The End of History; or My Summer with Apocalyptic Christians

Nicholas Guyatt

There are real advantages to writing about dead people. They don't have blogs, so there's no danger that they'll see your work and grumble about what you've written. They can't send you personal messages correcting your mistakes or arguing with your tone. And you don't have that scratching sense when you write your book that the subjects may quietly read it and just feel bad about what you've said. As someone who has spent most of his short career writing about people who've been dead for a hundred years or more, I found out all of this when I decided to write a book about contemporary America. Before too long, I felt quite nostalgic for archives and crumbling books and evidentiary dead ends. When you can find your subjects instantly via e-mail, no matter where you are in the world, you don't have the excuses upon which you normally depend.

Pastor John Hagee addresses a crowd of followers during a rally in downtown Jerusalem on April 7, 2008. Several hundred evangelicals from the Christians United for Israel movement marched in Jerusalem in solidarity with the Jewish state. GALI TIBBON/AFP/Getty Images.

In 2004 I had just finished my History Ph.D. at Princeton, and got my first job at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. My dissertation was on religious nationalism in early American history, and especially on the cluster of ideas about providence and national purpose that suggested a divine mission for the United States. I'd placed my manuscript with Cambridge, and I was sure that I was writing a monograph rather than a trade book, but I had become fascinated by the disconnect between my work on American religious history and the currents of contemporary evangelicalism. To be sure, there was still plenty of missionary rhetoric in American public life. George W. Bush used that language, and Bush's speechwriter Michael Gerson had insisted on the role of providence in shaping America's momentous course through history. But this familiar language was at odds with a new conviction that was sweeping through evangelical churches and bookstores. Tim LaHaye, co-author of the bestselling *Left Behind* books, was telling anyone who would listen that God hadn't sent America to save the world, because the world wasn't going to be saved. It would be consumed by the Antichrist, and the end was approaching fast.

Would a historian have anything to say about the contemporary End Times movement? I was certainly curious about believers in biblical prophecy, and I felt an intellectual obligation to study them since they hadn't been big players in my providence manuscript. But I didn't want to muscle into the territory occupied by sociologists or religion scholars, who had already produced interesting monographs on *Left Behind* and on the upsurge of apocalyptic enthusiasm in America. My aims were a bit different. Could I take a few months off from my regular research, and hit the road in search of the preachers and authors who were promoting the End Times message? Could I write a book that had some historical perspective, but which threw light on the contemporary significance of apocalyptic Christians? More to the point: Would anyone be willing to publish it?

I found myself an agent in London, and he came up with simple suggestions about how to proceed. Write a proposal. Play up your historical knowledge, but don't become a prisoner to it. Look for a big thesis, and hammer it home when you map out your chapters. Boast that you're going to interview the colossi of the Religious Right, even if you have no idea how to contact them. I followed all these steps, and let the agent do the rest. He quickly sold the book to Random House in the UK, and Harper Collins in the U.S. Then, to my enormous surprise, he was fired from the agency. One of the things I've found out during my brief exposure to commercial publishing is that *every* author has a story to tell about their editor/publicist/mentor/marketing person/jacket designer being fired at the *crucial* moment, just when the book was poised for enormous success.

Armed with a contract, but no actual manuscript, I wondered how I'd meet my subjects. The hook in the proposal was straightforward: a Time/CNN poll recently found that nearly 50 million Americans believe that the events of the Book of Revelation will take place during their own lifetimes. How does this affect their everyday lives? And should the rest of us be worried that they're looking forward to the end of the world? In the proposal, I talked about the efforts of End Timers like John Hagee and Joel Rosenberg to influence Washington politics, particularly Middle East policy. But I also wanted to meet ordinary evangelicals who tried to live their lives in the shadow of the apocalypse. And I wanted to explain why this apocalyptic sensibility—which was far removed from the main currents of American religious history—had come to prominence in recent decades.

Should I tell my prospective subjects that I was a nonbeliever and had serious doubts about the political lobbying of many apocalyptic Christians? I decided to call or e-mail a long list of pastors and evangelical authors. I told them the truth—or, at least, most of the truth. I was a historian who'd written an academic book about providentialism, and now I was writing a book for a general audience about apocalyptic Christianity. I was keen to explain the End Times perspective to nonevangelicals, and to explore the history of prophecy in America. I was a lapsed Catholic rather than an End Times enthusiast, but I wanted to let my subjects speak for themselves.

By the summer of 2006 I had compiled an interview list that spread out across several states and a few weeks of travel. I still had gaps in my schedule, so I flew to San Antonio—the home base of Pastor John Hagee—hoping to arrange more interviews on the fly. My first efforts were disappointing. I tried valiantly to get Pastor Hagee to speak with me, even crashing the reception for out-of-town visitors that follows the Sunday morning service at his megachurch. He smelled a rat, perhaps because I was European and a little too eager, and he sent me packing. But San An-

tonio was a great place to start because almost everyone else in town was happy to speak about Pastor Hagee. Each interview gave me a little more credibility, and people were willing to talk because I'd already spoken with their friends or colleagues. Before long, the gaps on the calendar were filled, and I was meeting all kinds of apocalyptic Christians. I conducted about fifteen long interviews from Washington, D.C. to California. Within a month, I had more than fifty hours of tape to transcribe, and a much clearer idea of how the book would turn out.

I remember writing a paper in graduate school on Perry Miller, the celebrated historian of Puritanism, and planning a research trip to Massachusetts. When I spoke with my advisor about the sources for the paper, I focused on the Miller archives at Harvard but also mentioned a few of Miller's associates who might be happy to talk to me. My advisor shook his head and warned me against doing interviews. "They're sometimes helpful if you want to confirm something you already know," he said. "But don't rely on them to tell you things that you don't know." I realize that plenty of historians regularly ignore this advice and produce terrific books drawing on oral sources, but this warning stayed with me and informed my decision about how to write the book. I decided to arrange the chapters around the individual conversations I'd had, and to steer clear of a big thesis or the kind of confident detachment that's expected from a monograph. Before making my research trip, I had a good grasp of the history of apocalyptic thinking in America and elsewhere. But I had no idea what was driving my subjects, and I retained this sense of uncertainty (and curiosity) as I wrote up my interviews.

One thing that I carried with me on my travels was the sense that my very limited sample of interviews made it impossible for me to speak with enormous authority about the apocalyptic movement. A more impressionistic approach to the writing seemed like a good idea not only because it might keep the reader entertained, but also because a historian would be run out of town for making grand conclusions on the basis of a handful of conversations. I still feel a little uncomfortable, though, with the knowledge that some of my subjects agreed to talk because they believed that I was working within a different set of professional guidelines than most popular writers.

When I'd finished my interviewing and dashed off my first draft, events continued to defeat my expectations, which, after all, were based on my experience with academic—not commercial—publishing. My editors in London and New York were nice about my manuscript, but each thought that something was missing. One editor disliked my history chapters, in which I'd tried to offer a quick guide to the origins of prophecy belief and the role of apocalyptic thinking in America from the Pilgrims to World War II. "Can't you just drip-feed these into the other chapters?" he asked. He thought that the entire book should be a "journey": the reader should be on the road with the author from start to finish, and the story should move toward a big finale. This wasn't a whim or a quirk of this particular editor; when I looked through the publisher's Web site at the other books they'd recently done, I was shocked to see that they were *all* billed as "journeys." Even the cookery titles had a narrative arc, from the pantry to the fridge and beyond. I settled on a compromise, playing up the road-trip aspects while arranging my historical chapters as interludes between the traveling. But I was quickly made aware of one of the realities of commercial publishing: your book needs to fit within quite rigid guidelines of what sells and what doesn't. Historians who've published their historical work with trade presses are already familiar with this, of course. For the rest of us—who've learned to fear outside readers rather than editors—these nudges will be quite unfamiliar.

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A more serious problem, according to both editors, concerned my tone and my perspective on evangelicals. Here was the advice, roughly speaking: "Could you make the Christians a little crazier?" I don't blame the editors for asking this question, because in my original proposal I had played up the potential threat of an organized evangelical lobby pushing its apocalyptic vision in Congress or even in the White House. I found some evidence for this frightening scenario on my travels, but I also realized that the contemporary apocalyptic movement is too diverse and complicated to be fitted into a simple Pastor Strangelove frame. This is perhaps the biggest dilemma I faced in working on the book: How much complication and nuance and uncertainty could I leave in the manuscript? Or, to put it differently, should a commercial publisher—drawn to a project by the overarching argument and the potential for a catchy headline—be in the business of subsidizing the more cautious thinking that our historical training encourages?

My editors had hoped for a snappy conclusion: "Fifty million Americans are trying to blow up the world, and President Bush is one of them!" I would have been happy to provide this, but my findings on the ground were rather different. Many influential evangelicals are indeed trying to hasten the apocalypse, and they've cleverly expanded their influence in Washington with a view to shaping America's Middle East policy. But most of those 50 million apocalyptic Christians are more ambivalent. Many have withdrawn from politics and worldly things. Some are trying to influence domestic policy (especially around the issues of abortion and education) but draw upon their End Times theology to structure their disappointment at political failure. Others can sustain completely separate visions of politics and theology, battling to influence local issues or to support national conservative candidates while acknowledging that some day the Rapture and the arrival of the Antichrist will make everything moot. Only a couple of my interviewees would venture details about the exact date of Christ's return; when they did, it was in hushed tones, and with a variety of mathematical caveats.

I went into the project with a suspicion about the political influence of apocalyptic Christians in America and came out feeling fascinated by the intellectual and emotional burdens of Bible prophecy. Yes, some of these people are undeniably scary, and it's worth keeping tabs on the national leaders of the apocalyptic movement since they're more influential now than ever before. But I didn't find enough evidence to suggest that America was on the brink of a prophecy pandemic, so I didn't want to make that claim in the book. My editors were undoubtedly disappointed that I hadn't found a starker, scarier threat to liberal America, and I wonder if they would have commissioned the book on the basis of my eventual conclusions.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to write something rather different from my usual work. I've also been reminded of why some of the apparent disadvantages of history writing—the laboriousness of the research, the tendency to hedge your bets and to allow the evidence to emerge in all its complexity—offer a valuable alternative to the tight schedules and editorial imperatives of commercial publishing. Finally, I've learned a valuable lesson from being able to meet the people I've been writing about. As I said earlier, it's unnerving to receive an e-mail from someone you've interviewed who has now read your book and isn't entirely happy. But visiting people and spending time with them confounds some of the easy conclusions that you might draw from their writing alone. This seems especially true when you're dealing with people whose views about the world differ wildly from your own. I'm trying to remember this now that I'm back in the safety of the archives.

Nicholas Guyatt is a lecturer in the department of history at the University of York in England. In addition to Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Looking Forward to the End of the World *(Harper Perennial, 2007), he is the author of* Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876 *(Cambridge University Press, 2007).*