

Chair of Christian Thought Lecture by Crawford Gribben

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‘The USA in rapture fiction: Evangelicalism’s new apocalyptic ‘other’”

This lecture will argue that rapture fiction is a way of theorizing conspiracy, and that the most recent rapture fictions demonstrate profound concern on the part of their authors about the current situation of evangelicals in and immediately around the USA. Since their inception in the early twentieth century, rapture fictions have reiterated the same basic pattern of prophetic chronology, but they have mapped onto that generally-agreed chronology the changing political and social preferences of the movement they represent. Early rapture fictions emerged from the UK, and contrasted British with European civic values. Later fictions emerged from the USA, and contrasted its national virtue with the barbarity of European Communism. Now, in the most recent series of rapture fictions, the USA has itself become the enemy of the faithful. The current crop of rapture fiction is more positive towards the militia movement, and more suspicious of federal government, than ever before. The apocalyptic imagination has turned in upon itself, and the USA has become identified as evangelicalism’s new apocalyptic ‘other’.

The popular idea that early modern millennial beliefs disappeared ‘into a world of cranks’ must be revised in light of the remarkable ‘mainstreaming’ of prophetic expectation at the end of the twentieth century. The steady politicization of American evangelicalism throughout the 1980s appears to have been both the cause and consequence of several competing varieties of prophetic expectation, ranging from postmillennial Reconstructionism (which teaches that Christians will assume power and impose Mosaic legislation in preparation for Christ’s return) to premillennial dispensationalism (which certainly does not). These varieties of evangelical expectation are steadily feeding into American political discourse, but, despite the religious aspirations of occasional presidential candidates and the popular clout of single-issue pressure groups, American dispensationalists still appear to prefer the politics of withdrawal to those of constructive engagement. The paradox of evangelical eschatology is the same in the early twenty-first century as it was in the late nineteenth: evangelicals are embracing pessimism and separatism at precisely the moment when their influence is at its height.

The modern roots of this pessimism can be traced through the reformulation of dispensationalism in the 1970s, when Hal Lindsey, with all his lurid end-times calculus, popularised a fundamental re-thinking of the ‘any-moment’ rapture. By pointing to specific events (such as the formation of the state of Israel) as the fulfilment of Scripture, he was abandoning the dominant dispensational view that the next event on the prophetic calendar was the return of Christ, and was re-fashioning one century and a half of a significant variety of evangelical expectation. Lindsey’s work went on to exercise immense influence. His most important book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), sold 28 million copies in the twenty years after its publication, disseminating widely his expectation of the rapid marginalisation of evangelical belief even as his ideas exercised increasing influence on successive presidential administrations. The book made famous Lindsey’s ‘this generation’ claim, and provided handy maps for readers to trace the military manoeuvres that would culminate in the Russian invasion of Israel and the ensuing Armageddon that, Lindsey argued, had to take place within forty or so years of Israel’s founding in 1948. Discussing Matt 24:34, he strongly implied that the rapture of the church would take place within one ‘generation’ – which he noted Biblically as a period of forty years – of 1948. Around 1988, in other words, the church would vanish, Antichrist would rise to power, and his final totalitarian government would be erected in readiness for the judgements of God.

This claim, had it been true, might have been understood to have had some very specific implications for public policy in the 1970s and 1980s, but Lindsey was embraced by certain sections of the American political elite, was appointed special advisor to the Reagan administration, and was given opportunities to brief the Israeli government on American affairs. The failure of his claims did nothing to dampen his credibility as a scholar of prophecy, and Lindsey went on to publish a series of related studies, which pointed more often to the errors of others than to those of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. As the example of Lindsey illustrates, prophetic failure can always be explained, and explanations for failure often continue to sell to the faithful. Even Edgar Whisenant, who confirmed Lindsey’s mathematics in *88 Reasons why the Rapture will be in 1988* (1988), was able to capitalise on the disappointment of his hopes. Those who had read the two million copies of his title sold before his ideas were contradicted by their failure may

have been surprised to find the argument tweaked and repackaged for additional sales in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992 and 1993. When prophecy is postponed, expectation is revised, and the process of marketing that expectation begins again. But, as Lindsey also shows, the rapture novel has been an inherent part of marketing revisions of eschatological hope.

These trends appear to be at play in a series of novels that has sold over twice as many copies as *The Late Great Planet Earth* in less than one decade, a series whose sales in ten years are half of those of *The Lord of the Rings* in fifty. The series epitomizes the paradox that evangelicals embrace despair when their cultural influence is at its height, and evidence the extent to which traditional dispensationalism has changed in the aftermath of the Cold War and in the rapprochement between certain sections of the movement and the Roman Catholic Church. This is the ‘publishing phenomenon’ of *Left Behind*.

Critical responses to the series have been so voluminous that it would now be impossible for Professor Paul Boyer to claim, as he did as recently as 1992, that evangelical millennialism ‘has received little scholarly attention’. As if to soften the blow of this recent and somewhat frustrating popularity, these critics regularly deny the centrality of dispensational thinking in American life and mock the cultural norms the novels present. Scholars have responded to the dominance of recent rapture fiction by dismissing the genre as comically ludicrous, or as a destabilising and chauvinistic threat. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, reviewed the final novel in the initial twelve-volume series, *Glorious Appearing* (2004), and noted the ‘awkwardness’ with which its authors blended ‘folksy humour, treacly sentiment and religiously justified bloodbaths’. Amy Johnson Frykholm, who wrote the first major study of the novels, has similarly complained that the novels’ characters ‘seem flimsy and ill developed, the plot contrived, and the writing thin’. But critics reserve sterner judgement for the series’ political and cultural overtones. Although the novels ‘claim to be about the future ... they are also very much about the present’. Their plots offer ‘very precise implications’ for public policy, for, the *Times Literary Supplement* complained, ‘the God worshipped by LaHaye and Jenkins considers abortion to be wrong, has it in for gay people and feminists, and opposes most forms of government regulation, especially gun control.’ Frykholm has agreed, finding in the novels a ‘conservative, patriarchal, even racist

agenda that mirrors that of the Christian Right'. Elsewhere she complains of 'a strong conservative agenda, a hostile antifeminist perspective, hints of anti-Semitism, and an overt homophobia', and quotes another reviewer's description of the series as 'hard-core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic propaganda'.

It seems that the media can only deal with traditional evangelical sentiments by dismissing them as marginal. 'Despite extraordinary newspaper and television coverage', McAlister notes, 'each account of the *Left Behind* phenomenon finds it necessary to introduce the books to an audience who presumably finds their very existence to be news.' Evangelicalism, in these reports, is consistently presented as a novelty. This is despite the fact that 'approximately one-third of Americans define themselves as "born again,"' despite the fact that 49% of Americans state their belief in a future Antichrist (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1997), and despite the fact that 19% of Americans believed in 1999 that he was on earth at that moment (*Newsweek*, 1999). Discussions of the *Left Behind* phenomenon almost invariably ignore these statistics, and confirm popular evangelical expectations of increasing hostility from the powers that be. The paradox of late twentieth-century dispensationalism is, as in the nineteenth century, that its adherents embrace apocalyptic pessimism at precisely their moment of greatest cultural power, because the credibility of their hopes depends upon despair; but the irony of the critics responding to this trend is that their representation of the movement as marginal is confirming its direst fears, reaffirming the cultural dichotomies that had been obscured by the crossover success of *Left Behind*. In dismissing the significance of the dispensational movement, however, critics are confirming its worst fears and fostering its optimal social conditions. If Jenkins' new book is any guide, this critical hostility may even be the catalyst that will propel some dispensationalists into violent resistance to a politically-correct but increasingly repressive regime. Liberal commentators may be more prescient than they realize when they represent the *Left Behind* phenomenon as a potential political doomsday. Like the anti-Christian authorities in one recent rapture novel, they may discover to their cost that beliefs 'that the end was near, that Jesus was coming soon' can develop into 'justification for flat-out sedition'. Hostility confirms the dispensational worldview, and could turn some adherents violently active.

Of course, rapture fictions – like other aspects of popular culture – exist in a complex relationship with human agency. Rapture fictions may be read passively, for entertainment, but they may also be read actively, as shaping or confirming existing systems of belief. Critics, citing the novels as evidence of a profoundly dangerous moment in American evangelical life, have worried that readers will approach the texts without sufficient critical sense, allowing the series’ presuppositions to dominate their own. The novels’ social conservatism is understood as dangerous partly because critics do not trust readers to negotiate with the authors’ political views. But the audiences of *Left Behind* are more often ‘assumed ... than investigated’, Frykholm has complained, and her interaction with readers has illustrated something of the variety of their negotiation with the texts. Evangelicals, she insists, respond to rapture fictions with evident irony. The latest of the novels suggest that, at times, that is the way they have been designed to be read. Frykholm’s study of the reception of the novels suggests that rapture fictions are read on their own terms, as fiction, and are not simply understood as a static manifesto for cultural or religious activism in the present. Nevertheless, by totalising audiences and ignoring readerly negotiation, liberal commentators confirm the marginal status of dispensational believers. This projection of marginality re-inscribes the cultural dichotomies that the success of *Left Behind* has overcome but that dispensationalists believe will characterise the end of time. These responses thus run the risk of turning the fiction they abhor into the fact they could hardly imagine. Critical hostility to the *Left Behind* worldview could, ironically, activate the scenarios of resistance the novels anticipate, and could demonstrate the dangers of this new evangelical pessimism.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the rapture novel genre – and its later manifestations – represents the opinions of the totality of dispensational believers. Dispensationalists of various hues are addressing contemporary prophetic interest but continue to negotiate with the ideas the novels moot. In 2002, for example, Billy Graham’s daily syndicated newspaper column featured a letter enquiring whether he believed the Antichrist was alive today. His answer was evasive. In the same year, Mark Hitchcock, a writer of pedagogical material in the wider *Left Behind* project, published his answer to the question. Noting that the mark of the beast – 666 – has been linked to

John F. Kennedy, Gorbachev, Reagan, Bill Gates, Windows 95 and even MS-DOS 6.21, Hitchcock claimed that the question could not be answered, as the Antichrist would only be revealed after the rapture. Others have more obviously attempted to capitalise on *Left Behind*'s revival of prophetic interest. Salem Kirban's truly dreadful rapture fictions, *666* (1970) and *1000* (1973), were republished in 1998 with covers designed to appeal to the *Left Behind* generation. These novels are among the worst in the genre, but they are also among the most politically significant. Kirban's novels rewrite America's relationship to the Antichrist's evil empire in statements that resonate with modern audiences attuned to current affairs. In *Left Behind*, for example, the American president is betrayed by his military, which supports the claims of the UN-backed Antichrist, and a nuclear exchange decimates the population centres: this is why the Bible appears to say nothing of America's future destiny. America is neutralised, but, as the Tribulation Force discover, is still the home of the brave. In Kirban's fiction, on the other hand, the Antichrist's empire includes the USA. Photographs illustrating his novels show characters being branded with '666' inside American churches (although careful inspection shows that the '666' would be reversed on the candidate's brow). The apocalyptic atmosphere created by the phenomenal success of *Left Behind*, the significance of the re-staging of the USA in Kirban's republished fiction, and the pollsters' claim that one-fifth of all Americans believe in the present existence of the Antichrist could therefore signal that a significant element of the American population believe that within forty years the USA will cease to exist as a sovereign power, that its establishment will capitulate to totalitarian evil, and that evangelicals, along with all other religious adherents, will be subject to brutal persecution. This sense of fear and protracted danger is immanent in Jenkins' latest work.

After Left Behind

Jenkins and LaHaye have responded with some ambivalence to their series' unanticipated success. Despite a continuing strong media profile – the writers were hailed on the cover of *Newsweek* as recently as 24 May 2004 – their writing partnership appears to have ended. *Left Behind* readers are now expecting a prequel and sequel to the twelve-volume series, but additional writers have already been recruited, and the *Left Behind* franchise has generated a number of new series. Several of these series appear to deliberately capitalise on readers' expectations, but others challenge them in significant ways. Two of

the new series – the eponymous titles *End of State* (2003), by Neesa Hart, and *Apocalypse Dawn* (2003), by Mel Odom – operate within the original *Left Behind* scenario and are actually advertised as being ‘based on the best-selling *Left Behind* series’. The plots of their political and military thrillers refer to the same basic chronology and major characters as the earlier work. Jenkins’ new work, *Soon* (2003), another *New York Times* best-seller, focuses on life before the rapture, but offers a more significant revision of *Left Behind*’s earlier paradigm.

Soon suggests that *Left Behind* never happened. It is a futuristic thriller, which extrapolates its description of a dystopian and humanistic totalitarianism from actual letters to *TIME* magazine that a frontispiece reproduces. The novel imagines what will happen if *Left Behind* is wrong and Christ does not come back in the immediate future. It ignores the current prophetic revival, evidenced in the millions of sales of rapture novels, and describes a future for evangelicalism against the backdrop of a series of religious wars springing from the attacks on the World Trade Centre (2001) and the invasion of Iraq (2003). From these incidents, the novel projects an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and terrorist strikes throughout North America and Europe in 2008. As these wars of religion intensified, ‘the globe was ablaze with attacks, counterattacks, reprisals, and finally, an all-out nuclear war that most thought signalled the end of the world’. The war brought the USA to the verge of extinction: a coalition of Muslim nations destroyed Washington, DC, and a North Korean ballistic missile, ‘the largest warhead ever to land on American soil’, obliterated the Pentagon. Worldwide, bombs ‘snuffed out tens of millions of lives’ and, by literally splitting China in two, generated a tidal wave ‘a million times more destructive’ than the Hiroshima explosion, a tsunami that ‘engulfed all of Hong Kong Island, swamped Taiwan with hundreds of feet of water, raced to the Philippine Sea and the East China Sea, obliterated Japan and Indonesia, swept into the Northwest Pacific Basin and the Japan Trench’, ‘swallowed’ Hawaii, and killed ‘thousands more’ in California. The unprecedented scale of its devastation brought a sudden end to all religious wars, as the battling faithful realize that global destruction was no longer a divine monopoly. Extremists abandon the religious convictions that had almost ended humanity, and nations embrace a world purged of sectarian terror. America is re-organised into seven regions but its new regime inaugurates ‘the most repressive

time in human history – when world governments have not only banned religion but are also technologically capable of enforcing that ban by spying on every citizen’. The state is exalted above the individual, but the nation-state has been largely superseded by the UN-sponsored new world order whose international currency the American states adopts. As if to symbolise the reduction of state-hood, the American flag now displays seven stars, in a Biblical allusion that the novel unsuccessfully extends. Under the shadow of the UN, the new world is ‘an intellectual, humanistic society that eschewed both religion and war’. To signal the importance of the world’s new humanistic beginning, the international government, based in Switzerland, renamed the calendar, with 1 January 2010 beginning the year 1 P3 (post-WWIII).

Thirty-six years later, in the equivalent of 2046, Paul Stepola is given the responsibility of rooting out the menace of the American Christian underground. As a special agent with the National Peace Organisation (the successor to the FBI and CIA), Stepola capitalises on the specialist knowledge gained through his doctoral studies in religion. Shocked by revelations that both his father and his former military commander were believers, Stepola embarks on a spiritual journey that leads him inexorably towards evangelical conversion. But the interests of the evangelicalism he investigates challenge his expectations just as much as they challenge the expectations of rapture fiction readers. These evangelicals – ‘the Watchmen’ – are an underground militia, headquartered in ‘a city beneath a city’ in the north-east, driven by their belief that the miracles tormenting the administration are signs of the second coming, and prepared, much more than the characters of *Left Behind*, to be subversives, to take lives in order to secure their own. Stepola’s conversion develops his character, and he struggles, like Rayford Steel in the earlier series, with temptation to engage in an extra-marital affair. But he battles on to eventually ‘sense the mind of God’, which provides him with a new mission, ‘to motivate every underground believer he could find to pray and plead with God to show Himself to the enemy’. His active suppression of the Christian underground leads Stepola ultimately to its defence. His initial ideas of active resistance give way to the quest for a miracle, a quest that has an emphasis on prayer that seems fundamentally incompatible with the globe-trotting, empire-building economic resistance of *Left Behind*’s survivors, the Tribulation Force.

Rewriting America

Stepola's concentration on the fate of Christian America mirrors that of the novel as a whole. *Soon*'s narrative is based on a fundamental re-thinking of the relationship between evangelicals and the American establishment, and assumes that, within forty years, the influence of evangelical prophecy in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations will have reached its antithesis. In *Soon*, Americans are as patriotic as ever, but this new patriotism is stripped of its religious content. In its depiction of America, *Soon* stands as the logical outcome of a longer trend in evangelical eschatology.

Prophetic scholars have often attempted to discover America's role in prophecy. Prophetic experts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to identify the new world as possessing unique millennial agency; Jonathon Edwards, for example, wondered whether the 'awakening' he witnessed might be heralding the millennium on American soil. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as dispensationalism began to dominate the evangelical imagination, America lost its prophetic identity, and its end-times role steadily diminished. The *Left Behind* novels worked on the presupposition that the USA had no role in Biblical prophecy.

Soon marries this changing prophetic perspective with America's new geopolitical situation. *Left Behind* was criticised for its international naivety (for example, in its apparent ignorance of the Palestinian problem), but *Soon* avoids this charge by neglecting international contexts entirely: there is no outside world to be concerned about. Cold War prophecy writers had imagined a bi-polar political world – East vs. West – in a dualism that mirrored the conflict's basic moral division. The longevity of these prophetic polarities meant that this geo-political analysis would have been familiar to such dispensational teachers as Donald Barnhouse in the 1950s, C. I. Scofield in the 1910s, and J. N. Darby in the 1840s. This tradition is completely upended in *Soon*. America has lost its sacred status, but the moral bi-polarity of the Cold War is now projected onto a single nation. *Soon* is, in this sense, the ultimate post-Cold War fiction. America has been stripped of its prophetic significance at the same time as it has lost its moral authority as the counter-weight to atheistic communism. The moral dichotomy that characterised Cold War geopolitics is now projected onto an exclusively American canvas.

In stark contrast to the uncomplicated patriotism of a great deal of American dispensational writing, America itself is now evangelicalism's eschatological 'other'. At times the parallels with Cold War communism are explicit.

He turned back to his computer and scrolled. "Over a hundred years ago Russia closed almost all its churches and disposed of more than forty thousand clergy. They turned city churches in museums and country churches into barns or apartments. ... What happened in Russia and China and Romania decades ago could re-emerge here, right under our noses."

But there are hints in the novel that the nation is still culturally divided. The population divides into the familiar contours of the '50:50 nation', with 'half' the population appear prepared to consider the possibility that the strange events which so perplex the authorities are the miracles the Christians claim. This intra-American moral polarity seems to invite comparisons between the geography of *Soon's* plot and the overwhelmingly southern distribution of rapture fiction readers. The action in *Soon* is almost entirely urban and is notably concentrated in Chicago, Washington DC, Las Vegas, California and a single Texan oil well. The novel's apocalyptic scenarios therefore tend to avoid the Bible Belt and those southern states where, polls have discovered, most readers of rapture fictions live. Undoubtedly, this urban focus reflects traditional evangelical suspicions of the city, but also provide a mechanism for prophecy believers to imagine the outpouring of divine judgements on those parts of the USA that are least receptive to their message. Perhaps Jenkins is identifying the USA's traditional political divisions with the future prophetic dichotomy his dispensational readers expect.

Thus *Soon* represents changing expectations of America, and shows Jenkins imagining the return of evangelicals to the social, cultural and political margins. The novel is oblivious to the success of *Left Behind*, as it had to be, if Jenkins' writing was not to veer from dispensationalism's orthodox centre. His commitment to dispensationalism's traditional narrative patterns – which consistently emphasise the increasing marginalisation and eventual persecution of the faithful – demand the deliberate elision of the success of the earlier series. As *Soon* illustrates, dispensationalists need to be alienated because they expect to be alienated at the end of the age, and they must always believe they could be living in that period. This newly-

conceived disjunction between evangelicalism and wider American culture explains *Soon*'s propensity towards violence.

Throughout their history, rapture novels have been powerfully ambivalent about the morality – and practical implications – of violence. *Left Behind* played with this ambiguity for narrative effect. At times the novels appear to justify murder when it would further the determined ends of history. Little wonder that the Antichrist's elite, discussing Rayford's ethic of murder, considered his grasp of situation ethics: 'Maybe he convinces himself it's a holy war. Then I guess anything goes.'

The suggestion that a 'holy war' means 'anything goes' certainly reinforces audience suspicions. Although Rayford eventually seems to dismiss the idea, it does appear to underpin the remarkable movement in Jenkins' writing from his depiction of the rapture as exodus (*Left Behind*) to the rapture as battle (*Soon*). Despite debates about the relationship between millennialism and violence – and the relationship between prophetic beliefs and behaviour has been described as 'unfathomable' – scholars agree that dispensational groups have demonstrated 'no proclivity' for violent action. Significantly, however, characters in *Soon* remember the violence of Christian fundamentalists in the first decade of the new millennium, and worry about the possibility of an armed evangelical rising:

religious extremists ... persecuted homosexuals, assassinated abortion doctors ... and bombed stem-cell research labs ... And after the terrorist attacks of '05, it was the extremists who defied the tolerance laws and rioted, killing Muslims.

The moral ambivalence of these references is clarified in the novel's depiction of the Watchmen, those believers organising 'Operation Soon', a project designed to spread the illegal news that the events the government dismisses as terrorist attacks are actually divinely-wrought miracles heralding the imminent return of Christ. The believers construct a massive underground complex in an abandoned mine, and post armed guards to maintain security and, if necessary, kill intruders. The location of the shelter would be concealed by the guards' removing the corpse to the surface, 'putting it in the vehicle it showed up in, and moving that vehicle somewhere so the body would not be traced to the mine'. Stepola was shocked by the revelation:

'How do you justify that?'

‘We don’t, Paul. We pray it never happens.’

Soon appears to show believers in different states responding in different ways to the possibility of violence. The physical resistance of the Watchmen in the north-east is paralleled by the eventual pacifism of believers in the south-west. In Los Angeles, military intervention means that believers there were dying on a scale elsewhere unseen. Under Stepola’s guidance, believers discuss the possibility of disrupting the city’s water supply. The idea is later abandoned, and the believers issue a brochure which ‘stated unequivocally that the underground Christians in Los Angeles were not armed and never planned to be’. Nevertheless, as the novel’s closing pages describe a final miracle – evidently designed to lead readers into the next instalment – the novel suggests that the event would be first of many that would be known, overground, as the ‘Christian Guerrilla War’. Once again, *Soon* moves beyond the expectations of audiences familiar with the resonances of *Left Behind*.

The significance of violence

Scholars of millennial studies suggest that the violent outbreaks of millennial groups are linked to a complex of isolation, paranoia, aspirations for dominion and mismanagement of the crisis. Scholars of millennial studies also argue that a basic difference exists between those groups which are organised militarily and those which assume a violent posture. Whatever their inherent proclivity, prophetic movements ‘pose a fundamental challenge to the established social order and hence are in high tension with it’, and are most dangerous when that resistance is sacralised. Richard Landes has proposed a typology that explains millennial agency as a matter of timing. He distinguishes ‘normal’ from ‘apocalyptic’ time, and argues that millennial groups tend to remain passive and often quietist until their sense of apocalyptic time is triggered. In the case of dispensationalism, normal time continues until the rapture, at which point the prophetic calendar re-commences and normal activities end.

The significance of *Soon* is that it completely overturns this chronological division even as it suggests the sacral function of violence. Using Landes’ typology, *Soon* shows Jenkins moving from a depiction of passive fundamentalism in this age, represented in *Left Behind* as normal life before the rapture, to a depiction of violent fundamentalism in this age, represented in *Soon* as believers arming themselves in

response to mounting persecution. The remarkable thing about this persecution is that it seems to mirror the totalitarianism dispensationalists expect of the Antichrist in the tribulation period. In other words, *Soon* re-imagines normal time, and imports into the age before the rapture the conditions that dispensationalists expect after the rapture. It requires its characters to re-orientate themselves to an American establishment that bears in this age the characteristics of the totalitarianism of the tribulation. *Soon* shows, therefore, evangelicals facing conditions in America that dispensational theologians argued they would never see, and developing their sense of responsibility accordingly. Jenkins' characters are radicalised, taking up arms against their government. Through its characters – and for its readers – *Soon* dramatises growing pessimism about the short-term future of evangelicals in the USA.

This pessimism seems to draw on the recent experiences of other separatist religious minorities. Confirming dispensationalism's proclivity for conspiracy theories, *Soon* hints that the evangelical future will parallel the Branch Davidian past. Shadows of Waco engulf the novel's description of government forces besieging a religious community it suspects of being 'heavily armed and dangerous', and engaged in 'anti-American subversive activities':

We surrounded the place before dawn, awakened their leadership, and ordered them to stand down and surrender peacefully ... One minute after the deadline, they opened fire on our forces, and we were forced to defend ourselves. ... We were forced to retreat as they bombed and burned the buildings and killed themselves.

Of course, contrary to this report, the believers had not committed suicide. Suicide was an unnecessary effort when government forces were queuing up to extinguish your life for you. Suspicion of the state is confirmed by its evidently destructive intentions. As Jenkins' audience imagines the necessary militarisation of Christians in 'normal time', their hesitance about violence in their own time may begin to change.

Painting this picture of suspicious retreat, *Soon* represents the cult-ing of dispensationalism. *Soon* represents evangelicals taking on the trappings of traditional cult stereotypes, engaging in illegal and underground activity, and demonstrating an alarming propensity for violence. The novel abandons traditional dispensational expectations of

this age as excessively optimistic, and imagines, in contrast to previous dispensational writers, nuclear war and unprecedented worldwide destruction entirely unpredicted by Scripture. *Soon* prises the future free from Biblical controls and opens up the possibility of the triumph worldwide atheism under the United Nations. *Soon* is a rapture novel that breaks from genre archetypes by exploring the eschatological significance of normal time. And in normal time, evangelicals – the novel’s characters – have become a cult. *Soon* is therefore a powerful dramatisation one possible evangelical response to the cultural logic of late capitalism. The novel itself, as ‘a remarkable mainstreaming of evangelical pop culture’, depends for its success upon the very conditions it disdains.

But market forces are at play. Like the other spin-off products, *Soon* capitalises on its audience’s ‘ever-widening circles of consumption’. The novel’s cover highlights Jenkins as the ‘best-selling author of the *Left Behind* series’. But just as *Left Behind* reinvented the paradigms of earlier rapture fictions, *Left Behind* itself is re-invented by *Soon*. But *Soon*’s totalising demands are just as clear. Jenkins does not lead a movement – he only addresses a reading community. Readers are free to negotiate their relationship to his novels as they follow his imagination into a world of increasing paranoia, increasing separation from the social mainstream, and increasing suspicion of national and international government. Like *Left Behind*, *Soon* demonstrates that the rapture novel genre, and the Christian underground it depicts, is ‘not a movement for fence straddlers’.

This very committed-ness suggests the risk of critical disdain. That unsparing criticism that represents the novels as marginal and extreme is in danger of constructing the apocalyptic scenarios it describes with such distaste. Critical hostility runs the risk of turning Jenkins’ sympathetically ironic reading community into a fully-fledged apocalyptic movement. It risks becoming the agent of mismanagement that millennial scholars identify as the catalyst that turns passive movements active. By pushing evangelicals to the cultural margins, it risks confirming their fears and constructing them as a potentially violent underground cult. *Soon* has shown that apocalyptic time, with all its unusual norms, can exist before the rapture. Critical hostility risks becoming the trigger for the movement it abhors.

The paradox is already there – as in the nineteenth century, dispensational believers are opting for pessimism at their most culturally pervasive moment. For this

paradox to be followed by irony – the irony that liberal criticism constructs the apocalyptic moment it dreads – would be the greatest tragedy of all.