

Progressive Religion ... Is Not An Oxymoron

By David E. Roy

Last month, I outlined the "pastor problem" for Barack Obama (Rev. Jeremiah Wright) and this month, as promised, I will pursue the same for John McCain (Rev. John Hagee).

McCain's Revelation

For a time, John McCain claimed that his endorsement by Rev. John Hagee was something he was glad to have. However, after some media scrutiny that lifted out Hagee's inflammatory statements about Catholicism and his highly questionable biblical interpretations that require a nuclear first strike on Iran, McCain decided to disavow the pastor and his rapt devotion to a gruesome end-times scenario.

Another of the comments made by Hagee that caught the media's attention was the grotesque idea that the Jewish Holocaust was the will of God. The reason that Hagee and others would entertain and promote this notion is that it led directly to the establishment of the modern state of Israel. This in turn is one of the necessary steps for the fulfillment of the storyline they have constructed from their selective reading of the Book of Revelation in the Christian New Testament as well as the Book of Daniel in the Jewish bible and a few other texts scattered about in the New Testament.

For McCain to court and accept an endorsement from a religious figure such as John Hagee suggests how out of touch his campaign must be with most Christians. The views that Hagee promotes are widely denounced across the board by the vast majority of evangelical Christians as well as progressives, main-line protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

The Big Problem: Hagee's Political Influence

The problem with Hagee and others who adhere to this unique set of beliefs is that they have a receptive audience with some of our current conservative political leaders as well as some of the conservative political leaders in Israel. As such, they have influence and are attempting to drive events in the direction they believe will result in the promised return of Jesus.

Bill Moyers, on his PBS show *Bill Moyers Journal*, has devoted at least two extensive reports that reveal the extent of Hagee's influence on the political front through his Christians United for Israel (CUFI).

(These reports aired on 10/5/07 and 3/7/08. For transcripts of these shows, see <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/10052007/transcript5.html> and <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/03072008/transcript4.html>. See also, http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/blog/2008/02/update_cufi.html.)

While Hagee boasts that there are 50 million members in CUFI, Dr. Timothy Weber, an evangelical critic of the end-times theology, estimates the number of

dedicated end-times believers to be closer to 20 million. Though less than half of Hagee's claim, that is still a huge number.

According to Weber, their influence is further amplified because other evangelicals who may not be familiar with the details of these end-times scenarios tend to defer to the die-hard believers as the experts on the topic. In addition, there is an even larger secular audience that tends to be drawn into the end-times' stories when the world is in crisis.

The members of CUFI are not quiet, reserved people. They are politically active where it counts. Moyers has clips of them in Washington, D.C., corralling and pointedly reminding several highly conservative members of congress that no mercy will be shown to anyone who would stand in the way of complete restoration of a "biblical" Israel. In this view, the Palestinians are part of the problem to be overcome. Also in this view, the idea that the Muslims have a sacred claim to the same territory is not even considered.

As a result, that region becomes the focus of at least three absolutist positions: The Christian Right, the Jewish Right and the Islamic Right. Clearly, three rights can make a very huge wrong for the rest of the world. As Weber said, "Religion enflames politics and politics enflames religion." (*Moyers Journal*, 10/5/07).

Hagee and the Bible: The Unbiblical Rapture

The theological problem with the end-times tale is that it is not genuinely biblical. It is a story-line that has been imposed upon the biblical tradition, a story-line that runs contrary to the intent of the supposed biblical source for this scenario. Probably the best book for detailing how unbiblical the end-times chronicle is can be found in Dr. Barbara Rossing's recently published, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Basic Books, 2004). Rossing is a professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She spoke in February at Fresno's Interfaith Scholar Weekend. For Rossing, the Book of Revelation, which is used extensively by the end-times adherents to predict a gory end for non-believers, is actually a book that supports the traditional Christian view of hope and love for the lives of people here on earth.

The point of connection between the end-times adherents (also called the dispensationalists¹) and the Book of Revelation is that both are rooted in a genuine and deep human yearning that rises up among oppressed people for liberation, redemption and, most powerfully, for a great and glorious end to the pain and dramatic reversal of the misfortune.

But the Book of Revelation comes at the story in virtually the opposite way from the end-times adherents. Instead of speaking to the oppressed with a voice of hope for the future in the manner of Revelation (including the establishment of God's peaceful and loving reign *on earth*), the dispensationalists envision a future where the faithful few slaughter the Anti-Christ along with a great many non-believers, sending them to a

fiery eternity, then abandoning earth to utter destruction while setting up shop on a whole new planet.

The End-Times Story-Line: A Summary

To better understand how divergent the prevalent end-times story is from the biblical material, from the mainstream Christian tradition that has developed over the past 2000 years and from common sense, it will be helpful to expand a bit on the story line:

Jesus is not to return the one final time of tradition, but twice. The first time, he will come in secret and rapture up to heaven those few true Christians whose beliefs and purity make them worthy of jumping to the head of the line. Those who are raptured up simply disappear from earth. If they happen to be piloting a plane or driving a bus, it is tough luck for the passengers. There are no notes, no explanation, nothing. They are just gone.

After the Rapture is concluded, then those who are "left behind" will face seven years of unbelievable tribulations. The tribulations cannot be avoided, but they can function to "scare straight" the remaining people and motivate them to become righteous Christians, accepting Jesus as their savior, lord and master. If they do, then when Jesus returns for the second and final time, they, too, eventually will be rewarded with everlasting life in heaven. If not, then it is never-ending fire and brimstone.

When Jesus returns the second time, Armageddon will commence. Victory for Jesus and his troops over the Anti-Christ and his troops is a forgone conclusion, but the battle must be fought anyway. The victory gives way to a millennium of Jesus' reign on earth and concludes with the days of his Final Judgment. At this point, the faithful believers will be magically transported to a whole new planet while Earth and its all the rest of its life forms are simply destroyed.

Conflict in the Middle East is Essential

An important key to all of this involves how the whole scenario is supposed to begin. According to these believers, it will start with cataclysmic trouble in the Middle East, trouble that is centered on Israel. In fact, the whole scenario has been on hold for a few millennia, waiting for the rebirth of the State of Israel as well as other signal events such as the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the resumption of animal sacrifices.

Now that Israel exists, Hagee and some others are actually demanding that the US conduct a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Iran in order to fulfill the end-times scenario. It is hard to square the call to annihilate millions of people with Jesus' biblical commandment to love your enemy and with the understanding that Jesus has traditionally been called the Prince of Peace. It is at this point that the end-times movement crosses the line from interesting heresy to something much more dangerous.

One Underlying Motivation: The Spirit of Adventure

What are some of the motivations that would propel people to champion these ideas? Two stand out. One, that seems healthy, is the spirit of rugged adventure, the pioneer spirit. This spirit dwells in many human beings and probably has biological roots. For thousands of years, it would have been important that at least some members of a tribe or clan wanted to explore the unknown beyond the edges of the known. While risky, it also would open the door to new sources of food and other resources.

This desire to explore the new, this passion to go into the wilderness, also may be similar to what Carl Jung called an archetype, a psychic form that is powerfully alluring on both a conscious and unconscious level.

This theme is apparent in the Rapture-Left Behind culture. "We get to go out and start a whole new world from scratch and, this time, we will do it right! What an adventure this will be!" It is less dramatic and less exciting to work to make the existing world better. That requires the maturity to enjoy progress in subtle, small steps instead of seeking the explosively dramatic moment of cataclysmic change.

A Second Underlying Motivation: Grandiose Narcissism

Another appeal to the Rapture-Left Behind movement is quite dark. This is the appeal to the narcissistic core that exists in all human beings. Most people struggle to grow past needing to be the most important person in their world by making others, in their mind at least, less important.

Unfortunately, the Left-Behind-Rapture movement seems designed to subvert this growth by its intense appeal to specialness. That is, an enormous amount of the charm in this movement is being more special than most others. What could be more special than believing one knows the truth about this life or death struggle that is going to be imposed upon the world by the Supreme Being, of being able to decode this mystery locked away for millennia and of being one of the few chosen ones who will be raptured up by Jesus to Heaven?

This motivation fuels drama. Moreover, it has the effect of making everyone caught up in it, from leaders to followers, feel they are incredibly important. This is a powerful addiction that is very difficult to overcome, the addiction to power and grandiose glory.

The Source of the Rapture: A Scottish Teenager & a Preacher

So, if virtually none of what the Rapture-Left Behind movement believes is true, how did these distortions come to be imported into our Christian tradition and what is the real intent of the Book of Revelation? Rossing's book covers this in detail. According to her research, the idea of Jesus coming back twice originated with a 15-year-old Scottish young lady named Margaret MacDonald who, in 1830, had a vision during a healing service. Her story was taken up by John Nelson Darby, a British evangelical preacher who proceeded to spread this story in Great Britain and in the United States.

Over the past 175 years, many authors and preachers have built upon Darby's ideas and created an elaborate scheme that involves, among other things, the belief that God had intended this end to happen millennia ago, but when Jesus was crucified and was not recognized by the Jews as the Messiah, as well as when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD and Israel was taken over by the Roman Empire, God supposedly hit the pause button in this sequence of events.

For the drama to resume, Israel and the temple in Jerusalem need to be restored, among a number of other events. Since Israel was established last century, many of the end-times adherents believe that things are on the verge of starting up again.

A Theological Tragedy and a Real World Danger

The theological tragedy is that the traditional Christian message of God's unconditional love is completely lost. The emphasis instead is on conflict and war. This in turn only helps to increase the real world danger of a nuclear war because there are end-times advocates in the US and on the ground in the Middle East who are working for more war, not for more peace.

While political leaders need to be supported by a patchwork of groups with sometimes highly divergent views and demands, it seems unnecessarily dangerous to seek the endorsement of people like Hagee who clearly are thirsty for dramatic conflict on a global scale in a time when it is increasingly obvious to a great many people that a world war for any cause, no matter how "righteous," will inevitably be a Pyrrhic victory for the entire planet.

¹ They are called dispensationalists because they believe that God has divided time into seven intervals or ages. Each age is managed (dispensed) by God in different ways. The last one, according to them, is the end-times that includes the Rapture, Armageddon and the Final Judgment. For Hagee, LaHaye, Jenkins and others, that time is now.

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