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Crawford GRIBBEN

Evangelicals, Islamists and the globalisation of apocalyptic discourse

ABSTRACT: After 9/11, it has become increasingly obvious that strongly held religious convictions about the end of the world cannot be dismissed as the predictable consequences of deprivation, as several generations of social scientists once claimed. Instead, it has become clear that these kinds of ideas, having a life of their own, may establish discourses which may have extraordinary capacity to cross nations, cultures and even religions, encouraging passive withdrawal from the political world as well as inspiring vicious and sometimes violent attempts at its subjugation, underwriting the 'war on terror' as well as inspiring some of those intent on the destruction of the United States.

This article describes one of Ireland's most successful intellectual exports – a very specific system of thinking about the end of the world known as 'dispensational premillennialism.' And the article will move from county Wicklow in the early nineteenth century, through the troubled decades of American modernity, to arrive, perhaps unexpectedly, in the company of the soldiers of radical *jihad*. The article will describe the globalisation of a discourse which was developed among the most privileged classes of early nineteenth-century Ireland to explain and justify their attempt to withdraw from the world, and which has more recently been used to explain and justify sometimes violent political interventions by both prominent Western politicians and some of the most marginalised and desperate inhabitants of our broken twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Ireland, America, John Nelson Darby, millenialism, dispensationalism.

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Did you notice when the world ended? Francis Fukuyama thought he could identify the 'end of history' in the global conquest of the market forces of late capitalism (1992). He might have been optimistic. Samuel Huntingdon followed Fukuyama's proposal with a less sanguine consideration of the shape of future conflicts, which he anticipated would reflect a 'clash of civilisations' (1996). And parts of his analysis were perhaps prescient. But political events move at their own speed, and frequently take unexpected turns. And so, in the summer of 2001, as scholars argued about whether the new century would really mark the global triumph of late capitalism, a group of Islamist terrorists hijacked a passenger plane and took the flight on a direct route towards a major American target – the President himself.

You may think you know what happened next. But you probably don't. Because the events I'm describing happened not on that day of infamy, 11 September 2001, but several months earlier, and in the realm of fiction, as evangelical Christian and Republican political strategist Joel C. Rosenberg completed the manuscript of his first prophecy novel, which he entitled, *The Last Jihad*.

Evangelical prophecy novels – that is, novels about the events which evangelicals tend to associate with the end of the world – are the subject of increasing scholarly attention. Literary critics and cultural historians have become particularly interested in the phenomenon in the aftermath of the success of the *Left Behind* series, which in the decade after the publication of the first instalment in 1995 sold over 65 million copies and had been read by one in nine of the American population. The series generated an extraordinary amount of publicity for an evangelical cultural project. And the two authors of the *Left Behind* series, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, have both appeared on the cover page of *TIME* and *Newsweek*.[1]

But the phenomenon is much broader than *Left Behind* alone. The novel in which Rosenberg anticipated the events which would take place on 9/11 (a novel which he eventually published in 2002) became successful in its own right, reaching number seven on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and number four on the bestseller list of the *Wall Street Journal*. And Rosenberg has followed *The Last Jihad* with a series of other novels extending the contours of its plot.

Much of Rosenberg's writing would be familiar to the devotees of this literary tradition. Throughout the history of the prophecy novel genre, its narratives have described more or less the same sequence of events, which most evangelicals in the USA associate with the end of the world. This sequence of end-times events, which is perhaps the dominant eschatological position among American evangelicals, is known as 'dispensational premillennialism,' or 'dispensationalism.' This system argues that normal life will continue until the 'rapture,' the unexpected and invisible return of Jesus Christ to take all true believers to heaven. In heaven, these believers are protected from the horrors of the 'tribulation,' during which, for at least seven years, the Antichrist rises to power and inaugurates a global persecution of Jews and those Gentiles who have come to believe in Jesus Christ after the rapture. During the tribulation, God pours out upon the earth the horrific judgements described in Revelation. These natural and supernatural disasters, together with the ravages of the Antichrist, result in billions of deaths. They will conclude with the second coming proper,

[1] *Time*, 1 July 2002, and *Newsweek*, 24 May 2004.

when Jesus Christ returns to judge his enemies and being a one-thousand year earthly reign described as 'the millennium.' Satan and his minions are bound during this period, but at its conclusion they are released to foment a final rebellion of humanity. The rebellion will fail, Christ will present the kingdom to his Father, and God will be all in all.

But these theological principles support a very specific set of political assumptions. Adherents of the dispensational scheme tend to assume that Jews have an inalienable right to the lands promised to Abraham, that the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 was a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and therefore that Christians should support Israel in its struggle with neighbouring Arab powers. Adherents of this system also tend towards political passivity in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict – for, they argue, the first person to solve the problems of the Middle East will be the Antichrist.

While this eschatological system may seem abstruse, and its political implications in some ways unfamiliar, many of the elements of dispensationalism have entered American popular culture. In 1991, for example, David Duchovny and Mimi Rogers starred in a movie entitled *The Rapture*, playing characters who convert from a swinging lifestyle to adopt a strict religiosity when they come to understand that the end of the world is approaching. These references increased through the 1990s with the release of a series of movies concerned with the approaching millennium, and linking it to themes of global disaster. These references continued to be made after the turn into the third Christian millennium. The 16th season of the *The Simpsons* included an episode entitled, 'Thank God, it's Doomsday' (2005), which featured Homer Simpson using numerology to conclude that the end of the world was less than one week away. With Homer predicting that "stars will fall from the sky," the residents of Springfield witness a number of celebrities fall from a stage to their deaths, and the prophecy is apparently confirmed. Similar resonances were at work in the Sonic Youth song, 'Do you believe in the rapture?' (2006). Other references, in different media, abound. But some of these key ideas have mutated as they have moved into popular culture, and as they have been appropriated by audiences which we might have expected to be fundamentally opposed to their original religious and political purpose.

That's why Rosenberg's novel, *The Last Jihad*, is so important. It signals so clearly the strange similarities of belief and/or action between American evangelicals and their most significant apocalyptic other, and suggests ways in which elements of the American evangelical eschatological style might be adopted by their political and cultural 'others.' The coincidence – for the parallels can surely be nothing more than coincidence – signals the extent to which important groups of Islamists and evangelicals are coming to share a similar set of expectations about the end times.

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But what we might not expect is that the origins of these expectations can be traced to Ireland, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In county Wicklow, almost two hundred years ago, members of the ascendency found themselves driven to a renewed study of biblical prophecy. Reacting to the horrors of the 1798 rebellion, and worrying that their privileges were continuing to be eroded, Irish protestants developed a novel interpretation of the end times which sought

to explain and justify from Scripture their political passivity, cultural withdrawal, and ecclesiastical separatism and secession. These developments in end-times thinking were led by John Nelson Darby, whose influence on the eschatological thought of evangelicals was "both profound and pivotal, more so perhaps than any other Christian leader for the last 200 years."[2]

Darby had been born in London, in 1800, to Irish and American parents with excellent social connections and Irish estates to match. Darby was educated in Westminster School, London, and Trinity College, Dublin, winning a gold medal for classics in 1819. He turned his considerable talents to law, and after further studies in King's Inn, Dublin, and Lincoln's Inn, London, was admitted to the Irish bar in 1822. It was a promising beginning. His brother in law, Edward Pennefather, was already established in a legal career, and would become Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. But Darby's conscience began to trouble him. Fearing that he "should be selling his services to defeat justice," (Larsen, 2003, s.v.) Darby "longed for complete devotedness to the work of the Lord," and decided to "get round amongst the poor Catholics of Ireland. I was induced to be ordained" (Darby, n.d., iii. 297).

Darby was deaconed in August 1825, and abandoned city life for the remote parish of Calary, in the Wicklow hills. Although he was devoting himself to the conversion of Catholics in the parish, Darby was not himself an evangelical. This situation was soon to change. Late in 1827, Darby was injured in a riding accident and spent several months recuperating in the homes of his sister, Susan Pennefather. After protracted biblical study, Darby came to evangelical convictions, and renewed his conversionist activities in his parish. But his theological evolution continued. Darby became frustrated by the Erastian nature of the Irish church and worried that his privileged world was coming to an end.[3] As he later put it:

> I, a conservative by birth, by education and by mind; a Protestant in Ireland into the bargain; I had been moved to the very depths of my soul on seeing that everything was going to be shaken. The testimony of God made me see and feel that all should be shaken, but … that we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Darby, n.d., iii. 294).

Darby abandoned the postmillennial scheme in which he had been trained, no longer believing that his activities were part of a globalization of evangelical faith necessary before the second coming of Christ. And he abandoned the Church of Ireland, identifying himself with small groups of believers known only as 'brethren.' With his eschatological conclusions being consolidated after a series of prophecy conferences convened on the estate of Theodosia, Lady Powerscourt (1830-38), Darby became one of the most effective leaders of the brethren, and the architect of their signature eschatological style. The origins of Darby's opinions have several times been explained, but little attention has been paid to the particular Irish contexts in which dispensationalism emerged as a theological justification for the cultural and spiritual mood of a privileged minority facing their political ruin.

[2] For a useful corrective to Sizer's analysis of Darby, see Wilkinson 2007.
[3] The following paragraphs are heavily dependent on Stunt 2004, 50-52.

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Darby's ideas rapidly spread to north America. There, circulated by journals, books and itinerant preachers, the structures of dispensationalism drew upon the long tradition of American prophetic thinking. Millennial beliefs were of course much closer to the religious mainstream in north America than they had been in Europe. Darby himself travelled to America on several occasions, and interacted with many of the most influential leaders of the evangelical movement. He found that his ideas about the church and its structures got no traction. But he found that his ideas about the end of the world grew incredibly popular.

American evangelical leaders modified Darby's scheme to their own ends. By the end of the nineteenth century, dispensationalism had become a foundational feature of the religious worldview which was about to emerge as protestant 'fundamentalism.' The publication of *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) associated Darby's interpretive scheme with the scholarly reputation of Oxford University Press. Its second edition appeared in 1917, the same year in which the world witnessed the Russian revolution and deliberated over the Balfour Declaration – two events which seemed to confirm the prophetic scheme which Darby had advanced. Dispensationalism had arrived.

Audiences receptive of the new prophetic teaching continued to grow, both in numbers and in influence. By the second half of the twentieth century, evangelicals had begun to move out from their cultural and political eclipse to mount a series of major social interventions. The popular weekly news magazines grew increasingly interested in the movement, especially from the mid 1970s, as politicians increasingly identified with its aspirations.

Ronald Reagan was perhaps one of the most influential of the system's adherents. In 1971, as Governor of California, he stated that "the day of Armageddon isn't far off … Ezekiel says that fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God's people. That must mean that they'll be destroyed by nuclear weapons." As President, in the 1980s, Reagan included in his cabinet other adherents of the system, including Attorney General Ed Meese, Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger, and Secretary of the Interior James Watt. And he recognised the predilections of his audience when, in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, he famously described the USSR as an "evil empire." But Reagan was no unique example. From Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush, every American president publicly identified with dispensational ideas.

This kind of prophetic discourse has become so successful that even its visual effect can be subliminally exploited. Consider the American presidential contest of 2008. The supporters of Barack Obama very quickly moved to identify their candidate in messianic terms. I remember being astonished to discover in the children's section of Hodges Figgis, on Dawson Street, Dublin, a book entitled *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope*, by Nikki Grimes – one of the best-selling of the huge number of children's books about the president. But the Democrats did not have any kind of monopoly on millennial ideas. For also in 2008, the supporters of John McCain, the Republican candidate in the presidential elections, launched a series of attack ads which identified Obama as "the one." The visual cues were telling – the attack ad mimicked the cover design

of the *Left Behind* novels and so, by describing Obama as "the one," encouraged its audiences to believe that he was in fact the antichrist.[4]

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Other groups are also appropriating dispensational ideas. Of course, Islamic theology has its own series of eschatological traditions, though I'm not equipped to deal with them in a comparative sense. What I am interested in noticing is that certain of the eschatological traditions represented within Islamism do represent a distinctly millennial flavour. This is an idea that students of religion may need to pay more attention to. We need to think not only about ideas as distinct elements, but about the structures in which these ideas are arranged. And in the case of some exponents of an Islamist apocalyptic vision, we find some of the traditional Islamic ideas-components arranged in a structure which borrows crucial ideas from evangelical writers.

Consider the surprising concentration on the year 2000 in Islamist literature. Across the Near East, and in Britain more often than in North America, Islamist writers pointed to the year 2000 as part of a larger timescale that, they believed, would include the final destruction of the United States. The emphasis on the year 2000 was perhaps unexpected, given the fact that the Muslim calendar began in the year 622. But the publications of some of these radical writers were demonstrating that Muslims were turning to the Bible, as well as the Qur'an, to discover the details of the end. 'The Hour' – the end of all things in Islamic theology – was being documented using information derived from Daniel and Revelation, as well as a number of the publications which had done so much to instruct evangelicals in dispensational ideas (Cook, 2013), including the works of Hal Lindsay. Yet, ironically, Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), the *New York Times* non-fiction bestselling text of the 1970s, had exercised profound influence on the Reagan White House. The same dispensational writers were influencing both the leaders and the enemies of the USA.

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And this is where the convergence of eschatological narratives gets complicated. For some American evangelicals have begun to consider the relationship between dispensationalism and its Islamist antithesis. Joel Richardson's *The Islamic Antichrist: The Shocking Truth about the Real Nature of the Beast* (2009), for example, offers a reading of the Christian and Muslim literary traditions to argue that the Jesus of the Qur'an ought to be identified as the Antichrist of the Bible: rarely is the zero-sum relationship between competing eschatological systems so starkly presented. For as Richard Landes has put it, one person's antichrist is another person's messiah.

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[4] The One - YouTube. 2013. The One - YouTube. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mopkn0lPzM8&feature=player_embedded [Accessed 30 October 2013].

Scholars of contemporary religion sometimes struggle to take popular prophetic belief entirely seriously. But prophecies – even when widespread and unlearned – can often be self-fulfilling. And in the convergence of evangelical and Islamist expectations of the end times must be a cause for scholarly pause. Dispensational premillennialism, while developed in Ireland to explain and justify its adherents' political passivity and social withdrawal, has largely disappeared from the consciousness of Irish evangelicals. But it has come to dominate American evangelicals' expectations of the future, and to justify and explain a series of foreign policy initiatives which have involved protracted military interventions. And, paradoxically, it is being inflected in the thinking of those Islamist jihadists with whom the USA increasingly has to do. For dispensationalism is a meme which has evolved as its elements have been appropriated in different, and sometimes competing, faith traditions, as evangelicals and Islamists have shared in the globalisation of the apocalypse.

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