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A Culture of Righteousness and Martyrdom

ELLIOTT COLLA

It is hard to avoid the pious denunciations of Islam in contemporary American popular culture. This is not a new development, of course. Hollywood has long labelled the Arab world and Islam with stock characters like “the treacherous Arab thief,” “the fanatical Muslim,” or “the Palestinian terrorist.” But such clichés, once confined largely to the realm of fiction and fantasy, are now crucial to mainstream political analysis. Corporate broadcasting and astute academic journals are flooded with commentaries that single out religion, specifically Islam, to describe what is wrong with Arab societies:

Islam is said to explain everything from misogyny to poverty, from terrorism to fascism. More than anything else, Islam is now widely understood to be the reason why Arab society “lacks” indigenous democratic traditions, respect for human rights and religious tolerance. It does not matter whether the term “Islam” is ever defined, consistently deployed, or even whether it actually explains the things it purports to do. Regardless of the inconsistency or dubious simplicity of this analysis, its core message is clear: the problem with Arab society is the central role played by religion in its culture.

The above observations about mainstream US discourse on Islam are admittedly banal. But they become quite intriguing when we view them in the context of the prominent place of evangelical Christianity in contemporary popular American culture. Part of what makes the American critique of Islam’s place in Arab culture so significant is that it often misleadingly implies that religion is not important at home. Perhaps because of the implicitly secular cultural bent of book and film critics, scant attention has been paid to the fact that since the mid-1990s millenarian Christian texts—fictional and otherwise—have been appearing on American best-seller lists. This spring, tellingly, such texts have dominated best-seller lists from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to *USA Today* and *Publishers Weekly*, just as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* has towered over competitors at the box office. Together the popularity of these texts suggests that many American audiences are viewing contemporary events in the Middle East through an extremist evangelical lens.

Left Behind

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ twelve-part *Left Behind* series of evangelical novels fictionalises eschatological accounts of the Millennium, from Rapture to Armageddon to the restoration of Christ’s rule on earth.¹ The recent publication of the final instalment of the series, *Glorious Appearing*, has been the most popular of all. With sales of over sixty million copies, the *Left Behind* series may become the most popular fictional series ever sold in the United States, outstripping novels, like the popular *DaVinci Code* (which, significantly, also treats core theological questions of modern Christianity), by a factor of almost 10 to 1. How to summarize the story told in these novels? The opening line of the third novel, *Nicolae*, puts it most succinctly: “It was the worst of times; it was the worst of times.” The authors claim to be faithfully following the Biblical prophecies alluded to in the book of Daniel and Revelations. In reality, they tell the story of an under-

The mainstream American critique of the centrality of Islam in Arab culture often implies that religion is not important at home. Yet evangelical Christianity has been occupying an increasingly more prominent place in contemporary popular American culture. Just as Mel Gibson’s, *The Passion of the Christ*, has towered over competitors at the box office, so too have millenarian Christian texts—fictional and otherwise—been appearing in, and dominating, American best-seller lists. The popularity of these texts suggests that many American audiences are viewing contemporary events in the Middle East through an extremist evangelical lens.

ground, worldwide network of righteous believers waging holy war in the Middle East against a Great Satan.

In the process of telling their tale of the rise of the anti-Christ and his defeat by Jesus Christ, the authors recapitulate familiar pieties of the American evangelical right. Poverty, crime and disease are tribulations sent to the world by a wrathful God: only the foolish or the proud would try reform. Peace and disarmament are compelling signs of approaching Armageddon: only the naive or the godless would promote them. Multilingualism and intellectualism are signs

of cynicism and worldliness. Secular Europe is godless and decadent. The UN is a nefarious agency undermining the sovereignty of the USA. When the anti-Christ takes over as UN Secretary General and changes the balance of power in the Security Council, American militia forces lead the struggle against him.

If the novels’ moral compass and foreign policy recommendations seem disconcerting, consider their portrayal of gender, sexuality and race. Female characters are insecure, overly-emotional girls in need of strong sensitive men-leaders with names like “Buck” and “Captain Steele.” Unmarried women are a problem in the novels—one sexual temptress blossoms into the Harlot of Babylon. Abortion and homosexuality are recurring anxieties among the core group of Crusaders fighting Satan who are, not surprisingly, white Americans and Ashkenazi converts to Christianity. People of colour appear occasionally in the background and are caricatured in ways that recall minstrel shows. While the representation of Muslims as misguided fanatics is certainly troubling, the novels single out Jews for special treatment. It is not just that the series characterizes Jews as parsimonious businessmen or Pharisees more attuned to dead law than to God’s living spirit. The novels assert that Jews might have been God’s Chosen People, but that they failed to recognize the true messiah. Only righteous Jews, that is, Jews who become born-again Christians, are depicted as heroes.

It is difficult to imagine the series attracting readers from outside the evangelical fold, but the size of sales indicates otherwise. The series’ publisher, Tyndale House, has also developed its own Armageddon industry which includes CD-ROM, graphic-novel editions, and slick live-action video and audio adaptations of *Left Behind*. *Left Behind: The Kids Series* has been designed for young readers. Most alarming of all, there is the *Left Behind: Military Series*, novels which tell the story of the Army Rangers and Marine Special Forces involved in the military aspects of Armageddon. Any resemblance to current US interventions in the Middle East are not accidental. As one blurb states: “Reading the *Left Behind* series has been a haunting experience, especially since September 11, with the war on terror, the struggles between the US and the United Nations, and the war in Iraq and its aftermath. Add to that the violence in Israel over the past two [sic] years with the current tensions over the ‘roadmap to peace’ and you get a sense that events described in the *Left Behind* series seem quite plausible.”²

Suspension of disbelief?

The Left Behind novels are not presented as mere fantasy. While there is no mistaking the fictional stamp of the books—they are marketed as fiction and they pay homage to pop genres, from Harlequin bodice rippers to Tom Clancy military thrillers, from 1970s disaster movies to episodes of MacGyver—the authors claim to have faithfully rendered Biblical prophecy literally.

Questions of realism and literalism are crucial to any reading of the novels, for even though American evangelicals approach the Bible in English translation, and even though their theologians are largely untutored in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, they hold that the events described in such prophecy are not metaphorical, and that their interpretation never strays from the letter of God's word.

The novels explain the "Pre-millennial" theology currently popular in evangelical churches, which states that righteous (i.e., born-again) Christians will be "raptured" into Heaven before the Tribulations described in Biblical prophecy come to pass. Moreover, in this rendering, prophecies described in the book of Daniel and Revelations are said to refer to present times. Of particular interest to this interpretation is the establishment of the state of Israel, an event which, they assert, foretells the imminent arrival of the End Times. Evangelicals interpret other events and possibilities in Palestine/Israel—such as the Jewish state's ongoing hostilities with the Arab world or the destruction of the al-Aqsa Mosque for the purposes of rebuilding of the Temple—as fulfilled or looming events prophesied in the Bible. This explains part of the unyielding fervour that evangelical Christians have for Israel, and why they accept the possibility of escalated conflict in the Middle East with hope rather than trepidation. Like other evangelicals, the publishers of Left Behind hold that Israeli settlements are a "super-sign" of prophecy, and thus should be encouraged. Similarly, they assert that the US removal of Saddam Hussein from power also makes possible the "rebuilding of Babylon as a major economic centre for the Middle East" which, along with struggles within the European Union and a possible schism within the Episcopal Church, are welcome signs of the End Times.³

But are these novels fiction? When the theological-political basis of such fictions proceeds with the confidence of literalism, it is difficult to say what the standards for judging realism, let alone fictionality, would be. Like fiction, the Left Behind novels are designed to play with belief. But whereas fiction traditionally asks its readers to suspend disbelief in order that their imagination is broadened, these novels engage their readers' imagination only in order to confirm what they already believe.

Mobilizing righteousness: A new American culture of martyrdom?

As suggested by the awkward "realism" of its Aramaic and Latin dialogue, and its excruciating recreation of Jesus' torture and crucifixion, Mel Gibson addressed his *The Passion of the Christ* to this popular demand for "literalist" renditions of Biblical narrative. Gibson's *Passion* has caused a storm of debate, not just for its portrayal of Jews, but also for its extremely graphic violence. But for all its failures, the film succeeds in one thing: it conveys an indelible image of Jesus suffering at the hands of sadistic tormentors. In more than one interview, Gibson has confirmed that his film seeks to create a sense of pathos in his audiences.

But what kind of pathos? The discomfort effected by the film is startling: we watch long scenes of torture, fore-knowing their outcome, yet unable to stop them from happening. The structure of this experience—watching someone being brutalized without being able to prevent it—is arguably one of humiliation. The film engages a rhetoric of shame—that is to say, of shaming the viewer. As Gibson put it, the usefulness of such images is to make "you feel not only compassion, but also a debt. You want to repay him for the enormity of his sacrifice."⁴

Significantly, the moral debt to which Gibson's film aspires overlaps with the guiding moral sentiment offered by the Left Behind series: righteousness. *The Passion of the Christ* asks us not just to be ashamed by Christ's victimization but also outraged by it. It also asks us to accept the scorn of the world as proof of our debt to him. Likewise, the Left Behind novels present characters who know that they are right, and that God is on their side. In doing so, they encourage readers not to fear the scorn of a fallen world, but to invite it as confirmation of their righteousness. From this sense of shame-righteousness, it is perhaps only a small step to accepting martyrdom as a normal practice of faith. Gibson's film offers a super-heroic model of such martyrdom. The Left Behind series offers more home-grown examples of the same. The novels

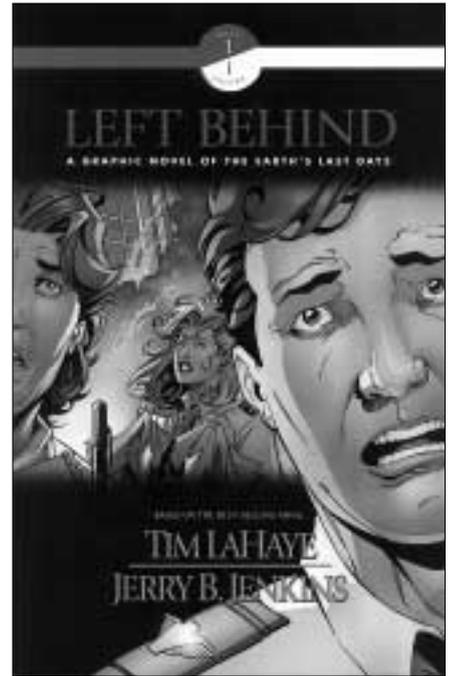
glorify in increasingly brutal detail the martyrdom of "tribulation saints."

It is indeed strange that, at the very height of American power, its popular culture would be so invested in narratives and images of Christian martyrdom and victimization. Such representations do not reflect an underlying reality of actual Christian suffering in the United States. Instead, they create an aura of spiritual righteousness around American power as it moves in the world. We might remember that whether in post-WWI Germany, or more recently in Serbia, Israel, and Rwanda, or in the US following 9-11, the deployment of military force has all too often been preceded by a popular discourse of national victimization. This history suggests that since it is no longer considered acceptable to engage in political violence except in the cause of defence, we should be wary whenever we see cultures, as in the US right now, which invest so heavily in images of victimization. Such images—regardless of their veracity or applicability—are essential for legitimising violence and military intervention.

Popular evangelical culture offers images of suffering and millenarianism that bring the confidence of literalist evangelicalism to bear on the prospect of long term American rule in the Middle East, a prospect that is as disorienting to most Americans as it is frightening to the region's inhabitants. Those who doubt whether Christian millenarianism is related to US foreign policy owe it to themselves to read the Left Behind novels, especially since there is much to suggest that American evangelicals are reading these works not as fictions, but as the faithful rendering of real-life prophecies in which Americans figure as righteous mujahideen. While it is unclear whether President Bush is a reader of the Left Behind series, he has often declared his appreciation for evangelism. And when he speaks of "evildoers," or warns that "you're either with us or against us," he is very consciously citing the same language that provides the vocabulary for the Left Behind novels.

Admittedly, for the US to attempt to pursue its imperial policies in the Middle East in the name of the millenarian ideology so widespread in its culture would be a disaster: it would not only generate more opposition in the region, it would alienate many in the mainstream US. Indeed, the current administration recognizes this problem each time it vociferously dissociates its policies from the millenarian dogmas its policy makers and military officers (and constituents) espouse so publicly elsewhere. Currently, the idea of Holy War against Islam would be abhorrent to most mainstream Christians and secular liberals, even those whose ideas about the use of geopolitical force against Islam are not radically divergent from those of the evangelicals. But if the Left Behind series is any indication, millions of Americans are reading about, and perhaps even praying for, just such a Holy War.

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**Left Behind
graphic novel**

Notes

1. Tim LaHaye has long been a prominent part of the radical right in California. A graduate of the evangelical Bob Jones University, LaHaye used his position as evangelical preacher in Southern California to help found "Californians for Biblical Morality," a key player in the rise of the US religious right during the 1980s. Before *Left Behind*, author Jerry B. Jenkins was best known for his biographies of evangelical athletes.
2. The official Left Behind series site is, <http://leftbehind.com>.
3. The Left Behind series: Interpreting the Signs, http://secure.agoramedia.com/leftbehind/index_leftbehind15.asp
4. The Left Behind Series: Newsletter Archive, <http://leftbehind.com/channelfree.asp?pageid=932>.