

CHAPTER 8

American Evangelicals Prepare the Eschatological Battlefield in Palestine

The culture of a country is a factor that influences its foreign policy, and it is time to take this connection more seriously with regard to the religious history of a country too. The reversal in the American policy vis-à-vis Israel's settlement policy in the occupied territories, accompanied by the rejection of the justified claims of the Palestinians—who include Christians—cannot be satisfactorily explained without taking the religious context into account. Here, we must bear in mind the special religious history of the United States, since even after the Enlightenment, religious values and worldviews lost none of their power in American public life, and they influenced the process whereby the United States became a nation.¹

Since the end of the 1970s, changes have taken place in the relationship of Evangelical faith communities to politics similar to those that have occurred in Judaism in Israel and in Islam in Palestine. In those cases, we recall, the antagonism between a politics justified in secular terms, on the one hand, and a distance taken by faith communities vis-à-vis the political realm, on the other, gave way to a new union of the two. Something similar happened in the United States, where the opposition between liberal political involvement and fundamentalist quietism lost its

dominance and gave way to a new kind of religious activism on the part of fundamentalists.²

From the 1920s on, fundamentalist groups had withdrawn from the public political sphere and left politics to the parties. But as a reforming liberalism gained an increasing ascendancy from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s and the neutrality of the state on moral questions began to gain acceptance, these groups felt summoned to put up resistance. The fundamentalists were particularly outraged by the Supreme Court's prohibition of prayer in public schools in 1962 and the partial liberalization of abortion in 1973; their reaction was shared by the Pentecostal movement, the charismatics, and the neo-Evangelicals. These "Evangelicals"—to use the collective term for this mostly white Protestant camp—saw these and other court decisions as undermining the morality of America and utterly unacceptable.³ The Evangelicals differed from the "social gospel" of liberal Protestant churches by seeing the principal cause of societal disorders such as unwanted pregnancies, increasing numbers of divorces, prostitution, pornography, and dependence on alcohol and drugs, not in societal circumstances, but in the "unconverted" state of human beings. They fought for the United States as a Christian nation, a republic founded on the values of family and patriotism, with state institutions and laws that were meant to uphold this morality. If need be, a genuine American must rebel against legislation and an administration of justice that deviated from this. Evangelicals made their voice heard in the public arena by running radio and television stations and private schools. With their networks of parishes, schools, universities, judicial organizations, and media, they find approval by roughly a quarter of all American voters today.⁴

At the end of the 1970s, representatives of the political right wing joined the preacher Jerry Falwell and other pastors in founding the organization the Moral Majority. The electoral potential of the Evangelicals had become interesting. "Entrepreneurs of the movement" (to use Manfred Brocker's term) built up new and powerful organizations that drew on the already existing resources and networks to mobilize citizens against abortion, for the protection of the family, for the retention of laws prohibiting immoral conduct, and for a militarily strong United States. They made a decisive contribution to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and he took up many of their views during his period in office, for example, when

he painted the scenario of a nuclear “Armageddon” or castigated the Soviet Union as the “evil empire.” This, however, did not prevent him from concluding disarmament treaties with Mikhail Gorbachev, on whose forehead many Evangelicals thought they could see the mark of the Antichrist. As yet, Reagan’s advisers were able to keep the neoconservatives, who were then in the ascendant, at arm’s length from the government.⁵

The Moral Majority collapsed as an organization in 1986–1987, but its place was soon taken by successors such as the Christian Coalition. In the 1990s, the New Christian Right, with a great number of organizations and initiatives, became established as a political heavyweight and became increasingly influential in the Republican Party.⁶ This was paralleled by the continuing ascendancy of the neoconservatives, who became leaders of public opinion in the 1990s. After the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they proclaimed that the new task of the United States was no longer only to advocate what was morally right, but to enforce this militarily in the international arena. They saw the Middle East as the principal arena for this struggle. They had a dismissive attitude toward international organizations that preferred nonmilitary solutions. The New Christian Right on its own could not determine the outcome of elections, and the Republican Party with its neoconservatives had no chance of winning without the Christian Right. In this situation, the party’s committees believed at the end of the 1990s that the governor of Texas, George W. Bush, was the most promising presidential candidate, because he was well established in the Evangelical camp. After he was elected president, neoconservatives were given key positions in the new administration, and this brought a new orientation to Middle East policies.

Already in 1996, neoconservatives acting for the American Enterprise Institute had advised the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to free himself from the fetters of the peace process. In their eyes, Israel was threatened by a loss of the critical mass for the nation: one disturbing symptom of this state of affairs was the fact that Israel was negotiating with the Palestinians even about its own capital, Jerusalem. And the fact that Israel reacted to terror only with acts of reprisal, rather than by pursuing the terrorist groups into the neighboring countries and eliminating them militarily, was a sign of weakness. Israel ought to make a clean

break with the policy of “land for peace.” It must strengthen its economy through liberalization and take pride in its own strength, independently of the United States. This is expressed as follows in a speech by an imaginary new Israeli prime minister in a report authored by Richard Perle and others for the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies’ “Study Group on a New Israeli Strategy Toward 2000”:

Our claim to the land—to which we have clung in hope for 2000 years—is legitimate and noble. It is not *within our own power*, no matter how much we concede, *to make peace unilaterally*. Only the unconditional acceptance by Arabs of our rights, *especially* in their territorial dimension, “*peace for peace*,” is a solid basis for the future.⁷

Instead of an equal treatment of Israeli and Palestinian claims, the neoconservatives one-sidedly aligned themselves with Israel. This change was religiously justified. One can see in this policy a desecularization of government action,⁸ bearing in mind Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde’s thesis about the genesis of the state in Western Europe: “At the mention of secularization in the context of the emergence of the state, most people think of the . . . declaration of neutrality with regard to questions of religious truth.”⁹ The neoconservatives’ strategy did not remain pure theory. In their foreign policy, successive U.S. administrations have abandoned neutrality vis-à-vis religious claims and sided with Israel’s policy on the question of the occupied territories.

The Desecularization of American Foreign Policy

Without the Evangelical voters, this political program would have stood no chance of becoming reality. Religions had already been growing in power in the United States over a long period, but this development took many by surprise, even among those who studied religion in an academic context. As late as the 1960s, the words of Arnold Toynbee expressed a consensus: “All current religions—whether tribe-bound or missionary or ‘lower’ or ‘higher’—have been losing their hold on the hearts and consciences and minds of their former adherents.”¹⁰ Peter L. Berger himself had declared in his 1967 diagnosis of religious communality that it lacked societal reality in the modern world.¹¹ It may indeed have seemed

at that time that communal religion was one of the losers of the modern period, but things soon changed. Two American sociologists of religion, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, have calculated on the basis of statistics of American Christian denominations across the whole period from 1776 to 1990 that the percentage of citizens in the United States who were members of a Christian congregation has grown constantly. In 1850, one-third of all Americans were members; in 1980, two-thirds belonged to congregations.¹² The trend continued after that date. Those who profited from this enormous growth were not liberal communities, but closed communities (“sects”) that made high moral demands of the lifestyle of their members.¹³ The two sociologists looked for the explanation in a hypothesis of economics, according to which large hierarchical organizations tend toward complacency, whereas small faith communities compete with other groups and must therefore continuously try to recruit new members. This means that the religious market is exploited in the best possible way, stimulating a diversification of religion. Secularization is not the consequence of a declining religious need, but of an unattractive offer on the market.¹⁴

In addition to this explanation, which has not gone uncontested,¹⁵ another explanation looks to the specific type of community formation. In the United States, religions have taken on the form of congregations. This applies even to religions (such as Hinduism) that traditionally were not congregational. One survey has counted more than 300,000 local congregations. These share certain organizational characteristics. As congregations, they possess land and buildings; laypersons play the dominant role in the leadership of the congregation; the congregation elects its ministers; the congregation is dependent on private financial backers. Its activities are not restricted to worship or religious instruction, but also include charitable assistance and active involvement in civil society. The relocation of residential areas from the city center to the suburbs helped to spread this type of faith community: the lack of public institutions in the suburbs made religious communality particularly attractive there.¹⁶ It is not by chance that it was American social scientists who focused on the subject of the social capital of faith communities and its impact on civil society. The welfare legislation of 1996 even made it possible for faith communities to receive financial means from the state to support their social work. A number of solid monographs have recently investigated

both quantitatively and qualitatively the modern formation of faith communities in the United States, confirming that this continues to expand greatly,¹⁷ whereas this is not the case in Europe (with the exception of migrant groups).

This new evidence led to a critical examination of the secularization thesis. Looking back over the 1990s, it became clear that the thesis of a decline in the importance of religion as a necessary accompaniment of modernization was due to specific circumstances and experiences of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸ Earlier sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim did not maintain the thesis in this form, since both these authors of classic works assumed that religion would be transformed in the modern period, not that it would disappear. Studies by Callum G. Brown in Great Britain are interesting in this context. In the “long sixties” (from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s), church attendance declined so drastically that one can speak of a collapse of the Christian life-world. Historians and sociologists came to accept secularization as a kind of master-narrative for the entire history of religion in the West since the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Similar expectations existed in the United States at the same time, as Peter L. Berger’s words attest. In reality, however, the development in the 1960s was not in the least symptomatic of a long-term global tendency.

Premillennialist Constructions of Contemporary Politics

The singular historical viewpoint of American Evangelical congregations was another force driving their increased religiosity. Complex and intensive researches have shed light on this aspect of Protestantism. They show, first of all, that one must not let oneself be astray by the word “fundamentalism.” The “fundamentalists” were indeed concerned to defend the true faith through the dogmatization of “fundamental” Christian doctrines. For example, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1910 declared the following five dogmas to be binding in their literal sense: the infallibility of scripture, the birth of Jesus Christ from a virgin, his atoning sacrifice, his bodily resurrection, and his power to work miracles.²⁰ We must however draw a distinction between the acute controversies that these dogmas provoked in the first two decades of the twentieth

century, leading to schisms above all in Baptist and Presbyterian congregations, and an older religious movement that had joined forces with this religious tendency. Here, I follow Ernest R. Sandeen, who clearly separates the controversy and the movement. The formulation of the right faith in the form of fundamental dogmas rested on the doctrine of the literal inspiration of the Bible, which the Presbyterian Princeton Theological Seminary upheld with particular emphasis (and indeed exaggeration) against liberal theology. The movement, on the other hand, was inspired by a view of salvation history: "It is millenarianism which gave life and shape to the Fundamentalist movement," Sandeen writes.²¹ The book series *The Fundamentals*, which made the new faith known in the country between 1910 and 1915, was based on a conjunction of biblical literalism and millenarianism. When the World's Conference on Christian Fundamentals was formed in 1919, this alliance received an organizational form and the millenarians became fundamentalists.²²

Premillennialism went back to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), a Briton whose teachings swelled to become an ever mightier current in the United States from 1875 to the present day.²³ Darby taught that after Israel had rejected the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the further fulfillment of the biblical prophecies had been interrupted; Israel's salvation history was suspended for a period, during which the Church was the bearer of salvation history. In the present age, however, this period ("dispensation") was nearing its end. Very soon, the eschatological clock will begin striking again, and all the prophecies that are still pending will be fulfilled in a final phase of history. These include the reestablishing of the people of Israel in Palestine. Darby's teachings did not predict when this would take place: it could happen "at any moment."

Premillennialism did not owe its influence to any precise chronological predictions of the day and the hour of the coming of the Lord. The situation was different in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when many Christians believed William Miller's prediction that the age of salvation would dawn in 1844. After the inevitable "great disappointment," the adherents of Darby's premillennialism refused to tie themselves down to a precise chronology. This, however, did not lead to any relaxation of the tension between the false present-day order and the future kingdom of God, since it is precisely the possibility of a sudden and unforeseeable

irruption of the eschaton that demands of the believers a continuous sanctification of their life and a permanent alertness, lest they fail to notice the first indications that history is about to change.

This tension was intensified by a puzzling and much disputed detail that Darby had added to the apocalyptic scenario, namely, the doctrine of the “rapture” of the righteous or of the Church. The question of its provenance has not been completely cleared up. Before the period of sufferings begins, the elect will be caught up to the Lord, thus escaping the terror that will then ensue.²⁴ The textual basis for this belief was the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thess. 4:16–17)²⁵

Darby taught that after the rapture, a terrible tribulation (Matt. 24:21) would begin for those left behind. This would last for seven years. In this period, the Antichrist would exercise his reign of terror over the world; the Jews would return to Palestine and rebuild the Temple, in accord with him. At the end, however, the Lord Jesus Christ would annihilate the Antichrist, together with the Gentiles and the Jews—if they remained obdurate—in the battle of Armageddon in Palestine. Jews who refused to abandon Judaism and become Christians would be destroyed because of their unbelief. After this, the thousand-year kingdom of God would begin.²⁶ This doctrine was called premillennialism because it taught that there would be a first appearance of Jesus Christ before the time of horror. It differs on this point from postmillennialism, which holds that he will appear only at the very end of time.²⁷

This view of history transforms experiences of meaninglessness into a meaningful sequence and imposes on the contemporary power of evil a historical scheme.²⁸ Stephen D. O’Leary has used a rhetorical analysis to distill the discursive strategies and arguments from American millenarian writings and speeches,²⁹ which provide a particularly fruitful and informative object of study. At the heart of premillennialism is the diagnosis of the manifestations of evil and the symptoms of the approaching end here and now. This gives premillennialism a considerable potential for sensitiv-

ity in the diagnosis of contemporary history and the politics of the day. Premillennialism is a cultural “superpower” in the generation of situational definitions that guide concrete action. It is only through analyzing its rhetoric that one can understand a contradiction that has so often been noted, namely, that although premillennialism teaches a pessimistic view of history, it also generates political activism.

The Miracle of the Restoration of Israel

American fundamentalism’s creed affirms what the Apostle Paul once entrusted to the community in Rome as a great mystery: “A hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25–27). Some of the Fathers of the Church, such as Augustine, believed that the biblical promises that had not yet been fulfilled no longer concerned the Jewish people in any way, but referred to the Church as the “true Israel,” but English and American Puritans continued to understand the promises of salvation as speaking of the people of the Jews. They awaited a return of the Jews to Palestine as the final event of the beginning of the Last Days. Israel is a decisively important actor in the final act of human history.

When innumerable Jews were forced to flee from Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, American Evangelicals submitted a petition in 1891 to U.S. President Benjamin Harrison and Secretary of State James Blaine in which they took the lead in pointing out the plight of these refugees and requested a solution—six years *before* the First Zionist Congress in Basle (1897). They wrote that the situation of the two million impoverished Jews who could find no permanent home in Europe was intolerable. Why not give them back Palestine, instead of bringing them to America? After all, God had once given it to them as their inalienable land. Jews had once again settled there, and the first signs of a new age of salvation could be discerned. The Blackstone Memorial of 1891 states:

Does not Palestine as rightfully belong to the Jews? It is said that rains are increasing and there are many evidences that the land is recovering its ancient fertility. If they could have autonomy in government the Jews of the world would rally to transport and establish their suffering brethren in their time-honored habitation. For over seventeen centuries they have patiently waited for such a privileged op-

portunity. They have not become agriculturists elsewhere because they believed they were mere sojourners in the various nations, and were yet to return to Palestine and till their own land. . . . We believe this is an appropriate time for all nations, and especially the Christian nations of Europe, to show kindness to Israel. A million of exiles, by their terrible suffering, are piteously appealing to our sympathy, justice, and humanity. Let us now restore to them the land of which they were so cruelly despoiled by our Roman ancestors.³⁰

As an Evangelical petition, this document is astonishing: at a time when the nascent Zionism was propagating the national right of the Jews to a state of their own, the petitioners saw in the Jewish settling of Palestine the imminent end of the exile and the sign of a new age of salvation. The puzzle is solved when one considers the theological background of the initiator of the petition, William E. Blackstone.³¹ He belonged to the same tradition as Darby and had declared in his book *Jesus Is Coming* (1881) that in a very short time, the fifth epoch of world history, which had ended with the crucifixion of Jesus, would be followed by the sixth and last epoch. All those prophecies that had not yet been fulfilled would now come to pass—including the restoration of Israel. This, however, would be followed by a terrible period of castigations and sufferings for Israel. The Antichrist would appear and establish himself as the ruler of the Jewish state. The terror would end only with the battle of Armageddon in Palestine (Rev. 16:16). Then the powers of evil would be destroyed and the thousand-year reign of Christ would begin (Rev. 20).

Blackstone's affirmations about Israel resemble those of Orthodox Jews who likewise regarded the restoration of Israel as a messianic act—though with the difference that they saw the settling of the Land before the days of the Messiah as apostasy. Only the adherents of religious Zionism would have been more to Blackstone's taste—but once again, with the difference that he would have demanded that they too convert to Jesus Christ. At a Jewish Zionist meeting in Los Angeles in 1918, he was bold enough to say that secular Zionists and assimilated Jews must expect to suffer the most dreadful terrors of the Last Days. He regarded a secular justification of Zionism as completely erroneous.³² As a matter of fact, most American Jews at that time spoke against a Jewish state, since they tended rather to see the United States as their "Zion." Accordingly, there were few convinced Jewish Zionists in the United States; before World

War I, according to data obtained by Timothy Weber, of 1.5 million Jews only 20,000 were members of Zionist associations. He concludes from this that at that period, more American Evangelicals than American Jews were interested in a Jewish state in Palestine.³³

The religious interpretation of the Zionist settlement had repercussions on the way in which the authors of the Blackstone Memorial understood their government. They saw the Americans as the descendants of the Romans—a view supported also by terms such as “Senate” and “Capitol” for the political institutions of the United States. They believed that God had envisaged for the United States a role similar to that of the Persian king Cyrus, who helped the Jews to return to Palestine from their Babylonian exile and who is therefore called the “anointed [*mashiach*] of the Lord” in Isaiah 45:1. Blackstone believed that he had also found a biblical prophecy that predicted in advance the special role of the United States. When the prophet Isaiah spoke of the “land of whirring wings” that would bring gifts to Zion (Isa. 18:1,7), he could only have meant the United States—as is indicated by the bald eagle on the Great Seal of the United States.³⁴

Belief in prophecy is more central to the political culture of America than was long supposed; this has been demonstrated above all by the historian Paul S. Boyer in his thorough study of the modern American belief in prophecy. All the political events surrounding the foundation of a state of Israel kindled an apocalyptic fever in American Evangelicals: the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which held out to the Jews the prospect of Palestine as their homeland; the withdrawal of the British from Palestine and the partition plan of the United Nations in 1947; the proclamation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948; the Suez War in 1957; the conquest of the Old City of Jerusalem by the Israeli army on June 8, 1967, and the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank in the course of the Six-Day War in 1967; and finally, the settling of the occupied territories. The conclusion that Boyer draws from his investigation of the belief in prophecy is similar to that drawn by O’Leary. Boyer too sees premillennialism as an instrument employed by believers to interpret their situation and to infer practical consequences for action. This applies to other parts of the premillennialist interpretative pattern too. The last chapter of Bernard McGinn’s study of the history of the Antichrist is entitled: “Antichrist Our Contemporary.”

Americans are obsessed with putting a name to the Antichrist.³⁵ They have repeatedly been convinced that some particularly cruel ruler was the Antichrist: Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and most recently Osama bin Laden. When the first photographs were circulated after Mikhail Gorbachev's election as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, fundamentalists similarly believed that the red birthmark on his forehead was the sign of the Antichrist.³⁶

"Specifics change; underlying thematic structures remain," P. S. Boyer aptly writes of American premillennialism.³⁷ The premillennialists saw fresh confirmation of their position in the period leading up to the Iraq War, when not a few Americans read the contemporary events through the filter of their belief in prophecy.³⁸ This was repeated during Israel's war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

Timothy Weber's investigation concentrates somewhat more on political activity. The "restoration" of Israel in Palestine in the course of the twentieth century also had repercussions on the attitude taken by the premillennialists to politics. "For the first time [they] believed that it was necessary to leave the bleachers and get onto the playing field to make sure the game ended according to the divine script," Weber observes.³⁹ The Evangelicals were no longer content with the role of onlookers: they wanted to be actors. Weber demonstrates this by means of a presentation of the military and political steps whereby the state of Israel came into being, identifying in each case the active part played by Protestant states and statesmen. And the exorbitant military and financial aid that the United States supplies to the state of Israel is due not only to the influence of a Jewish lobby, as has recently been asserted:⁴⁰ another reason lies in the wide diffusion of this Evangelical view of history.

The Popularization of the Premillennialists' View of History

The premillennialist conception of history has had an influence far beyond the fundamentalist faith communities. The precursor of a popularization of the eschatological scenario was Hal Lindsey, with his book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970).⁴¹ Lindsey was born in 1929 and studied at Dallas Theological Seminary, a stronghold of dispensationalist pre-

millennialism.⁴² In the spring of 1968, as head of the organization Campus Crusade for Christ, he visited California universities and held a series of lectures on five consecutive evenings about the imminent End of the Ages. These became the core of his book about the “defunct” great planet Earth. He preached that the final epoch of the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies about the end of time was imminent: the infallible sign of this was the restoration of Israel in the Holy Land in 1948. The theater of war was being made ready. The time had come of which Jesus said:

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matt. 24:32–34)

Now that Israel has been restored, only one generation separates us from the beginning of the seven-year epoch of tribulation. In other words, this will begin in 1988 at the latest. Usually, premillennialists exercise caution in questions about the calculation of the end, but here Hal Lindsey throws caution to the winds. Almost imperceptibly, a prognosis once again accompanied the diagnosis.⁴³

His interpretation of history goes on to say that the necessary precondition for the rebuilding of the Temple had been fulfilled with the 1967 war and the incorporation of the Old City of Jerusalem into the state of Israel. Besides this, the geopolitical alliances of the battle of Armageddon could already be discerned (chaps. 5–9). The threat to Israel from the Soviet Union in the north and Egypt in the south, as well as the return of the Roman empire in the form of the European Community, belonged to the Last Days. The next event would be the rapture of the righteous from the earth. People would be caught up all of a sudden from the cars in which they were traveling, or from a football match or from religious education class. Even heads of state would suddenly disappear, and the United Nations would promise its help to find them.

After the rapture, there would be a period of suffering. In World War III, Israel would be attacked from all sides. The Antichrist would promise to give peace to this world, and Israel would make a pact with him. Through a clever solution to the Middle East problem, the Antichrist would make good his promise and give the war-weary world peace. This would be followed by the coming of the Lord (chaps. 11–13). A nuclear war

would destroy the world, and Jesus Christ would establish the kingdom of God.

In the run-up to the presidential election in 1980, Hal Lindsey published a new book.⁴⁴ He paints a gloomy picture of the various fates that threaten the United States: it may be taken over by the Communists, or it may be destroyed in a surprise nuclear attack by the Soviet Union, or it may become dependent on the ten states of the European Community. Nevertheless, he sees a glimmer of hope. A political program could save the United States—a program that cuts back the welfare state and bureaucracy, rejects disarmament treaties, and makes America a military superpower through rearmament. This is presented as a way to preserve the faith in the struggle against the powers of the Antichrist; in reality, it was the electoral program of the Republicans. However, the new president, Ronald Reagan, was not himself an Evangelical, nor did he come from the circle of the New Christian Right. As a Hollywood actor whose first marriage had ended in divorce, he was not their ideal candidate, but he positioned himself so skillfully that their choice soon fell on him. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Lindsey wrote a book with Chuck Missler, *The Magog Factor*, in which he reallocated the role of the Evil One in the apocalyptic drama. Now it was the Islamists who took on the role of the Antichrist and his adherents.⁴⁵

“Rapture” as the Plot of a Novel

Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* was almost unimaginably successful: thirty-five million copies of this book were sold up to 1990, contributing to an enormous popularization of the premillennialist conception of history. But even this success was outdone by *Left Behind*, a series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Tim LaHaye, born in 1926, studied at the fundamentalist Bob Jones University and was one of the founders of the Moral Majority. He taught that the rapture would take place before the beginning of the time of tribulation. He wished to use novels to make this view popular, and he found a partner in the gifted author Jerry Jenkins. The first novel, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, was published in 1995, and the sixteenth, *Kingdom Come*, appeared in April 2007. These books were not only sold in religious bookstores; they

also found many purchasers in Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Wal-Mart stores. More than sixty million copies of some volumes were sold, far outdoing Hal Lindsey's bestseller. The publisher, Tyndale House, intensified the popularization of this view of present history through other product lines, such as comics, audio cassettes, web sites, computer games, videos, and DVDs.⁴⁶

The plot of the series is based on a small correction to the theological concept of the rapture that has considerable dramatic potential. In Darby's teaching, those left behind have no possibility of escaping their fate, but this series gives those "left behind" the chance to escape damnation through conversion. This modification generates the basic plot of the entire series, which underlies the storyline in all the individual scenes.⁴⁷ Those who are left behind still have the chance to prove themselves in the faith. For the men, of course, this means fighting heroically and courageously against the Antichrist and his accomplices.

The protagonist of the story is Rayford Steele, a pilot who is en route from O'Hare Chicago to London Heathrow in his Boeing 747, when the passengers and crew suddenly discover that dozens of passengers have disappeared, leaving only their garments and their jewelry on their seats. Steele is ordered to fly back to O'Hare, where he finds a world in chaos. Airplanes without pilots have crashed everywhere in the world. When he gets home, his house and his bed are empty. His wife, a born-again Christian, has also been caught up. Rayford Steele and others now form a "Tribulation Force" in order to oppose the powers of evil. They fight against Nicolae Carpathia, the head of the United Nations, who is in reality the Antichrist—he makes peace treaties with Israel only because he wants to safeguard his own rule. However, the truth demands that during the seven years of his rule, there should be no peace, but only war.

This storyline is staged in such a way that it evokes a flood of projections and associations in the readers and beholders with regard to correct conduct: in a deliberate amalgamation of male and female attributes, we are told that women are devoted and self-assured, while men are dominant and humble. The true America is represented, not by the political institutions, but by the believers; the UN is an instrument of the Antichrist. As time goes by, the moral, religious, and economic decline picks up speed.

Peace treaties and rearmament pacts are the work of the Antichrist, as is also the protection of the environment.⁴⁸

Immediately after its publication in 2002 in a first edition of allegedly 2.75 million copies, the volume *The Remnant* leapt to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Gershom Gorenberg, the author of the studies about the struggle for the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and the settling of the occupied territories mentioned earlier, has drawn attention to the anti-Judaism of the series.⁴⁹ Although the Jews of Israel are at the center of the story, the only choice they ultimately have is between converting to Jesus Christ and being annihilated. The exclusive concern of premillennialism in the past and the present has been the salvation of Christians, never the salvation of the Jews qua Jews.⁵⁰

The success of this series brings something to light that otherwise escapes notice, namely, the matrix of an American popular culture that generates specific views of contemporary history and politics. Its basic structure is an all-pervasive dualism. Evil is not something that has its origin in one's own world: it comes from outside. Human beings are not simultaneously good *and* evil: they are *either* good *or* evil. The solution to the existence of evil is its violent elimination. At the end, the good wins the day. This basic structure, which developed over a long period in the United States, is well known from Hollywood films, comics, and science fiction.⁵¹ *Left Behind* takes up a widespread popular fascination with one particular type of masculine violence and links this to premillennialism. The idealization of violence is transformed from a "religious semi-product" into a model of subjective religiosity.⁵²

The plot of the novels clearly promotes not only an alignment of the United States with Israel and support for its reestablishment in the Holy Land, but also a distancing vis-à-vis the Palestinians and their resistance to the expropriation of their land and the deprivation of their rights by Israel. The 145,000 Christian Palestinians are never mentioned in these books—absolutely in keeping with political reality. For while American fundamentalists cultivate exceedingly friendly relations with religious Zionists, the Arab Christians with their justified claims must take a back seat (as Timothy Weber observes with a critical undertone).⁵³ Israel's acquisition of statehood is interpreted as a stage in salvation history, while

the bitter opposition by the Palestinians is interpreted without any nuances as the expression of a metaphysical evil.

Scholars of the media are rightly very cautious about defining the influence that fictional works can have on human conduct. In this case, however, it seems possible to demonstrate that an influence does exist. The powerful networks of the Moral Majority or the New Christian Right introduced these patterns of interpretation into the world of politics, already under Ronald Reagan and obviously to an even greater extent under George W. Bush. The positive evaluation of military strength, which most of the Evangelicals share with the neoconservatives in the think tanks and the administration, promotes an intensification of the Middle East conflict. A typical representative of this way of thinking is the televangelist Jim Robinson, who was invited by President Reagan to say the opening prayer at the National Republican Convention in 1984. He is reported to have said on another occasion: "There'll be no peace until Jesus comes. Any preaching of peace prior to his return is heresy; it's against the word of God; it's Antichrist."⁵⁴