special relationship' with the United States, which over the last decade granted Israel over \$US3 billion a year, one-third of the entire US foreign aid budget. In addition, only a certain amount of international isolation can be tolerated in the foreseeable future, if Israel hopes to secure American support on a key national security concern such as Iran. On the other hand, just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, Netanyahu is subject to a domestic strain whose intensity is positively proportional to the degree of international that pressure he confronts on the settlements issue.

Given Israel's fragmented proportional representation voting system, Netanyahu's government is forced to seek and maintain consensus within a broad coalition, one that always includes right-wing parties opposing diplomatic commerce over the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Since his appointment in 2009, the Israeli prime minister has had to accommodate the demands of the politically prominent, yet often ignored, 'national religious' or 'Religious Zionist' constituency: a complex religious-political compound whose *raison d'être* is heavily reliant upon the Jewish presence beyond the Green Line (the 1949 Armistice Line). At present, the national religious front is largely represented by *HaBayit HaYehudi* (Jewish Home): a party currently commanding 11 seats in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), under the dynamic leadership of army reservist and high-tech entrepreneur Naftali Bennett. The Jewish Home ran the 2013 electoral campaign on a platform to annex 60 per cent of the West Bank to the national mainland, whilst calling 'for all political parties to sign a pledge never to evict Jews from their homes' in the Occupied Territories. By controlling the Housing Ministry in the new Netanyahu government, Bennett would now have all the financial resources and political remit to promote future settlement construction. In the eyes of past and present Religious Zionists, the territories 'liberated' from Israel's enemies after the Six Day War of June 1967 are sacred and integral to the Jewish state. Further, as a harbinger of redemption, the settlement project stands as the most authentic realization of Zionism as well as Judaism: 'no UN resolution, no Palestinian claimant, no American president has the right to say otherwise'.⁶ The messianic worldviews precipitating the birth of the national religious front and still animating its stand in Israeli and international politics are the subject of the present chapter.

A revolutionary counter-society

Since its foundation, the modern State of Israel has represented a paradigmatic case where secular politics and religion overlap and inter-mingle. The lack of a formal written constitution was attributed to the fact that the members of the Constituent Assembly could not agree on the role that Judaism was supposed to play in the newly born state. That underlying indecision also reverberated in the Declaration of Independence of May 1948, a document blending universalistic values of democracy and pluralism with particularistic themes and imagery resonating with the Hebrew tradition. In Israel, ascertaining the exact balance between the religious and the secular has always been the object of a never-ending negotiation. Nonetheless, in light of the power that the religious right is currently able to wield over Israeli society and the political system, the country's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion's famous forecast that religion would inevitably wane with the advancement of the Zionist project seems to have been disproved.

The Haredi and the national religious represent the two principal components of Israel's religious right. Although theologically different, they share the same ultra-Orthodox moorings. Having doubled their population both in the mainland and the Occupied Territories in the past decade, these two religious denominations together represent the fastest growing demographic sector in Israel. Further, given the nature of the political and electoral system, the national religious and ultra-Orthodox parties carry a weight far exceeding the number of their voters, especially for what concerns the government's decision-making over sensitive matters such as the future of the Occupied Territories. From the early beginning of the national religious front, its members and sympathizers have made the concerted effort to 'penetrate' Israeli institutions and larger society. At present, they occupy strategic roles in various layers of the government, economy, bureaucracy, media, state education system and, most recently, the highest ranks of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The expansion of the Religious Zionist network remains nevertheless geared towards the movement's main religious-political goal: advancing the settlement project throughout the West Bank.

In defiance of international law, Israeli demographic growth in the Occupied Territories has risen steadily over the past thirty years, bringing the total up to 350,000 settlers living in the West Bank. In 2012, the pro-government newspaper *Israel Hayom* reported an additional 300,000 Jewish residents in East Jerusalem. Calibrating that estimate on the current rhythm of growth (a record 4.5 per cent increase

per annum), some forecast that the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem would reach 1 million in four years' time.⁷

Militants in Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), the movement inspired by the Religious Zionist creed, constitute only a minority among the Jewish residents in the West Bank (25 per cent of the overall population). They are nevertheless concentrated in sensitive points in the contested terrain. Their ideological settlements and outposts are strategically located on the hills of Judea and Samaria, at the heart of the Jewish 'sacred geography'. As visible on an aerial map, the Gush Emunim spread in the West Bank forms a median string stretching from north to south, and engulfing cherished sites of Jewish biblical inheritance and memory. Included in this area are Rechelim, Beit-El (Bethel), Ofra, Jenin, Shechem (Nablus), Ramallah, Bethlehem, Halhul, Hebron and, last but not least, East Jerusalem, which represents 'the jewel' of the Religious Zionist identity. The territory recognized by the Hebrew Scriptures as 'the Land of the Patriarchs' is where the majority of the Arab population today resides: 3.5 million Palestinians live in the Occupied Territories, 2 million of them in the West Bank.⁸

The motivations at the basis of the national religious presence in the Occupied Territories are complex and multilayered. At a cursory glance, the settlement project can be seen as a means to establish 'geodemographic' facts on the ground thwarting any government policies aimed at a territorial compromise with the Palestinians. As Michael Fiege observes, through their 'thereness' and 'defiant existence', the settlements proved to be the most effective safeguard for the cause of Eretz Yisrael.⁹ Dani Dayan, the current chairman of Yesha Council, the settlers' main political body, describes the purpose of the national religious project as that of colonizing the West Bank until the 'point of irreversibility' – that is, reaching a stage at which no diplomatic decision could ever overturn the Jewish presence beyond the Green Line. As a report produced by political scientist Meron Benvenisti points out, that goal had already been fully accomplished as early as 1984, with 'only' 100,000 Israeli settlers living in the Occupied Territories.¹⁰

This chapter addresses the messianic thrust animating the national religious irredentism. This transcendental aspect in Gush Emunim's politics of territorial annexation is more often than not misconceived or underestimated. The re-Judaization of the entire Land of Israel, which is seen by activist believers as a primary religious duty to perform in the present-day reality, represents the physical implementation of a grand vision of redemption. This vision assumes concrete form on the hills of Judea and Samaria, in guise of a growing network of settlements and outposts.

Since its inception in 1974, Gush Emunim could not easily be categorized according to the standard parameters of political sciences, given its elusive character and unconventional goals. Even during its political apogee, in the years of Israel's first Likud governments, the movement never possessed formal membership or official cadres. After it ceased to exist as an organization in the late 1980s, it continued to function as an ideological umbrella for the national religious militants in the West Bank, nurturing their uncompromising 'non-withdrawal' stand. Also distinctive is the double standard serving as the basis of its modus operandi in politics. Gush Emunim can either effectively lobby in the Knesset or resort to organized protest outside of it. David Newman defines this peculiar behaviour as an amalgamation of religious fundamentalism and political pragmatism:

[Gush Emunim has] the ability to maintain an extra-parliamentary protest posture, while, at one and the same time, attaining legitimacy through cooptation as part of the political and institutional framework of the State and Government, with access to public sector resources as a means of advancing their political and ideological objectives.¹¹

Gush Emunim has been ambivalent even in respect to the outer world. On the one hand, its messianic message is not exclusively inward-looking, directed at those who have already adhered to its doctrine. Rather, the movement holds the desire to 'conquer' and 'transform' the surrounding society. Its members, distinguished by an intensified level of religiosity and dedication, stick out as a 'leading vanguard' of spiritual revolution that follows a precise nation-rebuilding agenda. The plan consists of the conversion of greater Jewish masses to the Religious Zionist creed, and the replacement of the current secular order with a theocratic rule in which every aspect is covered and ordained by the Torah and its commandments. On the other hand, Gush Emunim paradoxically entails a voluntary withdrawal from the rest of Israeli society. So as to forestall the perils of being sucked into the vortex of Western secularism, activist believers retreat into cohesive 'enclave' communities, whose boundaries are defined by purity, asceticism and righteousness. There, within the sacred enclosure of the settlement, energies are dedicated to various religious duties and rituals, first and foremost the settling of the Land. This self-imposed seclusion is however only a 'tactical measure, a temporary setback in preparation for a renewed [revolutionary] breakthrough'. Gush Emunim's oscillation between

mystical-religious withdrawal and political-revolutionary involvement can only be explained by considering its community east of the Green Line as a 'counter-society':

Gush Emunim's society operates alongside Israeli society: half dependent and half independent, apart from the public and the establishment but competing with it and aspiring to lead it. The Jewish fundamentalist enclaves, especially the settlements, are ghetto-like, with all the advantages this allows for leading a religious life in a secular world. At the same time, the settlements are both a bridgehead for assault and a model of an alternative life-style. Gush Emunim is more than just an intellectual current or pressure group: it is actually a counter-society.¹²

The settlers are the forerunners of the theocratic order they advocate for the larger Israeli polity. Their virtuous and puritanical lifestyle on the hills of Judea and Samaria testifies that the messianic vision on which the Zionist state is supposed to be refashioned represents a viable socio-political option. Another paradox consists in the fact that, especially during the years of the Likud administration, the Gush Emunim benefited from financial resources provided by the same secular institutions that its messianic revolution aspired to take over.

Gush Emunim's agenda is pursued through well-pondered programmes and tactics, devised appositely for the outer world. Two converging processes simultaneously take place, each a prerequisite for the attainment of the other. As already mentioned, Gush Emunim's palin-genetic project is advanced physically, by territorial colonization of the West Bank. But the re-Judaization of places sacred to Jewish memory is carried out in parallel with an effort of mass pedagogy. To secure the success of the Jewish spiritual awakening, it is deemed necessary to settle not only in the Land, but also in the 'hearts' of the Israelis. Hence, over the last three decades an informational and educational campaign reached out towards the general public, so as sensitize it to the holy cause of Eretz Yisrael. According to Ian Lustick's seminal study *Unsettled States*, Gush Emunim's conjoint project (colonialist and mass pedagogical) aims at the full transition of Judea and Samaria into an 'ideological-hegemonic' status: a stage in which a given territorial asset becomes so embedded in the collective perception of the homeland's geography that relinquishing it – even for a compelling and plausible reason such as the resolution of the conflict with the Arab neighbours – would be beyond the scope of common sense.¹³

In concluding remarks to the most updated ethnographic–sociological analysis of the settlements project, Fiege charges that ‘although Gush Emunim succeeded impressively in settling the Land, it failed to convince most Israelis that Judea and Samaria are indeed the national homeland that must never be forsaken or forgotten’. That the Jewish presence in the Occupied Territories has not been broadly accepted as a culturally unproblematic fait accompli would be confirmed by the ‘relative disinterestedness’ of the public opinion shown at the Gaza pullout in July 2005, and by the general willingness towards dismantling, ‘under appropriate circumstances’, more settlements in the West Bank for furthering the peace process. In other words, adds Fiege, amongst the vast majority of Israelis, ‘there are no longer hearts in which to settle, and maybe there never were’.¹⁴ Despite this, the facts on the ground remain along with people disposed to sacrifice everything in order to defend them: ‘once reality beats the Messianic vision, only those who trust supernatural forces keep that vision alive’.¹⁵

The plausibility of the last contention is reinforced by the striking difference, in attitude and commitment, between the secular and the religious residents in the West Bank. From the Second Intifada onwards, most of the lethal attacks against Israeli citizens occurred in the Occupied Territories, and indiscriminately targeted both secular and national religious settlers. Further, the separation barrier constructed during Ariel Sharon’s premiership as a security measure against Arab terrorism was soon recognized as an ‘acknowledgment that settlements lying to its east could, one day, be evacuated’. As a result of this, more than half of the secular residents ‘sought a way out’, by accepting the evacuation compensations offered by the state and relocating their home elsewhere in Israel. In contrast, almost all the national religious families remained in the unfavourable terrains of Judea and Samaria, and more of them moved in to occupy those places left vacant by the secular residents who had relocated to Israel.¹⁶ Today, Gush Emunim remains a resourceful, well-organized and motivated community that no doubt will engage in battle if its existence and values are to be put at risk by a territorial compromise with the Palestinian authorities. It is thus crucial to try to enter the Religious Zionist mindset in order to understand why it commands such a passionate and seemingly uncompromising affiliation with Eretz Yisrael.

Until recently, a serious theological understanding has been conspicuously absent from any diplomatic approach to the Middle East peace processes, let alone an appreciation of the significance of the messianic zeal in animating the settlement project. More than bringing

the reader *à jour* with the current state of the Arab–Israeli conflict, this chapter discusses Religious Zionism as a complex belief system. In particular, the aim here is to uncover the often overlooked core motives of the national religious engagement in Israeli politics, by using the themes and arguments that have previously been developed on Jewish eschatology and messianic thought. To prove a meaningful relationship between beliefs and political action, this chapter highlights how the sanctity of the Land of Israel, along with the imperative to settle it and not to compromise its integrity, derive directly from the mystical–kabbalist teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the founding father and chief ideologue of Religious Zionism. The rabbi viewed redemption as a gradualist process of cosmic repair, in which the Chosen People play a purposive role not only for the sake of Israel, but also for that of the rest of the world. If active participation in settling all Eretz Yisrael hastens the coming of the Messianic Age, even a minimal withdrawal from it would entail both contravening God’s will and halting the process of universal salvation.

As discussed further on, at the core of Rabbi Kook’s thought lies the insistence that the profane is an external manifestation of the inner holy foundation of reality and, accordingly, Zionist ideology and institutions are nothing but a ‘shell’ for a genuine form of nationalistic Judaism. Kook’s theo-political approach instantly annuls any prospect of separation between secular state and religion, subordinating the former to the latter. In his rich corpus of philosophical and religious writing, the rabbi also maintained that Zionism was a ‘mundane tool’ through which God advances the process of redemption. On this ground, Kook’s followers hailed the foundation of modern Israel in May 1948 and its territorial expansion after the Six Day War as miraculous events confirming the imminence of the Messianic Era.

An anti-messianic undertaking

Since its outset at the end of the nineteenth century, Zionism was addressed by Jewish Orthodoxy on theological grounds. The nationalist movement promoting the normalization of the Chosen triggered complex hermeneutical debates and endless deliberations in almost every rabbinical circle of Western and Eastern Europe. The discussion took place primarily from the messianic standpoint, with the majority view condemning Zionism as a ‘stumbling block for the pious Jew’ not only in light of its decisive anti-religious stand, but also considering the eschatological allusions stemming from its political programme. Despite

a gloss of modern and secular ideology, Zionism never refrained, especially in its constitutive phase, from deploying powerful redemptive symbols associated with the End of Days. The Jewish awakening was supposed to take place by 'ascension' to the biblical Land, the blooming of the deserts and the re-establishment of a national home in Palestine. Given the highly messianic import that its enterprise evoked, it was impossible not to assess Zionism from a religious standpoint.

It is often forgotten that the religious rebuke of Zionism is the outcome of how Orthodoxy understands the messianic process. In keeping with the apocalyptic approach, Rabbinic Judaism believes that Israel's redemption will be both initiated and completed by heavenly powers, and not by natural means. Only a divine irruption in history can catastrophically resolve the present historical deficiency represented by the Exile, and inaugurate a state of ultimate perfection and harmony in the Land of the Fathers. Any mundane attempt to hasten the Messianic Age is therefore proscribed as a 'sacrilegious venture'. If redemption does not arise from the 'Great Redeemer Himself in His Glory', it is not 'the path to the true salvation, or the long-desired goal', but an incidental 'fly in the ointment'.¹⁷ The end of exilic subjugation, the ingathering of the Diaspora Jews, the national restoration of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple are sacred undertakings to be deferred until the Messiah comes. The faithful can only patiently wait for a miraculous and transcendental deliverance.

Political quietism and passivity acquired normative status after sectarian campaigns for national independence brought disastrous consequences on the Jewish communities. The Great Revolt led by the radically messianic Zealots (66–70 CE) entailed Rome's brutal repression, the end of the fairly autonomous Second Commonwealth and the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple. The Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE) – a mass irredentist uprising sparked by similar End Time impulses – produced no lesser repercussions than the Great Revolt. The Jews of Judea were exiled or exterminated. Only in Galilee did a small Jewish population survive in the Land of Israel. Joseph Telushkin assesses the combined impact of these two messianic revolts on Jewish history and culture as follows:

It is estimated that as many as one million Jews died in the Great Revolt against Rome. When people today speak of the almost two-thousand-year span of Jewish homelessness and exile, they are dating it from the failure of the revolt and the destruction of the Temple. Indeed, the Great Revolt, followed some sixty years later by the Bar

Kokhba revolt, were the greatest calamities in Jewish history prior to the Holocaust. In addition to the more than one million Jews killed, these failed rebellions led to the total loss of Jewish political authority in Israel until 1948. This loss in itself exacerbated the magnitude of later Jewish catastrophes, since it precluded Israel from being used as a refuge for the large numbers of Jews fleeing persecutions elsewhere.¹⁸

The diffuse suffering produced by such attempts to ‘hasten the end’ heavily impacted on the religious leadership as well: the Pharisees, or rabbis, supplanted the old priestly elites as new spiritual guides, imposing a radical change in theological attitudes. Purity and piety became normatively binding not for their own sake, but because they were deemed to be the most appropriate religious principles to abide by in order to preserve rabbinic authority and the welfare of the communities and to avert further damage from being caused by messianic forms of political militancy. The yoke of the Exile and the powerlessness that ensued from that condition were therefore hailed as decrees that God imposed as expiation for Israel’s sins. All national aspirations over the Land of the Fathers were to be put on hold until the Messianic Age, a final realization that became strictly forbidden to force. The pious Jew was expected to consider the abdication of military prowess ‘as much parts of the Jewish tradition as the prohibition to eat pork’.¹⁹ Exchanging the path of national revolt with a more accommodating attitude towards foreign rule paradoxically led to greater stability and autonomy. With the Roman Empire’s sanction and support, rabbinical Judaism reached its golden age, flourishing throughout the Middle Ages as the received religious, legal and communal system.²⁰

The rabbinic sages designed normative safeguards so as to keep inalienable but ultimately self-destructive aspects of messianism from their application in historical time. The intention was to maintain the equilibrium of the exile, by discouraging Jewish massive return to or a Holy War over the Land of Israel – that is, eventualities that could have triggered again, as a backlash, the wrath of the various foreign hegemonies under which the Jewish communities lived after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The doctrinal fence around the ever present temptation to hasten the End was erected by putting forward three oaths. These ‘axiomatic vows’, first enshrined in the Babylonian Talmud, acquired legal Halakhic status later on, in medieval times. Still today they stand at the heart of the Orthodox denunciation of secular Zionism: (1) The God-fearing Jew must swear that he would not rebel against the Gentile nations, as the Holy One, in exchange, made the Gentile nations swear

that they would not subjugate Israel too harshly; (2) further, he must not make *aliya* (to migrate en masse or in an organized fashion to the Land of Israel) before the appointed time, but rather wait for the miracle of God's intervention; (3) finally, the Jew must not pray too strongly for the coming of the Messiah, so as not to bring Him about prematurely. Over the first half of the last century, quite tellingly, the centrality of the oaths in the Orthodox debate waxed as a Zionist settling in the Land of Israel increased as a viable sociopolitical prospect and, conversely, waned when the same prospect receded.²¹

In its original formulation, the messianic ideal affirms that the Chosen will be liberated by a Messiah, divinely appointed to be their King and bring about a new age distinguished by perfection, justice and peace. Rabbinic Orthodoxy attempted to neutralize the political implications of this ideal, not only rendering its realization strictly contingent on supernatural fiat, but also shifting the balance towards the spiritual side of redemption: 'instead of militant action, a religious ethical preparation of the individual was prescribed, to make the world worthy of salvation'.²² Orthodoxy charges that the hope for final deliverance in the Land of Israel – a hope famously encapsulated in the dictum 'Next year in Jerusalem' – is reserved only 'for synagogue and prayer', that is, for the Jews' contemplative feeling alone, without any repercussion on their practical conduct. In pre-Messianic times, the only legitimate means to pursue redemption consists in studying the Torah, respecting its commandments, maintaining oneself separate from the Gentiles and their sinful culture and, foremost, making amends for one's sins. More than a physical state, exile appears therefore to be a condition of the Jewish soul. This condition cannot be rectified by a historical breakthrough, but by a therapeutic process of inner repentance (in Hebrew *teshuva*), leading the faithful from present deficiency towards final fulfillment.²³ According to a parable attributed to Rabbi Joseph Haim Sonnenfeld:

The people of Israel find themselves in such a situation. God has exiled us on account of our sins, and exile is as a hospital for the Jewish people. It is inconceivable that we take control of our Land before we are completely cured. God keeps us and protects us, and administers to us His 'medicinal' trials in perfect measurement and dosage. We are certain that when we are completely healed of our sins, God will not hesitate for a moment, and will deliver us. How could we be in such haste to leave hospital in the face of mortal danger, a worldwide danger that hangs over our heads? God forbid!

What we seek of deliverance is that our cure be completed; we seek not to return in ill health to the royal palace, God forefend.²⁴

Orthodoxy reads both Judaism and messianism as being centred on the Torah, rather than on the Land. Salvation does not rely on the settling of Eretz Yisrael, let alone on political sovereignty over it. In pre-Messianic times, the Torah supersedes the Land in its physical sense, as the true 'national territory' of Judaism. The centrality of the Torah and the Mitzvot is also confirmed by the fact that, although a State of Israel has been established in Palestine, Jewish faith in the Diaspora did not wither away, but it is undergoing a remarkable renewal. More than settling the Land, the present-day task of the pious Jews consists in responding 'finally' and 'fully' to the challenge imposed by their privileged status: becoming a holy people, by leading a life based on precepts and ideals of purity.²⁵

Any worldly effort to hasten the messianic process is not an inconsequential sin. Settling in the Holy Land before the appointed time is a serious usurpation of God's prerogatives, which might undermine the Covenant of the Children of Israel, delay their redemptive process and even cause them unprecedented suffering. Orthodox Judaism tends to interpret any historical calamity befalling the Jewish people – from the most minor to the most catastrophic of the accidents – as a divine punishment triggered by shortcomings in their religious conduct. Hence, the secular entreaty to bring the Exile to a conclusion against God's will is denounced as a real threat to Jewish life. Calling for *aliya* before the advent of the Messiah is an insidious trap, which prolongs the exile rather than ending it. So as to dissuade Jews from such a satanic temptation, Orthodoxy forewarns that the punishment becomes even more unforgiving as the transgressions are committed within the sacred perimeter of Eretz Yisrael. There is a deeper and more comprehensive relationship with God in the Promised Land than anywhere else on earth. Migrating and living in there in pre-Messianic time, while setting aside the Torah and the Mitzvot, would therefore expose the Chosen to major dangers.²⁶

Furthermore, in combination with the admonition not to hasten the End, another critical argument is often raised in the Orthodox polemic. For many rabbis, any Zionist attempt to instantiate a Jewish national awakening by natural-historical means would inevitably fall short of perfection. To them, an infinite and unbridgeable chasm subsists between the incomplete, relative and transient essence of any human redemptive activity in this world, and the absolute perfection stemming

from the otherworldly intercession in the cycles of history – an intercession that, in accordance with the apocalyptic reading of the messianic process endorsed by Orthodoxy, would abolish the present aeon to inaugurate a qualitatively different one. The fullness of redemption, in other words, can be assured only by drawing a clear line between the two spheres, the divine and the mundane, and by removing the former as far as possible from the human agency stemming from the latter. Poignant examples to support this claim are drawn upon the biblical repertoire: both the restorations that took place after the Exodus from Egypt and under the Persian patronage of Cyrus fell into new and harsher exiles because they were realized through imperfect human endeavour. In order to be final, total and permanent, deliverance in the third and last Jewish Commonwealth must be expected ‘at the hands of the Holy One, blessed be He, and not by flesh and blood’.²⁷

The Haredi world

Haredi (or Charedi) is the standard shorthand to define present-day ultra-Orthodoxy, the most theologically conservative stream of Judaism. The term ‘Haredi’ (plural ‘Haredim’) literally means ‘one who trembles in awe of God’. Everything in the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle is built around the enforcement of age-old rabbinic codes. Haredim strive to become closer to God by studying the Torah and respecting its 613 Commandments. They fully subscribe to the Jewish religious law on issues such as segregation between men and women in public places, strict adherence to the Sabbath rules, modest dress and kosher food. Attaining the ‘purest form’ of Judaism also implies separation from what is seen as not pure. Ultra-Orthodox Jews mainly live in enclave communities in East Jerusalem. Their distinctive black and white dress code represents a further ‘defence mechanism’ against assimilation to the modern, Westernized and morally corrupt Israel. Making up about 10 per cent of the overall population, Haredim currently hold a disproportionate weight within Israeli society and politics. Given an unparalleled birth rate in its communities, this religious denomination no doubt represents Israel’s fastest growing demographic sector. Despite the impression of homogeneity, the Haredi world is fraught with variations, complexities and contradictions. Each ultra-Orthodox group displays its normative stand on a wide range of issues. Peculiarly divisive is the theological debate regarding secular Zionism and the Israeli state.

The Edah Haredit and the Neturei Karta are the Haredi identities endorsing the most extreme anti-Zionist posture. Judaism and Zionism

are seen as diametrically opposed concepts, which, as such, should be kept separate. The former represents 'a Godly way of life going back thousands of years', which is 'full of moral, ethical and religious content'. The latter is 'a comparatively new secular nationalistic concept completely devoid of ethics and morals'. Although the anti-Zionist Haredim are numerically negligible, the impact of their radical views is widely felt both within the ultra-Orthodox camp and wider Israeli society. These Haredi communities have been categorized as 'world renouncer' as they live in complete isolation, eschewing any political involvement with the state or any other contact with 'impure secularity'. They defer from military service in the IDF, refuse to pay taxes or participate in elections and renounce any financial support stemming from the public sector.²⁸

The unwavering and unconditional Haredi rejection of the Zionist project – as well as the national religious ideologies that currently pledge allegiance to it – is theologically grounded in the three Talmudic vows. Rabbis and members of the Neturei Karta stick to biblical dictum 'unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain' (Psalms 127:1). As a collective attempt to hasten the end, the Zionist nationalist revival constitutes 'a rebellion against the Kingdom of Heaven, an aggressive aspiration to overstep human boundaries into the realm reserved for God'.²⁹ In the anti-Zionist view, this sinful interference with the divine prerogatives is doomed to failure and has already produced catastrophic repercussions on the Jewish people. Neturei Karta's uncompromisingly passive stand on redemption led some of its prominent rabbis to the controversial conclusion that the Holocaust was an inevitable punishment, which God inflicted on the Jews for having contravened the oath not to return to Zion before the appointed time.³⁰ In order to dissociate themselves from Zionist 'sins', both Edah Haredit and the Neturei Karta have repeatedly called for full Arab autonomy in the Occupied Territories and also in East Jerusalem. Anti-Zionist Haredim believe that Jewish sovereignty cannot be exerted over the Promised Land as long as the condition of the Exile still persists. Being eternal and absolute, the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael prevails even if there are no Jews living on its soil. Therefore, in case the Palestinians were to return to the Occupied Territories (including East Jerusalem), the Neturei Karta and other anti-Zionist Haredim 'would relate to them exactly as they would towards any other foreign ruler. They would try to gain a maximum of rights for themselves as Jews striving to fulfil their religious commitments, without mixing religion and secular nationalism.'³¹

The vast majority of ultra-Orthodox Jews, nonetheless, are not as vocally anti-Zionist as the members of the Edah Haredit and the Neturei

Karta. Rather than condemning a priori, 'non-Zionist' Haredim opt for a much more pragmatic and nuanced stance. They discriminate between Zionism as an ideology and the state to which it gave rise: 'while rejecting the former, they grant the latter de facto recognition'.³² Under thoroughly pondered circumstances, it is deemed permissible to receive economic support from the Israeli state, to vote in its general elections and to participate actively in its governments (even those cabinets featuring women as ministers). Non-Zionist Haredim embrace an almost Hobbesian stand: a secular Leviathan better fulfils the Jewish individual's need for survival and protection from the Gentile nations – a need that became particularly urgent as a result of the Holocaust. However, the Zionist state being an entirely neutral entity, devoid of any religious significance, any Haredi involvement in its politics is theologically inconsequential. For these ultra-Orthodox Jews there is no relation whatsoever (be it negative or positive) between the Zionist institutions and the messianic process. As far as the value of the Israeli state is concerned, the Haredi pragmatic approach differs not only from the view of the Neturei Karta, but equally from that of Religious Zionism. The former regards the state as a heinous sin that derails Jewish redemption, whereas the latter, as will be seen, regards it as a miraculous realization confirming the imminence of the Messianic Age.³³

Non-Zionist Haredim are currently organized around two prominent religious–political parties: Agudat Yisrael and Shas. Although refusing to merge their agenda with the secular goals of the state, these parties use the influence stemming from their large voting base to strengthen the respective religious institutions and educational networks, and to bargain critical concessions with the Knesset. As a result of the proportional electoral system, the ultra-Orthodox parties have been able to wield hefty political power, often ending up as 'kingmakers' in multiparty coalitions. In past and in recent years, Shas, a Haredi party largely representing the interests of Sephardic Jews, has backed both right-wing or left-wing governments, 'extracting in exchange major pledges on the welfare benefits many Haredi families rely on'.³⁴ As the religious affairs analyst Yair Sheleg recently observed, 'the Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox have a deal which gives the latter what they want in order to let the secular continue to rule'. Even though with continuous tensions and renegotiations, the deal has held for six decades. The non-Zionist Haredim, however, always keep in mind that their engagement in the state is guided by expediency, rather than real attachment to the national cause. In keeping with the rabbinic tradition, in which every ultra-Orthodox group remains entrenched, religion and politics are two parallel lines that are

not supposed to converge until the Messianic time of redemption. Unlike their national religious counterparts, these Jews 'do not fight in Israel's army, fly its flags or celebrate its national holidays'.³⁵

With regard to territorial issues and their political implications, all non-Zionist Haredim agree that the Land was promised to the Jewish people, as a result of their everlasting Covenant with God. But, quite surprisingly, granting a holy status to Eretz Yisrael and a divine right to its possession does not a priori exclude the possibility of negotiating a compromise with the Palestinian authorities. Especially prior to the Second Intifada, prominent rabbis of both Agudat Yisrael and Shas endorsed a 'dovish' attitude and were seriously prepared to trade selected parts of Judea and Samaria for the pursuit of a peaceful coexistence with Israel's neighbours. This political stand was theologically underpinned by the normative principle of 'saving a life', which, under particular circumstances, supersedes the commandment to hold onto the Land of Promise in its wholeness. Ultra-Orthodoxy understands the essence of Judaism as being structured around three core values: the Torah, the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. For the rabbinic sages, these basic elements relate to each other following a hierarchical criterion. The relevance of the first two elements exceeds that of the third. Accordingly, 'the Land of Israel can be brokered to create an environment in the best interest of the Jewish people as a whole', and to prevent 'a cycle of never-ending warfare with the Arab population'.

In more recent years, however, security concerns have eroded the traditional ultra-Orthodox support for the principle of land for peace, moving many Haredim towards more hawkish positions. After Israeli unilateral withdrawal from the Occupied Territories intensified rather than diminished the fighting in South Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank, several voices within the Haredi world agreed that returning further land to create an Arab state on Israel's doorstep would put more Jewish lives at risk rather than protecting them. That leading rabbis have grown more sceptical about the sincerity of Palestinian intentions has also affected the theological debate. The emphasis soon shifted from the idea that the Torah does not exclude conceding land as a means to bringing peace to those biblical commandments stating that Israel should stand alone against the Gentile nations, and never forget the injuries incurred by its enemies.³⁶

After having teased out the main differences dividing the two ultra-Orthodox worldviews on the state, it is worth highlighting what these worldviews share. Both anti- and non-Zionist Haredim are extremely critical about those aspects of Israeli society that they deem detrimental to

traditional Judaism. The spiritual vacuum caused by 'the abandonment of the Torah' and Western secularization, they argue, represents the 'root of all evil, and the underlying reason of all the country's problems'.³⁷ It is worth noting that ultra-Orthodoxy is often perceived by the external world with no less disapproval. Many secular Israelis view its religious customs and regulations as retrograde. Their resentment is also sharpened by the fact that, as well as being exempted from the mandatory army draft, the vast majority of non-Zionist Haredim do not have paid jobs, being by and large subsidized by the state to study the Torah.

The Religious Zionist synthesis

It has been discussed how the quietist stand of Haredi Judaism is a direct consequence of viewing redemption as being exclusively dependent on God's will. The Jewish people are commanded not to hasten the End before the appointed time, and to fulfil their part of the Covenant only by obeying the law and commandments of the Torah. Accordingly, secular Zionism is deemed as a blasphemous and even dangerous usurpation of the divine prerogatives. As far as its doctrinal approach is concerned, Religious Zionism represents a revolutionary departure from this normative path. It sanctifies Zionist ideology, movement and state in view of their absolute religious standing. Further, it sees redemption as a humanly achievable realization, a process that Zionism initiated, the Jewish people must proactively advance, here and now, by their intra-historical commitment, and God would finally complete. Historical watersheds are often quoted by Religious Zionists as indisputable proofs of the validity of their claims. The re-establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 was hailed as the literal 'beginning' of the Jewish deliverance. In June 1967, such messianic expectations were further heightened by the results of the Six Day War. The reunification of the Old City of Jerusalem, the return of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall to Jewish hands and Israel's territorial expansion in Judea and Samaria were seen as a set of miracles reinforcing the faith in the imminence of the Messiah.³⁸

Religious Zionism insists on the inalienable right of each and every Jew to settle anywhere within the boundaries of biblical Israel. This right is also considered a religious duty, one that every faithful Jew must fulfill in order to hasten redemption. Any political or diplomatic compromise on Jewish control over the Promised Land, let alone a transfer of even the smallest part of it to a Gentile authority is absolutely prohibited by the Torah, since it would halt or compromise the very process of Jewish salvation.

From 1967 onwards, Religious Zionism offered to bridge the crippling divide between ultra-Orthodoxy and secular nationalism through an original synthesis between three distinct, albeit inherently overlapping, concepts: Judaism, Zionism and messianism. David Novak defines Judaism as ‘the Covenant between God and the people of Israel, which the Torah substantiates’; Zionism as ‘the movement for Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel’; and messianism as ‘the hope for God’s final redemption of the people of Israel – and along with them all of humankind’, a hope that ‘roots itself in God’s ultimate, Eschatological promise’. Both Zionism and Messianism, adds Novak, would be embedded in the Jewish religious tradition, although quite differently: ‘Zionism is the finite task of the Jewish people here and now for the sake of its life in this world.’ Messianism would rather be ‘the infinite task of God for the sake of the world-yet-beyond’. Religious Zionism intentionally blurs that ‘essential distinction between a Jewish human state and the Kingdom of God’.

In the following pages, Religious Zionism will be interpreted as a ‘theo-political’ belief system that, by virtue of its remarkable eschatological thrust and evocative appeal, was able to transform both rabbinic Orthodoxy and Zionism. It did so by overstretching the respective doctrinal-ideological confines and advocating a common ground between the two hitherto conflicting identities. From its outset, Religious Zionism presented itself as being ‘as traditionally justified as anti-Zionist Orthodoxy – minus its political quietism – and as strongly pro-Israel as secularist Zionism – minus its non-Judaic rationale’.³⁹ This unprecedented syncretism between Judaism, messianism and Zionism is today most vociferously epitomized by the settler movement known as Gush Emunim, a militant form of religious belonging that fights the cause of Eretz Yisrael politically. Gush Emunim’s immediate objective is to expand Jewish sovereignty beyond the Green Line. In this spirit, it dedicates its energies to establishing new outposts and settlements in the West Bank and consolidating the existing ones. In the long run, Gush Emunim aims at the Judaization of Israeli secular society and the creation of a theocratic state based on the principles and ideals of the Torah. Short- and long-term programmes are closely interrelated, each a necessary prerequisite for the attainment of the other.

The Kookist triangle

Gush Emunim’s distinctive involvement in Israeli politics cannot be fully grasped without considering what Gideon Aran defines as ‘Kookism’: ‘a comprehensive religious-political subculture encompassing the lives

of a few thousand cadres who constitute the stable, militant avant-garde among the settlers in the disputed areas'. As an original form of messianic politics, Kookism is figuratively described by Aran as a 'triangle', whose cornerstones are Rabbi Kook the father, Rabbi Kook the son and the Merkaz HaRav Kook Yeshiva in Jerusalem.⁴⁰ The intellectually sophisticated Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate. He is unanimously recognized as the spiritual father of Religious Zionism, a charismatic figure whose biography borders on the hagiographic. It is often reported that the rabbi steered a delicate course between radical innovation and Orthodoxy, as his mystical–esoteric speculations remained within the boundaries of the normative tradition, whilst drastically changing it. By turning a passive messianic hope into a major political drive for resettling the Land, Rabbi Kook the father closed the 'theological gap' between religious Judaism and secular Jewish nationalism. He transformed part of rabbinic Orthodoxy from being the erstwhile implacable enemy of Zionism into its most dedicated and loyal ally.⁴¹

Endowed with neither his father's charismatic halo nor philosophical inventiveness, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982) was nevertheless able to establish his persona as his father's legitimate heir. He represents the indispensable 'medium' through which his father's innovative yet abstruse theology was interpreted, popularized and, more importantly, politicized into a coherent national religious credo – one later serving as ideological base for a social movement. It was under Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's spiritual guidance that, in the early 1950s, during a moment of profound crisis engulfing the younger generations of Orthodox Jewry, an embryonic version of Gush Emunim took shape: the Gachelet, literally meaning 'glowing ember'. The first Religious Zionist vanguard was spurred by the palingenetic thrust to regenerate Israeli polity from its moral decadence and by means of an all-encompassing revolution.⁴² The Gachelet simultaneously sought to 'heal' Zionism from its secularity and 'rescue' Orthodoxy from its political marginality. It did so by capitalizing on the messianic import associated with the just-born Jewish state.⁴³

The last 'leg' of the Kookist triad is the influential Merkaz HaRav Kook Yeshiva: a Torah-based seminar, recognized and funded by the Israeli state, which indoctrinates Gush Emunim's junior cadres following the messianic schemes elaborated by the two rabbis Kook. Both spiritual leaders denied any separation between the Israeli state and Judaism, considering the profane as 'a mere external manifestation of the inner

holy foundation of reality'.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Merkaz HaRav sacralizes the state and its government as secular tools in the overall process of salvation, views the IDF as being 'holy' and every year encourages hundreds of its seminarists to undertake military service as a religious imperative. Further, in keeping with the Kookist outlook, prominent rabbis associated with the Merkaz HaRav hold that the Jewish presence and activities in the Occupied Territories manifest and advance the working of providence towards Israel's spiritual redemption. Founded by the very Rabbi Kook the father in 1924, the seminar today enrolls some 500 students primarily of high-school age. Many of these attend the 'Hesder Yeshiva', special courses combining Talmudic studies with service in combat units in the IDF. That the Merkaz HaRav stands as the theological stronghold breathing life into the national religious project in the West Bank has been tragically confirmed in March 2008, when a terroristic attack carried out by a Palestinian gunman killed eight of its seminarists.

I shall now concentrate on the theological aspects of Kookism – namely, the messianic teachings of Rabbi Kook the father, to analyze later how, under mutated cultural–historical circumstances, these teachings were able to activate their political potentialities.

The Lurianic lore

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's restorative view on the messianic process can be retraced to the kabbalistic tradition of Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534–72), the most influential exponent of the Safed School in the Galilee. For our purposes here, the complexity of Lurianic mystical lore has to be reduced to the basic theosophical concepts underpinning the overall doctrine. In particular attention will be focused on the idea of the 'Breaking of the Vessels'. This mystical idea represents the root of a long-standing development within Judaism, which, through Rabbi Kook's intellectual mediation, reached its current manifestations in Religious Zionism. Indeed, Gush Emunim's theo-political stand hinges on principles first introduced by Lurianic mysticism. Luria posited the primordial cosmogony as a twofold act, in which divine 'self-contraction' (*Tsimtsum*) is a necessary premise for divine revelation:

God was compelled to make room for the world by abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation. The first act of the Infinite Being is therefore not a

step outside but a step inside, a movement of recoil, of falling back upon oneself, of withdrawing into oneself. Instead of emanation we have the opposite, contraction. The God who revealed himself in firm contours was superseded by one who descended deeper into the recesses of His own Being, who concentrated Himself into Himself, and had done so from the very beginning of creation. One is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *Tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought of.⁴⁵

In order for everything other than God to come into existence, He had necessarily to 'exile Himself from boundless infinity to a more concentrated infinity'.⁴⁶ Only after such a voluntary restraint did God emit beams of divine light into the vacuum that had He produced, so as to build our world. Nevertheless, this propagation was immediately followed by destruction. Ten vessels were originally conceived to contain God's ten emanations of light (*Sefirot*). The primordial sparks represent the archetypal patterns of perfection upon which the cosmos was meant to take shape. Yet, as the divine lights burst forth all at once, their impact proved too much for the vessels. These were instantly broken and shattered (*Shevirat ha-Kelim*). As a result of the cosmic catastrophe, the sparks of light were dispersed. Some of them returned to their source, whilst others percolated downwards, from the divine realm into the lower depths, to give birth to that imperfect and chaotic world within which humankind also resides.⁴⁷ In keeping with the Lurianic system, evil, rather than being a contradictory entity outside the Godhead, stands as a principle stemming from His very creative emanation. Evil first emerged as 'a residue of the forces released by the initial breaking, which then took shape as the independent, life-hostile other side'.⁴⁸ Once the sparks intermingled with the vicious elements belonging to the lower sphere, deficiency became inherent to everything that exists in nature. This age of mixture will however persist as long as the original damage is not mended. Following the same logic at the basis of the Zoroastrian doctrine of the three ages, Luria envisaged a third and conclusive stage of reparation. The secret aim of creation and, at the same time, purpose of all human existence, consists in the restoration of what was originally compromised by the primordial catastrophe. Salvation means nothing but a process of cosmic repair (*Tikkun Olam*), one progressively reintegrating the holy sparks into that flawless whole, in which everything occupies its proper space.⁴⁹ Introducing an element

of imbalance, defectiveness and darkness might therefore be conducive to raising the stakes in the cosmic purification. God put in being a flawed world in order to rid Himself of the seeds of evil: the stronger the other side's manifestations after the original breaking, the greater the chance of returning the world to a clearer and purer harmony. This idea would be subsumed into Rabbi Kook's theological system, which brings the notion of *Tikkun Olam* down to earth, and fully applies it to account for the Jewish nation's historical becoming. According to Kook:

the 'shattering of the vessels' is not a cosmic catastrophe but, on the contrary, a positive manifestation, a vital step in the steady movement of all reality toward perfection. The Rabbi denies the existence of evil as an independent entity. As a result, he does not see the 'shattering' as the complete negation of 'repair', but rather as an integral part of the restorative process. It is worth suffering all the pangs of the shattering and the ill effects of the destruction in order to bring forth a perfected world.⁵⁰

Long before Kookism the principles of Lurianic mysticism already had political application. Indeed, they provided the ideological base to one of the greatest Jewish mass revolts in the Middle Ages: Sabbatianism, a 'palingenetic community' organized around a charismatic figure (Sabbatai Zevi) and imbued with transformative messianic longings. It can be convincingly argued that, despite being quite different in theological and sociological terms, both Sabbatianism and Kookism do not represent 'wild departures from traditional Judaism as the result of non-Jewish influences'. They are instead phenomena 'whose origins lay at the heart of the legitimate tradition, and whose heretical theology developed as a plausible offshoot of accepted concepts'.⁵¹

Saving God

Kookism and Lurianic Kabbalah intersect at a specific point: the fulfillment of creation, understood as emendation and reintegration of the divine luminaries into their original harmony, is a task that God began, but which humans ought to bring to a conclusion. Man and God are therefore 'partners' in the redemptive enterprise of the cosmos: 'after the original breaking God began the process of reparation, but He left its completion to man'.

It is worth remembering that the kabbalistic sages prior to Luria viewed redemption as a quietistic process relying on spiritual rectification. The

faithful were supposed to amend both the cosmos and their own souls, primarily by keeping faith with the Torah and its commandments. Although complying with such normative principles, Lurianic Kabbalah nevertheless infringed the 'cloister' of pure inwardness and passivity, introducing a truly revolutionary teaching: human active role in the process of cosmic restoration. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook took that principle to its extreme, completing the transformation of a mystical doctrine into what would later become the national religious ideological core. By emphasizing the active side of messianic over spiritual redemption, Kook the father put forward the revolutionary idea that the mission of cosmic repair was to be historically advanced, and there were compelling signs that this should have been done in present time. For the rabbi, the Zionist cause in the Holy Land, in all its historical concreteness, was the primary undertaking through which the pious Jews could accomplish the rectification of the entire cosmos: only by committing to Zionist nationalism could the Jewish people respond to the divine call. Through the politicization of *Tikkun*, the rabbi realized a key inversion 'subject-object' in the roles articulating the structure of traditional messianism. While for Orthodoxy only God can save humankind, now humankind can effectively contribute towards saving God by actively advancing the process of cosmic reintegration. This short circuit in the traditional eschatological categories of Judaism also entails a re-evaluation of history as an immanent channel of salvation. Redemption no longer depends on an apocalyptic breakthrough, but on a gradualist process extending back to creation. Rather than capping the End Time, and passively awaiting for God's miraculous intervention, each Jewish generation must fulfil its quota of restorations. Kook the father bequeathed the Jews with a mundane duty: the progressive gathering and mending of the divine fragments that were scattered to the four corners of the world by the Breaking of the Vessels. Only the Children of Israel could actively redeem the dross of the universe.⁵²

A perfect symmetry

In keeping with Luria's Janus-faced cosmogony, the starting point of creation is not contingent upon the Godhead's outward emanation, but rather on His decision to implode on Himself. So as to leave space for the cosmos to expand, God went into exile (*Galut*) from Himself. The process of redemption, which was put in motion by the catastrophic Breaking of the Vessels, consists in restoring the scattered, exiled sparks of divinity into their primordial harmony. Deficiency thus became synonymous with God's exile, and fulfilment with the complete *restitutio ad integrum*

of the cosmic order – a condition of restored plenitude, which also puts an end to God's own seclusion. It is important to draw attention to the fact that Luria proposed a powerful image of cosmic exile and redemption, whose symbolic structure mirrored the tension between the Jews' historical-political reality and their future aspirations of deliverance:

By connecting the notions of *Galut* and redemption with the central question of the essence of the universe, Luria managed to elaborate a system which transformed the exile of the people of Israel into an exile of the whole world, and the redemption of the people of Israel into a universal, cosmic redemption.⁵³

After having prepared itself in the 'underground', Luria's teachings emerged, and became widely accepted, in a moment of extreme hardship: the crisis following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. That collective trauma generated distress within the Jewish communities, but also severely tested their received frameworks of meaning. The authoritative resources of Rabbinic Judaism fell short of accounting for the disaster of the 'new Exodus'. At the same time, attendant persecutions befalling the Jews rendered their desire for deliverance even more acute. As a symbolic prism to interpret reality, Lurianic mysticism convincingly intervened in that vacuum, projecting the historical crisis onto a cosmic dimension. A movement so highly mystical and aristocratic turned into a dynamic social force, succeeding in establishing a resonance within broad masses of Jews.⁵⁴ The reasons for such a success reside in a theodicy postulating a 'perfect analogy' between the status of God and that of his Chosen. By equating it to that experienced by God himself, the brunt of the exile was reinterpreted as an exception to the universal order: a temporary victory of chaos that would soon be rectified. Through the cosmicization of Israel's exilic status, Lurianic Kabbalah allowed the Jews to perceive themselves as a major force in history, exactly when their powerlessness and vulnerability hinted at the contrary.⁵⁵

The rehabilitation of Israel through Luria's mysticism seems to follow many arguments underpinning the 'scathing' theodicy of the Covenant. The Hebrew prophets charged that, once viewed as divine punishments for having contravened the pact with Yahweh, humiliating defeats and persecutions turned into implicit confirmations of Israel's election, its sense of having been set apart for a universal mission. By reading national downfalls as uncontestable proofs of their patron divinity's power, the Jews learnt how to turn historical miseries into theological triumphs. Although both the Covenantal doctrine and

Lurianic Kabbalah may be viewed as spiritual resources to cope with the cognitive dissonance (the painful incongruence between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'), one generated by national disasters and foreign oppression, a critical difference should be observed here. According to the Covenant's principle of conditionality, only passive practices such as repentance and righteous conduct might heal the Jewish soul, restore divine favour and therefore advance Israel's redemption. Luria's mysticism posits instead that the rectification of Jewish exilic deficiency depends on human earthly agency. The Jewish people themselves can turn present deficiency into a final and everlasting messianic triumph. Their gradualist process of gathering and lifting up the scattered sparks to their original status of harmony becomes a practical means to re-establish a congruence between outer historical reality and inner belief. As a unique offshoot of Lurianism, Rabbi Kook's authoritative theology is built on a mythic structure that replicates

the historical experience of Judaism in our time and place and, at the same time, responds to its frustrations. From now on, the Jewish national condition, subsumed under the old symbols of Exile and Redemption, becomes a hint of heavenly condition. Thus, Exile is viewed as alienation of the sacred from itself, whereas Redemption is seen as resulting from its return to the recognition of the roots of its essence. This belief has a built-in activist potential, in that the believer is entrusted with the mission of sharing in cosmic events. There is a need for *Tikkun* – the return of the sacred to its sources, and the bringing of the profane into the sacred.⁵⁶

Luria's mysticism further reinforces the Covenantal ideal portraying the Jews as bearers of absolute universality. The restorative task assigned to them not only advances Israel's economy of salvation, but also that of all Gentile nations. *Tikkun's* legitimacy and over-determination rely on the assumption that the 'perfect analogy' is transitive, that is, it works in either direction: on the one hand, wherever Israel is exiled, the divine source of order (*Shekinah*) goes with it, and therefore the entire world is out of joint; on the other, once the Jews are restored to Eretz Yisrael, their national independence regained and their holy temple rebuilt, the whole cosmos, not just Israel, is set to rights. Israel's historically contingent situation becomes a barometer whose variations signal the status of creation as a whole: 'if the people of Israel rise, the world rises with them, and when they fall, the whole world falls with them'.⁵⁷ The image of a Jewish national renaissance as eternal, universal and absolute

telos passed to the rabbi's son, Zvi Yehuda Kook, to become the theological centrepiece of his thought:

All the civilizations of the world will be renewed by the renaissance of our spirit. All quarrels will be resolved, and our revival will cause all life to be luminous with the joy of fresh birth. All religions will don new and precious raiment, casting away whatever is soiled, abominable, and unclean; they will unite in imbibing of the dew of the Holy Lights, that were made ready for all mankind at the beginning of time in the well of Israel. The active power of Abraham's blessing to all the peoples of the world will become manifest, and it will serve as the basis of our renewed creativity in Eretz Yisrael.⁵⁸

Many biographical and scholarly studies stress the truly humanist calibre of Rabbi Kook the father, detailing how he repeatedly refrained from endorsing unethical means, even in the pursuit of the loftiest ideal in an imperfect and impure world. The pious man was concerned with the creation of a just and peaceful Jewish society in Palestine, a model that all Gentiles could later imitate for their own advancement. It is an equally common argument that it was Zvi Yehuda Kook's doctrinal approach to morph his father's inclusive messianism into an ethnocentric and righteous chauvinism, one that later provided the ideological groundwork for Gush Emunim's activism in the Occupied Territories. Nonetheless, as Schwartz's analysis explains, that transformation could not have taken place without Kook's reinterpretation of Luria's mystical idea that 'the entire cosmos is uplifted as a corollary to the elevation of Israel'.⁵⁹ By reinforcing that already controversial 'marriage' between universal and Jewish salvation, Kook the father led many future Religious Zionists to believe that their own national renaissance, one achieved by returning to and settling the Land, results in the redemption of all nations. By claiming to save far more than the Jews themselves, that very idea might, at best, inspire contempt and hostility towards the Gentiles who have not yet acknowledged the Jews' special status or, at worst, it might justify or even encourage ruthless measures against whoever refuses to 'bow and surrender' before Israel. As history teaches us, the line between the two possibilities is remarkably blurred.

Saints despite themselves

Long before the establishment of modern Israel, Rabbi Kook the father hailed Zionism not just as a mere nationalist movement advocating

the liberation of a people 'who for two thousand years had lived as a barely tolerated minority in a precarious, dispersed existence'.⁶⁰ Rather, Zionism was recognized as a 'sacred instrument' through which God was furthering His schemes of cosmic salvation in present historical reality. If returning to and settling the Land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a primary obligation of each and every devout Jew, helping Zionism meant not granting one's support to a heretical secular ideology, but acting in full accordance with the divine will:

God wants the children of Israel to return to their home in order to establish a Jewish sovereign state in which Jews could live according to the laws of Torah and halakha. ... Secular Zionists may think they do it for political, national or socialist reasons, but in fact the actual reason for them coming to resettle in Israel is a religious Jewish spark in their soul, planted by God. Without their knowledge, they are contributing to the divine scheme. The role of Religious Zionists is to help them to establish a Jewish state and turn the religious spark in them into a great light. They should show them that the real source of Zionism and the longed-for Zion is Judaism and teach them Torah with love and kindness. In the end, they will understand that the laws of Torah are the key to true harmony and a socialist state that will be a light for the nations and bring salvation to the world.⁶¹

Within the schemes of Kookism, Zionism is no longer a blasphemous offence to the basic principles of rabbinic Judaism, but a movement for concrete redemption in our time, which springs directly from a sacred source. Israel's national revival by natural, historical effort represents an opportunity to take a worldly stand, and shake off 'the dust of exile' from the Chosen. In keeping with this understanding, salvation became partially accomplished in May 1948 with the creation of the Zionist state. This does not represent a mere secular institution, but a messianic realization: the expression of God's will and living proof of His providential intervention in history. The State of Israel, as envisaged by Rabbi Kook the father, is 'the pedestal' of God's throne in this world, a concrete nexus between earth and heaven.

On a closer look, however, Kookism might also be recognized as an astute attempt to re-appropriate the prerogatives and achievements of secular politics within the sacred, and thereby resolve the contradictions between the two dimensions in favour of the latter. In this sense, Rabbi Kook's revolutionary approach toward both Zionism and Orthodox Judaism has been termed as a 'theology of the profane': a highly

sophisticated, original and ambitious intellectual effort undertaken by a religious mind, to come to terms with the threatening accomplishments of Western secularity – in particular, those modern ideologies such as nationalism and socialism, which had ‘permeated Judaism, carrying off many of the best and the brightest’.⁶² Zwi Werblowsky defined Kook the father as an ‘audacious Talmudist and Cabbalist who tried to formulate a theology of secularity and modernity in the category of the pre-modern [Judaic] tradition’. Once he migrated to Palestine to take up his post as rabbi of Jaffa, Kook had to rationalize, in theological terms, the inconvenient reality that the messianic dream of rebuilding Israel was being carried out quite successfully by the kibbutz movement – a socialist movement based on an agricultural collectivist lifestyle. Some of its members were oblivious to Judaism, whereas others utterly rejected the Torah and vilified its commandments. The Rabbi claimed to possess a much deeper insight into the nature and deeds of the first pioneers in the Land of the Fathers than the pioneers themselves.⁶³ Despite their unrighteous conduct, these early-day Zionists were modern ‘saints’, unwittingly fulfilling ancient Israel’s redemptive plan:

The pioneers coming to Palestine are indeed highly hostile to the Jewish religious tradition and are motivated, according to their own understanding, by secular ideological considerations, which are basically alien to the religious structures of Judaism. The legitimacy given by them to their actions is similarly not related to religious sources, but draws its inspiration from non-Jewish European revolutionary ideas such as Nationalism or Socialism. Yet, Rabbi Kook argued, this subjective understanding of their own motives is only one side of the picture. In the divine cosmic order, where every detail has its own place and *telos*, the true meaning of a person’s action may be unknown to himself. The same applies to the Zionist pioneers. They may subjectively think they are motivated by secular, political ideas, but truly they are acting within a cosmic scheme of a divine will, in which their seemingly secular and even atheistic motivation is nothing else than an external cover for the true meaning of their action as related to God’s redemptive structure. These people may contribute toward the ultimate Messianic coming even while they deny it; hence they have to be seen as tools and vessels in the hands of Divine Providence. Unbeknownst to themselves, they serve the labour of the Divine. It is the objective meaning of their project that is important, not their subjective motivation nor their external

deeds. ... In this way, the resettlement of the Land of Israel, even by blasphemous atheists, is a step on the road to salvation.⁶⁴

Kook's underlying argument is that behind every secular or even anti-religious Zionist undertaking is hidden the revival of the holy, as 'the highest degree of sacredness always resides in the innermost part of the profane'.⁶⁵ The rabbi, however, supplies a theological system that follows dialectic subtleties reminiscent of Hegelian theory known as the 'cunning of reason' or 'heterogenesis of the ends'. Hegel's philosophical approach to historical becoming postulates a critical cleavage between the subjective intentions of individual acting and its objective outcomes: 'one may play an effective role in a sequence of events helping to move matters along and even struggling toward a certain end, without grasping the inner logic of the events, their true meaning or real consequences'. Nevertheless, the final realizations of the cosmic drama, which secular Zionists are advancing by unconsciously laying its earthly foundations, will eventually correct all previous misconceptions and put everything under the right perspective. Kook the father charged that with the full bloom of the Messianic Era, when the Jewish spiritual rebirth takes place and a theocratic rule permeates Eretz Yisrael, the 'inherent holiness of Zionism will ultimately surface to the level of explicit consciousness'. The godless Zionists would be then 'constrained to realize that they are immersed and rooted in the divine life and bathed in the radiant sanctity that comes from above'.⁶⁶

The rabbi went even further, to suggest that one day the truly religious leaning of the Zionist enterprise would be acknowledged not only by its secularist advocates, but also by its fiercest detractors within the ultra-Orthodox camp: the anti- and a-Zionist Haredim. He supported such a controversial claim by referring to the parable about the construction of the First Temple. It is known that simple workmen erected the Holy of Holies, the most sacred inner sanctum, whose access was limited to the High Priest once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The sanctity and purity of the Temple took full effect only after the construction was completed. The same is true, argued Kook, for the Jewish state. Its building through non-holy hands enables the redemptive process to take place and, once the Zionist endeavour is over, the Israeli state will be sanctified and perfected through its absolute Judaization. In both instances, the establishment of the Holy Temple and the state, a gloss of sacredness ought to be granted to all of those 'simple workers' who bear the bricks without divining the messianic import of their work. By

considering the finalization of the dialectic process, religious Judaism 'should grasp the underlying meaning of Zionism and discern, beyond its external, secular forms, the divine spark evident at its heart'.⁶⁷ This very idea still undergirds the approach of mainstream Gush Emunim towards Zionist politics and institutions.

Eretz Yisrael

The emotional connection to Eretz Yisrael impacts on the behaviour of almost all religious Jews, whether advocates or opponents of the Zionist enterprise. The Jewish visceral tie to the Land of the Fathers is central not only to countless religious sermons and theological treatises, but also finds a respectable place in the Independence Day prayer book, which is read by both observant and non-observant Israelis. Quite paradoxically, the uncompromising sacredness of the Land is not matched by an equally definitive description of its territorial extension, mainly because the Torah does not provide Eretz Yisrael with a clear and unanimous set of geographical boundaries. The Land of Promise being one of the Covenant's most crucial aspects, the countless discrepancies about its borders reflect the variety of the formulations that the agreement between God and His Chosen received in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶⁸

The biblical source that is often quoted to legitimize Israel's territorial ownership as a divinely ordained inheritance (and, equally, to oppose any diplomatic compromise over it) is Numbers 33:53–54: 'and you shall take possession of the Land and settle it, for I have given the Land to you to possess it'. Many Orthodox Jews, whether in favour of or against Zionism, understand this verse as normatively binding: that is, as a commandment to conquer and control the Land of Promise, 'not to leave it in the hands of any other people or allow it to lie in waste'.⁶⁹ Even for Haredim, there is a tension between these Halakhic arguments urging the faithful to settle the Land and the distinctive Orthodox ban on any restoration en masse in Palestine in pre-messianic times. Kook the father solved such a contradiction by applying an unconditional understanding of the Covenantal promise to his historical reality, one in which the Zionist project was gaining momentum. Rather than being dismissed as literary heritage or poetry, the biblical passages enshrining the Jewish title to the Land became 'a living and legal document' and, at the same time, 'a blueprint for the settlement action' that was necessary for speeding up redemption and bringing the Messiah.⁷⁰

Kook bestowed the highest degree of religious meaning on Eretz Yisrael, viewing it as the essential feature of the Jewish nationhood in

its becoming. To him, however, the organic connection with the Land assured far more than a mere criterion of state territoriality. Rather, it was the 'sacred quality' setting Israel apart from the Gentile nations, the spiritual source upon which the Chosen drew their very unity and survival. That collective link could not be severed without undermining the foundations of the Jewish soul. Hence, returning to Zion was the primary religious duty that every Jew in the Diaspora was supposed to fulfil lest he betray his true self:

Jewish original creativity, whether in the realm of ideas or in the arena of daily life and action, is impossible except in Eretz Yisrael. A Jew cannot be as devoted and true to his own ideas, sentiments, and imagination in the Diaspora as he can in Eretz Yisrael. Revelations of the Holy, of whatever degree, are relatively pure in Eretz Yisrael; outside it, they are mixed with dross and much impurity. ... In the Holy Land man's imagination is lucid and clear, clean and pure, capable of receiving the revelations of Divine Truth. In Gentile lands the imagination is dim, clouded with darkness and shadowed with unholiness, and it cannot serve as the vessel for the outpouring of the Divine Light.⁷¹

In keeping with Kook's view, exilic life within the Gentile societies is accountable for the disintegration and malformation of the Jewish soul. Although they might respect the Torah and its commandments and thus perceive themselves as pious and devout, the Jewish people outside the Land inevitably lead a distorted and unholy life. Only a national revival in Zion can extricate the Jews from the defectiveness deriving from being scattered to the four corners of the world. A Jewish re-gathering in Eretz Yisrael heals the Chosen from exilic separation and individualism, by restoring them to their original unity and holiness. Eliezer Don-Yehiya highlights how the negation of *Galut* (Exile) represents the hallmark of the Religious Zionist mind and at the same time a doctrinal expedient to increase the weight of the national religious Orthodoxy over that of other religious authorities both in Israel and the Diaspora. Kook's polemic accent is therefore placed on the dichotomy between the sense of empowerment and harmony attainable within the sacred perimeter of the Holy Land and that of powerlessness and anomie otherwise hindering Jewish life outside of it.⁷²

It is essential to keep in mind that what Kook implicitly attacks here is also the Haredi quietist approach to the redemptive process: an approach that, according to the rabbi, accommodated the Jewish life

in the Diaspora, by instructing the faithful to accept the shortcomings associated with it. The rabbi's revolutionary break with ultra-Orthodoxy consists in having conceived a return en masse to Zion not 'as a mere Messianic postulate to be carried out in God's own good time', but as 'an immediate imperative for every Jew'.⁷³

Nevertheless, this radical subversion against the passive messianic approach could fully emerge only after secular Zionism, with its remarkable this-worldly achievements, opened new and unexpected avenues for Jewish identity and religiosity. A real turning point was reached once Kook himself immigrated to the Holy Land in 1904. All the cardinal ideas forming his eclectic theo-political system – namely, a 'comprehensive vision of Jewish rebirth, Messianic activism and belief in the organic rootedness of the national idea into the divine idea'⁷⁴ – precipitated together as Kook took pastoral responsibility over some of the first Jewish farming colonies, as a newly appointed rabbi of Jaffa. As already noted, the rabbi endowed the kibbutzim project with a sacred gloss: despite being motivated by early Zionism's socialist and, at times, anti-religious principles, the pioneers were promptly hailed as the generation of Jews heralding the Messiah. Through their dwelling, settling and working the soil of Eretz Yisrael, the pioneers were 'heroes' furthering God's purpose of redemption and, simultaneously, bringing about the wholesale regeneration of the Jewish people. In the words of Shlomo Zaiman Shragai, the spiritual leader of the Mizrachi movement and, later, Jerusalem's first elected mayor:

The special quality of Eretz Yisrael is not available to those who keep away from it, nor to those who merely breathe its air, but only to its workers, to the farmers blessed by the Lord. [Working the Land] awakens the divine in us and brings us to spiritual yearning and longing for the living God, to contemplation, thought, and faith. The lives we became used to over two thousand years must be eradicated to implant love for labour, from which we have been torn and detached throughout.

To every past and present Religious Zionist, an authentic return to the source of Judaism necessitates the empowering experience of manual labour and productivity within the sacred space of Eretz Yisrael. By meticulously subtracting the Land of Inheritance from the surrounding chaos of the desert, the settler becomes a 'redeemed Jew working in a redeemed Jewish world', a reborn man who had overcome the *Galut* mentality with all its limitations and misgivings.⁷⁵ The redemption of

the Jewish people is therefore intimately connected to the humanly carried-out redemption of the Land. This contravenes and reverses one of the basic tenets of Orthodoxy, according to which Jews cannot make *aliya*, let alone work on the Land, before the expiation of their sins is completed. Kook goes as far as to say that the Jewish presence and productivity in the Land where God dwells represents the highest form of repentance (*teshuva*). Redemption comes to be primarily seen as a physical–mundane task, rather than a purely spiritual process based on the observance of the Torah and its precepts. Gush Emunim does not abandon the theological moorings of Orthodoxy, as with scrupulous dedication its members fulfil the countless Halakhic norms distinguishing an undoubtedly Torah-centred lifestyle. However, the utmost degree of fanaticism is shown whenever the injunction to conquer and settle the Land is at stake. That biblical commandment overrides all the others. The obsessive attachment to the hills of Judea and Samaria, observes Aran, narrowed Gush Emunim's understanding of Judaism to 'one focal point of hyper intensity':

At present, the linchpin of religious fulfilment is the Land. At one time the critical medium for serving the Creator was yeshiva study; today it is settlement. Namely settlement of the Land of Israel, by assuming an all-inclusive and near-exclusive character, has gradually rendered the radical doctrine narrow and one-dimensional. The idea of annexing Judea and Samaria becomes the medium of religious performance, which is supposed to exhaust the gist of Jewish religiosity. On the one hand, one isolated precept is inflated to grand status; the commandment attached to settlement takes over and replaces all other commandments, to become the very accomplishment of the newly defined Judaism. And on the other hand, the value on which the redemption of the Jewish people and the entire universe depends is inadvertently reduced to the status of just one precept.⁷⁶

As already noted, the theological foundations of Judaism rest on three components, which form a sort of holy and indivisible whole: the Torah of Israel, the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.⁷⁷ Haredim decry Gush Emunim members for focusing too much of their own spiritual and material resources on the establishment of new settlements and outposts, and therefore according disproportionate weight to the Land at the expense of the Torah. To some extent, the Haredi theological indictment aligns with the liberal Zionist accusation that the territorial fetishism driving the settlement project turns out to be extremely

counterproductive for the safety of the People of Israel. Religious Zionists often refute such criticisms in a twofold manner: they contend that an excessive love for Eretz Yisrael hinders neither the unity nor the equilibrium within the triad of Jewish values, for such love encompasses and completes both the Torah and the People of Israel. This assertion is further reinforced by the argument that 'in various historical situations, one of the three components may emerge as more critical than the other two; and in our generation, the Land obviously merits premier status'.⁷⁸

Being understood as indisputable fulfilments of the messianic vision, the establishment of the Jewish state in May 1948 and, to a higher degree, its territorial expansion following the Six Day War were the two key intra-historical realizations capable of shifting the balance within the triadic relationship, favouring a one-dimensional understanding of Judaism. In the eyes of many Jews, in June 1967 the territories west of the Jordan River were not occupied but, rather, 'liberated' in a patently miraculous way. Therefore they could not ever be taken away from Jewish hands, as 'the Holy One, blessed be He, does not perform miracles in vain'.⁷⁹ An almost carnal attachment to Judea and Samaria took precedence over the traditional Orthodox emphasis on moral rectification, becoming 'the axis of a new religion'. This unprecedented form of Zionist Judaism based on uncompromising irredentist policies emerged from the conviction that a divine power was 'hovering' over all Jewish Israelis and forcing them to advance, in accordance with predetermined schemes, toward the attainment of full redemption.⁸⁰

This shift in theological paradigms confirms our assumption that not only can messianic beliefs affect human predisposition towards reality, but also that historical occurrences might conversely impact on and alter the inner structure of such beliefs. Before June 1967, the normative consensus within mainstream Orthodoxy was more or less unanimous in seeing the Jewish claim to Eretz Yisrael as being entirely subservient to the respect of the Torah and its norms. As a result of the messianic import of the Six Day War, a new approach gained momentum. For many ultra-Orthodox Jews, living in Israel as well as in the Diaspora, the Land and its maximalist colonization became the centralizing and unifying dogma to reassert their religious identity.

A medium of religious performance

As a belief system, Kookism blends together national, Jewish and universal renaissance, affording the faithful a crucial role in the material

advancement of such a conjoint process. Conquest, settlement and labour in the Land are essential to bringing about a religious revival healing, once and for all, the disease of *Galut* in the Jewish soul. In a parallel manner, it has been argued, the performance of those tasks also forwards *Tikkun Olam*, the process of rectification from which the entire cosmos will benefit. From the physical link with Eretz Yisrael emanates a spiritual force capable of 'reversing the powers of darkness and raising them to the highest vaults of holiness'.⁸¹ By holding on to Judea and Samaria and toiling their sacred soil, Gush Emunim settlers believe that they are releasing the 'sparks of light' that, after the initial Breaking of the Vessels, were imprisoned in that cosmic subjugation mirroring Israel's exile. The Land of Promise is imbued with the divine, whose essence can be progressively liberated through manual labour. In so doing, the settlers can claim to be helping God to restore harmony and perfection out of chaos.

The remarkable degree of Gush Emunim's political militancy is an inevitable outcome of the pronounced empirical dimension of its territorial messianism, which, in turn, stems directly from Rabbi Kook's kabbalistic teachings emphasizing the materialization of the redemptive ideal in external reality. Annexing more land or establishing new settlements and outposts in the midst of the Palestinian population are 'objectives of religious yearning', whose accomplishment is meant to hasten the coming of the Messiah. As Aran's study details, such enterprises are embedded in a set of liturgies that, once correctly performed, can uplift the believers closer to the Godhead, whilst solving the discrepancy between two levels of consciousness: 'the inner world dominated by the exhilarating religious hope of redemption' (the future fulfilment or 'what will be' according to their faith) and 'the frustrating outer world in which they must face a historical reality only partially redeemed' (the present deficiency or 'what is'). Put differently, the settlement project is a 'medium of religious performance': a sacred ritual capable of actualizing the messianic ideal in the present, rather than exclusively promoting its advent in the future.⁸² On not too dissimilar grounds, Uriel Tal sees the Religious Zionist activism in the Occupied Territories as an epiphanic and totalizing form of 'mystical-realism'. An 'organic' and 'invigorating' communion between the activist believers, the nationalist ideal and the sacredness of the Land unfolds in the process of redemption, here and now:

One of the major expressions of the duality of 'mystical realism' is found in the intertwining of the need for personal growth with the

commitment to national expansionism. Both reflect a deeply felt urge to escape from a sense of confinement; both are seen as a means to achieving a closer, truer, more authentic participation in the cosmic dimensions of one's concrete existence; both embody the act of the purgation of the soul and of the purification of the Land; both symbolize the union of time (the Messianic future realized now) and of space (the political sovereignty over Eretz Yisrael realized here). Eternity is reflected in current time while cosmology is reflected in the settled Land. The conquest of wider borders transcends the limitations of time, while the bestowal of eternal holiness upon the present confirms the absolute consecration of historical sites, soil, trees, stones, walls, waters, tombstones and burial plots. The pious settler is seized by rapturous zeal, yet also by a sense of bliss, joy, happiness, or overflowing light and radiance; one's entire being longs to fuse in glorious communion with peers, congregation, movement, and nation. At the same time, divine inspiration emanates from the Land. The Land embodies God's sublime presence with overpowering clarity, with beauty and glory. One is neither stricken dumb with amazement, nor overwhelmed by awe and rapture. Rather, this is an invigorating and activating ecstasy, an exaltation and rapture of ultimate union with the Land, the Nation, and Jewish statehood. ... The devotional settler on recently conquered land is possessed by his Messianic zeal, while his zeal transforms the conquest into redemption. The sacred symbol has been transformed into substance while the substance has been elevated to the realm of the sacred.⁸³

It is quite easy to infer from Tal's words the reasons why, in the eyes of many settlers, the territories in the West Bank are not illegally occupied, but liberated or redeemed from evil. It is quite easy also to appreciate how Eretz Yisrael's borders along with the objects of devotion that they contain, such as the holy tombs of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs or other sacred sites worshipped as the 'cradle of the nation', are held to be beyond any diplomatic commerce. For the Religious Zionist, the master of the universe has his own agenda of maximalist annexation that no earthly politics could ever supersede, even when such politics stem from the Israeli state itself. In Zvi Yehuda Kook's words, one can notice no room for compromise: 'any declaration or deed by any government in the world, including that of Israel, which contests our hold on the territories liberated in the holy war, has no validity and is therefore to be considered null and void'.⁸⁴ It is worth underscoring that the Religious Zionist resistance to trading land for peace is not uniquely motivated by the alleged biblical value of some remote and barren hillocks, but by

considerations of cosmic import. Politicians, negotiators or peacemakers often miss out this essential level of understanding, belittling the far-reaching impact of the mythical drives at stake. Undermining the integrity of Eretz Yisrael, even through a minimal return of land, would halt or even reverse the process of messianic restoration, giving control back to the forces of darkness. According to Hagai Ben-Artzi, Prime Minister Netanyahu's brother-in-law and a prominent figure in Gush Emunim, to remove one single settlement from Judea or Samaria would amount to setting the entire universe out of joint.⁸⁵

As already mentioned, the redemptive plan implemented in the soil of Eretz Yisrael saves far more than the Jewish people. This distinctive universalistic pretention reaches the grotesque in the public statements of Rabbi Moshe Levinger, an early-day national religious rabbi who spearheaded the first illegal settlement activities in the Old City of Hebron. For Levinger, expanding Israeli sovereignty over Judea and Samaria and, if possible, all the Occupied Territories represents 'a blessing for all mankind', Arab Palestinians included:

Jewish settlements in the midst of local population centres are motivated by feelings of respect and concern for the Palestinians' future. Consequently if we meet the Arabs' demand for withdrawal, we will only encourage their degeneration and moral decline, whereas enforcing the Israeli national will on the Arabs will foster a religious revival among them, eventually to be expressed in their spontaneous desire to join in the reconstruction of the Third Jewish Temple. We must penetrate the Kasbahs of cities in Judea and Samaria and drive our stakes therein for the good of the Arabs themselves.⁸⁶

Empirical evidence suggests that the mainstream of Gush Emunim never overtly referred to violence as a legitimate solution to the territorial dispute with the Palestinians. The official line of the movement would promote peaceful coexistence with surrounding Arab populations. However, time and again, the logic of the unique and chosen people fulfilling a universal vision has shown its potential for stirring hatred against the non-Jewish 'other'. This appears to be the case when Palestinians refuse to bow before the Jewish messianic ideals or whenever a diplomatic compromise over the integrity of Eretz Yisrael is in sight.

The Messianic Age

The concept of utopia, in its literal meaning 'no place', finds no direct application in classic messianic thought, given the over-emphasized

physical and territorial dimension of the latter. Deliverance can be final only when all the Jewish tribes are restored to the geographical areas where they once belonged. Without the return journey towards that precise location, redemption fails to reach its supreme status. The Jewish national revival, whose realization marks the pinnacle of that process, also takes place unambiguously within the sacred enclosure of Eretz Yisrael. That being said, what stands out as being paradigmatically utopian in Jewish messianism is the promise of a future aeon, in which all present limitations will be overcome. In a famous passage in the Book of Lamentations 5:21, the prophets call upon Israel to 'renew its days as of old'. This call ensues from the destruction of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the end of independent political sovereignty and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. Given the gravity of the national catastrophe, the future renewal cannot represent a mere restoration of a historical past. Rather, it must project a kind of perfection, harmony and peace that, not being subject to further disapproval or challenge, can only belong to heaven. Jewish messianism therefore remains committed to both the mundane and the transcendental. The two dimensions are opposed and, at the same time, intertwined.

Some observe that the appeal exerted by the definitiveness of the messianic ideal, that is the no-longer-perfectible harmony of the End Days, seems to matter almost more than the terms of its practical implementation, once that final stage is reached. In some biblical and Talmudic passages, the daily life flourishing in the Messianic Age is visualized as subscribing to a broad and likewise vague set of values. In opposition to the present ignorance and deficiency, the Jewish people will be possessed by righteous intentions, whilst benefiting from abundance, fertility and the absence of suffering or disease. That 'unprecedentedly higher order of reality' will serve as a 'source of inspiration for the improved life of humankind in general, so that all nations shall share in the blessings of peace, the rule of morality, and the overthrow of the wicked and perverted'. In the last days, the Gentiles will assemble in the midst of Jerusalem, to pay homage to the name of the Jewish God.

The perfection of the Messianic Age is also epitomized by the establishment of a third and last Commonwealth, one 'located in Zion, having its capital in a restored Jerusalem, and ruled by the scions of the house of David'.⁸⁷ In this renewed polity, the divine law, as stated in the Torah and its commandments, would ordain every detail of social and political life. Once more, mundane and heavenly come indissolubly together. Israel's national rebirth entails entering an earthly stage wherein 'knowledge of the Lord' fills everything 'as water covers the sea' (Isaiah 11:9).

A 'Torahcratic republic'

Being embedded in the same messianic tradition, both Haredim and Religious Zionists share the hope for the establishment of an End Time Jewish theocracy. What they fiercely dispute is the timing and methods of its accomplishment. In keeping with their eschatological standpoint, Haredim object to the idea of any Jewish state (be it secular or theocratic) prior to the coming of the Messiah. In particular, the eventuality of Torah-based polity is regarded as a 'contradiction in terms'. Even if it were to be run according to the Halakhic law, such a state, having been established by human rather than divine intercession, would defile the Torah as a rebellion against one of its fundamental norms not to hasten the End before the appointed time. For Religious Zionists, on the contrary, it is no longer necessary to wait for the Messiah after May 1948. They discerned in the establishment of the State of Israel 'the finger of God' and 'the first flowering' of Jewish redemption. Having regained national independence was described as a miraculous event, a divine overflow descending from heaven to signal the imminence of the Messianic Age. Following the teaching of Rabbi Kook the father through the mediation of his son, Religious Zionists raised an intra-historical and political realization (such as the just-born Jewish nation) to the level of the sacred. Despite being imbued with sanctity and messianic gleam, both the Zionist state and its secular society were nevertheless considered as provisional entities still waiting for a completion.⁸⁸

Abraham Yehuda Kook sketched the quintessential traits of that completion some three decades prior to the creation of the State of Israel. In a cornerstone speech of 1920, the rabbi discussed the messianic ideal that a Jewish theocracy should epitomize. He did so in negative terms, that is, by opposing the ideal to its very antithesis. An ordinary state based on the Western values of democracy, pluralism and popular sovereignty, argued Kook, amounts to no more than a 'large insurance company', where

the myriad ideas that are the crown of human vitality remain hovering above the state, not touching it. [But] this is not the case regarding a state that is ideal in its foundation, in whose being is engraved the supreme ideal content that is, truly, the greatest happiness of the individual. This state is supreme in the scale of happiness, and this state is our state, the State of Israel, the foundation of God's throne in the world. Its entire aim is that 'God be one and His Name one'. For this is, truly, the supreme happiness.⁸⁹

Some detected in Kook's vision of the future Jewish state unmistakable traces of that 'idealist-utopian' strand that is traditionally associated with the philosophy of Plato, Rousseau and Hegel, and quite opposed to the 'rational pragmatism' that instead underpins Locke's understanding of the social contract – a liberal paradigm of government, based on democratic rights and form of representation, which found its first direct application in the US Constitution of 1787. On a deeper level, the spiritual idealism imbuing Kook's political theology reminds one a great deal of the Rousseauian 'general will'. According to Jacob Talmon, that concept advocates social harmony and unanimity, but through an underlying ambiguity, which is at one and the same time 'fruitful' and 'dangerous':

Rousseau's thinking is dominated by a highly fruitful but dangerous ambiguity. On the one hand, the individual is said to obey nothing but his own will; on the other, he is urged to conform to some objective criterion. The contradiction is resolved by the claim that this external criterion is his better, higher, or real self, man's inner voice, as Rousseau calls it. Hence, even if constrained to obey the external standard, man cannot complain of being coerced, for in fact he is merely being made to obey his own true self. He is thus still free, indeed freer than before. Every exercise of the general will constitutes a reaffirmation of man's freedom. The final aim [of Rousseau's thinking] is therefore not the self-expression of the individual and the realization of his own and unique mode of existence, but the loss of the individual in the collective entity by taking on its colour and principle of existence. The aim is to train men to 'bear with docility the yoke of public happiness', in fact to create a new type of man, a purely political creature, without any particular private or social loyalties, any partial interests, as Rousseau would call them.

Kook's political theology borders on the Rousseau's concept of general will in that the rabbi reconciled individual freedom and happiness with an external and absolute truth – a transcendental truth that, once discovered by the religious mind, cannot be honestly refused. Conformity to that truth alone qualifies for membership to the Jewish polity: the greater whole from which the faithful attains superior life and being. Not only in such a polity is the individual discouraged from expressing personal opinions, interests and prejudices, but he must get rid of them as 'they obscure the objectively true and good, which, if he is true

to his true nature, he is bound to will'.⁹⁰ The more completely such idiosyncrasies are rooted out, the more lasting and stable are the new freedom and happiness of which the individual might benefit from by his being part of the harmonious whole. The intellectual affinity with the Genevan philosopher seems to be further confirmed by the fact that, like Rousseau, Rabbi Kook discredited parliamentary institutions, political parties, universal suffrage and balance/separation of powers as the 'real enemies' of social cohesion.⁹¹

It might be equally argued that Kook's appreciation of what represents a worthy Jewish national renewal is more consistent with his own religious tradition, rather than with selected motifs of continental political philosophy, in which the rabbi was nevertheless remarkably proficient. On this ground, Rabbi Kook's dismissal of democratic norms and of the Western state system (the 'large insurance company') might by and large originate from his monotheistic interpretation of the divine: the absolute oneness of God that is not subject to divisions. If sovereignty belongs to God alone, the only form of political authority that can legitimately be put forward is a theocratic rule implementing 'revealed law'. Quite tellingly, the utopian and totalistic vision that Rabbi Kook projects onto the future Israel is mirrored by Sayyid Qutb's political application of *tawhid*, an Islamic principle advocating the absolute and indivisible oneness of God. For the forefather of doctrinaire Jihadism,

any system in which the final decisions are referred to human beings deifies [them] by designating others than God as lords over men, reducing others to the status of slaves [and therefore] to proclaim the sovereignty of God means to eliminate all human kingship.⁹²

Although such pronouncements are often toned down in public rhetoric, Gush Emunim's involvement in politics is intrinsically justified by the ideal of a 'Torahcratic republic' supplanting the current secular order. In line with Rabbi Kook's vision, the culmination of the Religious Zionist revival will be reached with the reinstatement of the Great Sanhedrin: Ancient Israel's supreme religious authority that brought together 71 of the most distinguished rabbinical sages from every district of Eretz Yisrael. Once restored, this legislative and judicial court would promote the full application of Hebrew law in the reborn theocratic state and examine whether or not its rulings and customs are in accordance with the Torah. As a source of spiritual enlightenment, the Great Sanhedrin will heal, once and for all, the damage caused by the Zionists, through their 'outright secularization' and 'religious watering-down'.⁹³

The longing for the re-establishment of a rabbinic synedrion follows a leitmotif in Gush Emunim's collective imagery. Here, a selected and highly idealized version of Israel's biblical past is recovered as mythical 'meta-narrative' upon which the believer is called to shape the society of the future. As Aran observes, the 'nostalgic yearning for a glorious beginning of days' provides the faithful with the emotional thrust to reach out for the harmonious perfection and unity of the End of Days:

The ancient model is used by religious-political radicals to map the future with regard to both ritual matters and actual social affairs. Gush Emunim's vision includes not only the restoration of all details of biblical worship in toto but also the institution of the Bible as the standard for the conduct of public systems normally regulated by the state. Activist-believers in Israel even fantasize about an economic system based on the Pentateuch, observing the sabbatical year and the Jubilee, institutions which functioned two or three millennia ago or even earlier. In this fundamentalist doctrine and others, activist-believers stress that the restoration of such institutions fulfils a religious obligation and will automatically cure the nation's moral decadence and solve social problems.⁹⁴

The injunction that the Torah and Talmudic regulations should guide the new Jewish polity impinges not only on the civic and political behaviour of its members, but also and foremost on their private lives. Gush Emunim's national spiritual renewal entails shunning half-tints with a monochromatic rule. Insofar as the scope of Halakhic norms and values increases, the pluralism of interests, identities and belongings characterizing secular society is to be gradually erased. The divine law, in other words, will never leave the individual alone. The Torahcratic order rectifies the contradictions and aporias flawing the current order by a 'great simplification' of its unsettling complexities. The immediate corollary is that the terms fixing the inclusion in the new holy community turn out to be the same ones determining the exclusion from it. Membership is by default restricted to those who identify with and embrace the absolute truth of the Torah, whereas those who do not are regarded as 'alien'.

Several Jewish intellectuals warned about the worrisome resemblances between Religious Zionism's social utopianism and the palingenetic longings animating last century's totalitarian ideologies and regimes. Yeshayahu Leibowitz charged that assigning the state an intrinsically

sacred import represents the defining feature of any Fascist programme of national regeneration: 'if this is true in general, it is all the more true when the values the Torah and Mitzvot are attached to it'.⁹⁵ In a bid to resist the remarkable sway that messianic nationalism was holding over Israeli society in the aftermath of the Six Day War, Tal cautioned that the national religious doctrine was:

a dogmatic school of thought which inevitably leads to a policy that cannot accommodate the concept of human and civil rights, because its understanding of the totality leaves no room for tolerance. Religious Zionism is a movement which possesses great inner powers of mystical belief, and in light of the analysis of its ideological foundations, we find ourselves confronted with a structure familiar to us from twentieth-century political Messianism. There is as yet no place for comparison of content, but with regard to the structure of the conception – as distinct from its content – it is impossible not to notice an analogy to totalitarian movements of this century.⁹⁶

Since the early 1970s onwards, confident activist believers pursued the Religious Zionist ideal of national rebirth in their present. Through various strategies they attempted to foster the 'return' of secular Jewish Israelis to the bosom of Orthodoxy. In this regard Gush Emunim is far from being an inward-looking sect that scrupulously guards its own religious identity by retreating within its boundaries, as many Haredi identities do today in Israel. Rather, from its inception, Gush Emunim directed its message 'outside the circle of those who had already committed', in a revolutionary attempt to render its own idea of salvation compulsory for the rest of the Israeli society.

Between June 1967 and October 1973

One of the most daunting tasks concerning Gush Emunim is investigating its origins. A gap of several years stands between Kookism's inception and crystallization as a theological doctrine and the birth of Gush Emunim as a political movement. Among historians it is generally assumed that the revolutionary potentials inscribed into Rabbi Kook's kabbalistic system could not be actualized until the Six Day War, and without the state of collective euphoria that ensued from the event. The eruption of Gush Emunim and its messianic theo-politics, observes Gershom Gorenberg, was compelled by a set of sociopsychological

factors reacting to the mythical forces that the 'war of redemption' unleashed within Israeli society:

The Six Day War did more than create a new political and military map in the Middle East. It also changed the mythic map, in a piece of the world where myths have always bent reality. For Israelis, even those furthest from faith, it was easy to regard the victory as a kind of redemption. Jews, inscribed in history as victims, were now victors. The homeland, partitioned in 1948, was all in Israeli hands. For some Israelis, especially Zionists, the exultation coalesced into religious and political doctrine. The conquest of 'our Hebron' and 'our Shechem', the Old City and the Temple Mount, showed that God was leading His people to final redemption. As never before, Messianism became a respected ideology, powering the movement that settled Jews across the West Bank.⁹⁷

That a historical occurrence was turned into a prophetic validation was somehow confirmed by the symbolic-creationist meaning that was promptly bestowed upon the June 1967 War: 'just as the entire cosmos was created in six days, so was the Land of the Fathers emancipated in six days'.⁹⁸ As a sudden divine illumination, the event marked a paradigm shift in the relationship between Orthodox Jewry and secular Zionism. If, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the rising success of Zionist ideology filled the void generated by a waning degree of religiosity within Jewish communities, after June 1967 the decline and stagnation of political Zionism made room for a revitalized form of Orthodoxy. As a consequence of a territorial gain resembling a prophetic fulfilment, the war of 1967 precipitated, in both the Israeli and Diaspora contexts, a phenomenon known to the historian as 'Judaization': the assimilation of the notion of being Jewish to that of biblical Judaism.

Acting like a potent catalyst, the war of redemption forced many secular and religious Jews alike to rediscover a 'unity of fate' based on their shared Hebrew inheritance. It did so by syncretizing that revived ancestral tradition with the modern myths and values of Israeli nationalism, statehood, maximalist irredentism and military might. Another major consequence of the galvanizing success of the war of redemption was a fateful alignment of the messianic longings of many Orthodox Jews and the revanchist hopes advocated by Revisionist Zionism – a secular ideological undercurrent inspired by the teachings of Vladimir Jabotinsky – which was about to take the lead in Israeli politics with the advent of the Likud Party. Both Religious and Revisionist Zionists

entertained the dream of nationalist militarist rebirth towards the creation of a 'muscular Judaism': a regenerated breed of Zionist Jewry that, with its 'physical prowess, aggressiveness and battle-readiness', would have forever overcome and reversed 2000 years of oppression, subjugation and slaughter at the hands of the Gentiles.⁹⁹

Rather than focusing exclusively on the epiphanic import of a single historical event such as the Six Day War, other experts on the subject locate the generative circumstances of Gush Emunim in the stark contrast between the triumphant climate of June 1967 and the collective shock of the war in October 1973.¹⁰⁰ In keeping with this reading, the politicization of the Religious Zionist creed would be contingent upon the abrupt transition from the collective mystical awakening aroused by the re-encounter with Land of the Fathers to the traumatic disconfirmation that originated with the Yom Kippur War, when the hope of imminent redemption was blighted, first, by the military debacle and, later, by the plan for the strategic disengagement from the Sinai Peninsula. If the miraculous victory of June 1967 invigorated the messianic fervour of many, the downfall in October 1973 gave impetus to the idea that their direct intervention in politics was urgently needed in order to restore the redemptive process back to its previous course. In its formative charismatic phase (1974–77), Gush Emunim came to the fore as an uncompromising revolutionary vanguard recruiting mainly, but not exclusively, students from the Merkaz HaRav, the ideological hotbed of Kookism.¹⁰¹

The early Gush Emunim could be seen as a close-knit 'palingenetic community' oriented towards a new beginning whose embryonic nucleus assembled around prominent leaders of the national religious front. By virtue of their charisma and theological standing, figures like Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, Rabbi Hanan Porat and Rabbi Moshe Levinger were able to mobilize both the spirit and deeds of their first acolytes. They did so not with a detailed political programme but, rather, by 'painting a mood' and projecting the image of what did not yet exist: the theocratic rule over Eretz Yisrael that would have rectified all the deficiencies of the secular state. Disdaining parliamentary representation along with other conventional channels, the 'knitted skullcaps' generation broadcast its message and built its initial consensus through extra- and anti-institutional means – namely, by mounting a series of mass demonstrations against any territorial concession to Egypt, while simultaneously settling in the Occupied Territories of Judea, Samaria and Golan Heights.¹⁰²

The motives at the basis of Gush Emunim's initial success in terms of popular consensus mirror to some extent those spurring its transition

from quietism to militancy. If the remarkable success of June 1967 emboldened the national ego with a 'narcissistic over-evaluation, a tendency to believe in one's own omnipotence vis-à-vis neighbours and enemies', in October 1973, after just three days of battle, 'that inflated balloon of grandiosity and invincibility was painfully punctured', pushing many Israelis towards the opposite extreme of 'vulnerability, helplessness, and humiliation'. What used to be taken for granted, maintains Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, suddenly turned into something 'ephemeral and shaky'.¹⁰³ Hitherto advocated only by a handful of fringe groups, the vision of imminent messianic rebirth gained momentum as a new panacea providing a demoralized majority with hope and vitality. It is worth stressing that the dream of national religious palingenesis could not have had a significant resonance within various strata of Israeli society without a vacuum of governmental authority and legitimacy. Befalling the country like a shattering earthquake, the Yom Kippur War induced 'a loss of credibility in Israel's most trusted institutions, such as political leadership and the military, and an erosion of faith in the ability of the nation to achieve its aspirations'.¹⁰⁴ Casting its role as the protector of the country's 'refusal to compromise itself', Gush Emunim was able to exploit the breakdown within the secular structures of power and meaning, whilst capitalizing on it to advance the cause of Eretz Yisrael to a wider audience.

Gush Emunim as a revitalization movement

In April 1974, Gush Emunim was officially established as an ideological faction of the National Religious Party (NRP). Its theo-political programme enmeshed immediate objectives with long-term ambitions, positing the achievement of both as strictly interdependent. On the one hand, activist believers were to settle throughout the Occupied Territories and press for governmental decisions in favour of their ultimate annexation to Israel; on the other, a national religious revolution was aimed at regenerating both the secular state and society from their spiritual bankruptcy, while stirring ultra-Orthodoxy out of its political apathy. The two-tier agenda was enshrined in the only comprehensive manifesto that the movement ever produced:

[Our aim is] to bring about a great awakening of the Jewish People towards full implementation of the Zionist vision, with the recognition that this vision originates in Jewish tradition and roots, and that its objective is the full redemption of Israel and of the entire world.

The Jewish People is now engaged in fierce struggle for survival in its Land and for its right to full sovereignty therein. Yet we are witnessing a process of decline and retreat from realization of the Zionist ideal, in word and deed.¹⁰⁵

Gush Emunim's emphasis on the wholesale renewal of both Judaism and secular Zionism led political scientist Myron Aronoff to address the phenomenon through the conceptual category of a 'revitalization movement', as first introduced by anthropologist Antony Wallace.¹⁰⁶ In a pioneering essay published in 1956, Wallace defined the process of revitalization as 'a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture'. According to Wallace, the period of revitalization typically follows a moment of 'cultural distortion', in which the received frameworks of authority and meaning are put under severe strain. This crisis can occur as a consequence of 'natural calamities or may be due to the eruption of internecine socio-economic and political tensions, or to occupation, colonization, or acts of aggression inflicted on it by other societies'.¹⁰⁷ As a result of one or a combination of these factors, the *nomos* regulating the normal maintenance and reproduction of societal life becomes 'internally flawed': its constitutive elements are no longer 'harmoniously related', but 'mutually inconsistent and interfering'. If not promptly countervailed, this deterioration might lead to the 'symbolic death' of the collective order of existence. When the anomic crisis is 'sufficiently profound to prevent the [society] from perpetuating and regenerating itself through its own symbolic and ritual resources', the ground is prepared for the emergence of a revitalization movement, or in Griffin's terms for a palingenetic community oriented towards a new beginning.¹⁰⁸

In its embryonic stage, the community takes form and acts in the guise of a counter-society. Its adherents realize that they must either face extinction or initiate a process of revitalization. In order to do so, they secede, both symbolically and physically, from the larger human association in which they feel alienated, seeking the utmost degree of meaning and purpose within that unified and cohesive 'identity group' in which all members are, feel and desire in unison. In the initial phase of the process, the host of alternative values and goals embodied by the community must be nurtured in a protected milieu. This safe haven remains insulated from outer reality and from the contending versions of truth confusingly circulating in it. The withdrawal within, however, is only a temporary tactic for preparing the assault against what is dreaded outside. If the close-knit community functions as a

'giant cauldron' mustering grievances, frustrations and anxieties of the affiliated, the primary aim is to render those grievances, frustrations and anxieties into a concerted and unyielding exertion of utter change.¹⁰⁹ As a revolutionary elite, the community is entrenched in the sense of having been singled out to carry out a vital task. Its members always act in good faith and for the sake of the larger society. They cultivate their readiness to deviate from or contravene the prevailing rules only because they believe themselves to possess the right formula to remedy the crisis engulfing the whole polity. It is worth stressing that, despite its antinomian charge, the plan of radical restructuring is never devised for a purely annihilative purpose. The status quo is challenged, but always in order to take charge creatively over its failing symbolic system with a new and more efficacious *nomos*. In this sense, every revitalization movement should be primarily seen as an adaptive instrument for sociocultural renewal. Another important feature of several revitalization phenomena, maintains Wallace, is the 'prophet': a charismatic figure who can channel the revolutionary elan of his or her followers by aligning their thoughts, aspirations and deeds with the normative vision of the community. Such a figure convincingly accounts for the current plight, as well as furnishing hope for future fulfilment. On the one hand, the prophet explains the social malaise embattling the community as resulting from the repeated vituperation of certain dogmas and norms of conduct; on the other, he or she promises individual or collective revitalization from impending catastrophe provided that 'the right injunctions are followed and the right rituals are practiced'.

Notwithstanding the revolutionary claims, observes Wallace, the palingenesis that these movements avow rarely constitutes an *ex novo* creation. The term 'revitalization' itself derives from the idea that, according to those involved in the process, restoring values, customs or tropes belonging to an idealized version of the past can rejuvenate the deplorably corrupt status quo. However, on a closer analysis, this revival is not a mere reinstitution of the past either. First, one should consider that recovering what is thought to have been the 'tradition' is not an unproblematic task to accomplish, 'for the image of the ancient culture to be revived is distorted by historical ignorance'. Second, even if this 'philological restoration' was feasible, the process of revitalization would never be able to make *tabula rasa* of the mainstream *nomos* that the movement challenges, leaving many of its aspects 'intact, if unrecognized, in large areas of experience'.¹¹⁰ Wallace also notes that, more often than not, the revitalization movement nurtures a significant degree of identification and even envy towards the cultural lore that it

loathes and rejects as aggressively alien. Taking into account all these factors, the absolute novelty that every revitalizing project professes would rather be an intense syncretism recombining, in an original and unprecedented symbolic tapestry, heterogeneous and even incompatible elements, selected from a vast repertoire. This includes elements of the idealized utopian past, but also constitutive features of the same societal order considered as flawed and deficient. Wallace names this procedure as 'mazeway resynthesis' to allude to the evidence that the salvific path out of the 'labyrinthine anomie' is cut by means of the revitalization movement's syncretic and selective re-aggregation of different symbolic apparatuses. In Griffin's words, the new *Weltanschauung* put forward as a solution to the sense-making crisis would always entail a cultural compromise drawing from both the 'healthy sources' of the tradition and those values, myths, symbols and subsystems that have already attained currency within the society.¹¹¹ In light of its distinctive synthesis recombining elements of modernity, Zionist nationalism, Hebrew tradition and Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy, Gush Emunim would fit this description.

The 'McJihad' paradox

Fifteen years ago, American political theorist Benjamin Barber addressed the impact of globalization through a heuristic model based on two dialectically tensioned dynamics: the global-centrifugal drive of 'McWorld' versus the local-centripetal pull of 'Jihad'. For Barber, the same phenomenon of 'globalization' would produce a bifurcated effect. On the one hand, by intensifying planetary interconnectedness, flows of trade, finance, information, migration and ideas, the hyper-capitalist and consumerist McWorld would increasingly melt down the socioeconomic barriers between nation-states, rendering the world's complexities into one blandly indistinct market. As a result of the 'McDonaldization' of the entire world, continues Barber, we are witnessing the gradual erosion and disappearance of cultural differences and at the same time the disembedding of human communities from their local cultures, traditions and values. On the other hand, as a pull of a force gives rise to the reaction of an opposite force, the drive towards global homogeneity would assist the mounting tide of the 'local', under the guise of ethno-religious hatreds and rivalries, which are today responsible for the fragmentation of the geopolitical landscape into smaller tribal units. For Barber, the dialectics between the two forces define the axial tension of our epoch. As they modernize under the influx of globalization,

world societies become simultaneously and indistinguishably more universalistic and more particularistic, more 'neo-liberalist' and more 'neo-fundamentalist'.¹¹² Otherwise put, the McWorld and Jihad drives are highly interactive and causally linked, so much so that they amount to a singular process.

Israeli sociologist Uri Ram charges that the Israeli state is presently caught up in the convergence of the two powerful forces described by Barber, both on a regional and domestic scale:

Israel is straddled geopolitically between McWorld and Jihad, between being a protégé of the United States and being situated in the Middle East, at the heart of world Islamic resistance to the American creed. Yet not only is Israel situated globally between McWorld and Jihad but also undergoes 'within' the same bifurcation that takes place in the world at large. ... On the one hand Israel is a stable parliamentary democracy, it is highly advanced economically, and a Western-style consumer society; on the other it is a state of occupation, apartheid and social deprivation, and a place in which a separation between synagogue and state hardly obtains.

In the last two decades or so, adds Ram, the far-reaching impact of globalized modernity accrued an already ongoing decline within the classic paradigm of Zionist nationalism – a decline that began at the least in the early 1970s. Today, as the nation stands in a fully post-Zionist and globalized era, the central fault line along which Israeli collective identity is shaped would be the dialectic between the all-pervasive 'McWorld' and the backlash of Jewish 'Jihad'. Furthermore, that dialectic would find an exemplary geographic expression in two Israeli urban realities, only a 45-minute drive away from each other: the secularized and affluent Tel Aviv and the Orthodox and comparatively destitute Jerusalem. Tel Aviv stands as a vivid example of a hyper-capitalistic and dynamic city, thriving on all sorts of 'information highways' and fascinated by 'the global village, in which there is room for [the pop singer] Madonna and McDonald's'. Jerusalem, by contrast, stands as the quintessential embodiment of the distinctively local: 'Jerusalemite Israeliness' and its yearning for a wholesale return to the traditionally Jewish. Being all too often imbued with fear from, distrust in or even contempt for what is non-Jewish, the ultra-Orthodox faith and culture would border on ethno-religious exclusivity.¹¹³

As Ram's study points out, the bifurcated impact of globalized modernity on Israeli society would overlap with and embolden pre-existing class,

ethnic and political cleavages. The Ashkenazi upper and middle classes, the true 'winners' of globalization, would fully subscribe to more cosmopolitan attitudes and values, whilst advocating the country's wholesale integration into the Westernized patterns of McWorld. Opting for Israel's assimilation into the globalized economy would nevertheless entail endorsing an almost default stand in domestic politics: relinquishing the ideal of Eretz Yisrael in favour of a negotiated peace with the Palestinian counterparts. It is commonly held that the national religious agenda in the Occupied Territories is detrimental to Israel's full entrance into McWorld – namely because the by-product of Jewish colonization is nothing but violent Arab resistance and regional instability, which, in turn, cripple economic growth by deterring international investment and trade. For Ram, the Oslo Agreements pushed forward by the Rabin–Peres government during the mid 1990s stood as the first 'McWorld diplomatic manifesto', one sacrificing Gush Emunim's goals on the altar of free market prosperity for all Israelis.

In keeping with Barber's model, Ram contends that Israel's attempt to enter McWorld begets a concurrent process of 'tribalization' in the guise of Jewish Jihadism. The losers of globalization, that is, lower labouring classes and newly immigrated Jews from East Europe, would respond to the inroads of McWorld on a more local and sectarian scale. The lower socioeconomic classes tend to adhere to a confrontational form of ethno-nationalism and reject the upper classes' liberal cosmopolitan aspirations while stressing that the Jewish people must 'dwell alone', no matter the consequences that a stark contrast with the international community might produce in economic or diplomatic terms. It is quite revealing that, akin to their Islamist counterparts, the acolytes of the Jewish Jihad buy into Samuel Huntington's thesis positing an insurmountable 'clash of civilizations', in this case dividing Israeli Jewry from the rest of the world.

In the last decades, the struggle against the 'globalization–peace process' agenda has acquired the tones of a *Kulturkampf*. Not resisting the lures of McWorld would lead the Chosen astray from their righteous path, making them 'drown into a sea of lusts, licentiousness and permissiveness'. Needless to say, the issue of the Land is essential to the fight: bargaining over its territorial integrity amounts to the utter surrender of the Jewish soul to 'the dying Western culture'. Indeed, as Moshe Hellinger reports, within national religious circles and, more recently, even in that quota of Haredi Jews who once stood against the Zionist state, the holy cause of Eretz Yisrael is bound up with the cultural crusade against the impurity and moral laxity coming with the

'Hellenizing' influences of secularism, neoliberal capitalism and democratic pluralism.¹¹⁴

The Jewish Jihad front, including minorities such as national religious settlers, Orthodox Jews, Mizrahim and secular extremists, has been politically mobilized by the right-wing bloc led by the Likud Party – mainly in view of the latter's irredentist policies and diplomatic stand against a two-state solution. As early as 1996, the rallying cry of the 'Netanyahu Coalition' was based on a blend of 'populist anti-elitism and popular Jewish traditionalism', stigmatizing at one and the same time 'the cosmopolitan, urban, upper-middle classes (Ashkenzim) and practically all Israeli and Arab Palestinians'. At present, within the governmental coalition drawn out of the 2013 elections, the front is represented by the Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu and Jewish Home, three parties controlling together 42 of the 120 seats in the Knesset.

It is worth concluding this section by casting light on the modernist syncretism stemming from global–local dialectic. As far as the Barber's model is concerned, one might note a sort of self-perpetuating circularity. Insofar as McWorld is the 'prime mover' that activates and fuels its derivative 'twin' Jihad, the former, in turn, reinforces its globalizing mission in view of the need to reform the world from the augmented tribalism of the latter. As already explained, the two forces, being two different expressions of the very same process, do not stand against each other in stark exclusionary terms but, rather, in a dialectic complementation, one that sometimes leads towards a creative synthesis between opposites. Indeed, the true novelty about Barber's bifurcated paradigm, observes Ram, consists in the emergence of a 'third form':

Progress moves in steps but sometimes lurched backwards in history's twisting maze. Jihad not only revolts against but also abets McWorld, while McWorld not only imperils but also recreates and reinforces Jihad. Furthermore, McWorld and Jihad are not the tags of distinct social groups or world regions but rather dimensions of globalization that are intermixed, so that at certain points they almost collapse into what was termed 'McJihad'.¹¹⁵

One can easily associate Gush Emunim with the Jihad ideal-type. With its obsessive emphasis on biblical memory, puritanical lifestyle, community with God and messianic renaissance in Eretz Yisrael, the national religious identity swims against the prevailing currents of secularist McWorld. It does so in a bid to recover what is authentically 'local' and idiosyncratically 'Jewish': a concept that in Hebrew is expressed by the term 'seguliyut'.¹¹⁶

However, Jewish ethno-religious uniqueness and exclusiveness are not the only markers of national religious identity. In an almost paradoxical twist, the Jewish Jihad seems to attain its vitality by drinking directly from the springs of the avowedly despised McWorld. Standing against the homogenizing encroachment of Western modernity, observes Fiege, often implies 'selectively' embracing some of its most defining aspects:

To survive and thrive in a modern world, believers need to adopt aspects of Modernity selectively. They use modern media, often use advanced weapons, and, where such a regime exists, join in the open atmosphere of democracy and free press. Modern technology and institutions are usually accompanied by Modernist culture that infiltrates the believers' ranks. The Fundamentalists therefore are always balancing strict religious dicta with the lures of modern life. That is true even among groups that succeed in constructing a secluded enclave, such as the Jewish ultra-Orthodox, and is inevitable in communities that cherish their good relations with secular co-nationals, such as the ideological settlers of Gush Emunim.¹¹⁷

Once interpreted as a modernist anti-modernization movement, Gush Emunim would completely embody the McJihad paradox. Its political mobilization is apparently motivated by the mounting assault of an updated form of Hellenization, as epitomized by the soulless McWorld values and codes. However, it would be misleading to interpret Gush Emunim as a mere rejection of or, let alone, a retreat from the maelstrom of modernity. As a revitalizing project, Gush Emunim deconstructs the alien and apparently hostile cultural tropes of globalized modernity, but only to re-aggregate and syncretize them with the healthy elements of the Jewish tradition and Zionist nationalism. The end result of such a process would be an unprecedented modernist cultural compound. A *sui generis* reality originating from heterogeneous and apparently incompatible constituents (in Wallace's terminology, a 'mazeway resynthesis') would cut a revolutionary path towards a new nomos out of the anomic crisis engulfing the 'locally Jewish' polity.

Applying John Gray's ideas about the true 'meaning' of al-Qaeda to the Jewish context, Gush Emunim should not be seen solely as a tribalist surge against McWorld's snares, but also and foremost as a 'sacralised form of Modernity masqueraded as a true religion'.¹¹⁸ As Griffin would probably put it, Gush Emunim and its theo-political revolution represent a symptom of the very disease of which the national religious project presents itself as a cure.¹¹⁹

Normalization

It has been argued here that revitalization movements reject the current social order in which they reside and invest their hopes and resources in a new age whose arrival they perceive as imminent. The result is a collective existence located between the old order, whose demise is presumed inevitable, and the future one, which has yet to be born. It is essential to note that, in keeping with Wallace's anthropology, a revivalist phenomenon does not create 'structural liminality' (the experiential state of being in transition between ages and orders), rather, it exploits the ambiguous state of 'betwixt-and-between', by pro-actively intervening in the vacuum of authority, legitimacy and meaning with a viable alternative to the failing sociopolitical system.¹²⁰

Preserving a revitalizing community in such a liminal position is however no easy task to accomplish. In the first instance, as an exceptional historical circumstance favourable to a charismatic breakthrough, structural liminality is ephemeral in nature and therefore tends to be quickly 'reabsorbed' into normalcy. Second, as far as the revolutionary counter-society is concerned, an intensive and costly effort of mobilization is required in order to keep the internal state of effervescence alive. Further, the pledged assertions of impending and wholesale transformation defining the revitalizing identity can hardly be maintained ad infinitum, especially when the promised transfiguration fails to materialize. Since their *raison d'être* is highly contingent upon the extraordinary circumstances that existed at that particular time and place in which they originated, charismatic movements, secular and religious alike, might be categorized as 'situational'. Insofar as they detach temporally from the 'state of exception' that has precipitated their formation, situational movements are inherently prone to dissipate their initial thrust unless some sort of institutionalization is comprehensively undertaken. Intra-historical duration cannot be achieved without a substantial process of normalization, which usually entails downgrading or at least redefining the movement's original revolutionary essence and programmatic statements.

If Gush Emunim acted on the crisis generated by the Yom Kippur War, that 'situation' did not last very long. The death of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the prophet of the Religious Zionist renaissance, intensified the process of routinization, which was already under way after the extraordinary circumstances of 1973. As the charismatic appeal over the Israeli masses was waning and organizational concerns were becoming more pressing, the settlers' movement needed additional forces, which could

only be supplied by the same secular institutions that Gush Emunim aimed at supplanting with a Torahcratic republic. The distinctive anti-parliamentarism was to a significant extent toned down when, in order to obtain stable access to the policy-making process and thereby affect social change, Gush Emunim affiliated with the National Religious Party. Lobbying the political establishment through the NRP Knesset members signalled that the movement was growing out of its charismatic phase, whilst reconsidering its revolutionary assertiveness.¹²¹ Paradoxically, observes Aran, Gush Emunim's affirmation as a legitimate player within mainstream politics marked the beginning of its decline as a revitalization project. As a result of its co-optation, the national religious front compromised its aura of messianic counterculture, placing its religious leadership in uncharted waters or, even worse, in a 'trap':

Despite its obvious advantages, Gush Emunim's institutionalization as an integral part of the Israeli political system was at best a mixed blessing. The movement felt somewhat superfluous: its work was being accomplished by the government, which established settlements in the Occupied Territories, set up electricity lines, paved roads, and encouraged people to settle there *en masse*. Yet the government also continued to uphold its commitment to law and order, democracy, and the peace process, which now appeared to threaten Israeli sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael. The ostensible contradiction in the government's behaviour was paralleled by a curious irony within Gush Emunim: as settlements proliferated and expanded at an unprecedented pace, the movement seemed to be deteriorating, lurching from one crisis to another.¹²²

As noted, in order to realize the full transition of Judea and Samaria into the collective perception of the homeland's geography (in Lustick's words, to reach the 'ideological-hegemonic' status) and, in so doing, render any plan of territorial disengagement beyond the scope of common sense, it was deemed necessary to undertake a conjoined pedagogical and colonialist effort. Gush Emunim soon engaged in informational and outreach activities among the general public, alongside establishing facts on the ground beyond the Green Line. Once the Zionist apparatus, resources and institutions had been appointed as primary media to accomplish these goals, it was only logical to expect that routinization would have naturally ensued.

However, despite the relevance of these arguments, it should not be forgotten that, from a theological angle, the institutionalization

of Gush Emunim's theocratic revolution was a potential already sown in the messianic approach propelling the movement into militancy. Especially when one takes into account their practical and tangible dimension, the twin strategies of 'settling in the heart/settling in the land' are entirely consistent with Rabbi Kook's naturalistic messianism – a redemptive approach according to which Jewish final deliverance is to be pursued progressively and rely on the assistance stemming from the secular side of the national religious syncretism. In particular, attention has been drawn to how Kook the father understood Israel's redemption as a process that has already begun and whose development each generation of Jews must contribute toward with precise intra-historical tasks. Otherwise put, the routinization of the Religious Zionist palingenesis is to a not negligible degree implicit in the emphasis that the rabbi put on the mundane and human-led process in respect to the role of transcendental intervention.

Ravintzky categorizes Kookism as a 'Messianism without the Messiah': a form of redemption that takes place in the absence of a God-sent redeemer. It is not the Messiah who will miraculously bring about the critical turn (the Messianic Age) as theorized in the apocalyptic schemes of Haredi Judaism but, on the contrary, it is the earthly trajectory set in motion by secular Zionism and later advanced by the Jews committed to the cause of Eretz Yisrael that will give birth to the Messiah. Israel's saviour will neither start nor push salvation forward, but only mark its culmination: 'He is not responsible for the planting and growth of the fruit, but rather for its ripening.'¹²³ Once Gush Emunim adopted Kook's gradualist reading of redemption as a blueprint for political action, the messianic revolution was 'immanentized' to the extent to which the intra-historical and secular means of accomplishment (the Zionist state and its institutions) overshadowed the transcendental end that revolution was supposed to bring about. The utopian ideal of supplanting the current secular order with a Torah-based theocracy was indefinitely postponed as the transition towards it turned out to matter more than the absolute and meta-historical goal.

According to conventional paradigms in political science, the normalization phase that many charismatic movements go through often engenders secessionist crises. An in-group ideological split might occur between the dogmatic 'radicals' and the pragmatic 'consensus-builders'. The former, having normally led the preliminary stage of extra- or anti-institutional mobilization and protest, remain uncompromisingly faithful to the movement's original values and aims, whereas the latter are more willing to sacrifice those values and aims, or at least negotiate

them, in the name of 'practical strategies out of idealistic premises'.¹²⁴ In the case of Gush Emunim, the inner splitting became glaringly evident in the early 1980s, as the integrity of Eretz Yisrael came under serious diplomatic scrutiny.

Yamit

The Religious Zionist credo enmeshes Judaism with nationalism by sanctifying two key doctrinal principles: the holiness of the Land of Israel is mirrored by and harmonized with the holiness of the State of Israel. On the one hand, Kookism posits Eretz Yisrael as an organic and indivisible entity, given to the Jewish people in everlasting possession in light of the unconditional that Covenant God stipulated to them. Hence, no individual or group may relinquish any of its parts without contravening the divine will and hampering the process of messianic redemption. On the other, it has been argued that Kookism stems from that segment of Orthodoxy granting a religious value to the Zionist movement and advocating participation in its institutions. Despite the secular gloss, the Zionist ideology and state are essentially sacred as, in the guise of God's mundane tool, they press Jewish salvation forward, albeit unknowingly.

Israel's decision to implement the Camp David Accords of 1979 pitted for the very first time these two principles one against the other. In April 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Minister of Defence Ariel Sharon, until then two of the most dedicated secular supporters of the national religious project, succumbed to international pressure and agreed to the evacuation and destruction of the settlement region of Yamit, in the Sinai Peninsula. That an Israeli government was willing to relinquish territories as part of a peace agreement with the Arabs forced many Religious Zionists to come to terms with the traumatic disconfirmation of their basic assumptions regarding the state's sacred nature and redemptive role. With Yamit, historical evidence was going against the grain of the messianic triumphalism promoted within Kookist circles. As Motti Inbari details in his study, the withdrawal set a dangerous precedent for what could have happened in Judea and Samaria:

The State of Israel [was] moving in a direction that was inconsonant with, and even diametrically opposed to, the process of redemption as Religious Zionists saw it. The withdrawal from Yamit constituted irrefutable proof that the process of redemption was reversible and this was the underlying cause of the dissonance they experienced. ...

The idea that Zionists, unaware of the tremendous mission they bore, would deliver their secular enterprise into the hands of a Messianic theocracy with full control over Eretz Yisrael proved mistaken. The divine mission was neglected by precisely those who were destined to be its bearers, and in place of progress came regression. The desire for 'normality' led the course of redemption to the edge of oblivion.¹²⁵

The shattering of the grand vision of redemption at the hands of those who were supposed to be its first promoters sparked a far-reaching theological crisis within the national religious circles, one requiring explanation. Many spiritual leaders addressed the 'political shame' of Yamit as rooted in the reliance on diplomatic considerations over internal Jewish ideals and modes. By sacrificing sacred land and uprooting settlements in the name of an Israeli normalization within the 'patterns of behaviour' as defined by the international community, the secular state was selling out Israel's uniqueness as a nation that must necessarily dwell alone, in light of its leading role in the process of cosmic restoration. Nonetheless, Yamit did not divert Gush Emunim from the normative path of Kookism. Rather, the disconfirmation reinforced the national religious resoluteness in pursuing the messianic task according to the already consolidated modalities. In the first instance, the moral imperative to conquer and settle the Land by relying on the 'instrumentalities' of the Zionist state was reaffirmed even more strongly. Second, if the primary reason underlying the Sinai withdrawal was the lack of proper understanding about Eretz Yisrael's bearing in the economy of Jewish renewal, the primary task for Gush Emunim remained that of influencing, convincing and re-educating the entire nation through a long-term *Kulturkampf*. Inculcating a messianic consciousness in all Israelis would have kept the abominable elements of Westoxication from infiltrating the Jewish soul and, thus, prevented a general disposition towards further territorial losses. In the wake of Yamit, observes Janet Aviad, Gush Emunim's leaders

found it necessary to state repeatedly that the movement must not break out of the established democratic norms and must not attempt to force the majority to capitulate under threats of civil war or sectarianism. Gush Emunim saw itself as charged to remain within the main body of Israel in order to transform the whole. The movement must not only continue to settle and thereby guarantee the inner and outer continuation of the revitalization and redemption processes. It must also take upon itself the ideological task of defining meaning and guiding the lost people.¹²⁶

Gush Emunim's mainstream cadres and members integrated the traumatic evacuation of Sinai into their understanding of history, without undermining Rabbi Kook's gradualist pragmatism. If the consensus-builders did not question their allegiance to the secular institutions and, along with it, the assumption that the Zionist state was the sacred medium whereby redemption would have incrementally materialized, a very different response came from the radical fringes of the movement.

The apocalyptic turn

Yehuda Etzion, the main ideologue of the Jewish Underground (a Jewish terrorist organization that planned 'Operation Temple Mount' to blow up the mosques on the site), is recognized as one of the most original thinkers in contemporary Religious Zionism. Although his apocalyptic theory of redemption starkly diverts from the official vision of Merkaz Harav (the fountainhead of Rabbi Kook's theology), Etzion remains nonetheless an offspring of Gush Emunim's milieu and spirit.¹²⁷ His 'theocratic post-Zionist' perspective is the outcome of a criticism moved on both sides of the national religious synthesis: the signing of the Camp David Accords with Egypt in 1979 and the decision to sacrifice portions of Eretz Yisrael as 'bargaining chips' on the diplomatic table in 1982 proved to Etzion that secular and Religious Zionism had equally reached a dead end. If secular politicians derailed the course of redemption by sacrificing the holy integrity of the Land that they were meant to safeguard and promote, the lack of determination in Gush Emunim's leadership no doubt allowed this to happen. The polemical thrust, however, was mainly directed against the national religious doctrine – to be precise, Rabbi Kook's naturalistic approach to messianism and the Religious Zionist subservience to the Israeli government ensuing from that approach.

Etzion shared with mainstream Gush Emunim the maximalist end to establish a Jewish theocratic kingdom centred on the Temple Mount and with full dominion over present-day Israel, the Sinai, Jordan, Syria and parts of Lebanon and Iraq. What he fiercely contested were the tactics and timetable that Kook had set and Gush Emunim deployed in order to accomplish that supreme goal. Etzion reached the conclusion that the setback of Yamit was the direct outcome of fixing the redemptive task exclusively on the gradualist efforts of settling in the Land and in the Israelis' hearts. Further, the sanctification of the state, on the one hand, and the normalization of Gush Emunim within its structure, on the other, blunted the edge of the national religious revolution and, in

that manner, thwarted any autonomous will to oppose governmental policies envisaging territorial compromise.¹²⁸ Given all these shortcomings, Etzion saw the necessity to supplant the old tactics of messianic realization with new and more effective ones. After historical events disproved the pragmatists' belief that the Messianic Age could be pursued incrementally, relying on the Zionist state's institutional channels, forcing the End by an act of redemptive violence became a viable option for the dogmatists.

Once brought to the fore by Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet, in April 1984, the Jewish Underground's plot shocked both national and international public opinion, and at the same time revealed the present dangers arising from messianic frenzy. That many participants were closely associated with the Knesset-represented Gush Emunim jeopardized the latter's public standing, triggering heated theological debates and deliberations within Religious Zionist circles. This revelation also shattered modern Israel's 'non-terroristic self-perception', introducing 'a new dimension of brutality', which forever changed 'the way many Israelis thought of themselves and their fellow citizens'.¹²⁹

In his sociological analysis, Aran underscores the causal relationship between the decision of Begin's government to withdraw from Sinai and the comprehensive countermeasures that the plotters instigated in order to put a stop to this major 'national sin'. As far as the Jewish understanding of the Holy Land is concerned, a set of concentric circles stemming from a meaningful centre delimits an organically connected sacred space. Indeed, one can notice a 'metonymic contiguity' linking three physical entities: 'Jerusalem had come to symbolize all that the Land stood for, and just as Jerusalem became the symbol of the Land, so the Temple became the symbol of the City'.¹³⁰ Final salvation, it has been argued, would be accomplished by inclusion in that hallowed precinct organized around a centre. Given this mystical territorial unity, it stands to reason that, for many devout Religious Zionists, a major messianic reversal happening at Eretz Yisrael's periphery (Yamit's evacuation) might have repercussions at its epicentre (the Temple Mount).¹³¹ The Jewish Underground members foresaw that the only move to put redemption back on course was that of blowing up what they termed as the 'abomination': the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. These two shrines together represent the third most important sanctuary in the Muslim world. For millions of devout Sunnis, Islam began in Mecca and Medina, but to gloriously climax in Jerusalem, the 'Apocalyptic capital' of their faith. Haram al-Sharif, the Arab designation for the Temple Mount, is commonly recognized as the 'Noble Sanctuary' or

'Furthest Mosque'. As recounted in the Koran, at the opening of Sura 17, Haram al-Sharif is the destination of the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous Night Journey and the place from which he ascended to heaven to be received by God. There, the Islamic Millennium will be inaugurated under the rule of the Mahdi. A sort of 'fateful symmetry' exists between the Muslim and Jewish messianic expectations attached to the same 35-acre compound. The Temple Mount is the exact location where the Jewish End Time is expected to unfold. If the First and Second Temple once stood there, that plateau is also designated for the rebuilding of the third and last 'Holy of Holies'. That act, along with the reinstitution of animal sacrifices mandated by the Hebrew Bible, crowns the advent of the Davidic Messiah.¹³²

In June 1967, the Jewish people were miraculously reunited after 2000 years with the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. Soon after the armistice, Minister of Defence Moshe Dayan, fully aware of the potential for military, theological and political clashes arising from a Jewish monopoly over the site, decided to leave its jurisdiction in the hands of the *Waqf* – the Islamic council already managing the edifices around the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Nevertheless, that decision alone could not have stopped the wave of messianic fervour released by the sudden reacquisition. After heated deliberations, not only did the Orthodox authorities align with Dayan's status quo arrangement, but went even further. By October of the same year, they issued an unprecedented rabbinic ruling forbidding Jewish access to 'any part of the Temple Mount, irrespective of the gate used for entrance'. Many Israelis felt deprived of 'the most sacred site in their religious landscape, a site from which Jews had been traumatically barred and to which they had sought and fought to return relentlessly'. The main theological argument offered to back the ruling was that the restriction would save 'Jewish lives' by reducing the likelihood of interreligious conflict at 'the single most volatile piece of real estate in the Middle East, perhaps on the planet'.¹³³

Governmental and rabbinic efforts also converged in rechannelling the believers' spiritual yearnings towards a surreptitious *axis mundi*, a new bridge between the human and the divine world. The Western Wall, the only remnant of the Second Temple left standing after the Roman siege of 70 CE, was soon designated as an alternative and less disputed focus of Jewish prayer. Given the impressive number of rabbis who put their signature on the ruling, the vast majority of Orthodox Jews (Religious Zionists included) recognized the legitimacy of the ban imposed on them. For extremists of the kind like Etzion, on the contrary, the status quo arrangement along with the rabbinic ruling

endorsing it seemed frustratingly incomprehensible. Their dismay was heightened by the shame that Israel regained control of the Temple Mount after winning a God-driven war against the Arabs but did not dare rule over it. Rather, the Zionist government allowed the 'husk of Ishmael' to desecrate and contaminate what was considered to be the primary locus of national religious identity and messianic hope. In order to prepare the ground for the Third Temple as well as accelerate the prophetic timetable towards total redemption, Etzion and his followers thought it indispensable to translate desires into radical action and to purify the hallow precinct from the Islamic defilement.¹³⁴

In the Jewish Underground's imagery, the abomination also functioned as a sort of symbolic scapegoat, whose violent purging was essential to the theocratic palingenesis of secular and Westernized Israeli society. Whilst interrogated by the authorities, Menachem Livni, the plot's logistic and operational mind, contended that the existence of the two mosques on the Temple Mount represented 'the basis of the Arabs' hold on the Holy Land', but more importantly 'the root cause of all the spiritual errors of our generation'. Concrete action against the abomination was therefore required to tackle once and for all the deficiencies afflicting the nation. The cleansing of the abomination would have played as a 'catalyst for the Jewish ascent up the scales of sanctity', and thus achieved what the meek Zionist state and Kookism had hitherto missed.¹³⁵

The aspirations of the Jewish Underground plotters of 'Operation Temple Mount' were perfectly in line with Religious Zionism's overall vision: to actualize Israel's distinctive 'laws of destiny' and, by this means, elevate an ordinary state into a holy kingdom of priests capable of leading the entire world towards salvation. What changed drastically was the mode of accomplishment. If Gush Emunim had failed to capture the hearts of the people, a shocking breakthrough might have yielded better results in reducing the distance between the settlers' cause and the wider Israeli public. As Haggai Segal, another member of the terrorist group, put it: after it became clear that the messianic goals could not be achieved by evolution, the revolutionary route emerged as a viable option to rekindle the Jewish spiritual awakening.

It is almost impossible not to detect the apocalyptic flavour imbuing the whole enterprise. From a theological standpoint, the idea implied in that single but decisive strike against the Muslim shrines was that redemption was no longer expected to precipitate 'little by little' – that is, on Rabbi Kook's naturalistic progressive grounds but, rather, 'totally', 'suddenly' and 'catastrophically'. As an act of creative destruction,

the scheme was deliberately masterminded to elicit a 'domino effect' escalating towards an apocalyptic finale. The bombing of the Temple Mount mosques was meant to usher in the War of Gog Magog against the Islamic world. That war was desirable in that it would have compelled the Almighty to intervene on the terrorists' side, assist them in defeating the enemy and in establishing a Jewish theocratic dominion on earth. In this regard, Aran reported that:

a scholarly simulation game conducted at the Harvard Center for International Affairs analyzed the possible outcomes of [the Jewish Underground's] scheme, had it succeeded. Some experts believed that it might have triggered World War III. The cell of activist-believers had in fact taken such a possibility into account. The head of the Underground foresaw that the bombing of the abomination would arouse Muslims to a global jihad, sweeping all mankind into an ultimate confrontation. Israel's victorious emergence from this longed-for trial by fire would then pave the way for the coming of the Messiah.¹³⁶

Etzion's theocratic post-Zionism should be interpreted as a reaction as well as corrective to the various lacunae stemming from Kookism's application within the Israeli political context. In particular, the Jewish Underground's violent antinomianism culminating in the plan to blow up the mosques arose, on the one hand, from the institutionalization of Gush Emunim's spiritual revolution and, on the other, from the painful cognitive dissonance between the messianic ideal and historical reality – a dissonance generated by the Zionist state's willingness to betray its sacred mission by trading portions of Eretz Yisrael for peace. On this ground, theocratic post-Zionism might also be seen as a further 'revitalizing upsurge' growing out of or, better, seceding from a more comprehensive but declining revivalist phenomenon (Gush Emunim).

The reading of redemption advocated by the terrorists represents, however, an original and fairly idiosyncratic concoction of various normative elements belonging to both the naturalistic and apocalyptic modes of messianic realization, the two modes that have been extensively discussed in the first section of this study. If the Jewish Underground's sudden and violent manner of hastening the End breaks with Rabbi Kook's gradual pragmatism and, to an equal extent, with Religious Zionism's distinctive loyalty towards the secular state and its rules, the transition out of naturalistic messianism is consummated without losing the distinctive Promethean edge of Kookism – the key theological tenet that

the redemptive process can and must be proactively advanced by human action. Otherwise argued: in light of his inherent catastrophist approach, Etzion moves closer to the apocalyptic pessimism of the Haredi world, that is, the staunchest form of anti-Zionist Judaism. However, he does so by rejecting the ultra-Orthodox injunction that the burden of redemption ought to be left to the Lord alone, in a vague and elusive manner. Within theocratic post-Zionism, on the contrary, there is a distinctive call for human action, which, in its radicalism, largely supplants the passive hope in divine intervention. By forcing the End below with one fateful blow, the terrorists intended to activate the higher powers above, 'obliging' the Master of the Universe to intervene on Israel's behalf.¹³⁷ These arguments would confirm the assumption that the two modes (naturalistic/progressive and apocalyptic/catastrophic) are not mutually exclusive but, rather, stand in a creative and ever changing tension. In its various permutations, the messianic ideal responds like a barometer to external variations taking place in the socio-historical context. Its extreme sensitivity and adaptability towards reality represent the counterpoint to the influence that the messianic ideal exerts on reality when it constellates as a political force.

Etzion has frequently been labelled a 'zealot'. In the Jewish Orthodox lexicon, the term designates an overly pious believer whose fanatical ideas and deeds lie beyond the pale of a theological framework recognized as normative – in Etzion's case, Religious Zionism. Although its practical applications were mainly directed against the 'husks of Ishmael', the heathen presence on the Temple Mount, theocratic post-Zionism also entailed a blatant criticism of Gush Emunim's hierocratic leadership. Zealots paradigmatically act on their own initiative whenever the mainstream religious establishment they belong to is judged too weak to take serious action against what undermines or offends their cherished beliefs. Although it is precisely this avowed weakness to spur their resentful militancy, zealots nevertheless seem incapable of fully bypassing the rabbinic tradition that they are rooted in. More often than not, their antinomian elan yearns for some sort of *ex ante* or *ex post* authorization by some respected figures within the same Orthodox milieu that they criticize and challenge. As far as the Jewish Underground is concerned, many contend that the more indicative and thought-provoking aspects rest on the evidence that the zealous urge to precipitate redemption catastrophically was curbed not by external forces (the intervention of the Shin Bet) but, rather, by the internal decision to procrastinate the plan indefinitely. That decision by and large depended on the lack of rabbinic patronage or approval.

Despite Etzion being highly thought of because of his otherworldly ideals and purity of intents, his programme of active redemption was nevertheless hindered by a substantial 'legitimacy deficit'. In the first instance, neither he nor anybody else in the conspiracy circle had been ordained as a rabbi nor carried any resemblance of Halakhic authority. Second, all the attempts carried out to secure rabbinic endorsement were met with, at best, concern or, at worst, outright condemnation. Revered Religious Zionist rabbis referred to plots to expedite theocratic elevation 'catastrophically' with the label of Sabbatianism: a false and dangerous form of messianism putting at serious risk Jewish existence.¹³⁸ Curiously enough, theocratic post-Zionism was stigmatized by the same epithet that Haredi Judaism usually deploys to denounce Gush Emunim's political messianism.

Once Operation Temple Mount was foiled, the focus diverted from the most spectacular but impractical apocalyptic vision towards more feasible acts of 'smaller terrorism' against Palestinian officials, schools and population. The Jewish Underground shelved its grand scheme, but without abandoning its underlying principle, according to which chaos and violence against Arabs were harbingers of Jewish redemption in that they could effectively prevent and reverse any peace process. Today, a not too dissimilar tactic known as 'price-tag policy' is systematically implemented by the Hilltop Youth, the most radical splinter groups within the Religious Zionist spectrum over which neither the Gush Emunim leadership nor the secular state has control whatsoever. Each time the Israeli government enforces the evacuation of unauthorized outposts or curbs settlement expansion, these young and ideologically infused settlers exact a 'price' for such a betrayal by attacking Palestinians or vandalizing their religious symbols and property. In their mind, a struggle beyond the accepted confines of legality constitutes an objective in its own right as it is deliberately designed to elicit Arab retaliation. This, in turn, is expected to escalate into a wider crisis, forestalling any direct peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority.

That Etzion's dream to spark an apocalyptic 'Big Bang' through the destruction of the Dome of the Rock was overcome by inner theological restraints and inhibitions, would implicitly confirm that mainstream Gush Emunim was ultimately capable of withstanding and reabsorbing the crisis generated by Yamit's redemptive drawback. Kookism's standing among its believers, its flexibility and ability to adjust to frustrating historical realities has been further proven by the containment of the Gaza Strip and Amona pullouts in July 2005 and

February 2006, respectively. Notwithstanding the inner spiritual crisis caused by Sharon's betrayal, there were no significant signs of defection amongst the settlers, nor have they resorted to violence against the IDF or state institutions. However, a unilateral disengagement from the West Bank would no doubt herald a completely different scenario, that eventuality being the most difficult messianic disconfirmation for Gush Emunim to digest. Not only are the stony hills of Judea and Samaria the location where the settlers have lived for more than thirty years, building homes, working and raising their families there, but they are also the most 'non-negotiable' locus of messianic renaissance. Given such vested interests, any Israeli decision to uproot settlements in the West Bank might instantiate a far deeper theological shockwave and draw, as a counter-reaction, disaffected Religious Zionists towards a catastrophic and anti-legalistic stand, a stand similar to or ever exceeding Etzion's benchmark.¹³⁹

4

US Christian Zionism

US Christian Zionism represents the most obscure and least explored amid the various constituencies that animated the project of a 'New American Empire' during the era of President George W. Bush. It may be characterized as a modern millenarian movement stemming from American conservative Evangelicalism, which advocates that the restoration of Diaspora Jews to Palestine is a necessary step in an End Time scenario in which Christ returns to rule the world for 1000 years before the Final Judgement, and that he will do so from a theocratic kingdom centred on Jerusalem.¹

In a co-written study that stirred endless polemics, political scientists John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt submitted that US Evangelical Zionism represents the Christian 'significant adjunct' to the 'Israel lobby': a loose but powerful interest group composed of both Jews and Gentiles, whose 'acknowledged purpose is to press Israel's case within the United States and influence American foreign policy in ways that its members believe will benefit the Jewish state'. This lobby would pressurize Washington leaders to treat Israel 'as if it were the fifty-first state of the Confederation'. Although the authors refrain from defining the Israel lobby as a cabal or a conspiracy, they nonetheless recognize in its political prominence, remit and dedication the underlying cause for America's unwavering and unconditional support of the Zionist state in the past 40 years:

Since the Six-Day War, a salient feature – and arguably the central focus – of America's Middle East policy has been its relationship with Israel. For the past four decades, in fact, the United States has provided Israel with a level of material and diplomatic support that dwarfs what it provided to other countries. That aid is largely

unconditional: no matter what Israel does, the level of support remains for the most part unchanged. In particular, the United States consistently favours Israel over the Palestinians and rarely puts pressure on the Jewish state to stop building settlements and roads in the West Bank. ... Even when American presidents put pressure on Israel to make concessions or try to distance the United States from Israel's policies – as President George W. Bush has attempted to do on several occasions since September 11 – the lobby intervenes and brings them into line.²

Pastor Stephen Sizer, today one of Christian Zionism's most vehement critics, charges that Evangelical organizations and individuals inspired by this millenarian faith comprise 'what is probably the most powerful lobby in the US, influencing not only American foreign policy but also the chances of a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict'. To Sizer, conservative Evangelicals adhering to this End Time creed would be even more dedicated than the majority of Jewish interest groups in providing political, financial and moral support to modern Israel. Further, US Christian Zionists would vote disproportionately for the Republican Party and maintain significant links with the neoconservative elites. Until the November 2008 presidential election, the pastor adds, there were no doubt several prominent born-again Christians inside the White House (including Bush himself) who embraced, or at least sympathized with, this particular millenarian orientation.³

On a more cautionary note, other experts contend that the Evangelical right's weight within the Israel lobby should not be overstated, nor its overall influence on the White House. Especially when compared to established Jewish pressure groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Anti-Defamation League (ADL) or Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), Christian Zionist lobbies still lack 'the organizational capacity to analyze national security topics or to offer specific legislative guidance on concrete foreign policy issues'.⁴ For these reasons alone, Evangelical Zionism should be seen as a 'junior partner' to the Israel lobby and not as its driving force, which, according to the majority of commentators, would indisputably stem from the Jewish neoconservative core. The same considerations might apply to Christian Zionism's demographic strength in the US. Quite tellingly, supporters as well as detractors equally overinflate the number of Christian millenarian supporters of Israel to at least 50 million. More accurate and reliable estimates assess the current proportion of Christian Zionists to be composed of 20 to 25 per cent of the 85 to 90 million

American Evangelicals. This would mean that Christian Zionists amass about 6.4 per cent of the overall United States population that today stands at 315 million.⁵

As John Hubers reminds us, not buying into the figures that Christian Zionist leaders boast in order 'to puff their sense of self-importance' is essential to avoiding the recurrent misconception that all American Evangelicals are on board with the extremist End Time views underpinning such a theo-political movement.⁶ Despite representing the largest, fastest growing and most politically active component of US religious life, Evangelicalism is far from being a monolithic entity. Rather, it should be understood as a 'galaxy in perpetual motion', formed by groups, denominations and churches that, whilst sharing common cultural traits and doctrinal dogmas, remain nevertheless divided or in controversy over many other key theological issues.⁷ Defining a religious belonging whilst discriminating within its multiple facets is never an easy task to accomplish. This appears particularly to be the case in regards to the religious background of the case study presented here:

[All American] Evangelicals are so individualistic and diverse that it is hard even to identify and count them, much less to define their theology or measure their political convictions definitively. There is no agreement about how many Evangelicals there are in America, in part because there is no single comprehensive definition of who they are or what they believe. One should not think of Evangelicalism as a single vessel majestically transporting a unified community of believers to political domination, social redemption, and eternal salvation. Rather, it is like a vast fleet of rowboats and boogie boards, each bearing an individual in search of an authentic personal experience with God.⁸

In keeping with the taxonomic guidelines provided by John Green, a prominent demographer and expert on the impact of religion on American public life, US Christian Zionism would be embedded in the subculture of a conservative type of Evangelicalism, often called 'fundamentalism'.⁹ Sociologically speaking, the term was firstly deployed to define that faith-based countercultural movement against the secularist tendencies emerging in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. For our purposes here it is essential to note that this religious form of anti-modernism propounds, as its doctrinal basis, the principle of perfect biblical inerrancy paired with premillennial dispensational eschatology. The latter consists of a kind of apocalypticism fastening

on the utopian hope that the founding of the Zionist state and the Jewish ingathering in Eretz Yisrael signals the imminent irruption of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The fate of modern Israel is nonetheless a defining theological issue not exclusively for this conservative sector of the Evangelical population. As Timothy Weber points out, in spite of the fact that 'only a third of American Evangelicals would identify with dispensational world-views', many more Evangelical Bible believers, 'have a very warm spot in their heart for Israel. Let's face it. Evangelicals grew up with maps of Israel on their Sunday school wall!'¹⁰ It will be shown that, as a result of the September 11 aftershock, an Israel-centred kind of millenarian faith acquired momentum not only within the dispensationalist circles, but also in US Evangelicalism at large.

Even though it seems impossible to ascertain Christian Zionism's exact demographics or the extent of its influence on Washington's decision-making, it remains nonetheless necessary to study this phenomenon as it represents, along with Israeli Religious Zionism, another indicative example of how eschatological beliefs impact on political reality, both on a domestic and international scale. For these conservative Evangelicals, 'politics and prophecy-based faith are inseparable: not only do current events in the Middle East confirm the Word of God, but also reiterate biblical events'.¹¹ The injunctions and promises concerning the ancient tribes of Israel are therefore applied to the contemporary Zionist state. In light of an unconditional reading of the Covenant, Israel would be legitimately entitled to expand its national borders to meet those defining Eretz Yisrael, as recounted in Genesis 15:18. Relying on the same scriptural sources and literal hermeneutics, US Christian Zionism sides with Gush Emunim in advocating an Israeli annexation far beyond the currently Occupied Territories. God Himself would call for a Jewish dominion over all the 'Promised Land', which includes the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights as well as large parts of present-day Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan.

According to Evangelical Pastor John Hagee, today one of the most influential Christian Zionist leaders, a Jewish repossession of these territorial assets is seen as indispensable to preparing the way for the Second Coming of Jesus and the establishment of his Millenarian rule. Any diplomatic negotiation towards a two-state solution is thus not 'biblically sound', in that it would hamper God's geopolitical plan for the Middle East. Israel being 'the only nation the Almighty ever established', adds Hagee, the Palestinians can make no claim whatsoever to her land.¹² Considering the political visibility that US Evangelical Zionism acquired

during the eight years of the past Republican administration, al-Qaeda's ambition for the establishment of a worldwide Islamic Caliphate was directly mirrored by the utopian desire for a Jewish maximalist colonization of the Middle East.

Some not apologetic and reliable commentators explain the Evangelical 'bedrock support' for modern Israel beyond or away from End Time theology. In a balanced, nuanced and thoroughly researched study, Stephen Spector unveils a 'complex set of motivations' behind the Evangelical love for the Zionist cause. This would include guilt and contrition for Christianity's past collusion with anti-Semitism. With their unconditional love for Israel, US Evangelicals cast themselves as those 'righteous Christians' making amends for the sins of their European co-religionists who let the Holocaust happen. Evangelicals are also grateful to the Chosen for having laid the religious foundation of their faith. Without them, they would have neither the Bible nor a rabbi named 'Jesus'. Further, in view of the divine promise to Abraham contained in Genesis 12 ('I will bless those that bless you and will curse those that curse you'), Evangelicals are deeply concerned about being judged by God according to how they behaved towards His people.¹³

Accounting for the affiliation between the American Bible Belt and Israel on a not too dissimilar ground, diplomatic expert Aaron David Miller downplays the End Time theology's bearing in favour of the 'Judeo-Christian civilization' inspired by the 'good values' of democracy and freedom, one that today Israel and America would share and defend against the mounting tide of radical Islam – in particular Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah. The Zionist state would be the only friendly democracy in a 'bad neighborhood', the frontline of defence against an ominous enemy that has also the West in its sight.¹⁴

Analogous views seem to be unanimously held by all those Jewish interest groups that accept or even nurture the Evangelical support for the Zionist cause. George W. Mamo, the vice president and spokesman of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, discredits the idea that US Evangelicals support Israel in order to help summon the Second Coming. Mamo substantiates his claim with the results of an opinion poll:

We are told that the Evangelical Right supports Israel to hasten the return of Jesus and the onset of Armageddon – yet the Tarrance survey data show that only one in three Evangelicals supports Israel because it is the place prophesized for the Second Coming of Jesus. What is the most often cited reason Christians support Israel? 43 percent said

they support Israel because of Israel's democratic values and its role as our strong and reliable ally in the war against terrorism. In other words, four in ten self-identified Evangelicals support Israel because of our shared democratic values and the common enemy that is targeting America and Western values along with Israel.¹⁵

The analytical perspective embraced here is quite different: however important these non-eschatological drives might be, in order to unveil the underlying motives at the base of the political, financial and moral support this mass Evangelical constituency offers to the Zionist enterprise, it is necessary to pay close attention to its millenarian underpinning. US Christian Zionists are prophecy-believers scrutinizing the horizon of historical occurrences through the lens of an End Time 'jigsaw', one that has been idiosyncratically assembled from selected apocalyptic passages disseminated in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶ Once interpreted from a literal-inerrant hermeneutical standpoint, these key passages are seen as no less than 'pre-written history', containing a detailed and discernable timetable for the end of the present dispensation and the beginning of a no longer perfectible age of bliss and harmony.

During a visit to Jordan, Israel and Palestine that he made in February 2010, then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was reported as saying that Christian Zionism's theology represents a 'recent Protestant addition' devoid of any substantial 'biblical base'. According to Williams, the belief by some US conservative Evangelicals that the foundation and the territorial expansion of the Israeli state is a prerequisite for the return of Christ appeared as a consequence of some prophecy-driven speculations being made only in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Notwithstanding Williams' remarks about its recent vintage, it seems undeniable that, as a belief system, Christian Zionism shows profound affinity and continuity with long-established ideals and tropes inscribed in the apocalyptic tradition. Beyond the caricatures of 'mentally unhinged' fundamentalists ushering in the end of the world, stands a complex set of convictions and practices soothing present-day spiritual needs and existential anxieties. When one confronts a millenarian creed that today gathers millions of believers and also impinges on key geopolitical realities such as the Middle East peace processes, simplistic stereotype and sensationalist exposés should be abandoned in favour of a serious and critical engagement with the sources of such a consensus. The main purpose of this chapter is therefore to repeat the exercise done in the previous one. An attempt will here be made to define US Christian Zionism theologically, in order to tease out and

unpack the core motives from which its earthly involvement stems. It will be argued that in order to understand the Evangelical dedication to the Zionist cause, one should never dissociate God's special relationship with his Chosen from the eschatological calculations about the catastrophic irruption of a final and ultimate age of perfection and harmony. The promises made to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis and the visions of the End summoned by John's Apocalypse are the two pillars on which premillennial dispensationalism rests, however the former are subordinated to the latter. Our underlying assumption is that if the opposite were true, most of the dispensationalist appeal over US Evangelicals would wither away.

Dispensationalism

US Christian Zionism is embedded in a theological framework known as premillennial dispensationalism, by far the most influential apocalyptic belief system in contemporary America. As previously explained, premillennialism is a shorthand for a catastrophic understanding of the Christian redemptive process holding that Jesus Christ's return in glory will precede and actually inaugurate the 1000-year period of peace, bliss and holiness. Dispensationalism is one of the multiple variations of the premillennial template, developed during the nineteenth century by the Anglo-Irish Evangelist John Nelson Darby, a member of the Plymouth Brethren sect in Dublin. As his charismatic authority was waning in Britain, Darby decided to undertake several 'preaching tours' in North America, where he met and influenced such prominent Evangelical leaders as Dwight Moody and William Blackstone. Darby soon became a leading figure in the Bible and Prophecy Conference movement, a theological circle that, between 1875 and 1920, would set the doctrinal tone for the emerging fundamentalist movement in North America. Dispensationalism could not have attained its mass popularity in the US without the mediation of Cyrus Scofield, a Kansas theologian, minister and attorney fascinated by Darby's speculations about the Jews' prophetic role. In 1909, Scofield published through the Oxford University Press an annotated Bible with the intent of helping readers to understand the Old and New Testamentarian prophecies from a dispensationalist angle. In the following years, his book was sold by the millions, elevating Scofield to the status of 'ultimate authority, the final court of Biblical hermeneutics'. Today, many Evangelical Zionists regard the Scofield Reference Bible not as a commentary informed by Darby's futurist eschatology, but as the Christian canon itself.¹⁸

Dispensationalism does not represent a mere derivation from premillennial eschatology. Rather, it should be seen as an all-encompassing belief system, which blends together 'a Biblical hermeneutics, a philosophy of history and a fairly comprehensive systematic theology'.¹⁹ For our purpose here, the crux of Darby's intricate doctrine is recapitulated as follows. The entire sacred history, beginning with Creation and ending with Christ's Millennial Kingdom, unfolds according to a preordained plan, which is divided chronologically by seven 'dispensations', that is, distinct epochs marked off by precise temporal limits and something peculiar to each. In each and every one of these dispensations, God offers to a fallen humanity what Scofield calls a 'new means of grace': a chance to redeem itself and in so doing advance the overall process of salvation. Each time, however, humankind fails to live in obedience to the test. As God executes His chastisement, the present dispensation is brought to a closure and a new one begins. By establishing a set of binding Covenants with them, God originally appoints the Jews as 'chosen agents' of such a redemptive process. But, throughout its long history Israel falls repeatedly short of fulfilling its agreement with God. On account of their unfaithfulness and disobedience, punishment is visited upon the Israelites in the form of foreign oppression, loss of national independence and exilic subjugation.

The real turning point in Darby's sacred chronology takes place 483 years after the end of the Babylonian captivity and the Jewish second restoration to Israel. God sends His Son to save Israel from the Roman domination and re-establish the House of David as everlasting monarchy, but the Pharisees (the forefathers of Rabbinic Judaism) rejected Christ as their Messiah, allowing the Roman authorities to crucify him. As a result of the serious shortcoming, the cosmic plan of salvation centred on Israel is completely subverted. God suspends the prophetic timetable, chastises the Jews once more with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and a new exile, while temporally transferring His attention to the just formed Christian Church. Now, in the sixth dispensation preceding the Millennium, the chance of redemption comes only to 'those who accept Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as their personal saviour'. It is crucial to keep in mind that the reshuffle does not entail the Christian supersession of Israel. God's promises to Abraham as recounted in Genesis remain unconditional and eternal and the Age of the Church represents a sheer historical 'parenthesis', which will expire with the Jewish ultimate restoration to the Holy Land. In keeping with Darby's intricate script, the ingathering of the exiles and the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine would instantiate that eschatological

chain reaction, leading directly to the return of Jesus and his ensuing 1000-year reign. In other words, for King Jesus to rule the world from David's throne in Jerusalem, it is necessary that the Jewish people fulfil their part of the Covenant with God. From this eschatological scenario it follows that the Christian salvation rests entirely on the fate of the Jewish people and their return to the Land of Inheritance. Everything on the Christian Zionist mind rides on the Jews.²⁰

The cult of the text

In view of the distinctive emphasis that Martin Luther placed on 'sola scriptura', the cult of the sacred text has always been to some significant extent implicit in Reformed Christianity. As Carl G. Jung put it, having pulled down many normative frameworks, liturgies and rituals that Roman Catholicism had erected over the centuries, Protestantism was immediately confronted with the 'schismatic and disintegrating effect of individual revelation'. Once 'left to God alone', and without the protection or guidance of traditional dogmas, believers were thus obliged to intensify the authority of the Bible as a substitute for 'the lost authority of the Church'. That the truths of Christian faith and practice can and must be deduced from the Scripture alone, added Jung, entails 'a chance of immediate spiritual experience with God', but also 'a great risk'.²¹

The espousal of a literal system of biblical interpretation is often recognized as the doctrinal hallmark of Darby's doctrine. Scofield charged that premillennial dispensationalism was the result of 'consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principle of literal or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this. The non-literalist is the non-Dispensationalist, [whereas] the consistent literalist is a Dispensationalist.'²² Akin to the adherents of other fundamentalist viewpoints, past and present dispensationalist expositors reject any allegorical or mythological meaning bestowed on the sacred text that they revere. The latter must consistently be taken at its 'face value', that is, by giving to every word 'the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking'.²³

As a self-standing interpretative principle, however, literalism may not be methodologically sound, first of all in view of that 'absurd lack of proportion between the claims that are religiously important to Fundamentalists and the arguments about the sacred scriptures by which they seek to guarantee the veracity of those claims'.²⁴ Further, that the Old and New Testaments are fraught with countless contradictions, anomalies and overlapping 'doublets' would render it impossible

to enshrine a coherent meaning of the Word of God on literal grounds alone. On this ground, biblical scholar James Barr submits that the dependable and guiding principle to all conservative Evangelical hermeneutics, the one that overrides all other principles whilst dictating the overarching approach to the Bible is not literalism but rather inerrancy. What really matters is that, in view of its divine authorship, the Bible contains only 'axiomatic and fundamental truths', not only theologically but also in historical, geographical, chronological or scientific terms. No actual instances of error can be contemplated because even the smallest of them might put at risk the inspiration and authority of the whole:

Even if Fundamentalists sometimes say that they take the Bible literally, the facts of their interpretation show that this is not so. What Fundamentalists insist on is not that the Bible must be taken literally but that it must be so interpreted as to avoid any admission that it contains any kind of error. In order to avoid imputing errors to the Bible, Fundamentalists twist and turn back and forward between literal and non-literal interpretation. ... What they mean is that the Bible is error-free.²⁵

Commenting on Barr's ideas, Malise Ruthven charges that by means of the doctrine of inerrancy, fundamentalists are able to 'iron out' those textual anomalies or inconsistencies that readily arise from the application of literal hermeneutics. Whenever their scriptural interpretations are contradicted by historical evidence or established knowledge, fundamentalists avoid embarrassment – and also resist criticism by the hand of more progressive theologians – by shifting the ground away from literalism and towards inerrancy. Here, 'the burden of proof' is entirely transposed from God to man. Once the Bible is taken as God's infallible statement, it follows that its discrepancies must be explained as shortcomings in human understanding and not as flaws inherent in the text itself. Moving back and forth between literalism and inerrancy affords Christian fundamentalists the possibility to endow their idiosyncratic readings of the Bible with a patina of almost scientific authenticity.²⁶ Within conservative Evangelical circles, this hermeneutical criterion is frequently endorsed as the 'fighting word' against the outer and unfaithful world, but also functions as a 'litmus test' for in-group belonging. As such, it may be deployed as a 'loyalty oath' for membership in Evangelical congregations or feature in the statutes of various church organizations.²⁷

Literalism finessed by inerrancy is essential to premillennial dispensationalists as it provides the basis for satisfying their obsessive interest in 'understanding the times' for the sake of setting forth that chain of events leading towards the Apocalyptic transfiguration. The impetus for decoding the 'chronology of the End' out of selected biblical passages is a long-standing millenarian rationale, which continues today in that popular variety of 'fictionalized' dispensationalism represented by *The Late Great Planet Earth* or *Left Behind Series*. Within those circles it is commonly held that, if properly interpreted, the sacred text can unveil 'a detailed road map of events that will soon unfold as human history enters in its final stage'.²⁸

A rekindled commitment to the authority of Bible, along with the conviction that its prophecies are pre-written history, are often seen by historians as being part of that anti-modernist crusade that US conservative Evangelicalism waged against Darwin's evolutionist theories between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Under this light, the embrace of literal-inerrant hermeneutics would primarily represent a countercultural reaction to the allegorizing and spiritualizing exegeses imbuing Higher Criticism. This method of progressive biblical interpretation first emerged in the wake of the shift in epistemological paradigms engendered by the European Enlightenment, to acquire later, at the end of the eighteenth century, its fully fledged status within the area of German liberal Protestantism. Higher Criticism reads the sacred Scriptures through the lens of human history, rather than reading the latter through the prism of the former, as dispensationalism sets out to do. The sacred text is to be investigated 'rationally' as a bare cultural document like any other – that is, without any doctrinal restriction and by utilizing all the linguistic, archaeological and historical data available. This method posits that, consisting of distinct strata added and edited over time, the Bible is to be studied 'diachronically', through a detailed analysis of the various socio-historical contexts in which it was written. On these grounds, its apocalyptic-prophetic contents should be reevaluated either as 'inspirational poetry' crafted to sustain persecuted communities or in the guise of *vaticinia ex eventu* (prophecies of the past) – retrospective interpretations of already occurred events, which are recast in the guise of future predictions in order to legitimize a known outcome.

Needless to say, the supposedly value-free and scientifically objective methods of Higher Criticism represented a frontal attack at the core of conservative Christian identity, beliefs and values. In order to secure the basic assumptions of their worldview from the encroachment of

modernity and its degenerative ideas, a coterie of Evangelical clergymen launched in 1875 the Niagara Bible Conference. This annual summer resort symposium set the precedent for countless other Bible conferences throughout North America. By 1878, the countercultural revivalist movement had unanimously identified 14 'Fundamentals', amongst which Darby's eschatological system was officially included as the doctrinal tenet of the most recent vintage. A 'sectarian novelty' such as premillennial dispensationalism was thus enshrined as 'fundamental' to Evangelical orthodoxy as Christ's incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the working power of miracles or the Resurrection.

In view of the remarkable success of the Scofield Reference Bible, whose publication coincided with the heyday of the revivalist movement, Darby's doctrine became 'grafted' onto Evangelical Orthodoxy. Espousing the word of God through its plain meaning, referring to doctrinal inerrancy whenever such a plain meaning conflicts with reality, and reading current affairs through the lens of a highly periodized, deterministic and pessimistic eschatology became the theological bedrock of the nascent fundamentalist culture – a culture of which Christian Zionism represents today as the most politically salient offspring. As Gary Dorrien contends, the rise of dispensationalist theology was responsible for a steep decline in critical biblical literacy within American Protestantism, in turn leading to a weakening of key spiritual and ethical resources belonging to that religious tradition:

Instead of reading scripture inductively in its historical and canonical contexts, Dispensationalists fixed on a few Apocalyptic texts ripped out of context and applied literally to the future. In the name of recovering fundamental full-gospel Christianity, they promoted bad exegesis and displaced the Biblical doctrine of salvation with a bizarre schematism only remotely derived from the scripture.²⁹

It should not be forgotten that dispensational hermeneutics acquired authoritative ground within US Evangelical circles after key prophetic claims that Darby made about the Jews' restoration to the Land and the founding of a Jewish national home in Palestine appeared to have been miraculously fulfilled. The early successes of the Zionist movement did more than validate the standing of the Bible as divinely revealed truth. They bestowed credibility on other not yet fulfilled predictions announcing that imminent global catastrophe ushering in the Second Coming of Jesus and his Millenarian rule centred in Jerusalem. How

such a mutual reinforcement between End Time expectations and historical occurrences concerning modern Israel feeds into the political mobilization of Christian Zionism will be addressed further on.

The strength of Darby's belief system stems from a 'self-contained doctrinal package allowing no additions or subtractions'.³⁰ This package is nothing but a compound of heterogeneous and often unrelated passages drawn selectively from Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation or other apocalyptic verses scattered in the Old and New Testaments. Dispensationalists deploy the 'jigsaw puzzle' as an interpretative prism, to put past and present historical events into meaningful relation with each other and, in so doing, cast light on how the future will unfold.

More progressive voices within American Evangelicalism and Judaism tend to epitomize Darby's doctrine as a highly confected theology, derived from a 'pick-and-choose hermeneutics' and without any authoritative biblical grounding. Endorsing arguments that evoke the basics of Higher Criticism, New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing argues that dispensationalism assembles with utter impunity 'bits and pieces of Christian canon written many centuries apart and under very different socio-historical circumstances into an overarching End Time formula'.³¹ On a similar wavelength, Rabbi Michael Cook, an expert in Jewish-Christian relations, accuses Darby's doctrine of intermingling 'biblical materials from hither and yon that bear no intrinsic relation to one another, and that even individually are not understood correctly – all to construct an elaborately bizarre theological system reliant on no solid foundation whatsoever'.³² Craig Hill, another liberal Evangelical theologian lined up against the alleged Christian Zionist 'distortions', charges that:

ironically, in their effort to interpret the Bible literally and consistently, proponents of Dispensational theology have mangled the biblical witness almost beyond recognition. It is the Bible itself, this wonderfully diverse and complex witness to God and Christ, that has been 'left behind'.³³

What all these criticisms seem to underestimate is, to a significant extent, dispensationalism's major strength, one proved by the evidence that over its 100-year existence, Darby's 'hotchpotch' has shown itself as remarkably flexible and adaptable to change. This, observes O'Leary, often happens as a result of a twofold process. The acolytes of Darbite eschatology are prone to distort the import of historical occurrences in order to fit the prophecy and, in case this operation is not pursuable,

they are equally capable of twisting the prophecy in order to accommodate reality:

like the hypochondriac poring over a medical textbook who constantly finds his own ailments mirrored in the symptoms of every rare disease, [the dispensationalist] interpreter who searches the world around him for Apocalyptic signs of the times is likely to find that for which he seeks.³⁴

That the appeal of its predictions withstood several disconfirmations further confirms dispensationalism as an enduring and powerful millenarian creed, particularly capable of granting believers unity of meaning and reassurance in times of trials and tribulations.

Dual Covenant

At the heart of Darby's doctrine stands the idea of 'an almost apartheid-like separation' between Israel and the Church.³⁵ God has two distinct but parallel means of working towards eternity, one through the heirs of the Jewish tribes whom He originally appointed as His Chosen, and the other through those who have already accepted Jesus as their saviour. In all its historical variations, dispensationalism adamantly rejects the so-called 'replacement theology': a post-apostolic contention maintaining that the Church and its members have superseded Israel as new Covenantal people or, otherwise put, that the promises that God had originally made to the Israelites are now fulfilled in and through the Church. According to all dispensationalists alike, Christianity is neither the culmination of God's activity in the Old Testament, nor the novel 'light to the nations' whose coming was already foretold by the Hebrew prophets. To them, Israel indisputably refers to those physical descendants of Abraham who continue to be entrusted with a mission of cosmic redemption.³⁶

Rather than a 'spiritualized Israel', the Church represents a 'great parenthesis', a temporary interruption in the divine programme of salvation, resulting from the Jewish failure to recognize Jesus as their saviour. As previously mentioned, this failure caused God to halt the prophetic clock and reshuffle His plans. The 'prophetic time warp' represented by the Church's age, however, does not spell the end of God's love for His Chosen. Nor does it abrogate His Covenantal promises to them. When the current Church's parenthesis lapses on earth (an imminent event according to Darby), God will resume the Israelite dispensation and

bring it to its completion. At that time, the Jews will be once again be offered a chance to accept their 'true' Messiah. Such an event will signal the 'fullness of time' with the irruption of that 'glorious era of peace and righteousness known as the Millennium'.³⁷ A major inconsistency flawing the logic of Darby's argument is in the paradox of an omnipotent and omniscient God who is forced to alter His cosmic design as a result of a 'distraction' on the part of His Chosen.³⁸

Israel and the Church are to be kept separate, insofar as they are the focus of two different stages of prophetic fulfilment, the 'earthly' and the 'heavenly'. Dispensationalists distinctively assert that Judaism is a mundane entity with certain earthly political expectations and objectives to attend to – namely, the repossession of the Promised Land, the reinstitution of a Davidic Kingdom with full sovereignty over Eretz Yisrael and the reintroduction of sacrificial rituals in a rebuilt Third Temple. The Church instead belongs and will soon return to an extramundane realm, to live in close connection with God. In keeping with the logic of this eschatological script, Christianity's status would appear to be subordinated to that of Israel and not the other way around, as it could be argued from a supersessionist angle. Within many US Evangelical congregations, it is recurrently held that the Christians' primary duty is to 'bless Israel' because neither the Gospels nor the Church would have come into existence unless the Jews had fallen into 'unbelief' by allowing Jesus to be crucified. But a further level of Evangelical involvement in favour of the Zionist cause is justified in light of the role that the Jewish people would play 'intra-historically' to expedite the Christian ascension to heaven.

Restorationism

The belief that a Jewish restoration to Palestine is the harbinger of Christian salvation predates dispensationalism, stretching back at least to Oliver Cromwell's England. It is nevertheless only within Darby's End Time scenarios that such a belief reaches its full-blown theological systematization. From the Dual Covenant logic flows that the Church, rather than being designed to supersede the earthly Israel, must attend to a precise responsibility towards her. For Darby and his acolytes, it is a primary Christian obligation to 'bless' Israel, namely by assisting the Jews in regaining the fullness of their God-appointed territorial inheritance in Palestine.

On the satisfaction of this religious duty depends the Evangelical transition from present deficiency to millenarian fulfilment – to be

exact, the Church's ascension to the heavenly status that is compounded, as will be shown in the following pages, with the moment of the Rapture. Without any precedent in Christian theology, argues Sizer, dispensationalists go as far as equating the 'restoration ministry' to the apostolic commission to preach the Gospel to the whole world:

In the same sense that the first apostles were commissioned by the Lord to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth, [Evangelical Zionists] feel compelled to proclaim the word of Israel's restoration to every country and in every place where there are Christian believers.³⁹

Even at a cursory level, it is impossible not to notice a fateful convergence between US Evangelical Zionism and Israeli Religious Zionism. Despite unbridgeable theological differences, the two theo-political projects read the physical ingathering of the exiles in Palestine as the dawn of a messianic-millenarian era that has been foreordained by God Himself. For both movements alike, key soteriological goals command a precise earthly commitment.

One should also keep in mind that, in both cases, a Jewish exclusive and perpetual repossession of the Land is a law of historical necessity stemming from an unconditional reading of the heavenly promises to Israel. As previously explained, in its early formulations the Covenant enshrines an almost unrestricted entitlement to Eretz Yisrael; whereas, by the time Moses reinstates the 'berit' at Sinai, the Israelites are warned that their right to the Land remains strictly contingent on their faithfulness to the Torah. Donald Wagner, a Christian theologian who opposes the 'joint enterprise' between US Evangelicals and national religious Israelis, quotes this last reading to contend that the Land belongs to God alone and it is not at Israel's disposal. Once the Covenant is interpreted in light of its Mosaic reformulation, Eretz Yisrael would not be 'an end to itself' but, rather, 'an instrument' whereby the Chosen fulfil their religious calling. Accordingly, the Jews must relate to the Land as if they were mere 'tenants' or 'caretakers' whose occupancy is conditional on them living under the requirements of the Law. In addition to the injunctions to purity and holiness, the Law also outlines clear obligations to practice justice and not to abuse non-Jewish 'sojourners'.

In view of the eschatological import attached to a Jewish presence in Judea, Samaria and beyond, US Evangelical Zionists invariably tend to negate or minimize such terms of conditionality. In that way, they

augment the Religious Zionist approach to Eretz Yisrael as an object of religious yearning whose 'liberation' from non-Jewish hands is tantamount to salvation. Despite radical differences in their respective eschatological outlooks, the two movements align in believing that redemption will come only when Israel settles the whole Land. Quite tellingly, they rely on the same biblical passages featuring unrestrained Covenantal rights to bestow a gloss of sacredness on the settlement project in the Occupied Territories. With their single-minded focus on the Judaization of the West Bank, Religious Zionists along with their Evangelical counterparts elevate the import of the Land over that of the spiritual relationship with God. In Wagner's view, whenever Eretz Yisrael becomes an object of devotion, the Chosen fall into idolatry. By considering the Land as a 'goal' in itself and not as 'means' to realize their Covenantal duties, the Jews would attribute absolute value to that which is not absolute. In particular, they would act towards a representation of God as if it was God. Wagner adds that this major sin, in addition to the lack of humane treatment for the non-Jewish sojourner, might cause Israel divine punishment in the form of a new exile rather than a messianic restoration.⁴⁰

However well-intentioned to promote peace Wagner might be, his argument seems fraught with a sense of 'righteous innocence'. As Reverend Robert Smith observes, whenever 'Christians begin travelling down lines of thought which argue that Jews should again be removed from the Land because they have failed to properly observe the Torah or its demands of justice, Jews might understandably become quite nervous and irritated.' Christians, continues Smith, ought to engage the question concerning Jewish alleged violations against Palestinians' rights with humility. In particular, they should keep in mind that 'Christian tradition of theological anti-Judaism and historical legacy of murderous anti-Semitism', two factors that no doubt contributed to 'the founding of Israel as a modern nation-state and the subsequent displacement of millions of Palestinians'.⁴¹

Purging Eretz Yisrael

Evangelical Zionism aligns with its Jewish messianic counterpart in a further crucial respect: the problems stemming from the Arab presence on the sacred soil of Eretz Yisrael are addressed through the lens of strikingly similar ancestral slogans, dogmas or invocations and therefore seem to be the political solutions. Within the imagery of the two movements,

a mythical past inscribed in the Old Testament is called on to make the 'state of things' in Palestine appear as foreordained and immutable.

Myth should be understood here following Bruce Lincoln's suggestion: not in a pejorative sense, as a false or arbitrary story, but in the guise of something regarded by its proponents as 'a paradigmatic and unquestionable truth'. Insofar as Evangelical and Jewish Religious Zionism are concerned, the instrumentality of the biblical tradition – or, more precisely, of highly discriminating interpretations of it – is twofold. On the one hand, the obsessive repetition of the same authoritative truths enables the two religious communities to reproduce their identity in the accustomed forms; on the other, such a recitation is also strategically deployed to deprive contending narratives or claims of their own authority.⁴²

Once it escalates towards exclusionary thinking, this process of delegitimization of the 'other side' seems to become essential in the pursuit of the respective Christian and Jewish eschatological goals. To achieve wondrous salvation in the final age, argues Ravitzky, it is necessary to search for 'a blemish that is clearly visible and that may be addressed as the source of all trouble and infirmity'. For all the problems that beset us to be solved, 'that blemish must be cleansed'.⁴³

In his ethnographic study about the settlers' movement, Fiege observes that in recent years two opposing dynamics have been taking place in Israel's wider society. While for the majority of secular Jews the Arabs have increasingly turned from threatening enemies into potential negotiation partners, the Gush Emunim settlers have done their utmost to perpetuate their status of 'ultimate others'. According to Fiege, this process is far from being 'unilinear' as the surge of Arab terrorism especially after the Second Intifada has reawoken 'primeval fears' in all Israelis, religious and secular alike. This notwithstanding, attention should be drawn to the fact that, rather than framing the 'non-Jewish issue' through the legal categories of the state, national religious activists obstinately place both Arab Israelis and Palestinians within the status of 'gerim' – a Halakhic shorthand for 'resident aliens'.⁴⁴

As the leading school of Religious Zionist thought, the Merkaz Harav overtly states that 'the non-Jewish residents are to be treated by the people of Israel with tolerance and respect but no more'. The principle of national self-determination and universal human rights are not normatively binding in dealings with the Arabs, because such principles are subordinated to the biblical injunction that 'the Land of Israel belongs to the Jews alone'. This sacred postulate has 'definite implications' that ought to inform present-day policies towards the 'Palestinian problem'.

All the Arabs either living within the Green Line or in Judea and Samaria therefore would be confronted with three alternatives, being:

(1) To acknowledge publicly the legitimacy of the Zionist doctrine (or better, the Gush Emunim's version of it), and to receive full civil rights, including the right to elect and be elected to the Knesset and serve in the army; (2) to obey the laws of the state without formal recognition of Zionism and be in return granted full rights of resident aliens (but not political rights); or (3) to be offered economic incentives to immigrate to Arab countries.⁴⁵

As outlined in the previous chapter, as far as Kookism is concerned, democratic norms, principles and values do not hold in the case of Israel because they are nothing but corrupting offsprings of that Western culture alienating the Chosen from their redemptive task.

The actualization of the 'Jewish law of destiny' through the conquest and settlement of Eretz Yisrael overrides any ethical consideration for the Gentiles who reside on its sacred soil. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner reminds his audience that:

Israel was commanded in the Torah that 'thou shalt be holy', but [it was] not commanded to be moral; and the general codes of morality which have been accepted by mankind, in principle at least, do not commit the Jew, for he was chosen to be beyond them.⁴⁶

It follows that resident aliens may live in the Land as long as they do not oppose in any form or fashion its Judaization, namely with their demands for national self-determination. An Arab who advances such a claim, adds Rabbi Aviner, 'is neither a Palestinian nationalist nor a proud patriot; he is not even deluded. He is simply a liar because he, along with all his compatriots, knows that the Arabs hold no rights to Eretz Yisrael.'⁴⁷

Rabbi Zvi Tau, today one of the most prominent figures within Religious Zionism, describes the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as a modern rendition of the ancient struggle of the Israelites opposing the Philistines, one of Israel's biblical enemies. Drawing on evocative precedents in Hebrew lore augments the rabbi's claim about the intrinsically different stature of the two contenders:

The Philistines are the absolute contrast to Israel's course of life. Theirs is a semblance of nationality. They masquerade as a people, they

cloak themselves with all the national features – and yet they lack any essence, any content of their own. The Philistines have no value, role or hidden talent that is required to complete the form of humanity, nor do they have any foothold in eternity, as do the Jewish people, whose nationality is connected with the divine plan of restoring the world and making all creatures achieve their true purpose.

Now as then, Tau adds, ‘Ahmed’ and ‘Mustafa’ pretend to have a collective identity as a nation, but only as an excuse to steal the Land from the Jews, and in that way forestall their mission of cosmic redemption.⁴⁸

Overwhelmingly, US Christian Zionists side with these Jewish exclusivist positions. For the sake of staying true to the divine plan, the Chosen cannot be governed by ordinary norms and therefore can lay aside any concern for democracy, justice or international law. Bluntly put, it is Darby’s prophecy that settles the issue once and for all, and the Gentiles can only adjust. The eschatological end (the ingathering of the exiles and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine) amply justifies the means (displacing Arab population from their homes).⁴⁹ Akin to their national religious counterparts, Evangelical dispensationalists recite selected biblical mantras to reinforce such consequentialist statements. Recurrently, they invoke the scriptural evidence that ‘God owned the Promised Land and had deeded it to the children of Abraham through Isaac, not Ishmael’ – the firstborn and illegitimate son of the Jewish patriarch by his maidservant Hagar. Within both the dispensationalist and Religious Zionist narratives, the present-day conflict between Arabs and Jews is often depicted as perpetrating an ancestral feud: the litigation between Abraham’s rejected and appointed offspring, as recounted in Genesis 17:19 and 21:12.⁵⁰

Another key overlapping between the two messianic and millenarian discourses consists in the idea that Restorationism remains enmeshed with the pursuit of purity. Not only do the respective eschatological plans impose a Jewish ingathering into and monopoly over the Land, but they also imply that that sacred enclosure will be purged from its corrupting agents. Darby himself was quite explicit in stating that for the establishment of the Millennium, Eretz Yisrael must be rid of everything that is not ethnically and religiously ‘sound’. He nonetheless saw this cleansing as an act depending on divine fiat:

The first thing, then, which the Lord will do is to purify the Land which belongs to the Jews of the Tyrians, the Philistines, the Sidonians;

of Edom and Moab, and Amon – of all the wicked, in short from the Nile to the Euphrates. It will be done by the power of Christ in favour of His people re-established by His goodness.⁵¹

Along the lines of Rabbi Tau, Darby explicitly refers to the biblical themes and accounts of the Book of Joshua. As Moses' successor, Joshua led, by force of arms and with divine intervention, the conquest and settlement of the Land of Canaan. For the very first time in their brief existence, the Hebrews put an end to their nomadic lifestyle and established a homeland. Following a plan foreordained by God, they became 'Israelites'. As recounted in the Bible, this national foundation includes murderous purification of the Land from the autochthonous tribes (the seven polytheistic nations of Canaan listed by Darby except one), which the Book of Joshua purports as 'heathens'.

That restoration to a harmonious whole entails purification from the 'other side' – a mystical force that embodies evil, defilement or moral corruption – is not an exceptional tenet. Historically, this theme has received countless applications, both in religious and secular discourses. However, it seems to be almost compulsively recurrent in both Christian and Religious Zionism's imagery. As previously noted, drawing from Rabbi Kook's reading of the kabbalistic tradition, Gush Emunim sees the systematic expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank as nothing less than a 'metaphysical transformation', a redeeming act that transfers quotas of Eretz Yisrael from the power of Satan to the divine sphere and thereby advances the process of cosmic salvation. In the national religious idiom, territorial conquest involves at one and the same time outer and inner refinement. Purgation through settling the Land is so all-encompassing that it results in self-purification. Insofar as Eretz Yisrael is liberated from the 'aliens', the pious Jew is redeemed from his own 'alienness', and therefore pointed towards sanctity.⁵² The corollary of this assumption is that even a minimal territorial withdrawal would restore Satan's sovereignty over the Land and the individual soul.

US dispensationalism puts an analogous argument forward. Giving up land for the establishment of a Palestinian state would be the first step towards the dissolution of a fully Jewish Eretz Yisrael, and therefore it would hinder the primary focus of Evangelical identity and eschatological yearning. During a heartfelt speech given in Jerusalem in 2003, televangelist Pat Robertson summarized the motives at the base of the Christian Zionist objection to a two-state solution. The pastor exhorted his beloved Israeli listeners not to commit 'a national suicide' by abiding to the international community's recommendations. Any hope to

achieve a sustainable peace by dividing the Land is illusory, argued Robertson, namely in view of the inherently malignant and savage disposition of the Arab counterparts:

I hardly find it necessary to remind this audience of the stated objectives of Yasser Arafat, the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad. Their goal is not peace, but the final destruction of the State of Israel. At no time do they, or their allies in the Muslim world, acknowledge the sovereignty of Israel over even one square inch of territory in the Middle East. If a Palestinian State is created in the heart of Israel with sovereign power to deploy troops, import modern weapons (even weapons of mass destruction) and operate with full secrecy and diplomatic immunity, the ability of the State of Israel to defend itself will be fatally compromised. The slogan 'land for peace' is a cruel chimera.⁵³

For Christian and Jewish Religious Zionists alike, Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and South Lebanon brought neither stabilization in the region nor a lasting peace with the Arab nations, but more terroristic attacks against the Jewish state. In the same way, Sharon's decision to disengage unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in 2005 had the sole outcome of transforming the Strip into a launching pad for Hamas' missiles. In both circles, it is equally held that any attempt to create a Palestinian democracy would be utterly pointless given the Muslim determination to sabotage the divine Covenant and annihilate Israel. In sum, Islamofascists would have no desire for a 'two-state solution', but only for a 'one-state solution' where Sharia law governs the whole of Palestine.⁵⁴ Invariably, the two millenarian-messianic narratives operate through conceptual categories hinting of Huntington's thesis of a clash between 'sealed-off' civilizations. The Jewish exceptionalism is starkly pitted against a menacing Islamic world and without problematizing the myriad of facets and undercurrents animating both terms of the dyad.

The seeds of Amalek

Given the political visibility that they hold domestically and also the repercussions that might result on an international scale from such a policy, the national religious leadership has always avoided calling for a mass Arab transfer from Eretz Yisrael. Although the majority of its fringe members would not object to such a radical measure, mainstream

Gush Emunim recognizes the resident aliens' an autonomous status, whilst reserving 'forced eviction' only for those few agitators who refuse to accept or fight against the Jewish presence and sovereignty.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, some voices within the Merkaz Harav contemplate an unrestrained commandment to ethnic cleansing in the 'state of exception', that is, in case of holy war.

A Torah-based call for what today might be recognized as 'genocide' finds its primary scriptural basis in Exodus 17:16, Deuteronomy 25: 17–19 and, more recurrently, in I Samuel 15:3. Here the Lord of hosts imparts to King Saul the ruthless manner by which to eradicate Amalek and his seeds from Eretz Yisrael: 'now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass'. The Amalekites feature in the Old Testament as Israel's most inveterate foes. In view of their boundless cruelty and treacherous nature, the conflict against them is often depicted as a manifestation of the archetypal opposition between light and darkness, purity and pollution or between the people of God and the forces of evil.

In a controversial article published in February 1980 under the title 'The Commandment of Genocide in the Torah', Rabbi Israel Hess alluded to the Arabs living in Eretz Yisrael as direct descendants of the biblical Amalekites, whilst considering waging war against them a 'sacred obligation', to be carried out until their memory is 'blotted out' forever. Although they represent a wild departure from commonly accepted ultra-Orthodox thinking about the Jews' relationship with the Gentiles, Rabbi Hess' speculations received a first application in the early 1980s, during the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon – a region that Religious Zionists regard as being part of the Holy Land. At that time, the military rabbinate, traditionally infused with national religious fervour, exhorted all the IDF soldiers to follow in the footsteps of Joshua and Saul, and hence deliver the Land from the powers of Satan by exterminating its non-Jewish inhabitants.⁵⁶ In more recent times, during the January 2009 military campaign in Gaza, 'the morals of the battlefield' were once again set on biblical grounds, stirring up a huge debate with the national and international media questioning the secular nature of the IDF.⁵⁷ In order to boost the troops' fighting spirit, the military chaplains delivered pre-battle sermons casting the 22-day operation as a merciless eschatological confrontation between the children of light and the children of darkness.⁵⁸ *Haaretz*, one of the national leading Israeli dailies, reported that before the army units went into the combat zone, several soldiers were passed out IDF-issued flyers with the stamp

of the military rabbinate stating that: 'we are the people of Israel, we came by a miracle to the Eretz Yisrael, God returned us to the Land, now we need to struggle to get rid of the Gentiles that are interfering with our conquest of the Land'. Other pamphlets handed out to the troops quoted Rabbi Aviner as equating Gaza's Palestinians to the Philistines, whilst warning the reader that: 'when you show mercy to a cruel enemy, you are being cruel to pure and honest soldiers. This is terribly immoral. These are not games at the amusement park where sportsmanship teaches one to make concessions. This is a war on murderers.'⁵⁹

Following mainstream Gush Emunim's cautionary approach to the Arab issue, US Evangelical Zionists avoid advocating ethnic cleansing of non-Jewish populations in unequivocal terms. This notwithstanding, they never refrained from backing the most regressive components within the Israeli religious and secular right. Nor do they keep from embracing Gush Emunim's lexicon to vilify the Palestinians' national aspirations. To many dispensationalists, the Arabs currently residing within Eretz Yisrael are, at best, 'alien sojourners' or, at worst, 'Philistines' and 'Amalekites'. Southern-bred Baptist pastor, former Arkansas governor and 2008 Republican presidential primaries candidate Mike Huckabee is well known for his unwavering support for a fully Jewish Jerusalem and for championing the settlers' divine right to live and build in Judea and Samaria as they wish. In October 2007, during a speech given whilst he was still campaigning for the party nomination in New Hampshire, Huckabee expressed his frustration at past and present Israeli decisions to trade portions of Eretz Yisrael for a diplomatic agreement with the Palestinian Authority. Once asked by Rabbi Moshe Bleich about the feasibility of a two-state solution, he argued that:

From its own standpoint of security, Israel should not give up the West Bank or the Golan Heights. I support the creation of a Palestinian state, but I believe that it should be formed outside of Israel. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are possible alternatives. The Arabs have far more land than the Israelis and it would only be fair for other Arab nations to give the Palestinians land for a state, rather than carving it out of the tiny Israeli state.⁶⁰

In August 2009, Huckabee was reported as touring the Holy Land under the sponsorship of Ateret Cohanim, a US-registered non-profit organization that fundraises an average of \$2 million a year to advance its 'Jewish reclamation plan' – national religious front project aiming to win

'demographically' East Jerusalem by replacing its Arab residents with pro-Gush Emunim Jewish families.⁶¹ According to New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind, one of Huckabee's travelling mates, the overall purpose of taking the foreign trip was nevertheless that of 'shining the spotlight' on President Obama's 'horrific attempts' to revive the peace process in the region, by pressing Netanyahu to halt settlement activities in the Occupied Territories. With such a goal in mind, Huckabee visited and pledged allegiance to some of the Hilltop Youth's illegal outposts in the West Bank, the presence of which defiantly opposes not only the US diplomatic course, but also the decisions of the Israeli government. In recent times, splinter groups like the Hilltop Youth made a name for themselves for leading an isolated, ascetic and commune-like lifestyle aimed at reproducing that of the biblical Hebrews. Hilltop Youth members are also known for their confrontational posture against the Zionist state and for channelling their grievances through callous retaliation against neighbouring Palestinian villages.

Many experts on the subject submit that, in view of its strong anti-nomian charge against secular and religious Zionism alike, the vision of messianic rebirth advocated by this new stream of settlers represents a further radicalization of Rabbi Meir Kahane's pseudo-fascist ideology – and not an offshoot of Gush Emunim. It is interesting to note that what represents a seldom confessed 'state of exception' amid the most zealous of the Religious Zionists becomes an openly admitted 'norm' for all the Kahanists. Rabbi Kahane postulated that the presence of impure *goyim* in the midst of Eretz Yisrael (Muslims, Druze and Christians alike) constitute 'the greatest desecration of the divine name', a major obstacle between the Chosen and their redemptive goal. From this perspective, the negation of the basic civil-human rights of non-Jewish populations, their forceful removal from the Land and, eventually, systematic violence against them become sacred goals in their own right, just as important as the settlement project.⁶² To Baruch Ben Yossef, a contemporary Kahane devotee, the real and only catalyst of Messianic redemption is a ruthless war aimed at extirpating the *Sitra Achra* – the forces of evil of the 'Other Side' – from Eretz Yisrael:

If we want to understand Rabbi Kahane, his message was that we need to go to war because, in fact, what will bring our redemption is not prayer. What will bring redemption is war. But today, we're going in exactly the opposite direction. Instead of war, there's Peace Now. There's an attempt to prevent war at all costs. And if we can force the army to go back to being offensive, an army of revenge, an

army which cares about Jews more than anybody else, then we'll be able to bring the final redemption in the only way possible, through war. War now!⁶³

In the mid 1980s, Ravitzky, Sprinzak and many other concerned Israeli scholars described Kahanism's rising success in view of the rabbi's remarkable ability to strike 'sensitive chords' in the collective anxieties of that particular time. His inflammatory messianism focused on 'one single guilty party', 'a suitable target for one's blame' whose elimination was key to solving a set of very different problems: the threat posed by the non-Jewish demographic growth and Arab terrorism along with other major national security concerns. With Kahane, the twin process of dehumanization and demonization through biblical precedents reached its apex. In angry editorials or during mass rallies, the rabbi's populism went as far as endorsing a racist approach worthy of Hitler's propaganda. Indeed, Kahane's gospel Jewish self-transformation demanded the eviction of all the husks of Ishmael. The Arabs were stigmatized with the epithet of 'vermin', 'dogs' or 'foxes' roaming around Eretz Yisrael with the only purpose to seduce and rape Jewish girls. Preoccupations with racial purity and pollution were so obsessive in the rabbi's mind that he invoked legislation imposing long prison sentences on any Arab who had sexual intercourse with a Jewish woman.⁶⁴

Today, Kahane's venomous rhetoric finds a significant resonance on the margins of the national religious front, within the third-generation *Sabras* – young Israelis born and raised on the hills of Judea and Samaria, and extremely disaffected with the current standing of both secular Zionism and mainstream Gush Emunim. These are the highly militant settlers to which many US Evangelical Zionists lend financial and political support. Huckabee's pilgrimage to the City of David included a visit to Kiryat Arba, the largest of Gush Emunim settlements and, at the same time, the hotbed of the ultra-rightist Kach and Kahane Chai parties – two movements that were officially outlawed in 1994, and are still considered terroristic organizations by Israel, the European Union, Canada and the United States. That the Hilltop Youth incubated in that particular ideological milieu seems to be confirmed by the methods that its members espouse to prevent any further government-sponsored disengagement from the Occupied Territories. Especially after the Gaza pullout, they have been systematically engaging in violent acts against the Palestinians in the hope of eliciting a new Intifada and perhaps even a war between Israel and the Arab nations.⁶⁵

People who must dwell alone

By addressing modern Israel through the same exclusionary biblical claims, US Evangelicals and Religious Zionists remove the Jewish state from the category of ordinary countries. Their sacred postulates equally contend that the only nation that God ever established and appointed as a guiding light to the rest of the world must necessarily dwell alone, as a cell hermetically sealed and divorced from reality. Such an ideal, implicit but rarely admitted within dispensationalist and national religious circles, acquires the clarity of a programmatic manifesto for past and present Kahanists. In the extremist's mind, observes Ravitzky, the Jewish identity is invariably expressed in negative terms, within a context of confrontation and conflict:

Who are we? We are chosen, we are special, we are supreme; we have been set apart from the Gentiles and their abominations. No positive content is added to these declarations. What is good is good simply by virtue of its being the opposite of that which is outside, of the Other, whatever it or he may be. [The Jewish people] are separate, set aside, isolated and different, living apart from all the rest, without the defiling contact with cultures conceived in uncleanness and born in profane vanity.⁶⁶

In order to fulfil its destiny and make history reach its summit, Israel must keep apart from the global community and act outside its recognized norms. By disregarding basic democratic principles and disdaining civil-human rights of the resident aliens, Christian and Jewish theo-politics are conjointly reversing secular Zionism's original project to normalize the Chosen, putting an end to their dissociation from the surrounding world. The irony, it would seem, is that actualizing Israel's universalist mission of restoration causes her a regression into what Boas Evron has called a 'ghetto mentality': an impenetrable and self-sustaining psychological mould in which daydreaming about Jewish might, election and final victory over Israel's foes intermingles with and is reinforced by a feeling of bitter embattlement and persecution. Indeed, superiority complex and victimization become here the 'two magnetic foci of the same [paranoid] power field'. For national religious settlers, Kahanists and their dispensationalist allies, Israel's international isolation and the mounting 'goyish' hostility against her are at one and the same time a necessity and a kind of blessing – the

indisputable proofs confirming the Jewish uniqueness in the eye of God and the approaching final triumph under His auspices.⁶⁷

Jacob's troubles

Following the premillennial rationale described in the first section of this study, dispensationalism reads the current historical situation as 'beyond repair'. The Messiah's return must be preceded by 'the birth pangs' in which the negative reign of the Antichrist temporarily prevails. In keeping with this idea, Darby speculates that the Jewish full restoration heralds a 'great tribulation': a seven-year period of unparalleled anarchy, apostasy, turmoil and natural catastrophes signalling that the lowest ebb has been reached on the global scale. But a world led astray by Satan's emissaries also entails that the Church's dispensation is close to completion, with Israel once again resuming its place at the centre stage in God's plan. After having been suspended during the great parenthesis, the prophetic countdown restarts by focusing on the earthly people who rejected Jesus in the first place. This latter-day trial, also known as 'Jacob's troubles', exclusively concerns God's dealing with His Chosen. In view of its heavenly status, the faithful members of the Church are completely exempted from such End Time woes.

The great tribulation climaxes with the battle of Armageddon, a military conflagration in the midst of Eretz Yisrael. The Antichrist's treacherous rule will last until Christ returns in glory to vanquish his demonic armies, end his tyranny and restore an earthly Davidic Kingdom centred on Jerusalem. Once delivered from all its enemies, Israel would eventually acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, and enjoy beside him a privileged status in the Millennium. All humankind will then be able to live in peace and safety, whilst the Antichrist is cast into a lake of fire and Satan remains bound up in a bottomless pit. At the close of the 1000-year era, however, the forces of evil will be unleashed from their constraints one last time, to organize a short-lived revolt against the Christ's government, which shall be 'squelched' by the heavenly fire. Darby's master plot concludes with a general resurrection, a universal judgement on the basis of how the Gentiles have treated the Jews, followed by a timeless state of bliss and perfection.

It is often overlooked that the divine wrath that will be poured onto the world during the tribulation and, later, the cataclysmic destructions ensuing the battle of Armageddon have the main purpose to make the earthly people receive the returned Jesus as their Messiah. Only in this way can the Old Testament promises to Israel be brought to ultimate

fulfilment. This focus on the Jews is even more ostensible if one considers the 'atypical nature' of the interlude between history and eternity. Contrary to any premillennial convention on the subject, nearly all dispensationalists envisage a millennium featuring the Chosen and their sacred rituals as main protagonists. According to Darby's speculations, a rebuilt Temple of Jerusalem will be the climax of the Millenarian Age, with the Levitical Priesthood and the sacrificial system reinstituted within its sacred walls. In view of its Jewish-centred essence, Darby's theology goes against the grain of mainstream Christology – namely, because it overtly contradicts the assumption that Jesus' redemptive sacrifice at Golgotha superseded the Mosaic Law as a means to atone for human sins.

Vertical escapism

Deeply intertwined with the concept of a separation between the earthly Israel and the heavenly Church is the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture, a watershed concept in American premillennial culture and at the same time the theological backbone of dispensationalism. This doctrine posits that just prior to the downward spiral of cataclysms, the 'true' Church (made up of the pious Christians who have already died, together with those who are still alive) will be 'raptured' out of the world to 'meet the Lord in the air', whilst the rest of the 'unbelieving' humanity is 'left behind' to face the tribulation and Armageddon's final holocaust.

Many theologians and biblical scholars charge that Darby's rapture has no scriptural foundation, and often denounce it as another example of highly concocted faith, obtained by 'piecing together' various yet not plausibly related verses from the Christian canon. Millions of dispensationalists reject the criticism underscoring how the hopeful anticipation of a last-minute and exclusivist exemption from the End Time suffering finds its indisputable scriptural proof in a literalist-futurist reading of Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians (4:16–17):

At the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet-call, the Lord himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead will rise, then we who are left alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Quite bizarrely, proponents of such a hermeneutics hold that Christ will have in fact a 'two-stage' Parousia. The first Second Coming will

be visible only to the Church's members, as Jesus secretly raptures 'the saints' in heaven, sparing them the earthly trials. The second return, known as 'glorious appearing', will instead be visible to everyone else (Jews included) at the close of the tribulation, when the Messiah defeats the Antichrist and inaugurates his Jerusalem-based kingdom. Today, the pre-tribulation rapture represents by far the most commonly preached eschatological scenario in US conservative Evangelical circles. High-profile televangelists make it a pivotal theme in their broadcasts, warning millions of viewers of the horror they would face if they missed the opportunity to meet the Lord in the air. Hundreds, if not thousands, of websites are also devoted to promoting such doctrine towards global audiences.

As an article of faith, the Rapture offers at least three observable advantages. First, it resolves the problems arising from prophetic disconfirmation, which in turn are generated by the need to set a precise date for the Apocalypse. The sense of an imminent Rapture, whose plausibility was further strengthened by the historical realizations of May 1948 and June 1967, provides 'an incentive for believers to organize their personal lives around the thought that Christ could return at any moment, [but] without committing them to a falsifiable scenario of last-day events'.⁶⁸ Second, by placing believers in a perpetual state of excitement and uncertainty, the lack of a specific date for the Lord's secret return functions as a remarkable spur to keep one's soul in check in terms of self-purification and faithfulness – or, as Fenn describes it, it puts dispensationalists 'in the middle of chronic purgatory', relentlessly on the watch for whatever might delay or impair their unique chance to be snatched away from a collapsing world.⁶⁹ Third, adopting Ernst Becker's terminology, the Rapture might be assessed as one of most perfected 'immortality projects' known to contemporary Western civilization: an effective symbolic expedient assuaging the distinctively human fear of death that stems from the likewise distinctively human awareness of it.⁷⁰

The 'psychology of deliverance' inherent in the any-moment Rapture is a more potent determinative in adding adherents to the 'dispensationalist party' than any other logics underpinning Darby's biblical exegeses. In other words, the core of premillennial consensus would be built around the 'confidence that current toils, frustrations, disappointments, or difficulties' will be forever eliminated by a 'vertical escapism' towards heaven.⁷¹ In his historical study accounting for the changes in the Western attitude towards mortality, Philippe Ariès maintains that the old, durable and massive sentiment of familiarity with one's own finitude (a sentiment distinguished by 'neither fear or despair, half-way

between resignation and mystical trust') has been progressively replaced by the 'pornography of death'. The interdiction on the thought of dying has become today a culturally acknowledged taboo, replacing sex as principal forbidden subject of conversation. Although a causative relationship cannot be plausibly proven, it deserves nonetheless attention that, for the French medievalist, a systematic 'denial of death' aimed at preserving the diametrically opposed idea of an 'inalterable happiness' began to take hold in US culture from around the beginning of the last century – that is, at the same time in which Darby's prophetic speculations were acquiring momentum within the emerging fundamentalist movement.⁷²

Taking the analysis of its symbolism to a deeper level, it may be convincingly argued that the Rapture is an immortality project in which survival demands seeing somebody else suffering and dying in one's place. Those who espoused Darby's End Time scenario expect to watch the demise of the 'unbelieving world' from a front seat in heaven's balconies, a 'vantage point' in which the raptured saints feel secure from all the violent wars, persecutions, earthquakes and plagues befalling the wicked who have been left behind. To Rossing, a bird's eye view of the world's obliteration whilst the faithful can escape its torments represents 'what Dispensationalism is all about'.⁷³ This voyeuristic quest for immortality recalls the human desire for outliving others so masterfully described by Elias Canetti. Every 'moment of survival', Canetti maintains, is not simply an immense pleasure and relief, but an intrinsic 'moment of power':

The terror at the dead man lying before one gives way to satisfaction: one is not dead oneself. One stands upright oneself, unhurt, untouched. And whether he is an enemy whom one has killed or a friend who has died, it suddenly looks as though death, which one was threatened by, had been diverted from oneself to that person. It is this feeling that very swiftly takes the upper hand; what was only just terror is now permeated with satisfaction. Survival is central to power. The living man never considers himself greater than when confronted with the dead man, who is felled forever: at this moment, the living man feels as though he had grown. ... But even if the deceased meant little to one and no special demonstration of grief is expected, it nevertheless would flout good taste to reveal any of the satisfaction at being confronted with the dead man. It is a triumph that remains concealed, that one admits to nobody else and perhaps not even to oneself.⁷⁴

Dispensationalism turns what should remain a discretely concealed triumph into a loud and clear theological statement. According to theologian Michael Northcott, a religious community steeped in the suggestion of a selective Armageddon, one in which only the elected will escape, survive and watch from above the violence unfolding below, is ideologically prepared or perhaps even prone to social inequalities and polarizations. The Christian ethics inherent in Darby's doctrine, adds Northcott, impeccably match with the moral dispositions underpinning the neoliberalist free market, rampant corporate capitalism, gated communities and policies envisaging high rates of incarceration for controlling the most disadvantaged members of society – all present-day US realities in which the rich are incommensurably blessed, whilst all the rest are 'left behind' in the tribulation zone.⁷⁵

The Armageddon complex

Apart from lending unconditional support to modern Israel and backing the national religious enterprise in the West Bank, those US dispensationalists who live in the shadow of Second Coming are also renowned as strong advocates of the so-called 'Armageddon complex': an eschatology that predicts and imposes an End of Days cataclysm in the Middle East as a precondition to salvation. Mirroring the original archetype of the Apocalypse, dispensationalists always see history in a descending phase. Nothing pure can be regenerated, but it must necessarily decay before attaining ultimate perfection. Once the lowest ebb has been reached, a cosmic ordeal is needed to sweep away the old and the flawed, making room for the 'new heaven and new earth'. The current historical aeon is by assumption beyond repair, too corrupt for reforms and thus doomed to complete annihilation. The appeal of the Armageddon complex resides in its ability to render global turmoil and anomie into an assurance of imminent redemption. Indeed, the harsher the birth pangs, the sooner the Rapture. Further, the catastrophic transition between the two ages shows no compassion whatsoever towards those who remain outside the circle of the elected.

In light of these rationales, dispensationalism has often been dismissed as a 'pathological theology', whose downfalls go far beyond those underpinning any consequentialist logic – a logic according to which the absoluteness of the end overrides any ethical consideration about the means of realization. Considering the graphic imagery that permeates all past and present dispensationalist rhetoric (religious or fictional alike), one may easily argue that the cathartic violence inscribed

in the means is fetishized to an extent that it becomes an end in itself. As Mark Juergensmeyer puts it, annihilating the unbelieving world is performed within a theological context that turns that destructiveness into a source of spiritual nourishment, something per se 'holy'.⁷⁶ The distinctive passion that dispensationalists show for the self-destroying and self-creating fire of the Apocalypse strikingly resonates with Robert Jay Lifton's idea of 'nuclearism': humankind's deification and worship of the very agents of its potential annihilation, another 'immortality project' set out to overcome our fear, frailty and biological finitude.⁷⁷

Jerusalem as a thermometer

At present, millions of US Christian Zionists focus their imagination almost entirely on modern Israel, with Iran and the Muslim world serving respectively as a specific and general 'antithetical other'.⁷⁸ Once current events in the Middle East are interpolated with Darby's prophetic script, Jerusalem becomes at one and the same time a geopolitical pivot and a barometer of the end of history. The understanding of the Holy City as eschatological *axis mundi* transpires from many columns of the dispensationalist magazine *Philadelphia Trumpet*. In the April 2009 issue entitled 'Incredible Hope in a Hopeless World', author Brad McDonald summed up some previous 'worldwatch' forecasts to reach the following conclusion:

Passages in both the Old and New Testament show that Jerusalem is the centre around which world events orbit in the months and days leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. To those who understand this prophetic reality, Jerusalem is more than just another city blistered by chaos: It's a thermometer for measuring, and anticipating End Time events. Zechariah 14:1–2 is a seminal passage outlining the events in Jerusalem immediately preceding Jesus' return. His vision explains that immediately prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the entire city of Jerusalem 'shall be taken' by a conquering force. ... What this prophecy indicates is that Iran, backed by a Hamas-dominated Palestinian insurgency, will take half the city of Jerusalem captive. [This will] start a chain reaction of events – an avalanche of crises – leading directly to Christ's Second Coming! ... We need to watch Jerusalem, this remarkable thermometer of End Time events, more closely than ever. Even now, events in that city indicate that the Messiah's return is imminent, and that the time rapidly approaches when Jesus Christ will transform Jerusalem into exactly what its name means: a city of PEACE!

For Jerusalem to fulfil the dispensationalist script and therefore become the Millenarian 'City of Peace' in which Jesus Christ rules, the temperature must necessarily rise. The Israeli capital is expected to be 'blistered by chaos', persecuted to an unprecedented scale and 'dripping with blood'.⁷⁹ In their public endorsements of the Zionist cause, US Evangelical churches and organizations invariably argue that the present perilous climate enjoins every Christian to pray for Israel and stand on her side, as the Jewish people have been 'targeted for genocide' by the Islamofascists. However, consistent with their premillennial hopes, many Christian Zionists are also remarkably happy to be standing on the brink of a nuclear Armageddon in which the earthly people, and not them, will partake.

This seems to be implicitly confirmed by their innate tendency to celebrate events that most of Israelis would consider as calamitous. Amid US dispensationalists, speculations about the Rapture or other End Time 'joys' greatly increase following crises or outbreaks of violence in the Middle East involving the Zionist state. On 21 July 2006, for example, as soon as the missiles started to be launched against Israel by Hezbollah or Hamas, prominent Evangelical and Republican broadcaster Janet Parshall gleefully announced: 'these are the times we have been waiting for. This is straight out of our Sunday Bible School lessons. We are on the edge of eternity.'⁸⁰ On a similar note, in his 2006 bestseller *Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World*, Pastor Hagee saw the events unfolding in the Middle East as confirming the dispensationalist script about the imminence of the 'Ezekiel War': the first climatic confrontation between God's forces and the Antichrist's armies, which will precipitate the downward spiral of events leading to Christ's second advent.

That in the last years the Iranian Islamic Republic has been actively enriching uranium would be another unmistakable sign that the world is very close to the tribulation years heralding the Millennium. An atomic showdown with then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad being inevitable because foretold in the Book of Jeremiah, argued Hagee, Israel and America should not wait too long and pre-emptively strike Iran.⁸¹ Nonetheless, confronting Iran's nuclear capability programme in the terms that the pastor suggests would not represent a Clausewitzian 'continuation of politics by other means' but, rather, a way to light up the dispensationalist Apocalypse using the Israeli state and the Jews living in it as a 'match'.⁸²

Utopian peace

Given its profound anti-historical charge, the eschatology of US Evangelical Zionism seems to share more affinities with the zealots

dissenters at the margins of the national religious spectrum. Akin to Christian Zionism, both Etzion's post-theocratic Zionism and Kahanism embrace a catastrophic form of messianism in which final fulfilment can only be obtained through a violent cataclysm uprooting the current aeon. This theological stand could not contrast more with the naturalistic reading of redemption that instead dictates the political involvement of mainstream Gush Emunim. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the kabbalist lore on which Kookism is based values history as a channel for Jewish salvation. The intra-mundane task of cosmic restoration is pursued asymptotically and with the aid of the secular state, by settling the national religious cause in the Land and in the heart of the Israelis. Accordingly, the current dispensation cannot suddenly be abolished by an apocalyptic outbreak because soteriological meaning is continuously extracted from its course.

Nonetheless, there seems to be one point at which all these three very different redemptive projects converge. US Christian Zionism, Gush Emunim and its radical fringes posit a state of peace in Eretz Yisrael as a final and utopian ideal, a concept that is utterly indifferent to the conventional rules of political-diplomatic praxis. To US Evangelicals the dialectic between violent Armageddon and the Millenarian bliss eschews any possibility for negotiation between the parts. No peace in the Middle East can be realized or even thought of until and unless the Second Coming is reached catastrophically. Therefore, any effort to settle the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in the present dispensation is 'at best a lack of faith or at worst a rebellious defiance towards God's pre-defined plans'.⁸³

Given the cosmic scale of the Manichean opposition, 'the articulation and adjudication of differences' can only be advanced by means of 'an all-or-nothing' eschatological confrontation. It is written in the Bible that pacifism prior to that final victory is nothing but trafficking with the Antichrist.⁸⁴ Etzion's and Kahane's worldviews function on similar premises. As far as their theologies of permanent warfare are concerned, no appeasement is deemed possible with the ontologically evil and impure *goyim*, but only their utter defeat and obliteration. Peace is a messianic goal that can be achieved solely by purging Eretz Yisrael from its corrupting agents. Despite its gradualist approach to redemption, mainstream Gush Emunim espouses a no less radical stand. After the signing of the Camp David Accords, the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli settlement of Yamit in the Sinai Peninsula, Yisrael Ariel, protested that 'the true peace for which we aim and to which we must educate [our people] is that based on the unification of the human race around one Torah'.⁸⁵

The etymological affinity between the Hebrew words *shalom* (peace) and *shlemut* (wholeness, perfection, something that is undivided and free of defects) may shed a light on the Religious Zionist disposition towards a diplomatic agreement with the Arab world. Even for the least anti-historical amongst these three redemptive projects, the utopian nature of the goal eschews the scope for political manoeuvring. Ravitzky observes that in so much as there can be no Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael except a complete return,

there can be no Jewish notion of peace except a perfect peace. Peace is no longer merely a contingent political concept, attainable in the course of history, but an ahistorical one, the peace of the End of Days prophesied by Isaiah and Micah. 'True peace' must be based on utter harmony, love, and [Jewish] brotherhood, not just on a balance of forces that keeps conflicting interests in check. [In this sense,] many of the younger Kook's disciples, the leadership of Gush Emunim, saw the peace agreement with Egypt as a betrayal, not only of the ideal of the integrity of the Land of Israel, but also of the integrity of the Jewish idea of peace. The elevation of an idea to utopian status prevents it from being realized, even partially, in the here and now. If peace is understood in exclusively Messianic terms, political activity aimed at achieving it is, in effect, neutralized – even if that means leaving the field of history to the forces of war. For Messianic perfection knows no compromise.⁸⁶

It is interesting to note that what secular diplomacy sees as an attempt towards a sustainable peace in Palestine is altogether rejected by Evangelical and Religious Zionists alike as the starkest attack on peace. Decision-making about the future of Eretz Yisrael should take nothing but the 'Jewish side' into any account. As Aran puts it, messianic peace represents a solipsistic orientation toward the sacred, 'something between the Chosen and their God – and not a complex web of diplomatic or strategic relations between communities and states'.⁸⁷ Once interpreted as an ultra-mundane state of perfection, peace becomes a zero-sum game. Although in millenarian and messianic hopes, this totalistic concept looms ahead, in the guise of a futuristic stage to be fully realized only at the End Time, the methods of its implementation are already indiscriminate and uncompromising during the present age.

Giving up on the world

Mainline Reform, Orthodox and Catholic denominations, and sometimes more progressive forms of US Evangelicalism, often criticize

dispensationalism as a belief system in which ecclesiology and Christology are subordinated to an exclusionary and violent eschatology. This subordination would negatively impinge on a proper understanding of Christian ethics along with their social application.⁸⁸ Conversely, those Evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal and independent Bible churches that endorse Darbite premillennialism often see mainline Christian denominations 'with hostility and have at times understood the World Council of Churches and related bodies to be tools of the Antichrist'.⁸⁹ The nature of this stark opposition reflects, to a significant extent, the way in which the two theological orientations understand and approach the current historical dispensation: the former as a channel for social reform motivated by Christ's teachings as codified by institutionalized churches; the latter as entirely pervaded by evil and therefore only worthy of obliteration.

This anti-historical posture is also reflected in how dispensationalists interpret their Messiah. For Boyer and many other critics, the kind of Christological figure whom US premillennialists celebrate and wait for would be an appalling departure from the 'lowly' Jesus of Nazareth – the defeated and suffering Messiah whose message of unconditional love, non-violent resistance and forgiveness is located by mainstream Christianity in the synoptic Gospels.⁹⁰ Within the framework Darby set for millions of US Evangelicals, rather, Jesus is the victorious Lamb riding on a white steed with his eyes flaming fire, which is instead described in the final chapters of Revelation. According to Darby's acolytes, this End Time warrior-king will avenge the world's accumulated injustices with a sharp sword, smite the heathen nations, rule over them with a rod of iron, carry out selective judgement and exclusive salvation and abolish history with a Jewish millenarian kingdom centred on Jerusalem. In this sense, dispensationalism reprises to the highest degree the Combat Myth inscribed in the Davidic messianic tradition, whilst altogether downplaying or rejecting the inclusive and atoning meaning associated with the Cross – a meaning that, as far as many New Testament theologians are concerned, is supposed to unravel and have impact intra-historically and in the current aeon.

As central to the divine plan, mainstream Christianity presents that Jesus consciously faced martyrdom to wash humankind's sins away. Further, Golgotha inaugurated the coming Kingdom of God, which is based on the Church's earthly working inspired by Jesus' teachings. Being placed in the world and finding solutions to the deep problems that confront humankind, accordingly, would be the primary task that every Christian has to face. In contrast, dispensationalists interpret the crucifixion mainly as a symbol of failure, one marking

the postponement of the intended Kingdom, which will only be made manifest when Jesus returns as the Davidic king, exercising precisely the form of political power [that many Christians] claim Jesus rejected. [In mainstream Churches,] Jesus is worshiped and glorified because he was slain, and it is in his suffering to the point of death that we find the meaning of human history. In Dispensationalism, we will not see [the real] Jesus in his glory until he returns as a conquering warrior and theocratic ruler. Ultimate meaning is located in the future fulfilment of promises to the nation of Israel.⁹¹

Considering these stark differences in terms of Christology, the mundane engagement that mainline Churches often promote becomes in dispensational theology a mere 'second order program, entirely subservient to God's dealings with Israel'.⁹² Today, millions of US Evangelical Zionists are keeping faith with this peculiar anti-historical stand when they argue that the only kind of sociopolitical action that the heavenly people can subscribe to is restoring more exiles to Palestine, broadening Jewish control over the Land and strengthening Israel's military prowess in sight of a nuclear Armageddon with Iran. Ironically, these Evangelicals act in this world, but only with the purpose of expediting its final demise. With his famous 'lifeboat' metaphor, Chicago premillennialist Dwight Moody made it crystal clear that the real goal is not to improve present reality (as a postmillennialist might argue), but selectively to 'snatch' people out of it:

I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat, and said to me, 'Moody save all you can.' God will come in judgment and burn up this world, but the children of God do not belong to this world; they are in it, but not of it, like a ship in the water. This world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer. If you have friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off.⁹³

Moody's 'flight from the world' encapsulates the source of distinctive indifference or hostility that US dispensationalists display toward civic, political and cultural responsibilities other than their blind commitment to the Zionist cause. In essence, premillennialism is about liberating believers from their enslavement by history, setting them free from the burden of time suddenly and violently. This faith is set on the destruction of everything that man has become as a historical being. It is only by degrading mundane reality that dispensationalists can achieve their union with the sacred. Quite telling is their attitude towards environmental conservation

and non-renewable natural resources. Given that biblical prophecies tell us that only a few generations are left before Armageddon, it would be morally justified to 'abuse the world as we will soon lose it'.⁹⁴

Participatory shift

Until the first half of the last century, the idea that the End could be forced, let alone by political means, just had a few proponents within US dispensationalist circles. Although conscious to be living at the close of history, the vast majority of Evangelical Zionists believed that only God could move the hands of the prophetic clock. They consequently shunned earthly involvement, remaining nevertheless watchful and spiritually prepared. According to Timothy Weber, it took two key historical occurrences to galvanize dispensationalists out of their passivity and render them active players in the political arena: the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, and its territorial expansion following the Six Day War in June 1967. Weber compares the early dispensationalists to spectators in the stands of a stadium who watched history unfolding down below, on the playing field. Only few of them believed that they could or actually should expedite Darby's prophetic timetable. Once the millenarian ideal of a third Jewish Commonwealth seemed to have been translated into a modern state, which later expanded its territory threefold almost to meet the biblical boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, a profound shift took place in the dispensationalist mind and predisposition towards history: 'no longer content to be observes only, US Christian Zionists descended to the playing field and became important participants in the world they were sure was rapidly passing away'.⁹⁵ Millions of Evangelicals started implementing 'politically' their End Time hopes, with the confidence that the reappearance of the greatest Jew of all time, the Lord Jesus Christ, was imminent.

Similar to the Religious Zionist case, one might observe a mutual creative tension between millenarian ideals and empirical reality, which also functions as a remarkable catalyst for theo-political mobilization. Although their redemptive modes and goals vastly differ, Christian Zionism and Gush Emunim read the same mundane events – the founding of the Zionist state and, 20 years later, the Jewish recapture of East Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Golan Heights – as indisputable validations of the Covenantal promises to Israel.⁹⁶ In both cases, not only did this miraculous alignment between religious ideal and historical reality confirm the 'beginning of the flowering of redemption', but it also prompted believers

into meaningful action in order to push the respective messianic–millenarian processes forward, towards their finalization.

As far as US dispensationalists are concerned, the convergence between prophecy and historical reality was so overwhelming that it had significantly altered the original application of their premillennial faith. Notwithstanding the world was seen irreparably doomed and the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Jewish restoration were believed to come to pass regardless, it became critical for many in the Bible Belt to reconsider their traditional indifference towards the current aeon. The motive at the basis of the participatory shift might essentially be twofold. First, as Ravitsky would describe it, dispensationalists began to act in the world on the assumption of having been singled out for the highest purpose in life. The overconfidence about the redemptive spin that history had taken gave them the impression of being almost in exclusive partnership with God. This compelled them to assume a purposive role in that cosmic drama that they believed to be unfolding in the Middle East. Second, their theo-political surge might also depend on the typically dispensationalist sense of the impending End, but without a fixed date – a sense that the events of May 1948 and June 1967 further emboldened in the mind of countless End Time believers.

On the subject of setting a date for the Apocalypse, O’Leary charges that ‘greater specificity may turn [premillennial] audiences into passive spectators awaiting the fall of the final curtain on history’, whereas indeterminacy would open up a more fluid prophetic timetable that might encourage the same audience to participate as protagonist in that ‘dramatic finale’.⁹⁷ The two decisive turning points taking place in a 20-year span inaugurated, for those who lived in the shadow of the Second Coming, a ‘transitional phase’: as previously argued, the apocalyptic impression of standing on the cusp of two qualitatively different ages, in this case history and eternity. Rather than putting brackets around thoughts and actions, this sense of imminence and liminality would spur believers into forcing a closure, and therefore complete their transition into the new and blissful Millenarian Age.

Weber makes it crystal clear that, being multiple the responses that can stem from the same eschatological orientation, there has never been or ever will be such a thing as a typical or uniform premillennial style of political engagement. However, following Jonathan Butler’s analytical categories, Weber describes the Evangelical Zionist approach towards mundane reality as follows:

Instead of abandoning the social order or manoeuvring on the fringes, some premillennialists assume political and social responsibility.

Naturally, their participation in politics is discriminatory. Premillennialists are very selective about what they become involved in. Their approach tends to be individualistic, moralistic, and short-term. That is, they usually refuse to get involved in long-term projects for social transformation. They know that they cannot change things permanently. But they believe that there are some things that they can do. Therefore, many premillennialists decide to give the Devil all the trouble [they] can till Jesus comes.⁹⁸

In view of their focus on assisting the Jewish return to and control over Eretz Yisrael in order to precipitate the Second Coming, the Christian Zionist engagement with the defiling world would be distinctively short-termed and highly discriminatory. Believers are also called on to enter the domain of public life with the main purpose of bringing US domestic and foreign policies in line with Darby's master plot. Nonetheless, Washington's corridors of power must be lobbied only until Jesus Christ secretly evacuates his people through the Rapture 'airlift'. After that event the current dispensation is lost in the darkness of disinterest since it must collapse in the final apocalyptic ordeal. The paradox consists in the fact that, in keeping with their dispensational eschatology, US Evangelicals are impelled to operate resourcefully and purposively within history, but only to advance the already fore-ordained plan to abolish its course violently.

The politics of the Apocalypse

The awakening of US Christian fundamentalism as a major force to be reckoned with began in early 1970s. Whilst mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations witnessed a steep decline, conservative Evangelicalism rose in terms of membership, financial assets and missionary activities, becoming the fastest developing sector of American Christianity.⁹⁹ The drive for such a remarkable growth was Darby's premillennial doctrine, now popularized through the modern media of mass communication. With their televised sermons reaching millions of viewers, the charismatic evangelists, Jerry Falwell and Pat Roberson, started preaching their doomsday gospel focusing on modern Israel to large audiences. During the same period, Hal Lindsey's great publishing phenomenon, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, rendered the obscure passages of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation into an intelligible script that readers could use to put current affairs in the right prophetic perspective. Further, the Dallas Theological Seminary established itself as the academic and ideological 'Vatican' of premillennial dispensationalism, also

becoming one of the most prestigious training grounds for Evangelical clergy and laity, both in the US and around the world.

Not only did dispensationalism enter with confidence into the US public life and popular culture, but it also encroached on the domain of domestic and international politics. Since the early 1980s, Evangelical dispensationalist leaders forged alliances with American Jewish pressure groups and Israeli politicians in favour of the Zionist cause. At the same time, relying on grassroots networks able to reach and mobilize millions, the Christian right began to wield considerable influence as a key voting bloc for the Republican Party, trying to put in office only candidates with views and programmes in line with their eschatological agenda focused on Israel.

An impressive corpus of literature has been published about George W. Bush's spiritual orientations and the strategic ties that he maintained with the conservative Evangelical circles prior to and throughout his two mandates at the White House. As Emilio Gentile reports in his essay about US civil religion in the wake of September 11, countless assessments of Bush's persona and political leadership have been built up by scanning his religious beliefs and questioning their sincerity. At stake was judging whether the unusual messianic tones of his presidency represented an aberration from the course of the American tradition or a marked expression of its very essence. Two main categorizations often emerged. Bush was labelled either as a 'sanctimonious' president held hostage by the Evangelical right; or as a 'mediocre but astute politician, who dressed up a cynical and unscrupulous political line in religious clothes, aiming solely at fostering the interests of the pressure groups that had financed his electoral campaign'. As Gentile points out, discerning between the two realms might be an inconclusive exercise, especially if one considers the impact of September 11 on the processes of sacralization of politics and the politicization of religion. Indeed, as a result of the traumatic attacks and the ensuing 'holy war' mentality of the Global War on Terror, the two dimensions seemed to intermingle almost to the point of losing their respective boundaries, and not only within the American context.¹⁰⁰

Another disputed issue concerns Bush's alleged dispensationalist leanings. Although it is probably impossible to ascertain the extent to which the president, himself a born-again Christian, embraced or sympathized with such a prophetic creed, it is indisputable that he constantly courted Evangelical audiences in which Christian Zionist leaders and believers featured prominently.¹⁰¹ For their part, the latter hailed Bush's arrival at the White House as the beginning of a spiritual revival

that would have brought God right back to national politics. Especially when compared to the scandalous conduct of his predecessor, Bush's religious and moral credentials made him the righteous leader whom many Evangelicals so eagerly awaited in order to regenerate America towards its idealized standards of a 'Christian nation'. After the new president introduced Bible study groups in the White House along with the unprecedented custom of opening every government meeting with a prayer, many in the Bible Belt were led to believe that God Himself had answered their wishes.¹⁰²

According to such reliable sources as the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Evangelical votes turned out to be a key in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.¹⁰³ It is therefore plausible to assume that for Bush, or any other politician in his entourage, it would have been almost impossible to ignore the demands stemming from that segment of religious voters – in particular those concerning the modern State of Israel. It is well known that, as his presidency was reaching its conclusion, Bush attempted to leave a footnote in history by championing 'the expansion of freedom and peace in the Holy Land'.¹⁰⁴ A special report by the journalist Bill Moyers on the 2007 Annapolis peace talks gave a very simple but nonetheless poignant representation of the kind of impasse in which Bush's foreign policy had been constantly caught in. The narrating voice opens the report by explaining that during that event two opposite dynamics were colliding with each other in the same centre of power, but at different levels of political negotiations. As Bush officially discussed a two-state solution with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House, down below, in the lobbies, his National Security Advisor was trying to placate some Evangelical representatives who saw in the same diplomatic solution a 'lynching' of the Jewish state.¹⁰⁵

Many contend that presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and even Bush Sr tended to be more decisive in their criticism of Israel's settlement activities in the Occupied Territories, whereas both Bush administrations lent such activities an almost tacit approval.¹⁰⁶ Nearly every study denouncing the political remit that US Evangelical Zionism acquired during the Bush era quotes the 'Jenin incident' to back the claim that the Bible Belt's lobbying in Washington represented a 'safety net' for Israel's unilateral policies in the Occupied Territories. In March 2002, in response to the Netanya suicide bombing known as the 'Passover massacre', Prime Minister Ariel Sharon launched 'Operation Defensive Shield', with the primary goal of dismantling the Arab terrorist network in the West bank, thereby preventing further suicide

bombings against Israeli civilians.¹⁰⁷ During the siege of the northern town of Jenin, 23 IDF soldiers were killed in the fighting along with 53 Palestinians, a disputed number of which were civilians. In view of the fact that it was considered the hotbed of Palestinian militancy, a refugee camp located in the proximities of the town was extensively targeted in the operation, with the IDF also keeping the Red Cross and other humanitarian aid organizations from intervening for thirteen days. The ensuing international outcry led to a UN resolution demanding that Israel withdraw from the West Bank 'without delay'. No longer able to ignore the mounting international pressure, President Bush eventually sided with the Security Council and asked a defiant Sharon to pull out of the Palestinian areas without further delay. This decision angered and at the same time spurred a key component of Bush's electoral base into action. Wagner takes the following events as indisputable proof of Christian Zionism's theo-political influence in Washington's corridors of power:

Prominent Christian Zionist leaders, working closely with pro-Israel groups in Washington, used their media and internet outlets to mobilize their constituencies to deliver tens of thousands of telephone calls, e-mails and letters to the President, telling him to refrain from pressuring Sharon and to allow Israel to finish its job [the elimination of the terrorist cells and infrastructures from the West Bank territories]. In the aftermath of that campaign, Bush did not utter another word of opposition to Israeli military actions. Falwell told the CBS news program *60 Minutes* that after the incident, Israel could count on Bush to 'do the right thing for Israel every time'. The lesson was that even when the Bush administration criticized Israel, the Israelis, conscious of the extensive support they enjoy in the US Congress, would not take it seriously.¹⁰⁸

In his seminal study on American nationalism published in the wake of the Iraq War, Anatol Lieven submits that a substantial pro-Israeli twist in the US Middle East policy coincided with what he calls a 'southernization' of the Republican Party. Such a process, adds Lieven, began with Bush's first election and reached its apex in 2004, at a moment in which the 'White South' (a shorthand for the conservative Evangelical constituency steeped in Darbite premillennialism) was overrepresented both in Congress and in the Senate. Lieven, together with many other concerned voices, warned that the Christian right's hold on Capitol Hill was putting at risk the constitutional separation between Church

and State, whilst providing religious support to a form of 'chauvinist nationalism' geared towards the Middle East.¹⁰⁹

The study's last and longest chapter, 'American Nationalism, Israel and the Middle East', is focused on ascertaining the extent to which the Evangelical right was able to align US foreign policy with Israel's staunch unilateralism and expansionism in the Occupied Territories. Here, the London School of Economics political scientist underscores how, during the Bush era, the regressive coalescence between eschatological hopes and ultra-nationalist impulses turned out to be a 'calamitous liability'. For Lieven, the 'love affair' between Evangelical Zionists, 'neocons' and Israeli right-wingers did far more than curb the national aspirations of the Palestinians. It in fact alienated many moderate voices within Muslim societies, whilst proving remarkably fruitful to radical Islam in terms of propaganda and recruitment.¹¹⁰

That during the Bush era dispensationalist leanings had spilled into mainstream US politics was epitomized by an official speech that James Inhofe gave at Capitol Hill as early as March 2002. In that circumstance, the prominent Republican Senator and the Christian right (also known as the New Christian Right) member clarified the main motive why Israel should continue to settle in the West Bank:

Because God said so. This is the most important reason. Look it up in the Book of Genesis: [it] says that Abraham removed his tent and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built an altar before the Lord. Hebron is in the West Bank. It is the place where God appeared to Abraham and said 'I am giving you this land.' This is not a political battle at all, [but rather] a contest over whether the word of God is true.¹¹¹

Another calculated dispensationalist effort put in place to win hearts and minds to the cause of the Jewish state is the so-called 'Tour Bus Diplomacy'. Under the pretext of guiding US Evangelicals around the sites where Darby's prophecies were said to come true, this initiative brought and continues to bring millions of visitors to the Holy Land, generating substantial revenues for the Israeli economy. In such prophecy-based itineraries, little is usually mentioned about the life and teaching of Jesus, but much more is mentioned about the divine right granted to the Jewish state in its struggle against the Palestinians.¹¹²

Restorationism remains, however, a key earthly commitment to move the prophetic clock forward. Since their political activation, Christian Zionist churches and congregations have been engaged in a twofold

task. On the one hand, they provide financial aid to the existing Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories. In a way strikingly reminiscent of the indulgences system fully operating in pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism, US Evangelicals can secure quotas of eternity by signing into a distance adoption of a Jewish community living in Eretz Yisrael. On the other hand, they economically and logistically assist those Diaspora Jews willing to make 'aliya' (return) to Judea and Samaria.¹¹³ These twin initiatives are directed at consolidating and increasing Jewish demographics in the West Bank, and therefore make an eventual Israeli disengagement from it more difficult or even impossible. Despite having been at odds for 2000 years, observes Shalom Goldman, Jewish messianism and Christian millenarianism have in the last few decades especially begun to converge. The core of this most unexpected, previously inconceivable and wide-ranging theo-political alliance consists in the shared effort to establish facts on the ground aimed at overturning the territorial partition of Eretz Yisrael and, in that manner, furthering the respective redemptive vision.¹¹⁴

Colin Shindler contends that the real catalyst for the symbiotic partnership was, more than the Six Day War, the *mahpekhah*: that political revolution originating from the destabilizing setback of the Yom Kippur War that put an end to the Labour Party's three decades of hegemony and inaugurated the era of Jabotinskyian Revisionist Zionism. To Shindler, 17 May 1977, the day that Menachem Begin won a landslide victory in the national elections, represented a crossroads for Gush Emunim and US Christian Zionism alike. For the first time, these two newly emergent messianic-millenarian movements could rely on a secular platform sympathetic to their 'land-hungry' policies. Despite some initial frictions caused by Begin's decision to return the whole of Sinai to Egypt in 1982, a honeymoon between the Likud Party and the Bible Belt continued undisturbed until the summer of 2005, when Sharon's government bowed to the demographic realities of the region (8000 Jewish settlers living in one-third of the Gaza Strip, surrounded by 1.3 million Palestinians) and decided to pull out unilaterally from Gaza. As Shindler points out, US Christian Zionism found in Likud's maximalist policies a conduit for their aspirations toward Armageddon, whereas the Israeli secular right discovered in US dispensationalists unwavering supporters, numerically stronger and far more dependable than the traditionally liberal and overtly dovish members of American Jewry. From the early 1980s onwards, Likud premiers strategically utilized Evangelical Zionists either to pressurize the White House or to counteract criticism of Israel's settlement policies stemming from both American Progressive Christianity and Reform Judaism.¹¹⁵

At present, the rising star within the New Christian Right spectrum is the already mentioned pastor John Hagee, the spiritual leader of the San Antonio Cornerstone congregation – a non-denominational Evangelical ‘mega church’ that declares that it gathers more than 19,000 under its roof. In addition, the pastor boasts a television and radio audience of 99 million homes. In 2006, Hagee launched the non-profit group of the Christians United for Israel (CUFI), with the purpose of teaching Evangelicals the ‘language of Washington DC’ and coordinating their lobbying effort to keep the US foreign policy constantly pro-Zionist. Superseding traditional organizations like Falwell’s Moral Majority or Robertson’s Christians Coalition, CUFI has recently become the new dynamic reality of US conservative Evangelicalism. It claims ‘426,000 active members, 40 events per month, a growing network on college campuses, and Hispanic and African American outreach’.¹¹⁶ Its annually organized summit ‘A Night to Honour Israel’ has been attended over the years by such influential American and Israeli figures as Joseph Lieberman, John McCain, Elie Wiesel, Abe Foxman, Benjamin Netanyahu, Shimon Peres and Dore Gold. The 2006 kick-off event also received formal words of support from the former president, Bush and his wife.

Journalist Rachel Tabachnick points out that, notwithstanding his influence and public visibility, Hagee represents a kind of ‘oddity’ in the Evangelical spectrum, namely in view of his theological background. In 1975, the pastor abandoned the Assemblies of God, the largest and most influential Pentecostal denomination in the US, to become an influential national leader amongst independent (nondenominational) Charismatic churches. The vast majority of CUFI directors, leaders and host churches have similar moorings. The pastor and his organization would therefore be representative of a new and ascending trend within the American dispensationalist faith and culture – one that at present wields the most considerable power by drawing on international missionary networks and television and radio worldwide broadcasts.¹¹⁷

Pastor Hagee’s two hats

The moment that dispensationalist leaders chose to embark on a route of politics, rhetorical skills and stratagems need to be developed to accommodate two almost irreconcilable demands. On the one hand, their political approach and praxis should acknowledge and to some extent satisfy the longings for an apocalyptic denouement stemming from their religious constituencies; on the other, in order to present themselves as credible political players, dispensationalist leaders need

to allay scepticism, concern or embarrassment that those very longings generated amid either political opponents or potential partners.

This conundrum became fully apparent in the late 1980s, when televangelist Pat Robertson decided to run for president. To avoid the polemic that his long-standing Armageddon advocacy was likely to raise, Robertson had to redefine significantly his theological trajectory from pure premillennial dispensationalism towards 'nebulous' postmillennialism.¹¹⁸ In an essay dedicated to a rhetorical analysis of his public speeches during that period, O'Leary reports that:

Robertson gradually departed from the pessimistic scenarios of Antichrist, Great Tribulation and Armageddon and began to offer representations of the future that resembled the postmillennial [position]. ... Invoking the Puritan sense of America's covenantal destiny, Robertson claimed that the answer to the nation's troubles lay 'in a new rise of faith and freedom that will give to every American a vision of hope and opportunity'.¹¹⁹

Entertaining political ambitions entails revisiting the interpretation of biblical prophecies. The televangelist had to move away from, or at least downplay, the catastrophic scenarios distinguishing his premillennial faith, to embrace a more optimistic vision in which transcendental fulfilment was pursued intra-historically through a gradual reform of American society, both in moral and material terms. However, such a reshuffle downplaying the destructive side of the Apocalypse with the idea of human perfectibility – that is, the argument that the eschaton could be approached asymptotically – failed in convincing two 'crucial audiences'. Within the dispensational camp, many denounced the shift in religious rhetoric as a 'heretical embrace' of postmillennialism bordering on 'secular humanist philosophy'. As conservative Evangelical minister Jimmy Swaggart pointed out, Robertson's contention that 'Christians can overwhelm the world and transform it into a community of peace and prosperity' is nothing but a 'false picture of utopia' that finds little resonance in biblical prophecies. These, on the contrary, would speak mainly of 'imaginable conflicts and excruciating suffering', demanding Godly rather than human intercession.¹²⁰ No less encouraging responses came from political opponents and media commentators, which equally labelled Robertson's disavowal of Armageddon theology as disingenuous opportunism. The twofold reaction caused Robertson to be discredited and marginalized and, ultimately, resulted in his defeat at the primaries.

Although he never considered running for the White House, Pastor Hagee is today confronted by a similar predicament. At every attempt to broaden CUI's appeal and acceptance within the American national domain, he must face the daunting task of striking the exact balance between the marked apocalyptic charge of his dispensational faith and the rules of mainstream politics. In order to overcome this impasse, Hagee strategically resorts to a 'double standard' approach, affording the pastor to modulate his message in accordance with the identity and inclinations of its recipients.

Whenever he intervenes in the wider public arena, where dispensationalists represent only a minority amongst other secular and religious audiences, Hagee tends to 'whitewash' his doomsday register and lexicon. He accordingly presents his Zionist commitment in less eschatological than geopolitical and cultural terms. Israel and the Jewish people who live within and beyond its borders matter not as a vehicle for Christian deliverance from the world, but because of the crucial values and common spiritual heritage that they share with the United States. Supporting the Zionist state, along with its maximalist policies in the West Bank, would be the best manner to foster democratic progress in that region. Since its national foundation, Israel has been the 'canary in the coalmine', 'the scout' in that conflict opposing Western civilization to 'a new onslaught of hatred stemming from the Islamofascists'.¹²¹ Furthermore, another salient non-eschatological reason that Evangelicals often publically quote in order to justify their political stand is the guilt for ongoing centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice, persecution and oppression, which several Christian churches – namely European – tolerated or even supported.¹²² If theological issues were to become pertinent whilst Hagee speaks to the outer world, the pastor would vehemently reject the view that the Evangelical love for and dedication to Israel is embedded in End Time speculations, emphasizing that, rather, it stems from Christian observance of the Covenantal promises as recounted in Genesis. These arguments notwithstanding, Darbite eschatology appears to remain the elephant in the room, the nettlesome issue that US Christian Zionists are always reminded of and uncomfortable to account for. For instance, after reporter Max Blumenthal raised the alleged dispensationalist leanings of his organization during a 2007 press conference, an annoyed Hagee retorted that 'our support of Israel has absolutely nothing to do with End Time prophecy'. Blumenthal was invited to leave the premises and was then escorted by CUI's security personnel.

An entirely different approach is endorsed when the pastor addresses his religious congregation in the auditorium of the Saint Antonio mega-church, during his televised sermons or in the pages of his End Time pamphlets. Here Hagee becomes a 'rethor' (rhetorician) who persuades the 'already converted' by framing events through the lens of Darby's prophetic script. In this more intimate setting, everything occurring on the historical horizon has a meaning that points towards the catastrophic finale: 'when you see what's happening in America and the world, it doesn't take long to realize that God is proclaiming through the voice of nature that we are approaching the coming of Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven'.¹²³ Following O'Leary's explanation about how the 'Apocalyptic persuasion' is rhetorically built within dispensationalist circles, the rethor would be a personality endowed with charisma whose discourse arouses and fulfils an End Time 'appetite' in the minds of his auditors by interpolating historical occurrences with Darby's predictive schemes. If the apocalyptic persuasion is successfully construed, adds O'Leary, a virtuous bond is established between the rethor, his audience and the prophetic script.¹²⁴ It is within this particular setting that Hagee feels at ease in justifying his support for the Zionist cause on fully eschatological grounds. In this context, the pastor can read the signs of the time to confidently charge that the rising Arab turmoil engulfing Israel is nothing but the harbinger of a foreordained chain reaction leading to the Rapture, the Tribulation, the appearance of the Antichrist and his rule, the battle of Armageddon and the establishment of the Millenarian rule centred in Jerusalem – all topics that would be extremely hard to digest for a non-dispensationalist public.

In keeping with these arguments, Sarah Posner, the associate editor of the online journal *Religion Dispatches*, and a major expert in the New Christian Right, notes that Hagee studiously wears 'two hats': one as a visible pro-Zionist activist whose support is courted by leading national and Israeli politicians; the other as a pastor of an Evangelical congregation that gathers millions of souls living in the shadow of the Second Coming.¹²⁵ Simultaneously straddling two hardly compatible realms, mundane politics and anti-historical End Time speculation, might nevertheless present the same pitfalls as those that caused the Robertson fiasco. On the one hand, to over-accommodate the demands of the political game could put at risk the basis of Hagee's religious consensus. In particular, compromising on key eschatological principles might alienate those hard-core premillennialists who draw essential spiritual comfort from apocalyptic rhetoric. This appears to be the case especially

if one considers the most recent and fastest growing additions to US dispensationalism: the Pentecostal and Charismatic streams, representing an aggressive 'new breed' of premillennialism that takes the doomsday narrative to its extreme that has also shown itself to be remarkably committed towards hastening the coming of the Millennium.¹²⁶

On the other hand, in view of the catastrophic predictions and scathing theodicy on which they base their authority, dispensational leaders will always find it difficult to present themselves as credible players within the public arena. In spite of the effort to conform to the accepted rules and codes of secular politics, their Armageddon theology calling for the violent annihilation of the world and the demonization of out-group opponents is bound to remain a liability for those who aspire to speak the language of Washington. This last assertion seems to have been validated once more during the 2008 presidential campaigns, when Republican Senator John McCain had to distance himself from CUFİ and ultimately reject Hagee's political endorsement as a result of a long list of outlandish jeremiads that the latter had previously uttered. In late February 2008, the pastor labelled the Catholic Church a 'great whore' and a 'false cult system' playing a primary role in the Holocaust. The criticism already mounting up on a national scale intensified even further when new derogatory statements surfaced: most notably when Hagee commented that Hurricane Katrina was nothing but a divine retribution for a gay pride parade planned in New Orleans for the week in which the hurricane made landfall.¹²⁷ Furthermore, on 18 September 2005, during a sermon at his mega-church, the pastor linked this event – one of the deadliest natural disasters in the history of the country – to the Bush administration's decision to support the Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip as a preliminary step towards a two-state solution, as follows:

I want to ask Washington a question. Is there a connection between the 9000 Jewish refugees being forcibly removed from their homes in the Gaza Strip now living in tents and the thousands of Americans who have been expelled from their homes by this tremendous work of nature? Is there a connection there? If you've got a better answer, I'd like to hear it.¹²⁸

Although not directly evoking an End Time scenario, it is undeniable that these controversial remarks are an offspring from Hagee's dispensationalist outlook. This goes to say that until and unless the 'Apocalyptic sting' is completely removed, US Christian Zionists cannot

affirm themselves as a plausible player in a pluralistic political system. Nonetheless, removing that sting might involve an unbearable spiritual loss for many of its adherents. Given the patent anti-historical and catastrophic stand underpinning premillennialism, US Christian Zionists and their theo-politics will attach most of their fortunes to the state of exception, and always struggle to survive, let alone flourish beyond the extra-ordinary. This represents a major difference with Gush Emunim, a movement whose naturalistic and gradual understanding of redemption makes its political engagement comparatively easier.

One may object to extrapolations being made from only two case studies, Evangelical and Jewish Religious Zionism, proceeding from far too narrow a base to support a general statement. Even so, an assumption can at least be put forward at this level of analysis: once established as a stable system of hierocratic authority, or after having obtained formal recognition within a given political system, religious movements with strong apocalyptic-messianic agendas tend to renegotiate their original catastrophic or revolutionary rationales. For a movement so concerned with otherworldly salvation such as US Christian Zionism is, becoming deeply involved in electoral politics and foreign policy imposes a difficult revision of its theological worldview. However justified, it might appear to achieve more political purchase and thereby press forward the eschatological agenda, any process of mundane institutionalization represents for a premillennial movement a 'doctrinal oxymoron'. The middle-of-the-road position between purely apocalyptic beliefs and political ideology aimed at attaining intra-historical duration can hardly be located, let alone maintained. This contradiction in terms may as well produce profound repercussions in the movement's membership. If core ideals of sudden and catastrophic palingenesis were to be sacrificed beyond recognition (put differently, diluted into the infinite postmillennial approximations towards the eschaton), the group identity might be so seriously undermined as to create the premise for internal crisis, secessions or even disbandment.

That political involvement tends to alter eschatological beliefs – sometimes even to the extent of their complete transfiguration – represents a meaningful counterpoint to the other general assumption advanced in the course of this study that, with their call for absolute renewal, eschatological beliefs impact on political reality. As far as theo-political phenomena like Christian and Jewish Religious Zionism are concerned, the relationship between mundane reality and transcendental ideals is not given once and for all. The two dimensions seem to

remain in a dialectic tension, constantly adjusting to each other over the course of time.

Adversus Ioudaeos

The traumatic experience of the Holocaust reintroduced with unprecedented urgency the question of whether Christianity was, at its doctrinal core and from its historical beginnings, the primary source of Western anti-Semitism. Many theologians and scholars concentrated on the so-called *adversus Ioudaeos* ('Against the Jews') tradition: as explained by Rosemary Ruether, a Christian self-understanding constructed in a fundamental opposition to Judaism, whether through repudiation of its supposed errors or by supersession of its virtues.¹²⁹ It has already been argued that the Jewish ideal of a human fellowship set apart by divine election and thereby endowed with the mission to further universal salvation was a template that the emerging Church aimed to appropriate as its own. Ruether also contends that an approach ranging from anti-Jewish apologetic to overt anti-Semitism was part and parcel of early Christianity's attempt to affirm and differentiate itself from Judaism, without however severing the roots with its essential spiritual moorings. In fact,

Judaism cannot be jettisoned entirely from the Christian worldview, lest the markers of Jesus' own identity lose their points of reference and the kingdom He proclaimed be emptied of its content. St. Augustine provided the category of 'witness people', arguing that the Jews are necessary for the continuation of Christian life until the *Eschaton*. Wrong as they are, the Jews in their very error serve the purposes of vindicating the Messianic prophecies that Jesus fulfils, exemplifying the contemporary consequences of rejecting God's grace, and validating the Second Coming by their acknowledgement of the one whom they have not previously recognized. The Jews may by definition be diametrically 'other' than what Christianity is, but they are the necessary other of Christianity's ongoing life.¹³⁰

Fenn contends that as 'the only nation on earth to have its history written in advance', biblical Israel serves as a primary 'focal point' for any social or religious congregation that lays claim to live at a crucial turning point in history or in a special dispensation of grace.¹³¹ In keeping with René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, Israel might be easily

recognized as a theological rendition of what the French scholar calls a 'model-obstacle'.¹³² This syntagm captures an ambivalent and contradictory attitude towards the desired object, in our case what biblical Israel symbolizes in the eyes of many non-Jewish believers. On the one hand, in view of its exclusive relationship with God and the task of cosmic salvation that it is entrusted to lead on His behalf, the Israelite nation represents an unparalleled model of perfection and holiness, which demands to be worshiped and imitated. On the other hand, that model establishes an insurmountable obstacle to one's desire towards holiness and perfection, mainly in view of the fact that the actual existence of Israel precludes someone else's chance to attain such a privileged status and relationship with God.

Once interpreted in a Girardian guise, the beloved Israel is bound to turn into a 'hated rival', or as Girard would probably put it, a 'mimetic double', that entices one's desire for holiness and perfection, but also stirs resentment by blocking the fulfilment of that very desire. In eschatological terms, whenever a community sees itself closest to the supreme redemptive finalization, it might come into violent confrontation with the model-obstacle embodied by Israel. As will be seen in the following pages, an almost schizophrenic oscillation between the most servile love and the most envious hatred towards the Israelites permeates both Darby's End Time script and its current application in US Evangelical Zionism.

In view of the obsessive casting of the tribes of Israel as foils in Christendom's march toward the Millennium, dispensationalism and its adherents no doubt represent a theological unicum. In no other circumstance, argues historian Yaakov Ariel, 'has one religious community assigned a predominant role to another religious community in its vision of redemption or claimed that the other group holds a special relationship with God'; in no other case 'has one religious group invested so much hope in another group as the key brokers on the road to universal salvation'.¹³³ Nonetheless, whilst considering the Jewish people to be vital in God's plans for humanity, dispensationalism does not translate only into philanthropic support for Zion. That some worrisome innuendos or even blatant statements constantly recur throughout past and present Evangelical discourses, rather, would suggest that what at first glance might appear as love and dedication is in reality a more ambivalent, if not self-contradictory feeling.¹³⁴ As Weber and Boyer well documented, along with their mass rallies honouring God's Chosen nation with Hebrew singing and Israeli flag-waving,

US Christian Zionists have always nurtured a 'dark side' in their attitude towards the beloved Children of God.¹³⁵

Many take issue with Darby premillennialism, arguing that the latter forces Judaism and the Jews into the service of the conservative Evangelical *Heilsgeschichte*. The Jewish people would be nothing more than 'pawns' in somebody else's eschatological game. Although nominally rejecting replacement theology (as previously detailed, the idea that the Church rightfully became 'the new, true Israel, with no room left in God's Covenant for the old, benighted Israel'¹³⁶), Christian Zionism remains strictly ingrained in a supersessionist logic, especially if one considers the ancillary role that Darby earmarked for the earthly people. A quite remarkable analogy can be drawn between the dispensationalist logic and the idea of heterogenesis of the ends, as theorized by the elder Rabbi Kook. Insofar as the forefather of Gush Emunim recognized in secular Zionism a mundane tool unwittingly pursuing the sacred cause of messianic renaissance, Darby posited the earthly people as unknowing instruments of a divine process that, through their ingathering in Eretz Yisrael and final acceptance of Jesus, will bring about Christian salvation. Given such undeniable finality, dispensationalism represents a controversial theology encroaching on any serious interfaith dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

Despite remaining a distinct ethnic-religious entity alongside the heavenly Church, the Jews will eventually need to be subsumed within the worldwide fellowship of people who recognize Jesus as their saviour. Evangelical Zionism conceives of both the Israeli and Diaspora Jews not as a self-standing religious community, but 'as a remnant of an ancient people who carry a special mission and are predestined to help bring the drama of Christian salvation to its conclusion'. In keeping with this view, Judaism cannot per se provide

its adherents with spiritual comfort, moral guidelines, and, most important of all, salvation. Only in Christianity could Jews, as individuals, find eternal life and, as a nation, the peace and security they sought, as well as the fulfilment of their destiny as the chosen people.¹³⁷

It is not surprising that theologians who are well versed in both eschatology and interreligious matters are those to be mostly concerned about the far-reaching implications of Darby premillennialism. For instance, Peter Pettit, the director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding and an associate professor of religion, holds that the

threat associated with Christian Zionism is essentially twofold. First, the apartheid separation between the earthly and heavenly people is bound to contrast the Jewish errors with the Christian truths. In so doing, the Dual Covenant approach would perpetuate or even exceed the shortcomings and dangers stemming from replacement theology. Second, interpreting Judaism as the 'left hand of Christology' remains an idealized form of Judaism, a Christian 'construction' that finds no resonance whatsoever in either the Israeli context or Diaspora Jewry. By taking its bearings more from the eschatological needs of US dispensationalism than from Jewish life and the Jewish community, adds Pettit, this fetishized idea of Israel would 'indelibly mar any genuine relationship with Judaism – if not perhaps our very identity as Christians', and also add into 'the very sour substances of old Christian anti-Semitism'.¹³⁸

Rabbi Cook charges that anti-Semitic potentials are inscribed in the essence of dispensational theology, in particular in the core belief that 'the onus for delay' in completing God's prophetic timetable rests on His Chosen.¹³⁹ The love and dedication professed towards Zion do not prevent prominent Evangelical leaders from expressing impatience (or even contempt) toward those Jews who seem not to attend to or even betray their End Time assignment. The feeling that what really counts is not the Jewish people's wellbeing but the eschatological rationale that they fulfil seems to have been proven by a number of controversial statements. In 2006, Pat Robertson suggested that Sharon's descent into a comatose state was a divine punishment inflicted upon the Israeli prime minister for his policies undermining the integrity of Eretz Yisrael. Eleven years earlier, the televangelist addressed Yitzhak Rabin's murder by an Israeli religious zealot in not too dissimilar terms to those endorsed by the Israeli Religious right. As stated by Robertson, Rabin would have paid the toll for having contravened God's national policy statement, as enshrined in Genesis.¹⁴⁰

In keeping with their prophetic hopes, US dispensationalists seem to expect and even welcome a state of constant warfare engulfing modern Israel. This represents another glaring contradiction if one considers the concern that many Evangelical Zionists like Hagee boast today for Israel's national security. A similar course is followed whenever US Christian Zionists mobilize their political assets in order to keep the US and Israeli governments from making any diplomatic overtures towards the Palestinian authorities or the wider Arab world that might stabilize the region. Dispensationalists believe that a violent confrontation between the Chosen nation and its non-Jewish neighbours represents the true and only harbinger of millenarian peace. Escalating turmoil

and violence in the Middle East is also conducive to the spiritual refinement of God's people, once the Christian faithful have already departed the earthly scene. One should never forget that, according to Darby's economy of salvation, the underlying purpose of the Tribulation period (otherwise known as 'Jacob's trouble') and of Armageddon itself is to condition a remnant of Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah in compensation for their ancestors' rejection of him.¹⁴¹ To appreciate the far-reaching consequences of premillennial dispensationalism – especially from an interfaith dialogue perspective, it seems essential to take thoroughly into account what past and modern-day Evangelical Zionists have to say in regard to the Jews and their End Time fate.

Christian Zionists usually feel neither responsible nor accountable for the moral implications that their belief system carries. Claiming that it stems authoritatively from the Bible, they often invoke the principle of Jewish guilt for deicide, the long-standing 'corporate indictment' at the basis of every kind of Christian anti-Semitism. Central to Darbite prophecies is the idea that Jesus offered the Kingdom of God to Israel and himself as a messiah, but the Jewish people discarded such an offer and crucified Jesus. As a result, it has been argued here, the final fulfilment of God's promises to Israel had to be postponed and the Church's interim inaugurated. From that moment, the Chosen are considered to be in a state of 'unbelief', that is, 'under a "national blood-guiltiness" for killing Christ, a stigma that could not be wiped away until the Second Coming and the Jewish repentance for it'. Being in unbelief is also the underlying justification that dispensationalists use to frame pogroms and persecutions befalling the Jewish people: 'as a nation, the Jews crucified their king, therefore the nations will crucify them' until they repent for that fateful and sinful misdeed. The brutality and frequency with which they have been harassed over the centuries should make the Chosen realize the magnitude of their spiritual blindness.¹⁴²

Following the dispensationalist plot, the Jewish refinement towards a Christian rebirth climaxes during the seven-year Tribulation. Although the End Time trials are meant to invest all sinners who missed the Rapture's window of opportunity (Jews and Gentiles alike who have been 'left behind'), Israel will no doubt be the primary target of the coming judgement. Dreadful events loom ahead for the Jews according to Darby's calendar, as 'the Christ-rejecting nation must drink the cup of God's wrath to the last drop'. Previous disasters and persecutions would pale to insignificance if compared to the mass ordeal that the Chosen will undergo whilst the Antichrist reigns on earth. Hitler's 'Final Solution', many dispensationalists submit, was 'just a foretaste'. Deriving

such a prophetic claim from a reading of Zechariah 13:8, Darby charges that during Jacob's trouble the Antichrist will slaughter two-thirds of the Jews regathered in Palestine. This new and unparalleled Holocaust is nevertheless portrayed as 'a means to a good cause', as Israel's suffering would ultimately yield to her glorious Christian destiny:

The time of Jacob's trouble will definitely be a part of Israel's sorrowful and tragic history. The unbelief and failures of Israel are pruned and punished through the unparalleled fires of the tribulation. The Jewish remnant entering the Millennium at the end of the Tribulation will thus have been purified for God's Kingdom.

It is worth noting that according to the dispensationalist plot, both forces of good and evil work in unison to draw the 'godly remnant' back to their original fold. Otherwise put, the astounding Jewish bloodbath that the Antichrist unleashes during his reign is part of God's plan to redeem the Jews from their state of unbelief. As previously done during the entire course of history, God allows Satan's emissaries to be the rod of chastisement and correction for His favourite but rebellious people. The Jews, Boyer observes, are thus confronted with the ultimate 'catch-22': regardless of their decision to recognize 'whom they pierced', in the last days supernatural and human forces must exterminate the Jews in ghastly numbers in order to bring the entire cosmos to perfection.¹⁴³ In light of such a divine foreordination, Israel would never be able to escape her tragic fate. As many concerned voices point out, this represents the eschatological bottom line that must be addressed by those American and Israeli Jews who seek to evaluate the nature of Evangelical Zionist support for Israel.

Considering what has been so far detailed, the End Time theology of US Evangelical Zionism appears clouded with paradoxes, logical inconsistencies and, foremost, ambivalence. Tabachnick recently charged that, camouflaged in exuberant love and support for the Zionist cause, Hagee along with many other conservative Evangelicals overtly promote narratives paralleling the classic tropes and storylines of Western anti-Semitism – in particular, those in which the Jews are portrayed not as ordinary people, but as either superhuman or subhuman beings. For Tabachnick, the 'net result' of the Evangelical obsession with Israel is 'stripping away the Jews' hard-won humanity'. This would represent the first step in that symbolic process that in so many historical circumstances led to 'unconcealed hatred, fear, and even genocide'.¹⁴⁴ The pervasiveness of biblical abstractions amid US Evangelicals is also

confirmed by the widespread assumption that the glory of Israel is exclusively past and future. Quite tellingly, the impenitent Jews currently living in unbelief are often held as the major contributors to the moral and sociopolitical decline scourging the present age. A portrayal informed by the super- and sub-human binary finds a resonance in the words of Charles Cook, a prominent member of the Los Angeles Bible Institute. In an article published in the early 1930s with the title 'The international Jew', Cook wrote that:

the Jewish race is morally fully capable of doing all that is charged against it. It is at present rejected by God, and in a state of disobedience and rebellion. As a race, Jews are gifted far beyond all other peoples, and even in their ruin, with the curse of God on them, are in the front rank of achievement; but accompanying traits are pride, overbearing arrogance, inordinate love for material things, trickery, rudeness and egotism that taxes the superlatives of any language. Oppressed are they? Indeed, and subject to injustice more than any other race, and yet never learning the lesson of true humility. For the unregenerated Jew usually has a very unattractive personality. There is a reason for his being *persona non grata* at resorts and in the best society; who can deny it?¹⁴⁵

It is quite telling that in the same article where he highlights the Jewish inherent duplicity, Cook also validates the authenticity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the most influential piece of anti-Semitic literature in modern times. This early twentieth-century Russian forgery was purported to be the secret proceedings of a Jewish internationalist plot to subjugate and overthrow Western Christian civilization by disrupting its political-economic stability and undercutting its moral values.¹⁴⁶ As Hanna Arendt shows in her seminal study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, within a short period of time the manuscript became key to any religious or secular ideology aiming at establishing a paranoid outlook on Jews. Because *Protocols* offered indisputable evidence that the powerful and obnoxious Jews were masterminding a global conspiracy to turn the present order into a techno-capitalist dictatorship, the Russian fabrication became the most perfected weapon in the arsenal of Nazi propaganda.¹⁴⁷

From the 1930s onwards, the *Protocols* also acquired momentum within US dispensationalist circles. The main reason for this unexpected popularity was that the anti-Semitic hoax purporting to describe a Jewish plan for world domination seemed to fit perfectly with the

Darbite omen that before the End, 'civilization itself would hang in the balance', with the Jews under the spell of the Antichrist and at the centre stage of the unfolding cosmic drama. The oddity consisted in the fact that, despite adamantly condemning any manifestation of anti-Semitism, Evangelicals believed the Jewish 'hidden hand' to be more or less in every place. After having instigated the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Jewish cabal was now scheming behind every communist upheaval. The international and national banking system was controlled by the influential and ominous members of the 'Illuminati conspiracy' – which, according to many Evangelicals, triggered the 1929 Wall Street Crash and was at the same time plotting behind the curtain of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Further, the secular Jewish intelligentsia, who allegedly dictated the tone of Hollywood motion picture production and the agenda of the national press, was to be held accountable for the cultural decay engulfing the country. That such a cabal had spread its tentacles almost everywhere was nevertheless an implicit confirmation that the final apocalyptic denouement was imminent. The Bible had predicted such a crisis just prior to Christ's return (the world touching its lowest ebb before its regeneration), and many devoted dispensationalists could properly frame the Jewish scheming that was behind it.¹⁴⁸

After having fallen into disuse, the myth of a Jewish-led plot regained currency during the 1990s, when Robertson started alleging that an elite network of international bankers – the Rothschilds, the firm of Kuhn, Jacob Schiff, Loeb and the Warburgs – was operating through secret societies to undermine both Christian values and American liberties, with the purpose of taking undisputed control of the entire world. In the pages of his bestseller *The New World Order*, the televangelist reiterated an updated version of the *Protocols*' infamous template by arguing that the sinister plan for Jewish global domination would be nothing but the gateway for that final confrontation between good and evil, bringing history to a close. More recently, a similar paranoia was embraced by Hagee, with his internationally broadcast sermons stating that 'our economic destiny is controlled by the Federal Reserve system that is now headed by Alan Greenspan [and] a group of class A stockholders, including the Rothschilds'.¹⁴⁹

In the last 30 years, the Evangelical allusions to the conspiratorial nature of world Jewry, together with the warnings that Auschwitz was just a 'prelude' to what will happen prior to the Millennium, made no impression whatsoever on the leadership of the Likud Party. Quite the opposite, Likud continues to fortify its traditional ties with US

dispensationalists in a bid to maintain a 'congressional bulwark' against any presidential move against the settlement enterprise in the Occupied Territories. The practical benefits stemming from US Evangelical Zionism seem to outweigh its anti-Semitic proclivities, even for many Diaspora sensibilities. It is safe to assume that belittling the apocalyptic tropes of dispensationalism therefore remains an almost default choice not only for those Evangelical leaders like Hagee who acquired prominence on the national and international stage, but also for any individual Jew or Jewish institution accepting political or financial support from that religious constituency.

The espousal of non-eschatological motives (to justify the Evangelical dedication to Israel) is glaringly evident in the rhetoric of David Brog – an American Jew, a committed Zionist and more recently the executive director of CUFI. To him, there is no doubt that a genuine philo-Semitism is bred in the marrow of Hagee's organization. Evangelical Zionists would represent the 'theological heirs' of those 'righteous Gentiles' who saved many Jews during the Holocaust. Such Christians would share with many American and Israeli Jews the same love for freedom and democracy and, accordingly, the same understanding of the war on Islamofascism. The struggle against this common and threatening enemy would make them 'brothers'. Brog also claims to be an 'outspoken defender' of the Zionist–Evangelical alliance in view of the key role that the Judeo-Christian tradition has played 'in elevating Western morality'.¹⁵⁰

Consistent with his ideological and personal background, Brog is strategically poised under the banner of CUFI to win the hearts and minds of those American Jews who are still uncomfortable with the Evangelical dedication to Zion. In his heartfelt statement *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State*, Brog encourages his co-religionists to 'break free from their fixation on past traumas and embrace their Christian allies who fight anti-Semitism as passionately as do the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'.¹⁵¹ It is worth noting that the CUFI executive director discards the most worrisome implications of Darbite eschatology with the following argumentative logic:

There is a wonderful irony in secular critics of Christian Zionism, typically Jewish, complaining about the great disasters that will befall them upon Christ's Second Coming. These critics, of course, don't actually believe that there will be a Second Coming of Christ. If there will be no Second Coming, then there will be no mass

conversion or death [of the Jews]. So what exactly are these critics worried about?¹⁵²

In order to present CUFI as a legitimate political partner to Israeli and Diaspora Jewry, Brog has to line up with Pastor Hagee's efforts to dissociate US Evangelical Zionism from its eschatological bearing. Hence, he underscores the utilitarian side of the partnership by reminding the sceptical Jews that dispensationalism envisages a future in which the Jewish people neither believe nor recognize their fate, whilst Evangelicals are providing essential financial support and political backing for the Zionist cause right now. In an appraisal nearer to an indictment, the ultra-Orthodox Gershom Gorenberg charges that to demean the Jews to this 'mutually exploitative alliance' with US dispensationalism amounts to being complicit with its anti-Semitic overtones. Furthermore, those Jews and Jewish organizations who advocate close ties with the Evangelical right would also undermine

decades of dialogue with Catholics and mainstream Protestants who have undertaken the difficult task of reassessing Christianity's attitude toward Jews. It will be hard for Jews to affirm that reassessment if prominent Jewish groups are working closely with Christian groups like Hagee's which negate Judaism.¹⁵³

At present, the 'stock figure of the scheming and cosmopolitan Jews' found a new home in Islamic apocalyptic literature, to back the widespread assumption that a worldwide Zionist plot controlling mainstream US politics and government is currently at work, this time to pervert the Islamic religious values and murder all Muslim communities. In the years following September 11, especially after the United States became mired in military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq that were perceived as invasions, Muslim apocalyptic fiction became a vast subcultural phenomenon with fast-growing circulation. Either via the Internet or cheaply produced paperbacks, Muslim End Time novels reached millions of readers in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Kuwait City, but also in the wider Muslim and Arabic-speaking world. This genre provides a popular platform for the most vociferous and poisonous form of anti-Semitism, steeped in strong eschatological hopes for future Islamic triumph:

With the perceived imminence of the end of times, hatreds have been rendered inexpiable and compromise inconceivable. The

absolute violence and appalling cruelty of Islamist Apocalyptic fictions are sustained by the prospect not only of more and larger massacres, but also genocide. The disappearance of the Jewish people, either by conversion or extermination, is celebrated in advance, and with a fervour that is more commonly associated with eulogists of ethnic cleansing than doctors of religious law.¹⁵⁴

As both David Cook's and Jean-Pierre Filiu's studies illustrate, the idea that a nefarious Jewish cabal is secretly manipulating the world to push it without mercy towards hell finds no resonance whatsoever within the classic scriptural and theological sources of Islam, where the Jews feature only incidentally.¹⁵⁵ That idea would rather be a direct borrowing from Western anti-Semitic discourses. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Islamic apocalyptic pamphleteers uncritically assimilated the conspiracy template of the *Protocols* through the mediation of dispensationalist exegeses. In stunning detail, Filiu shows how many Muslim radical writers ransacked the enemy's repertoire, in search of material that could be deployed to buttress their own End Time speculations.

The French historian draws attention to the following ironic but nonetheless significant fact: such pamphleteers grant authoritative status to prophetic scenarios concocted by Evangelical authors like Falwell, Robertson, Lindsey and LaHaye-Jenkins, but claim to have understood their predictive meaning better than the dispensationalists themselves. Indeed, by means of this looting, observes Filiu, the Muslim propagandists vengefully turn the Christian Apocalypse back against Israel and its American partisans.¹⁵⁶ In their view, everything in the outside world emanates from *Al-Masih ad-Dajjal* (the Arabic term for the 'false messiah' or Antichrist) and his Jewish minions.

In a mutated religious context, the Jews' dual essence, potent and at the same time malignant, is maintained and even magnified. On the one hand, these secret plots can rely on unlimited financial resources and unassailable positions of power; on the other, they are dead set on infiltrating and subverting the *Umma*, both politically and culturally. Even in this End Time fresco, the satanic successes heralded by the spreading of Jewish conspiracy are part and parcel of that Muslim messianic dialectic leading towards a period of ultimate peace and justice. In line with the noted 'birth-pangs' rationale, the world must be fully pervaded by evil before the Mahdi sets Islam back on the straight and true path from which it had previously strayed. The creation of an all-encompassing, ruthless and ontologically evil Zionist world government would serve as the necessary interlude to a military-political

redde rationem, another Armageddon but this time benefiting the Muslim masses over the Judeo-Christian crusaders.¹⁵⁷

In view of these arguments, adds Filiu, there appears to be a 'curious complicity' between Evangelical and Muslim millenarianisms, both embedded in a strikingly hateful anti-Semitic imagery that 'migrates from one paranoid universe to the other and back again. Transfigured by revanchist authors on both sides of the Apocalyptic divide, [this imagery] ends up casting a long shadow over a single ominous panorama.'¹⁵⁸

An ironic over-assurance

The widespread popularity enjoyed nowadays by premillennial dispensationalism represents a stark counterpoint to the meagre acceptance that this prophetic outlook received when it was first introduced in US society. It was only during the late nineteenth century that a substantial number of American Evangelicals began switching over to the pessimistic views of dispensationalism. The shift in the eschatological paradigm occurred mainly in view of the fact that the postmillennial ideal of a perfect society had failed to materialize. This trend was furthered by the events scourging what historian Eric Hobsbawm has defined as the 'age of extremes'.¹⁵⁹ Conflicts, revolutions and crises ensuing the outbreak of the Great War dissuaded anyone from clinging to the contention that the trajectory drawn by human civilization was unabatedly pointing upward. A world constantly on the brink of self-annihilation ridiculed the possibility of intra-historical salvation, let alone doing so through gradualist reformation. Quite the opposite, the indisputable pervasiveness of evil was the main reason why many reoriented their hopes beyond the current aeon. As a result of a world growing threateningly darker, the vision of a catastrophic ending followed by glorious fulfilment abandoned the fringes of American Evangelicalism, becoming a theological viewpoint that could command the allegiance of millions.

While dispensationalism is often seen as part of that 'cultural package' that US Evangelicals have more or less uncritically inherited in the guise of religious truth, more attentive scholars locate the underlying reasons for its success in a voluntary adhesion. This form of millenarian consensus, they argue, would largely depend on the enduring purchase of some eschatological ideas and tropes that dispensationalism reprises and amplifies. Most notably, Darby's belief system would neutralize or

at least downplay the unsettling complexity of history, by contrasting it to the teleological clarity governing the plan that God has already fore-ordained for humanity. Not only do dispensationalists know the pre-determined end towards which history flows, but also 'how it is going to get there'. In the pages of the morning newspaper can be traced an unmistakable confirmation of what has been carefully spelled out in the prophetic passages of the Bible. Taking confidence from this divinely inspired awareness, one can hardly be afraid of dealing with details. As Weber points out, dispensationalism's greatest source of appeal lies on its remarkable ability to provide 'over-assurance' in turbulent times:

There is something comforting about knowing that historical events fit into a prophetic pattern, that God is guiding everything, no matter how horrible and apparently destructive, to a redemptive end. Once believers find a place for historical events in their prophetic puzzle, such events cease to terrify and bewilder.¹⁶⁰

Any assessment of the ascendancy of dispensationalism, argues Weber, would not be exhaustive without considering that 'ironic comfort' that this belief system can bring to people. Despite the fact that dispensationalists might appear as 'the world's biggest promoters of gloom and doom', their pessimism is only apparent. In Pat Robertson's words, one must not weep at tragedies or misfortunes because these are an 'evident token' of personal salvation.¹⁶¹ The prospect of a deteriorating world, one touching its lowest ebb in political, social and moral terms, is fully accepted and even welcomed. The worse the situation gets, the better things are. God will redress grievances of His faithful only when despair reaches the trigger point required. That everything is decaying signals the imminence of that supernatural intervention that will annihilate in order to make things anew.

It goes without saying that the spiritual comfort that Darby's eschatology so distinctively offers is mostly attractive to those who feel lost and bewildered. An obsessive quest for order always hints at its threatening absence. That dispensationalism is a theology best fit for dark times would be confirmed by the fact that its popularity always peaks at moments in which 'evil seems increasingly irresistible and human survival hung in the balance'. If the trauma of the First World War augmented the purchase of Darby's speculations, so did the threat of an ultimate nuclear confrontation with the godless communists during the Cold War. In Weber's words, 'as long as the world remains a terrifying

place, seemingly bent on its own destruction, premillennial worldviews will always have the ring of truth for many'.¹⁶² It is therefore not surprising that the apocalyptic imagination received a new lease of life in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, when the world, or at least large segments of it, appeared once again prey to Satan and his Islamic emissaries.

5

Cultural Apocalypse

It makes little sense to call September 11 the most horrible case of terrorism in history, but it was the most spectacular. Al Qaeda's instinct for symbols ensured this much success: a nearly global perception that our ability to navigate the world was infinitely more precarious than it had been the day before. The perception was so wide and swift that for the first time in history not space but time became shorthand. If naming a city – Lisbon or Auschwitz – was enough for early ages to record deepest shock and horror, the twenty-first century began by naming a date.¹

The traumatic experience engendered by September 11 may be fruitfully viewed through Ernesto De Martino's heuristic category of 'cultural Apocalypse'. According to the Italian anthropologist, the Apocalypse is a long-standing archetype whose symbolic import exceeds the religious landscape, to flood across many other cultural domains such as politics, philosophy, literature and the arts. For De Martino, the archetype's primary meaning would not hint at the violent annihilation of the mundane sphere along with all the forms of life contained in it but, rather, at the diffused and unsettling perception of the impending end of a given cultural order. In De Martino's words, experiencing an apocalypse implies first of all a 'loss of presence', that is, being cast outside any possible secular or religious horizon of salvation, completely detached from the familiar, facing without any comfort the diabolical unhinging of all that has been known.²

This is perhaps the main reason why radical and irreversible breaks in the cultural-historical continuum – such as the Lisbon earthquake,

the Nazi Genocide or September 11 – are hardly admitted in their gravity by those who live through them. As philosopher Susan Neiman reminds us, sometimes ‘the only way to hold the world together is to deny that it has been shattered’. If they cannot be overtly recognized as such, shattering turning points in our lives need to be pushed into subconscious recesses. Indeed, ‘one cannot be aware whether an epoch has been ended by an event when not viewing that event as epochal is essential to going on’.³

Within Robert Lifton’s psychoanalytical paradigm, the turning of a highly coherent world into a shaky and insecure one is quite tellingly called ‘de-symbolization’: the impairment of both individual and collective psyche caused by the absence of any integrating pattern, the horror determined by the feeling of falling apart, the fear that the centre will not hold or maybe that there is no centre at all. In most circumstances, argues Lifton, a ‘symbolic death’ of this kind might be even more frightening than the prospect of our biological demise.⁴

Nevertheless, De Martino and Lifton equally insist on the possibility that such a traumatic breakdown might present a regenerative side. The acute disorientation and anxiety put into being by the erosion of the traditional symbolic frameworks may plunge an entire society into disarray and thus mark the end of the world as a culturally specific domain. However, being divorced from meaning, continuity and connectedness would almost by default spur us towards finding ‘a haven in some new and partial system of values, which aspires to become a total, absolute truth [and thereby] provides a bulwark against the definitive disintegration of nomic principles’.⁵ For those who experience it, a cultural apocalypse (or process of de-symbolization) entails being forced to act like that sailor described in a Edgar Allan Poe’s short story: once one is trapped defencelessly inside the Maelström, survival can only be assured by advancing a new and more adequate hypothesis on the mounting chaos.⁶

A nation tottering on the brink of chaos

As Emilio Gentile points out, after the collapse of the USSR, officially decreed in December 1991, the twenty-first century began as an undisputed ‘American century’:

[At the beginning of the third millennium,] the United States towered over the world like a colossus. It dominated business, trade, and communications, it had the strongest economy in the world, and its military strength was unrivalled. This supremacy embraced

economics, finance, the armed forces, lifestyle, language, and mass-produced products, which flooded the world, consequently conditioning minds and fascinating even its enemies.

On the morning of September 11, in the first year of the new and promising millennium, nineteen Islamic terrorists, carrying only minimal arms but willing to sacrifice their lives for an ideal, managed to hijack four commercial airliners rendering a Hollywoodian calamity movie into terrifying reality. From a perspective bereft of any moral judgement for the boundless barbarity of its outcome, by its plot al-Qaeda achieved one of the most remarkable political successes known to human history. Namely because it transformed, in the space of just a few hours and with comparatively limited logistic recourses, the world's only super-power into a 'grief-stricken community', a bewildered and humiliated nation 'tottering on the brink of chaos'.⁷

After the first plane had crashed into the North Tower at 8:46 am, more than 200 million Americans watched the rolling images of what was arguably to become 'the most horrifying global media event ever generated by the society of the spectacle'.⁸ That infernal prodigy of televised destruction made an overconfident nation fully and painfully appreciate its own vulnerability.

In the opinion of Elemér Hankiss, the reason why the events of September 11 had such a profound impact, spreading like a pandemic throughout American society and the rest of the world, is essentially twofold. As already mentioned, in the decades prior to September 11 the United States had become the beacon of the West, 'a conscious and unconscious, emotional and cognitive axis mundi', a point of reference to which countless individuals clung in terms of values, lifestyles and aspirations. By deliberately hitting at America's heart and shattering the emblems of its pride, prosperity and might, al-Qaeda impaired the symbolic framework of Western civilization.⁹ Hundreds of millions of people lose an essential anchoring, plunging suddenly into a fearful vacuum. The destabilizing import of September 11 also depended on the kind of primeval fears that the event was able to awaken and magnify at the deepest psychological level. In keeping with Ernest Becker's theories about the distinctively Western 'denial of death', the Hungarian sociologist claimed that that shocking carnage projected onto millions of TV screens put a definitive end to the illusion of immortality nurtured in our contemporary consumerist society.¹⁰

The overwhelming encounter with death is also central to Griffin's reading of that historical watershed. As a momentous and graphic event

compulsively re-enacted by the world media, September 11 functioned as a sort of powerful catalyst that 'flung to the surface' the all too often suppressed awareness of our fragility and transience, whilst exposing the illusory nature of any idea of Western progress or civilization. Reworking some of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's thoughts on the 'disembedding experience' of modernity, Griffin maintains that September the 11 had

such a profound resonance in the modern psyche arguably because it crystallizes and renders palpable the liquefying impact of Modernity on reality and the anxiety this induces. ... 9/11 and its sequels in Bali, Madrid and London gave shape and substance to what Bauman calls 'the Titanic syndrome', namely 'the horror of falling through the wafer-thin crust of civilization into that nothingness stripped of the elementary staples of organized, civilized life'. It is a nothingness akin to death itself or the closest our mortal minds can get to grasping the inconceivable prospect of personal non-being.¹¹

Not only did September 11 arouse fears until then unknown and thereby jeopardize the normal functioning of key symbolic frameworks, but it also sparked off a far-reaching spiritual crisis, the proportions of which were in some respects comparable only to the theological debate around the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. This outcome was almost inevitable in view of the role that faith has traditionally had in America's public life and sense of historical destiny. Whilst in their quest for overarching sense in that tragedy, vast numbers of Americans drew on their pre-existing religious beliefs and values and flocked to churches, synagogues and mosques,¹² others felt that turning to the traditional outlets of sacred meaning was neither satisfying nor possible. To them, the sheer enormity of the catastrophe randomly befalling innocents could not be so simply accommodated in a providential design, revealing, rather, its utter inadequacy in accounting for what had just happened. In terms of received theodicies, it became challengingly difficult for mainstream theologians and clergymen to find a plausible religious justification for that scale of death, suffering and grief without insulting human sensibilities and reason. Despite leading figures from almost all confessional backgrounds speaking to the nation and their respective communities in an attempt to reconcile that tragedy with the inscrutable divine schemes, to many anguished Americans God no longer appeared as an omniscient, all-powerful and merciful supernatural entity. Confronted with the inexplicable evil of that unforgettable day, some observed that God was most likely either

good yet powerless; or omnipotent but utterly oblivious (or even indifferent) to human suffering.¹³

Other voices in the midst the Evangelical right endorsed a far more scathing theodicy. They did so by reviving the Old Testamentarian trope of an unforgiving and vengeful divinity visiting chastisement upon His nation after it had deviated from the prescribed path of holiness and purity. As Lincoln's study details, this was a clumsy yet significant attempt to reiterate a 'typological association' between the United States and Ancient Israel, which the Evangelical right viewed as 'two privileged nations' blessed by a Covenantal relationship with God. Consistent with this reading, Reverend Falwell declared that on September 11 the Almighty lifted the 'safety curtain' protecting the United States from its worst enemies as a result of America's collective shortcomings as a Christian nation. God withdrew His favour, thereby allowing al-Qaeda to give America 'what she probably deserved' in light of several 'capital sins', such as the immoral lifestyle of gay and lesbian communities, the murderous dealings of abortionists and the secularizing campaigns waged by liberal associations. The excoriating jeremiad was met with nearly unanimous disapproval even amongst conservative Christians, forcing Falwell to backtrack.¹⁴

Especially for those theologians and religious figures filled with indignation at such statements, the divine will and voice was to be sought elsewhere: not in the perpetrators of the terroristic attack (according to Falwell, the agents of divine chastisement of America) but, rather, amongst the victims and their witnessing during those dramatic and trying moments. On the tragic morning of September 11, observes Rowan Williams, God's spirit could be foremost found in the last and deeply moving words spoken on mobile phones to their families by the people who were about to die on board the hijacked planes or trapped in the collapsing towers. Those words celebrated 'the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love and the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged'.¹⁵

In their attempt to provide a spiritual interpretation of the bewildering event, historian of religions Karen Armstrong and theologian Duncan Forrester both referred back to apocalyptic categories, yet downplayed the catastrophic tones and Manichean polarization normally attached to that doctrine. In this case, the hermeneutical emphasis was not laid on the struggle against the absolute good of the wounded American nation to the ultimate evil of al-Qaeda – a dualism that in the opinion of two prominent commentators could only have fed into an uncritical and dangerous sense of self-righteousness. Rather, September 11 was to

be seen as an 'Apokalypsis' in the original, etymological understanding of the word: a sudden breaking point in human destiny unveiling an ultimate truth (*aleitheia*) that has always been present, but remains most of the time hidden, denied or forgotten. In keeping with such hermeneutics, the shock caused by the terroristic attack was first of all an apocalyptic disclosure of the human condition. By temporarily annulling the buffer zone between the safe and comfortable existence in the 'First World' and the perennial instability and misery plaguing the 'Third World', September 11 led millions of US citizens to the realization of how precariously transient life can be for the vast majority of the world's population.¹⁶ On a not too dissimilar note, theologian Robert Franklin considered the disaster not as a mere democratization of existential angst but, rather, 'a prophetic warning to the American nation, an exhortation to carry out an act of humility and repentance for its arrogance and abuse of power towards other people'.¹⁷

This vast array of different and seemingly irreconcilable spiritual responses to the same devastating trauma may be viewed as the relentless outpouring of our symbolic faculties, the distinctively human need to impart convincing and coherent meaning, especially when the 'spectres of chaos and anomie' seem to prevail. Premillennial dispensationalism was one of the responses arising from the unsettling impression that control was definitely lost, and 'the American society was being dragged headlong into a future for which it was not prepared'.¹⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Pastor Hagee candidly told a BBC interviewer that the 'End Time began on September 11, 2001'; the whole world was standing on the brink of the Third World War, nothing but the birth pangs of the Millenarian Age.¹⁹ Furthermore, assuming that the national disaster was nothing but a sign heralding the beginning of the seven years of Tribulations, many born-again Christians made themselves ready to be shortly spirited away to Heaven. At the same time, bookstores worldwide reported skyrocketing sales of apocalyptic fiction of the likes of Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* or LaHaye's *Left Behind* series.²⁰

Many studies underscore how these otherwise far-fetched contentions and expectations about the world's approaching end acquired momentum well beyond the already sympathetic Evangelical circles, to reach broader and even secular strata of the American public. It is safe to assume that they did so by intervening in that vacuum of meaning left by the breakdown of the received and culturally derived worldviews – worldviews that could imbue any society with order, stability, predictability and permanence.

In his bestselling *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the End of Utopia*, John Gray writes that, by violently irrupting the US collective consciousness, September 11 induced a cultural twist away from neoliberalist optimism and towards a more sombre view. In the decade preceding al-Qaeda's attacks, Gray contends, the consensus of opinion subscribed to Fukuyama's inherently postmillennial proposition that following the end of the Cold War, American-style government and free-market economy were the foundations of the only model that could and ought to be incrementally universalized, as it represented the 'end point' of humankind's ideological evolution. As a result of the terrorist attacks, the utopian faith in such a linear progress within the fabric of history suddenly wore thin. It was no longer a suitable possibility for the new zeitgeist. To Gray, the men who hijacked civilian planes and used them as weapons to attack New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 did far more than kill thousands of innocent civilians. They in fact inflicted a mortal blow on one of Western civilization's underlying myths – as already noted, a myth of which the Twin Towers represented the central emblem and the US the ultimate harbinger. This epochal watershed, adds the English philosopher, opened the way for a more catastrophic kind of palingenesis.²¹

A new 'plausibility structure'

In a groundbreaking study published in 1967, Peter Berger described a 'plausibility structure' as the 'symbolic base' that every society 'has to continuously construct and maintain for assuring its existence as a world'. To the sociologist, 'the firmer the plausibility structure is, the firmer will be the world based upon it', affording the individual to 'integrate the anomic experiences of his biography into the socially established nomos'. Accordingly, 'if the explanation of the world no longer holds', then the human persistence within that world cannot be maintained for very long either, creating a 'sense-making crisis' at the price of severe anomie and anxiety.²²

In more recent times, building on and empirically testing the hypotheses put forward by Rank, Berger, Brown, Becker and Lifton, a group of social psychologists elaborated the so-called 'Terror Management Theory', commonly known as TMT.²³ For our purposes here, the crux of the TMT model may be synthesized as follows: an overwhelming encounter with death (or in keeping with the model's terminology, a 'mortality salience' experience) undermines those 'anxiety-buffering' faculties exerted by cultural worldviews, whose primary role is not to 'illuminate the truth, but rather to obscure the horrifying possibility that

death entails the permanent annihilation of the self'.²⁴ Once deprived of this sheltering symbolic canopy, human beings are exposed to the 'the terror of death'. Otherwise put, the brittle and transient character of their existence becomes fully apparent. To avert the disintegration of the 'psychic self' caused by the feeling that death lurks everywhere, individuals must promptly recreate a more efficacious worldview – a new plausibility structure capable of displacing the otherwise paralyzing death anxiety, whilst restoring a sense of invulnerability.²⁵

Claiming to back such an assertion with scientific evidence provided by comprehensive and exhaustive clinical investigation, TMT's leading theorists Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski and Jeff Greenberg contend that the September 11 trauma functioned as a potent 'mortality salience trigger'. The trauma, in turn, bred in many individuals the need to bolster their symbolic self-defences, reorienting their allegiance towards alternative 'immortality projects', in an attempt to leap anomic time and enter into a new dispensation free of the terror of death.

In the first section of this study, a detailed analysis was given of the crucial role of cyclic and eschatological myths of decay, destruction and the rebirth of the cosmos. Emphasis was laid on their capacity to keep at bay a sense of absurdity and despair, especially in trying times. It has been repeatedly argued that the apocalyptic is a 'self-contained' myth whose strength resides in a dialectic binding together of dissolution and renewal. Seeing the world through an apocalyptic prism entails the possibility that even the most unsettling catastrophe can be symbolically tamed by being interpreted as a sign that a phase of deficiency is reaching its nadir and a new beginning is at hand. In Eliade's words, 'human beings living through ages of destruction and chaos [are able] to bear the burden of being contemporary with a disastrous period by becoming conscious of the position [they] occupy in the descending trajectory of the cosmic cycle'.²⁶ By means of the apocalyptic myth, argues Griffin, one can seize the most remarkable chance of self-renewal, 'the last and greatest achievement of the old disintegrating system and first achievement of the new, the moment when time is annulled and history radically formed in the heightened emotional climate of absolute zero'. Whoever has surmounted his or her Maelström in the way described by Griffin can be viewed as someone whose flight from inner/outer chaos has found expression and solution in an intense 'elective affinity' with a movement of cosmic regeneration.²⁷

From a different but nevertheless compatible perspective, Richard Fenn argues that apocalyptic thinking tends to gain currency in historical circumstances in which the received methods of divination, rituals and symbolic resources on which a society has hitherto relied prove

unable to foresee, postpone or explain a disaster. To Fenn, the unexpectedly new, the sudden and the disruptive can be domesticated only when appropriately subsumed within that cultural continuity between what came before and that which will come after. Accordingly, symbols, myths and rituals harmonizing present with past and future are indeed 'the last line of defence against the passage of time: the final repudiation of the unprecedented and the irreversible character of moments and events'. These cultural stratagems granting 'pseudo-mastery' over the pressure of time tend to falter during plagues, famines, wars or natural cataclysms – occasions on which 'the scale of death' is too overpowering. Here, people easily get lost in what the ancient Roman poet Virgil called 'a maze of dread':

The world itself seems entirely unreliable: not only dangerous but also deceptive. The appearance of being a safe and thriving land becomes only a façade that hides the threat of death. Every attempt at prognostication and prediction, at interpretation and explanation, therefore fails to give the event a believable place in the society's lexicon for disaster. In such circumstances, death is so overwhelming, and the moment so disruptive, that the past is irrelevant, useless or even forgotten, and the future seems inconceivable, impossible.

The more a human congregation is subject to internal and external threats, the less it can believe in its capacity to survive. The present becomes threateningly opaque because the past does not offer any viable precedent, whilst the future remains imminent but indecipherable. When such a vital connection between the present, past and future cannot effectively be reproduced, adds Fenn, a society is not able to withstand the 'stigma of time', or it runs 'out of time'. Its members fall into 'despair, lose their will to live [because they] contemplate the possibility that they may become nothing in the end. Their soul begins to perish within them.'²⁸ Nevertheless, the loss of *nomos* opens up a liminal phase in which a new form of 'temporalization' is desperately sought. In certain strata of the community, many might thus feel the need for a new gesture towards the 'renomization' of the world, wresting it back from absurdity by reinstating some elements of order.²⁹ It is in these circumstances that archetypes of palingenesis, either in religious or secular guise, are likely to take over:

By reviewing the past, and by projecting not only disaster but the possibility of restoration and revenge into the future, [the

apocalyptic vision] recreates or renews a narrative that overcomes the break with the past, softens the impact of the moment with the balm of precedent and recollection, and makes the future seem less opaque and frightening.³⁰

Although its theo-political rise dates back to the late seventies, it was the post-September 11 cultural and psychological breakdown that disclosed dispensationalism's full potential, both as a belief system and as a source of political mobilization. In the eyes of many, Darby's creed became a plausibility structure capable of restoring overarching meaning from historical meaninglessness, an alternative immortality project displacing the death anxiety and a form of temporalization re-harmonizing the essential continuum of past-present-future. An unbearably fluid, shaky and insecure world touching its lowest ebb could be rationalized by means of a deterministic roadmap for the future, one hinting at a final reversal of fortunes, retribution and glory over America's demoniac foes.

Several scholarly studies and journalist reportages underscore how, in the aftermath of September 11, the radius and purchase of Darby's prophetic system (or at least of some of its defining rationales) appeared to have exceeded the number of the already converted – the conservative Evangelical audiences geographically concentrated in the Bible Belt. As Kevin Rozario points out, it was almost impossible to ignore the deep imprint of premillennial imagery and teachings on popular ways of seeing and responding to that unprecedented national calamity.³¹ That for many Americans the 'reality' revealed by the terrorist attack was an apocalyptic one seems to have been captured by a 2002 Time/CNN poll: a survey that almost every book concerned with contemporary millenarian phenomena quotes in its pages.³² Although one cannot ascertain how reliable the statistics are, the Time/CNN poll remains nonetheless indicative of the cultural shift towards a more catastrophic mood. Weber summarizes the main findings as follows:

More than one-third of Americans said that since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, they have been thinking more about how current events might be leading to the end of the world. While only 36 percent of all Americans believe that the Bible is God's Word and should be taken literally, 59 percent say they believe that events predicted in the Book of Revelation [in particular, the battle of Armageddon] will come to pass. Almost one out of four Americans believes that 9/11 was predicted in the Bible, and nearly one in five believes that he or she will live long enough to see the end of the world.³³

The conspicuous, logical discrepancy between two key data (namely, 59 per cent of the interviewees claiming that the events foretold in the last book of the Christian canon will, in fact, occur, whilst only 36 per cent of them embraced the principle of literal/inerrant biblical hermeneutics) may in principle dissolve if one considers the hypothesis on dispensationalist consensus put forward by Paul Boyer.

In his seminal essay 'When Time Shall Be No More', Boyer charged that dispensationalists might not be the only people in contemporary America to be influenced by Darby's End Time speculations. In times of world unrest and crisis, many individuals who do not normally confer any predictive import to the Holy Scriptures, let alone to the Scofield Reference Bible, would suddenly become attentive listeners to prominent End Time mongers like Falwell, Robertson or, more recently, Hagee, who systematically resort to Darby's script to explain where history is headed. To illustrate how the 'prophecy belief' works, Boyer portrays this phenomenon in the guise of an 'onion structure', in which two concentric circles irradiate from a core of dedicated dispensationalist clergymen and communities.³⁴ The people included in such a core represent the 'innermost experts' who can account for everything taking place in the world by quoting those biblical references that are more suitable to casting an eschatological light on present events. The first outer circle encompasses millions of US Evangelicals who, despite being less versed in Darby's outlook, nevertheless believe that the Bible has relevant clues to offer about how the future will unfold. Once in need of prophetic guidance or spiritual reassurance, these Evangelicals will inevitably refer to those insightful dispensationalist interpreters who seem to know best. Included in a second wider circle are greater masses of mainly secular Americans who confer 'scant attention' to premillennial scenarios.

However, when confronted by 'sufficiently alarming earthly crises, [they] may suddenly buy into "prediction addiction", as what had been only peripheral to them now abruptly shifts to the centre'.³⁵ Applying Boyer's heuristic framework one may better understand why, as a result of symbolic breakdown caused by the September 11 trauma as well as by the ensuing 'climate of fear' fomented by several media outlets and politicians, the Antichrist, Armageddon, Judgement Day and Rapture imageries went far beyond their dispensationalist moorings, filtering out towards broader Evangelical and secular audiences. It goes without saying that with the dispensationalist worldview moving to the fore also came, especially within US Evangelicalism, a renewed eschatological interest (and consequent political support) for the Jewish people, their return to their biblical home and the holy cause of Eretz

Yisrael. According to the above-mentioned Time/CNN poll, over one-third of those Americans who were interviewed and claimed to support the Zionist state reported that they did so 'because they believed the Bible teaches that the Jews must possess their own country in the Holy Land before Jesus can return'.³⁶

Axis of evil

The shift towards a more premillennial mood was also reflected in and confirmed by the suddenly mutated apprehension of evil within US society. According to literary historian Andrew Delbanco, prior to the September 11 attacks, Americans had long lost touch with the issue of evil, one of the key symbolic categories structuring their collective consciousness as a nation. When American culture began, 350 years earlier, evil had a 'name' and a 'face':

The Devil was an incandescent presence in most people's lives, a symbol and explanation for both the cruelties one received and those perpetrated by others. But by 1700 he was already losing his grip on the imagination – a process that continued ever since and that has left us with a Satan who is no more than a vestigial image, a broken-spirited relic of a perished past, a ludicrous ham actor with no greater part to play in human imagination.

The waning of Satan's presence, continues Delbanco, deprived Americans of an essential conceptual map: 'a gulf has opened up in [their] culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it'. Never had the repertoire of evil been richer than in the contemporary age, with its manifestations so widely disseminated and its victims' testimonies so excruciatingly detailed. Yet, never had the Americans been so incapable of 'connecting [their] inner lives with the horrors that pass before [their] eyes in outer world'. To account for the shrinking awareness of evil, Delbanco also draws attention to what postmodern critics often refer to as a 'crisis of reality' – one generated by our unrelenting exposure to the 'hyper-real' horrors of the news media, movies and video games, a surfeit of authentic or imagined violence that numbs us and inhibits our thinking. When 'some shocking new cruelty' on a television screen seizes the American people's attention, they may 'shudder or wince', but then they 'switch the channel'.³⁷

Everything was abruptly reversed on that unforgettable morning of mid September, when the real matched and even surpassed the

cinematic and the virtual. The spectacular attacks unveiled 'the viscous abyss of nameless horrors and irredeemable evil lurking just below the surface of normality'.³⁸ Millions of Americans were suddenly and painfully forced to come to terms, once again, with the hitherto forgotten category of evil, be it a philosophical abstraction, a metaphysical ideal or a historical reality. After the planes ploughed into the buildings and became fireballs, Satan was no longer 'a broken-spirited relic of a perished past'. He was back in people's lives and one had to confront him. Indeed, some even witnessed the Devil's 'sneering image' frighteningly materializing from the flames and smoke engulfing the Towers:

The minds of contemporary people are far less exempt from mythic elements than we would like to believe in our rational moments. The apparition of Satan, who with his black wings spread over the Twin Towers, darkened the sky and the universe, seems to have been a rather common experience of those who witnessed the attack. In a picture that got great publicity around the world and showed the infernal flames and smoke of the explosion, lots of people discovered the outlines of Satan's face.³⁹

The reappearance of evil, in a society symbolically ill-equipped to tame its harrowing pervasiveness, was one of the reasons for a rekindled interest in the apocalyptic – an outlook whose purchase had significantly waned since the end of the Cold War. In O'Leary's opinion, the strength of this doctrine largely resides in its theodicy, that is to say, its ability to find a solution to the problem of evil. The apocalyptic can convincingly frame the mounting tide of the demonic within that eschatological duel whose ultimate outcome (the eradication of evil) has already been fixed from the very beginning by God. Not only despite but also as a result of a world touching its lowest ebb, the faithful can live in blissful anticipation of the End Time's rewards and exemplary punishment of their foes.

Biblical scholar John Collins emphasizes the remarkable flexibility and versatility of the apocalyptic. Its template can either accommodate a revolution wishing to overturn the status quo or be deployed for the opposite purpose, to buttress the established structures of authority and their political goals.⁴⁰ This last application is visible in the theological underpinning of the Bush administration's Global War on Terror as well as in the neoconservative ambition to inaugurate a 'New American Century'. It is worth concluding this chapter by taking into account that 'odd alignment' between the dispensationalist agenda for hastening the end of the world and a different but nonetheless not incompatible

secular project aiming at redeeming the world in the name of democracy, freedom and free market economics, whilst ridding it of the 'evildoers'.

In his study of the ethics of George W. Bush, Peter Singer addresses in detail that rudimentary 'Manichean way of looking at the world' that informed and at the same time unified the president's theological and political language. Since Bush's early speeches, writes Singer, the reference to a confrontation with evil was nearly compulsive:

[Bush] has spoken about evil in 319 separate speeches, or about 30 percent of all the speeches he gave between the time he took office and June 16, 2003. In these speeches he uses the word 'evil' as a noun far more often than he uses it as an adjective – 914 noun uses as against 182 adjectival uses. Only twenty-four times, in all these occasions on which Bush talks of evil, does he use it as an adjective to describe what people do, that is, to judge acts or deeds. This suggests that Bush is not thinking about evil deeds, or even people, nearly as often as he is thinking about evil as a 'force', something that has a real existence apart from the callous, brutal and selfish acts of which human beings are capable.⁴¹

Singer's analysis lays bare a theme that will later recur in all the rhetoric surrounding the Global War on Terror: the battle that Bush wages seems to be more against an ontological entity than a concrete subject, be it a group of individuals or a state.⁴² On 12 September, the Republican president declared that Americans were called upon to fight not 'a nation or a religion', but 'evil itself'. The enormity of evil attacking America and the world demanded a commensurate response aimed at its utter and definitive eradication. Human civilization was 'at the beginning of a very long battle against the evildoers'. Although wisely discriminating between Islam and Islamofascists, in his following addresses, the president continued 'to demonize the enemy, identifying it in a non-personified manner with evil, depicted as a sacred entity, which the Islamic terrorists worshipped and served'.⁴³

Theologians were perhaps the first ones to warn that, insofar as the image of the enemy took on a metaphysical connotation, US international politics was bound to assume the overtones of a holy war. On 14 September, Bush gathered with prominent spiritual and political leaders to mourn the victims of al-Qaeda's attacks. The National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, an event marked with sacred solemnity in the Washington cathedrals of St Peter and St Paul, has been recognized as the moment at which a 'mourning nation' was officially launched into

the Global War on Terror. In a speech at the event, Bush's public expression of religious commitment assumed a new tone and he no longer spoke about a personal rebirth in Christ, but of a national palingenesis:

We are here in the middle hour of our grief. Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil. In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. ... They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender, and the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time. We will rid the world of the evildoers. We've never seen this kind of evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action before, either, and they're about to find out. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war. And we know that God is not neutral between them. Ours is the cause of human dignity. This idea of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbour. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.⁴⁴

The presidential message is imbued with elementary dualism and axiomatic truths. The contrast is built between righteousness and perdition. No neutrality, hesitation or middle ground: you are either with us or with the terrorists. It is pointless to try to understand the evildoers' nature, let alone their motives. In his response to September 11, Bush seemed keen to make US foreign policy coextensive with his personal experience of a reborn Christian, one marked by the rejection of all previous sinful life and the embrace of the only and true path towards righteousness. Emphasis was therefore laid not on the need to seek justice for the murderous attacks, but on a climatic struggle against the 'axis of evil' to be pursued globally. Mirroring back the approach of his enemies, on 14 September Bush waged an 'altruistic' jihad, setting America the duty to have the world 'born again' – namely, by cleansing it from evil and spreading the seeds of democracy and freedom in its place. In an essay addressing the 'abuse of evil' in post-September 11 US politics, Richard Bernstein contends that, despite its simplicity, Bush's Manichean language became 'extremely effective in arousing deep emotions and political support', not only amid conservative Evangelicals, but also all those Americans who became aware of their vulnerability towards the evil of Islamic extremists.⁴⁵

Jim Wallis, a liberal Evangelical theologian who has written extensively about the president's religious rhetoric, maintains that after September 11 Bush's presidential approach underwent a transformation, along with his notion of himself and his place in history. Bush had previously been a sort of self-help Methodist, someone whose faith had produced a difference in his personal life, resolving drinking and family issues. When September 11 came, argues Wallis, the self-help Methodist became a 'Messianic American Calvinist'. The line 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' is taken directly from the Gospel of John (1:5). This biblical verse, continues Wallis, concerns the light of Christ and the word of God, which shine in the darkness and have never been overcome. However, in the presidential speech, the meaning of that verse is no longer about the light of Christ, the word of God, but about the United States, the new 'beacon of light' to the world.⁴⁶ As Lincoln's acute textual analyses show, the codes and tones of almost every presidential speech following September 11 were inherently biblical, with a strong emphasis on themes of ethical dualism, the theology of election and sense of redemptive mission. It is Lincoln's main contention that, by means of those speeches, Bush studiously put forward

a well-structured syllogism, in which two premises – (1) that, in its wars, the United States pursues the cause of freedom and (2) that this cause originates, not with the United States, but with God Himself – interact to suggest an implicit conclusion: that the United States is God's chosen instrument for the accomplishment of His purpose for all humanity.⁴⁷

In view of the marked eschatological overtones that they share, one might recognize in Bush's Global War on Terror a mimesis of al-Qaeda's jihadist manifesto. Akin to Osama Bin Laden's holy war mentality, Bush's is shaped by the archetypal understanding of historical development as systematized by Zoroastrian eschatology. It has been detailed how this three-phase template envisage a perfect past, when a Godly perfection ruled on earth, a broken present where the principle of falsehood and that of truth are intermingled, and a restored future completely bereft of evil. This template, it has been argued, is also foreordained towards an ultimate stage of no longer perfectible bliss. Where, as a final utopian condition, al-Qaeda jihadists envisage the restoration of the Abbasid Caliphate along with a seamless Muslim community under Sharia law, the Bush administration and neocon elites see a no less totalitarian 'free world' economically organized around neoliberalist principles.

In view of the imagery evoked during defining moments of his presidency, Bush's conduct has often been equated with a form of political messianism. As a scholar extremely receptive to the strategic use of symbols by political authorities, Lincoln regards the 'Mission Accomplished' address as one of the most exemplary attempts at presenting Bush's messianic persona. On 1 May 2003, wearing a pilot's suit, the president landed on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*, just a few miles from San Diego Bay. Here, Bush was meant to give a speech to the nation marking the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq, epitomized by the recent toppling of his statue in Baghdad's main square. To Lincoln, the presidential address was more than a display of America's military might or a celebration of its recent success over the Iraqi regime. In light of its carefully choreographed iconography, the event was aimed at conveying 'the impression of a warrior president and triumphant saviour descending from the clouds, master of air, land and sea'.⁴⁸ It is well known that, even prior to September 11, Bush often presented himself as God's appointed agent, legitimate beneficiary of His support and defender of the divine attributes and virtues against America's adversaries.⁴⁹ On that occasion, nevertheless, the president had more ambitious aspirations. He tried to elevate his presidential leadership to the status of a king or high priest enacting a quasi-divine recreation – in Eliade's terms, that kind of *renovatio mundi* expected at the end of history, when all evil is swept away and the pristine perfection of the cosmos is restored.⁵⁰

An overarching concern in this book is to emphasize how the apocalyptic can hardly be classified in uncontroversial and unitary terms. As a literary genre or mythic archetype, it presents us with a complex set of different but nonetheless interwoven meanings and applications. It can reveal itself as a religious medium giving voice to the oppressed, whilst potentially mobilizing their grievances into the political arena. Further, it can work as a 'plausibility structure' assuaging the angst of those who feel threatened by an anomic present. With opportune adaptations, apocalyptic temporality, symbolism and tropes may equally serve as handmaiden of imperial propaganda and as a rhetorical means to gather consensus around it.

It is worth noting that it was the extraordinary circumstances of September 11 that provided Bush with the opportunity to put forth his messianic leadership, both on the domestic and international stage. Several polls cast just before the historical turning point seem to indicate that the popularity of the newly elected president was at its lowest, mostly because of his inconclusive political performances. In

the approval ratings, Bush was often criticized for his poor and unsophisticated oratorical skills, a deficiency that impinged on his ability to convey the goals and ambitions of his presidency. Many Americans were alienated by Bush's excessive recourse to a religion-laden language, others by his ultra-conservative approach towards public life.

It seems ironic that, as a result of the vacuum of meaning created by September 11, Bush's marked religious lexicon and lifestyle turned to be crucial in convincing millions of citizens that he was the right president at the right time. In the first months ensuing the attacks, writes Gentile, a weak and clueless president morphed into a resolute and determined 'commander in chief' of a country at war with evil. Many hailed him as the 'new Moses of America', 'to whom the divine Providence had entrusted the arduous task of leading the nation at one of the most tragic moments of its history'.⁵¹

To account for the surge in presidential authority and legitimacy, the Italian scholar underscores the bearing of the 'unprecedented' over the charismatic qualities of the president himself. Bush's leadership would have intervened in and capitalized on the climate of patriotic effervescence that spontaneously formed in the wake of al-Qaeda's attacks. The wound at the heart of America swiftly reversed a decades-long trend of apathy and disunion, making US citizens rediscover 'confidence in the institutions and collective solidarity over and above political divisions, a greater social involvement and interest in the common good, and an impelling desire to participate and collaborate'. The 'extraordinary nationwide spread of patriotism imbued with religiosity' sometimes bordered on jingoistic pride in search of an enemy to strike back at. It was only by acting on the reinvigorated communitarian spirit that President Bush and the neocons were able to develop and put forth their Chauvinist version of American civil religion. Gentile stresses the highly idiosyncratic nature of this nationalist creed and its creative borrowings from a vast repertoire of religious myths, values and tropes defining the US collective identity. It is undeniable that the majority of them were eschatological in character.⁵² On the one hand, as already mentioned, Bush's rhetoric was markedly shaped by the same Manichean overtones and monistic ambitions permeating the worldviews of dispensational Evangelicalism. On the other hand, it also embraced more postmillennial themes and ideas. One of them was a militarized version of the 'Manifest Destiny': a core myth positing the United States as the 'Covenant nation', a 'new Israel' entrusted by God with the mission to redeem the world by universalizing the intrinsically American values of liberty and democracy. The syncretic character of Bush's

political religion, adds Gentile, became key to justifying the offshore spread of the War on Terror as a selfless act. By tapping into these long-standing and shared imageries, myths and ideals, the president could turn a hitherto shocked 'community of sorrow' into a 'community of faith', committed heart and soul to fighting evil on a global scale.⁵³ One might argue that, as a result of the sense-making crisis engendered by September 11, an entire nation became a paligenetic community oriented towards a new beginning. However, such a community of fate inspired by Bush's messianic nationalism did not outlive the exceptional circumstances that precipitated its formation.

If Bush and his neoconservative entourage exploited the post-September 11 climate in order to advance their geostrategic agenda, the initial national and international support that they were able to seize on soon eroded. That happened mainly as a result of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, a military campaign that Gray labelled as the 'first grand utopian experiment of the new century' and, given its disastrous outcome, most likely 'the last one'. In the eyes of many, the Iraq War was nothing but a sequence of fateful missteps and miscalculations, starting with the controversies stirred by the alleged illegality of a pre-emptive war along with the unsubstantiated claims about Saddam's capabilities and intentions regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

However, the Bush administration's fiasco became fully apparent only when the liberation of the country and its de-Ba'athification turned into a full-blown insurgency. Chaos, looting and sectarian violence quickly engulfed the country, exacting the highest toll of casualties both amongst Iraqi civilians and the US Army. As some leaked US intelligence reports pointed out, invading that Muslim nation was only conducive to fomenting the surge in Salafist Jihadism, both in the region and throughout the world, rather than curbing its ascendancy. Gray's study details how the failure to impose a regime change towards neoliberalist democracy in a non-Western context was largely contingent upon the utopian approach of the neoconservative project. The Bush administration's vision for the 'new Iraq' was ill-fated because it was incapable of seriously taking into account the complex map of ethnic-religious strife boiling underneath the lid of Saddam Hussein's tyranny.⁵⁴ In Isaiah Berlin's mind, the neoconservative project would have probably amounted to another attempt to foist an alien and artificial order onto a reluctant sociopolitical reality, trying to fit human beings 'like bricks' into some fanatically held schemata.

The uncritical absolutism and self-righteousness imbuing Bush's crusade against evil did not wait too long to raise their 'ugly heads'. Arthur

Schlesinger's dictum that 'there are no more dangerous people on earth than those who believe to be executing God's will'⁵⁵ became perhaps the most appropriate commentary to the news headlines of late April 2004. The firestorm ignited by the shocking revelations and photos concerning Abu Ghraib prison questioned at its core the moral authority of Bush's altruistic messianism. With a bitter irony, sadistic torture and an utter disregard for basic human rights seemed to have become acceptable means in order to assist what were considered to be the highest goals of a civilized humanity. The abuses perpetrated in the name of democracy and freedom opened one of the most challenging periods in America's history, heavily undermining its international standing and also spreading a wave of anti-Americanism even in those countries that initially expressed complete solidarity in the wake of September 11. In Lincoln's opinion, the depravities portrayed in the Abu Ghraib's photos were nothing but the default outcome of 'humble foot soldiers absorbing the [Manichean] symbolic constructs of their superiors', and implementing these very constructs with 'the limited means at their disposal':

Like children overexposed to Hollywood westerns who team up to mount crude versions of 'cowboys and Indians' on their own, the soldiers at Abu Ghraib staged and restaged variant scenarios, all of which delineate the difference between 'us' and 'them'. In these small-scale tableaux, low-level GIs endlessly re-persuaded themselves of the basic truths: We are high; they are low. We are clean; they are dirty. We are strong and brave; they are weak and cowardly. We are lordly; they are virtually animals. We are God's chosen; they are estranged from everything divine. In the vast majority of the pictures that have been published, the Iraqis are naked and close to the floor. In virtually all, they are – or have been made to seem – humiliated, demoralized, craven, and base, thoroughly dominated by America's superior power. For all that it may seem counterintuitive, I am persuaded that the mini-dramas staged at Abu Ghraib were not designed to degrade the Iraqi prisoners. Rather, they were designed to confirm the captors' worst suspicions concerning the Iraqis, whom they had been trained to regard as 'terrorists', as 'fanatics', as 'die-hard Baathists', or, simply, as Arabs and Muslims, but, in any event, as always already degraded. The point was to establish that such people got what they deserved and deserved what they got, being exactly what 'we' always knew them to be.⁵⁶

Since its first public formulation, the War on Terror found devout supporters within the conservative Evangelical circles, the first 'target

audience' that the president's rhetoric tried to 'enlist' in his campaign against the 'axis of evil'.⁵⁷ Most congenial to the conservative Evangelical mindset was Bush's practice of redefining America's enemies as God's enemies. Indeed, acting on a well-embedded dispensationalist obsession, many presidential addresses gave the impression of naming the Antichrist and his demonic emissaries. In the months leading up to the Iraqi invasion, Boyer was one of the first concerned voices pointing to that synergy that, 'in a shadowy but vital way', was aligning Bush's foreign policy with the fears and hopes of his most dedicated voting bloc. In a piece written for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the historian argued that, by means of his calculated End Time innuendos, the president was 'moulding the premillennial hysteria' burgeoning in America after September 11 into grass-roots support for a looming war:

[American] leaders have always invoked God's blessing on their wars, and, in this respect, the Bush administration is simply carrying on a familiar tradition. But when our born-again president describes the national foreign-policy objective in Eschatological terms as a global struggle against 'evildoers', and when, in his State of the Union Address, he cast Saddam Hussein as a demonic, quasi-supernatural figure who could unleash a day of horror like none we have ever known, he is not only playing upon our still-raw memories of 9/11. He is also invoking a powerful and ancient Apocalyptic vocabulary that for millions of prophecy believers conveys a specific and thrilling message of an approaching End – not just of Saddam, but of human history as we know it.⁵⁸

It should not pass unnoticed how the End Time theology of Evangelical dispensationalism proved to be compatible not only with Bush's holy war, but also with the ideology of a small but disproportionally powerful component of American Jewry. In her controversial statement against neoliberal capitalism and its methods, Naomi Klein suggests that the neoconservative intelligentsia in Washington and at the Pentagon was steeped in the utopian belief that democracy and the free market would not prevail throughout the world in a peaceful manner. On the contrary, they could only be brought about by acts of 'creative destruction' associated with an extensive application of American military prowess. Akin to Armageddonite Evangelicals, neocons saw the current world order as irredeemably corrupt and therefore in urgent need of drastic reform. It is hard not to trace in Paul Wolfowitz's or Michael Ledeen's call for 'a shock therapy-style' revolution in the Middle East

another variation of that apocalyptic template positing that wars, socio-historical havoc and natural disasters are best suited to cleaning the slate for a new dawn.⁵⁹ As far as these two leading neoconservatives were concerned, the present social and economic realities were to be demolished in order to make room for democracy and corporate capitalism, whose combination represented the most perfected form of human government. As Kevin MacDonald reports, the neocons paired their dream of economic palingenesis with the so-called 'Israelisation' of US foreign policy. During the Bush era, their primary goal was to enmesh the national interests in the region with those of the Likud Party or other like-minded groups, such as the national religious settlers in the West Bank. For MacDonald, the neocons consistently backed all those Jewish hawkish movements that were 'driven by a vision of an apartheid-like, expansionist Israel where democracy is little more than an instrument of ethnic warfare rather than an expression of Western universalism'.⁶⁰ In view of these 'elective affinities', it is not too surprising that US Christian Zionism remained the only constituency supporting the Bush administration and the neoconservative project even when their debacles and shortcomings had become glaringly apparent.

What Gray and many others see as a 'heartfelt alliance' or a 'highly toxic fusion' of secular and religious forms of Chiliasm,⁶¹ should be better understood as a temporary convergence between quite different palingenetic visions – temporary because they are mostly reliant on the state of exception engendered by the September 11 aftershock. Indeed one can notice a number of affinities. Yet, once the strictly anti-historical character of its eschatology is taken into account, dispensationalism can hardly be compatible either with Bush's rendition of the Manifest Destiny or with the neoconservative ambition to establish a new American century. Despite their passion for creative destruction, these secular projects need history as a channel for mundane reformation. On this ground, they retain defining rationales of the postmillennial template. The picture of societal perfection that both Bush and the neocons aspired to make prevail with the use of military might was a new international order under the aegis of the United States. Boyer reminds us that in the eyes of many dispensationalists, 'there is only one true Kingdom of God and no earthly nation can claim that title for itself'. Despite their natural love for their country, these Evangelical Christians see America as being 'part of that world system which is passing away, one of those Gentile powers that will be either destroyed at Armageddon or judged at Christ's coming'.⁶² Its strong anti-historical charge remains the main reason why Christian Zionists will always find

it difficult to present themselves as a viable political partner, at least without softening their apocalyptic edge and therefore losing a key marker of religious identity and appeal.

The end of the Apocalypse?

Many recognized in Obama's victory in November 2008 another historical watershed, heralding this time the end of the utopian–palingenetic alignment between Republicans, neocons and the Christian right. With the new leader at the White House, it appeared that the post-September 11 apocalyptic climate had definitely come to an end and the cultural trajectory returned to a less confrontational route. Whilst rejecting the temptation of moral absolutism in politics, Obama's new mantra 'yes, we can change' hints at the possibility of intra-historical improvement, but only through human laborious and humble commitment. The mutated zeitgeist, Andrew Bacevich observes, would also be reflected in the spiritual dispositions of the Democratic president. Whereas Bush was a born-again Christian, intent heart and soul on ridding the world of satanic forces, the newly elected president would be, by his own admission, more incline towards the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr rather than that of Billy Graham.⁶³ In Niebuhr's view, an Augustinian appreciation of human original sin and flawed nature would provide a far better foundation for attaining freedom and just government. The Protestant philosopher therefore dismissed political utopianism, messianism or any other kind of perfectionism as Promethean illusions, warning that these were not only useless for dealing with reality, but also extremely dangerous – as Hitler's concentration camps and Stalin's gulags proved to be during the difficult times that Niebuhr witnessed. God does not allow humankind to overstep his prerogatives, let alone to engage in Manichean crusades to defeat evil and establish a Kingdom of God on earth. President Obama has written that he absorbed from Niebuhr's thought the compelling inspiration that democracy should be 'a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems'. The exercise of power is necessary but always in humility, 'because human nature is imperfect, sinful. We are always prone to excess and mistakes, to doing real damage, even with our best intentions and actions.'⁶⁴ The new historical turning-point marked by Obama's election also suggests that American culture and civil religion might be interpreted as an unending oscillation between the post- and premillennial ideal types – and sometimes an intermingling between some of the distinctive characteristics of the two eschatological templates.

For some theologians and political commentators, a less catastrophic and absolutistic 'quality of the time' entailed a diminished Evangelical influence over US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Others, on the contrary, underlined the resilience of the Christian right and its ability to adapt to changing cultural-political scenarios. Without sympathies in the White House, Evangelical Zionists may ally themselves with right-wing Jewish pressure groups and lobby against Obama, should his administration decide to move aggressively on Palestinian statehood, or press on sensitive issues such as East Jerusalem and the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. With this preoccupation in mind, CUFI executive director David Brog stated that in case 'tension were to emerge' between the US and the Israel, 'we in the pro-Zionist Christian community and the pro-Zionist Jewish community may be called upon to try to blunt any excessive pressure the Israelis feel on them'. The political dynamics at play in this mutated scenario are somehow validated by the numerous 'diplomatic detours' that Prime Minister Netanyahu took to address the audiences of Hagee's mega-church in San Antonio, sometimes even before visiting President Obama at the White House.⁶⁵

In April 2009, Washington analyst James Besser observed that, although it 'may make a lot of noise on Capitol Hill', the 'conjoint gambit' between CUFI and Netanyahu would be politically inconclusive, namely for two reasons. First, the Evangelicals lost their Republican base in both the Senate and Congress; second, Obama counts on the consensus stemming from the more liberal voices of American Jewry, a consensus that places the president in 'a good position' to deal with such influential pro-Israel lobbies as AIPAC and ADL. The situation in terms of lobbying influence nevertheless changed in November 2010, when the congressional mid-term elections brought a Republican majority back in the Senate.

For a short lapse of time, new opportunities for a revived religious-political partnership seemed to emerge from the debate around the 2012 Republican Party primaries. As early as June 2011, media commentators underlined how Rick Perry ticked many of the boxes on the Evangelical wish list. Not only did the governor of Texas pledge his commitment to the Christian right's stand on abortion, same-sex marriage and other defining social issues, but he also justified his support for the Zionist cause on strict biblical grounds, whilst criticizing Obama's position on pushing Israel back to the 1967 borders. Perhaps for this reason alone Hagee enthusiastically praised Perry, hailing him as the 'new Abraham Lincoln of America'.⁶⁶ After Huckabee indicated

that he did not receive God's 'full blessing' for a run, Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann became, for a little while, the most suitable nominees for the Evangelical agenda. Palin's alleged End Time beliefs hit the headlines when the ex-governor of Alaska criticized the Obama administration's pressure on Israel, while arguing that a growing settlement activity in the West Bank was indeed necessary as 'many Jews will be flocking [there] in the days, weeks and months ahead'.⁶⁷ In the opinion of journalists Jeffry Goldberg and Kevin MacDonald, Senator Bachmann also showed unmistakable Christian Zionist leanings when she forewarned, with an overt reference to Genesis 12:3, that 'if the United States fails to stand with Israel, that will be the end of the United States. As a nation we have been blessed because of our relationship with Israel, and if we reject Israel, then there is a curse that comes into play.'⁶⁸ All the Evangelical hopes turned into dismay, however, as Mormon Mitt Romney rose in the polls throughout the election year, finally to become the new Republican Party's presidential nominee. In late 2012, in a bid to show their dissatisfaction with the conservative establishment, prominent Christian Zionist leaders provocatively designated Netanyahu as the only 'worthy candidate' to run against the incumbent president. To them, none within the Republican Party could possibly match the Israeli prime minister's hawkish stand against Iran, reluctance towards the prospect of a two-state solution and unwavering support of the settlement project. Despite its oddity, Netanyahu's designation as Republican nominee may be viewed as implicitly signalling the end of an era in which Evangelicals held sway in Washington.

With Obama in office until 2016, the most effective way in which dispensationalists might continue to encroach on the Middle East peace process is by assisting the already existing settlements or helping more 'scattered Jews' return to the land of their ancestors. Jeremy Ben-Ami, the spokesman for the liberal Jewish lobby J-Street, underlines how CUF's powerful and organized network is deepening the Judaization of East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The illegal occupation, continues Ben-Ami, is strangling the hopes for future generations of Palestinians and Israelis alike.⁶⁹

US Christian Zionists have been backing some of the most dangerous elements within the Gush Emunim camp: the volatile fringes settling the hills of Judea and Samaria, those fiercely resisting any diplomatic compromise over the integrity of Eretz Yisrael. They do so not by petitioning or demonstrating but, rather, through systematic acts of violence against the Palestinian population living near the settlers' outposts. If there were to be Israeli unilateral territorial withdrawal,

such extremist groups might respond by opting for the same 'apocalyptic path' that the Jewish Underground was willing to take in 1984. In the terrorists' minds, a single but decisive strike against the Muslim shrines on the Temple Mount would have precipitated final redemption catastrophically. By triggering the War of Gog and Magog against the Islamic world, the bombing of the abomination would have eventually compelled the Almighty to intervene on the terrorists' side, defeat the enemy and establish a Jewish theocracy on earth. In retrospect, such an attempt to force the End through violent means would have been most welcomed by many US dispensationalists, as the apocalyptic gateway to their own Ezekiel War. According to both mindsets, there must be a confrontation on an unprecedented scale of horror in the Middle East before their respective Messiah returns, renders judgement and resolves human deficiencies by establishing a perfect symmetry between the world above and the world below.

Conclusion

Two Parallel Lines

The underlying purpose of this study was to consolidate a heuristic approach taking seriously and granting positive standing to the belief systems of Israeli Religious Zionism and US Christian dispensationalism. To some significant extent, this entailed reconceptualizing the classic analytical categories that social and political sciences deploy to address messianic and millenarian consensus. In particular, I challenged the idea that such a consensus is nothing but the outcome of deception and manipulation, an elaborate hoax, essentially manufactured by means of brainwashing or anaesthetization the genuine feelings of believers and/or capitalizing on their fears and anxieties.

I argued that, in their assessments, scholars often neglect the critical *pars construens* of these belief systems, which also represents the primary source of their mobilizing appeal: the palingenetic myth of existential renewal. Such a myth posits that the deficiencies and flaws hindering the current state of affairs can be resolved once and for all, with a comprehensive and all-encompassing transformation leading towards the establishment of a perfected and harmonious order in which every aspect of life emanates from and is organized around transcendental principles.

Despite being little more than a pencil sketch, the utopian vision of future fulfilment is compelling in the present. In the two case studies presented here, it has been shown how, under particular socio-historical circumstances, the myth of palingenesis could prompt many believers into purposeful action, breaking out of the existing normative constraints, thereby causing a real impact, one that is today visible in the West Bank with the still growing Jewish settlements. That neither the messianic nor the millenarian breakthroughs have so far come true as expected did not weaken the allegiance to those ideals within

the respective religious communities. Nor did such a failure to materialize alter the commitment to foster politically the ultimate dreams of Jewish renaissance or Christian final fulfilment.

This evidence should at least entice scholars to approach Evangelical dispensationalists in the Bible Belt and national religious settlers in Judea and Samaria in a different way: not as passive, brainwashed dupes of an oppressive cult system or as deranged lunatic fringes but, rather, as people actively and imaginatively engaged with a cultural material that relates directly to their spiritual needs, which also allows them to put their daily life into meaningful perspective.

Whoever sincerely wishes to grasp those collective belongings that have been traditionally categorized as forms of religious fundamentalism (sometimes a misleading term because it is less descriptive than accusatory) should make the not easy effort to engage with that particular level of sacred imagination, finding constructive ways to speak to the adherents' hopes and fears, and also trying not to meet hostility with hostility.¹ It goes without saying that assigning to the rationality-based paradigms of social and political sciences the principle, if not the entire, responsibility for such an analytical pursuit will be, to say the least, inconclusive. The remarkable resurgence of millenarian and messianic movements that we are currently witnessing within and beyond the Abrahamic spectrum requires, in addition to liberal heuristic paradigms, a systematic and in-depth assessment from authentically theological perspectives – perspectives that are more inclined than those of secular humanists to afford sacred mythopoeia its own form of argumentative rationality and explanatory power. Being regarded as a higher form of criticism, rationality has been historically deployed to debunk the claims of religious myth. However, as brilliantly put by Hans Blumenberg, the non-rational symbolized by myth represents one of the plausible modes of accomplishment of *logos*.² In keeping with the interpretative standpoint endorsed here, one might as well charge that reason and the mythic grammar of eschatology have equal standing, both being cultural patterns that can provide humankind with a sense of unity and meaning, all the more so when facing the mounting tide of meaningless chaos.

Within these two politicized forms of religion, one can notice a dialectic tension between transcendental ideals and historical reality. Whilst addressing the theo-political aspirations of Israeli Religious Zionism and US Evangelical Zionism, two entwined hypotheses have been tested. If the two case studies showed that messianic and millenarian ideals can indeed impact on political reality by virtue of their absolutist palingenetic call, it has also documented how being actively

involved in the political arena entails to some not negligible extent abiding or conforming to its rules. In the long run, political praxes based on compromise and negotiation impinge on or even undermine the religiously sanctioned identity, values and goals of the religious movement. In so doing, attempts to implement messianic and millenarian aspirations in earthly reality are bound to engender the premises for spiritual crises and secessionist impulses, which, in turn, might be conducive to radicalization. This last aspect became glaringly evident in the Religious Zionist context, where the compromises associated with the normalization of Gush Emunim's spiritual revolution within the institutional framework of the secular state led to the Jewish Underground's antinomian reaction, one that culminated in the terroristic plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock.

In his seminal study, Ravitzky emphasized how the dialectics between messianic ideal and historical reality is at the heart of Gush Emunim's political engagement, but at same time generates an unsolvable and far-reaching contradiction. Insofar as the cause of Eretz Yisrael in the Occupied Territories is concerned, this contradiction still produces repercussions, reverberating in both Israel's public life and international standing. On the one hand, partial but key intra-historical achievements such as a Jewish return to Palestine, the establishment of the State of Israel and its territorial acquisitions following the Six Day War, even when realized by a secular agency such as Zionism, will always evoke the idea of an ultra-mundane fulfilment and therefore maintain messianic import. This consonance between what has been promised to the Jewish people in the eschatological future and what has already been accomplished by the Zionist enterprise in the historical present leads the members of the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva to believe that the modern Israeli state is a metaphysical sanctum, the first flowering of redemption or the pedestal of God's throne in world. On the other hand, the same Zionist achievements, having now acquired a transcendental standard to live up to, will constantly run the risk of falling short of perfection. In Ravitzky's words, as a partly realized historical entity, the secular state will always derive its standing from the fully realized meta-historical ideal (the utopian-futuristic order that still does not exist, the one that has been designated as the ultimate goal of history), and is 'therefore called upon to tailor itself, here and now, to the latter's specifications'.³ It goes without saying that bringing down the perfection of heaven and bestowing it on a human institution can only breed the most disastrous disconfirmations. This appears to be the case, especially if one considers that the Zionist state constantly engages in

national and international matters by means of political compromise and negotiation. In other words, acting intra-historically as a secular state rather than that Torah-based theocracy will always erode or undermine altogether the heavenly status that Religious Zionism granted to modern Israel.

As a theo-political movement, mainstream Gush Emunim tried to bridge the gap between what the Israeli state and society were in reality and what they ought to be in keeping with heavenly standards. It did so by means of an incremental revolution, a continuous progression towards redemption that relied on the support and resources granted by the Zionist state and its institutions. We explained how the aim of the national religious revolution was basically twofold: to settle Eretz Yisrael's cause physically through the settlement project in the Occupied Territories, and to settle the same cause spiritually in the hearts of the Israelis by a pedagogical project. If the first ambition succeeded remarkably, the second failed miserably. The failure became fully apparent for the first time when Begin's government decided to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in partial fulfilment of the peace deal with Egypt. The distance between the messianic ideal and the historical reality widened, seemingly beyond recovery. By giving up parts of the Land to the Arab foes and succumbing to the will of Western 'Hellenizers', the Zionist movement – supposedly, the bearer of the Jewish exceptionality and the handmaiden of redemption – seemed to have betrayed its holy mission. This painful disconfirmation soon produced a deep theological cleavage within the national religious camp. Once Gush Emunim's progressive means of messianic realization proved inadequate, some at the margins of the movement completely disavowed them and thought that the recovery of wholeness could only be pursued catastrophically.

It is worth remembering that the transition from the naturalist to the apocalyptic mode that is at the base of the Jewish Underground plot originated in a cognitive dissonance between the messianic absolute and historical reality. Ravitzky makes this crystal clear: the intoxicating power of the utopian ideal that 'constantly looms in the believers' imagination as ultimate goal in all its unconditional redemptive significance' undermined both the political legitimacy of the secular state and the religious authority of mainstream Gush Emunim. Paradoxically, the metaphysical elevation of the State of Israel (primarily due to Rabbi Kook's decision to bestow a sacred gloss on it) crippled the standing of both entities in the eyes of the most zealous, whilst giving room for manoeuvre to Etzion and his terroristic attempt to rectify the course of Jewish redemption. In Ravitzky's words: 'the wider the gap between the ideal and the real,

between the anticipated perfection and the actual implementation, the more questionable is the existing Zionist state and its political decisions'.⁴ Despite its failure, the 1984 apocalyptic twist stemming from a discrepancy between what is historically and what ought to be according to the messianic absolute set an important precedent for the future, especially in circumstances in which the territorial integrity of *Eretz Yisrael* in the West Bank, will be under diplomatic scrutiny.

US Evangelical Zionism presents an altogether different scenario, mainly because nothing like Etzion's schism has ever occurred within its ranks. However, analogous considerations might be raised in regard to CUF's ambitions to play a key role in Washington's corridors of power in order to hasten politically the End Time. For a movement as concerned with otherworldly salvation as Christian Zionism is, becoming deeply involved in the US lobbying system, electoral politics and foreign policy imposes a difficult revision of its theological worldview – namely, the anti-historical stand of its Armageddon agenda. However justified it might appear to achieve more political purchase and thereby press forward the End, any process of mundane institutionalization represents for a premillennial movement a doctrinal oxymoron. The 'middle-of-the-road position' between purely apocalyptic beliefs and political ideology aimed at attaining duration can hardly be located, let alone maintained.

An emphasis has been made on how the incompatibility between eschatology and politics might have profound repercussions on the religious community. If core ideals of sudden and catastrophic palinogenesis were to be sacrificed beyond recognition, diluted into the infinite postmillennial approximations towards the eschaton, the group identity might be so seriously undermined as to create the premises for internal crisis, secessions or disbandment. Even in this case, cognitive dissonance between what ought to be according to the sacred absolute and what really is within the fabric of history might predispose believers toward a more radicalized path as a means to bridge the unbridgeable.

The 'Theological–Political Fragment', an early writing of Walter Benjamin to which many intellectuals attached enormous importance, elucidates, just in a few sentences, the major predicament concerning any human attempt to implement the perfection of the Kingdom of God within the fabric of history or, as defined in the pages of this book, to 'force the End':

Only the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, and creates its relation to the Messianic.

For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical *dynamis*; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [Ende]. Therefore, the secular order cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning.⁵

In keeping with the arguments treated in this book, the German philosopher's cryptic words are taken to mean that the Kingdom of God, the loftiest transcendental ideal not only in Judaism, but also in Christianity, cannot be successfully politicized, ransacked from the world above and implemented in that below. It cannot be established as a goal of human pursuit, simply because only the divine Messiah is supposed to intervene in history to complete its course – as Benjamin puts it, by awakening the dead, defeating one's oppressors and restoring that harmonious whole that has previously been smashed into pieces. 'Nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything Messianic': this statement alone would represent a mortal blow to the theological worldview and earthly aspirations of either a Kookist or a dispensationalist.

Most likely, Benjamin derived his fascination in messianism from his close friendship with Gershom Scholem, perhaps the most authoritative expert in the subject. Commenting on the wave of infectious euphoria that swept over many religious and secular Israelis in wake of the 1967 War, Scholem warned that messianism and politics were two 'parallel lines' not meant to meet. Whenever the former is introduced in the latter, he added, 'it becomes a very dangerous business' that 'can only lead to disaster', as it did for the Jewish people in the seventeenth century with the rise and fall of Sabbatianism.⁶ Akin to Scholem, historian Jacob Talmon charged that whoever forces the Messiah into history will be 'spewed out' by history. To him, any Promethean attempt to render messianism into a blueprint for political action, 'far from resolving all contradictions and conflicts into a state of total harmony, increases them, creates new dissensions and leads to an automatic chain reaction of violence, counter-violence and so on'. Of a similar opinion was also Martin Buber, who, despite cherishing the messianic ideal as the cornerstone of Jewish spirituality, was fully aware of the risks arising from its politicization.⁷ These warnings notwithstanding, it seems that the two parallel forces can hardly be kept from converging, and not only in the Israeli or American contexts.

Aside from Religious Zionism and Christian dispensationalism, there is an impressive number and variety of chiliastic phenomena demonstrating that the apocalyptic myth is one of key cultural hinges upon which our civilization still turns. The near universality of this myth also suggests that, time and again, some will believe that they are living on the limen separating two qualitatively different aeons. Under the impression that the grandest transfiguration is about to take place, they will be tempted to usurp the divine prerogatives so as to force a closure on the old and decadent order, enter the new and blissful age and thereby solve forever the human predicament. According to Carl Gustav Jung, the coming of the Apocalypse was not just a prophetic prediction. It was first and foremost an inexorable psychological law. The violent shattering of the world as it has been, followed by its reconstitution in a no longer perfectible form, along with the coming of a deity to judge, reward or punish humanity were all key features of a major archetype.

In Jungian terms, an archetype is a primordial psychic pattern composed of a complex and powerful network of closely interrelated images. It is crucial to note that Jung understood the archetype not as a simple outpouring of our symbolic faculties but, rather, as a dynamic agency, almost 'a living subject endowed with a certain intentionality and autonomy'.⁸ To account for the full scope and force of such qualities, Jung compared the archetype to 'an old watercourse along which the water of life has flown for centuries, digging a deep channel for itself. The longer it has flown in its channel the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its old riverbed.'⁹ Once it 'constellates' in its archetypal form, that is, as a dynamic and autonomous agency, the Apocalypse will be capable of extending from an individual ego to another, eventually to encompass the whole collective unconscious, and align the latter with its own purposes.¹⁰

It is almost impossible not to conclude this book by quoting Frank Kermode's most memorable question, as reported in his obituary published in *The Guardian* in August 2010: 'Why is it, Kermode asked, when the alarm clock by our bed goes "tick-tick", the brain insists on hearing "tick-tock"? The reason, he suggested, is our human addiction to beginnings and, even more addictively, endings: "tick is a humble Genesis, whereas tock represents a feeble Apocalypse."¹¹ Even for one of Britain's most influential literary critics, the human mind is inescapably drawn to eschatological thinking.

Notes

Introduction: Political Religions and Theo-Politics

1. See especially the afterword, 'Totalitarian Modernity', in Emilio Gentile, *The Origins of Fascist Ideology 1918–1925*, Enigma, 2005, pp. 363–402.
2. Ibid., p. 367.
3. See Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 14.
4. See George Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perception of Reality*, Wayne University Press, 1987; Uriel Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich*, Routledge, 2004; Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Princeton University Press, 1994; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; and Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
5. See Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia: The Myth of the Nation in the 20th Century*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. From the Italian *Risorgere*, 'to rise again', the Italian *Risorgimento* was the historical period of and the political movement for the liberation and national unification of Italy (1750–1870).
6. On this subject, see Emilio Gentile, *Against Caesar: Christianity and Totalitarianism in the Epoch of Fascisms*, Feltrinelli, 2010 (in Italian).
7. Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, Yale University Press, 1981, p. 288.
8. Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 36.
9. Ernest B. Koenker, *Secular Salvations: The Rites and Symbols of Political Religions*, Fortress Press, 1965, p. vii.
10. Quoted in John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, 2005, p. xii.
11. See Stanley G. Payne, 'On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and its Application', in Roger Griffin, Robert Mallett and John Tortorice (eds), *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 31–2.
12. According to French sociologist Émile Durkheim, anomie (anomy) represents the unsettling breakdown of the established frameworks of meaning providing groups and individuals with sense, belonging and guidance.
13. See Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, Hurst and Co., 2005.
14. See Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, Praeger, 2003, pp. 1–8.
15. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1952, p. 131.
16. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 6–7.
17. See Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 38–40.
18. See Emilio Gentile, *Apocalypse of Modernity: The Great War for the New Man*, Feltrinelli, 2008 (in Italian).

19. See Roger Griffin, 'God's Counterfeiters', in *ibid.* (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, Routledge, 2005, p. 15.
20. See George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Grosset and Dunlap, 1964, quoted in Roger Griffin, *A Fascist Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 211.
21. See Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 35–53.

1 Meaning at the End

1. For an analysis of the dualistic scheme of human time, see 'Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time', in Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, Athlone Press, 1971, pp. 30–53.
2. The image of the 'devouring' Kronos is entirely borrowed from Griffin's *Modernism and Fascism*, pp. 80–5.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Henri-Charles Puech, 'Gnosis and Time', in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbook*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 40.
5. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 1–8.
6. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt, 1961, pp. 80–113.
7. Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, University of Missouri Press, 2000, p. 71.
8. See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Harper Collins, 1963, pp. 65–7.
9. See Stephen O'Leary, *Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 196.
10. Löwith, *Meaning*, p. 18.
11. Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 153.
12. See Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 49–73.
13. Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, 'Primordial Time and Final Time', in Campbell (ed.), *Man and Time*, p. 338.
14. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 111.
15. Donald H. Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster*, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 13.
16. Gideon Shimon, *The Zionist Ideology*, Brandeis University Press, 1995, p. 334.
17. See Anthony Smith, *Chosen People, Sacred Sources of National Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 49.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
19. Leviticus 26:3–5.
20. Akenson, *God's Peoples*, pp. 16–17.
21. See Theodore Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism, and Progress*, University of Toronto Press, 1982, pp. 18–35.
22. Puech, *Gnosis*, pp. 50–1.
23. See Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology*, Paternoster, 2004, pp. 169–73.

24. See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 12–13.
25. See D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic, Ancient and Modern*, SCM Press, 1978, pp. 28–32.
26. Puech, *Gnosis*, p. 48.
27. Löwith, *Meaning*, p. 188.
28. Ibid. Oscar Cullmann discussed the famous image of 'Victory Day' in his seminal study, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, SCM Press, 1951.
29. See John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 42–3.
30. John Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, Semeia 14*, Scholars Press, 1979, p. 9.
31. See Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, Crossroad, 1982, p. 11.
32. See Bernard McGinn, 'Early Apocalypticism: The Ongoing Debate', in C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (eds), *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 11.
33. John J. Collins, 'From Prophecy to Apocalypticism', in John J. Collins (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Vol. 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, Continuum Publishing, 2000, p. 158.
34. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of Millennium, Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Pimlico, 2004, pp. 19–20.
35. Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, Tyndale House, 1974, p. 261.
36. See Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 92–101.
37. Quoted in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 42.
38. Catherine Wessinger, 'Millennialism with and without Mayhem', in Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (eds), *Millennium, Messiah, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, Routledge, 1997, pp. 47–61; and Bernard McGinn, 'Revelation', in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds), *Literary Guide to the Bible*, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 523.
39. Cohn, *The Pursuit*, p. 24.
40. See Adela Yarbo Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Westminster, 1984, pp. 156–9.
41. See Bernard McGinn, 'Early Apocalypticism: The Ongoing Debate', in Patrides and Wittreich (eds), *The Apocalypse*, pp. 21–3.
42. See Philip Kreyenbrock, 'Millennialism and Eschatology in the Zoroastrian Tradition', in Abbas Amanat and Magnus T. Bernhardsson (eds), *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypses from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, Tauris, 2002, pp. 33–56.
43. Cohn, *Cosmos*, p. 99.
44. See Bernard McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, Harper Collins, 1994.
45. See Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 66–7.
46. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, p. 23.
47. Henry H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation*, Attic Press, 1941, p. 38.

48. Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Religious Radicalism*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 171.
49. See Yakov Rabkin, *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism*, Zed Books, 2006, pp. 71–81.
50. Duncan B. Forrester, *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror*, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 52–3.
51. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Schocken, 1995, p. 8.
52. Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment*, University of California Press, 2000, p. 33.
53. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, p. 8.
54. David Ohana, 'J. L. Talmon, Gershom Scholem and the Price of Messianism', *History of European Ideas*, 34, 2008, 169–88.
55. On the themes concerning the Biblical apokatastasis, see especially Ernesto De Martino, *The End of The World: A Contribution to the Analysis of Cultural Apocalypses*, Einaudi, 2002, pp. 215–17 (in Italian).
56. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Thesis 14, in *Illuminations*, Schocken, 1968, p. 261.
57. See Jacob Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, Exile and Return in the History of Judaism*, Beacon Press, 1987, pp. 222–4.
58. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Heaven*, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 30–3.
59. See Ravitzky, *Messianism*, p. 169.
60. M. H. Abrams, 'Apocalypse: Themes and Variations', in Patrides and Wittreich (eds), *The Apocalypse*, pp. 346–7.
61. Löwith, *Meaning*, p. 183.
62. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, p. 13.
63. Löwith, *Meaning*, p. 184.
64. See Gaetano Lettieri, 'The Ambiguity of Eden and the Enigma of Adam', in Regina Psaki (ed.), *The Earthly Paradise: The Garden of Eden from Antiquity to Modernity*, Bingham University Press, 2002, pp. 23–55.
65. See Regina M. Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics*, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 35.
66. St Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, New City Press, 2007, Sermon 24.
67. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, p. 47.

2 Millenarianism, Messianism and Absolute Politics

1. See Revelation 20:4–7. Millenarianism describes a religious belief that pertains to the 'millennium' – a term that itself derives from the Latin *mille* (thousand) and *annus* (year). The synonymous 'chiliasm', less common in the English usage, comes from the Greek numeral *chilioi* (one thousand). In the following pages, these terms will be used alternatively.
2. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press, 2003, p. 16.
3. See Catherine Wessinger, 'Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution and Violence', in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Case Studies*, Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 6.

4. See Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven and New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*, Blackwell, 1980, p. 195.
5. See Yonina Talmond, 'Millennial Movements', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 7, 1966, pp. 159–200.
6. See I. C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology*, Regnery, 1967, p. 52; Cohn, *The Pursuit*, p. 13; and John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Prentice Hall, 1975, p. 21.
7. Ravitzky, *Messianism*, 1.
8. See Frank Graziano, *Millennial New World*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 9–11.
9. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 42–3.
10. Luciano Cavalli, 'Charisma and Twentieth-Century Politics', in Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (eds), *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, Allen and Unwin, 1987, p. 317.
11. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge, 1960, p. 36.
12. Kenelm Burridge, *Mambu: Melanesian Millennium*, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 276.
13. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Longman, 1951, pp. 103–4.
14. A period of time approximately from 220 BCE to 70 CE, which corresponds to the second half of the Second Temple period.
15. See Tremper Longman, 'The Messiah: Explorations in the Law and Writings', in Stanley Porter (ed.), *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, Eerdmans, 2007, pp. 26–7.
16. See the entry 'Son of Man', in John Bowker (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford University Press, 1997.
17. See Howard Marshall, 'Jesus as Messiah in Mark and Matthew', in Porter (ed.), *The Messiah*, p. 135.
18. See Gager, *Kingdom*, p. 43.
19. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books, 1969, pp. 76–7.
20. See Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, Harvard University Press, 1973, pp. 64–5; and Adela Yarbo Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 130–45.
21. Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, Eerdmans, 1996, p. 434.
22. See Matthews A. Ojo, 'Born Again', in Brenda E. Brasher (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Fundamentalism*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 79–81.
23. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. 35.
24. See Roger Griffin, 'Palingenetic Political Community: Rethinking the Legitimation of Totalitarian Regimes in Interwar Europe', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 3 (3), 2002, pp. 24–43.
25. See Douglas Masden and Peter G. Snow, *The Charismatic Bond: Political Behaviour in Time of Crisis*, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 7.
26. See Griffin, 'Palingenetic Political Community', p. 26.
27. For a general introduction on premillennialism, see especially George Eldon Ladd, 'Historical Premillennialism', in Robert Clouse (ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1977, pp. 17–63.

28. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: Background of the Idea of Progress*, University of California Press, p. 7.
29. See Loraine Boettner, 'Postmillennialism' in Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, pp. 118–21.
30. According to some postmillennial apologists, the Christ of Matthew 28: 18–20 would have commended the evangelization of the entire world as follows: 'And Jesus came and spoke unto them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.'
31. See Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 84.
32. See Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism*, Brill, 2002.
33. Martin L. Gordon, 'Messianism: Two Divergent Messianic Conceptions', in Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin (eds), *Religious Zionism: After 40 Years of Statehood*, Mesilot and World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 82–95.
34. Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, Bollinger, 1973, p. 66.
35. Ravitzky, *Messianism*, pp. 28–9.
36. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, pp. 89–90.
37. Ravitzky, *Messianism*, p. 81.
38. See Wessinger, 'Millennialism with and without Mayhem'.
39. See James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought*, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 276–9.
40. Jean Baudrillard, 'Hysteresis of the Millennium', in Charles Strozier and Michael Flynn (eds), *The Year 2000: Essays on the End*, New York University Press, 1997, p. 254.
41. Ravitzky, *Messianism*, pp. 129–30.
42. See Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 92–4.
43. See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, 'Redemption and the Dawn of Redemption', in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 121–7.
44. See Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1957, p. 55.
45. According to French sociologist Émile Durkheim, anomie (anomy) represents the unsettling breakdown of the established frameworks of meaning providing groups and individuals with a sense of belonging and guidance.
46. See Cohn, *The Pursuit*, pp. 282–5.
47. See Said Amir Arjomand, 'Messianism, Millennialism and Revolution', in Amanat and Bernhardsson (eds), *Imagining the End*, p. 108.
48. See Alessandro Pizzorno, *The Roots of Absolute Politics and Other Essays*, Feltrinelli, 1994 (in Italian).
49. For an excellent treatment of the Joachimite prophetic system and its massive impact on Western thought, see especially Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*, Clarendon Press, 1969.

50. See Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 126–41.
51. See Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 110–21.
52. See James F. Rinehart, *Revolution and the Millennium: China, Mexico and Iran*, Praeger, 1997, pp. 22–3.
53. See John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*, Polity Press, 2009, p. 63.
54. See Frank Kermode, 'Apocalypse and the Modern', in Saul Friedländer et al. (eds), *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*, Holmes and Meier, 1985, pp. 84–106.
55. See Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 17–21.
56. See *ibid.*, p. 15.
57. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, 2006, p. 17.
58. See Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, pp. 100–7.
59. Hall, *Apocalypse*, pp. 3–4, 11, 42 and 201.

3 Jewish Religious Zionism

1. For an analysis of President Obama's new foreign policy approach towards the Middle East and Islamic world as announced in the Cairo Speech, see John Zogby, 'Obama Rides the Waves of Change', *Forbes Magazine*, 21 May 2009, available at: http://www.forbes.com/2009/05/20/obama-middle-east-opinions-columnists-change_print.html (accessed 29 May 2009).
2. Quoted in Andrew Sullivan, 'Obama Tears up Israel's Carte Blanche', *Timesonline*, 28 March 2010, available at: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/andrew_sullivan/article7078640.ece (accessed April 2011).
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4. See 'Peace Now's Settlement Watch Report: 2011 a Record Year for West Bank Settlement Construction', *Americans for Peace Now*, 10 January 2012, available at: <http://peacenow.org.il/eng/2011Summary> (accessed April 2012).
5. See 'Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu Challenged for Right-Wing Vote', *BBC News Middle East*, 19 January 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21088844> (accessed October 2013).
6. On Bennett's biography and standing within the 'new breed' of Israeli religious nationalists, see especially David Remnick's journalistic report, 'The Party Faithful: The Settlers Move to Annex the West Bank – and Israeli Politics', *The New Yorker*, 21 January 2013.
7. Quoted in Harriet Sherwood, 'Population of Jewish Settlements in West Bank up 15,000 in a Year', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2012.
8. See International Crisis Group (ICG) report, 'Israel's Religious Right and the Question of Settlements', *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No. 89, 20 July 2009.
9. See Michael Fiege, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories*, Wayne State University Press, 2009, pp. 34–8.

10. See Meron Benvenisti, 'The West Bank Data Project', *American Enterprise Institute*, 1984.
11. David Newman, 'From *Hitnachalut* to *Hitnatkut*: The Impact of Gush Emunim and the Settlement Movement on Israeli Politics and Society', *Israel Studies*, 10 (3), 2005, p. 193.
12. Gideon Aran, 'Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: The Bloc of the Faithful in Israel (Gush Emunim)', in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms Observed, Fundamentalism Project I*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 319.
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14. See Fiege, *Settling in the Hearts*, pp. 269–76.
15. Newman, 'From *Hitnachalut*', p. 192.
16. See International Crisis Group report, 'Israel's Religious Right', pp. 17–26.
17. Quoted in Rabkin, *A Threat from Within*, p. 72.
18. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish Religion, its People and its History*, Morrow, 1991, pp. 137–47.
19. Rabkin, *A Threat from Within*, pp. 71–81.
20. See David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, Schocken, 1986, pp. 15–27.
21. See Reuven Firestone, 'Holy War in Modern Judaism? *Mitzvah* War and the Problem of the Three Vows', *Journal of American Academy of Religions*, 74 (4), 2006, pp. 954–82. The Halakhah is the entire body of Jewish religious laws, which includes biblical law and later Talmudic and Rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions. The Halakhah provides a detailed set of prescriptions covering every aspect of life.
22. Lilly Weissbrod, 'Core Values and Revolutionary Change', in David Newman (ed.), *The Impact of Gush Emunim: Politics and Settlement in the West Bank*, Croom Helm, 1984, p. 72.
23. See Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, Basic Books, 1981, p. 3.
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25. David Novak, 'Judaism, Zionism, Messianism: Telling them Apart', *First Things*, February 1991.
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27. Ratvitzky, *Messianism*, p. 19.
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30. See Maurice Chittenden, 'Rabbi Claims Holocaust Dead Deserved it', *The Sunday Times*, 17 December 2006, available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article756142.ece> (accessed 23 December 2006).
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33. See Gideon Aran, 'From Religious Zionism to Zionist Religion', in Calvin Goldscheider and Jacob Neusner (eds), *Social Foundations of Judaism*, Prentice Hall, 1990, p. 267.
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40. See Gideon Aran, 'The Father, the Son, and the Holy Land: The Spiritual Authorities of Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel', in Appleby (ed.), *The Spokesmen for the Despised*, pp. 294–327.
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108. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, p. 104.
109. See Peleg, *Zealotry*, pp. 64–76.
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112. See Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld: Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy*, Corgi Books, 2001, pp. xii–xxxv.
113. Ram, *The Globalization of Israel*, pp. 6 and 180–205.
114. See Hellinger, 'Political Theology', pp. 445–6.
115. See Ram, *The Globalization of Israel*, p. 109.
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133. See Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, Cornell University Press, 2010, pp. 114–33.
134. See Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism*, pp. 68–9.
135. See Sprinzak, *Brother against Brother*, pp. 158–65.
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137. See Gorenberg, *The End of Days*, pp. 117–18.
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139. This is the underlying hypothesis of Inbari's new study, *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises*, Cambridge, 2012.

4 US Christian Zionism

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9. See John Green, 'Evangelical Protestants and Jews', in Mittleman et al. (eds), *Uneasy Allies?*, pp. 19–38.
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87. Aran, 'Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism', p. 315.
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89. Wager, 'Defining Christian Zionism'.
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