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THE HOLLOW CHRISTIANS OF END TIMES FICTION

A flaw at the heart of End Times fiction gravely weakens its credibility as Christian literature. Its stock characters lack the degree of interiority required for convincing narratives of encounters with the transcendent. The formulaic style of characterization eviscerates Christian experience. This deficiency is especially evident when we compare the rich and memorable portrayals of Catholics in the novels of, say, Georges Bernanos or Graham Greene or Walker Percy. Indeed, it is deeply ironic that the best-selling Christian fiction of all time fails to communicate the phenomenological truth of Christian experience, to evoke the distinctive textures of Christian spiritualities.<sup>1</sup>

End Times fiction has been at the heart of the boom in Christian publishing that began in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Since the late Jerry Falwell, fundamentalist leader and activist, observed of the first novel in the Left Behind series, "In terms of its impact on Christianity, it's probably greater than that of any other book in modern times, outside the Bible,"<sup>3</sup> this series alone can boast sales of over 65 million books.<sup>4</sup> And when we combine this statistic with that of other popular End Times novel cycles, such as those by James BeauSeigneur, Neesa Hart, and Mel Odom,<sup>5</sup> it is evident that, today, this fiction has a presence in American culture far greater than that of any other Christian genre. Yet, this most prominent Christian fiction, which claims to speak for "true

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<sup>1</sup> In view of the many criticisms I shall level at this genre, I should signal my awareness that it merits a measure of respect, if only for its ambition to address a range of concerns – salvation, piety, transcendence, human life *sub specie aeternitatis* – that most secular fiction ignores.

<sup>2</sup> End Times fiction has a much longer history. Crawford Gribben has identified Sydney Watson, a British author, as "the father of the genre," who established its "basic contours and the stock characters and events": Crawford Gribben, "Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition," *Literature and Theology* 18, no. 1 (March 2014): 82. Watson's novels include *Scarlet and Purple* (1913), *The Mark of the Beast* (1915), and *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (1916).

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Time Magazine*, February 7, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Jennie Chapman, *Plotting Apocalypse: Reading, Agency, and Identity in the Left Behind Series* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 4.

<sup>5</sup> The novel cycles of Hart and Odom are literally spin-offs of LaHaye's and Jenkins' Left Behind series and commissioned by the same publishers. Hart's End of State trilogy looks at the Rapture and Tribulation from the perspective of Washington DC politics, Odom's Apocalypse tetralogy from that of the U.S. military. Many of the same characters from LaHaye's and Jenkins' books appear in Hart's and Odom's.

Christians,"<sup>6</sup> cannot accommodate the very subjectivity required for the transcendent experience that defines its own type of Christianity.

The ambitious religious themes of End Times fiction – interactions with divine and satanic powers, the Rapture of the "True Church," the events of the Tribulation, the transfigurative force of salvation, the glory of Christ's Second Coming – should have inspired a fresh discourse of Christian spirituality that pushes language to its limits, radically new forms for investigating religious consciousness, something comparable to the literary experimentation of high modernism. Yet, End Times fiction has proved to be one of the most artless and aesthetically conservative genres, predictable and doctrinal to an extreme. This fiction may be antagonistic toward secular humanism and the theologies of liberal Protestantism and its "watered down Protestants,"<sup>7</sup> yet its language, which ranges between the trite and luridly sensational, quite evidently lacks the dynamism that often drives adversarial writing. The genre's instantly consumable prose suggests a complacent assumption that the experiences of spiritual rebirth and salvation, of encounters with divine power and other supernatural forces, can be adequately conveyed in conventional language. "I think we're in for something really big!" says the Christian hero of Pat Robertson's *The End of the Age*,<sup>8</sup> when he senses the imminent descent of the New Jerusalem. Such an expectation, one might think, would have called forth language commensurate with the impending experience of transfiguration, not a forgettable banality. And when the Christian hero of BeauSeigneur's *Acts of God* enters the Millennial Kingdom, he compares his old mode of existence with his new exalted one: "It's a little like going up in an airplane, and you don't really notice the air pressure changing until your ears pop, and then suddenly you can hear better. Well, it's like my whole life was under that pressure and now finally my ears have popped."<sup>9</sup> One might say the prose falls somewhat short of evoking the spiritual transports of a Millennial Christian.

Speech devoid of any subtext or psychic charge is just one of many symptoms of the hollowness of the Christians who populate End Times fiction. Another is the absence of the sense of an individual's religious haecceity; the genre constructs characters who merely conform to or deviate from some ideal Christian type. (The novels notably lack the *petit fait vrai*, that small, specific detail – the quirk or foible, the particularity of vernacular or dress, the physical defect or cherished possession – that helps constitute a character's individuality; all too often, we are given characters without characteristics.)

Critics have observed that End Times novels, in which courageous Christians resist the regime of the Antichrist and planes crash when their pilots are raptured, resemble popular action or disaster movies. Bruce David Forbes remarks that "In a sense, the Left Behind books are just another Arnold

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<sup>6</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 200.

<sup>7</sup> Salem Kirban, 666, in *666 and 1000* (Huntington Valley, PA: Salem Kirban, 1970), 85.

<sup>8</sup> Pat Robertson, *The End of the Age* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 401.

<sup>9</sup> James BeauSeigneur, *Acts of God* (Rockville, MD: SelectiveHouse Publishers, Inc., 2000), 430.

Schwarzenegger movie in written form, with explicit religious imagery added."<sup>10</sup> And if the comparison with Hollywood action films had any merit, then there would not be much to say about the absence from this fiction of spiritually complex and psychologically developed Christian characters. However, the comparison, when not just a casual figure of speech, is based on a transcoding error. The End Times genre is not subject to the narrative constraints of a 120-minute viewing experience. The novel cycles can exceed 1000 pages (*Left Behind* weighs in at around 7,000), which favors a tempo that, far from the speedy montage of the action movie, is often slow, not to say tedious, with large segments devoted to Christian sermonizing, Bible-talk among the characters and their endeavors to interpret the supernatural events of the End Times (a far cry from the minimal dialogue that distinguishes Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* films). In fact, these novels are only *intermittently* animated by cinematic-style spectacle and fast editing, which is to say that we cannot resort to the claim that action-filled, plot-driven narratives are to blame for the cast of bloodless stereotypes used to portray Christians.

Why has scholarship overlooked the paradox that Christ-centered End Times fiction fails to construct a vivid and credible *Christian* subjectivity? First, much criticism has been preoccupied with how the genre constructs a *right-wing* subjectivity, revealing how it endorses principles associated with the Christian Right, notably, neoliberalism, ultranationalism, antisemitism, antifeminism, and homophobia.<sup>11</sup> Second, Christian critics have censured End Times fiction, but on *exegetical* grounds, arguing, in particular, that the rapture theology of its authors is the result of a misreading of Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce David Forbes, "How Popular Are the Left Behind Books... and Why?" in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series*, eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 25.

<sup>11</sup> For neoliberalism see Andrew Strombeck, "Invest in Jesus: Neoliberalism and the Left Behind Novels," *Cultural Critique* 64, (Fall 2006): 161-195; Chapman, *Plotting Apocalypse*, chapter 5. For ultranationalism see Francis F. Schaeffer, *Patience with God* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2010), chapter 8; Amy Johnson Frykholm, "What Social and Political Messages Appear in the Left Behind Books? A Literary Discussion of Millenarian Fiction," in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times*, 168-77; Hugh Urban, "America Left Behind: Bush, the Neoconservatives and Evangelical Christian Fiction," *Journal of Religion and Society*, no. 8 (2006). For antisemitism see Yaakov Ariel, "How Are Jews and Israel Portrayed in the Left Behind Series?" in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times*, 131-166; Sherryll Mleynek, "The Rhetoric of the 'Jewish Problem' in the Left Behind Novels," *Literature and Theology* 19, no. 4 (November 2005): 367-383. For antifeminism and homophobia see Chapman, *Plotting Apocalypse*, chapters 7 and 8.

<sup>12</sup> See Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001); Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be "Left Behind"? A Critique of the Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003); Mark Reasoner, "What Does the Bible Say About the End Times? A Biblical Studies Discussion of Interpretive Method" in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times*, 71-98; Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Westview Press, 2004); Tyler Wigg Stevenson, "Revelation's Warning to Evangelicals: Left Behind May Be Hazardous to Our Health," *Reflections*, 2005, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/end-times-and-end-gamesis-scripture-being-left-behind/revelation-s-warning-evangelicals-left>; Gene Edward Veith, "When Truth Gets Left Behind," *Christian Research Journal* 24, no. 4 (2002).

Nevertheless, Christian readers should be offended by a genre that, unable to rise above preconceived and cliché-ridden accounts of spiritual experience, represents Christians through characters that are mere emblems of Christianity. So, how should we account for this inadequacy?

End Times fiction is governed by a fundamentalist theology that imposes severe limits on the literary expression of Christian subjectivity. This theology inhibits the narration of the spiritual and psychological development of the genre's Christian heroes, such that their experiences of the transcendent will strike the reader as weightless and unconvincing. Specifically, I shall argue that the orthodox fundamentalist doctrines, reproduced by End Times novelists, flatten fictional characters and hence enervate the drama of transfigurative moments in the life of the Christian. These doctrines are antithetical to the genre's narratives of salvation and encounters with the divine insofar as they permit only existentially thin and undiscerning accounts of the most profound of Christian experiences. So, while, to be sure, Jerry Jenkins is no Walker Percy and James BeauSeigneur no Marilynne Robinson, we cannot ascribe End Times fiction's cast of hollow Christians simply to the novelists' lack of literary skills; rather, the problem will be seen to be integral to a genre built on fundamentalist dogma.

#### *The Fundamentalism of End Times Fiction*

Since the 1970s, fundamentalists have been counted as a subset under the vast umbrella of evangelicalism. As George Marsden famously observed, "a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something."<sup>13</sup> However, Marsden's formulation, though correct, overlooks the fact that fundamentalism itself is an umbrella term, given the doctrinal differences between denominations (e.g., Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) and between its large, well-funded institutions of study (e.g., Dallas, Princeton, Fuller, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminaries, Moody Bible Institute, Bob Jones University, Wheaton College),<sup>14</sup> to say nothing of how doctrinal differences also divide ministries, generations, and regions. Most critics will be familiar with controversies between premillennialists and postmillennialists,<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1; "Fundamentalist" often functions as a pejorative, largely derived from a hostile mass media, which connotes bigotry, intolerance, ultra-conservatism, and hickville backwardness, and which has the effect of stigmatizing and "othering" a large cohort of Christians. Hence, many Bible-believing Christians reject the label "fundamentalist" in preference for "conservative evangelical."

<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s, disputes between evangelical divinity schools heated up when Fuller Theological Seminary removed Biblical inerrancy from its statement of faith, while inerrancy remains the first statement of faith of Princeton, Gordon-Conwell, and Dallas Theological Seminaries. Another dispute centered on the possible salvation of the unevangelized.

<sup>15</sup> Postmillennialism, which flourished in the 19th Century in conjunction with the Social Gospel, is the eschatological belief that through the church humans, rather than Christ, will usher in the Millennial Kingdom of peace and perfect community. However, after World War I, this belief was largely supplanted by premillennialism, which, lacking faith in the redemptive potential of "man-made institutions," postulated the any-moment return of Christ, who would implement His millennial reign on earth.

disagreements over dispensationalism as a method for decoding biblical prophecy. Furthermore, fundamentalists significantly vary in their tolerance of non-fundamentalist beliefs, ranging, for example, from outright rejection of ecumenical movements to amenability to interfaith dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

The type of fundamentalism that drives End Times fiction is largely orthodox and has the majority of adherents insofar as it proceeds from: (1) *Bible-based hermeneutics*, specifically, adherence to the truth of the five “fundamentals” or core doctrines, tabled in 1910 and held to be indispensable to “true” Christianity, i.e., the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the substitutionary atonement, the Resurrection, and the authenticity of miracles. (2) *Dispensational Premillennialism*, the eschatology to which most fundamentalists subscribe<sup>17</sup> and which divides history into seven divinely administered epochs or “dispensations,” the last (the Millennium) to be preceded by a rigidly ordered sequence of End Times events: the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Second Coming, Armageddon, and, finally, Christ’s reign on earth.<sup>18</sup> (3) *A Christian Right agenda*, which, since the late 1970s, calls for intervention in the public sphere against the practices of abortion and

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<sup>16</sup> Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> David Saxon, “Why Are Most Fundamentalists Dispensationalists?” *Proclaim and Defend* (blog), *Foundations Baptist Fellowship International*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2015/02/10/why-are-most-fundamentalists-dispensationalists/>; Tara Isabella Burton, “#RaptureAnxiety calls out evangelicals’ toxic obsession with the end times,” *Vox*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/12/12/16763230/raptureanxiety-calls-out-evangelicals-obsession-with-the-end-times-roy-moore-evangelical-jerusalem>.

<sup>18</sup> Dispensational premillennialism was a doctrine developed in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), an Irish-born leader of the Plymouth Brethren, and widely promulgated through the best-selling Scofield Reference Bible (first edition 1909), and subsequently through prophecy conferences, bible colleges, and radio and television preaching. Leading proponents of the doctrine include the late Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Jack Van Impe, and John Hagee. Among the principal institutions involved in the dissemination of dispensational premillennialism are Dallas Theological Seminary and Bob Jones University. According to a survey of evangelical leaders, conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals in 2011, “65 percent identify with premillennial theology, 13 percent with amillennial and 4 percent with postmillennial. Seventeen percent responded ‘other’” (See National Association of Evangelicals, “Premillennialism Reigns in Evangelical Theology,” January 2011, <https://www.nae.net/premillennialism-reigns-in-evangelical-theology/>). But premillennialists disagree among themselves as to whether believers will be raptured before, during or after the Tribulation, while J. Gresham Machen, a representative leader of the fundamentalist theologians at the Princeton Seminary, wrote in the 1920s that premillennialism is “a false method in interpreting Scripture” (quoted in Timothy Weber, “The Dispensationalist Era,” *Christian History* 18, no. 1 (1999), 34). Moreover, many dispensationalist theologians (e.g., Todd Magnum, Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising) identify as “rapture agnostics,” refusing to affirm the rapture as doctrine (Richard Middleton, “A Farewell to the Rapture in Matthew 24? Problem Texts for Holistic Eschatology, Part 3,” *Creation to Eschaton* (blog), October 17, 2014, <https://richardmiddleton.wordpress.com/2014/10/17/a-farewell-to-the-rapture-problem-texts-for-holistic-eschatology-part-3/>).

homosexual marriage, and advocates for prayer and the teaching of Creationism in schools.<sup>19</sup>

The late Tim LaHaye (1926-2016), fundamentalist leader and self-declared “prophecy scholar,” advised his coauthor, Jerry Jenkins, on how to plot the *Left Behind* novels so that their narrative structure strictly complied with the tenets of dispensational premillennialism. Moreover, he combined this prophecy of the End Times with an Arminian account of grace<sup>20</sup> – “salvation is a matter of the will”<sup>21</sup> – and with Christian Zionist thinking. Unlike some of his fundamentalist peers, he also believed in a “second chance” for salvation after the Rapture.<sup>22</sup> And while most fundamentalists already subscribed to this mix of doctrines (thanks largely to Hal Lindsey’s best-selling End Times work, *The Late Great Planet Earth*), it does not exhaust fundamentalism as a theology. All the same, in the context of End Times fiction, this fusion of ideas has proved highly marketable: a theological formula that is easily adaptable to the quick-read stories at which Jenkins excels. Furthermore, in what looks like commercial opportunism, the publication of the *Left Behind* books (five of which appeared between 1999-2000)<sup>23</sup> coincided with fundamentalist excitement about the end of the millennium, to say nothing of the authors exploiting the millenarianism that has for decades energized American popular culture.<sup>24</sup> So, LaHaye and Jenkins, along with other End Times novelists, succeeded in reaffirming the most popular strain of fundamentalism, but at a cost: a literary rendering of Christian subjectivity that is so shallow and tenuous it cannot give a convincing account of religious experience.

In *The Rapture: Who Will Face the Tribulation?*, LaHaye introduces the biblical hermeneutics that guide the *Left Behind* series: “When the plain sense of

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, not all fundamentalists should be classified as “Christian Right.” Unlike their Baby Boomer and Generation X forebears, many Millennials who belong to fundamentalist churches are committed to progressive causes. Consider, for example, the anti-Trumpist Red Letter Christians, organized by Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, who combat racism, protest gun violence, support immigrants, and belong to ministries that affirm LGBTQ rights. On their website, they claim to be “taking the words of Jesus seriously” in Nathalie Baptiste, “I Went to an Evangelical Revival and It Was All About Fighting Racism and Protecting LGBT Right,” *Mother Jones*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/05/i-went-to-an-evangelical-revival-and-it-was-all-about-fighting-racism-and-protecting-lgbt-rights/>. See also Paul Maltby, *Christian Fundamentalism and the Culture of Disenchantment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 108-109.

<sup>20</sup> LaHaye rejected predestination and maintained “Calvinism [...] comes perilously close to blasphemy” in Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Kingdom Come: The Final Victory* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 356. See also LaHaye, *Left Behind*, 199.

<sup>22</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 214, 299, 418.

<sup>23</sup> See also Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992). In a landmark study, Ernest Sandeen argued the bold thesis that “it is millenarianism which gave life and shape to the Fundamentalist movement” in Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), xv.

Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise" (238). This interpretive method promotes a doctrinal absolutism that prohibits any reading of Scripture that generates interpretations other than those yielded by a largely literal reading. Such a mandatory reading practice polices the Christian subjectivity of LaHaye's and Jenkins' characters, who always and necessarily learn their Bible on strictly fundamentalist terms. The exploration and multiplication of the meanings of Holy Scripture, which can prove so spiritually enriching (think of the *Midrashic* tradition of exegesis), is forbidden, condemned as heretical.

One element of fundamentalist theology that ought to favor a developed subjectivity in End Times fiction is the doctrine of a personal relationship with Jesus. If salvation in the Hebrew Bible occurs at the level of the *ethnos*, embracing the nation of Israel, for fundamentalists salvation is an individualized matter: we are saved "one soul at a time"; to be "born again" is experienced as a deeply individualized transaction.<sup>25</sup> Now consider the following passage from *Glorious Appearing*, the twelfth novel in the Left Behind series, which is clearly meant to educate the reader about the true believer's personal relationship with Jesus:

It should have been no surprise, [Enoch] decided, that Christ would supernaturally make personal to every believer the truth of His coming, as if He had come for each individually [...] Enoch's jaw dropped. Sitting there in the brilliance of God's glory, his Savior Jesus had spoken directly to him by name.  
"Did you hear that?" he said, and the three dozen plus kneeling around him dissolved into tears. "He used my name."  
"He used *my* name," a young man said.<sup>26</sup>

Consider also the description of this climactic encounter with Jesus at the end of *The Christ Clone Trilogy*. Decker Hawthorne, BeauSeigneur's newspaperman hero, finds Christ standing before him, just after the latter's descent from heaven on a white stallion:

Decker was drawn to look deeper and as he did, he realized that the love of the man was the source of the light around them.  
"Well done," Jesus said.  
Decker buried his face in Jesus' shoulder and wept. "I'm so sorry," he said.  
"I know, Decker. I know," Jesus said as he wept with him. "All is forgiven," he said, stroking Decker's hair, still holding him in his arms.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Apropos being "born again" in the context of the doctrine of a personal God, see LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 395-96. In his novel *The Second Coming*, Walker Percy's narrator succinctly observes that "born-again Christians...had no use for anything, liturgy or sacrament, which got in the way of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ" (Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Picardo, 1980), 158-59).

<sup>26</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing*, 211-212.

<sup>27</sup> BeauSeigneur, *Acts of God*, 417.

In each case, the prose fails to convey the momentous experience of unmediated contact with the divine; “Enoch’s jaw dropped” and Decker “wept” clearly miss the mark. Surely, a direct encounter with Jesus would prove to be a profoundly transfigurative, not to say self-shattering, moment. However, because the genre’s theological principles impede or discourage the development of characters as existential beings, allowing for little more than mass-media stereotypes (*the sympathetic pastor, the intrepid journalist, the devout housewife*),<sup>28</sup> sentimental kitsch must substitute for sublime experience.

Recall that, at its inception, Protestantism renounced priest-mediated ritual in favor of an immediate appeal to the heart and conscience of the individual believer. This radical change amounted to a reorientation inwards, an opening up of the space of interiority, a reconstitution of the religious subject as an introspective being – in short, a hypertrophy of the inner life. Therefore, it is all the more disappointing to find that characters in End Times fiction exhibit only the most rudimentary level of inwardness.<sup>29</sup> The problem is that the theology that governs the genre resists exploration of the arduous and complex processes by which one becomes a religious self.

The argument that follows is not pursued from a single critical perspective; rather, it eclectically draws on the work of diverse theologians and novelists. Their ideas are not always compatible, nor need they be, for the strategy is simply to adopt other Christian viewpoints that enable us to see, by comparison, how fundamentalist doctrines and dispositions impede the subjective development of the Christians of End Times fiction.

#### *Sola Fide*

In these stories of the pre-Tribulation Rapture, those “left behind” must choose between faith in Christ as their Savior or allegiance to the regime of the Antichrist. So, if like the authors of End Times fiction, one is a fundamentalist Christian, the stakes could not be higher: each person “left behind” stands on the brink of an eternity in heaven or hell. Yet these same authors cannot rise to the literary challenge of communicating the drama and gravity of salvation or damnation. Consider the following account of the conversion of the journalist Buck Williams, one of the four principal heroes of the Left Behind series:

Buck backed up against the door [of the washroom...] remembering [pastor] Bruce’s advice that he could talk to God the same way he

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<sup>28</sup> Pat Robertson’s Antichrist often comes across as a comic-book super-villain. Here he is responding to a defector from his regime: “You miserable little traitor! You know no one can resist me! I will crush you like a grape and feed your body to the birds. I will have vengeance!” (Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 363).

<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that in order for a novel to succeed it must always give us characters with deep and richly complex inner lives. Certainly, a good many accomplished secular novels offer characters who are little more than stereotypes, for example, satirical works by Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley, or William Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut. However, End Times fiction, whose themes embrace redeemability and spiritual plight, surely has an obligation to create characters with a degree of interiority that is sufficient to be explored.



talked to a friend. "God," he said, "I need you [...]" *And as he prayed he believed.* This was no experiment, no halfhearted attempt. He wasn't just hoping or trying something out. Buck knew he was talking to God himself. He admitted he needed God, that he knew he was as lost and sinful as anyone [...] When he finished [praying...] the deal was done. Buck was not the type to go into anything lightly. As well as he knew anything, he knew there would be no turning back.<sup>30</sup>

The reader might have expected that the description of an encounter with God would stand out from the surrounding sentences; that a pronounced shift in literary register would distinguish the spiritual experience from the character's practical business. Instead, Jerry Jenkins knocks out a paragraph of vapid, easy-to-read prose.<sup>31</sup> Even if we read the passage as though crafted in free indirect discourse (e.g. "the deal was done"), it is still devoid of drama, altogether without moment. Jenkins forestalls any expectation of communication with God as an experience deeply marked with awe by having a pastor advise that Buck "could talk to God the same way he talked to a friend."<sup>32</sup> So much for God as Mystery and apophatic transcendence or for the multitude of biblical passages that envisage trembling before the power, glory, and holiness of the Almighty.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the pastor's advice almost trivializes the act of prayer by enabling such an informal mode of address. In a discussion of "the inwardness of prayer," P. T. Forsyth (1848-1921), the distinguished evangelical theologian, wrote, "We do not start [to pray] on equal terms, march up to Him, as it were, and put our case."<sup>34</sup> He insisted that prayer is a spiritually arduous undertaking: "Prayer is the assimilation of a holy God's moral strength. ...To feed the soul we must toil at prayer. And what a labour it is! 'He prayed in an agony.' We must pray even to tears if need be."<sup>35</sup> Yet, the characters of End Times fiction typically lack the depth, the degree of inwardness, needed for the spiritual labor of prayer. Jenkins also bypasses the need to explore and expand upon Buck's spiritual transfiguration or the operation of grace simply by telling us *four* times that Buck "knew" the significance of his experience. These shortcomings can be attributed to the fundamentalist doctrine of unconditional faith-based redeemability, which lies behind the account of Buck's conversion and which is central to the End Times genre.

Next, here is Ernest Angley's description of a born-again experience in *Raptured*:

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<sup>30</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 446-447; my emphases.

<sup>31</sup> For a similar narration of another conversion scene see LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 215-16.

<sup>32</sup> For Kierkegaard, "[I]n this world, God and I cannot speak together; we have no language in common" (Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling" in *Selections from the Writing of Kierkegaard*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 141).

<sup>33</sup> See Exod. 3:6; Deut. 2:25; Is. 8:13; 66:2; Ps. 2:11; 33:8; 34:11; 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Hos. 3:5; 11:10.

<sup>34</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (Beloved Publishing LLC, 2017), 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

The saints gathered in the altar; someone knelt beside Nancy, giving her instructions on how to become saved. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Nancy cried out to the God of Heaven for Christ's sake to wash away her sins. At last she felt the burden of sin roll away. Never in all her life had she felt so happy and free at heart as she shouted the praises of God for saving her soul.<sup>36</sup>

No panoply of literary resources here; the language fails to rise above the level of the denotative. The work of grace that enables such conversions should be recounted in language equal to the transfiguration, but Jenkins, Angley, and others fail to relay the extraordinary nature of the event. Their doctrine-driven writing disregards the complex nature and depth of subjectivity needed for a persuasive account of the salvation experience because: (i) salvation through faith alone necessarily operates outside of psychology, culture, and ideology; (ii) the doctrine of *sola fide* overlooks the contradictions, absurdities, ambiguities, and instabilities that complicate human subjectivity. What then remains for characterization is just a generic type of person, such that any vivid, compelling account of spiritual transfiguration is not possible.

Consider the post-conversion words of Bradley Benton, the "left-behind" protagonist and White House Chief of Staff in Neesa Hart's *End of State*: "All we have to do is believe. And if you can't believe, ask Him to help you believe. If He could love me, if He could *forgive* me, after the way I've lied about my faith to my friends and my family, then He will forgive anyone."<sup>37</sup> And one Corporal Bill Townsend, "a devout Christian" in Mel Odom's *Apocalypse Dawn*,<sup>38</sup> tells Goose, the novel's protagonist, "Life comes down to two choices [...] You believe or you don't believe. God will test you because He loves you."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as Goose subsequently reflects, "believing was the *only* choice a man with even a glimmer of faith could do."<sup>40</sup> End Times fiction's model of redemption amounts to an easy believism that precludes what is absurd and paradoxical about faith. So, as a challenging alternative to this model, recall Kierkegaard's meditations on the type of faith shown by Abraham, when the latter was confronted by God's "absurd" demand that he sacrifice his son Isaac: "And all the while he had faith, believing that God would not demand Isaac of him, though ready all the while to sacrifice him, should it be demanded of him. He believed this on the strength of the absurd, for there was no question of human calculation any longer."<sup>41</sup> (Kierkegaard conceded that such a form of faith is almost impossible: "I cannot carry out the movement of faith: I cannot close my eyes and confidently plunge into the absurd."<sup>42</sup>) In a discussion of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, Rowan Williams adopts a "Barthian theological perspective" to remind us that

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<sup>36</sup> Earnest Angley, *Raptured: A Novel on the Second Coming of the Lord* (Akron, OH: Winston Press, 1950), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Neesa Hart, *End of State: Now All the Rules Have Changed* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 260. See also *Ibid.*, 69, 165, 230, 240.

<sup>38</sup> Mel Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 199. See also *Ibid.*, 258, 333, 341, 440.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 141-142.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

a simultaneous recognition of truth and falsehood is the expected condition of the person who has faith. Faith is not the acknowledgement of a simple consonance between what I think/believe and the truth of God, but the twofold acknowledgement of the incalculable gulf between the truth of God and my own subjectivity along with the inseparable commitment of God to the self-deceiving and helpless heart.<sup>43</sup>

The model of the conversion process in End Times fiction discounts the role of (lifelong?) endeavor in nurturing and consolidating Christian subjectivity, and understates the angst and ardor often experienced in the pursuit of salvation. So much for “work[ing] out your own salvation with fear and trembling,”<sup>44</sup> fighting the good fight of faith,<sup>45</sup> wielding the sword of the Spirit,<sup>46</sup> “resist[ing] unto blood, striving against sin.”<sup>47</sup> As pastor Bruce Barnes explains to Rayford Steele, the airline-pilot hero of the *Left Behind* series: “It’s really quite simple. God made it easy. That doesn’t mean it’s not a supernatural transaction or that we can pick and choose the good parts [...]. But if we see the truth and act on it, God won’t withhold salvation from us.”<sup>48</sup> And just here, we may again quote Kierkegaard, this time for his cynicism about the easy piety of Copenhagen’s bourgeois Christians, whence his remark that “In the olden days [...] faith was a task for a whole lifetime because it was held that proficiency in faith was not to be won within a few days or weeks.”<sup>49</sup> Flannery O’Connor had a realistic understanding of the difficulty of achieving faith in today’s liberal, post-Enlightenment culture. She claimed to be writing for “those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development.”<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, in this secular humanist context, she maintained, “It is much harder to believe than not to believe,”<sup>51</sup> and she saw her literary challenge as one of forging a style that would render the supernatural intelligible to a skeptical readership.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, “Native Speakers: Identity, Grace, and Homecoming,” *Christianity and Literature* 61, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 7-18.

<sup>44</sup> Phil. 2:12.

<sup>45</sup> 2 Tim. 4:7.

<sup>46</sup> Eph. 6:10-18.

<sup>47</sup> Heb. 12:4.

<sup>48</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 120.

<sup>50</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 207.

<sup>51</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: letters of Flannery O’Connor*, Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 354.

<sup>52</sup> Ron Hansen, a Jesuit novelist, observes, “We cannot call a fiction Christian just because there is no irreligion in it, no skepticism...for such a fiction, in its evasions, may have also evaded, in Karl Rahner’s words, ‘that blessed peril that consists in encountering God.’ A faith-inspired fiction squarely faces the imponderables of life, and in the fiction writer’s radical self-confrontation may even confess to desolation and doubt” (Ron Hansen, *A Stay Against Confusion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 25-26). The reader of Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* gets a dose of desolation and doubt in the angst of Clarence Wilmot, the Presbyterian minister and one of the novel’s four protagonists, when he “felt the last participles of his faith leave him” (John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (New York: Fawcett Ballantine Books, 1996), 5); “It was a ghastly moment, a silent sounding of bottomlessness”

End Times fiction is permeated by a strain of thinking that Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously identified as “cheap grace.” That is to say, in this fiction salvation does not depend on enduring discipleship, unflagging devotion, and spiritual exercise, but only a voluntary act of faith. In *Left Behind*, Rayford Steele learns from the recorded words of the story’s spiritual authority, Bruce Barnes, that “If you accept God’s message of salvation, his Holy Spirit will come in unto you and make you spiritually born anew. You don’t need to understand all this theologically. You can become a child of God by praying to him right now.”<sup>53</sup> In BeauSeigneur’s *In His Image*, a believer responds to a skeptic’s question about “get[ting] into the kingdom of God” saying, “God is no farther from any of us than our willingness to call upon him.”<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, Christian spiritual autobiographies (famously, John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*) usually teach us that a sinner’s reconciliation with God is an arduous struggle, that his/her repentance may not be wholly sincere, that conversion may not be irrevocable, leaving the supplicant susceptible to backsliding.

Evidently, the authors of End Times fiction assume that God’s forgiveness is unconditional, that is to say, secured once and for all and without further cost or commitment. So consider an alternative Christian account of the matter. In a discussion of Bonhoeffer’s views on forgiveness, the theologian L. Gregory Jones has observed: “The person ‘hopes’ for God’s mercy; he or she cannot presume it. If it becomes a presumption rather than something that must be hoped and prayed for under the reality of God’s judgment, then the action loses its quality of repentance and becomes a cheap and venal grace.”<sup>55</sup> To counter this “presumption,” Jones explains genuine forgiveness as “costly,” that is to say, a way of life “embodied” in such *concrete practices* of Christian community as discipleship, commitment to the church, ongoing repentance. Forgiveness requires “the deepest inward concentration” on service in the world as Christians.<sup>56</sup>

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer accused Germany’s Lutheran Church of adopting an undemanding view of grace that required of its members little more than assent to doctrine, while they continued to live a secular bourgeois life. He argued that it was this “cheap grace” that facilitated the Church’s capitulation to Hitler’s regime.<sup>57</sup> He understood that cheap grace has a narcotizing effect on the Christian sensibility: it induces complacency and self-righteousness; it creates a caricature of the Christian. In our own century, we have seen how around 80% of America’s evangelical community voted for administrations (those of Bush and Trump) defined by their ultranationalist and militarist policies and anti-democratic tendencies. This cohort constitutes

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(Ibid., 6); “Without biblical blessing the physical universe became sheerly horrible and disgusting” (Ibid., 7).

<sup>53</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 215.

<sup>54</sup> James BeauSeigneur, *In His Image* (Rockville, MD: SelectiveHouse Publishers, Inc., 2001), 222.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>57</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Trans. R. H. Fuller. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 58-59.

much of the Christian Right, a phenomenon that some *Christian* observers have explicitly identified as “fascist,”<sup>58</sup> and its politics are echoed in End Times fiction. Suffice to add here, in the spirit of Bonhoeffer, this fiction’s assumption of an easily conferred grace has reinforced the self-righteousness of far-right Christians, anesthetizing their minds against the spiritual and ethical self-questioning that could have served as a counterforce to the imperialist violence and authoritarian disposition of the governments they elected to office.

#### *An Anthropology of Sin*

Fundamentalist anthropology understands humans as sinners by nature, but with the potential to be forgiven. This is reflected in End Times fiction in a flattening of character into just two stereotypes: the sinner and the saved. (Even for characters whose faith is uncertain, *ultimately* no other identity matters.) Thus, moral complexity of character has a minimal presence in End Times novels. Indeed, when the consequences of committing or not committing to Christ’s Church are believed to be eternal, the exploration of fictional characters beyond the sinner/saved binary becomes almost as redundant as character exploration in morality plays. Hence, End Times characters are nearly always devoid of the idiosyncrasies and neuroses that complicate subjectivity; they are too stereotyped ever to surprise the reader with inconsistent behavior or senseless action or an unexpected utterance.

In *Nicolae*, the third book in the Left Behind series, the now-converted Rayford Steele, quoting from Isaiah and Romans, observes, “The Bible is clear that all of our righteousnesses are like filthy rags. There is none righteous, no, not one.... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In the economy of God, we are all worthy only of the punishment of death.”<sup>59</sup> And Marcus Dumont, Hart’s left-behind reverend, observes, “No one deserves grace. That’s what makes it grace. God *is* a God of righteousness and purity and holiness. There’s no one on earth who can meet His expectations. Only through the blood of Christ can we hope to be clean enough to have fellowship with a holy God.”<sup>60</sup> The fundamentalist idea of humans as essentially sinners is one of the key topoi of End Times fiction and it yields characters chiefly defined as either those who choose to obey the biblical injunction to believe that Jesus died for their sins or those who choose to reject it.<sup>61</sup> And while the power to choose between these options appears to respect human will and initiative, the theology necessarily devalues other possibilities for self-determination and thus severely limits the significance of human agency. Moreover, so dogmatic are End Times novelists in warning readers of the cost of remaining a sinner (as seen in their obsessive focus on retribution), they foreclose on the possibility of expressing any empathy with,

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<sup>58</sup> Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Dorothee Sölle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Nicolae: The Rise of the Antichrist* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1997), 316; See also *Left Behind* 200, 396; *Soul Harvest* 131-32; 666 284.

<sup>60</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Nicolae*, 270; See also *Ibid.*, 68, 73, 170, 171.

<sup>61</sup> LaHaye has written, “there are only two kinds of people on earth: Christians and unbelievers” (Tim LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972), 9).

or understanding of, the damned. The latter, largely stripped of subjectivity, frequently are rendered as no more than generic reprobates, having no function other than to graphically illustrate, for the reader's edification, the price paid for not accepting Jesus as Savior.

In *Embodying Forgiveness*, L. Gregory Jones, alluding to Paul's letter to the Romans (6:1-11), cogently states the transfigurative effects of sincere repentance: "Christian forgiveness requires our death, understood in the specific form and shape of Jesus Christ's dying – and rising. For we participate in Christ's dying *and* rising, we die to our old selves and find a future not bound by the past."<sup>62</sup> Surely a Christian novelist has an obligation to convey the elevating nature (the "rising") of spiritual rebirth. However, the fundamentalist antihumanism of End Times fiction, which resists any aggrandizement of the human, places far more weight on our essential unworthiness and indebtedness, we undeserving recipients of grace, even in the context of spiritual regeneration. Consider the following passage from *Left Behind*, when Rayford prays for forgiveness:

Dear God, I admit that I'm a sinner. I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me and save me. I ask this in the name of Jesus, who died for me. I trust in him right now. I believe that the sinless blood of Jesus is sufficient to pay the price for my salvation. Thank you for hearing me and receiving me. Thank you for saving my soul." [...] Rayford wanted to talk to God more. He wanted to be specific about his sin [even though] he knew he was forgiven [...] He confessed his pride. Pride in his intelligence. Pride in his looks. Pride in his abilities. He confessed his lusts, how he had neglected his wife, how he had sought his own pleasure. How he had worshiped money and things. When he was through, he felt clean.<sup>63</sup>

A regeneration of the spirit, a reconciliation with God no less, has just occurred but the narrator dispatches the experience almost in telegraphic shorthand: "[H]e knew he was forgiven," "he felt clean," "I am sorry for my sins." ("Sorry"? Could the language of repentance be any more superficial?) And note that the process of repentance is compressed into the timespan of an assigned task, hence "when he was through." So, just when the language should register a *magnification* of humanity (an intimation of prelapsarian being, grace as divine empowerment of the favored individual), a general stinginess of tone prevails, which reflects a theology that just cannot relinquish the belief that first and foremost humanity is a tainted species. Hart's Reverend Marcus "felt crushed by the realization of how unworthy and undeserving of God's mercy he was [...] [H]e screamed into the carpet as he poured out the pride and arrogance that had driven him for so long."<sup>64</sup> In these excerpts, the cardinal sin of pride finds its counterweight in the virtue of humility, yet it is precisely this kind of binarism that yields stereotypes as opposed to psychologically complex, richly ambiguous characters.

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<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 216.

<sup>64</sup> Hart, *End of State*, 73.

End Times fiction's unrelenting focus on human sinfulness and unworthiness, a focus that reflects the defining tenet of fundamentalist anthropology, leaves out of account the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. For example, the doctrine is cited only once in the entire Left Behind series.<sup>65</sup> Yet, the Bible is insistent that humans are made in the image of God.<sup>66</sup> And even allowing that what it means to be made in God's image is a matter of theological dispute,<sup>67</sup> an inherently divine property or proclivity would function as a counterforce to sin. As Saint Paul recognized, sinfulness does not eliminate the inherent dignity that follows from being created in God's image: "For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain."<sup>68</sup> If End Times fiction was premised on an anthropology that, *in tension with* innate depravity, recognized intrinsic values conferred by grace, its Christian heroes would have a more substantial and compelling presence on the page.

While LaHaye embraced the Arminian view of humanity's freedom to choose reconciliation with God, his fiction shifts the real locus of control away from humans towards God. As pastor Bruce Barnes explains:

"[The Bible] also says we can't save ourselves. Lots of people thought they could earn their way to God or to heaven by doing good things, but that's probably the biggest misconception ever [...] The Bible says that it's not by works of righteousness that we have done, but by his mercy God saved us. It also says that we are saved by grace through Christ, not of ourselves, so we can't brag about our goodness [...] When we tell Christ that we acknowledge ourselves as sinners and lost, and receive his gift of salvation, he saves us."<sup>69</sup>

Here the role of human agency in the process of salvation is drastically limited to a willingness to commit to faith in Christ as Savior; other agential factors are forcefully discounted. This shrinking of the redemptive power of human action is yet another factor in End Times fiction's thinning out of the subject.

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<sup>65</sup> An Amazon word search of all sixteen novels yielded no results for either "Imago Dei" or "Image of God." Only in *Armageddon* is the doctrine cited: "He said he had created humans in his own image." (Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Armageddon: The Cosmic Battle of the Ages* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 295). The phrase "image of God" is used in *The Indwelling* but in the context of "the Shekinah glory" rather than in an anthropological context: "If this was the very image of God could he see it and live?" (Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Indwelling: The Beast Takes Possession* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2000), 235) Finally, to avoid confusion, the title of the first book in BeauSeigneur's Christ Clone trilogy is *In His Image*. However, this refers to a conspiracy in which one "Christopher," the adopted son of a biology professor, is the image of Jesus because he has been cloned from live human cells taken from the Turin Shroud. (Later, we learn that Christopher is the Antichrist.)

<sup>66</sup> See Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Eph 4:24; Col 1:15; 3:10; Jas. 3:9.

<sup>67</sup> Kevin Vanhooser, "Human being, individual and social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163-166, 177-178.

<sup>68</sup> 1 Cor. 15:9-10

<sup>69</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 200-201.

*A Totalitarian God*

End Times novelists judge men and women vis-à-vis fundamentalism's harsh totalitarian God, who first and foremost demands of humanity unqualified obedience, devotion, and reverence. This emphasis on a super-eminent, all-controlling God implies as prideful and profane those secular desires and projects that give meaning to human life as something existing in its own right, irrespective of God's authority. (In his antihumanist screed, *The Battle for the Mind*, Tim LaHaye has denounced the "self-centered, self-sufficient man" on the grounds that "man is not autonomous, but dependent on God"<sup>70</sup>). Ultimately, End Times novelists understand righteousness as complete self-abasement before God. Hart's Reverend Marcus recalls, "The morning after the Rapture, I fell on my face before God and surrendered my pride and self-serving nature."<sup>71</sup> Consider also the experience of Rayford Steele at a prayer session with the Christian resistance group known as the "Tribulation Force":

As Rayford knelt there, he realized he needed to surrender his will to God [...] [He] felt so small, so inadequate before God, that he could not seem to get low enough. He crouched, he squatted [...] The overwhelming sense of unworthiness seemed to crush him, and he slipped to the floor and lay prostrate on the carpet [...] He had never felt so vividly in the presence of God [...] Rayford wished he could sink lower into the carpet, could cut a hole in the floor and hide from the purity and infinite power of God.<sup>72</sup>

But to describe Rayford as prostrate, as feeling he cannot sink low enough in obeisance, hardly amounts to communicating the sense of reverential fear of one who "had never felt so vividly in the presence of God." An encounter with the "purity and infinite power of God" surely is an experience of such disorienting magnitude and intensity as to threaten the integrity of the self, except there is not much of a self to threaten. It is not surprising, therefore, when, just a few sentences later, and without so much as a shift in register, Rayford and his prayer-companions begin discussing the mystery of who sent Rayford's daughter, Chloe, some flowers!

The theocentric disposition of End Times fiction favors images of Christians lying face down in the presence of God<sup>73</sup> and, in general, extols humbling self-abnegation over secular forms of self-realization (through, say, intellectual pursuits or community projects), which simply fail to stimulate the theocentric imagination. Of course, even the acknowledgment of one's utter worthlessness before the grandeur of God could, if creatively managed, afford an opportunity for a rich literary rendering of a profound spiritual experience. However, given the theocentric attitude of the fiction, the human

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<sup>70</sup> Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1980), 70.

<sup>71</sup> Hart, *End of State*, 166. See also *Ibid.*, 73; BeauSeigneur, *Acts of God*, 416-17; LaHaye and Jenkins, *Nicolae*, 208.

<sup>72</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 240-241.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 14:25.



perspective is not ultimately what counts; delving into the psyche seems futile.

The totalitarian God of fundamentalism, a deity who demands unconditional obedience from humanity, has been transferred wholesale to End Times fiction. Indeed, it is the pervasive presence of this invigilating, ever-judgmental God that largely explains the genre's vindictive disposition, its obsession with punishment and the gruesome torments of nonbelievers. God's wrath, as illustrated on page after page by the horrors of the Tribulation, carries more weight than God's mercy. Under the terms of this grim regime, salvation is often understood more as a juridical transaction, that is, the reward for those who bow before God's authority, than as a transfiguration by which the self is sanctified and elevated to a new mode of being. Thus, once again, the reader in search of an arresting account of the most significant spiritual experience available to Christians will feel shortchanged.

In a discussion of divine judgment, Daniel M. Bell Jr. challenges the orthodox understanding of the sacrifice of Christ in *economic* terms; that is to say, the substitutionary atonement understood as a debt paid for human sin against God, as compensation paid to satisfy divine justice. Instead, he continues a line of argument, recently developed by David Bentley Hart, that accounts for the sacrifice in "aneconomic" terms: "God became human as a gift that exceeded every debt, that exploded the very calculus of debt and retribution and set in its place an aneconomic order of charity that recovers life in the mode of donation and lavish generosity. In Christ, we are done with judgment of God; in Christ we reach the end of judgment."<sup>74</sup> To cite Bell is not necessarily to agree with his account of the aneconomic significance of Christ's death; however, it serves as a foil to help us see the sternly judgmental theology, the "calculus of debt and retribution," that governs End Times fiction. In the world of the latter, humans are subjected to a regime of totalized judgment and harsh reckoning; its Christian heroes display little awareness of a cosmic order infused with the gift and bounty of God's goodness, little if any consciousness of "divine plenitude and superabundance."<sup>75</sup>

#### *Submissive Rebels*

The intrinsically revolutionary nature of Christianity was conveyed by Paul's famous pronouncement in his letter to the Romans that, "[Y]e are not under the law, but under grace."<sup>76</sup> As Jacob Taubes argued in *The Political Theology of Paul*, this epistle is "a political declaration of war on the Caesar;"<sup>77</sup> it established Christianity in a subversive relation not only to the Mosaic law but also to the law of Imperial Rome, and projected a new Christianized world order. Creston Davis and Patrick Aaron Riches identify Christians

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<sup>74</sup> Daniel M. Bell Jr., "Only Jesus Saves: Toward a Theopolitical Ontology of Judgment," in *Theology and the Political*, eds. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005), 213.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Rom. 6:14.

<sup>77</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 16.

transformed by these spiritual conditions as “theopolitical revolutionary subjects.”<sup>78</sup> They explain this identity by invoking the concept of metanoia (a radically transformative and penitential change of heart) vis-à-vis the “Event” (i.e., the kenotic in-breaking of Christ):

Metanoia is the total recentering of being by (re)turning to being-as-gift, which is belonging to the Event. The metanoic (re)turn to the Event is the mode whereby the subject is formed, and not the subject alone, but the subject in common faithfulness with the whole community of the Event. It is radical, sudden, painful, and breaks open the self at home with the ego.”<sup>79</sup>

Whether or not we agree with this collectivist view of salvation, at least it conveys an impression of the depth, urgency, and extraordinary nature of a revolutionary Christian subjectivity. However, End Times fiction conveys no such impression; after all, given its authoritarian disposition, fundamentalism is not quite comfortable with a subject that is insurrectionary to the core. The Christian rebels of the End Times may be mobilized by the prospect of Christ’s sudden irruption into History but, at the same time, orthodoxy demands first and foremost a submissive mentality, unquestioning obedience to divine authority. (The theologian Dorothee Sölle coined the term “christofascist” to describe the “blind obedience of authoritarian strains of Christianity.”<sup>80</sup>) In the end, the genre must compromise: it gives us theocratic foot soldiers, God’s “Green Berets,”<sup>81</sup> rather than theopolitical revolutionary subjects.

A revolutionary impulse clearly permeates the End Times genre, which is explicitly antagonistic towards secular humanism and modernity, and whose heroes operate as rebels against the world government of the Antichrist, seeking to replace it with a theocratic regime. And yet the reader will encounter nothing like a revolutionary subjectivity in this fiction. For example, descriptions of the Tribulation Force, in the left Behind series – “[S]triding four abreast, arms around each other’s shoulders, knit with a common purpose, [they] faced the gravest dangers anyone could face and they knew their mission [...] their goal nothing less than to stand and fight the enemies of God”<sup>82</sup> – make these rebellious Christians sound more like a team of intrepid heroes in an action comic. Their revolutionary consciousness only amounts to strategizing in their fight against the Beast Regime and discovering the momentous truth that the Bible prophesied God’s plan for the End Times. In the context of the *Eschaton*, revolutionary consciousness should convey its potential for spiritual transfiguration but, under the genre’s theocentric constraints, the reader must settle for the assurance that the End Times heroes are God’s unwavering righteous servants, who will soon enter the Millennial Kingdom.

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<sup>78</sup> Creston Davis and Patrick Aaron Riches, “Metanoia: the Theological Praxis of Revolution,” in *Theology and the Political*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>80</sup> Sölle, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, xv, xix.

<sup>81</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 420.

<sup>82</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 468; See also LaHaye and Jenkins, *Tribulation Force*, ix.

Finally, consider the principal conversion scene in Robertson's *The End of the Age*. "'So, now, Carl,' [Pastor] John Edwards said...., 'are you and Lori ready to meet Him when He returns?' 'Jack,' [Carl] answered, 'you know very well that we aren't ready. But we want to be. Will you tell us what to do?'"<sup>83</sup> Of course, by definition, pastors have a duty to provide spiritual guidance to their flock. Yet, the marked tendency of End Times novelists to depend on pastors and other spiritual leaders to fulfill this role (e.g., Bruce Barnes and Tsion Ben-Judah in the *Left Behind* series, Marcus Dumont in Hart's series) largely exempts them from a focus on the inner lives of their Christian heroes; the arduous, soul-searching business of moral decision-making is offloaded from the protagonists onto their pastors. Protracted spiritual struggle with the risk of an uncertain outcome (what Augustine called *tentatio*) could develop and add depth to the interior lives of the genre's Christians; however, that uncertainty is precluded in End Times fiction because it recreates the authoritarianism of fundamentalist ministries, whose members readily submit to the directions of their pastors.

### *Sola Scriptura*

Insofar as End Times fiction is governed by a doctrinal absolutism, it should come as no surprise that its authors favor the omniscient narrative viewpoint of the third person. As plots relentlessly progress toward the *Eschaton*, doctrine supplants subjectivity when all that counts is whether a character is righteous or unrighteous. That which is volatile and capricious in human psychology is suppressed; in particular, the psychodynamics of the inner life are non-existent (a feature reflected in the genre's denotative, didactic, and decatheted prose). The voice of authority is invariably that of the dogmatizing pastor, to whom the protagonists must ultimately defer. The End Times novel serves not as a vehicle for exploring the subjectivity of its Christian characters but as a pulpit for expounding Holy Scripture.

According to Harriet Harris, the doctrine of "plenary verbal inspiration," that is, the belief that "all of the words of scripture are God's own words," was developed "partly in order to combat the subjectivism that [fundamentalists] see in liberal approaches to the Bible"; hence, "Antisubjectivism [has] become a prominent feature of fundamentalist apologetics."<sup>84</sup> Fundamentalists harbor a suspicion of subjectivity in general, seeing an introspective focus on individual experiences and feelings as a diversion from the objective standard of Scripture.<sup>85</sup> To cede too much subjectivity to humans is to allow them too much autonomy of thought. Subjectivity may generate perspectives and forms of cognition that rival the "transcendent truths" of the Bible. But this

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<sup>83</sup> Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 208; my emphasis.

<sup>84</sup> Harriet A. Harris, "Fundamentalism," in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, eds. Chad Meister and James Beilby (London: Routledge, 2015), 304, 308-309.

<sup>85</sup> This anti-subjectivist disposition may be seen as a departure from evangelicalism's pietistic heritage of the "Great Awakenings," which elevated spiritual experience and intuition (the "religion of the heart") above doctrine. In addition, I don't mean to imply that, from a *theological standpoint*, there is never a case for anti-subjectivism. For example, Karl Barth's *Revealed Theology* largely depended on a critique of the "anthropocentrism" implied in the focus on inner experience that characterized 19<sup>th</sup>-century (German) liberal theology.

anti-subjectivist bias works against the development of characters capable of spiritual and mystical experience. Pat Robertson's narrator condemns the New Age "psychics and gurus who take direction from demons,"<sup>86</sup> while, in Salem Kirban's *666*, education in the regime of the Antichrist notably includes "mystic meditation."<sup>87</sup> The Tribulation Force is composed of Christian militants, not contemplatives endowed with a capacity for deep spiritual insights. Moreover, these characters display almost no aesthetic sensitivity; in this genre, recognition of the beauty and wonders of the Creation is virtually non-existent; rather, aesthetic experience is almost always mediated through attributes of divine power, such as "glory," "majesty," and "magnificence." In short, lacking the potential for rich spiritual experience and largely deficient in aesthetic appreciation, the inner life of End Times fiction's characters is meager relative to that of characters in non-fundamentalist Christian fiction. As an example of the latter, suffice here to recall David Kern, the young protagonist in John Updike's story "Pigeon Feathers." David's aesthetic appreciation of a dead pigeon's feathers enables a concluding epiphany, a spiritual insight into nature as the work of God's creative design: "And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him."<sup>88</sup> Updike's hero is spiritually empowered by an independent, active mind, which can access redemptive knowledge that is not dependent on the revealed Word of God. Consider also the mystical experiences of the heroine in Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Hansen, a devout Catholic, gives Mariette, a postulant, greater access to the divine through rapturous trances than through her understanding of the Bible. Such a priority, which is inconsistent with fundamentalism's doctrine of *sola scriptura*, endows Mariette with a spiritual fervor not found in the characters of End Times novels. Mariette tells a sexton that "In prayer I float out of myself [...] I have lost my body; I don't know where I am or even if I am now human or spirit [...] And when I have gotten to a fullness of joy and peace and tranquility, then I know I have been possessed by Jesus and have completely lost myself in him. Oh, what a blissful abandonment it is!"<sup>89</sup> But fundamentalist theology denies the legitimacy of this kind of mystical experience.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the late Ray Yungen, author and contributor to the fundamentalist website Lighthouse Trails Research, insisted that God does not endorse mystical experience because "a trance state [is] outside of God's sanction [...]. Besides, nowhere in the Bible are such mystical practices prescribed" (Yungen). And the late Ken Silva, an ordained Southern Baptist Church minister and founder of the fundamentalist Apprising Ministries website, dismissed mysticism as the practice of "subjectivists" that "misleads

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<sup>86</sup> Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 192.

<sup>87</sup> Kirban, *666*, 188.

<sup>88</sup> John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Ballantine Books, 1963), 149.

<sup>89</sup> Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 128.

<sup>90</sup> An exception to End Times fiction's rejection of mystical experience can be found in LaHaye's and Jenkins' *The Indwelling*, when Tsion Ben-Judah, a former rabbinical scholar-turned-Christian, has an "out-of-the-body experience" (232). However, far from contradicting the Bible, Tsion's experience serves to corroborate it: he witnesses the war in heaven between the Archangel Michael and Satan as recounted in Revelation 12:1-7 (244-48).

Christians” because “our personal, spiritual experiences are unreliable” as opposed to “God’s self-revelation through the Scriptures.”<sup>91</sup>

According to Calvin, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.”<sup>92</sup> However, in fundamentalist thought, the putative innate faculty of the *sensus divinitatis* meets with the same fate as mysticism; to propose such a faculty assigns too much cognitive power to the subject at the expense of the extrinsic truth of Scripture. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88), the Swiss-German theologian, argued for a grace-given *innate* spiritual sensorium on the grounds that revelation cannot be purely extrinsic but, like an encounter with a work of art, it must resonate with something *already* deep within us. If Christ is to be perceived as He actually is, natural vision will not suffice; we can only see Him through our spiritual senses. The latter are necessary for the perception of divine splendor. Hence, Balthasar quotes K. Neuhaus, “the natural eye does not see the *Kabod* [i.e. glory]. In order to perceive it, in the natural eye there must emerge the supernatural glance.”<sup>93</sup> Yet, while End Times fiction will often feature spectacles of divine splendor, such as the “Glorious Appearing,” or Christians in direct communication with the divine, its characters evince nothing remotely like the kind of perception that is enabled by a spiritual sensorium or the *sensus divinitatis*. The divine is always instantly comprehensible to those who encounter it and, as will be evident from passages already quoted, the language used to describe such encounters is as literal as that used for any corporeal form of perception.

In distinct contrast to this fundamentalist insistence on the extrinsic authority of Scripture as the most dependable and principal means of knowing God, we should note Kierkegaard’s appeal to the “infinite passion of inwardness,” which alone, he maintains, brings the individual into a direct or “non-alienated” relation with God: “The existing person who chooses the objective way now enters upon all approximating deliberation intended to bring forth God objectively, which is not achieved in all eternity, because God is a subject and hence only for subjectivity in inwardness.”<sup>94</sup>

Subjectivism need not mean self-absorption or narrow introspection. Kevin Vanhooser reminds us of Karl Rahner’s attempt to ground theology in human subjectivity: “[T]he turn to the subject need not be a turning in upon oneself” but, rather, “the realization of humanity’s capacity for receiving God’s self-

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<sup>91</sup> Ken Silva, “‘Experiencing God’ by Henry Blackaby’s ‘Experiencing God’: How Mysticism Misleads Christians,” *Apprising Ministries* (blog), August 6, 2012, <http://apprising.org/2012/08/06/experiencing-god-by-henry-blackaby-how-mysticism-misleads-christians/>.

<sup>92</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion Vol. 1*, Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 43.

<sup>93</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Vol. 6: The Old Covenant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 35.

<sup>94</sup> Sören Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments Volume One*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 199-200.

communication."<sup>95</sup> Here the claim is that human nature is defined by this capacity, this interior faculty for "hearing" God's message, a "transcendental openness" (Rahner) to the experience of God's revelation in everyday life.

#### *A Non-Sacramental Nature*

End Times fiction must be distinguished from other literary genres by its conspicuous absence of local color, its lifeless *mise-en-scène* and, in particular, writing that relays no vivid impression of the natural world. The relevance of this deficiency to the genre's hollow Christians becomes evident when we consider how our relationship to the natural world contributes to the construction of subjectivity. Though that relationship may be highly variable and contingent, ranging from the bioregional identity that develops from life in a particular habitat to a sense of planetary citizenship and the responsibilities that entails, it nevertheless plays an important part in the constitution of ideas of self and home. However, fundamentalist theology largely erases this dimension of subjectivity as a consequence of its non-sacramental view of the natural world. This theology reads Genesis as propounding a model of humanity's relationship to nature as one of dominion (rather than stewardship), whence nature is reduced to a divinely bestowed resource awaiting exploitation.<sup>96</sup> It insists on a radical discontinuity between nature's doom and humanity's destiny that is largely based on biblical prophecy: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away."<sup>97</sup> This doctrine enables the view, so prominent in End Times fiction, that as long as the church can be redeemed, nature can be left to its apocalyptic fate.<sup>98</sup> Hence, the nonchalant tone, at the end of LaHaye's and Jenkins' *Kingdom Come*, with which we are told that, "Fire from the heavens and from within the earth ignited the globe and in a flash it was incinerated and blown into tiny flaming particles that hurtled through space."<sup>99</sup> In *1000*, Kirban's sequel to *666*, we read that "To purify this earth, so tainted with the scars of sin, God sets it afire with a fervent heat,"<sup>100</sup> a prophecy Kirban corroborates with reference to 2 Peter 3:7, 10. In *Left Behind*, pastor Bruce Barnes, citing the "sixth Seal Judgment," prophesies, without a hint of regret, that God's wrath "will come in the form of a worldwide earthquake so devastating that no instruments would be able to measure it,"<sup>101</sup> while in *Raptured*, Angley impassively describes the hail and fire that destroy the earth's flora<sup>102</sup> and the meteorite that turns the sea to blood and kills off marine life.<sup>103</sup> This view of nature as dispensable, which

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<sup>95</sup> Vanhooser, "Human being, individual and social," 171.

<sup>96</sup> See Maltby, *Christian Fundamentalism and the Culture of Disenchantment*, 113-29.

<sup>97</sup> Rev. 21:1, a verse routinely cited in End Times novels.

<sup>98</sup> Theologian Francis A. Schaeffer has lamented that "much evangelical Christianity is rooted in a platonic concept [of nature], wherein the only interest is in the 'upper story,' in the heavenly things - only in 'saving the soul' and getting it to heaven.... In such a Christianity there is a strong tendency to see nothing in nature beyond its use as one of the classic proofs of God's existence" (Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 40).

<sup>99</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 350.

<sup>100</sup> Kirban, *1000*, in *666 and 1000*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 312; see also BeauSeigneur, *Acts of God*, 389.

<sup>102</sup> Angley, *Raptured*, 190; cf. Rev. 8:7.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 191; cf. Rev. 16:3.

underlies the genre, turns humans from earthlings into resident aliens, and in the process strips subjectivity of its ecological dimension.

In End Times fiction, knowledge of salvation comes only from God's revealed Word and cannot be derived from our understanding of "sin-corrupted" nature. (Indeed, we learn that after the Rapture God has left control of the world to Satan.<sup>104</sup>) Hence, it is instructive to contrast this fiction's fundamentalist tendency to desacralize nature, and in the process diminish human subjectivity, with ecotheological ideas that sanctify nature and by extension enrich subjectivity. Some ecotheologians have revived the nature discourse of the medieval Christian mystics, for whom religion meant the experience of being at one with the Creation. In this tradition, nature itself supplies the symbols of God: "life-giving wind," "water of life," "light." In her "ecological theology," Sallie McFague follows in the tradition of Christian sacramentalism to propose that "the world [...] is the sacrament of God, the visible, physical bodily presence of God."<sup>105</sup> To live in a world that is "God's body," as opposed to a creation that is the work of an extrinsic deity, is to encounter the divine in concrete forms, to be open to the experience of "immanent transcendence."<sup>106</sup> And while End Times fiction envisages the "saved" portion of humanity as "raptured" beyond the created world, which is to say that salvation is a matter of *removing* humanity from nature rather than restoring or "repristinating" nature, ecologically disposed theologians hold that Christianity should not teach withdrawal from a degraded world but provide hope for its renewal.<sup>107</sup> Norman Wirzba, believing in divine immanence, argues that "God's redemptive purposes are worked out in the creation rather than apart from it."<sup>108</sup> Jürgen Moltmann appeals to "the ecological wisdom of the Bible,"<sup>109</sup> whence one should seek to "discover God *in* all the beings he has created."<sup>110</sup> And if salvation takes place *in* the creation, then we should shift some attention from End Times fiction's dispensationalist focus on time to an ecotheological focus on space. In short, the fundamentalist idea of nature as just a stage for the drama of salvation history is replaced by the ecotheological idea that nature is *the very place* where salvation occurs. At the very least, the argument can be made that spiritual subjectivity flourishes when humans come to understand and revere their place in the "creation community" or ecocosm of human and non-human life-forms.

In her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," Flannery O'Connor argued,

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<sup>104</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 229; Angley, *Raptured*, 198; Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 236, 357.

<sup>105</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 185.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>107</sup> Tyler Wigg Stevenson writes, "The worldview engendered by *Left Behind* [...] pushes the edict of 1 John 2:15 ('Do not love the world or anything in [it]') to the point where the very failure to intervene, the sin of omission, can constitute discipleship" (Stevenson, "Revelation's Warning to Evangelicals.")

<sup>108</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>109</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), xii.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

[T]he chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn't mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater.<sup>111</sup>

O'Connor's focus on the natural follows from her belief that "every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses."<sup>112</sup> Hence "The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look."<sup>113</sup> For O'Connor, the Christian writer has a duty to reveal how mystery is embodied in the concrete, sensuous world of the natural. In a similar vein, Richard Kearney cites the vivid nature imagery of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Pied Beauty" as the "micro-theology" of a poet who "recorded God's grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the quotidian."<sup>114</sup>

The fundamentalist emphasis on a redemptive relationship with God that is directly personal and unmediated is conducive to a non-sacramental view of the physical world: a denial that grace may be channeled through nature, that is, through elements, creatures, or the landscape. And just here it is illuminating briefly to note Balthasar's alternative ideas about the relation between nature and grace. He argued that divine truth assumes encounterable forms in "creaturely nature."<sup>115</sup> Hence, he called for "preliminary philosophical work" that will enable us "to see in the natural realm a breadth, abundance, and multiplicity that will prepare us to appreciate fully the work of grace, which uses this whole plenitude to exhibit itself and, in so doing, permeates it [nature], forms it, elevates it, and gives it its ultimate efficacy."<sup>116</sup> For Balthasar, the Christian can apprehend the operation of grace by virtue of its being consummated through the rich abundance and variegated forms of nature.

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) offers an eminent example of how a sacramental theology is conducive to the creation of a spiritually developed character. John Ames, the book's protagonist, is a Congregationalist minister, much of whose everyday experience is sacralized by a hyper-awareness of the flow of grace through the natural world. In one of many letters to his son, he writes, "I wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it. I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life."<sup>117</sup> Hence, in scene after scene, Ames encounters the most mundane of experiences as deeply religious by virtue of the sacramental power he finds in them. A game of baseball with his brother on a hot day is linked with baptism and anointment when the brother, instead

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<sup>111</sup> O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 175.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Kearney, "Paul's Notion of Dunamis: Between the Possible and the Impossible," in *St. Paul Among the Philosophers*, eds. John Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 157.

<sup>115</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory: Vol. 1: Truth of the World* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>117</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York, NY: Picador, 2004), 69.



of drinking a glass of cool water, pours it over his own head, then recites Psalm 133 and its invocation of the sanctifying power of “precious oil upon the head.”<sup>118</sup> When Ames observes his wife and son blowing bubbles at the pet cat, he senses “the celestial consequences of [their] worldly endeavors.”<sup>119</sup> He remarks on “that little incandescence you see in people when the charm of a thing strikes them,” and links the observation to Proverbs 15:30: “The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart.”<sup>120</sup> And he recalls an excursion to a fire-gutted church, where his father found him a charred biscuit, whose ashy taste, “might resemble the bread of affliction,” an association that invests the moment with eucharistic significance.<sup>121</sup> Robinson’s writing is most vivid whenever it enriches the consciousness of Ames as he registers divine grace at work in the natural world.

### *Two-Realm Christianity*

End Times fiction’s understatement, not to say neglect, of the rich textures of Christian spiritualities is partly a consequence of fundamentalism’s theocentric attitude: God-consciousness developed at the expense of Creation-consciousness. In his exploration of biblical metaphors of Creation stewardship, theologian Douglas J. Hall argues, “Orientation towards God too easily becomes an alternative to world orientation, rather than a way of qualifying and deepening one’s awareness of and involvement in the life of the world. Theocentric faith manifests an abiding suspicion of all forms of Christianity that demonstrate a too direct interest in this world.”<sup>122</sup> And with a focus on North American evangelicals, Hall proceeds to note that, “God-affirming/world-denying forms of Christianity” give rise to a “Docetic Christ, clearly enough identified with *Theos* but hardly made flesh, hardly *Anthropos*.”<sup>123</sup> In End Times fiction, the suffering and humiliation of the Incarnated Christ, the Christ of *this* world, has far less presence than the otherworldly warrior Jesus, who descends from heaven on a white horse. “Jesus still appeared before [Rayford’s eyes] – shining, magnificent, powerful, victorious. And that sword from His mouth, the powerful Word of God itself, continued to slice through the air, reaping the wrath of God’s final judgment.”<sup>124</sup> Empathy for a bleeding, crucified Christ who suffered in *this* world would do far more for the spiritual formation of End Times fiction’s protagonists than the gloating reception of the weaponized *Christus Victor* who returns from heaven to usher in the Millennial Kingdom.

In his Temple sermon, Jeremiah exhorts the Jews to be just in their dealings with “the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow” if they wish to dwell in proximity to God.<sup>125</sup> This redemptive communitarian ethics, derived from a covenantal injunction, has no counterpart in End Times fiction, where the only way into the Kingdom is through “justification by faith alone.” This

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>122</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, revised edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 105.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>124</sup> LaHaye & Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing*, 208.

<sup>125</sup> Jer. 7:6-7.

radical shift from justice to justification is reflected in the absence from the fiction of any concern with social struggles and civil rights, with neighborhood and public welfare. End Times protagonists have only the most tenuous relation to community. (Indeed, beyond evangelizing, a character's ethical responsibility to others is virtually a non-issue in this fiction, which is a deficiency given that fulfillment of this responsibility, according to many theologians, enriches the religious self.) This fundamentalist disposition reflects Martin Luther's doctrine of the "two kingdoms," the spiritual and the secular, whose separation, he insisted, must be strictly maintained. The first duty of the pious Christian is to pursue *spiritual* reform within the religious realm, while the pursuit of *social* reform should be confined to the secular realm, insofar as social reform, Luther insisted, was the business of government, not the church.<sup>126</sup> Such thinking has led many fundamentalist denominations to abdicate from civil rights struggles (other than the fight for "the rights of the unborn") and, hence, undervalue how emulating Jesus in his "being for others"<sup>127</sup> enables one's formation as a Christian. George Omega, the protagonist of Kirban's *666*, complains about the mainline Protestant churches, where "there was more social concern and less soul concern,"<sup>128</sup> churches that "have watered down the message of man's sin and God's redemption and have replaced it with a social gospel that attempts to cure the ills of society."<sup>129</sup> Bonhoeffer, alluding to Luther's "two kingdoms," critiqued this rigid separation of Christian ethics from social justice as "thinking in terms of two spheres": "[T]he one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, and the other worldly, profane, natural and unchristian."<sup>130</sup> This separation, he argued, has the pernicious effect of excluding the social realm from Christ's influence and authority. In short, an ethic of social disconnectedness in End Times fiction attenuates the subjectivity of its Christian characters, who live with an undeveloped sense of social obligation.

#### *Dispensationalist Eschatology*

Dispensational premillennialism, the eschatology that shapes the plot structure of End Times fiction, contributes to the hollowing out of the genre's Christians. As noted above, this doctrine reads Scripture as prophesying an End Times schedule of events: the Rapture, the Tribulation and the rise of the Antichrist, the Second Coming, Armageddon, and the Millennial Kingdom. The doctrine's fundamentalist adherents see major political events, such as the Cold War or war in the Middle East, through its biblical lens.<sup>131</sup> But faith

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<sup>126</sup> To be sure, the Christian Right, starting with the Moral Majority, founded by Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich in 1979, is an ensemble of political action committees organized to intervene in the secular sphere largely to promote family values, anti-abortion policies, and prayer in schools. However, this agenda, which is governed by pious deference to biblical authority, is quite different from that of the Social Gospellers and, later, the Civil Rights activists, which is governed by fellow feeling and a concern for social justice. Both agendas, though manifestly divergent, are perceived by their adherents as biblically mandated.

<sup>127</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

<sup>128</sup> Kirban, *666*, 249.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>130</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1964), 62, 66.

<sup>131</sup> Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 175.

in this prophecy reduces the intrinsic value of any long-term, secular-historical developments (civil rights, class struggle) by marginalizing them vis-à-vis the history of cosmic spiritual war. Hence, any subjectivity that may have evolved within the dynamics of secular history is largely disregarded unless it can be aligned to one of the two sides in the clash between the Church and Satan.

The narrative structure of this fiction is designed to correspond with the divinely planned timetable of final events, largely as revealed to the Apocalypticist, John of Patmos. This means that all characters are slotted into a prefabricated plot, whereby human action (other than choosing a side in the cosmic spiritual battle) becomes largely inconsequential in the face of the vast eschatological forces. Such a context is less conducive to developing the subjectivity of characters than when they must navigate an open-ended reality.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, these characters lack depth partly because of the abstract nature of their circumstances; that is to say, they must function within a purely speculative (prophesied) scheme of history. If these Christians had some concrete, embedded relation to the empirical history into which the events of the End Times irrupt – for example, the social marginalization and low-wage economy that will be familiar to much of the readership (the *economic* left behinders) – they might have a more vivid presence on the page. However, given that the purpose of this fiction is to propagate the doctrine of dispensational premillennialism, its characters have been exclusively conceived to illustrate that doctrine. (To be sure, many of the genre’s protagonists are specified as journalists or TV newsmen,<sup>133</sup> but their investigative skills chiefly count for having prepared them for the challenging task of decoding the signs of the impending End Times.)

The sides in the cosmic spiritual battle that overarches End Times narratives are starkly defined in absolutist terms: Good versus Evil.<sup>134</sup> But such a black-and-white morality leaves no significant space for ambiguity or irony.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, even when protagonists struggle with faith, the genre predetermines only two possible outcomes: either the character eventually comes out on the side of God or the side of Satan. And it is precisely this reductionist moral schema that contributes to the melodramatic characterization: a character, albeit ultimately, can only be right or wrong, righteous or unrighteous. We sometimes encounter an End Times hero (nearly always a man) who harbors doubts about God’s benevolent purposes or existence, yet the reader can be sure that, as the genre’s formula and doxology dictate, he will eventually be converted to belief in the essential goodness and inevitable triumph of (fundamentalism’s) God.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Gribben notes that “the providentialism that the prophetic discourse sponsors increasingly counteracts the successful development of character and plot” (Gribben, “Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition,” 90).

<sup>133</sup> Such journalists/newsmen include Tom Hammond (Watson), George Omega (Kirban), Decker Hawthorne (BeauSeigneur), Clayton Daniels (Betzer), Buck Williams (LaHaye and Jenkins).

<sup>134</sup> E.g. Hart, *End of State*, 297-298.

<sup>135</sup> For an extensive discussion of the absence of irony in End Times fiction, see Maltby, *Christian Fundamentalism and the Culture of Disenchantment*, 53-90.

<sup>136</sup> Hart, *End of State*, 256; Most left-behind men in End Times fiction find solace in the beliefs of a devoutly Christian (and, therefore, raptured) wife, who serves as the

Surely Christ's return, "His Glorious Appearing," must constitute such a supernatural rupture in history that it would explode all categories of thinking, shatter the norms of human understanding. In an essay on the "Christ Event," Alain Badiou writes, "'Event' means that the established figures of discourse are powerless to declare it. In the framework of established discourses, there is no naming process available for an event."<sup>137</sup> A thoughtful literary recounting of how such an event could induce a deep shock to the psyche would push language to its limits or, at least, encourage an introspective focus on a radically disrupted mind. Yet, note the following responses to the *parousia* in *Glorious Appearing*:

To see Jesus, clad in white, riding the white horse, and speaking with the authority of the ages, and knowing that He was slaying the enemy in the Holy Land at the same time... [author's ellipses] it was just too much to take in. Enoch believed that Jesus was the lover of his soul, and seeing Him return on the clouds, knowing He was there to set up His thousand-year kingdom reign, completed Enoch somehow.<sup>138</sup>

Something about Jesus' appearing struck Rayford so deeply that he was glad no one else was around. He would not have been able to utter a sound. There were no words for the thrill, the magnetism, the overwhelming perfection of the moment.<sup>139</sup>

One cannot blame the trite prose, the striking absence of any aura of the extraordinary, simply on the limits of Jenkins' literary skills; consider also that the kind of writer who is fixated on the objective truth of divine sovereignty will be less likely to cultivate the type of prose that must struggle to communicate the phenomenological truth of a subject's experience. The latter kind of prose is what distinguishes the fiction of non-fundamentalist Christian writers, such as Updike or Robinson or Percy, from that of fundamentalist Christian writers. Updike and the others clearly have doctrinal affiliations but their prose is more than just a medium for evangelization; rather, they pursue their spiritual truths *through* the minds of their protagonists, a challenge which requires a good deal of literary and linguistic resourcefulness. Conversely, Jenkins' hurried writing conveys no sense of the spiritually transfigurative nature of Christ's return. But then it is not Enoch's or Rayford's or any character's experience that matters; what matters is the theological perspective, Jenkins' principal purpose being to propagate the truth of biblical prophecy. The reactions of his characters are proforma, given that they have been created primarily to validate a doctrinal truth. The human perspective has a small claim on the reader's attention in the face of the apocalyptic force of the unfolding dispensation. Indeed, in the

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genre's role model for righteousness. See Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn*, 234; Hart, *End of State*, 4, 109-110; LaHaye & Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 4-5; Kirban, 666, 42, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Alain Badiou, "St. Paul, Founder of the Universal Subject," in *St. Paul among the Philosophers*, eds. John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2009), 30-31.

<sup>138</sup> LaHaye & Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing*, 206.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

pages that immediately follow these passages,<sup>140</sup> it is the voice of Jesus that prevails, as heard in a lengthy sermonizing monologue.

One can easily lose sight of the simple fact that the characters of End Times fiction are defined in the macrocosmic context of (quite literally) world-shattering events. The genre has no interest in exploring the transfigurative potential of the random micro-event. Ron Hansen commends Jesus's story-telling method of the parable for its power to "skew quotidian reality," thereby enabling us "to find in our paltry circumstances occasions for surprise, revelation, and self-transcendence."<sup>141</sup> Non-fundamentalist Christian authors like Hansen, Updike, and Robinson, have productively worked with "paltry circumstances" in order to expose their protagonists to the numinous power of the ordinary. (Updike famously spoke of his "duty" to "give the mundane its beautiful due."<sup>142</sup>)

Finally, a symptom of this fiction's hollow characters is that the End Times violence, for which the genre is notorious, chiefly affects only the bodies of nonbelievers; the spiritual torments of the latter are generally ignored.<sup>143</sup> Thus, in BeauSeigneur's *Acts of God*, nonbelievers flee at the sight of Jesus's glorious return, experiencing "such pain throughout their bodies as they had never felt before. And looking down, they watched as blood began to seep from their pores, and in mere minutes their flesh wrinkled and [...] began to literally rot away."<sup>144</sup> And in the same context and with the same excitement of apocalypse pornography, *The End of the Age* recounts how "Pieces of flesh began to fall from the [Antichrist's] soldiers' bones. Their eyeballs began to rot in their sockets. Their internal organs slowly began to turn to mush, and they fell, gushing blood, one after another."<sup>145</sup> The violence may be supernatural in origin, but its spiritual impact cannot be registered when the individuals concerned are never more than anonymous infidels, the objectified targets of divine wrath. In contrast, consider the *spiritual* dimension of violence in O'Connor's fiction (though, granted, she is not writing in an eschatological context). Here, the violence is often inflicted by "agents of grace" on sanctimonious protagonists in contexts that facilitate the spiritual development of the latter. (O'Connor was repelled by the pride and complacency of Christians who, in a secular-humanist fashion, had faith in

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 209, 211-212.

<sup>141</sup> Hansen, *A Stay Against Confusion*, 21.

<sup>142</sup> John Updike, *The Early Stories: 1953-1975* (New York: Fawcett Ballantine Books, 2003), xvii.

<sup>143</sup> I can find no reason to think that the grotesque forms of physical suffering of End Times fiction's non-believers figure the corrupt state of their souls. Rather, the genre delivers a literalist rendering of Revelation's prophecy of the *physical* punishments released by the opening of the seals. Moreover, the novelists, who perceive themselves as part of a persecuted and embattled community, recount the pain inflicted on the infidels with, frankly, a tone of sadistic relish. They anticipate the latter's bodily torments as the comeuppance suffered by those who spurned their Christian beliefs. Their fiction is driven by a fiercely vindictive eschatology. As Frank Schaeffer observes, "Jenkins and LaHaye provide the ultimate revenge fantasy for the culturally left behind against the 'elite'" in Francis F. Schaeffer, *Patience with God* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 114.

<sup>144</sup> BeauSeigneur, *Acts of God*, 410.

<sup>145</sup> Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 397. See also Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Apollyon: The Destroyer Is Unleashed* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999), 143, 304-32.

their own powers of redemption.) Recall the experience of the self-righteous grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” who, having just witnessed the brutal murder of her family and is herself about to be shot by the same killer, has an epiphany that signifies her spiritual rebirth. This prompts the killer to remark, “She would of been a good woman [...] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”<sup>146</sup> According to O’Connor, “[V]iolence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.”<sup>147</sup> Indeed, under an introspective focus, a single, familiar act of violence in her fiction carries more of a spiritual charge, registers a far greater impact on a character’s psyche, than all the meticulously detailed, ostentatiously gruesome, and supernatural forms of death inflicted on unbelievers *en masse* in End Times fiction.

### *Evangelism*

Fundamentalism understands humans as essentially sinners in thrall to the devil, so that salvation depends on (i) recognizing that only Jesus can save them and (ii) their repentance of their sins. Accordingly, for fundamentalists the stakes could not be higher: an eternity in heaven or hell. Hence, End Times fiction, one of the most assertive and militant of literary genres, struggles to coopt the terms by which we understand salvation. Openly acknowledging their proselytizing agenda, the authors of the *Left Behind* series employ a vast infrastructure of websites, book clubs, radio shows, and ministries to reinforce the redemptive message of their books; in the words of Tsion Ben-Judah, the spiritual leader of the Tribulation Force, the converted must “evangelize with the fervor of the apostle Paul and reap the great soul harvest that is ours to gather.”<sup>148</sup> But this agenda contributes to the hollowing out of the subjectivities of the books’ characters in two ways. First, the fiction stages a dispensationalist model of history, not to explore the subjective experience of those who find themselves trapped in the violence of the Tribulation period, but chiefly to teach readers about biblical prophecy. As LaHaye puts it, End Times novelists are “sincerely attempt[ing] to use fiction to cast light on prophetic truth.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, the novels abound with lengthy discussions of Revelation and other New Testament writings, such that the novels themselves can substitute for Bible study classes.<sup>150</sup> Second, the

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<sup>146</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in *The Complete Short Stories* (New York: Noontday Press, 1993), 133; O’Connor also dramatizes the redemptive potential of violence in Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989); O’Connor, “Greenleaf,” and “Parker’s Back,” in *The Complete Short Stories*.

<sup>147</sup> O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 112.

<sup>148</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Soul Harvest: The World Takes Sides* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 330.

<sup>149</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 356. It is by no means clear that this proselytizing agenda has been successful. Amy Johnson Frykholm writes, “As I conducted my research, I searched in vain for a person who could testify to a life changed through the reading of *Left Behind*” in Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 164.

<sup>150</sup> See especially Robertson, *The End of the Age*, 146-64; Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn*, 199, 284, 255, 265, 285; Hart, *End of State*, 43-44, 158, 171, 175, 219, 226-27, 253, 257. Kirban incorporates over 120 biblical quotations in *666*, Angley over 30 in *Raptured*.

characters function not as psychologically credible beings, but chiefly to instruct the reader as to whom counts or does not count as an exemplary Christian, that is to say, a *redeemable* subject. Surely, any literary reflection on the question of *human* redeemability should engage in nuanced and probing analyses of the complexity of the human psyche: its contradictions, instabilities, and cognitive limitations. Yet, the authors of End Times fiction, their fictional protagonists, and most of their readers are so convinced of the truth of Jesus's declarations – e.g., “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me”<sup>151</sup> – that such analyses are minimal, if not complacently ignored. Faith in Jesus' words inclines fundamentalist novelists towards indoctrination rather than exploration of subjectivity beyond the parameters of redeemability. O'Connor insisted that Christian fiction should not provide us with answers but “leave us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery.”<sup>152</sup> For her, the best art was not didactic because “a work of art is a good in itself.” Hence, “[t]he artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists.”<sup>153</sup>

### *Conclusion*

There are several reasons why End Times fiction is read. Christians may read it to validate their belief in biblical prophecy or, as Amy Johnson Frykholm has shown, to affirm their membership of a faith community.<sup>154</sup> (I would add that the horrendous punishments meted out to non-believers serve to ratify the righteous status of the genre's Christian readership.) Others simply enjoy the adventures of the Tribulation Force and other crusaders in the world of a future apocalypse in the spirit of a Christian type of science fiction. But readers who come to this best-selling of all Christian literary genres in search of a vivid and compelling sense of Christian spirituality will be frustrated. After all, as I have tried to show, the genre's narration of spiritual experience is necessarily slight and perfunctory given the pressure of fundamentalist doctrines that tend to attenuate subjectivity or place it under suspicion. Ideally, End Times fiction would exploit its novelistic resources to provide insights into Christian spirituality that are not accessible to non-literary discourses. However, constrained by fundamentalism, this fiction generates characters who lack the depth of subjectivity, the moral complexity and singularity needed for it to measure up to other types of Christian fiction. Hence, by the standards of the latter, there are no End Times novelists of any literary distinction.

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<sup>151</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>152</sup> O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 184.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>154</sup> Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, 40.