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“Ticket to Paradise”

Skipping Towards Armageddon: The Politics and Propaganda of the Left Behind Novels and the LaHaye Empire

Michael Standaert

Soft Skull Press

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by Jeff Bursey

Two years ago, in the mingled rural-urban city where I live, I noticed two bumper stickers on one car. The first read: *I Brake For God*. The second, and more interesting, said: HLLBCKWHVHSWRDNT. Aside from the commercial use of a lipogram, what stood out was the pride and confidence behind this Christian announcement. People here take their religion seriously. That same summer I heard the delightful anecdote of a Presbyterian acquaintance whose son had been rejected by a Christian girl because she wanted to go out with someone who shared her beliefs. It made me wonder about the hand that could draw such fine lines in a closely knit community where farm equipment crawls down city streets towards one garage or another. People talk freely about how cell phones can be set to vibrate so they won't disturb their owner during a church service. On their last day of classes, students calmly tell professors that they don't need to keep their English textbooks because they have the only book that matters. Some add that the professor will of course be going straight to hell for what they've talked about during the semester. Tim LaHaye, as quoted in *Skipping Towards Armageddon*, says “[t]he literal interpretation of the Bible is the foundation stone of prophetic truth... As we have seen, the lack of the *at any moment* awareness of our Lord's return often leads to a carnal life.” Those students, like the owner of the bumper stickers, figured all this out ahead of their not-likely-to-be-saved neighbours.

Michael Standaert's examination of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels, as well as the faith-based structure they come out of and support, is important reading for those who wonder how fundamentalism moved from the margins to the centre of the U.S. government, determining that country's social policies, and equally important, its purpose in the Near East. In disentangling the threads which unite Christian organizations, lobbies, and institutions, and displaying how George W. Bush (among others) benefits from and is /29/ influenced by the money and constituents the Tim LaHaye Ministries, his Pre-Trib Research Center, and his Family Life Seminars bring in and control, Standaert has done an impressive job. He reveals “the insular pinball world of prophecy literature interpretations, pulpit jeremiads, and the promises made by premillennialist spokesmen in evangelical radio and television....” He starts and ends with personal stories related to his research, and maintains a personal, at times angry, voice as he interweaves the history of the Rapture and dispensational premillennialism—which stem from literal interpretations of the Bible, specifically the Book of Revelation—with the fate of nonbelievers when the Rapture occurs, the figure of the Antichrist (candidates include John Kennedy and Europe), a history of anti-Semitic texts (the case is made that the *Left Behind* books are anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and harshly disposed towards any non-believer), and much else.

Since the appearance of the first *Left Behind* book in 1995, the series has sold at least sixty million copies, indicating that many people are buying them for group reading purposes as well as for private pleasure. “LaHaye reportedly received a \$42 million advance from Bantam Books for a new series called *Babylon Rising*,” Standaert says, and this indicates that the financial profits to be made by exploiting belief in and the Rapture and the Tribulation (what Pre-Trib is short for) for Christian fundamentalists is clearly more than what can be gained from “the redemption through Jesus Christ preached in the New Testament.” Those profits have to be made fast if skies raining blood can occur before the end of the business day, and as long as there are wars and unrest, especially in the Near East, then LaHaye’s financial outlook is rosy. Standaert quotes a prominent evangelist who spoke at the 1984 Republican convention: “There’ll be no peace until Jesus comes. Any preaching of peace prior to this return is heresy. It’s against the word of God. It’s anti-Christ.” An elderly Catholic woman I know spoke with a conviction borne of fear that the “Devil is walking the land.” When George W. Bush talks about evildoers and an axis of evil, as well as the never-ending war on terror, this is not only rhetoric; it’s text that can be found in many fundamentalist works. As Standaert sees it, Marxist Socialism, German Nazism, and Italian Fascism are “recent examples of ‘catastrophic millennialism.’ What they all contain is a reliance on militant language and portraying everything outside their ideology as ‘evil’ or so directly opposed to their worldview that they must be destroyed.” The free shedding of someone else’s blood in the war against non-believers is just part of the movement towards salvation, and if it helps speed up the arrival of the Rapture, then that’s all to the good.

Standaert’s arguments would have come across more smoothly if his book had been proofread or copy-edited. The number of mistakes is astonishing: names are incorrect, words are dropped out of sentences or extra ones inserted, punctuation and spacing are erratic, book titles are not always capitalized, and on a different level, information is repeated from chapter to chapter, as though Standaert didn’t trust readers to remember anything. The lack of an index is a serious deficiency when reference is made to many groups, individuals, and topics are referred to. Hopefully, in future printings Soft Skull will work to remove the errors. Those blotches aside, *Skipping Towards Armageddon* is a needed gathering together of paper and Internet sources that clearly brings out LaHaye’s “hollow, hateful, and spiritually corrupt attempt at mass-marketing conspiracy and fear...” Standaert deserves credit for wading through hate-filled publications and interviews without losing his professionalism. He has produced a book which can be read easily (barring the irritating use of endnotes), and which will appeal to general readers.

Tim LaHaye is eighty this year. He may wish for the Rapture to occur before he dies of mundane causes so that he can be whisked off to his version of heaven, where he will have a vantage point from which to see his enemies and the non-believers (if they’re not interchangeable terms) destroyed by God—as he and Jenkins depict it in their books—with balls of fire, earthquakes, locusts, and so forth. Although it’s possible he would despise every Church Father—LaHaye calls Augustine a “Greek humanist”—he may feel something akin to Tertullian’s anticipated pleasure over what he would see when he assumed his own privileged place in heaven:

...that last day of judgment, with its everlasting issues; that day unlooked for by the nations, the theme of their derision, when the world hoary with age, and all its many products, shall be consumed in one great flame!... Which sight gives me joy? which rouses me to exultation?—as I see so many illustrious monarchs, whose reception into the heavens was publicly announced, groaning now in the lowest darkness with great Jove himself, and those, too, who bore witness of their exultation... I shall have a better opportunity than of

hearing the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity... of beholding the wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows; unless even then I shall not care to attend to such ministers of sin, in my eager wish rather to fix a gaze insatiable on those whose fury vented itself against the Lord.

As for the driver with the bumper stickers, secure in the promise she took from the Bible, she didn't worry about tempting fate as she made a left turn on the red light.

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