

Christian nationalists lead pro-Israel rally at Columbia

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NEW YORK (RNS)—Christian nationalist activist and musician Sean Feucht, pastor Russell Johnson and conservative author Eric Metaxas headed a pro-Israel rally at Columbia University in response to the “Gaza solidarity encampment” established by students a week ago.

The “United for Israel” rally on April 25 was promoted on social media and intended to show support for Israel, Jewish students and faculties.

It drew a crowd of a few hundred, who circled the Columbia campus singing hymns and praying without entering its gate. Instead, they traded shouted slogans and threats through the Upper Manhattan school’s iron fences.

The rally was a sign of political evangelicalism’s increasing interest in campus politics writ large and in the pro-Palestinian campus protests in particular. Earlier in the week, House Speaker Mike Johnson, an evangelical Christian, made an appearance at Columbia to decry antisemitism on the campus and meet with school officials to demand the resignation of Columbia President Minouche Shafik.

The rally was billed as an attempt to “redeem Columbia University,” in the words of Feucht, who gained notoriety during the COVID-19 pandemic for holding [worship concerts to protest restrictions on gathering](#).

He organized the rally with Russell Johnson, the conservative lead pastor of Pursuit NW Church, and Metaxas, a 2020 election denier and supporter of former President Donald Trump. Metaxas—who wrote a 2010 biography of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for opposing

Hitler in World War II—toted a poster of Bonhoeffer's image during Thursday's event.

Feucht kickstarted the event by intoning the Christian anthem "How Great Is Our God" before blessing the crowd and praying for Israel.

'These are the end days'

"Today, we say enough is enough. This anti-Christ, antisemitic agenda that has risen up in New York City, that has risen up in universities," he said.

The day before, in a livestream, Feucht said there had been a rise in antisemitism on campuses due to the pro-Palestinian student protests and that it was a sign the end times were near.

"We're seeing this rise and this flood of antisemitism across the world. These are the end days. I know people say this all the time, and everyone's saying this is the end of the day. ... Well, these are the end days, and we're one day closer to the return of Jesus," he said.

Adding that the Israel-Hamas war is "one of these end times issues," Feucht said that Christians need to "get right" by siding with Israel.

Reading aloud a verse from the 12th chapter of the Bible's Book of Genesis referring to God's covenant with Abraham, Feucht said it was a [Christian duty](#) to support Israel.

Feucht then led the protesters in a procession around Columbia's Morningside Heights campus. Their march, he claimed, mirrored that of Joshua's army circling the walls of Jericho, as told in the Book of Joshua.

Some protesters blew shofars, musical horns used in Jewish religious ceremonies, emulating the biblical story.

Noreen Ciano, a 63-year-old Christian from New Jersey, closed her eyes

and prayed in tongues as she marched.

"I was praying for peace. I was praying for the Lord's presence in this place," she told Religion News Service.

A nondenominational Christian, Ciano is a member of the International House of Prayer Eastern Gate Church, for which she hosts a radio show. As a Christian, she said, supporting Israel should be an easy decision, as "the whole Bible is Israel-centric."

Contrasting perspectives

Some in the crowd waved Israeli and American flags and yelled, "Bring them home," in reference to the estimated 130 hostages still thought to be held by Hamas since the Oct. 7 attacks.

Along their path, the marchers encountered members of the anti-Zionist Hasidic group Neturei Karta, who held signs reading "Judaism rejects Zionism and the State of Israel."

Pro-Palestinian Christian activists also clashed with the crowd, some of them bearing signs reading "Jesus lies under the rubble in Palestine."

At the end of the rally, the march faced off with pro-Palestinian student protesters at the campus gates on Amsterdam Avenue and 116th Street in a tense confrontation. The two groups yelled at each other through the gates, and the pro-Israel crowd sang the Israeli anthem and "God Bless America."

Members of Passages, a pro-Israel Christian organization that plans "Christian birthright trips" to the Holy Land, came bearing signs reading "Christians stand with Israel."

Ariel Kohane, a Modern Orthodox Jew who wore a yarmulke printed with the name of a Jewish activist group, Young Jewish Conservatives, under a

red “Trump was right” cap, said the marchers’ support of Christian Zionists was much appreciated at this juncture in the war in Gaza.

He also praised the efforts of other evangelical groups, such as Christian United for Israel and its leader, John Hagee, who headlined a rally for Israel late last year in Washington.

“We share conservative political views and religious values. We are allies, and we work together, hand in hand. It’s so wonderful that they are standing side-by-side with us, shoulder-to-shoulder,” Kohane said.

Kohane, who lives near the Columbia campus, denounced the “Gaza solidarity encampment” and said the situation should prompt donors to withdraw funding from the institution. He said Shafik should resign due to her poor handling of the situation.

Anya Andreeva, a Christian living in Brooklyn, came to pray and support Israel. She said she heard about the rally on Facebook but made sure it would be a peaceful demonstration focused on prayer before she decided to attend. She vetted the organizers before coming.

“I saw enough to trust it. I’m keen not to side with anything that uses Christianity as a promotion for any kind of agenda,” she said.

The rally ended in a prayer session. The crowd prayed for the “salvation and safety” of the hostages and blessed Jewish participants who attended.

“Lord, we pray even tonight that a miracle would take place, a miracle across the Middle East,” Feucht said.