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Life Stories and Christian Zionist Ideology – A Theoretical Outline of How to Capture the Interplay between Individual and Ideology

Christian Zionism is usually characterized as a theological and political movement grounded in literalist bible hermeneutics and End-time speculations that dedicate unwavering support to the State of Israel and the Jewish people. The prophetic element in Christian Zionism has in later years been downplayed for a more down-to-earth focus on social and political commitment to the well-being of the state of Israel. This shift in emphasis leaves the floor open to new investigations into the identification with Israel that is central to many western evangelicals' understanding of their Christian faith. In my research I use narrative methods to investigate contemporary Christian volunteer workers in Israel. I want to investigate how individual life-stories relate to the grand narrative of Christian Zionism in order to answer the question of the symbolical value that Israel bears to these believers. In the present paper I discuss theoretical and methodological questions in relation to my research project. As the interplay between individual biographies and ideology is the particular focus of my research I use James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's theoretical approach combined with ethnographic methods.

Christian Zionism, fundamentalism & the apocalypse

Religious fundamentalisms¹ can be understood, as has been pointed out by social-psychologist Peter Herriot, as “unashamed grand narratives.”² That is, they are “grand narratives” as they comprise a full worldview complete with epistemological and ontological assumption, *and* they are “unashamed” to the extent that they deny the modern (or late-modern, or post-modern) demise of grand narratives. This plays out in fundamentalist's view of history and scripture: 1. their reality is ruled by divine forces; history is to them a narrative of divine omnipotence, not the erring unpredictability of selective interpretation, *and*, 2. Their worldview is intra-textual,³ all reality's essentials can be understood by a “plain” reading of their Holy book. Christian Fundamentalism's immediate context is that of modernity; it arose in the modern era as a reaction against certain aspects of modernity – liberal humanism, secularism-rationalism, individualism etc. – and it simultaneously, perhaps paradoxically, successfully employs the tools and techniques of modernity to carry out their struggle on secular evil, in whatever form. Christian Zionism in its contemporary form has pre-modern roots but rose to distinction during the same time, and in the same religious context, as Fundamentalism. In its early formulations the immediate second coming of Christ was a defining aspect of both Fundamentalism and Christian Zionism. Furthermore, both movements have been and are still today to be found mainly, but not exclusively, in North American Evangelical Protestantism. Yet, the terms are not synonymous, fundamentalism denotes, in general terms, a religious rebellion against modernity⁴ and is a much broader concept than Christian Zionism. The latter is understood, once again generally, as a theological disposition that credits God with the creation of the State of Israel and the “return” of the Jewish People. Consequently, Christian Zionists can be fundamentalists (and vice versa) but do not have to be.

¹ I try to consistently use the term “fundamentalism” to refer to the cross-cultural trend in contemporary religions that are united by the family resemblance of fight against modernity (Marty och Appleby 1991), and “Fundamentalism” to refer to the specific protestant movement that coined the term and used it as a self-description, or this movement's successors.

² (Herriot 2009)

³ (Herriot 2009) p. 25, 198

⁴ (Marty och Appleby 1991)

Apocalyptic speculations in the 18th and 19th Centuries led some theologians, most notably the Plymouth Brethren John Nelson Darby, to conclude that the end of the Jewish exile and the second coming of Jesus were somehow interrelated. As is common within apocalyptic movements and necessary due to the unruliness of history; the “predictions” often took the form of post-hoc rationalizations for what had already taken place. As the Jewish people took matters in their own hands and created a state without (obvious) divine intervention, this was afterwards understood as a “sign of the time”; historical times are about to end, and the second coming of Christ is near. The eschatology of those apocalypticists understands the history as divided in dispensations (hence, the name Dispensationalism) and the return of the Jews to Israel is understood a sign of the present era, the era of the Church, coming to an end. This will be followed by a rapture of the faithful (i.e. the true Christians) a 7 year tribulation when Anti-Christ rules the earth, the battle of Armageddon, and finally the return of Christ in all His glory and the end of (historical) times. In the scholarship on Christian Zionism, this theology of the End-times has been understood not only as a historical, but also, a logical pre-condition of Christian Zionism. In contemporary Christian Zionist circles, however, especially the mainline organizations in Israel, this background is being downplayed and focus is shifted towards a “Comfort-approach”; the Jews are the rightful rulers of the land as they are promised by God,⁵ the role for Christians are to support Israel and its (Jewish) inhabitants through economic, social, political and moral means. Needless to say, a pro-Israeli political bias is one of the most central features of contemporary Christian Zionism. In the present paper I use the term Christian Zionism to refer to Christian support of political Zionism, whether this support is eschatologically motivated or not, while at the same time recognizing the historical importance of the apocalyptic history.

The believers life stories and an unashamed grand narrative

Previous research on Christian Zionism has focused the bulk of its attention towards the historical development of Christian Zionism,⁶ and its political consequences.⁷ The theological identification with Israel on the level of the individual, which I understand as central in Christian Zionism has not been addressed sufficiently. One way to do so is to use qualitative methods combined with narrative analysis; a form analysis of the interview material has the potential to uncover also less conscious aspects of identity, which would possibly be invisible with a more traditional ethnographic method. But there are more reasons for a narrative approach to Christian Zionism; to present oneself or personal experience by the help of biblical pre-figurations is quite common in evangelical and other forms of Biblicist Christianity. It has, for example, been pointed out that Evangelical auto-biographies tend to show narrative structures plotted on obvious biblical themes.⁸ The writer presents himself as a Jona, a Moses, or a Jesus tempted in the desert; almost as if the individual structures him- or herself as a *bricolage*⁹ where biblical motifs are one of many colors. Secondly, it can further be argued that Christian Zionism in essence is a story, a good story, about the exile and return of the chosen people, the redemption of the once lost, and the good-hearted helpers, the Christians, who alone understand the full spiritual significance of this return. It is furthermore a story in an apocalyptic setting, which adds extra drama to the plot and frames it in a

⁵ The most important biblical reference here is God’s promises to Abraham in Genesis 12.

⁶ (Sizer, Christian Zionism - Roadmap to Armegeeddon? 2004); (Sizer, The Historical Roots of Christian Zionism from Irving to Balfour in the United Kingdom 2005); (Wagner 2005); (Lewis 2010); (Tuchmann 2001); (Clark 2007); (Goldman 2009); (Ariel, American Premillennialism and Its Attitudes Towards the Jewish People, Judaism, Zionism, 1875-1925 1986)

⁷ (Haija 2006); (Zunes 2005); (Ariel, An Unexpected Alliance: Christian Zionism and Its Historical Significance 2006); (Cohn-Sherbok 2006); (Kiracofe 2009); (Spector 2009)

⁸ (Lienesch 1993)

⁹ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 153. Holstein and Gubrium applies Claude Levi-Strauss term “Bricolage” on the self.

setting of adventure, heroism, and struggle. The immense success of the *Left Behind* – series¹⁰ should against that backdrop come as no surprise. This story, the narrative of exile and return can be understood as a concrete expression of the grand narrative of Christian Zionism.

Christian Zionist volunteer programs

One of the more tangible outcomes of Christian Zionist ideology is the blossoming of Christian volunteer programs on Israeli soil. Most mainline Christian Zionist organizations¹¹ in Israel offer a variety of such programs stretching from social work to political lobbying, from administration and media to direct support of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Those programs are generally presented as a possibility for an individual spiritual journey more than as a divinely mandated necessity for the fulfillment of prophecy. In my forthcoming field research, with young Christian volunteers in Israel, I will investigate narrative themes in the life stories of the interviewees. The interviewees will be asked to narrate their life stories, especially as they relate to their pro-Israeli preference, their choice of doing volunteer work in Israel and how they experience and understand their time there. It can be expected that the volunteers' life stories contain several features, both biblical themes, but also fragments of the grand narrative of Christian Zionism. I am interested in the relationship between those pre-existing stories and the individual identities of the volunteers. To investigate this I need a theory that takes the social context into consideration while analyzing the life stories. But before I go on to outline that theory I will discuss two terms crucial for my research, narrative *and* identity.

Identifying narrative and narrating identity

There are two concepts central to my research that need to be specified at this stage; narrative and identity. I don't mean to offer a clear-cut definition of any of them as I consider both concepts as far too multidimensional for that being desirable, if even possible. And my study is not about identity construction as such but about how questions of identity come into play within a specific religious setting.

Narrative

Lieblich et al. point out that “while qualitative studies freely use the terms *narrative* and *narrative research*, it is quite rare to find definitions of those terms.”¹² Generally narrative is used rather synonymously with story, and narrative research consequently is the kind of research that deals with stories. In more specific terms, narrative theory suggests that human discourse can and should be viewed as stories. But this is just postponing the problem; we still need to define story. Within the theoretical discussion on narrative there is a plurality of usages of the most central term, a plurality that maybe can't finally be dissolved into one clear definition. Amia Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson suggest in the introduction to the second volume of *the Narrative Study of Lives* series that:

*At this stage of the exploration for meaning, which precedes theory building, determining the boundaries of the concept and the exact meaning can only be harmful to progress in the field. We are not yet at the stage of having a theory of the narrative in the social sciences.*¹³

However true that might be it has to be possible to say something about the boundaries of the concept. A common description of narrative (or story) is that it is a specific kind of discourse that

¹⁰ The Left Behind series is a series of 16 novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. It is a fictional story about the End-times from a Christian Dispensationalist perspective. The series have sold more than 65 million copies worldwide.

¹¹ For example; International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, Bridges for Peace, Christian Friends of Israel Jerusalem, CMJ Israel, Frontline Israel, Caspari Center and Livets Ord Israel.

¹² (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach och Zilber 1998) p. 2 emphasis in original.

¹³ Lieblich and Josselson referred in (Johansson 2005) p. 121.

involves a chronological ordering of events into a meaningful pattern. Paul Ricoeur describes that narratives combines “...two dimension: a chronological dimension and a non-chronological dimension ... the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events.”¹⁴ Two components then seem to be necessary in order to call something a narrative; a sequential ordering of events and, second, meaningful totalities. Plot is connected to meaning in the sense that the ordering of the events into a plot gives the sequence meaning where there was none before. A plot makes causal connections¹⁵ between the “scattered events” which gives them meaning in the light of each other.¹⁶ By analyzing how the plot is organized; its genre, its general pattern, who is the good, the bad and the ugly in the story, this construction of meaning, it is assumed, can be investigated. In life story interviews the assumption is basically the same; by analyzing the material as a narrative, the process of establishing meaning out of our past experiences can be understood. This process is an act of *selfing*¹⁷ in that it is establishing ourselves in the story we are telling, which leads us into the discussion of my second crucial term, namely, identity.

Identity

Identity can be understood, and has been understood, in terms of agency, self and subjectivity (earlier on, also in terms of soul). I don't intend to philosophically engage the question about the self, and what can be said about this entity. Instead I would like to take a pragmatic approach towards human subjectivity. In the preface to *The Self We Live By – Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*, the two American sociologists James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium establish a plot that sets the stage for a recovery of the notion of the self in a postmodern environment.¹⁸ However deconstructed human subjectivity has become by structuralist and poststructuralist attempts; the self, according to Holstein and Gubrium, is something we cannot live without. Far from offering a philosophical apologetic for the subject they mean that we continuously construct our self in our everyday affairs, in whatever context we inhabit. A pragmatic approach towards identity would mean a self that is constructed because we don't function properly (theoretically) without it. It would also mean that it is a usable concept in my coming research. Emphasizing the socially structured character of identity doesn't mean, however, that the self only is a mirror of its environment. Instead it can be viewed, as in the case of Holstein and Gubrium, as a simultaneously constructed and constructing being. We construct *ourselves* in the stories that we tell.

The other side of the social coin, which is usually much less emphasized, is that the subject is not only a receiver but also a sender. Our identities shape the world that we encounter; our interpretations are influenced by our social and ideological position, our worldview. To some extent, our identity conditions what we understand, what we see, how we *read* the world. At least to this extent, we create the world that creates us, and in that sense; identity is a social structure with epistemological *and* ontological consequences. I view the encounter between individual identity and social context as mutually constituting. We are shaping *ourselves* within a context, and those selves condition our experience of the world.

As I want to understand the interplay between a socio-religio-cultural context and the individuals that make up the Christian Zionist movement I need a theory that takes both aspects into account. In the next section I will discuss Holstein & Gubriums theoretical approach as one possible way to follow.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur referred in (Mishler 1986) p. 148

¹⁵ For a discussion on the use of causal connections as a interpretative tool in narrative analysis see (Pals 2006)

¹⁶ (Taylor 1984) p. 61-8

¹⁷ (St. Aubin, o.a. 2006) p. 235

¹⁸ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. ix-xi

Theory – preliminary remarks

It is difficult to find one single approach that can be employed without any modifications to my project. Many studies that are employing qualitative narrative techniques are developing their own specific methods in the encounter with their material. This means an immense variation of methods within the field. For this reason theoretical and methodological questions cannot be finally settled at this stage but need instead to be reevaluated at different stages throughout the process. To develop a specific methodological approach requires a serious engagement with theoretical questions but also a significant amount of freedom on the hands of the researcher. It also means that the material will have to be approached inductively; there is no pre-specified framework to apply to the data but rather a field of interpretative resources that is available for the researcher.

A contextual approach towards narrative identity

One of the main ideas in *The self we live by* is that the subject is a notion that we cannot do without.¹⁹ Even if we strip the concept of explanatory value we continue to construct it, for practical purposes, in our everyday affairs. As such human subjectivity, and identity construction processes continue to be important fields of investigation for those scholars interested in social and individual behavior. By bracketing the question of agency, Holstein's and Gubrium's interest is rather in *how* the subject is constructed in human interaction and communication. They are trying to rebuild the self as a social structure in a way that avoids the pit falls of both the liberal humanistic traditions' self-assured subject on the one hand and the postmodern plethora of images on the other. The self, in their view, is not only what we are but something we actively construct; the self is something that we live by.²⁰ What's more is that they are examining the possibilities to understand the self as something *conditioned* by its social environment but not *determined* by it.²¹ Their self is simultaneously constructed by the outside and actively participating in the construction of itself, above all, by means of narrative.

Discursive practice and discourses-in-practice

To understand how the subject constructs itself, Holstein and Gubrium combine the Wittgensteinian notion of language games, and ethno-methodological practice with Foucault's theory of discourses.²² The construction of self is always done locally, in a specific language game, and by the interpretative subject but the discourses (cultural, ethnic, political, gendered, theological and so on) are resources used in this self-construction.²³ As such, these discourses condition but do not determine the outcome of self-construction. The narrative practice in which we construct ourselves are further conditioned by biographical particulars which means that two individuals within the same local culture, using the same discourses (if such a situation is imaginable) would still come up with significantly different results. To put it simply, when we story ourselves, we choose how to portray ourselves in a way that corresponds to that social environment where we for the moment reside. We use words understood in that context, familiar categories are employed to structure biographical experience, and, we align with the form of discourse that this particular language game determines; we play by the rules so to speak. To clarify the relationship between the constructing and the constructed self, Holstein and Gubrium coin a distinction between "discursive practice" which is understood as the self-interpreting *practice* of the subject and "discourses-in-practice" which are the *resources* that this subject employs when it stories itself.²⁴

¹⁹ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. x

²⁰ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 10

²¹ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 167

²² (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 79-80, 94

²³ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 169

²⁴ (Holstein och Gubrium 2000) p. 92.

Christian Zionism as a discourse-in-practice

To view narrative practice as a meeting place between biographical particulars and cultural context means that a study of self-construction is by necessity local as this practice is different in different contexts, but it also means that an enquiry into the technology of self-construction provides a window towards the culture in which this particular self is being constructed. This point of departure provides a way for me to use individual life-stories in my investigation of (local) Christian Zionist culture and theology as understood by the participants themselves. The life-stories that I will gather will obviously provide biographical particulars but it will also provide clues about the context in which they are narrated. The community is a narrative resource, so is theology, ideology, and culture in general. By listening carefully to how those stories are narrated, which the leading themes are, what metaphors are used and how the stories are plotted I hope to understand Christian Zionism from the point of view of those involved. The interpretation of the discourses-in-practice within the narratives can be compared to, and to some extent validated (externally) by this comparison with, the participant observation that I will do during my field work in Jerusalem.

The emphasis on the social self, which constructs itself in a local context by the use of the various resources available, is a very useful point of departure in my project. As the theory is designed to investigate the interplay between discursive practice and discourses-in-practice, that is, between the (life)-narratives and the culture that those stories to some extent express it provides a possibility for me to investigate local Christian Zionism and individual Christian Zionists at the same time.

Preliminary thoughts on methodology, selection & analysis

Elliot G. Mishler emphasizes how interviews in traditional methodologies were understood as a form of stimuli – response mechanism; if all interviewees would be provided with the same stimuli the answers could be neatly coded and quantified to fit positivist standards of research.²⁵ His “alternative approach”, on the other hand, stresses the necessity to view interviews as a form of discourse, as speech events or speech activities “regulated and guided by norms of appropriateness and relevance that are part of the speakers’ shared linguistic competence as members of a community.”²⁶ That is, interviews need to be understood in their context, which is where they gain their meaning and relevance. Further on, these speech events are co-created by interviewer and interviewees. This characterization of narrative research is shared by sociologist Cathrine Kohler Riessman. In her understanding, narrative research is an inherently interpretative practice.²⁷ A contextual, hermeneutic understanding of the interview situation, and in extension, my material does not delegitimize it from claiming compliance with academic standards. It does require, however, an explicit discussion on the choice of methodology, the theoretical background and general pre-suppositions on the hands of the researcher.

The selection of informants will be heavily dependent on what contacts I will gain in my pilot study to be conducted in spring 2011. Jerusalem is home to a big amount of Christian Zionist organizations,²⁸ most of them, and all listed below, having their own volunteer program. A second opportunity, which is closely related is to use Christian Youth involved in *Sar-El*, an Israeli co-ordinated volunteer program for internationals wanting to serve Israel, and in particular the Israeli military, the IDF.²⁹ I cannot know, at this stage, which of those organizations will give me access to their participants and allow me to join them in their respective programs. For my theoretical outline to be fruitful I will need a program with significant ideological and theological content, I need dedicated participants, and to avoid language barriers and cultural complications I need English

²⁵ (Mishler 1986) p. 136

²⁶ (Mishler 1986) p. 137

²⁷ (Riessman 1993) p. 4-5

²⁸ For example; International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, Bridges for Peace, Christian Friends of Israel Jerusalem, CMJ Israel, Frontline Israel, Caspari Center, Livets Ord Israel.

²⁹ <http://sar-el.org/> (accessed 2011-02-21)

speakers from western countries. I understand that all these factors need to be further specified and brought in compliance with the theoretical framework, but it would be pre-mature and unpractical to do so at this stage. After the pilot study, during the process of transcribing and analyzing the material I will need to once again engage theoretical questions.

The narrative study of fundamentalism

While previous studies of Christian Zionism have successfully described the movement's theological foundations, its historical developments and to some extent also its political implications the question of social identity has not been sufficiently addressed. Christian Zionism is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that cannot easily be captured in some basic definition of core beliefs. Given the pre-history of Christian anti-Semitism, premillennialist toward social change³⁰ and the Evangelical movement's general skepticism towards ecumenical and inter-religious co-operation; Christian Zionism appears highly improbable if not impossible. Yet, the movement is flourishing in the West and increasingly also in other parts of the world where evangelical Christianity is growing.

At the same time, qualitative narrative techniques, a methodology well-suited to investigate the construction of identities, has been employed to study a huge variety of subjects, but to my knowledge, not at all in the field of Christian Zionism or conservative religious movements in general. Yet, those movements seem to present an especially fertile soil for the study of narrative identities. For them:

1. *History is a drama.* The overarching ideology includes all the features of a good story; drama, eschatological urgency, a paradise lost and a paradise found, heroes and villains. The scattered events, to revisit Ricoeur above, of past experience gain meaning in relation to the cosmic drama between good and evil.

2. *Scripture is central.* The Holy Scriptures are held in high regard and their commands (as interpreted by the movement's leading figures) are internalized to the degree that one can describe their world-view as intra-textual. All there is a crucial need to know, it is understood, is in the book. This internalization of biblical stories and events provides a pool of figures and themes to employ in the everyday technology of self-construction.

To employ narrative techniques in the field of Christian Zionism provides a unique possibility to examine psychological and social aspects of a contemporary religious movement. The difference to a more traditional ethnographic approach with a thematic analysis is that the current framework provides possibilities to go beneath the often repeated and standardized answers that are common in any area of research which is politically sensitive or ethically contested. By adding form analysis; unconscious values and norms becomes visible. Religious and ethnic (as well as gender and sexual) stereotypes, for example, are generally not expressed explicit as it is seldom socially acceptable. However, by analyzing plots, metaphors and linguistic forms, those stereotypes can be uncovered.

Fundamentalism is often studied "top-down" and from the "outside"; textual studies of the leading figures, the political context and implications of the movements activities, its organizational structures etc. What is striking with religious fundamentalism, however, is that it demands its followers to accept a world-view that is radically different the modern secular worldview that is predominant in contemporary western societies. This worldview is not always explicit and involves questions of social identities as much as the explicit core beliefs and practices of the movement. I would argue that to employ narrative techniques in the field of fundamentalism presents an opportunity, perhaps unique, to analyze this world-view from the inside-out.

³⁰ "Premillennialism" is the belief that God will rapture the faithful before the millennial kingdom on earth which implies that the world is in a general moral and spiritual decline, and will be so until the end of days. This perspective hardly motivates political action as is noted by Nancy T. Ammerman in (Ammerman 1991).

Concluding remarks

I have argued that Christian Zionism can be understood as a grand narrative, a totality that gives meaning to "the scattered events" of modern existence and of modern Jewish history in particular. Events such as the founding of the state, the Israeli occupation of the Old Town in Jerusalem in the 6-day war and Operation Moses have been understood according to this narrative as signs that the second coming of Jesus is just around the corner. This narrative can, following Holstein and Gubrium, be understood as a resource in the everyday technology of self-construction in the local culture of Christian Zionist volunteer workers in Israel. By analyzing the *discursive practice* where this narrative is put into practice several features of Christian Zionism can be analyzed:

1. What relative role do different aspects of Christian Zionist belief play for the participants in the everyday technology of self-construction?
2. What worldview is expressed in the life stories and how does this correspond to the grand narrative of Christian Zionism?
3. How does Christian Zionist ideology influence the participants in matters of faith and practice?
4. Is the volunteer work experienced as a spiritual journey, and if so, where does it lead?

A common socio-psychological explanation for the rise and continued prevalence of fundamentalism is that it is a reaction against the fragmentation of reality that started with modernity.³¹ According to this explanation fundamentalism's success is attributed to the increase in self-esteem and certainty that it guarantees its followers, by the use of differentiation processes. Similar attempts have been made to explain Christian Zionism.³² If this observation is correct, Israel's "symbolic role" for Christian Zionists can be expected to correspond to this need for certainty. The "gain" of doing volunteer work is a gain in certainty in matters of faith and identity. If this is actually the case is an empirical question.

³¹ (Herriot 2009) p.

³² Westbrook, Matt. *Israel and the Jew as Lieux de Mémoire: Zionist Protestants, Globalization and Memory* Paper presented at the Christian Zionism in Comparative Perspective Seminar at American Academy of Religion Annual Conference in Atlanta 2010, Unpublished.

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