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Confirmation of Prophecy by Proxy:  
Audience Anticipation and Reception of the 2014 Movie *Left Behind* and its  
Relevance to the Dispensational Premillennialist Worldview

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
Sociology

By

Andrew Burns

B.A. University of New Orleans. 2011

May, 2015

**Dedicated to  
My Niece  
Who Just Got Here  
And  
My Father  
Who Just Left**

## Acknowledgements

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**Notice**

**A complete record of all data source materials is maintained by the author and may be furnished, upon request.**

## **Definition of Key Terms**

Apocalypticism – Belief in an impending end of the world, normally expressed within a religious context.

Dispensationalism – A Christian theological system that separates biblical eras into different programs, referred to as dispensations. Dispensationalism also asserts a literal interpretation of the Bible and biblical prophecy and draws a distinction between Israel and Christian church for reasons of interpreting the Bible.

Eschatology – Religious study of “last things,” and may refer to the study of the end of an age, the end of the world, or death and the afterlife.

Millenarianism – The belief in a major future transformative event that may be associated with either utopian hopes and/or apocalyptic fears. Also referred to as millenarism.

Millennialism – The belief that Jesus Christ will return to Earth to reign for a thousand years.

Proselytize – To attempt to convert others from one religion, belief, opinion or worldview to another. In the context of this study, proselytizing (also referred to as proselyting) is synonymous with evangelizing, or evangelism.

Rapture – The anticipated instantaneous transportation of Christians from Earth to Heaven. Belief in the rapture is, in this study, referred to as dispensational premillennialism, or DPM.

Second Coming – The belief that Jesus Christ will return, bodily, to Earth.

Tribulation – The cause of great trouble or suffering. In the context of Christian eschatology, the Great Tribulation, or Tribulation Period is a seven-year period of time expected before the Second Coming of Christ.

**Abstract:**

Media has the potential to legitimize or spread a belief system to the general public. The 2014 movie *Left Behind* is an example of a deliberate attempt at promoting the belief system referred to as dispensational premillennialism (DPM), or belief in the imminent rapture of Christians. Producers of *Left Behind* (2014) sought to promote DPM to the general public, hoping for a mass conversion. Online discussion and interviews were gathered and interpreted qualitatively. Content analysis of audience anticipation and reception show believers were as concerned with the conversion of the general public via this movie than the movie itself. Differences between the text of the movie and discussion surrounding the film provide insights into the DPM worldview. Dispensational premillennialists are observed; rejecting earthly existence as counterfeit, asserting the general inerrancy of prophecy while rejecting “date setting” practices and using the effigy of the Antichrist to criticize perceived socio-political enemies.

**Keywords:** collective belief, anticipation, reception, Culture Theory, Frame Theory, Millenarianism, Apocalypticism, Rapture Film, mass communications, media.



## Introduction

Belief in the instantaneous transportation of Christians from Earth to Heaven in an event referred to as the rapture is largely particular to English speaking countries, primarily found within the United States of America, and has gained popularity and adherence within the past hundred years. This belief is one variation of a broad system of Christian eschatology, or apocalyptic beliefs, referred to as millennialism. The rapture became a widely discussed prophetic concept throughout the world due in part to media products such as the *Left Behind* book series and subsequent movie adaptations. Belief in the rapture, also known as dispensational premillennialism (or DPM), is increasingly common among American Christians but still quite rare within the whole of Christendom. The rapture is not officially sanctioned religious doctrine by any major Christian denomination, but is an element of belief amongst the growing number of non-denominational churches throughout North America.

In contrast with dispensational premillennialism, millenarianism, and other apocalyptic belief systems and movements, exist throughout the world and occur regularly throughout human history. Dispensational premillennialism represents a contemporary Christian millenarian movement. Modern technology and the rise of social media access worldwide plays a role in the spread of millenarian beliefs, such as belief in the rapture. A form of ideological consumerism now exists, by which individuals may expose themselves to and adopt any number of different social, political, religious and apocalyptic views or none at all. This poses opportunities and problems for dispensational premillennialism, a movement that seeks to evangelize,

to proselytize, to the entire world while maintaining a significant level of ideological fidelity.

Dispensational premillennialism may also be viewed as a radical socio-religious movement seeking legitimacy and normalcy within Christianity as well as the American socio-political landscape. Throughout the history of DPM, adherents are won through social interaction and media campaigns including religious pamphlets, various versions of the Bible, novels, radio shows, religious fiction and non-fiction films. Today those who believe in the rapture continue their outreach through electronic media; they produce video lecture series on their own websites and on YouTube, they evangelize on Facebook and other social media forums. It is this history of successful multi-media evangelism that led movie producer Paul Lalonde to make a new film version of *Left Behind*, the same title and source material as the movie he himself produced fourteen years before. This most recent version of *Left Behind*, released in movie theatres in October 2014, was intended to appeal to a wider cinematic audience by using big budget Hollywood production and famous actors. Lalonde's vision for the film was the culmination of the dispensational premillennialists' primary concerns: proselytizing non-believers, legitimizing and normalizing belief in the rapture, competing with and casting doubt upon rival apocalyptic views, and clearly defining the DPM worldview (Lalonde, n.d.).

Lalonde's production and the subsequent 2014 release of *Left Behind* did not occur within same social climate as the movie version released in 2000 starring Kirk

Cameron. Lalonde's production company, Stoney Lake, hired separate marketing, advertising, and public relations companies to maximize overall marketing of the movie before its release (Partners, n.d.). One firm, Social Notz, was devoted entirely to social media marketing and touts itself as expert in *social advertising*: the use of social media outlets to promote a product through consumer participation and content creation (Services, n.d.). The use of a *Left Behind* official fan Facebook page to generate interest in the film provided a window into the larger social concerns and worldview of fans of the series. Images used to promote the movie on Facebook ranged from images of characters in the movie, to imagined images immediately following the rapture, to images that were directly related to current events rather than the movie itself. Silhouettes of men wearing turbans and holding semi-automatic weapons or images of people in hazmat suits holding petri dishes, hearkening to the hot button issues of the time, were part of the official social media campaign and incited intense discussions that were widely divergent from the themes of the movie or of the rapture. This divergence, far from being extra-ideological, represents the tone and content of dispensational premillennialism within the current socio-political milieu.

The following is a qualitative case study, employing content analysis and qualitative coding in the research design. The data for this case study emerged in tandem with the initial research questions.

I first became aware that the movie *Left Behind* was being remade due to an invitation to “like” the movie on Facebook. I did so and began to see promotional images appear on my Facebook homepage with comments attached that reflected a worldview counter that of the modern, secular society. The emergent forum for rapture-believing Christians appearing daily within my social media constituted an unintended covert non-participant observation experience, one that I simply operationalized through qualitative deductive codes with the goal of generating effective inductive codes.

### **Purpose Statement**

There were several purposes for this qualitative case study. The use of emerging qualitative methods of investigation was employed to show the potential richness and depth of content and analysis derived from social media and through comparing a media production with its reception. In an effort to update the scholarship regarding the particular worldview, this study investigates media representations of dispensational premillennialism (DPM), or modern belief in the rapture, and expressions of worldview implicit in social media comments made by DPM adherents. Another major goal is to explore the role media plays in framing reality and identity through audience interaction, anticipation and reception, of a given text within a given period of time. Through consideration of DPM as a millenarian movement, the value of this case study may lend itself to other millenarian movements. All of the above are secondary to the investigation of the primary ideological grouping, DPM, and what this ideology adds to the overall social milieu.

The primary ideological grouping considered, *dispensational premillennialists* believe in a future instantaneous transportation of born-again Christians to Heaven; an event referred to as the *rapture*. This group represents a significant percentage of the American population. Dispensational premillennialists have a very similar worldview to another Christian grouping, post-millennialists. Postmillennialists do not believe in the rapture but do anticipate cataclysmic events in the very near future. DPM and postmillennialism are both housed within the larger ideological circumferences of Evangelical Christianity and Christian Fundamentalism. Although these groups disagree on specific interpretations of the Bible with regard to the chronology of last things, they tend to largely agree on and have similar ideology with regard to society at large. In investigating DPMs, the expectation is that a greater understanding of apocalyptic and millenarian ideologies, such as post-millennialism, may be attained.

### **Why Apocalyptic and Rapture Media Matters**

No recent survey estimates the number of Americans who believe in the rapture, but a 2010 Pew Research poll shows that when Americans imagine the events up to and including the year 2050 that they envision apocalyptic events (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, and Keeter, 2010). The results show that 58% expect another World War, 53% expect a nuclear attack on the United States, and 66% expect global warming to cause serious problems in the next 35 years (ibid.). The survey also showed that 41% of Americans surveyed expect the Jesus Christ to return to the Earth within this

time period with white evangelical Christians being the demographic most likely to anticipate Christ's return (ibid.). No clear population estimate can be based on the Pew Research poll, but it can be argued that approximately 41% of the American population either maintain a DPM or postmillennialism worldview.

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic media has been a fixture in American media for decades. Most recently, movies such as *2012*, *The Purge*, and remakes of *Total Recall* and *Mad Max* have set their plot within various settings of terrestrial collapse and destruction. Rapture media, which depicts the sudden and mysterious disappearance of millions of people, has existed since at least the first *rapture film*, a 1941 short film titled *The Rapture*. Retellings of the rapture narrative in 2014 included the HBO series *The Leftovers*, a History Channel series entitled *Revelation: the End of Days*, and the remake of *Left Behind*. The recurring narratives of apocalyptic and rapture imagery will only continue as the Internet Movie Database reports that the HBO films the 2015 season of *The Leftovers*, *Mad Max: Fury Road* is scheduled to be followed by *Mad Max 5: Furiosa*, a third movie in the *Purge* series is set for release in 2016 (imdb, n.d.).

The interest in apocalyptic and rapture narratives is related to the apocalyptic vision of the future that persists among Americans as evidenced by the Pew Research poll. Though the majority of viewers of such media may see these movies and television series as pure fiction, still others either adopt or had previously adopted these narratives as their own view of a potential future. The population of

focus in this case study, dispensational premillennialists, views the *Left Behind* narrative to be a generally accurate portrayal of events to come.

Related to this study, and to the use of social media within this study, is the rise of social media strategies for the promotion of a worldview. Facebook is the primary source of data collection for this case study, it is also a website where individuals share news and views outside of the mainstream news and media outlets. In studying the promotion of the 2014 movie *Left Behind* on Facebook, I was exposed to various religious and secular theories involving potential future apocalyptic events and conspiracy theories. In the process of selecting “like” on the *Left Behind* Facebook page, I was warned of potential rapture dates in 2014, 2015, 2017, 2028, and 2032 as well as invited to “like” another Facebook group devoted to proving that aliens were, in fact, demons and that an event referred to as the “Great Deception” would soon occur, signaling impending apocalypse. I was also invited to “like” the independent movie production, *Gray State*, a secular anti-government conspiracy narrative that anticipates a future round up of patriotic Americans into F.E.M.A. concentration camps (Gray State official website, n.d.). The interrelation of social media makes possible the interconnection of analogous worldviews, allowing for the awareness of one to lead to the exposure to many others. The result is a continuum of interrelated apocalyptic beliefs and expectations shared between religious and secular groups that tend to reinforce rather than contradict one another, is worth studying as a relevant modern development within the subject of apocalyptic ideation.

## Literature Review

In considering the question of researching apocalyptic belief, and the specific avenue of research I would pursue, I first considered my own interest in cinema and media as it pertains to larger cultural movements. Movies and other media have the potential to become potent metaphors, expressing in a succinct manner the philosophical center of an ideology. Common examples of this include the deliberate propaganda of totalitarian regimes such as the 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. A more modern example of ideological media include the movie (and graphic novel) *V for Vendetta* and the adoption of the Guy Fawkes iconography by the vigilante hacker group Anonymous; media can provide the symbolic shorthand that represents a political ideology, or a social movement.

It is this type of phenomenon that *Left Behind* exemplifies for belief in the rapture. Before *Left Behind* can be considered in such a light, however, it is important to discuss all the component parts of culture, religion in society, and media consumption and production that all interact in the multifaceted complexity that typifies the lived experience of contemporary culture. It is that multifaceted complexity that begs for succinct metaphors and necessitates totalizing ontological narratives.

Classical sociology focused in on religious experience and the effect religion has on human society. Anthropological data was repurposed to create a general picture of the lived experience of religiosity, the importance of concepts 'the sacred' and 'the



profane', as well as religion's place in the sociology of knowledge (Durkheim, 1965; Weber, 1963; Eliade, 1959). Comparison of religious practices, beliefs and levels of solidarity within religious groups provided a deep understanding of the social order. Religion was considered central to understanding economics and the polity (Weber, 1978; Durkheim, 1965). Classical sociology studied religion in particular as a means of understanding society in general. As with many classical theoretical paradigms, new developments and new information necessitated new study in the study of sociology of religion. A 1993 meta-analysis of then recent sociology of religion articles illustrated the discipline's current focus on the relative success of religion despite the secularization of the culture at large (Warner, 1993). The success of religion within the late modern social climate is said to be due, in part, to the adaptability of religiosity and individuation of religious experience (ibid.). In the course of this paper, the role of media to promote, enhance, and inform religious identity will be explored. I will show that the secularization of society in general is seen by some as a call to redouble their faith, and their religious focus.

Distinction is made between established religions and new religious movements (NRMs) within the literature. In the book, *When Prophecy Fails*, covert investigators observe and document one NRM, a UFO religion predicting a catastrophic flood expected to engulf the planet on December 21, 1954 (Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter, 1956). Though the flood prediction proved false, the book served as *de facto* confirmation of Festinger's expectation that increased conviction and

proselytizing result as a coping mechanism in NRMs when disconfirmation of faith leads to cognitive dissonance.

Methodological issues in interpreting the data of *When Prophecy Fails* have been cited in doubts on the effectiveness of Festinger's interpretation of cognitive dissonance in NRMs (Festinger et al., 1956[2013]; Aronson, 1969). A 2011 edition of *Religion and the Social Order* took on the sociological understanding of NRMs through reinvestigating the issue of prophecy and reexamining Festinger in the process. The collection, edited by Tumminia and Swatos, takes decades of research on NRMs as presented in eight distinct papers and shows that the experience of prophecy is dynamic and reaction to disconfirmation of a prophecy is rarely so easily defined as through one simple mental process (Tumminia and Swatos, 2011). Though much of the criticism is justified, some of the critique is not accurate to the scope conditions originally laid out in *When Prophecy Fails* and, instead, assumes an oversimplified version of cognitive dissonance theory. As a result of this ongoing discussion with regard to prophecy and cognitive dissonance, I take special care to observe when cognitive dissonance seems to appear within my observations and the reactions elicited.

### **Dispensational Premillennialism and Christian Eschatology**

To understand the motivations of individuals who believe in the rapture, who are also referred to as dispensational premillennialists or pre-tribulationists, it is important to understand their basic beliefs and belief system. The starting point for

dispensational premillennialism is the Bible, in particular the New Testament book of Revelation and three synoptic passages collectively referred to as the Olivet Discourse. The Olivet Discourse are a set descriptions of Jesus' sermon at the Mount of Olives as told in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew in which Jesus warns of coming persecution and tribulation. The book of Revelation, also referred to as the Apocalypse or Revelation, is the last book in most versions of the Bible. To some Christians, Revelation is seen as an allegory employing fantastic imagery and symbolism. To others it is seen as a coded history of the early church during years of Roman oppression, and still others view the book as a historical document but one that describes the entirety of human history from beginning to end. These are respectively referred to as the idealist/symbolic, preterist, and historicist interpretations. A fourth interpretation of the book of Revelation, the futurist interpretation, sees the book as a prophetic document that details the future events to befall all humanity. The book of Revelation, as well as specific apocalyptic passages in the Old Testament and the Olivet Discourse, comprise the basis for all Christian eschatology, or end-times study (USCCB, n.d.; Mounce, n.d.; Ice, n.d.).

The *futurist* interpretation of the book of Revelation asserts that at some point in the future there will be a seven year *Tribulation Period*, a time of worldwide war, famine, and suffering that will end with the *Second Coming* of Jesus Christ. Christ will then reign over the earth for a thousand years: a period called the *Millennium*. Those that believe in futurism are thus referred to as millennialists.

Variation in belief exists widely amongst millennialists. Some believe that there will be an idyllic thousand-year period before the Second Coming; this is referred to as postmillennialism. Others believe that Christ will come to Earth for the thousand-year period, this is a simplified description of premillennialism. Premillennialism has existed since the early church, when it was called *chiliasm* or *millenarianism*, but dispensational premillennialism, and with it a belief in a pre-tribulation rapture, did not appear until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the biblical interpretation of John Nelson Darby. Darby's influence on American religious life was significant, though this did not appear to be the case at the time of his evangelism. In order to understand the importance of dispensationalism, one must first consider the legacy of millennialism in America.

### **History of American Apocalyptic Christianity**

Before fleeing for New World, the Puritans represented the height of Protestant European apocalypticism. After a history that spanned as far back as Martin Luther, who defied the Catholic Church's claim to its heresy and claimed the book of Revelation proved the papacy as the Antichrist (Coffey, 2006). The Scottish Puritan revolt that began in 1637 began of a chain of events that led to the Puritan exodus to what was to become America. Puritanism began in Great Britain and was generally hopeful that England would become the "New Israel" that would bring forth the millennium (Stuckert, 2008). As Puritans moved to the New World, so too did their "New Israel" and the hopes that Americans would be the new "Chosen People" (ibid.).

Utopianism and apocalypticism were fused. The New England Puritans remained concerned with future apocalyptic events to the point of obsession. Apocalypse, or in their eyes paradise, was believed to be imminent and, thus, most Puritans planned their daily lives around the hopeful expectation of a Christian utopia (Stuckert, 2008; Maclear, 1975).

In 1831, Baptist preacher William Miller began to lecture across the country that the Apocalypse would occur between 1843 and 1844. Starting slowly, *Millerism* developed into a major American Christian movement, leading thousands to await Christ's arrival. The Great Disappointment, as the failed prophecy came to be known, led to even greater reliance on Bible prophecy in American religious life. The formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Adventist churches were a direct result of the Great Disappointment (Tumminia and Swatos, 2011; Numbers, 1993).

Joseph Smith formed the Church of Christ (later changing the name to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, known also as Mormonism) and began a series of prophetic predictions that continued until his death in 1844. Smith made several predictions for the possible return of Christ as did founder of the Watch Tower Society, Charles Taze Russell. Russell's Jehovah's Witnesses, another Adventist denomination, made several attempts to predict the day of Christ's Second Coming,

Though many of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's American Christian apocalyptic movements were Premillennialist, including William Miller and the Adventists, but it wasn't until a British preacher named John Nelson Darby came to North America to introduce the concept of the Rapture. Darby preached his religious concepts of the separation of historical eras, called dispensationalism, and of the pre-tribulation rapture in the U.S. and Canada between 1862 and 1877 (De Sousa, 2007; Frykholm, 2004). Darby's rapture concept was initially spread through a series of lectures as well as through word of mouth and religious pamphlets or tracts. Although the Rapture was not an accepted tenet of any major established Christian church at the time, the concept consistently grew in popularity throughout America (Eaton, 1997). One of the texts explaining Darby's rapture concept was a heavily footnoted version of the King James Bible produced by darbyite Cyrus I. Scofield (Frykholm, 2004). Published in 1917, the *Scofield Reference Bible* fused the King James Version of Old and New Testament with premillennialist the interpretation of the Bible. The fact that Darby's prophetic interpretations were printed in a Bible alongside key verses, instead of the more common practice of a separate commentary, lent power and legitimacy to premillennialist beliefs (Stuckert, 2008).

The rapture was only part of the larger religious doctrine of dispensationalism. Darby preached that Earth's history is separated into seven periods, or Dispensations, which vary in both the nature of God's expectations of and promise to humanity. Dispensational eschatology holds that, at the end of the current

dispensation, Christians will be taken or “caught up” from the Earth, tribulation will follow and the Christian millennium after (De Sousa, 2007).

Dispensationalism and other millennialist Christian worldviews represent a significant factor in the religious lives of many contemporary Americans. Pew Research showed that approximately 41% of Americans expect Jesus Christ to return to earth by the year 2050, a further 13% of respondents said they did not know, while 46% believe that this “definitely will not” happen (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, and Keeter, 2010).

Prophetic and apocalyptic ideologies, specifically postmillennialism and dispensational premillennialism, have been implicated in right-wing political movements in the United States such as the Moral Majority and Christian Conservative movements of the 1980s and 1990s (Aho, 2012) More radical right-wing extremism has also been associated with millennialist eschatology; several political groupings that can be collectively called Dominionism or dominion theology consist of political attempts to replace the current representative Democracy with biblically derived Theocracy; advocating the abolition of social welfare, public education, the Federal Reserve and the assertion of biblical law over all other legal frameworks (ibid.). Dominionism in America is often associated with a religiously derived version of American exceptionalism and, thus, makes any study of American millenarian movements tangentially a discussion of right-wing American politics and of U.S. foreign policy as well. The complex interconnections

among various eschatologies and political and social prescriptions stemming from American millennialism are vast, too vast to cover in this paper, however it is important to note that Christian eschatology is relevant to the lived experiences and political ideologies of many Americans alive today and throughout history. Millennialism is not necessarily political but has become politicized in America through specific evangelists, combining religion and politics, and enjoying significant success in their evangelism.

A 1991 article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* put the relevance of premillennialism in the context of political participation. The view amongst premillennialists was that much of the social change within the twenty years preceding the survey were caused by Satan and political involvement was a reaction to the perceived satanic threat (Wilcox, Lindsey, and Jelen, 1991). The article also addresses the then developing concept that Satan was not only a spiritual, but also a political force to be reckoned with and fought against (ibid.). Today, as my findings show, dispensational premillennialists view nearly every social force as a site of conflict between God and the Devil.

The subject of apocalyptic and millenarian Christianity in America has gone through a number of internal changes. One recent shift is the result of a series of failed predictions from the now deceased evangelist and Christian radio broadcaster, Harold Camping. Camping promoted his predictions for the end of the world on May 21, 2011 and later October 21, 2011 through his radio stations, on various



billboards, web campaigns and a small army of Christians who disrupted their lives to evangelize full-time in anticipation of the rapture. Anger from disappointed Christians was intense, some volunteers sunk all their money and over a year of their life into spreading the word of the two failed predictions (ABC News, 2011). A few months after the October, 2011 prediction failed to come true, Camping himself declared that predicting the date of the Second Coming was a “sin” and swore off the act of “date setting” the Apocalypse (Kwon, 2012). Attempting to predict the Second Coming of Christ was the very reason that the Great Disappointment occurred, an event that led to several new and potent religious groups within the United States. One hundred and sixty-seven years later, Harold Camping’s failed predictions ensured that an internal taboo against “date setting” would prevent most Christians, whether or not they believe in the rapture, from ascribing to the belief that the apocalypse would occur on any particular date.

### **Mass Media and the Millennium**

Like most Americans alive in the past hundred years, mass media has been an important aspect of the millennialist experience. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth studied Christian Fundamentalists’ interaction with radio and television in the U.S. during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and showed that they had varied success depending on the medium and the state of governmental regulations. Early in the history of radio, Fundamentalist groups had some success in attaining broadcast airtime. After 1929, however, government and network control hindered access to radio airwaves for groups considered to be among the religious “fringe.” The Federal Council of

Churches was given the power to block Fundamentalist Christians from the government sanctioned free airtime the Council of Churches controlled (Bendroth, 1996).

Minority Christian groups, such as Christian Fundamentalists, succeeded not through structural aide to organized religion but despite a lack of support from media gatekeepers. Fundamentalist groups did this by creating their own intergroup governance and focusing on serving a loyal audience rather than competing in new markets. Most relevant for this study, these religious groups used media in innovative ways to counteract the lack of establishment support. In 1960, when the Federal Communications Commission no longer required free airtime be allotted for religious programming, Christian Fundamentalist broadcasters remained and grew in strength and audience as mainstream Protestant Christian programming decreased drastically (Bendroth, 1996). This example illustrates the ability for movements to use mass media in innovative ways to achieve their goals. This holds true for dispensational premillennialism, which owes its current status as a potent American religious movement to innovations in mass media, such as the *Scofield Reference Bible* and rapture narratives such as *Left Behind*.

### **Rapture Films and the *Left Behind* Franchise**

The success of independently produced and distributed media has been central to the spread of DPM. The first major example of this was the *Scofield Reference Bible*, but where this text served to legitimize the ideology of dispensationalism, later

rapture fiction worked more as a tool for inciting evangelism. Like Christian Fundamentalist groups mentioned earlier, dispensational premillennialists dealt with relative inaccessibility of mainstream radio and television broadcast access. This did not halt their momentum as dispensational premillennialists found that the production of independent media, such as movies, was an effective way of promoting their message (Walliss, 2008; 2009; Eaton, 1997; Frykholm, 2004).

The first rapture film was produced in 1941 when an Illinois businessman named Carlos Baptista founded the Scriptures Visualized Institute, through which he produced an eleven and a half minute short film entitled *The Rapture* (Walliss, 2009). *The Rapture* set the standard themes and plot element of every Rapture Film (ibid.). From *The Rapture*, all other rapture fiction can be compared, including the *Left Behind* novels and movies. *The Rapture* was neither graphic nor explicit in its depiction of the Tribulation Period, and relied on emotional melodrama and voice-over narration to describe events before, during, immediately after the rapture (Walliss, 2009). Later rapture films and fiction novels focused on the Tribulation Period as the predominant setting. *The Rapture* briefly describes earthquakes, lightning, and islands sinking into the sea, whereas *Left Behind* gives a detailed narrative of a total societal shift from normalcy to chaos (Walliss, 2009; LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995).

The 1972 Film *A Thief in the Night* began a four movie series, revolutionized the Evangelical use of film, and started what has been since referred to as the *Rapture*

*Film Industry* (Walliss, 2008). The *Thief in the Night* movie series, also referred to simply as the *Apocalypse* series, added to the thematic structure of rapture films with new themes that arose in the aftermath of WWII as well as emphasizing the use of Bible prophecy as the basis for narrative story structure (Walliss, 2008; 2009; Frykholm, 2004). This film series helped to create a unified dispensational premillennialist worldview and an under-the-radar film industry (Aho, 2013; Walliss, 2008; 2009). The *Apocalypse* film series was never released in major movie theatres, but was instead shown on 16mm film to Christian youth groups and in churches (Walliss, 2008). Many have seen *Apocalypse* worldwide, one source estimates the number of viewers at 300 million. Among them are *Left Behind's* author, Tim LaHaye and Producer of the 2000 the 2014 movie adaptations, Paul Lalonde (Anderson, 2012; Walliss, 2008; 2009; Frykholm, 2004).

The *Apocalypse* series and *Left Behind* franchise focus on describing the Tribulation Period in graphic detail and including new religious, socio-religious and geopolitical themes (Walliss, 2008; Frykholm, 2004). The Antichrist is the most important character in the drama of the Tribulation period (Walliss, 2008). Eluded to throughout *A Thief in the Night*, the Anti-Christ is the agent of evil who comes to rule the world as a bringer of peace, forming a One World Government (alternatively referred to as a New Roman Empire); this is an intentional allusion to and vilification of the United Nations and of globalization in general (Ibid.). The Antichrist in both film series and in the original *Left Behind* novels is a European politician (*Left Behind* specifies that the Antichrist be of Roman descent) and these

series also contain a specific social constraint which drives tension: compulsory acceptance of “The Mark of the Beast,” a permanent tattoo or physical brand on the body which Christians must reject (Walliss, 2008; Frykholm, 2004; LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995). Central to the plot in *Apocalypse* is the creation of an ‘apostate church’ which all citizens must join or risk execution (Walliss, 2008). In the *Left Behind* series, the Antichrist outlaws Christianity outright (Frykholm, 2004; LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995). In both *Left Behind* and *Apocalypse*, Christians (those who accept Christ after the rapture, or *Tribulation Saints*) are persecuted, hunted and killed for their faith (Walliss, 2008; Frykholm, 2004).

The history of the *Left Behind* franchise, when taken in conjunction with the social context and worldview of their viewership, tells a story that informs this study. Anyone who read the original *Left Behind* novel, released in 1995, would certainly be able to see that it was as much a document promoting a set of political messages, even more so than an attempt to promote a religious ideology. The novel made a point to show that the post-rapture world would be populated by, liberals, intellectuals, people who claim to be Christian but somehow fall short. The novel begins dramatically when Russia attempts a sneak aerial attack on Israel and is instantly destroyed by supernatural forces. The subject of Israel is of primary concern in the 1995 novel, as was the subject of race. The book makes several references to the Jewish people, Jewish Nationalism, Orthodox Judaism, and the State of Israel; the subject of Israel as the Holy Land is contrasted in the novel with the assertion that 144,000 Jewish men and women will become born-again

Christians only to be martyred soon after. The race of the Antichrist is also a matter of interest in the 1995 novel version of *Left Behind*, though it is only briefly mentioned that he be of Roman descent.

The follow-up novels, and the first three movie versions of the *Left Behind* books, made regular allusion to an afeared New World Order, including one world government with one currency and one religion. Christianity, of course, would be illegal and all will be forced to take the Mark of the Beast. This concern for globalization had been apparent in the earlier rapture film *A Thief in the Night* but was particularly important in the *Left Behind* novels. Where the *Thief in the Night* movies focused on individuals who were choosing whether or not to become Born-again Christians, *Left Behind* focused on the *Tribulation Force*, who had already converted to Christianity and were now fighting against the New World Order. In both of these series, there is a clear allusion to the United Nations and a largely secular European polity as the “real New World Order.”

Though the discussion of race, ethnicity, or national origin does not come up in the 2014 movie version of *Left Behind* itself, discussion amongst those individuals who commented on the *Left Behind* movie’s Facebook page included interest and, at times, a preoccupation with the race of the Antichrist, the fate of the State of Israel, the Jewish people, Middle-Eastern geopolitics, and increasing globalization, among other issues. In reading the novels, and viewing the movies, *Left Behind* can be seen as much as a political as a religious ideological document.

## **The Relevance of Millenarianism and Millenarian Movements**

Not all Christians adhere to an apocalyptic reading of the Bible. Likewise, Christianity is not the only religion or ideology that has spawned apocalyptic ideation. That being said, the term *millenarianism*, noted earlier as a term used for early Christian premillennialism, has come to describe any messianic movement, be it religious or secular. For this reason, considering Christian millenarian movements can serve as a historical base level by which other millenarian movements may be contrasted.

Millenarianism can be defined as a belief in an imminent, radically transformative event enacted by a messianic agent to provide salvation to believers (Cohn, 1970; Bowie and Deacy, 1997). The millenarian mindset generally includes an idealized past, a highly negative view of current conditions, the expectation of ecstasy for the in-group and agony for everyone else (Hall, 2013). Millenarian movements often develop as a reaction to radical social change (Bowie and Deacy, 1997). These movements have taken the form of religious, secular, nationalist, social and even economic apocalypticism (ibid.). Millenarianism assumes the need for a radically transformative future event and either anticipates a future messianic actor and/or redemptive event or, as in the case of millenarian violence, attempts to initiate the desired transformation.

Prototypical Millenarianism, so called by religious studies researcher G.W. Trompf due to a lack of a defined Messiah (or specific evidence thereof), has been noted in

non-Western cultural beliefs and practices such as the native migratory quests of pre-Columbian Brazil and the social disturbances of the Taiping Chinese peasant revolts (Trompf, 2000). Anthropologists have documented millenarian movements occurring as the reaction of native peoples to first contact with the outside world and, in particular, modern tools and equipment (Bowie and Deacy, 1997). *Cargo cults*, as explained by anthropologists, were a reaction to the shock and disorientation that followed the loss of social order and usually involved mystical visions of reclaiming the old social order (Ibid.). The center of tribal power lost as the introduction of new information and technology dissolves the *collective effervescence* and once sacred objects lose their *mana* (Bowie and Deacy, 1997; Durkheim, 1959[1912]). From a Durkheimian standpoint millenarian movements, therefore, are the result of loss of the *totemic principle* that unifies the tribe and links the community with sacred power. *Cargo cults* develop as tribal elders begin having visions of *mana* restored (ibid.).

Current research on millenarian movements has focused on recent and contemporary millenarian violence. Quantitative and long range research following millenarian-inspired events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and Branch Davidian stand-off and siege found that between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, religious millenarian groups were far less likely (36.9%) to resort to violence due to governmental or economic pressures than secular millenarian groups (87.5%), suggesting that secular millenarian movements are more radical than religious ones (Lee and Simms, 2008). The rise of Hitler and the



Nazis in the late-1920s is perhaps the most well known secular millenarian movement in human history (Rhodes, 1980). Current secular millenarian movements in America that either threaten to turn violent or have become violent in some way include the Militia movement and the White Supremacist movement (Lee and Sims, 2008; Barkum, 1989). The current conflict between world governments and terrorist organizations in general, and the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) in particular, belies a great need for nuanced study of millenarian movements (Celso, 2014).

It is important to continue studying non-violent and/or religious millenarian movements to better understand the dynamic evolving nature of millenarian ideologies. Similarities remain between violent and non-violent millenarianism; and between the secular and the religious millenarian movements. All millenarian movements have as common threads the reaction to social change, the desire for a major transformative event, and the tendency toward proselytizing. Though all millenarian movements have similarities, particularities exist based on a wide range of factors such as parent ideology, socio-economic status of movement members, and the specific social changes to which they are reacting. Individual movements may change goals, tactics or ideological center (Bainbridge, 1997; Stuckert, 2008; Trompf, 2000). The social milieu surrounding a millenarian movement may change as well, outlawing or stigmatizing a once legitimate ideology, producing ideological schisms, or legitimizing an ideology once considered taboo or sacrilege. There is still much to be learned by studying how members of these movements perceive current

events and envision future risks. Still more can be learned about how millenarian movements consume, use, interpret, and interact with new technology and media. These insights are, to varying degrees, transferable from non-violent movement to violent movement; which may benefit the overall knowledge base of global risk management as well as sociology in general (Bainbridge, 1997; Wilcox, Lindsey, and Jelen, 1991). This, of course, is not to insinuate that ideology is only relevant for study when adherents turn violent but, rather, to point out that there is to be a distinction between violent and non-violent ideological movements.

It is important to distinguish between the movement and the original religion or ideology from which it developed. For the purpose of this study, dispensational premillennialism will be considered a millenarian movement, not for the content of its religious doctrine but for its focus on the expectation of an apocalyptic future and the expected fate to befall those who do not believe and act accordingly. In this sense, dispensational premillennialism is less a religious movement and more of a social movement with a religiously derived ideology. As a millenarian movement, dispensational premillennialism can be discussed and considered for the social changes that concern those members of the movement. One telling aspect that regularly comes up within this particular research is the use of particular Bible verses, but more often a particularly millenarian and apocalyptic framing of current events and social forces, to reinforce and validate belief in the wickedness of this world and a coming rapture.

## **Framing and the Call to Proselytize**

Erving Goffman's explanation of primary frameworks (or 'frames') as "schemata of interpretation" lends insight into differing worldviews and how an idea or event might be meaningless to one group but fully imbued with meaning to another. Goffman's book *Frame Analysis* describes two primary frameworks, *natural* and *social*. Natural frameworks view events as driven by natural determinants and social frameworks perceive events as driven by the *guided doings* of an agent (Goffman, 1974). DPM frames all events as *guided doings*, either by God or by Satan (Walliss, 2004). This distinction is significant; the whole of reality is seen as a decision made by an intelligent being, not as a force of nature. Nearly every catastrophic event, major geopolitical development, and cultural movement is thus viewed as the result of either divine or demonic intervention (Naugle, n.d.). This, in turn, creates the locked-tight logic that negates any disconfirmation either on the basis of them being satanic deceptions or, in the case of failed apocalyptic "date setting", the sole providence of God.

The end of the world is, itself, a framing schema. For the world to end, there must first be a definition to what necessitates 'the end' as well as the presupposition of this world as transitory. The simplified version of the premillennialist Christian ontology is that this world is part of a greater reality that includes Heaven and Hell and that this world will be removed and replaced with a new Heaven and a new Earth (Ice, n.d.). The concept of an end to humanity's earthly existence, to premillennialists, is a welcome one. They anticipate the fulfillment of prophecy with

joy and welcome; through the destruction of the world comes their great reward in the next.

Dispensational premillennialism can further be explored through the literature considering collective frames of social movements. Researchers Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow conducted a review of the scholarship that updates and further informs theory of social movements with regard to framing. They found that social movements are not just the physical mobilization of like-minded people against a perceived problem or need, but also the means by which meaning is produced and maintained (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frames change both through discursive and strategic processes as well as through contestation with opposing frames (Ibid.). Premillennialism is a social movement housed within a specific set of religious and apocalyptic beliefs (Aho, 2013). To this end, discursive processes such as proselytizing and strategic processes such as promoting their ideology in the public realm provide meaning and purpose to the lives of members of a given movement.

Believers in a pre-tribulation rapture are among a significant number of Fundamentalist Christians who frame the world as both doomed and beset by evil forces. They believe the only option is to deny the world and become a born-again Christian (Frykholm, 2004). They also believe in the importance of evangelizing to the non-believer. In this ideological framework, everyone who is not already a born-again Christian is doomed to experience extreme cruelty and pain in the tribulation period and everyone who is born-again will be saved via the rapture (ibid.). What

separates this eschatology from that of postmillennialism is the belief in a second chance of sorts; those who were exposed to evangelism but did not convert before the rapture will have a chance to convert to Christianity during the Tribulation.

It is here that this case study will differ from *When Prophecy Fails* in the context of proselytizing. When Festinger et al. observed increased proselytizing they concluded that this was a result of cognitive dissonance resulting from disconfirmation of prophecy (Festinger et al., 1956[2013]). In the case of those who believe in a tribulation period and the rapture, proselytizing is deeply engrained action that is prescribed by faith and required as an act of duty. The issue of disconfirmation of prophecy, too, is rendered irrelevant as prophecy is defined within the culture of DPM as generally imminent, but not defined as occurring in any particular day or date. Cognitive dissonance is still an issue, but in this case study it only becomes apparent when the movie *Left Behind* fails to ignite a new spiritual revival in America.

Proselytizing, more commonly referred to in Christianity as evangelism, is one of the primary stated goals for the making of the 2014 movie version of *Left Behind*. Rather than just reaching out to the faithful, as was the case in previous incarnations of the story, the goal was to appeal to non-believers as well. Producers attempted to reach this wider audience by hiring big name actors and using Hollywood quality production (Lalonde, 2014). Producer Paul Lalonde hoped non-believers who saw

the movie would either convert immediately or at least be aware of what is happening when millions of Christians disappear.

It is in the above context that media and cultural studies perspectives are useful. No matter the producer's intention of purpose, meaning, or message, the consumers (social agents) have the power to accept, reject, or mitigate with their own interpretation of the production in question. These processes are theorized and described through the media and cultural study later by media theorists and they will be addressed later in this paper. For now, I merely wish to call attention to the concept of evangelizing, whether via media or otherwise, can represent participation in one's faith, an act of kindness, even an act of love for the believer. These motivations represent some of the conceptualizations for those who believe in the rapture and why they liked, and even why they disliked, the 2014 movie.

### **Disclosure**

My personal relationship with religion and spirituality has left me with a lifelong interest in topics such as apocalypticism and eschatology. I experienced childhood in a Catholic household and attended several church services of various denominations in the years since. I have also visited several religious services outside of the Christian faith. My religious views can most succinctly be described as agnosticism. Though I view the true nature of God as unknowable, I think that the nature of religious experience is knowable and has personal, social, and political components that are worthy of study. Regardless of the true ontological nature of

reality, whatever that may be, religion and religious beliefs have significant social effects and implications.

The first time I was approached with an end-times prophecy of any kind, I was twelve years old. Another twelve-year-old boy approached me in 1992; he told me that the end of the world would occur in September 1997. I became interested in where this idea came from, what prompted someone to tell the young boy this and why he felt it important to tell this to me. My interest in these beliefs were peaked again some years later when, in April of 1993, the ATF siege of the Branch Davidian compound ended in tragedy and controversy and again, in March of 1997, when Marshall Applewhite and 38 other members of the group known as Heaven's Gate were found dead in their communal home. I thought back to my friend who, five years before, warned me about September 1997 and, though I did not believe the world would end, I was worried he may end up in the news like the followers of David Koresh or Marshall Applewhite. Throughout my life, my interest in religious experience has often mixed with the analogous experience of apocalyptic and millenarian belief.

### **Theory**

In consideration of the movie *Left Behind*, I began my theoretical review focused on sociology and media studies, but the subjects of myth and millenarianism both brought in perspectives from classical sociology and cultural studies. Ultimately, the content of the data collected brought the focus back to the use of Erving Goffman's

frame theory. After analysis of the data, all of the aforementioned theoretical paradigms proved important in conjunction to interpret the data.

The movie *Left Behind* serves as a representation of the dispensational premillennialist worldview. The film describes the world as it is and as it expected to be through the eyes of those who anticipate rapture at any moment. Within the theoretical lens of sociology of culture, Wendy Griswold defines the generalizable unit, the *cultural object*, as any item, idea, work of art, myth, etc. with “shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold, 1987; 2004). *Cultural objects* tell a story, and are most readily apparent as a *cultural object* when the medium is already associated with narrative (Ibid.).

Considering *Left Behind* as a *cultural object* places emphasis on the interconnections between and producer intentions, audience reception, the forms the cultural object takes, along with the interactions of these elements within the greater social world. These interrelated elements form a circuit Griswold calls the *cultural diamond* (Ibid.). Griswold notes that cultural diffusion happens over time. The *cultural object* changes as it passes through the circuits of the *cultural diamond* and is output as a new (albeit related) *cultural object*. This process plays out continuously over time. The several incarnations of the *Left Behind* story illustrate this process. Each incarnation is different, yet related, to all other versions of the narrative (Ibid.).



The interplay of production and consumption (intention and reception), and how it shapes the meaning of a cultural object is further explored through the media studies work of Stuart Hall. Hall calls the production and consumption in television. Hall considers issues of commodity production of media, such as television news, a *communicative event*, or “event with meaning imbued within.” For my purposes, the *communicative event* is the same as a *cultural object* (Hall, 1993; Griswold, 1987; 2004). With his theory of encoding/decoding, Hall considers production (intention) as having an ideal interpretation and code of signification, which stands in agreement with the dominant power structure and, thus, is the *dominant-hegemonic position* (Hall, 1993). The consumer (receiver) may accept the *dominant-hegemonic position* and maintain its code of signification, adapt and decode the intended message into a *negotiated position*, or adopt an *oppositional code* that fully comprehends the intended message from the *dominant-hegemonic position* but rejects and recodes it to fit their worldview (Ibid.).

The content of the movie *Left Behind* describes the central myth of the dispensational premillennialist, as do the 1995 book the movie was based off of; but whereas most religious ideologies center their dogma and worldview on the creation myth, the central myth of millenarian ideologies lie in their apocalyptic eschatology. In a sense, *Left Behind* is the *totem* of dispensational premillennialism. Whether referring to the first in a series of novels, the audio book version released to coincide with the first book, one the four video games, or one of the four movies based on the book series thus far, *Left Behind* serves as explanation and validation of

the dispensational premillennialist worldview. As if to ensure the role of *Left Behind* as *totem*, movie producer Paul Lalonde described his film *Left Behind* as “a true story, it just hasn’t happened yet;” a phrase he repeated in nearly every interview in promotion of the movie.

In considering the belief system, its representation in media, and the interpretation of the world at large among believers, it became apparent that those who believe in the rapture regularly position themselves against other beliefs as well as against non-belief. In this respect, dispensational premillennialism deliberately positions itself against secular society and the secularization of society is regularly regarded with suspicion and contempt. *Left Behind’s* story is meant to reinforce faith, be a call to evangelism, serve as a warning to the non-believer and show right versus wrong behavior: the argument being that there is a right and wrong belief but also that one must believe in something.

Following Hall’s schemata of encoding/decoding, Bobo shows that various audience populations are able to interact with a text on their own terms and, thus, can frame the text within their own cultural worldview with their own *cultural reading* (Bobo, 1997). In the case of the population that believes in the rapture, *Left Behind* is so literal a representation of their worldview that a study of the *cultural reading* of the movie by believers would yield very little variation from intention: rather, discursive interpretations exist. What is discussed within the forum promoting the movie has little or nothing to do directly with the plot or the storyline of the movie

and, instead, focuses on current events and how they relate to prophecy. In this context, the texts that dispensational premillennialists culturally read, or frame, include national and international news stories and macro-level social change as reported in various news sources and are interpreted in the context of the battle between God and the Devil.

Mentioned earlier within the subject of millenarian movements, Frame Theory considers the perception of reality as being filtered through the specific schemata of interpretation, or *frames*. Culture and media theorists Wendy Griswold and Stuart Hall's work on reception of media, on *encoding* and *decoding* of media messages, illustrates an example of *framing* in the context of media experience. As I will show in the data, viewer opinions on a movie's writing, acting, etc. are framed through the specific worldview of the viewer. In a similar manner, current events, global geopolitics and the nature and fate of humanity are both framed by the worldview of those who perceive it and serve to augment, reinforce, and may occasionally negate a specific framework.

It is worth reiterating that the modern world as framed by the dispensational premillennialist is overrun with evil and, therefore, they adopt an oppositional stance in reference to those elements of modern society they find to be against God, namely secularization and humanism. Dispensational premillennialists thus read any communicative event that appears to be in support of secularization or humanist ideals through an oppositional code.

A cinematic representation of a *cultural object* serving as the central myth of a social movement, *Left Behind* reinforces the dispensational premillennialist ideological worldview and prescribes right action for believers and non-believers alike. Goffman's Frame Theory helps explain that reality is viewed through specific interpretive schemes. Sociology of culture explores the interplay between societies and the narratives they produce. Media studies consider the active participation of viewer in the consumption of media. Considering the social and historical context of the 2014 version of *Left Behind*, and the audience's reception thereof, closes the circuit of consumption and culture, claiming that society itself is a set of narratives that are either agreed upon or contested. All of these perspectives remained relevant when considering the data collected with regard to the following research questions.

## Gaps in the Literature

Scholarship regarding dispensational premillennialism has focused on the religious ideology. Rapture film literature has focused these movies as a means for dispensational premillennialists to cope with, and comment on, current events as well as reinforcing DPM identity and ideology (Walliss, 2008; 2009; Frykholm, 2004). Scholarship on this subject had not dealt with audience reaction to these movies or what ideological constructs might emerge through detailed investigation of audience reaction. Given the importance placed on proselytizing by the movie's producers, the 2014 theatrical release of *Left Behind* served to study audience reaction. In studying the anticipation of dispensational premillennialists before seeing the movie, and reactions after, it is my hope that greater insight into the ideology and worldview of this population will emerge.

The literature regarding extremism and millenarian movements tend to view their subjects as exceptional. By considering one specific population with an apocalyptic worldview, I seek to discover the intersections and commonalities with the growing extremism represented on social media in the current moment. Though this group may be seen, in one context, as religious extremists and doctrinal outcasts among Christendom, they also represent a significant and potentially growing number of Americans and, as such, a significant aspect of the political and social fabric of America.

## **Research Questions**

R1: What does audience anticipation before and reception after encountering a given text reveal about the worldview of the audience?

R2: What role does the 2014 release of *Left Behind* play in the dispensational premillennialist framing of the world?

## **Sub-Questions**

R3: What framing schemes emerge that may also exist in other millenarian groups?

R4: What role, if any, does cognitive dissonance play in maintaining ideological framing in this particular context?

## **Research Design**

My research is in the form of a qualitative case study. The focus of the case study is the experience of dispensational premillennialists in their anticipation for and immediate reaction to the 2014 movie *Left Behind*. The research focuses on audience anticipation and reaction during a two-month timeframe, September 1<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, including brief in-person interviews of moviegoers that serve as movie reviews during *Left Behind's* opening weekend. The case study includes inductive and deductive coding of comments made to the movie's promotional Facebook page, reviews posted to popular movie review websites, the in-person interviews, and a content analysis of the movie itself.

## Methods

I conduct a relational content analysis of the movie itself, using inductive and deductive coding. On opening weekend of the movie's theatrical release I conducted a *windshield survey*, briefly asking audience members what they thought of the movie immediately after viewing of audience attendees. I collected and analyzed online social media comments posted alongside *Left Behind* Facebook photos originally posted by the official *Left Behind* movie Facebook page. Comprising the crux of my data, I collected 250 individual Facebook comments and one additional Facebook conversation thread; coding each for inductive, deductive and *in vivo* codes with the intent to compare and contrast with the codes collected from the movie itself. Facebook promotional photos were only coded for content, such as text, associated captions, and the specific content of the image in an effort to place sample comments in context. All Facebook comments collected were coded inductively and deductively and were the independent content of the individual who posted them. Commenters are given pseudonyms to remain anonymous. Comments are minimally edited for clarity of content.

Facebook comments underwent a further level of analysis. Comments were assigned a typology based on the content and the context in which the comment was posted. Comments were deemed dispensational premillennialist, Christian, or general public. This typology is used to gauge the relevance of a given post to research questions and separate what may be ambiguous statements with ideological statements. Dispensational premillennialism (coded DPM) was assigned to any

comment that; included a specific statement of belief in the rapture, and any statement indicating Christianity and hopeful anticipation of Apocalypse, excluding those who indicate Post-millennialism. Christians not coded DPM (coded CX) were assigned to any comment that could be labeled as Christian but not indicating a belief in the rapture; indicating disbelief or ambivalence toward the rapture, or being too vague in their comment to be considered DPM, this includes Post-Millennialism. Comments were considered General Public (coded GP) if no specific indication of Christian faith was given, an indication of disbelief in Christianity was given, or comments were too vague to be considered DPM or CX. This typology tends to push ambiguous content toward the general public (GP) grouping, and thus all content deemed DPM content will be the most deliberate ideological content available.

Online film reviews were also collected and analyzed from online film websites during the movie's opening weekend. Film reviews were coded inductively and with deduction based on reviewer's rating of the movie and their apparent or expressed ideological stance. All information gathered is then considered for overall themes and as a part of a specific timeline consisting of before movie release, during the opening weekend, and after the release of the movie. All coding was done with openness to *in vivo* coding, codes and themes "in their own words"), but without a specific intention to gather *in vivo* codes. Ultimately, the main themes addressed in my findings were the most prevalent of *in vivo* codes.



## Data Sources

The Movie, *Left Behind*, released to theatres October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 and later on DVD on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Fifteen in person interviews, conducted on location at the Grand Theatre in Kenner, Louisiana during the movie's opening weekend.

Facebook comments and captions upon reposting promotional photos from the *Left Behind* movie Facebook page (collectively referred to as "comments"); 125 taken from September 3<sup>rd</sup> to October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 125 taken from October 4<sup>th</sup> to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. One additional comment thread taken from the *Left Behind* Facebook page on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 for the purpose of gaining greater clarity for research question R2. Comments were chosen in a randomized fashion, selecting every third as they appeared on the photos' comment threads excluding redundant posts and repeat commenters. Of these 250 comments, 132 (52.8%) were placed into group DPM, 41 (16.4%) placed into group Christian (CX), and 77 (30.8%) were considered General Public (GP) comments.

An additional thread was taken as one non-randomized dialog including all comments from a promotional photo posted before the intended survey period, this was done to ensure any context that may have been lost in randomizing other comments was mitigated through the use of an entire online conversation.

Internet film reviews were collected and coded from three popular movie-related websites that allow general public to post film reviews. These film review websites

are Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), Rotten Tomatoes (rottentomatoes.com), and Fandango (fandango.com). 15 reviews were selected randomly, taking every third review chronologically from October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 on, from each of the three websites totaling 45 total reviews.

### **Findings**

Expectations among rapture-believers centered on the hope that the new version of *Left Behind* would be a major success in theatres. Believers wanted the movie to spark a religious revival in America, a sentiment that was both apparent and, at times, explicitly stated. When general public viewers and movie critics panned the movie and a transformative blockbuster did not arise, the tone of DPM comments on Facebook shifted. Comments focused on social forces that were framed as the work of Satan. Discussion of current events, deliberately prompted by the content of promotional Facebook posts, revealed the DPM view of society, global conflict, the role of America, and a suspicion that current social trends may be the result of satanic forces.

Whether moviegoers said they enjoyed the movie or that they were disappointed, comments from DPMs included some proselytizing message, many of them including some assertion that the rapture is imminent and urging readers to “be ready.” Social media comments were echoed in both the in-person and online movie reviews, though in-person interviews were predominantly positive while online movie reviews were generally negative. The majority of comments and reviews

included some form of ideological message. Rather than focusing exclusively on the movie itself, commenters regularly used the subject of the movie as an opportunity to evangelize, argue the merits of specific prophecy, assert a generally prophetic worldview, and to express their hopefulness that the rapture will occur soon.

### **The Movie**

"If you look hard enough, you will see whatever it is you are looking for. Now, you might have to ignore a lot of other things to do it; one of them might be the truth."

– Cameron "Buck" Williams, *Left Behind* (2014)

The content of the 2014 movie *Left Behind* was largely secondary to the content of comments posted on *Left Behind's* official Facebook page. The movie, however, serves as a contrast individual comments and movie reviews because commenters and audience members that reviewed the movie online rarely mentioned specific elements of the movie that they liked or disliked. The movie's message, therefore, was largely taken for granted. The 2014 cinematic version of *Left Behind* differed widely from the original novel and the earlier film version, covering and completely rewriting the first three chapters of the original twenty-five-chapter novel. As I began to code the movie, scene-by-scene and beat-by-beat, I found themes, narrative metaphors, and plot devices that went largely unnoticed by the movie's most aggressive supporters and critics, elements that never existed in any of the previous incarnations of *Left Behind*. Though these themes and narrative metaphors may be unintended story elements or, more likely, represent implicit aspects of the writer's

worldview, they offer implicit insights into the dispensational premillennialist perception of the world.

Primary themes of the film included concern for the traditional family dynamic, and family roles, as well as strong thematic support of traditional authority. These themes are more prevalent than issues of religion or conversion. At the head of the traditional family is the father, and faith in the father is another major theme in this movie. Traditional authority was regularly reinforced, both in scenes that take place on the ground and those in air. Rayford Steele (Nicolas Cage) is the father who has been shirking his husbandly duties, as well as the captain of an airplane who alone can bring crew and passengers to safety. The midair drama, when isolated from the rest of the movie, may be read as allegory promoting class division in society.

The drama on the ground centered on chaos and the loss of innocence. Significant effort was made to point out that children under a certain age, seemingly twelve or thirteen, were taken outright while older teens and adults were not; referred to by DPM believers as the “rapture of the innocence.” Innocence lost as well due to the immediate turn to criminality and looting, which goes on throughout the post-rapture segment of the movie. This, of course, serves to counterpoint the traditional authority by asserting that, after the rapture, a lack of traditional authority will lead to chaos and lawlessness.

The main plot of the movie *Left Behind* focuses on a family in the midst of turmoil. Chloe Steele (played by Cassie Thompson) comes home to celebrate her birthday with her parents, Irene (Lea Thompson) and Rayford, and younger brother Raymie (Major Dodson). Chloe suspects her father may leave her mother due to her mother's increasing religiosity. This is the traditional family in crisis, Rayford is an airline captain and the breadwinner of the family and Irene is the stay at home mother (no mention of her having any life outside of the realms of home and church). Rayford is plotting infidelity when the rapture occurs, infidelity that his daughter Chloe angrily blames on God.

When Raymie disappears in Chloe's arms, the event that signals the rapture has occurred, she is unwilling to accept that he is gone and goes through great lengths to find her little brother. When a significant number of passengers in a plane Rayford is flying disappear without a trace, Rayford Steele turns away from his intended philandering and focuses his attentions on flying amidst chaotic conditions but also makes repeated attempts to contact his wife and daughter via his satellite phone. In both cases, the angry Chloe and the unfaithful Rayford turn towards the family, hoping that there is something left of the traditional family left amid the crisis.

Chloe's frantic search for Raymie ends with the realization that all children on earth have disappeared. Following this shock, Chloe rushes home to discover that her mother has also disappeared. For a period of time, Chloe is led to believe that her father has died in a mid-air collision. The loss of her whole family leads her to

suicidal ideation; a last minute phone call from her father stops her from jumping off a bridge to her death.

The separation between Rayford's plane and Chloe's search for Raymie leads to two concurrent subplots, both with some focus on the loss of traditional family and family roles. Chloe is confronted with several scenes of mothers clutching swaddling blankets in which babies once were wrapped, grown women doubled over next to empty baby strollers. The loss of motherhood and the disappearance of Chloe's young brother was confirmed when Chloe enters an empty hospital nursery, a female patient ominously providing the exposition that every child on earth is gone. In the airplane, passengers confront the disappearances of their children and loved-ones. A mother, (played by Jordin Sparks) cannot accept the disappearance of her little daughter and contemplates killing herself. After the subject of the rapture is brought up, some two thirds of the way through the movie, an older man in first class laments that he has not spent enough time with his daughter. The man (played by Gary Grubbs) confides with another passenger that, although he wants to see his daughter once more, he hopes his daughter has been taken up to Heaven.

Traditional authority intersects with the idealized traditional family within the storyline. At the head of the idealized family structure is the father. The father as leader and protector is embodied in Rayford Steele. Rayford also embodies the traditional authoritarian within this narrative. As leader, Rayford Steele is forced to make difficult decisions throughout the movie, including intentionally dropping

cabin pressure temporarily in order to stop an angry mob from breaking in to the cockpit. By virtue of being the only pilot in the plane and captain during a crisis, Rayford is the protector who must maintain composure in order to maintain safety for passengers and crew.

Rayford is not without his flaws. Though he is able to successfully fulfill his role as airline captain, Rayford's deflection of his role as husband and father, choosing a tryst in London over his daughter's birthday visit, constitutes a moral message against shirking said roles and responsibilities. At the end of the movie, a contrite Rayford apologizes to his daughter and laments the loss of his innocent son and his faithful and loving Christian wife. The contrite sinner, Rayford serves as an archetypal character, who becomes a Christian mid-flight and fully accepts his roles of traditional head of the family and traditional authority all while accepting the religious prescription that the movie puts forward.

The movie contains several class archetypes as well. The social structure imposed on passengers and crew in an airplane play out in metaphorical fashion in midair sequences in the 2014 movie version of *Left Behind*. Sequences that were neither in the original novel, nor the first movie version released in 2000, pit first class (upper class) and coach passengers (working class) against each other in a struggle to maintain order amid the mid-air chaos. The two classes have different reactions immediately after the disappearance of their loved-ones; coach passengers revolt while first-class passengers maintain their composure. The Leader archetype,

Captain Rayford Steele, acts as autocrat, controlling the working class through judicious control over information, a willingness to use whatever force is at his disposal to maintain order, all with the knowledge that the upper classes will support him while policing themselves. All these archetypal messages play out within five minutes of screen time.

The resulting narrative prescribes proper action and authority in a society in crisis. Angry men from the coach section of the plane form a mob and attempt to break into the cockpit, the seat of power. Two men from first class hold off the working class mob temporarily, Cameron “Buck” Williams and Hassid (played by Chad Michael Murray and Alec Rayme). These two men in particular serve a further prescriptive role as chivalric figures, repeatedly helping women in distress throughout the crisis in the air. While the working class men from coach attempt to break into the cockpit, Buck and Hassid endeavor to protect female flight attendant Hattie Durham, played by actress Nicky Whelan.

The captain decides to release cabin pressure, subduing the mob and forcing everyone to return to their seats and put on oxygen masks. The captain, after stabilizing pressure, informs his flight attendant and passes the first class passengers to address coach passengers in a tone that is equally informative and chastising. The allegory of mid-air crisis is a social commentary. This appeared to be a call for the return to stratified social order; class differences represent prescriptive distinctions of action and access, leaders are to be respected and have a



right to control their subjects, crises necessitate the return to chivalry, and information must be controlled from the top down to ensure the stability of the whole.

The movie endeavors to address every possible worldview in opposition to the dispensational premillennialist worldview and the characters that suggest these alternative worldviews are quickly shut down. As passengers attempt to cope with the disappearances, Edwin speculates as to the whereabouts of the missing passengers, suggesting alien abduction, time travel, and a possible wormhole. Another character, Shasta, is convinced that her estranged husband had the plane grounded to kidnap their child while she was asleep. Melvin, a little person who is antagonistic towards everyone throughout the movie, decides to investigate Hassid, a Muslim passenger in first class, to determine if he is a terrorist and may somehow be involved with the disappearances. All of the aforementioned theories are scoffed off or vehemently denied by other passengers. Venice, another first class passenger, fears that the disappearances may be the rapture and decides to shoot heroin to assuage her fears. When, later, Venice announces that she knows what has taken place, the rapture, that other passengers listen and accept this worldview without question.

The counterpoint to traditional authority is the crisis on the ground; chaos and lawlessness result in a lack of authoritarian control. Police seem lost and impotent as people steal and riot all around them. Rayford descends from the sky with the

help of his one remaining family member: analogy may be drawn from this miraculous “return of the father” and the anticipated Second Coming. The movie ends with the reunion of the family, father and daughter, and the completion of the traditional authority narrative. The traditional authority in the air, coupled with the chaotic lack of authority in the post-rapture crisis on the ground in *Left Behind* read as a critique of contemporary society, with the apparent message being support for the return of a strong patriarchal society. The way the movie is written, the lack of a strong male leader ensures that people will instantaneously loot and riot the moment they see an opportunity.

The stated goal of the movie, to convince non-believers of the pre-tribulation rapture was never overtly addressed. Unlike other rapture movies, the 2014 version of *Left Behind* did not set up the events in the movie by mentioning a future rapture, neither did it link the disappearances to the Bible or any specific belief afterward. One mention from one character that “it’s in the Bible” was the entirety of the exposition of the rapture in the movie. Though the movie was intended for the general public, *Left Behind* did not thoroughly set up the rapture concept. In this respect, rapture movies such as *A Thief in the Night* or the 1941 movie *The Rapture* are more demonstrative of a clear religious message while the 2014 version of *Left Behind* appeared, instead, to focus on more social messages. Furthermore, dialog early on in the movie mocked and attacked belief in biblical prophecy, the portrayal of non-believers as hostile toward Christians served as concise arguments counter to the movie’s stated evangelistic goals. Findings, described later in the Film

Reviews section, show that some DPM audience members were insulted and disappointed by the movie and cited this as a reason for rejecting the movie altogether.

### **Audience Anticipation and Expectation**

Audience expectations for the movie were the same for most DPM commenters as it was for the movie's producers. Expectations centered on the hope that the movie would be a cinematic success and, thus, would have success in evangelism. The purpose of making a "Hollywood movie" (as the movie was regularly referred to) being an attempt to expose non-Christians to biblical prophecies. Failing their immediate conversion, the expectation is that non-believers exposed to the *Left Behind* narrative would convert after the rapture and become *Tribulation Saints*; Christians who will fight the Antichrist until the final battle of Armageddon.

Lord help me understand how this is good for the Franchise. OK he's Nicolas Cage. But [does] he believe? Unbelievers can hinder the Spirit and not be as ministering as and successful as the others. For these films have saved a lot of Souls. That must continue. God bless This movie and Nicolas Cage!! For the Glory of God!  
– "Ronald," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

To some would-be movie-goers within the general public, the prospect of watching Nicolas Cage in a Christian movie about the rapture was a draw because it was expected to garner so much kitsch: Cage has a reputation for overacting and many commenters seized upon this for its potential for ironic humor. To the active rapture-believing Christian however, there was to be no irony. From the dispensational premillennialist perspective this *Left Behind* is a timely story with an

undeniable message and, thus, the movie was expected to serve as a potent proselytizing tool and lead to the conversion of millions of non-believers, a modern American Revival.

God did bless America for years and now America has kicked him out. Which will cause us all to find out what it means to not be [blessed] and protected by God. Hang on yall, its bout to get rough round here...  
- "Jerry," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Before seeing the movie, Facebook commenters had clear opinions of what it will be and how others would react to it. Those who professed a belief in the rapture prejudged the film to be a worthwhile endeavor, for the most part. The realization that the movie would only be a fraction of the storyline of the novel annoyed some. A few commenters were angry that the movie did not include Nicolae Carpathia, the Antichrist character who was in the original novel and film versions of *Left Behind*.

I read that this doesn't follow the book series and the author [wasn't] really happy with the movie. No mention of Nicholae....and no one is playing him according to Imdb.  
- "Craig," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Comments on Facebook focused more on ideology than on the movie itself. Photos posted on the movie's Facebook page, which were planned by the movie's social media marketing firm, included imagery from the film, as well as images that seemed to link current events with biblical prophecy. Along with the repeated interrogative "Are you ready?" (which generally denoted a DPM comment) and

regular added comment “Amen” (which I coded as Christian rather than DPM), a wide variety of comments belied contemporary concerns and how the coming movie release was expected to fit in as a tool for conversion. Though the majority of comments were from people who identified as Christian, Born-again Christian, or who specifically professed belief in the rapture, 30.8% of all Facebook comments were non-descript or generally against Christianity or dispensational premillennialism and, thus, were deemed from the general public. The majority of general public comments were positive towards the movie or to the story, though they did not include any mention of God or rapture, but the comment from “Joe” below illustrates that some commenters within the general public could have a mean-spirited or mocking tone.

I wish this was real. But it's not. How about you all stop waiting and leave a la Hale Bopp comet? Go out like Heaven's Gate.  
– “Joe,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page



Figure 1: Reference Image 1: posted on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 with the caption “Do you know someone who isn't ready? Bring them to Left Behind on October 3rd so they can get ready while there's still time!”

Not scare [tactics] just pure truth...so those who see it laugh refuse to believe or deny the truth [the] Lord is going to show them each and every time and each and every way they had a chance to except Him and made the choice not to...  
– “Mandy,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

The events of September and October 2014, such as the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), the beheadings of American hostages by ISIS, the first Ebola patients in the United States, were seen as prophetic signs of the impending rapture among DPM commenters. Prophetic Bible verses that seemed to coincide with this interpretation were included in promotional images by Facebook page social media management company Social Notz, and commenters seized on the suggestion. Expectations of imminent rapture made the release of *Left Behind* a pseudo-

prophetic document in and of itself. Many people wrote that the timing of the movie's release, coinciding with news cycles focused on ISIS, Ebola, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, was no mere coincidence. The world seemed to reflect prophecies that foretold beheadings, persecution, pestilence, war and rumors of war; all of which are to presage Armageddon.

Image 3 (on the next page) was posted on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014, a day after the anniversary of 9/11 and amid growing concern over ISIS. The subject of DPM oriented comments ranged from fear and concern for ISIS and the current geopolitical situation, to the need to become Christian, to the perceived sin and wickedness of the world today. Comments such as the one below drew parallels between marriage equality and the prophetic belief that Armageddon will resemble "the days of Noah," when the biblical flood said to be sent by God to clear the world of iniquity.



Figure 2: Reference Image 3: Posted with the caption "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh."  
Luke 21:28

As were the day's of Noah! So shall be the Coming of Christ! All were partying, Playing, Giving in marriage! Man with man! Women with Women! They all thought Noah was Crazy! To! How much more do you need to see? Let's face it! Prophecy has been Fulfilled!! Im just saying!!  
– "Glen," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Fears and concerns radiate from the link between images of jihadi in silhouette (an image that was used twice, in a post on September 3<sup>rd</sup> as well as the one pictured above from September 12<sup>th</sup>) and the nature of current events. One concern that comes up throughout these Facebook comments is the United States' spiritual health and the perceived loss of status as being God's "chosen nation" but alongside there is



also the concern for Israel, God's *other* chosen nation and people. The concern follows the line of prophetic interpretation predicting that the Antichrist will beguile the world by bringing peace in Israel and the Middle East.

Dear Heavenly Father, Please help us here in America. Our country is so lost. We need you. God Bless America again... Please. In your sweet name I pray. Amen  
– “Rosaline,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

The subject of the *Antichrist* brings with it a litany of expectations, but also offers context by which world leaders may be criticized and suspicions validated. The Antichrist is a malevolent figure expected to serve as an agent of Satan. The Antichrist is expected to rise to become a great global political power, be admired and beloved of all people throughout the world, but will enslave the world in within the same time period. The Antichrist's ascent to power will signal the beginning of the end of the world. One of the Antichrist's expected feats of beguiling will be to bring peace in the Middle East.

I have seen many misconceptions about the antichrist on this thread. The antichrist will be of middle eastern decent. Does not mean that's where he currently resides. He will be adored and admired by many. In other words he will be very liked. Not evil in appearance. He will be the one who mediates the peace treaty between Israel and Syria. He will perform miracles. Or so some think. Not [from] God but of the Enemy. In order to be able to decipher the antichrist, you must be grounded in the Word. Do not be fooled by those who claim to have the power of God. It's very simple. Only Jesus himself can make these claims. He will create one world currency, one world religion and one world order. Just stay grounded in the Word and you will NOT be deceived.  
– “Laura,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Discussion of the Antichrist's racial/ethnic background is also often discussed, not only in the original *Left Behind* novels and movie, but also in the discussion amongst DPM comments on the Facebook page during my study (LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995). Commenters, citing specific interpretations of the Bible, state that he (almost always described as a man) will come from one of the "Seven Old World Empires" which includes the Roman Empire and the Middle East.

[In apparent reply to "Laura" above] not sure about middle eastern read Daniel Chapter 7 and you will see the fourth beast is the Roman Empire (the only one NOT conquered) and the little horn (the AC) comes from this beast. So not sure if you can show me Scripture please  
– "Abigail," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Along with the expectation of an Antichrist comes the expectation of the *Mark of the Beast*. In the Bible, the Mark of the Beast is described in the book of Revelation as the number 666 branded upon the hand or the forehead. Speculation among commenters studied focused on a "technological Mark of the Beast"; such as an RFID (Radio-Frequency Identification) microchip implanted subcutaneously as a combination identification/tracker/credit card. Christians must reject the Mark of the Beast because, as per standard futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation, acceptance of the mark requires the denial of Christ's divinity.

Need to pray for the lost the ones not ready that are going to Hell people this is Real by 2017 the chip will be implanted then [that] will fell then it will be 666 branded. Pray like we never prayed before such a short time we h as very to work to bring the unsaved go Jesus  
– "Mary," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

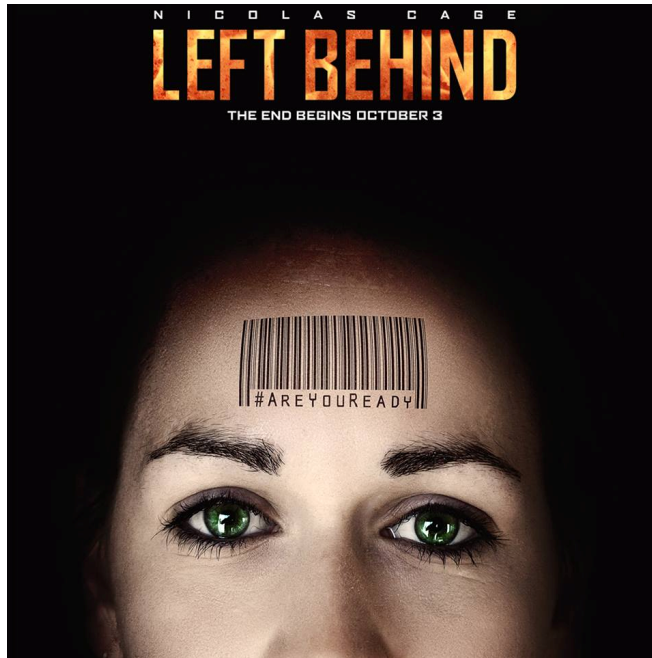


Figure 3: Mark upon the forehead, from official *Left Behind* movie Facebook Page.

The Antichrist, though the use of the Mark of the Beast, will, thus, trick all non-Christians into submission to the Devil. In addition to concern for the appearance of an Antichrist and the imposition of a demonic mark, this interpretation of Bible prophecy includes the suspicion through that a future *One World Government* will gain global control through the creation of a *One World Religion* that will either pervert or reject Christianity. The fear of a global consolidation of governance and distrust of non-Christian social movements influence the discussion of the Antichrist towards speculation that current world leaders may be the Antichrist, may become the Antichrist, or may be “paving the way” for the Antichrist in some way.

Obama has deceived us about his religion. He will somehow be the one to bring peace at the last minute. No one saw him coming but I did. I predicted to the hour that we would be where we are at right now. My decrement is spot on.  
– “Dianna,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Read the Muslims belief on their coming Imam which coincides with our teachings of the antichrist. Too similar to be a coincidence. Look at them now. They fit the description.

– “Liza,” commenter on Left Behind Facebook page

So much of the “experience” of the movie occurred before the actual release of the movie. Fans of the *Left Behind* book and original movie series had preconceived notions of what to expect and had largely made up their minds as to whether they would like the movie or not before the movie’s release. Ideology and the hope that the masses would convert as a result of this movie motivated support for the movie among those who identified themselves as Christian, whether they professed belief in the rapture or not. Notably, though DPM comments focused on asserting that the rapture was real, the concern for conversion was that the non-believer be converted to Christianity and not necessarily to belief in the rapture. The DPM experience of actually watching the movie, along with poor box office turnout, apparently dashed the hopes that this movie version would inspire massive conversions amongst Americans to Christianity. The next section addresses what replaced the hopeful anticipation for a new American Christian Revival.

### **Audience Reception**

After the October 3<sup>rd</sup> release of the movie in theatres, Facebook comments appeared to shift in specific ways. One major difference is that almost uniform positivity for the movie amongst those who believe in rapture was lost. Some DPM audience members expressed a great love for the movie, while others expressed great disappointment. The hope that the movie would change the minds of non-believers

was lost. Promotional posts asking whom fans took or intended to take to the movie elicited comments focusing on family and friends; in depth conversations after viewing expressed the hope for their possible conversion, but the “New American Revival” was no longer anticipated or discussed. Worse yet, the attempt to appeal to the general public alienated some within the dispensational premillennialist community. This anger and disappointment was echoed in reviews of *Left Behind* from moviegoers who expressed belief in the rapture. The mention of and emphasis on conspiracy theories on *Left Behind's* Facebook page seemed to fill the conversational void left by the disappointment. Discussion of the Antichrist, global geopolitics and the suspicion of globalization, prophetic speculation, and contemporary social change in the United States continued while discussion of the movie itself ebbed.

According to the Internet Movie Database, Box Office sales dropped after the opening weekend, the movie’s \$16 million budget was four times that of the original movie version filmed in 2000. After making \$6 million the opening weekend, sales tapered and the movie closed its theatrical release making just under \$ 14 million, \$2 million shy of breaking even. The theatrical release closed on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and, with it, the hope for an unprecedented rapture film blockbuster (*Left Behind*, 2014; *Left Behind: the Movie*, 2000).

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, a total lunar eclipse or “blood moon” (so called for its reddish hue) signaled the second of four potential “end of days” speculated by San Antonio Pastor

John Hagee between April 2014 and October 2015 (Fetcher, 2015). The subject of the blood moon, and the taboo of “date-setting” among dispensational premillennialists became intertwined with the subject of the movie in the comments regarding the following Facebook image (Image 6). To avoid endorsing any particular “end date,” Facebook page administrators, most likely from the company Social Notz, included in the caption a disclaimer, “we’re not saying it will happen today, but it COULD” (their emphasis).

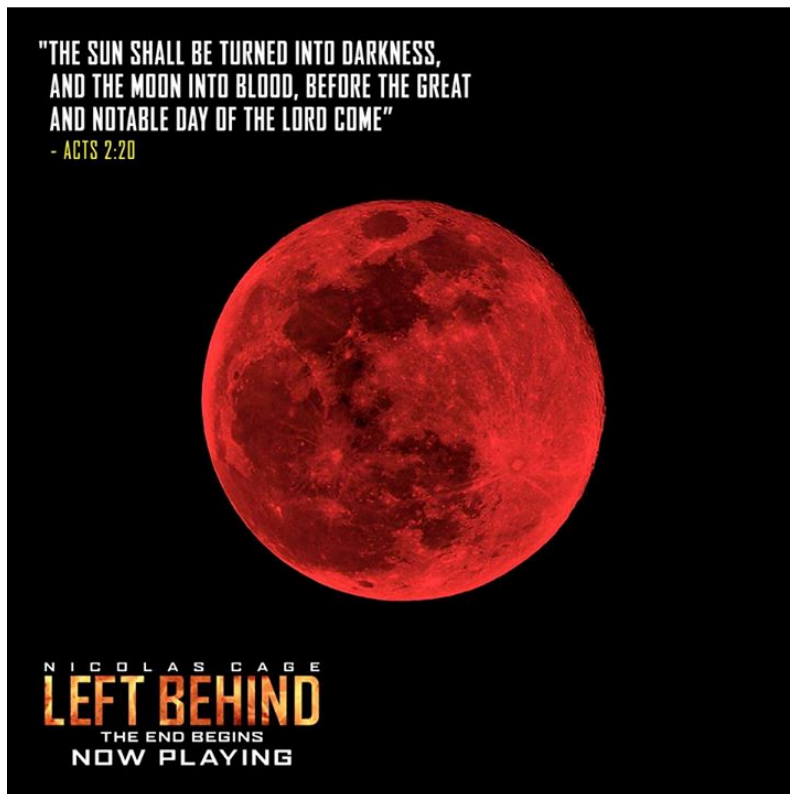


Figure 4: Reference Image 6: Posted October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 with the caption “No one knows when the Rapture will happen so we’re not saying it will happen today, but it COULD. That’s why everyone needs to ask each other, “Are you ready?”

Mathew 24:36 But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.  
– “Sandy,” commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

No one knows the day or the hour. Jesus told us that in Matt. 24. I don't believe in setting dates on Jesus return. But Jesus tells us that there will be signs in the heavens & in the earth. There will be pestilence & disease (Ebola, AIDS, West Nile), wars & rumors of war. I would say get right with God & get in fellowship with Him. Get sin out, and let God's Spirit flow through you to others who know not His love.

- "Samuel," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

Several posts on the Facebook page exposed the disappointment that dispensational premillennialists had in the movie and the experiences at the movie theater. Some blame poor acting, some poor production quality or storyline. Many of the disappointed believers expressed concern that the movie was not biblical enough or did not cast Christians in a favorable light. DPMs who expressed enjoyment of the movie said the opposite; the movie was biblically accurate and gave various other reasons for liking the movie.

I'm a Christian and was so looking forward to this film but was extremely disappointed in the poor acting and watered down version from the book and original Kirk Cameron movie. Just because it is a Christian movie, doesn't mean it was well done. The production value was sub par and I was expecting Nicolas Cage to do a much better job. He's no slouch of an actor but he clearly didn't give this film his best. The supporting actors and sub plots were poorly performed and underdeveloped. What was up with Leah Thompson talking to her daughter like she was five years old? "HI CHLOOOOEEEE, WELCOME HOOOOME HONEEEEEYYYY".

Very over acted, it was almost embarrassing. [comment truncated]

- "Robert," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

Great movie....got a little corny a couple times but totally Biblically based. I recommend it to everyone!

- "Cassandra," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

The following image (Image 7) coincided with the American news media's focus on the Ebola outbreak. Ebola, which had already killed or infected thousands in Africa,

had just had the first cases in the United States (CDC 2014). Linking the biblical mention of Pestilence with a scientist holding a petri dish gave strong suggestion that Ebola could be the infectious epidemic Jesus described in the Olivet Discourse that would signal the end of days. This allusion caught the attention of some commenters who criticized or mocked the belief as well as the use of Ebola in apocalyptic prognostication. Still, others took the connection as confirmation of prophetic beliefs.

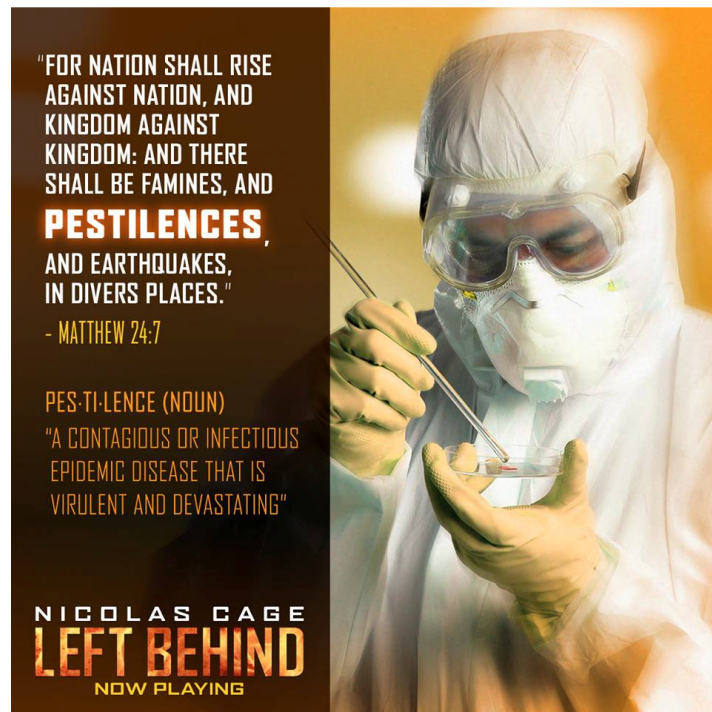


Figure 5: Reference Image 7: Posted October 19th, 2014 with the caption "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh."(Luke 21:28, KJV) NOW is the time to be ready. Take someone you care about to see Left Behind TODAY. As Rayford Steele (Nicolas Cage) says in the movie, "Irene knew this was coming. How could she know that?" Even if your loved ones don't, or even won't believe ... when the rapture happens, at least they'll know it didn't just come out of nowhere."



[Its] so close you can almost feel it coming on the breeze  
- "Mel," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

[Ebola]...war in middle east...were really on the time.  
- "Luther," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

[Regarding the Blood Moon Theory]  
330 days left, folks!  
- "Eloise," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

Conspiracy theories receive mention in Facebook comments as well as in *Left Behind*. Concern that people will mistake the rapture for a mass alien abduction, or some other quasi-scientific explanation concerned *Left Behind* authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in the writing of the original novels. This same concern is addressed in the film by the character Edwin, and is immediately scoffed at. Speculation for a secret one-world government (alternately referred to as *New World Order* or the *Illuminati*) and blaming the rapture on aliens play a part in the Tribulation narrative for dispensational premillennialists.

The ground work is being laid to say the "Rapture" was not of God but by Aliens.  
- "Daniel," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

It's really beginning, just observe on what is happening now on America, they are  
planning for the New World Order  
- "Martin," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

Online film reviews were similar to Facebook comments in the variety of opinions expressed, as opposed to in-person interviews of moviegoers immediately after viewing the movie that was largely positive. Since all of the reviews were given or posted during the movie's opening weekend, reviews are assumed to be largely the opinion of the viewer immediately after watching the movie. Reviews often betrayed a concern for the movie's success, or for the success of the larger goal of bringing non-believers to Christianity.

It's awesome. You know, and a lot of people need to come out and see it because the bible teaches us that God has his time for everything and this is true, you know, and more Christians need to get out there and tell the people that don't know that this is going to take place. And that is the church job to do. You know, God has his chosen people and he has assigned certain tasks to, you know. And I'm one of 'em. I'm one of 'em.

– “Michelle,” interviewed in person after viewing *Left Behind*

Negative movie reviews predominated online. Self-professed Christians, reviewers who expressed faith in the rapture, as well as apparent non-believers were all represented in the majority opinion. Some reviewers felt it important to clarify their stance on eschatology before expressing disappointment in the movie. Several reviews delve into the history of the *Left Behind* storyline; from novel to film to the 2014 remake. Dispensational premillennialists who reviewed the movie online were often insulted or confused by the way Christians were portrayed at the beginning of the movie. A few DPM reviewers also cited bad acting or screenwriting and suggested the original *Left Behind* novel or the 2000 movie version instead.

After watching this 15 million dollar budget flick, I kind of wonder where all the money went. It sure didn't go into the production and special effects, probably Nicolas Cage's salary. As a Christian, the purpose of a faith based film is to win converts not turn them away. Why is it most every movie involving Christians always makes them out to be crazy lunatics?  
- "Demetrius," movie reviewer posting on Imdb.com

All of the reviewers interviewed in person, except my two guests, gave a positive review of the movie. Many of those who provided positive in person reviews continued by adding that they believed in the biblical accuracy and/or eschatological accuracy of the movie. My in-person interviewees were not warned that they would be asked to comment, were asked for comments immediately after exiting the movie theatre. This meant interviewees had no time to prepare what they may say about the movie. In contrast, online reviews are the result of an intention to post a review, the effort of composing a review and the ability to delete any unintended items before submitting. The fact that both in-person and online reviews generally contained an element of concern for the legitimacy of the message of the movie seemed to be significant: no one I observed thought of *Left Behind* as "just a movie." In addition, in-person interviews became discussions between friends or relatives who went together to see the film and illustrated a more natural discussion on the topics than did my original interview questions. The following interaction between the interviewer, one male and one female moviegoer is an example just such an incidence.

Interviewer

What specifics [in the movie] would you say were effective or not effective?

Male Moviegoer

I think... you know it's been so long since I read the series that, but, I think that they dramatized it pretty well without making it too specific, a lot of flash, a lot, you know... They didn't get into any ... all of the goriness and you know all of the ... at this point. They developed the characters really well...

Female Moviegoer

There is something that...

Male Moviegoer

...compared to the way they did before.

Female Moviegoer

Yeah, I think that they had in the book that on the plane that they had somebody that looked like Islamic or something.

Male Moviegoer

Yeah, I don't remember if they had that on the plane.

Female Moviegoer

Yeah, but it's interesting that they put that one in there.

Male Moviegoer

Yeah.

Female Moviegoer

And then they had all these put in all these people who were anti-, you know, anti-Bible, and um, anti-God that kinda ... I don't remember that that was in the book too. Was it?

Male Moviegoer

You know, I don't remember...

Female Moviegoer

I don't know if that was Hollywood at all.

Male Moviegoer

I, I don't remember the book having as much detail with the passengers. That's one thing I don't remember.

Female Moviegoer

Yeah.

Male Moviegoer

But the uh ...

Female Moviegoer

Yeah.

Male Moviegoer

Certainly...

Female Moviegoer

I read the book about twelve years ago.

Male Moviegoer

Yeah, I can't remember the last time I read the book, though. I shared buying the books with a coworker years ago and uh, and she kept the whole series, I don't, I don't have 'em anymore but uh, so it's kind of ... Anyway, I hope to see the future movie ... I'm wondering how many movies its going to take to get through the series, I mean, obviously a lot happened. And, of course, in the bible it happens that way, right? So, so there's a lot going on there, you know? So, kinda scary.

Female Moviegoer

Scary, but like the ... you know, you just don't know. So, I mean, it's a matter of faith; if you believe in that.

Male Moviegoer

Yeah, you know I tend to. I tend to believe in this, you know, I'm guess I'm not ... You know ... everybody has different levels of, you know, of how far they, of what they believe and of course this is Tim LaHaye's, ... Tim LaHaye's interpretation of what he's read. So, everybody has their own interpretation, you know. Everyone has their own interpretation of how it's gonna ... and this is one interpretation. It's going to be interesting to see, (laughs) and I don't know if I want to be around to see it.

(Both laugh, and then walk away)

Though this and other interviews morphed into conversations, and the interviewer turned silent observer, the content of the conversation continued in a familiar pattern: the movie was either more or less faithful to the 1995 novel of the same

name, the book is one interpretation of the “end times” and, although it may not happen exactly as described in the novel or movie, the rapture and tribulation are expected and will end in Apocalypse. This was echoed throughout the positive reviews of the movie. The only positive review of the movie given by a self-proclaimed non-religious person focused on Nicolas Cage’s performance and the “attractive blondes” in the cast.

I am not a religious person, but I went to see this because I love suspense movies. And I LOVED this movie! Not Cage's best performance, but far from his worst. As an added bonus, the two female leads are VERY attractive blondes and they each have a lot of screen time.

– “Brandon,” movie reviewer posting on Rottentomatoes.com

### **Interpretation**

General interpretations are derived from dispensational premillennialist (DPM) Facebook commenters and those sampled who were not deemed part of the general public, and from those movie reviewers who expressed belief in the rapture. Three recurring overall themes emerged. The terrestrial world is viewed, to some extent, as a false reality that belongs to the Devil and that Heaven is the true home for Christians. Proof of the imminence of Bible prophecy is everywhere. The Antichrist serves as the personification of all things against dispensational premillennialist sensibilities; speculation regarding who the Antichrist may be reflects political and social rather than religious concerns.

## **This World is Not Our Home**

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.  
Hebrews 13:14, King James Version of the Bible (Bible Hub, n.d.)

One consistent theme throughout all of the DPM Facebook comments and movie reviews involved the very nature of Humanity's earthly existence. Dispensational premillennialists see this world as the preliminary locale and the afterlife as the permanent destination. Some go further to express distrust in the world that we live in and the readiness to leave, citing the "wickedness" of this world. This ideology presupposes that God should be present and recognized in all things and that any institutionalization of secular values goes against God. With the increasing disenchantment of the world and secularization of society, the conclusion that DPM commenters draw is that God is being pushed out of his rightful place in society. This has led to diminishing authority of worldly institutions in the eyes of dispensational premillennialists.

I hope [it's] soon. I can't take this place any more. Good is bad, bad is good. Abortion, same sex marriage...the list goes on and on.  
- "Bob" commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

[Name omitted] and I went to see 'Left Behind', today .... Very good movie, but I think when the RAPTURE happens, it's going to be so much worse....People get ready, Jesus is coming .. We'll soon be going home....if you aren't ready to go do something about it before it's too late...  
- "Caren," commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. 1 John 2: 15, 16, 17.

– “Tom,” commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

The delegitimization qua disenchantment of the world plays out in discussion of those institutions that have promoted liberal and/or secular ideals such as marriage equality, religious tolerance, and peaceful outcomes in the perennial conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians. Several commenters point to gay marriage as a sign of wickedness in the world.

The discussion of “Hollywood” and the movie *Left Behind* being considered a “Hollywood film” sparked some comment about legitimacy. “Hollywood” is not so much an area in Los Angeles, California as it is a symbol for secularism and worldly wickedness to the dispensational premillennialists. Producer Paul Lalonde, before and after the production of the *Left Behind* has commented on the worldliness (synonymous with wickedness) of some Hollywood films, but draws the distinction that not everything that comes from Hollywood is evil (Lalonde, n.d.). Still, comments on the Facebook page treat “Hollywood” as one specific entity with a specific ethos; one that is against Christianity. Discussion of “Hollywood” differed when discussion was focused on Hollywood actor, Nicolas Cage. Cage, described in comments as a non-believer (he has not publicly professed any specific religious belief or lack thereof) but several comments suggest that the actor will most likely convert to Christianity as a result of acting in this film. This view is echoed several



times within the comments posted on Facebook and shows that although “Hollywood” seems lost, Hollywood and individuals such as Nicolas Cage may be used to promote *Left Behind*'s ideological message.

This should not be of any concern my friend.....it's Hollywood entertainment about a very important prediction in our Bible....I just hope it wakes up, just one person and then that person is Saved. If this happens then this movies has been worth every cent, time and effort!!

– “Corbin,” commenter on the *Left Behind* Facebook page

I believe Nicolas Cage will definitely be born again, after this movie is over. How can ANYONE, believer or Nonbeliever, go through these actions/emotions, without those feelings sent from God, Our Father!??

– “Cheryl,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Rather than viewing the world as God’s creation, “the world” is described as false, suspect, or the true home of the Devil. Earth ceases to be real, and earthly existence is framed as a counterfeit reality; a dream. People are either “awake” or “asleep” and the sleep/wake metaphor is used to announce that DPM commenters are “awake.”

The Bible is fulfilling so fast, And yes, you better wake up America!!

– “Shawn,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

[Referring to the first cases of Ebola in America]

Hummm.....could this be a sign??.....nope everyone go back to sleep.

– “Mark,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

## The General Confirmation of Prophecy

But they went forth and they preached in every place, and our Lord was helping them and confirming their words with the signs that they were doing.  
Mark 16:20, Aramaic Bible in Plain English (Bible Hub, n.d.)

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.  
Matthew 24:36, New International Version (Bible Hub, n.d.)

One of the foundational themes in dispensational premillennialism that emerged is the general inerrancy of prophecy. This is distinct from the concept of biblical inerrancy, but is logically related. The Bible, in this viewpoint, is accurate in all things, and portions of the Bible may be viewed as prophetic. Based on a dispensational premillennialist reading, prophetic portions of the Bible are interpreted in both generalized and specific ways to denote specific future events: this is the *futurist interpretation* of the Bible. The futurist interpretation of Bible prophecy supports the belief that current events generally signal imminent fulfillment of prophecy. This means that a general prophecy, such as the appearance of the Antichrist, will literally happen in the DPM worldview. A specific prophetic assertion, such as Rev. John Hagee's prediction that the rapture will occur on or before the final *blood moon* of 2015, may or may not occur as stated (Fetcher, 2015).

The general inerrancy of prophecy calls on specific actions for believers in prophecy, chief among them being proselytizing wherever and whenever possible. This is also the reason for the taboo surrounding "date setting," as previously described (see above), though the practice still occurs. Though specific predictions of "day and

hour” are taboo, the general consensus among dispensational premillennialists for the end times, and with it the Rapture, is that it will be very soon.

Nearly every mention of current events was framed as a confirmation of prophecy. The framing of current events or the state of the world today as signs of imminent Apocalypse calls DPM believers to increase proselytizing. Since the inception of DPM through the preaching of John Nelson Darby, current events and changing social conditions have been framed as signs of impending Armageddon; thus, the call to proselytize is always relevant amongst those who believe in the rapture. With regard to the central argument of *When Prophecy Fails*, proselytizing is a primary concern for dispensational premillennialists (Festinger et al., 1956[2013]). The belief in a general rather than specific inerrancy of prophecy shields against *cognitive dissonance* described in *When Prophecy Fails* with regard to disconfirmation; by discouraging “date setting” and encouraging the concept that, though no one may know the exact day and time, the belief remains that the rapture is soon to come.

## **The Antichrist and the Great Deception**

And upon her forehead was written: "Mystery Babylon The Great, The Mother of Harlots and of the Filth of The Earth."  
Revelation 17:5, Aramaic Bible in Plain English (Bible Hub, n.d.)

[The Antichrist] will use every kind of evil deception to fool those on their way to destruction, because they refuse to love and accept the truth that would save them.  
So God will send great deception upon them, and they will believe all these lies.  
2 Thessalonians 2:10-11, New Living Translation (Bible Hub, n.d.)

Mystery Babylon, the Antichrist, the Beast; intense imagery and nightmarish descriptions of evil seem fantastic and unmistakable, but these three figures in the book of Revelation are said to be shrouded in deception that will fool the non-believer, yet will be transparent to those who believe. This is the primary framework through which dispensational premillennialists view the world, and all the actors in it. All things are situated into one of two categories, the sum of these categories comprise reality to the dispensational premillennialist. An event is either true and the work of God, or else a lie and the work of Satan. People are either Christians adhering to the DPM worldview, or else deceived by Satan. Truth lies within a literal interpretation of the Bible and an acceptance of prophetic passages in the Bible as generally inerrant predictions of future events. All other information is the part of a *Great Deception* allowed by God so that non-believers may be deceived by Satan and the Antichrist. It is through this logic that all people and things disliked or distrusted by a given Premillennialist becomes either an element

of the deception, an agent or harbinger of the Antichrist, or potentially the Antichrist himself.

Occasional mention of or allusion to the *Great Deception* occurred throughout DPM Facebook comments and represented an underlying tone when considering the subject of the non-believer. The secular worldview, including any science that contradicts Biblical inerrancy, is seen as just such a deception, leading to division between phenomenological reality and the dispensational premillennialist perception of reality. This division makes anyone or anything that contradicts the DPM framework appear to be satanic, or tricked by Satan. There is a logic to what is called evil and who is suspected of being the Antichrist. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, moderators of the *Left Behind* Facebook page posted the following image:



Figure 6: Man of Sin: Posted September 1, 2014 with the caption “The one the Bible calls the “man of sin” is almost certainly alive today and already in a position of power or influence. Do you think he knows that he's the antichrist?”

The above image, depicting the silhouette of a man in a suit overlooking a stormy skyline, elicited 2,278 comments including several conversations about the potential identity of the Antichrist. Several commenters implicated President Barack Obama and discussion centered on whether the President was the Antichrist, a harbinger for the Antichrist, or not the Antichrist at all.

Barack Obama is paving the way for the AC. It is on a crackin folks. It is the end of days. Come Lord!  
– “Sierra,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

I don't believe Obama is the AC but I do believe he would support and befriend the Beast. I do believe he would use his power and influence to elevate him and gain favor for him. Be watchful of who the Antichrist puppets are as well.  
– “Luther,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

It can't be Obama. We are told he (AC) will be well respected and revered by all who know of him. He will deceive all. Way too many of us can see right through Mr. O.  
– “Zeke,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Further conversation speculated that the Antichrist might be a Muslim, a Zionist, a member of ISIS, the Pope, or even Turkish leader Recep Erdoğan. One commenter, perhaps jokingly, suggested it could be the Dalai Lama.

The antichrist is supposed to come from the Middle East and is known as the 'Assyrian'. That is in the Word of God. We can speculate all we want but the most important question is 'Are you ready?'  
– “Phil,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

I think he will be a muslim.  
– “Mary,” commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

One russian boy-prophet said - he will cause very powerful hypnosis. Everyone will be in love with him. Buddhists will see Buddha in him. Muslims will see Mohammed, simple people will see ideal of their human. Solution - never see him. Dont look at him.

- "Eve," commenter on *Left Behind* Facebook page

Speculation as to whom the Antichrist might be, unlike "date setting," is not so much a taboo as it is a matter of great speculative interest for dispensational premillennialists. Such speculation serves as an outlet to discuss political and social issues an individual believer may dislike or distrust. Framing such opinions in this way legitimizes what would otherwise be deemed "worldly concerns."

Alongside the Antichrist, discussion regarding the nature of the "Mark of the Beast" was another speculative concern. One commenter suggested that the Affordable Care Act (also known as "Obamacare") might be the tool employed to brand non-believers and ensures their eternal damnation. Another commenter, as previously mentioned, suggested that RFID microchips will be implanted subcutaneously on a massive scale and that this will seal the fates of all who receive them.

Another allusion to the book of Revelation, "Mystery Babylon," or the city of the Antichrist, becomes a representation of fear of globalization. Discussion of Babylon as interpreted as the modern "global village," through the speculated future "One World Government" links the fear of the global interconnectivity of cultures and governance. The United Nations and European Union are implicated as evidence

that such a project is already underway, providing further evidence that the Antichrist exists and is at work on the Earth today.

Such allusions and speculation both serve as an outlet, as described above, but also as an integral aspect of their worldview. All the current social forces that run counter their ideology. Marriage equality for same-sex couples, Atheism, and Islam are given the same level of suspicion and vilification as ISIS, Ebola, and the open persecution of Christians. A distrust of any individual, institution, event, ideology, or trend may become the subject of satanic speculation. The DPM worldview, however, maintains that the rapture is ever imminent and Apocalypse is soon to follow.

In consideration of when and how *cognitive dissonance* relates to the DPM experience, the evidence posed in *When Prophecy Fails* can prove again useful when reevaluated: as opposed to disconfirmation, *cognitive dissonance* is created when a threat to the legitimacy of some element of a given belief system is made (Festinger et al., 1956[2013]). In the case of *When Prophecy Fails*, the date of a prophesized catastrophic flood was such an integral element, and materials reinforcing the faith so significantly lacking in options for interpretation, the disconfirmation of prophecy constituted a delegitimization of faith. This was met with a complete paradigm shift from which adherents could not recover, splintering the group. In the case of the 2014 film *Left Behind*, believers hoped a “Hollywood” movie would spread the DPM message. When the movie largely failed in this goal, it was not a



significant loss to the faith and little, if any, cognitive dissonance resulted. Dispensational premillennialists have a significant depth of material reinforcement for their ideology as well, several versions of the Bible, novels and movies such as *A Thief in the Night* (1972) and *Left Behind* (2000) that believers can direct non-believers toward instead of the Nicolas Cage film. DPM believers themselves may rely on various interpretations of biblical prophecy and the belief that any conflicting information is the result of a *Great Deception*. The various forms of mitigating strategies to neutralize cognitive dissonance are related to framing and involve modifying the framework, or schemata of interpretation, so that the ideology needn't be changed (Goffman, 1974). Cognitive dissonance apparent as a result of the newest *Left Behind's* box office and proselytizing failure was mild at best. The failure of *Left Behind* to spark a new religious revival was minor in comparison to the disconfirmation described in *When Prophecy Fails* because the DPM faith was merely being promoted, not tested.

Spreading and legitimizing the ideology were central to the media campaign that promoted the 2014 version of *Left Behind* as well as to the movie itself. Dispensational premillennialists are not a unified collective congregation with a terrestrial figurehead but, rather, millions of independent believers who support their ideology through acts of evangelism and are supported through various church groups. DPM evangelism sets itself in opposition to alternative ideologies and worldviews, thus proselytizing is primary to the DPM identity and to the legitimation of the faith.

The modern era has posed new challenges to dispensational premillennialism. As DPM comments repeatedly professed belief in the imminent rapture and of faith in the Bible they also held firm an even deeper belief that there was one true faith and one way to see the world. Commenters consistently decried what they considered the iniquitous nature of modern society. Non-believers, the major target of DPM proselytizing, represent a fearful unknown. The non-believer is not only an individual to be proselytized for the sake of their mortal soul but for the fact that disbelief, atheism or agnosticism, is a new ideological opposition that only seems to grow even in the face of evangelism.

The media campaign promoting *Left Behind* was a campaign for a movie, the belief in the rapture, a belief in Christianity, and the belief in belief itself. Though few commenters acknowledged the issue, the fear that their faith could be reduced to discourse (admittedly the very thing this paper deigns to do) was a reality that was prescient within nearly every posting made. The Antichrist must be real, the Bible cannot solely be a moral but also an ontological document, the book of Revelation must be fulfilled, and *all those who do not believe must see Left Behind*. All these directives unify in the most basic underlying declaration: there is one legitimate reality that is beyond reduction, constituting episteme and not doxa, and is discernible only through one Ideological center and must be accessed only by becoming a Born-again Christian.

## Conclusion

Framing the world is an ongoing process. Current events are constantly augmenting the way we see our world and other inhabitants within it. For the dispensational premillennialists in this study, it was no coincidence that the cinematic release of *Left Behind* coincided with current events, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), the worst Ebola outbreak to date, an increasingly visible social discourse on gay marriage in America. All this was framed as a sign from God of impending rapture.

Events and experiences must be consistently interpreted through various schemata in order to maintain a worldview. The DPM worldview allows for few schemata. All things are either, an act of God or godly forces, or an act of the devil or demonic forces. Events seen as confirmation of prophecy, whether they are the rise of ISIS/ISIL or a tetrad of lunar eclipses coinciding with Jewish holy days, are not treated as proof that the rapture will come on a specific date but, rather, that prophecy will be fulfilled soon. Through this god/devil, or good/evil, binary schemata of interpretation, all things are to be placed within the DPM worldview. Rival narratives, such as belief in extraterrestrials, are considered a satanic deception and, thus, placed on the unfavorable side of the binary.

Central to the DPM experience is the act of proselytizing non-believers. This is a mode of prescribed action and reinforces legitimizing efforts for the ideology. Rapture narratives such as *Left Behind* have, in the past, served to reinforce the proselytizing endeavor and reinforce belief among the indoctrinated. The most

recent cinematic version of the story, however, was made in the hopes of being an evangelizing proxy; non-believers were meant to go for the action, for the big-name stars, or for the drama but were expected to stay, ask questions of their friends and family who brought them, and eventually convert. The attempt failed, but with this failure came reaffirmations of three key ideological concepts at the center of the rapture ideology. The denial and delegitimatization of this physical world is primary to the dispensational premillennialist worldview. Prophecy, as dispensational premillennialists interpret it, is accurate in a general sense, and this prescribes all believers to evangelize. Speculating the specific date of the rapture is frowned upon, but the identity of the Antichrist is a matter of much speculation and anyone or anything that is not part of the dispensational premillennialist narrative is suspect and speculated as a potential tool, harbinger, or incarnation of the Antichrist. All of these aspects serve as buffers from cognitive dissonance and are regular aspects of cognitive consonance. Put another way, the rapture worldview comes with a specific ideological reading of the world, existing culture, and current events that fundamentally isolates believers but, at the same time, insists that they seek legitimization of their faith by preaching to the non-believer.

Various media, whether book, Bible with built-in commentary, pamphlet, or movie, have the potential to influence those who experience them; but such is not guaranteed. In the case of the 2014 movie version of *Left Behind*, the deliberate attempt to use media to mold and shape the views of people outside of the faith falls flat, in part because it relies on a traditional view of culture and communications in

the heart of a modern, increasingly secular world. The attempt to promote traditional authority and pose an alternative worldview to non-believers through cinema actually had the affect of alienating some Christian audience members, either by failing to fulfill expectations within the storyline, or by portraying Christians in a negative light.

As a millenarian belief, dispensational premillennialism has essentially become a routinized belief system. The same basic narrative has existed since the first rapture fiction movie was produced in 1941. Unlike the “Seekers” studied by Festinger et al. and documented in the book *When Prophecy Fails*, belief in the rapture has significant buffers that prevent disconfirmation. Through routinization of millenarian belief, Armageddon is always “soon” and believers must always “be ready,” hence, a perpetual state of anticipation is required or at least recommended. Though a future transformative event is expected, it need never happen for the faith to remain relevant.

Millenarian movements develop as a reaction to radical social change and can be a coping mechanism for loss of social status and prestige among once dominant social groups (Trompf, 2000; Bowie and Deacy, 1997). Modern society can now be seen as a series of continual social changes and, as such, new millenarian movements are to be expected. Dispensational premillennialism is not a new millenarian movement, however, but a movement that has existed from its inception in the 1830s until

today in part because of openness to utilizing new media to promote and reinforce their message.

The millenarian drive to reclaim a lost social order appears in the movie itself, through the allegorical promotion of traditional authority. The repeated allusion of DPM Facebook comments to current events as signs that the world will soon end point to the millenarian disposition. The regular discussion of the social, political, and cultural state of affairs in the current era in America as a cause for concern, even proof of impending doom, always included the unspoken or spoken desire to return to a time when things were different. Though dispensational premillennialism as a movement has a celestial rather than terrestrial messiah, it remains a millenarian movement in that the expectation that a future mass conversion will, one day, make the world right once more and return America to its “chosen nation” status. To most dispensational premillennialists observed throughout this study, the hope was that this would occur before the rapture, and that the 2014 movie *Left Behind* would be the catalyst that sparked a revival.

## **Reviewing the Process**

This was my first case study, and the largest project I have ever undertaken. My experience overall was positive, at times, even exciting. The use of social media non-participant observation proved a simple and valuable method. The emergent nature of design in qualitative case study allowed me the flexibility to include additional data. The emphasis on comments and reviews for codes and content to counterbalance any bias infused in my coding of the movie proved helpful during the analysis phase as well: I could focus on inductive codes from movie reviewers and Facebook commenters to support deductive codes which were based on the literature. I regularly revisited sample comments to consider my findings. The fact that the social media page was still up and active as of the completion of this study allowed me to regularly check for any new developments that may inform my study as well as to check other comments during the sample period not used to ensure sufficient data saturation.

## **Recommendations**

There is no current data estimating the number of Americans that believe in the rapture. The 2011 Pew Research study covers only those Americans that anticipate the Second Coming before the year 2050, not whether that event is anticipated before, or after a rapture-like event. A survey that seeks to estimate this percentage would be beneficial for future research along these lines. This study would have benefited from such a study, as well as from any research that located political, social, and ideological differences and similarities between dispensational premillennialists and post-millennialists in the United States: for the purposes of this study it was assumed that these two groups differed primarily along eschatological lines and otherwise maintained generally similar worldviews.



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## **Vita**

Andrew Burns was born in Toledo, Ohio in 1980. Andrew briefly attended Ohio State University, taking a few years away from academia before returning to complete his bachelor's degree at University of New Orleans. In 2013, Andrew returned to University of New Orleans to attain his master's degree in sociology.