A Culture of Righteousness and Martyrdom

It is hard to avoid the pious denunciation of Islam in contemporary American popular culture. This is not a new development, of course. Hollywood has long libelled the Arab world and Islam with stock characters like “the treacherous Arab,” “the Left Behind 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 “sack[s]” 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 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 all. Perhaps because of the implicitly secular cultural bent of book and film criticism, scant attention has been paid to the fact that since the mid-1990s, Christian-oriented 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.

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.

Left Behind

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ twelve-part Left Behind series of evangelical novels fictionalises eschatological accounts of the Millenium, from Rapture to Armageddon to the restoration of Christ’s rule on earth. 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-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 repeatedly challenge the American evangelical right. Poverty, crime and disease are tribulations sent to the world by a wrathful God: only the foolhardy 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 military 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 Jews. 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 blurbs 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.”

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Suspension of disbelief?

The Left Behind novels are not presented as mere fantasy. While there is no imitating the fictional stamp of the books—they are marketed as fiction and they pay homage to pop genres, from Harley Quinn bondage 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 not just to foreign policy, but to personal experience—watching someone being brutalized without being able to prevent it.

The Passion of the Christ caused a storm of debate, not just for its portrayal of Jews, but also for its depiction of Christians. From this sense of shame-righteousness, it is perhaps only a 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 scorn of a fallen world, but to invite it as confirmation of their righteousness.

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 discussion in the Arab world, particularly by the destruction of the al-Aqsa Mosque for the purposes of rebuilding of the Temple—as fulfilled or looming events prophesized 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.

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.

Notes

1. Tim LaHaye has long been a prominent part of the religious 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. E-mail: Elliott_Colla@Brown.edu

2. The official Left Behind series site is, http://leftbehind.com/
