

ISSUES
in National Affairs

**Understanding the Summer of Hate:
Contemporary Antisemitism
Takes a Violent Turn**

Kenneth S. Stern



Kenneth S. Stern is the American Jewish Committee's expert on antisemitism and extremism, and the author of *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate*.

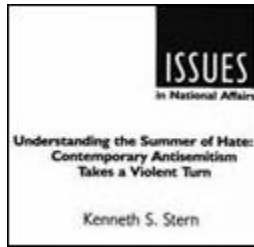
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Understanding the Summer of Hate



"To want to live in a world where blacks have power over whites, where Jews are in control, I think that's a sickness and I'd like to eradicate that sickness. In some ways it's inevitable - racial holy war."
Benjamin Smith, July 1999

"He was concerned about the decline of the white race and he wanted to send a message to America by killing Jews." - a law enforcement official, on Buford Furrow, August 1999

On April 12, 1999 the American Jewish Committee convened a national conference entitled "The Christian Identity Movement: Promoting antisemitism, racism, and violence by distorting Christian theology." Experts from around the country agreed: hate-inspired violence from the American far right was likely to increase. Unfortunately, this prediction has already come true.

During the summer of 1999 three vicious hate crimes - the shooting at a Los Angeles Jewish community center, a white supremacist killing spree in the Midwest, and the arson of three Sacramento area synagogues - showed us all that American antisemitism can still be lethal, even in cities and suburbs far away from the Aryan Nations in Idaho or the Freemen in Montana. Too often we try to gauge the level of this threat through important, but secondary symptoms such as the number of hate crimes or hate groups or hate group members or bigoted Internet sites. The primary indicator is the ebb and flow of ideas. And while societal antisemitism is at historic lows (as evidenced by survey research, the high intermarriage rate, and educational and employment opportunities), the power, sophistication, and allure of fringe antisemitic theologies and ideologies are on the rise, and threaten to become increasingly violent.

Ideas were the motivating factors in the hate crimes committed by Buford Furrow, a Christian Identity adherent who wounded five, including three children at the JCC before killing Joseph Iletto, a Filipino postal worker. Ideas drove Benjamin Smith, a World Church of the Creator adherent who killed a black man and a Korean man, and injured Orthodox Jews in the Midwest. And ideas were behind the crimes of Benjamin and James

Williams, prime suspects in the Sacramento synagogue burnings and the murder of a gay couple. Literature vilifying Jews and minorities were linked to all three tragedies.

We Jews often tend to dismiss such antisemitic tracts as vile and silly (what bigotry isn't?). But these are variations on time-tested world views that are internally logical, consistent, and empowering. Unfortunately they teach that Jews (and others, but primarily Jews) are not only to be disliked, or even detested, but to be destroyed for the noblest purpose of all, communal self defense.

How could someone who can open fire on little children or torch synagogues possibly see such acts as noble self defense? Because their ideology tells them that these are not little people or houses of worship, but little devils and houses of Satan.

Christian Identity teaches its adherents to see the world through distorted biblical text. Its "mainline" theory is that blacks and other people of color (called "mud people") are a "pre-Adamic" creation, similar to beasts. According to their racist interpretation of the Genesis story, God created Adam and Eve later. Impregnated by Adam, Eve gave birth to Abel, whose descendants are white, Nordic, Aryan types - i.e. the "true" chosen people. Impregnated by Satan, Eve produced Cain, and their descendants are the Jews. This is called the "two-seed" theory of creation.

As with most other theologies, there are doctrinal differences. Some Christian Identity adherents prefer the "one-seed" theory. People of color are still non-human, and whites are still God's "chosen people." Jews, however, are descended not from Eve and Satan but from a later union of Satan and Rebecca, which produced Esau. Regardless of the variant, Christian Identity presents a neat theological package in which minorities are not human and Jews are literally the sons and daughters of Satan. Therefore, any assault on pre-human "mud people" or demonic Jews is not only desirable but divinely inspired. Minorities (depicted as responsible for crime and other social ills) are seen as the tool of the Jew-devils in their war against the white Aryans. Nothing less than survival of the white genotype is at stake. Violence is not only justified in this war, but glorified.

These antisemitic ideas do not come out of thin air. Like any other system of thought, they have a history. Christian Identity is an offshoot of an old English theology called British Israelism, which is based on the belief that the British are one of the "lost tribes" of Israel. While, as scholar Michael Barkun points out, there are many examples of analogy to Jews in British history (including the Puritans in the American colonies seeing themselves as the "New Israel"), the notion of a "direct biological link between England and the biblical tribes" began in the 1800s with John Wilson. Wilson claimed to have proved that "many of our most common [English] words and names of familiar objects are almost pure Hebrew." Of course if the British were "God's chosen people," where did this leave the Jews? Some British Israelites answered this by claiming that the British descended from Israel, while Jews descended from Judah. Or that Jews had intermarried so much over the centuries that they had little, if any, direct lineage to ancient Israel. ◦

British Israelism influenced the American far right early in the 20th century. William Cameron, editor of the antisemitic newspaper *The Dearborn Independent* (published by automaker Henry Ford), was also a British Israelite. His newspaper articles, later published in book form as *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, blamed Jews for communism, capitalism, usury, freemasonry, killing Christ, being Satanjc, and other such crimes.

By the late 1930s, the stage was set for British Israelism to produce Christian Identity, a full-blown antisemitic theology. Ties between American and British British-Israelite groups had become looser, while British Israel organizing increased on the West Coast from California up through British Columbia, frequently in association with other right-wing groups of the time. These were, of course, the years around World War II when outright antisemitism was being preached by the Nazis in Germany and their ideological allies around the world. Jews, in such far-right literature, were always painted as evil and alien. But a 1944 novel distributed by the British-Israel Association of Greater Vancouver entitled "When?: A Prophetic Novel of the Very Near Future" by "H. Ben Judah" was one of the first tracts to suggest a biological link, that Jews were actually the offspring of the devil. This idea became the key precept of modern Christian Identity, and was popularized by people such as Wesley Swift, a Ku Klux Klan member and founder of the Church of Jesus Christ - Christian. (The name reflects the Christian Identity belief that Jesus was not a Jew.)

This antisemitic theology has had a major impact on the far right over the last half century. William Potter Gale of the Christian Defense League, James Wickstrom of the Posse Comitatus, James Ellison of The Covenant, The Sword, and The Arm of the Lord, Thom Robb of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and Richard Butler of the Aryan Nations - many of whom had connections directly to Swift - help build a movement and refine its theology, which is not a subtle one. The chapel in Richard Butler's Aryan Nations Idaho compound is adorned with a portrait of Adolf Hitler - the caption reads "When I Come Back, No More Mr. Nice Guy."

Christian Identity followers have included Randy Weaver, famous for his stand-off with federal officials in Ruby Ridge, Idaho; Gordon Kahl, who shot federal marshals in North Dakota; various members of The Order, which robbed banks and killed Jewish talk radio personality Alan Berg, and members of the Montana Freemen, who had a standoff with federal officials in 1996.

Today, the Christian Identity movement has approximately 90 ministries in 34 states. Reverend Pete Peters, in his early fifties, is the movement's most prominent figure. His church, based in LaPorte, Colorado, is supplemented by a radio program and a website, from which he promotes racist (including "Martin Luther King, Jr., His Dream, Our Nightmare"), antisemitic (including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) and homophobic (including "Death Penalty for Homosexuals") material. Peters even promotes Canadian neo-Nazi Ernst Zündel, who argues that teaching children about the Holocaust in Canadian and American schools is "child abuse."

Because Christian Identity teaches that the Jews are devils, anything associated with Jews becomes suspect. Not surprisingly Christian Identity adherents believe that Jews simply made up the Holocaust, and that the gas chambers are a hoax. They also see the federal government as a smoke-screen created by Jews in order to subjugate whites. They call it "ZOG," for "Zionist Occupational Government."

A Theological Grounding

Perhaps the greatest threat posed by the Christian Identity movement is its success in providing a unifying theology for disparate white supremacist factions in the U.S.— a theology that hails whites as God's "chosen people" and sees America as God's exclusive gift to them. The danger is two-fold. First, people may be drawn into the world of hate through these familiar – but distorted – theological references. And second, Christian Identity provides yet another layer of justification and empowerment to people who already see the world through racist and antisemitic lenses. The websites of many KKK, neo-Nazi, Skinhead, and other such hate groups propagate Christian Identity ideas or link to Christian Identity sites, where anyone can download *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and buy hundreds of books, videos, and audio tapes with titles such as "The Bible is not a Jewish Book," "Jewry: A False People, False Promises, A Counterfeit Nation," "The Cabala and the Witchcraft Connection," "God Commands Racial Segregation," and "The Cain-Satanic Seed Line." Internet users can also obtain listings of Christian Identity radio broadcasts over shortwave, or download Real Audio versions of these programs.

Not only philosophical ideas, but also tactical ones, are preached. Literature found in Buford Furrow's car was written by former American Nazi Party member Richard Kelly Hoskins. Hoskins is best known in Christian Identity circles for his writings about the "Phineas Priesthood," and the idea that one gains a place of honor by committing terrorist acts to "protect" the white race.

Since these ideas all have the same core belief – demonizing Jews and holding them responsible for the perceived problems of "white America" – they have the ability to influence people who share the larger world-view and call to action, regardless of doctrinal differences. All indications are that the Williams brothers, suspects in the Sacramento-area synagogue arsons, who were influenced by Identity, also shaped their world vision by less sectarian notions, some of which were promoted by literature from the Illinois-based World Church of the Creator. "It is a puzzling set of influences," the *Washington Post* reported, ". . . because one movement adheres to a strict and devout religious faith and the other claims to reject the idea of God or gods even though it calls itself a church."

Not puzzling at all, really. As author Leonard Zeskind has noted, the theological structure of the Christian Identity movement may prove too restrictive for some who want to act without religious restrictions on their personal life. Richard Butler, Zeskind notes, frowns on drinking beer. And what theology provides for one antisemitic worldview, pure conspiracy theory provides for another. Ultimately they come out at the same place - a

belief that Jews are biologically alien and are driven to destroy white European people and their progeny.

Only two weeks after the synagogues were burned in Sacramento, World Church of the Creator member Benjamin Smith went on a killing spree in the Midwest. Smith - who had made a name for himself by distributing WCOTC material on college campuses in the region months earlier - murdered an African-American and an Asian-American, and wounded another Asian-American, another African-American, and six Jews before killing himself. He too saw Jews as the major enemy. "My genesis of racial awakening began in eighth grade," he wrote. "By law, all Illinois students in the eighth grade are forced to learn about the Jewish 'Holocaust' in National Socialist Germany. The best way to describe my eighth grade teacher is 'dirty Jew.' . . . The Jew teacher began with the 'slaughtering' of the Indians by white pioneers and settlers. He then moved to the 'evils' of Black slavery and ended with the 'murder of six million Jews.' . . . The entire class was mind manipulation, pure and simple." Smith's antisemitism clearly fit that of the World Church of the Creator.

Unlike the extended timeline of the Christian Identity movement, The Church of the Creator was formed recently. It was founded in 1969 by Ben Klassen, a former John Birchler who resigned from that organization because it was not "telling [its] members the whole truth. . . . Mr. Welch," Klassen's resignation letter read, "[y]ou know as well as anybody that we are not threatened by a 'Communist' conspiracy, but in [sic] the clutches of a Jewish conspiracy."

Klassen later formed the "Church of the Creator." It was, and is, like no other church. Unlike Christian Identity, the COTC did not find a theological basis for hate by distorting text. Rather it saw white supremacy as a self-evident and natural mission.

"Christianity teaches love your enemies and hate your own kind," a COTC tract said. "We teach exactly the opposite, namely hate and destroy your enemies and love your own kind." The Church of the Creator targeted Jews as its main enemy. Just as Klassen labeled the Birchers' fight against communism a "smoke screen" created by and for the benefit of Jews, he viewed Christianity as another Jewish conspiracy. "The Jews' primary objective in concocting Christianity," Klassen wrote, "was to destroy their mortal enemies, the Roman Empire." And, of course, the COTC preached that the Holocaust never happened, but is a Jewish hoax.

COTC members called minorities "mud races," which they see as "sub-species below [white people]. . . . The niggers . . . are at the very bottom . . . not far above monkey and chimpanzees."

Carry these ideas to their logical conclusions, and, just as with Christian Identity, violence is inevitable. Not surprisingly, COTC also has an extensive history of violence, in keeping with its favorite expression "RAHOWA!" short for Racial Holy War. In recent years members have been convicted for killing a black veteran, beating a black man and his son, and robbing and beating a video store owner who they believed was Jewish.

They have also been linked to bombing plots, including one targeting a Los Angeles African Methodist Episcopal church and a Washington State NAACP office.

In 1993 Klassen committed suicide, and the Church of the Creator was on the verge of foundering. A new, young leader named Matt Hale resuscitated it in 1996. Through organizing, publications, and material on the Internet, the World Church of the Creator, as it is now known, has expanded to over forty chapters around the country. It also has a presence abroad.

Before Smith went on his killing spree he was active in promoting WCOTC material throughout the Midwest, but especially on college campuses. He was not a typical skinhead, deadbeat KKKer, or, like Furrow, a former guard at a remote Christian Identity compound. Rather, he had a collegiate background and had grown up in an affluent neighborhood. Hateful ideas, presented in empowering packages, can animate even the best and brightest.

Leaderless Resistance and Lone Wolves

Alan Berg was killed by The Order on June 18, 1984. The Sacramento-area synagogues were attacked on June 18, 1999. While the hatred that propelled these two events was similar, a fundamental shift in tactics has taken place over the intervening fifteen years.

The antisemites learned that law enforcement would eventually infiltrate and break up criminal terrorist groups. Instead, it was argued, small cells should be created that could fly below the government's radar. Louis Beam, who once terrorized Vietnamese fisherman in Galveston when he was a Ku Klux Klan leader and later became "ambassador at large" of the Aryan Nations, authored this strategy, called "leaderless resistance." "All individuals and groups," he wrote, "operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction. . . . Participants in a program of Leaderless Resistance through Phantom Cell or individual action must know exactly what they are doing, AND EXACTLY HOW TO DO IT."

In 1992, after Randy Weaver's surrender at Ruby Ridge, Christian Identity leader Pete Peters organized a meeting in Estes Park, Colorado that gathered about 160 extremists, including luminaries in the Christian Identity movement such as Louis Beam. A "Sacred Warfare Actions Tactics" (SWAT) committee was formed, and suggested adoption of Beam's "leaderless resistance" model. This was the organizational idea around which militia groups were built, many by Christian Identity adherents such as John Trochmann of the Militia of Montana. Convicted Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh may have also been following this strategy when he blew up the Murrah federal office building - in fact he had contacted a Christian Identity compound near the Oklahoma-Arkansas border just days before his terrorist act. And literally dozens of small groups have been arrested in recent years with the means and plans for acts of domestic terrorism, including plots to attack trains, assassinate political leaders, blow up government buildings, and build biological and/or chemical weapons.

While militia-like activity actually slowed some in 1999, the number of individual terrorist actions seemed to rise. On the Internet and elsewhere, the antisemitic far right has been encouraging individual action. Just hours after the shooting in Los Angeles, one web site was calling for other "lone wolves" to step forward.

There is no reason to expect that small cell and individual attacks will decrease, and every reason to expect them to escalate. The "bottom line" for these haters is belief that the continued existence of white people is in danger, and that Jews (either as doing the devil's work or as a way to wrest control) are responsible for remaking America into a country that is projected to have a majority of people of color by the middle of the 21st century. The more diverse America becomes, the more likely some people will be troubled by this new racial balance and, like Furrow, try to change the scales themselves through violence. His attack combined all the elements that we should expect to see - attacks against Jews, people of color, and the federal government. (This movement teaches that not only do Jews secretly "control" government, but more fundamentally, that any government that treats all Americans equally is treasonous, sacrilegious, or both, and that its property and employees are "fair game" in this "war.")

The implications for the Jewish community and law enforcement are disturbing. There are no easy answers or magic bullets. Gun control legislation and hate crimes laws make sense, and so does discussion of the role of the FBI in monitoring and infiltrating such groups. But any such discussion must not forget the lessons learned from the FBI's disturbing history of violating civil rights during its COINTELPRO program of the 1960s and 1970s.

Most importantly, we have to change how we think about domestic terrorism and the antisemitic ideas which fuel it. Imagine if these latest atrocities were committed by foreigners believing it their duty to kill Americans, and receiving their guidance not from an individual group but from a movement that preaches the virtue of individual terrorist acts. As important as gun control legislation and hate crimes laws are, would highlighting these issues be Washington's entire reaction?

One would have thought that the death of 168 people, including babies, in Oklahoma City would have been enough to move our leadership in Washington to hold full-scale hearings into the racist and antisemitic subculture that preaches violence against Americans in order to "preserve" America. Through each succeeding terrorist event, including many exposed plots to blow up government buildings and hate-inspired killings, our leadership has remained silent. The silence continues, even though the last three hate tragedies occurred in major urban areas.

Congressional hearings to begin the national discussion about this increasing danger are essential, but not sufficient. The academic community has an obligation, too. Throughout history, regardless of time, place, political structure or any other variable, people have adopted ideologies of hate. Sometimes these deadly ideas have even become state policy. Although other academic fields look at this problem tangentially, we have no central

discipline dedicated to the study of human hatred. Just as medicine - a combination of biology, chemistry and other disciplines - tells us how to treat sickness, a separate field of "hate studies" could provide testable, integrated theories about how to manage hate, at both the individual and the societal level.

The need for such a field is becoming increasingly urgent in this age of the Internet, where hateful ideas now circulate at warp-speed, rather than the slow pace of the individual hate newsletter shipped in the plain brown wrapper. Antisemites of different theological or doctrinal bents - Ku Klux Klan, Skinhead, Christian Identity, Holocaust Deniers, the Nation of Islam, promoters of Islamic terrorism - frequently link their websites to one another, sharing a sense of power and community that has one thing in common: hatred of Jews. But rather than bemoan new technologies (that have as much potential for good as evil), or dismiss the actions of a few violent criminals as episodic and inevitable hate crime, our task is to take the ideas behind these movements more seriously, understand that they are inherently political, and confront them with greater sophistication. For these ideas are not antisemitic notions that fly about the ether and land, like a virus, on people who have weak constitutions. Whether Christian Identity, World Church of the Creator, traditional neo-Nazi, or other, these are powerful theological and/or political notions that define a world in which all problems threaten the continued existence of white people, and all problems are created by Jews. Our history teaches us that such ideas - whether they be that Jews killed Christ, poisoned wells, killed Christian children for their blood, secretly direct world governments, run the media, control Hollywood, made up the Holocaust, or do the work of the devil - are not only disquieting, but dangerous, and inevitably lead to acts of violence.

How to fight Christian Identity and other hate ideologies

There are many things that organizations such as AJC and individuals can do to fight Christian Identity and other hate ideologies. All the while, we have to remember to put this danger in perspective: that these are fringe ideologies followed by a small percentage of Americans, but conversely, it only takes a single hater or small group of them to cause tremendous damage.

The easiest lesson - albeit one that treats the symptom rather than the problem - is to make sure the security of our Jewish institutions is adequate, and provides a deterrent. We don't want our houses of worship and other communal structures to become prison-like, both because we don't want to live that way and also because we don't want to give the haters such a "victory." But Buford Furrow investigated, and dismissed, other potential Jewish buildings as too secure before targeting the Jewish community center.

We must also help shape the national discussion on domestic terrorism. There have still been no full-scale Congressional hearings into this menace. We must advocate for such hearings, finding ways to combat hate-inspired terrorism while preserving civil liberties, as well as pressing for gun control legislation and hate crimes laws.

We must also educate ourselves and our children (in age-appropriate ways) about contemporary antisemitism so that we can be wiser as we combat it. We tend to teach that Jew-hatred is synonymous with the Holocaust, and that it is the responsibility of Jewish defense organizations to take care of the few "crazies" out there. One parent of a child at the Los Angeles JCC said he couldn't imagine that such a crime could be connected with antisemitism in 1999. Jewish parents can imagine this now, but still don't know why contemporary antisemitism exists, and what political function it fulfills. (For example, Holocaust Deniers aren't spending so much energy because they think a few pages in textbooks about twentieth century history are wrong; they want to rehabilitate Nazism in order to impact the future.) I have addressed many thousands of Jews over the last decade. Only a few people in each audience, if any, had ever heard of Christian Identity, how Holocaust deniers present their "arguments," or other basic information. Few teenagers - even of confirmation class age - know about *The Protocols of The Elders of Zion*. We no longer can afford the luxury of such ignorance.

We must also seek out and help the grass-roots organizations around the country that, on shoestring budgets, combat Christian Identity and other hate groups. Let me tell you about two. The Seattle-based Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment is lead by Bill Wassmuth, who was a parish priest in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in 1986 when he began speaking out about the bigotry of the nearby Aryan Nations. A few weeks later Wassmuth was sitting in his living room when a pipe bomb went off, set by Aryan Nations members. Shrapnel flew by. The back of his house was destroyed. Luckily Wassmuth was not hurt. Nor was he intimidated (despite the fact that the plot had been to kill him). He founded the Coalition, which brings churches, synagogues, civil rights and human rights groups together to fight bigotry. The Coalition - which has had AJC support from the beginning - has also given birth to and sustained a network of local task forces that target the far right in small communities around the Northwest, Colorado and Wyoming. Last year the Coalition responded to an announced Aryan Nations march by soliciting pledges from people around the region: the longer the hate event lasted, the more money would be raised for anti-hate activities in the Northwest. Faced with this prospect, the Aryan Nations canceled their march.

Another important grass-roots group is the Illinois-based Center for New Community, led by Rev. David Ostendorf. In January 1999, Ostendorf's organization checked Pete Peter's website and discovered that he was going to hold a Christian Identity seminar in the small Mississippi river town of Quincy, Illinois, over three days in early March. Ostendorf educated the local clergy about Christian Identity and 15 local pastors contacted the local hotel manager, who cancelled the white supremacist meeting, despite a significant loss of revenue. Later that month Ostendorf convened a meeting of about seventy-five local leaders at that same hotel. He taught them about Christian Identity and its strategy to recruit from the edges of mainstream Christianity by holding conferences and bible retreats. The community learned how to counter Christian Identity in the short- and long-term and "will be a steady force against this phenomenon in the Quincy area," Ostendorf notes. But there is still much work to do. Christian Identity is "deep and widespread" he says. "There are 52 Identity congregations in our region. We need to expose, educate and organize about this, building moral barriers against hatred at the community level."

Our members and friends should support such efforts.*

In conclusion, we need to continue educating our national leadership about their responsibility to treat the white supremacist movement more seriously; to work with academic institutions to provide intellectual leadership in this fight; and to support grass-root groups in their work around the country. With such a multifaceted strategy, we can significantly reduce the chances that we will again see the horrible television image of Jewish children, hand in hand, being lead away from a scene of antisemitic-inspired carnage.

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- For more information about the Northwest Coalition or the Center for New Community, contact: Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, PO Box 21428, Seattle, WA 98111-3428, (206) 233-9136, <http://members.aol.com/ncamh>; Center for New Community, 6429 W. North Avenue, Suite 101, Oak Park, IL 60302, (708) 848-0319, e-mail newcomm@newcomm.org, website <http://www.newcomm.org>.

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