

The Rapture racket

By Bill Berkowitz

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What if the Book of Revelation doesn't mandate death, destruction and the annihilation of all but true believers? "The rapture is a racket," writes Barbara R. Rossing in the first sentence of her recently published book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Westview Press, 2004). Rossing, a New Testament scholar and an associate professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, maintains that the Rapture is a fraud of monumental proportions, as well as a disturbing way to instill fear in people.

"Whether prescribing a violent script for Israel or survivalism in the United States, this theology distorts God's vision for the world," Rossing writes. "In place of healing, the Rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus' blessing of peacemaking, the Rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war. [...] This theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind!"

What if the Book of Revelation doesn't spell doom and gloom? What if it doesn't mandate the death, destruction and annihilation of all but true believers? What will Rapture-mongers do?

The Rev. Tim LaHaye and his co-author Jerry Jenkins are as responsible as anyone for taking *The Rapture* mainstream. Their *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels, published by Tyndale House, have sold nearly 60 million copies and for several years have been regular staples on the fiction best seller lists across the country. The final volume in the 12-volume series, *Glorious Appearing*, was released this spring and it quickly found its way onto the best seller lists. The Rev. LaHaye – a longtime, high-profile religious right political leader who co-founded *The Moral Majority* with Rev. Jerry Falwell in 1979 – does the novels' imagining, while Jenkins, the author of more than 100 books including *Out of the Blue* with former Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Orel Hershiser and *Just As I Am*, the Rev. Billy Graham's memoir, does the writing.

Their message is a variation of President Bush's "Either you're with us, or you're with them" war against terrorism mantra: Either you accept Jesus Christ as your savior or, the Rev. LaHaye told CNN's Larry King, you will be left behind.

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The phrase “left behind” derives from “the Christian fundamentalist belief in the Rapture [also known as the End of Days] that is, at the sound of a trumpet, Jesus will soon appear in the clouds to take believers up to meet him, thus escaping the horrible calamities foretold in the Book of Revelation,” writes Guy Manchester in *Freedom Writer*. Manchester, the author of *Acts of the Apostles*, a novel about theocracy in America, maintains that Rapturists believe that those who aren’t lifted up will be left behind to suffer the consequences of “The Great Tribulation,” a seven-year period, the last three and a half years of which will contain great suffering and devastation. Jews, amongst others, will be left behind to suffer, but before it’s over “144,000 of them will accept Jesus as their savior. The rest will perish.”

For true believers -- and there are many millions in the United States -- the Rapture is a glorious prospect. Some fundamentalist Christians see the war in Iraq and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as a foreshadowing of the coming of the Rapture, and as a way to speed up the end of times. The Rapture scenario is what many believe drives evangelical Christians to demonstrate their unwavering support for Israel. Rossing, who supports states for both Jews and Palestinians writes: “... the new movement of ‘Christian Zionism’ is a militant all-or-nothing kind of Zionism that scripts Israel as a player in the dispensationalist Christian end-times drama in a way that baffles even Israelis.”

Then, there are the prophets making profits off the Rapture. “Usually the doomsday prophecies are reasonably harmless,” Bryan Zepp Jamieson wrote in an April essay for zeppcommentaries.com. “A small group of people hole up somewhere for the rapture, and when it doesn’t happen, they just figure their leader made a mistake in the arithmetic, and most go right on believing. Sometimes the leader convinces his followers that the way to not get left behind is by signing everything they own over to the leader, and come the day of reckoning, the group finds that they got left behind in a different sort of way.”

“They (the Left Behind series) are instilling this terrible fear in children that people are going to be left behind. It is not biblical. There is no rapture in the Bible,” Rossing told The Rutherford Institute’s Whitehead.

“9/11 was a wake up call to America,” the Rev. LaHaye told Morley Safer in his 60 Minutes II interview. “Suddenly, our false sense of security was shaken. Now we realize we’re vulnerable. And that fear can lead many people to Christ.”

“I see many signs of the Lord’s return. This could be the generation that’s going to hear Jesus shout from the heaven, and we’ll respond, to be with him. And you don’t want your loved ones to be left behind,” he pointed out.

In an interview with The Rutherford Institute’s John Whitehead, Barbara Rossing turns the tables on the Rapture faithful who see death, annihilation and years of terror: “I was on

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60 Minutes [II] with [the Rev.] Tim LaHaye, [and] he said that liberals have created this loving, wimpy Jesus and that we need the judgmental, warrior Jesus. The big question now is what is the true image of Jesus? A loving Jesus is not wimpy. A loving Jesus is precisely who Jesus is, and that is how he is portrayed in the Gospels.”

Rather than scare the living daylights out of folks, the book of Revelation actually aims “to comfort and inspire Christians to a vision of hope,” Rossing stated. “In the early Roman Empire, when it looked like violence was getting out of hand – much like things today – it was a message to people that the empire would not last much longer and that the Emperor was not the one in charge of the world. Jesus is in our midst, but He is not the avenging warrior Jesus. Jesus is the lamb who is leading us to a different way of life – one espousing love.”

The Left Behind series has helped launch an extraordinarily profitable cottage industry, where there’s no shortage of new products and spin-offs: Left Behind II: Tribulation Force - - the second Left Behind movie starring Kirk Cameron -- is now available on DVD; The Left Behind Prophecy Club is a fee-based website and newsletter designed “to help people understand how current events may actually relate to End Times prophecy;” “In a world where madmen rule, the voice of God will not be silenced,” reads the promotional blurb for Jerry Jenkins’ latest novel titled Silenced (Book 2 in the SOON trilogy).

For those looking for up-to-the-minute Rapture scorecards, Webmaster Todd Strandberg has created The Rapture Index, which he somewhat playfully calls a “Dow Jones Industrial Average of End Time activity.” The Rapture Index tracks of a number of indicators, aimed at gauging how bad things are on earth. Included in the mixed bag of categories or “indicators” are: Bible-related categories which include False Christs, Satanism, the Mark of the Beast and The Anti-Christ; financial indicators, including stats on unemployment, inflation, interest rates, and oil prices; cultural issues including drug use, liberalism, and civil rights; and then, there are your natural disasters -- earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, plagues and drought.

Two weeks after 9/11, “the index hit an all-time high of 182... as the bandwidth nearly melted under the weight of 8 million visitors,” Time magazine reported. As of September 13, the index stood at 151, the highest number this year. (Interestingly, the record low number, 93, was registered on December 12, 1993, the end of Bill Clinton’s first year as president.)

Comparing the theme of the “Left Behind” series to ethnic cleansing, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently wrote: “If a Muslim were to write an Islamic version of ‘Glorious Appearing’ and publish it in Saudi Arabia, jubilantly describing a massacre of millions of non-Muslims by God, we would have a fit.” Kristoff added that “It’s disconcerting to find ethnic cleansing celebrated as the height of piety.”