

# Christian Identity

*This document is an archived copy of an older ADL report and may not reflect the most current facts or developments related to its subject matter.*

## INTRODUCTION

Christian Identity is a religious ideology popular in extreme right-wing circles. Adherents believe that whites of European descent can be traced back to the "Lost Tribes of Israel." Many consider Jews to be the Satanic offspring of Eve and the Serpent, while non-whites are "mud peoples" created before Adam and Eve. Its virulent racist and anti-Semitic beliefs are usually accompanied by extreme anti-government sentiments. Despite its small size, Christian Identity influences virtually all white supremacist and extreme anti-government movements. It has also informed criminal behavior ranging from hate crimes to acts of terrorism.

## Quick Profile

**Origins:** Mid-20th Century (origins date to mid-19th Century)

**Background:** A racist and anti-Semitic religious sect whose adherents believe that white people of European descent are the descendants of the "Lost Tribes" of ancient Israel.

**Influential Personalities:** Howard Rand, William Cameron, Wesley Swift, Bertrand Comparet, Richard Butler, William Potter Gale, James K. Warner, Sheldon Emry, Dave Barley, Pete Peters

**Ideology:** Anti-Semitic, racist, anti-government, conspiratorial

**Outreach:** Churches, pamphlets, tracts, books, shortwave radio, Web sites Estimated Size: 25,000 to 50,000

**Criminal activity:** Overall level of criminal activity is high, ranging from hate crimes to acts of terrorism

## THE "LOST TRIBES" FOUND

One of the most remarkable developments in the extreme right in the United States in the past few decades has been the rise of an obscure religious ideology known as Christian Identity. Penetrating existing racist and anti-Semitic groups and movements, it has inflamed their bigotry with religious fervor and also sparked the creation of many new groups. Adherents have committed hate crimes, bombings and other acts of terrorism. Identity's current influence ranges from Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups to the anti-government militia and sovereign citizen movements-yet most Americans are unaware that it even exists.

Christian Identity's origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century in Great Britain, where a small circle of religious thinkers advanced the idea, known as British-Israelism or Anglo-Israelism, that modern Europeans were biologically descended from the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament-specifically, from

the "Lost Tribes" scattered by invasions of Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians. The Lost Tribes had purportedly made their way to Europe, and from them descended the modern European nationalities.

These peculiar views-arrived at through creative interpretation of scripture, language, and history-never became widely popular. According to Michael Barkun, the leading historian of Christian Identity, the British-Israel movement in Great Britain peaked in the 1920s with approximately five thousand adherents. Although eccentric, British-Israelites seem to have had no ambitious political agenda or animus, and were probably no more racist or anti-Semitic than the mainstream of Western culture at that time.

By the late 19th century, British-Israelite doctrines began to migrate to the United States; they had a particular appeal to some of the many Americans who believed that the country had a special destiny in God's eyes. British-Israelites began to lecture and publish across the nation, especially in New England, the Midwest and along the West Coast. The foremost American believer was New Englander Howard Rand (1889-1991), who's Anglo-Saxon Federation distributed thousands of pieces of literature. Nevertheless, British-Israelism remained small and obscure.

#### AN UGLY TURN

Once on American shores, British-Israelism began to evolve. Originally, believers viewed contemporary Jews as descendants of those ancient Israelites who had never been "lost." They might be seen critically but, given their significant role in the British-Israel genealogical scheme, not usually with animosity. By the 1930s, however, in the U.S., a strain of anti-Semitism started to permeate the movement (though some maintained traditional beliefs - and a small number of traditionalists still exist in the U.S.).

British Israelism increasingly advanced the idea that most Jews were not really descendants of ancient Israelites, but were descended from an Asiatic people known as the Khazars, who settled near the Black Sea during the Middle Ages.

Taking hold in this country at a time when anti-Semitism was as well, British Israelism increasingly advanced the idea - common in anti-Semitic circles in the early twentieth century - that most Jews were not really descendants of ancient Israelites, but were instead descended from an Asiatic people known as the Khazars, who settled near the Black Sea during the Middle Ages. European (Ashkenazic) Jews were thus "false" Israelites who further obscured the fact that it was really white Europeans who were the "true" Israelites. One of the most influential British-Israel advocates of this and other anti-Jewish ideas was William J. Cameron, editor of the *Dearborn Independent*, the weekly newspaper published by automobile magnate Henry Ford in the 1920s, and Ford's press adviser until the 1940s. Under Cameron's leadership, the *Independent* popularized the infamous anti-Semitic hoax, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

The anti-Semitic strain of British-Israelism was particularly strong on the West Coast of Canada and the United States. The key figure in the transformation of British-Israelism into what was increasingly called "Christian Identity" was Wesley Swift (1913-1970), a former Methodist minister from Southern California. In the 1940s, Swift started his own church, later known as the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. He was active in extreme right-wing groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, and developed a close friendship with the nation's most prominent postwar anti-Semite, Gerald L. K. Smith. Because of the activities of Swift and

associates such as Bertrand Comparet and San Jacinto Capt, Christian Identity increasingly became linked with extreme right-wing ideologies.

## A THEOLOGY OF HATE

Under the leadership of Swift and his disciples, Christian Identity theology diverged sharply from traditional British-Israelism. It remained loosely organized, however, without one "orthodox" set of dogma; instead, Identity came to involve a variety of ideas and theories orbiting around several core precepts.

The core of the system, as with British-Israelism, was that white Europeans were descended from the Israelite people of the Bible: this was their true "identity." Volumes of Identity writing is devoted to revealing this hidden history. As anti-Semitism came to be folded into these accounts, the result was a fanciful but ostensibly Biblical rationale for hatred of Jews.

The key figure in the transformation of British-Israelism into what was increasingly called "Christian Identity" was Wesley Swift (1913-1970), a former Methodist minister from Southern California.



The most extreme expression of Identity anti-Semitism is the so-called "two-seed" (or "seedliner") theory, developed by Swift, his associates and his disciples in the 1960s. According to the two-seed theory, the seduction of Eve by the Serpent in Eden was sexual, Cain was the product of their liaison and Cain, in turn, was the father of the Jewish people; all Jews, therefore, are children of the devil, literally demonic. The other seedline in the two-seed scheme traces from Adam and Eve's other son, Abel, through the lost tribes to today's white European-derived believers.

"One-seed" Identity adherents do not believe that Jews are physically descended from Satan, though in other respects they are no less anti-Semitic than the two-seedliners.

Many adherents, especially seedliners, also believe in pre-Adamic races. That is, they contend that Adam and Eve were not the first people created by God, but were the first created in God's image. Other previous creations, not endowed with the divine likeness, were the forerunners of all the nonwhite peoples of the Earth, the "mud peoples," who had no soul. Adam and Eve, and their Israelite descendants, were the first whites, a fact "proven" by the suggestion that the very name "Adam" means "to show blood," or blush, which they claim is only possible for whites.

Another significant aspect of Christian Identity theology is its millennialism—the belief that the world is in its final days. Millennialism is widespread among Protestants around the world, but Identity diverges

sharply from traditional forms of Protestantism. Like many evangelicals, Christian Identity adherents believe that Jesus Christ will return to the Earth following a period of "tribulation." However, Identity adherents reject the popular evangelical contention that devoted followers of Jesus will be "saved" or "raptured" before the Tribulation begins (a concept known as premillennialism). Identity is postmillennial: it holds that Jesus will not return until after the Tribulation. Many believe they are in or are about to enter into the time of

Tribulation, a great battle between good and evil in which they will take part. While some Protestants are also postmillennial, Identity Christians view the apocalypse as a racial battle, which helps to create a hothouse atmosphere wherever Identity thrives.

**Christian Identity penetrated most of the major extreme-right movements. Thanks to Aryan Nations, some neo-Nazis became believers. Klan leaders such as Thomas Robb and Louis Beam adopted the faith, as did some racist skinheads, such as the Hammerskins. Christian Identity also found a welcome home in extreme anti-government activism, notably the tax protest movement, the sovereign citizen movement (descended from Gale's Posse Comitatus) and the militia movement.**

Because they believe in the imminent collapse of worldly institutions, Identity adherents tend to devalue and distrust secular institutions in ways that make extreme anti-government ideologies (such as those of militia groups or sovereign citizens) appealing. They hold themselves to "God's laws," not "man's laws," and many do not feel bound to a government that they consider run by Jews, the New World Order or some other sinister entity. This anti-secularism has led to reclusiveness among Identity Christians, with some living by themselves or with like-minded people in isolated locations (such as the "Elohim City" compound in eastern Oklahoma).

## A MOVEMENT DEVELOPS

By the 1960s, a new group of Christian Identity leaders had emerged. In the ensuing decades, they would spread Identity throughout the far right. Most prominent among them were California disciples of Wesley Swift: James K. Warner, William Potter Gale and Richard Butler. Warner (1939-), who moved to Louisiana and became active in the segregationist struggle against civil rights, was the head of the Christian Defense League and the New Christian Crusade Church. Gale (1917-1988) was an early leader in the Christian Defense League as well as its paramilitary arm, the California Rangers. In the 1970s he founded the Posse Comitatus (the group that helped spawn the sovereign citizen movement), while in the 1980s he created the Committee of the States and served as the "chief of staff" of its "unorganized militia." Most famous of all, Butler (1918-) moved Swift's Church of Jesus Christ Christian to northern Idaho in 1974, where he recast it as the neo-Nazi group Aryan Nations.

**Christian Identity's racist and apocalyptic qualities helped lead to several well-known incidents of domestic terrorism during the past quarter century.**

Christian Identity penetrated most of the major extreme-right movements. Thanks to Aryan Nations, some neo-Nazis became believers. Klan leaders such as Thomas Robb and Louis Beam adopted the faith, as did some racist skinheads, such as the Hammerskins. Christian Identity also found a welcome home in extreme anti-government activism, notably the tax protest movement, the sovereign citizen movement (descended from

Gale's Posse Comitatus) and the militia movement. The resurgence of right-wing extremism in the 1990s following the Ruby Ridge and Waco standoffs further spread Identity beliefs.

The influence of Identity often extends beyond Identity circles. The Militia of Montana, which helped create the militia movement, is headed by Identity adherents, though they do not promote the theology. Similarly, one of the most popular anti-government magazines, *Media Bypass*, was recently purchased by the Identity journalists Chris Temple and Paul Hall, Jr., who have so far only rarely injected Identity messages into the magazine's anti-government, conspiratorial contents.

At the start of the 21st century, Christian Identity is strongest in the Pacific Northwest and the Midwest, but Christian Identity groups or churches can be found in virtually every region of the United States (outside the United States, it is much weaker, but there are Identity groups in Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, Australia and South Africa). Yet while spread far it is also spread thin. Estimates of the total number of believers in North America vary from a low of 25,000 to a high of 50,000; the true number is probably closer to the low end of the scale. Given this relatively small following, its extensive penetration of the far right is all the more remarkable.

## VIOLENCE AND HATE

Christian Identity's racist and apocalyptic qualities helped lead to several well-known incidents of domestic terrorism during the past quarter century. In North Dakota in 1983, Gordon Kahl demonstrated how radical Identity adherents could be when he killed two U.S. Marshals who had come to arrest him for a parole violation (a mourner at one funeral was Assistant Attorney General Rudolph W. Giuliani, later to become all too familiar with such funerals). A four-month manhunt ended in another shootout in Arkansas, where Kahl killed a local sheriff before he himself was killed.

That same year, the white supremacist terrorist group known as The Order began its series of armed robberies (to which it would add additional crimes ranging from counterfeiting to assassination). Several members of the gang were Christian Identity, including David Tate, who in 1985 killed a Missouri State Highway Patrol officer attempting to reach an Identity survivalist compound called the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA). An ensuing standoff resulted in the demise of the CSA and the arrest of its leadership. During the 1980s, several Identity groups attempted to follow in the footsteps of The Order, including The Order II and the Arizona Patriots, who committed bombings and an attempted armored car robbery, respectively.

In the 1990s, Identity criminal activity continued apace, including efforts by an Oklahoma Identity minister, Willie Ray Lampley, to commit a series of bombings in the summer of 1995 in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh. The following year, the Montana Freeman, whose leaders were Identity, made headlines for their "paper terrorism" tactics and their 81-day standoff with the federal government. In 1998, Eric Rudolph, who had been associated with Identity ministers such as Nord Davis and Dan Gayman, became a fugitive after allegedly bombing gay bars, the Atlanta Summer Olympics, and an abortion clinic. The following year, Buford Furrow, a former Aryan Nations security guard, went on a shooting spree at a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles, wounding four children and an adult, and later killing a Filipino-American postal worker.

Perhaps the most chilling manifestation of Identity terrorism can be found in the concept of the Phineas Priesthood, set forth by Richard Kelly Hoskins in his 1990 book *Vigilantes of Christendom*. The Priesthood is based on the concept of the obscure Biblical character Phinehas, an Israelite who used a spear to slay a "race-mixing" fellow Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he had sex. Hoskins conjured up the idea of an elite class of "Phineas Priests," self-anointed warriors who would use extreme measures to attack race-mixers, gays, or abortionists, among other targets. Over the years, some have committed crimes using the Phineas Priest label, including a group of about eight who committed bombings and bank robberies in the Spokane, Washington, area in 1996 (four of whom were caught and sentenced to lengthy prison terms). In 2002, two Aryan Nations splinter groups openly adopted Phineas Priest names or symbols.

**SELECTED CHRISTIAN IDENTITY ORGANIZATIONS**

NAME	LOCATION	LEADER
America's Promise Ministries	Sandpoint, ID	Dave Barley
Aryan Nations	Lincoln, AL	various
Aryan Nations/Tabernacle of the Phineas Priesthood	Leola, PA	Charles Juba/August Kreis
Christian Research	Eureka Springs, AR	Dan Gentry
Church of Israel	Schell City, MO	Dan Gayman
Church of the True Israel	Hayden, ID	Various
Fellowship of God's Covenant People	Union, KY	Lawrence Blanchard
Gospel Ministries	Boise, ID	Bob Hallstrom
Imperial Klans of America	Powderly, KY	Ron Edwards
Kingdom Identity Ministries	Harrison, AR	Mike Hallimore
Mission to Israel	Scottsbluff, NE	Ted Weiland
New Christian Crusade Church	Arabi, LA	James K. Warner
Our Savior's Church	Gainesville, MO	Gordon Winrod (jailed)
Present Truth Ministries	Panama, OK	George Eaton
Scriptures for America/La Porte Church of Christ	La Porte, CO	Pete Peters
Sheriff's Posse Comitatus	Essexville, MI	James P. Wickstrom
Stone Kingdom Ministries	Asheville, NC	James Bruggeman
Thomas Robb Ministries/Knights of the Ku Klux Klan	Harrison, AR	Thomas Robb
Virginia Christian Israelites	Round Hill, VA	Chuck Kuhler
Virginia Publishing Company	Lynchburg, VA	Richard Kelly Hoskins
White Camelia Knights	Cleveland, TX	Charles Lee
Elohim City	Adair County, OK	John Millar

# Report Updates (2003-2005)

## CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN 2003-2004

January 3, 2005

In 2003-2004, Christian Identity continued to operate largely beneath the public radar, with only the September 2004 death of Aryan Nations founder Richard Butler and the upcoming trial of Identity adherent and suspected bomber Eric Rudolph drawing significant media attention (Rudolph faces trial on charges he bombed an Alabama abortion clinic in 1998, killing an off-duty police officer and wounding another person).

In its typically low-key way, however, the movement has been quite active. In the summer of 2004, for example, three major Christian Identity groups—Aryan Nations, the Church of True Israel, and America's Promise Ministries—all held important gatherings in the Pacific Northwest at the same time. Also during 2004, Identity minister Pete Peters amassed audiences numbering in the hundreds at events in Tennessee, Arizona and elsewhere. Another Christian Identity event in Missouri drew 500 attendees, a substantial number for any extremist gathering.

Richard Butler's death was, nonetheless, probably the most important event of 2004. Butler was not only a legendary "elder statesmen" of the white supremacist right, but also perhaps the most well-known Christian Identity figure in America, even though his openly neo-Nazi Aryan Nations was not a typical Identity group. Following his death, Aryan Nations followers scrambled to seize the remains of the organization. A cadre of Butler supporters moved the group's "headquarters" to Alabama but has been strangely quiet since.

Meanwhile, a Pennsylvania-based faction led by Charles Juba and August Kreis, which had broken with Butler several years earlier, tried to reassert itself as the "true" Aryan Nations, bringing Identity heavyweight James Wickstrom of Michigan onboard as "World Chaplain." It has had only limited success to date, spending much of its time feuding with other groups, including the Louisiana-based Church of the Sons of Yahweh, led by Morris Gulett.

## 40 MEMBERS OF ARYAN NATIONS PARADE THROUGH IDAHO TOWN

July 19, 2004

Most of the prominent Christian Identity leaders from around the United States traveled to the Pacific Northwest for white supremacist events held on the weekend of July 16-18, 2004. Christian Identity is a racist and anti-Semitic religious sect.

The most visible event was the three-day Aryan World Congress gathering hosted by Aryan Nations in the Northern Idaho town of Coeur d'Alene. The Congress was attended by approximately 50 white supremacists, including racist group leaders such as Billy Roper of White Revolution and Thomas Metzger of White Aryan Resistance.

From the back of a pickup truck, ailing neo-Nazi leader Richard Butler led a racist parade through Coeur

d'Alene. About 40 white supremacists accompanied him, while others cheered and gave Nazi salutes as onlookers. Most bystanders, however, were there to oppose the Aryan Nations event.

The second weekend event, "The Gathering," took place in Western Montana and was organized by The Church of True Israel, and offshoot of Aryan Nations. This event drew only some 30 participants rather than the 200 expected by its organizers. One possible reason for the low attendance was that the owner of the property on which the meeting was to take place withdrew his offer after the event drew attention from law enforcement and the media. Church of True Israel organizers scrambled to find another venue for their meeting, which ended up taking place in a remote unimproved campground outside of St. Regis, Montana.

### **ARYAN NATIONS PLANS ANNUAL WORLD CONGRESS AND PARADE IN IDAHO**

July 13, 2004

Three of the most active Christian Identity groups in the U.S. are planning three separate events in Montana and Idaho on the weekend of July 16-18, 2004. Collectively, these events are expected to gather most of the major Christian Identity figures from around the country. Christian Identity is a racist and anti-Semitic religious sect that figures prominently in right-wing extremist groups and movements in the U.S.

America's Promise Ministries and Aryan Nations will host their annual events in Idaho, while the Church of True Israel (CTI), an offshoot of Aryan Nations, will hold its gathering in Montana. All three events seek to bring together dozens of like minded Christian Identity adherents, most of whom consider non-whites to be subhuman and Jews to be the offspring of Satan. Other well known white supremacists are also scheduled to attend the events.

The neo-Nazi Aryan Nations, based in Hayden, Idaho, plans to hold its annual World Congress at the Kahnderosa Campgrounds in Cataldo, Idaho, and to parade in downtown Coeur d'Alene. In addition to Aryan Nations' leader Richard Butler scheduled speakers include neo-Nazis Tom Metzger of White Aryan Resistance and Billy Roper of White Revolution. Ken Greg of the Tennessee's Knights of Yahweh is also scheduled to address the gathering.

Meanwhile, CTI, a splinter group from Aryan Nations started in the 1990s, is planning its own event, dubbed "The Gathering," in St. Regis, Montana. The event, hosted by one of the group's leaders, James Dillavou, will feature speakers and Identity leaders from over half a dozen states, including Mark Downey of Kinsmen Redeemer Ministries in Tacoma, Washington; Morris Gullett of Louisiana's Church of the Sons of YHVH; V.S. Herrell of Tennessee's Christian Separatist Church Society; Don Campbell of Minnesota's Covenant Church of Yahweh; and Rachel Pendergraft and Thom Robb of the Arkansas-based Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. According to CTI, the Militia of Montana will also attend.

Pastor Dave Barley, who heads America's Promise Ministries based in Sandpoint, Idaho, plans to host the third event. Among the anticipated speakers at Barley's annual summer conference are Ron Oja, Doug Evers and Ernestine Young of Idaho's Church of the Covenant; and Warwick Potts and James Bruggeman of North Carolina's Stone Kingdom Ministries.

Though small in numbers, Christian Identity influences virtually all white supremacist and extreme anti-government movements and is practiced by some of the most notorious bigots of the radical right. Several Identity events held in the U.S. in 2004 had 300-500 attendees.