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Religion And The Racist Right: The Origins Of The Christian Identity Movement



Synopsis

According to Michael Barkun, many white supremacist groups of the radical right are deeply committed to the distinctive but little-recognized religious position known as Christian Identity. In *Religion and the Racist Right* (1994), Barkun provided the first sustained exploration of the ideological and organizational development of the Christian Identity movement. In a new chapter written for the revised edition, he traces the role of Christian Identity figures in the dramatic events of the first half of the 1990s, from the Oklahoma City bombing and the rise of the militia movement to the Freeman standoff in Montana. He also explores the government's evolving response to these challenges to the legitimacy of the state. Michael Barkun is professor of political science in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. He is author of several books, including *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-over District of New York in the 1840s*.

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Customer Reviews

While the Christian Identity cult is numerically insignificant, its ideology informs and influences American racist powers of every stripe. Identity's bizarre conceptual stew stirs together peculiar interpretations of biblical scripture to "prove" inherent Caucasian superiority. Its literal demonization of Jews fuels not only white racist groups such as WAR but also Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam. Barkun (political science, Syracuse Univ.) here proffers the first sustained study of Identity from its origins in 19th-century British-Israelism, which held that the Anglo-Saxons were the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. While James Aho's fine *Politics of Righteousness* (Univ. of Washington Pr., 1990)

addresses Identity's political activity, this work remains the only complete analysis of its more pervasive religious teachings. Essential to every academic collection concerned with racism, anti-Semitism, and American religious cults. Bill Piekarski, Southwestern Coll. Lib., Chula Vista, Cal. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A fascinating and terrifying account that is at once a work of academic scholarship and a startling exposé of a particularly virulent form of religious extremism. Barkun (Political Science/Syracuse Univ.) examines the origins and ideology of the so-called Christian Identity Movement. This small movement (upper-range estimates figure its adherents at no more than 50,000 and lower guesses say they number only 2,000) has nevertheless succeeded in dominating the discourse of the extreme right--even among groups not even distantly related to it. White supremacist and anti-Semitic, the Christian Identity Movement (composed of groups like the Aryan Nation, the Posse Comitatus, and David Duke's element of the Ku Klux Klan, among others) has three core beliefs--whites are the true descendants of the biblical Israelites and as such have a providential role to fulfill; Jews are unrelated to the biblical Israelites and are instead the spawn of Satan; and the world is on the verge of a fiery apocalypse in which the Aryans must battle the Jews and their allies to redeem the world. In this last regard, the Israel of the traditional apocalyptic accounts becomes identified with the United States rather than the ancient land of Palestine. Barkun convincingly demonstrates the direct roots of these Christian Identity groups in an obscure school of 19th-century thought in England known as British-Israelism. This philosophy saw Britons as the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, and thus linked to the Jews, with a role as a chosen people. Unlike its violent American progeny, however, the previous movement was not anti-Semitic and, in fact, recognized a kinship with Jews. Compelling and well presented, this volume deserves to be read by anyone concerned with Christian or political extremism in America. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I picked this up to see how British-Israelism preceded and paralleled black "Hebrew Israelism". It did not disappoint, although the author makes no mention of BHI. for example, much of the preface could be applied to 1West "Hebrew Israelism". This book was well done and so was very enlightening on a number of points. For example, early 19th century Identity folks were into Pyramidism (like Charles Russell) and date setting (like Charles Russell). Some identified Egypt as

the banking and financial system. The criticism of this book is largely unwarranted. If I had to guess, it comes from ticks of Anglo-Israelites and their homies. Yet, if you read the book for yourself, you will see the author is relatively objective and usually fair to his subjects. He writes with respect and knowledge. Vocab Malone "The Street Apologist" Phoenix, AZ

I originally picked up this book to get some background on the Church of Latter Day Saints. I'm in no way anti-Mormon (though I disagree with most political beliefs generally associated with them), but they are among the most interesting contributions to world culture that the United States has, willy-nilly, made. The first chapter "the Origins of British-Israelism" was especially helpful, though the Saints are occasionally mentioned throughout, and, I would like to say, not in a pejorative way. This chapter also was useful in getting some insight into some Black American thought I was encountering while working in a Black majority culture. Again, though Blacks are hardly mentioned, I was able to construe some of the mythological thinking I'd encountered using the historical material found in this book. Lately I've been reading quite a bit in areas of 19th and 20th C history that cause me to bump up against some pretty virulent anti-Jewish "thought", if that's the right word, and I've come to wonder how likely or, perhaps, inherent these fallacies might be among those who start questioning what they see around them. "Anti-Semitism", as we usually call it, seems to be a common trait of the alienated, a trait that perhaps arises from the nature of alienation in Mediterranean-derived cultures (as even Germany, Russia and Britain are). The author covers a lot of groups given to this sort of fear-mongering subculture, and he does it with the minimum of rancor and dogmatism. An example would be his treatment of the Ecotopia movement that was intermittently heard of in the US Northwest. I myself have some sympathy to some of the ideas some of these people have, and I can say that the author in no way threw out the baby with the bathwater here. My general impression is that he treats these groups as fairly as can be done. Of course, some of the other reviews found at this site demonstrate that there are people who don't think so. The book is now getting pretty old for a book that some, at least, would consider controversial material. Nonetheless, since it contains a lot of clearly-described and well-annotated historical stuff, I think it's remained useful. It's very readable, at least for those who like to read history.

"Religion and the Racist Right" traces the origins and development of the Christian Identity movement, a particularly virulent strain of racist theology that constitutes the religious undergirding of many violence prone white supremacists groups on the radical right of our political culture. These

are groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nations, the Order, the Posse Comitatus, and the Militias. The author, Michael Barkun, also argues that Identity doctrine is conspicuous within the circles of David Duke supporters. Mr. Barkun finds the origin of Identity within a distant and little known 19th century religious movement called British Israelism. This movement emerged from within Victorian English Protestant circles and claimed that the British were descendants of the "lost ten tribes" of Israel. Barkun then asks, and sets about to answer the question as to how this rather curious notion devolved into the three central religious doctrines of Christian Identity; first and most important, that the Jews are the literal biological offspring of Satan who have from the beginning of time been engaged in a cosmic conspiracy to rob the white race of its birthright as the true "chosen people of God"; that the white "Aryans" are descendants of the biblical tribes of Israel; and that the world is on the verge of a final, apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, in which Aryans do battle with the Jewish conspiracy and its allies so that the world can be redeemed. The question is important because, as Mr. Barkun argues, these strange ideas are at the heart of much of the political activity of the radical right. They serve as religious justification for the conspiratorial paranoia so prominent among Identity followers. Over time, Identity writers have elaborated on the extent of this conspiracy's malevolence and cunning. They portray it as reaching into every facet of American life, the churches, universities and mass media, but particularly the Federal government. "A worldview premised upon such ideas sees politics in confrontational terms, with choices that range from disengagement to violent overthrow." In the introduction Mr. Barkun describes the development of Identity as a strange story that "unfolds in a subculture few know,... where deviant religion, spurious scholarship, and radical politics intersect". This might be regarded as an apt description of how the book reads. It is like reading a well crafted mystery novel in which the many clues from diverse sources painstakingly build toward answering the question of how this deadly ideology ever emerged. The book is divided into three parts. Part one pieces together the development of British Israelism with a focus on three main aspects: its' origins and consolidation as a social movement up to the mid 19th century in England, its racial explanations for its central idea and the early development of its' anti-Semitism and millenarianism, and its' exportation to the United States and the development of Identity doctrine under the influence of leading figures of the extreme right wing. Under their influence, racism becomes the key hermeneutic for history, particularly the Bible, as well as for the rest of reality. Part two examines the development of Christian Identity doctrine, its peculiar cast on millenarianism and, most importantly, its demonization of the Jews. Mr. Barkun recognizes that demonizing the Jews is not new. The unfortunate practice goes back to the Middle Ages. But, according to Barkun, Identity's doctrine that the Jews are the biological offspring of

a sexual union between the Devil and Eve is the most unique and extreme. Barkun suggests that the biological link to the Devil is the outcome of British Israelism's struggle with the question of the identity and status of the Jews. If the British are the true Israelites, then who are the modern day Jews? Their answers relied more and more over time on racial explanations. This started from the beginning with their distinction between the Southern Kingdom of Judah, from which the Jews were deemed to have sprung, and the northern Kingdom of Israel, from which the British are considered the descendants. The former was lost through centuries of intermarriage with a host of other races, while the latter migrated to Britain, its pure blood-line intact. Consequently, the Jews were religiously disenfranchised by dint of their racial impurity. Barkun tells us that while British Israelism was increasingly anti-Semitic over time, its anti-Semitism was not sustained or systematic. Moreover, within British Israelism, the Jews were always in some sense salvagable. But in the hands of their American counterparts these racial explanations grew increasingly nefarious. The anti-Semitism of British Israelism hatched the idea of the "good Jews" and the "bad Jews". The leaders of American racism transformed this into the evil Jews. But more than this, their doctrine combined virulent racism with two much older ideas, the idea of a cosmic conspiracy by the Devil toward world dominance, with the idea of a Jewish conspiracy toward social subversion. Hence the Jews are viewed as Evil incarnate. Part three of the book deals with the political outcome of their doctrines. God's purpose is racial redemption, which is viewed as the only valid political goal. It is not therefore negotiable. Any compromise is viewed as compromise with the Devil himself. This is why the overthrow of or separation from the US. government is so important to Identity followers. They view democracy as part of this cosmic Jewish conspiracy to destroy white Christian civilization. To them, democracy is designed to promote race mixing with "mud people". This derisive phrase is how Identity refers to all people of color. They're regarded as mistakes by God before the creation of the perfect white race in Adam. Identity views interracial marriage and abortion as part of the plan to destroy the white race. Combine this with their apocalyptic expectations that we are living in the end times and the final conflict will involve a war between the Aryans, the Jews and their allies, and you arrive at what Barkun calls Identity's "politics of ultimacy". Prepare for war and regard the rest of the world as deceived or deceiving. This is an important and timely book for those who seek to understand the ideology and politics of the extreme right wing of American political culture. But the reader must exercise patience. The book reads like a picture puzzle because the sources for the development of this sad and deadly perspective are extremely varied and obscure. But it behooves all Americans to understand what we're up against, and Mr. Barkun's book is a good first step in that direction.

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