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## Letters to the Editors

ISIM,

### Citation

ISIM,. (2005). Letters to the Editors. *Isim Review*, 15(1), 5-5. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16975>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## ISIM Newsletter 14

### A Culture of Righteousness and Martyrdom



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#### Left Behind Graphic Novel

Dear Dr Colla,

I read with interest your article, "A Culture of Righteousness and Martyrdom," in the *ISIM Newsletter* 14. While I share fully in your opposition to American crusaderism, the article fails to demonstrate a concrete connection between the eschatological fantasies of the *Left Behind* series and the actual outworking of U.S. policy towards the Islamic Middle East, if that was your purpose. It is of course true, and has been proved down to the ground, that evangelical Christians in the U.S. are overwhelmingly pro-Zionist, and that this has had some impact on both the attitudes of Congresspersons and on the strength of U.S. support for Israel. However, it seems to me more likely that popularity of the *Left Behind* series is just a momentary reflection of enduring millenarian convictions about the place of the Middle East in the "end-times," rather than actually contributing to some kind of new American culture of martyrdom. Don't forget that Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* was selling like hotcakes in the 1970s, long before September 11 or the Taliban or the Iraq war—and the theology of the *Left Behind* series is really just warmed-over Lindsey.

For the record, I am myself evangelical in conviction but do not accept the eschatology of the *Left Behind* authors. I abhor Israeli policy toward the Palestinians and do what I can to advocate the justice of Palestinian demands, as do other evangelical Christians in, for example, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, an organization devoted to building supportive links to the churches of the Middle East and promoting an historically informed

view of the Palestine conflict. This is just to say that the evangelical "community" in the U.S. and abroad is so large that there is considerably more theological and political diversity than is often imagined.

I am also troubled by your incorporation of Mel Gibson's film as indicative of a martyr cum crusader complex that is specifically American, and your linking it at all with the *Left Behind* series. First, it is worth remembering that Gibson is Roman Catholic, and that while evangelicals did turn out for the film in large numbers, so did Catholics and Orthodox Christians, both in the U.S. and throughout the world. I live in Egypt, where Coptic Christians were very enthusiastic about the film, and of course there were many thousands of appreciative Muslim viewers here as well. Secondly, Jewish anxiety about the film was based on an assessment of the film as, politically, at the polar opposite of the *Left Behind* series with its implicit pro-Zionism, since Gibson's film allegedly portrayed the Jews as villains. Of course, the fear was that the film would stoke the old antipathy toward Jews as Christ-killers, although I don't think there's any evidence to show that it did. Third, there is in your article, and in the editorial, a tendency to equate all forms of "martyrdom" in the various religions of the Middle East and connect them vaguely with the valorization of violence. But it is simply not true that "martyr" means the same thing in all religions at all times and all places. In this context, it should be recalled that "martyr" in the traditional Christian understanding refers to someone who suffers passively in the service of God, or for the sake of conscience, and who emphatically does not resort to any kind of violent aggression or resistance, hence the *passio Christi* depicted very movingly in Gibson's film.

Yours sincerely,

**Michael J. Reimer**

Associate Professor  
Department of History  
American University in Cairo

#### Elliott Colla's response

Dear Dr Reimer,

I appreciate your points. While I agree with some, I disagree with others. First, in terms of "causality" or "influence," we cannot say with any empirical exactness the degree to which evangelical theology (especially of the different strands of millenarianism) is shaping

the Middle East foreign policy of the Bush administration. I attempted to use language that showed that such theology is "informing" (rather than commanding) the thought, and probably even some aspects of policy. It may be difficult living outside the US right now to see how popular millenarian evangelical thinking is, but from my perspective, living here, I have seen it move from the margins to the mainstream since 9-11. It hasn't hurt that Bush, Ashcroft, and others in the administration invoke, in their public addresses, language that is meant to resound with their evangelical church membership.

If there was a big point to my wanting to write on those novels it was this: I wanted to say that if there were similar millenarian novels geared for Muslim audiences, and if these novels were popular in Riyadh or Tehran, you can bet that the US media would be making a big deal about them as an example of Islam's "culture of intolerance and hatred." In other words, one of the things that most fascinated me was the post-9-11 cultural context which allowed these novels to move from a marginal readership to mainstream blockbusters.

With regard to the *Left Behind* series, it's abundantly clear that they're not offered, nor are they being read as pure fiction. I encourage you to look at the *Newsweek* issue with Tim LaHaye on the cover (24 May 2004, U.S. edition). One of the most interesting points covered was how the publication of a volume in the series was speeded up after the 9/11 attacks. It went on to be the top novel in sales for all of 2001. There's also a powerful picture in that article of a GI in Iraq reading a *Left Behind* novel. A spokesman for the US Armed Forces mentioned that the "military series" of *Left Behind* were given away en masse to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. I can't help but wonder if some soldiers reading these books aren't thinking they're involved in the first stages of Armageddon.

As for including Mel Gibson's film in the piece, it seems fair to read Gibson's *Passion* and the *Left Behind* series as part of a single, deeper cultural narrative about the inequity of the world and the comfort that God will punish the wicked and reward the righteous. That these texts are circulating at a moment in which Americans portray themselves as innocent victims of evil terror (rather than as victims of a terrorist attack that took place within a history of violence in which the US government has been a major participant) seems significant. The relationship between images of innocents suffering and the desire for just retribution seems to me to be a key part of what righteousness is all about. Believe me, Americans—especially

Evangelical ones—are feeling pretty righteous about the violence that US forces are bringing to the Middle East right now. I don't expect you to agree with my interpretation, but I hope that my reading is a bit clearer now.

Best wishes,

**Elliott Colla**

## MEMRI

Dear Editors,

I was surprised to see MEMRI cited as a reliable source of information in the editorial of the June issue of the *ISIM Newsletter*. Reactions to *The Passion of Christ* in the Arab world are certainly worth study, but MEMRI, an organization co-founded by a former Israeli intelligence officer, is the last place such a study should be done. MEMRI devotes its efforts to seeking out the most bizarre and rabid articles from the Arab press and presenting them as mainstream public opinion. MEMRI's main goal, it seems, is to document, and frequently, to exaggerate rising levels of anti-Semitism in the Arab world, and its analysis of Mel Gibson's controversial film can only be viewed in light of this agenda. In short, despite its claims to be a "non-partisan" translation service, MEMRI is primarily a political propaganda tool, not a scholarly reference source.

Among the many critiques of MEMRI's origins and bias is Brian Whitaker's "Selective Memri" (Aug. 12, 2002) in the *Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0%2C7792%2C773258%2C00.html>

Sincerely,

**Mark Pettigrew**  
Berkeley, CA

## Response

Dear Mr Pettigrew,

Thank-you very much for your message concerning MEMRI and for providing *The Guardian* link which we have since read. We made reference to the MEMRI source without a full awareness of the background of the organization.

**The Editors**

*Letters to the Editors can be sent to [review@isim.nl](mailto:review@isim.nl) and should include the author's name and affiliation.*