This paper starts with a discussion of the category of the sacred, and then discusses a particular mode of reading sacred time in the Christian exegetical tradition. My main case study is of a popular series of fundamentalist Christian novels which deploy this typological mode of reading to posit the ending of human history. I conclude by talking briefly about apocalyptic and messianic conceptions of historical time, and about the problems associated with the politics of the ruptural event.

I.

Does the sacred have a content, or is it a purely formal structure? In the classic Durkheimian formulation, the sacred is understood as an empty category defined structurally by nothing but its opposition to the profane. This opposition then comes to govern a series of further structural relations within the cosmos. Against the homogeneous, amorphous, undifferentiated space of the profane world is set the radical heterogeneity of sacred space, which – ‘saturated with being’ and with significance – interrupts it, breaks its flow, opens out on to absolute otherness. Time is similarly heterogeneous: unlike profane time, sacred time is reversible, because ‘every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the actualisation of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, “in the beginning”’. But this sheer otherness of the sacred is itself a kind of content; and already in Durkheim it is possible to see the emergence of a positive characterisation of the sacred as it divides internally to produce a distinctive ambivalence, an oscillation between repulsion and fascination, dread and desire,
the tremendum and the fascinans. For Durkheim this takes the form of a division between the pure and the impure, and between beneficence and malevolence, both of which are the object of interdiction: thus ‘the pure and the impure are not two separate classes, but two varieties of the same class, which includes all sacred things’. The sacred, as evidenced in its ambiguous Latin root sacer, designates at once the accursed, the outcast, and the holy, a force which is above all dangerous, contagious, and compelling; it is, in Roger Caillois’s words, ‘what one cannot approach without dying’.

The sacred is thus a force or a presence, whether anthropomorphised or not, which is conceived non-naturalistically as a suspension or rupture of normal time and space by the uncontrollable outbreak of ‘spots’ of transcendence. Gods are positioned directly in relation to this force, as the force itself or as emanations of it. Within this framework it is ‘normal’ time which is aberrant, and the time of the sacred that carries the full weight of meaningfulness in a fallen world. Mundane history is subordinate to that other temporality which comprehends but surpasses human time.

II
The figural interpretation of the sacred Scriptures developed in the Christian patristic period is built around that subordination of mundane to sacred time, proceeding by the reading of one real historical event as the prefiguring of another, where the relation between them ‘is revealed by an accord or similarity’. The term ‘figure’ originally designates a shape that emerges from a hollow mould (forma), although it then comes (by a transfer from instrument to effect) to mean form or shape in the sense of outline, a body that stands in relief
against a ground. Erich Auerbach traces the development of a more abstract sense of the Latin figura, in part under the influence of the Greek schema (σχῆμα), so that ‘side by side with the original plastic signification and overshadowing it, there appeared a far more general concept of grammatical, rhetorical, logical, mathematical – and later even of musical and choreographic – form’. Figure as shape moves in one direction towards the meanings of ‘statue’, ‘image’, and ‘portrait’, in another towards that of ‘appearance’ and of ‘the deceptive likenesses that walk in dreams’, and in Lucretius it shifts from the form to its imitation, from model to copy. In Quintilian it takes on the sense of rhetorical trope, and this lays the ground for the substantive hermeneutic meaning (as figura rerum rather than figura verborum) that it acquires with the Church Fathers: that of the prefiguring of one theologically significant historical event or personage by another.

Typically, an event in the Old Testament is taken to prefigure the person of Christ and is recast in terms of the fulfilment that is concealed within it. Paul’s use of figural interpretation is strategically intended ‘to strip the Old Testament of its normative character and show that it is merely the shadow of things to come’; with the advent of grace ‘the old law is annulled; it is shadow and typos’, where the Greek typos – semantically close to the Latin figura – designates at once a rhetorical figure, a deeper level of meaning, and a deceptive semblance. In this schema, where a connection is established between two moments which are separate in time but which are both within time, the first ‘signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses and fulfills the first’. Christ realizes the figure of David, for example, at once completing and transcending him. Figural interpretation is thus a kind of reverse
prophecy, a back-projected teleology: what has happened was what was always destined to happen.

Both events – the figura and its fulfilment, the type and the antitype – are at once historical and yet in some sense ‘provisional and incomplete’, since ‘they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event’: the advent of the Kingdom of Heaven, the end of historical time. Historical time is always shadowed by its atemporal other; it

remains open and questionable, points to something still concealed, and the tentativeness of events in the figural interpretation is fundamentally different from the tentativeness of events in the modern view of historical development. In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other that is promised and not yet present. Whereas in the modern view the event is always self-sufficient and secure, while the interpretation is fundamentally incomplete, in the figural interpretation the fact is subordinated to an interpretation which is fully secured to begin with: the event is enacted according to an ideal model which is a prototype situated in the future and thus far only promised.
The figures are ‘the tentative form of something eternal and timeless’, and conversely ‘every future model, though incomplete as history, is already fulfilled in God and has existed from all eternity in His providence’.\(^\text{16}\)

To Auerbach’s exposition we might add that the concept of *figura* has implications for the concept of person as it is understood in Christian theology. Christ is the archetype and fulfilment of human personhood, the redeemer in his own person of the fallen human nature of Adamic mankind. The essence of his being is that he is the incarnate form of God, consisting of two natures, human and divine, but having one person; and that person (the Greek term used at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 and again at the Council of Constantinople in 381 is *hypostasis*) is one of the three persons of the Trinity, distinct, co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial in the unity of substance of God.\(^\text{17}\) Boethius, defining the person as embodied, animate, rational, and particular, and thus as ‘the individual substance of a rational nature’, struggles to reconcile the Latin *persona*, derived from the mask which differentiates actors on the stage, with *hypostasis*: the former designates a substance, that which underlies accidental qualities; the latter designates the pure subsistence which is independent of accidental qualities, but corresponds to the former when it takes on particular form. Christ unites these two senses; he is, in brief, at once a fully human and suffering person (*persona*) and the promise of glorified personhood in its reunion with the God from which it has been separated.

Dante’s *Commedia* is Auerbach’s key example of the working of figural interpretation in a text in which ‘the meaning of every life has its place in the providential history of the world’.\(^\text{18}\) Warren Ginsberg gives the more secular example of Gottfried’s *Tristan*, where the hero is constructed as a typological
realisation of the Biblical David (who is more usually read in the exegetical
tradition as a forerunner of Christ). Typology here works as ‘a method that
converts a theory of history into narrative structure, and rechannels a system of
foreshadowing and prefiguration into the formation of living character’. I want
to engage with a very different kind of text, however, by looking at a more recent
example of the fictional use of typological interpretation.

III
Mary Louise Pratt wrote some years ago of watching an evangelical preacher
performing on television an exegesis of a passage from the Book of Ezekiel. She is
struck by the receptiveness of his ‘rapt audience of a couple of thousand’, all of
whom ‘accompanied him, Bibles open in their hands, index fingers following the
lines, lips moving as they weighed the powerful words’; his work is charged
with a sense of vital historical mission, which is enhanced by his charismatic use
of the medium. In listening to the televangelist Pratt is struck by the similarity of
his work to her own as a teacher and an interpreter of texts; the exegesis she
hears is ‘spellbinding’, combining the scholarly elucidation of allusions,
etymologies, and historical references with an eloquent and morally informed
ability to convey ‘the depth and wisdom of the text, the plenitude of its meanings,
the higher purposes to which it called them’. Yet what this interpretation is
doing is reading the text – Chapter 38 of the Book of Ezekiel – as a prophetic
anticipation of an apocalyptic war in the Middle East; the televangelist reads a
coded text for its esoteric core of literal truth about a future event, and he no
longer understands typology as applying only to the history of the Jewish people but extends it to all subsequent history, and specifically that of his own people.

This is in many ways a peculiarly American story. Although the combination of belief in the literal or coded truth of Scripture with the reach and power of the mass media can be found elsewhere – in the worlds of Islam and of Hinduism, in the mass-produced iconography of Catholicism, and spreading out from the evangelising Protestant churches of the United States to Central and South America and many other parts of the Western world – it works with particular intensity in that country which more than any other is the creature of Enlightenment reason and modernity, which understands itself as an exception among the nations, chosen by God to fulfil its manifest destiny, and where the tensions between secular and religious versions of the common weal have become pervasive.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s the United States was swept by a cultural revolution at least as formative as that of the 1960s counter-culture, in which millions of Bible believers

broke old taboos constraining their interactions with outsiders, claimed new cultural territory, and refashioned themselves in church services, Bible studies, books and pamphlets, classrooms, families, daily life, and the public arena. In the process, they altered what it meant to be a fundamentalist and reconfigured the large fellowship of born-again Christians, the rules of national public discourse, and the meaning of modernity.22
The movement had its origins in nineteenth-century revivalist movements (and in an eschatological tradition running through the whole history of Christianity), in the typological concordances of the widely disseminated Scofield Reference Bible (1909), in Billy Graham’s crusades, and in Hal Lindsey’s populist manual of prophetic belief The Late Great Planet Earth (1970), the single best-selling non-fiction title of the 1970s. Lindsey’s manual drew together anxieties about communism, globalisation, ecumenism, and the displacement of the nation state by supra-national governmental and monetary systems, all of which he read as indicators of ‘the rise of the “Beast system”, otherwise known as the ominous “New World Order”, controlled by secret organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Trilateral Commission’.²³ The evangelical revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, appealing to the cultural anxieties of a white and largely working-class demographic ‘left behind’ by rapid social change, was guided and shaped by a number of evangelical preachers, most prominently Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, with a command of television that enabled them to reach well beyond their local congregations, seminaries and ‘universities’ to an audience of millions.

The significance of this movement outwards into public life lay in its challenge to the modern settlement in which religion is allotted a protected place outside of politics and the serious business of the state. As Susan Harding puts it, the huge 1980 ‘Washington for Jesus’ rally tore up ‘a tacit contract with modern America’ which, ‘fashioned in the wake of the 1925 Scopes trial, specifically proscribed the “mixing” of ostensibly premodern, that is, Bible-believing, Protestant rhetorics and routine politics. It thus rendered the public arena and the nation as a whole “modern” in the sense of secular’.²⁴ Now, however, the
assumption that a religious premodernity and a secular modernity are neatly separable into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ is barely tenable; as the social landscape has changed, with religion and politics again forming a globally unstable mixture, we have come to realise that ‘modernity is unthinkable without the constantly evolving, constantly renegotiated pact between religious and secular knowledge. What appears today as an “undoing of secularisation” is a violent reworking of the pact, whose outcome we cannot foresee.’

The central assumptions of enlightened modernity – the primacy of scientific protocols of proof over faith, a non-transcendent understanding of history, value pluralism – are directly challenged by a discourse of Biblical certainty secure in its anchorage in the public sphere. It is not that an achieved modernity has been disrupted by an incursion of ‘premodern’ elements, but that the separation of religious and political spheres, which has been formative of the modern state since the late eighteenth century, has been replaced by a kind of fusion in which the force of the political is redefined: Jimmy Carter was elected in 1976 as a born-again Christian; Ronald Reagan built his foreign policy around millenarian beliefs, and his Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, refused to engage with environmental degradation because of his belief that the imminent return of Christ would make human intervention redundant; George Bush proclaimed his rebirth and redemption as a Christian, and spoke in favour of the teaching of Creation Science in schools; and Jon Huntsman dropped out of the 2012 Republican primary race lamenting that he was the only one of the five leading candidates who believed in the reality of climate change and the theory of evolution. An estimated 70 million Americans call themselves evangelicals, and they gave George W. Bush 40% of his
vote. Each one of them wants to bring God into politics. Religion no longer knows, or accepts, its ‘place’.

The exercise of biblical exegesis that Pratt witnessed is at the core of those fundamentalist modes of religious thought which understand the historical world not as an irreversible and linear unfolding of events, but as a concordance of sacred time with historical time within a closed (and therefore atemporal) order of the universe.27 Prophecy is what reads the sense of that closed order. The end days foretold in the Bible are always already inscribed in a patterning of the world which has the Biblical text as its encoded manifestation. Such a placing of the world within sacred time radically undermines non-transcendental forms of reading:

Current events and the daily news are not neutral, secular phenomena that exist independently and are subjected to religious interpretation by Christians. They are signs of the times. They are inside bible-based history. They are evidence that God and his enemy are coming to final blows over the fate of the Jews and of all mankind.28

Everything can be placed in relation to this interpretive schema. The historical time posited by fundamentalist Christians in the United States (and of course there are close negative parallels in fundamentalist Islamic thought) draws a connection between Israel and America, the two covenanted nations: a Salomonic Golden Age flourishes in the US to the end of the Eisenhower presidency, then declines as the liberal-humanist enemies of religion (for which read in part the counter-culture of the 1960s) force through the 1962 decision
banning school prayer and the case that legalises abortion, Roe v Wade, in 1973. Then follows the presidency of Bill Clinton, the evil Zedekiah who ignores the admonitions of the prophets, and its culmination in the event that parallels the conquest and enslavement of the chosen people by Babylon, the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Biblical prophecy gives tens of millions of Americans a way of construing apparently secular events within a typological perspective; it gives them a line about

the AIDS crisis, the New Age Movement, satanic cults and demonic principalities, about the epidemic of abortion, pornography, homosexuality, divorce, crime, and drugs … about Israel, about what God has in store for Israel … about the Persian Gulf war, or the Middle East peace treaty … [about] what the election and reelection of Bill Clinton meant for America … about the North American [Free] Trade Agreement, [the] General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the European Economic Community, about borderless travel between nations, the Internet, transnational business and finance, and UFOs and alien abductions.²⁹

The dominant interpretive framework amongst American fundamentalists – the doctrine of dispensational premillenarianism – posits that ‘God at the beginning of time determined a specific, detailed plan for history’s last days – a plan revealed in the Bible with minute particularity, though in symbolic language and veiled images’.³⁰ In this plan, history culminates in the ‘rapture’ of the saints or chosen ones, who ascend with Christ to Heaven and dwell there for seven years
while those left behind suffer terrible tribulations culminating in Israel in the battle of Armageddon between the forces of Christ and the Antichrist; the chosen ones then return with Christ to rule with him on earth during the Kingdom Age of 1000 years. The schema is enunciated in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’s best-selling end-time novel, *Left Behind* (later expanded to a series, as well as to a number of franchised movies, graphic novels, children’s novels, a television series, digital games, and merchandising spin-offs), in which the initial moment of rapture is followed by the story of those church members who were not truly saved, and to whom the divine order of things is explained in a DVD left behind for them by their raptured pastor. Dozens of other novels, and untold numbers of populist doctrinal texts, expound some version of this pattern.

IV

As it happens, it is Ezekiel 38 that forms the basis for much of the underlying pattern of *Left Behind*; an appendix to the novel, ‘The Truth Behind the Fiction’, reads Ezekiel 38 and 39 as prefiguring the role of Russia in attacking Israel in the end times. The identification of Ezekiel’s ‘Gog, the land of Magog’ (an unspecific power from the north) with Russia is here merely stated, but it draws on a long history of exegesis deriving in part from the much later identification of Gog with the land of the Scythians, and from the identification made by the nineteenth-century philologist Wilhelm Gesenius of the Hebrew noun *rosh*, meaning prince (‘the chief prince of Meschech and Tubal’), with the Nordic Rus people. The authors also note that Saddam Hussein began the rebuilding of Babylon, and that
his ‘removal’ will facilitate this revival of Babylon. In a later novel in the series, *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of the Left Behind*, the figural hermeneutics which establishes the concordance of the Old and New Testaments receives narrative embodiment in the person of the orthodox Rabbi Tsion Ben-Judah, who is commissioned by the state of Israel to examine the scriptures for their prophetic truth and discovers that Jesus is indeed the predicted Messiah. In Robert Price’s analysis, this mode of allegorical exegesis represents a shift from treating the New Testament (as the earliest gospel, Matthew, does) as representing actions undertaken in order to bring about a fulfilment of the words of the prophets, to the appeal by Luke and later exegetes to the Old Testament texts as anachronistic anticipations of a future to which they are merely the prelude. That future is at once the coming and the second coming (*parousia*) of Christ, two distinct times within a closed order of temporal recurrence.

*Left Behind* begins with Captain Rayford Steele piloting a Boeing 747 across the Atlantic, thinking lustful thoughts about his ‘drop-dead gorgeous’ flight attendant Hattie Durham, and then suddenly finding out that a number of passengers are missing, leaving behind their clothes and their loved ones. The plane returns to Chicago to find widespread devastation: cars and planes have crashed, and millions of people – including babies in the womb and corpses on their way to a funeral – have vanished into thin air; video footage shows people instantaneously dematerializing. Steele returns to his home to find that his wife and young son are amongst those who have disappeared.

From this point the novel follows two parallel and interwoven narrative strands. One is the story of Steele’s private moral quest, which involves a rejection of his adulterous self, a recognition of the truth of his wife’s religious
beliefs, and the decoding (with the help of the DVD left behind by the pastor of her congregation and of the spiritual leadership of that pastor’s replacement, a man who has recognized his own previous lack of true faith) of Biblical prophecies in Revelations and Ezekiel, which tell of the rapture of the faithful followed by a seven-year period of worsening warfare, famine, and plague, ending in the Great Tribulation which precedes the millennial rule of Christ. It becomes clear to Steele that ‘God had tried to warn his people by putting his Word in written form centuries before’; he is born again as a believer, and persuades his daughter Chloe to convert to his newly-found faith.

The other narrative strand follows the more public quest of the ace reporter ‘Buck’ Williams to uncover a conspiracy on the part of a cabal of powerful, ruthless, and very wealthy men to install a young and charismatic politician, Nicolae Carpathia (‘a stunningly handsome blond who looked not unlike a young Brad Pitt’) as the leader of a world government, technically the United Nations, with its headquarters in the renovated city of Babylon, with a single currency, a single language, a single world religion headquartered in Rome, and with the United Nations having a monopoly of weapons in a world that has disarmed. Carpathia is Romanian but (the implication is: therefore) of Roman stock. Together with Buck we learn to read the clues: a series of men who have got in the way of Carpathia’s rise have been murdered, including Buck’s English contact who tipped him off to the conspiracy and the Scotland Yard detective who revealed the extent of the power of the financiers backing Carpathia. Talking to the born-again pastor, Bruce Barnes, Buck realises that all the signs point to Carpathia’s being the Antichrist; he himself undergoes a spiritual conversion, which gives him the power to resist Carpathia as he exercises his evil powers
over a gathering of his inner circle, executing his two most powerful backers and 
hypnotising everyone except Buck – protected by his newfound ally, Jesus – into 
seeing a double suicide instead of a murder. The novel finishes with an 
annunciation of the challenge that awaits the three male protagonists:

Steele, Buck Williams, and Bruce Barnes faced the gravest dangers 
anyone could face, and they knew their mission.

The task of the Tribulation Force was clear and their goal nothing 
less than to stand and fight the enemies of God during the seven most 
chaotic years the planet would ever see.43

The text quoted in the DVD left behind by the raptured pastor is 1 Corinthians 
51-7, proclaiming the Resurrection and the raising up of the dead to their 
incorruptible bodies. This is the event the novel narrates: ‘Bible prophecy’, we are 
told, ‘is history written in advance’.44 In this instance; in another story told at the 
beginning of the novel about the invasion of Israel by Russia in alliance with 
Libya and Ethiopia, where the invading planes and rockets are mysteriously 
destroyed in mid-air; and in another concerning the apparently supernatural 
powers of two Jewish prophets proclaiming that Christ was the messiah, the laws 
of the physical universe are suspended, and this (fictional) suspension is then 
adduced as proof of the power of Biblical prophecy.

Generically, Left Behind has elements of a number of popular genres. Buck 
at one point feels ‘as if he were living in a science fiction thriller’,45 and there are 
components too of the fantasy epic. Thematically the novel is close to such movie 
genres as the catastrophe movie and the alien invasion movie. And although it
predates *The Da Vinci Code* by eight years, the central role given to the decoding of Biblical texts and the political melodrama of the conspiracy plot mark it as a close relative. At its core, *Left Behind* is a proselytising novel written for a nonsecular interpretive community that already accepts its underlying assumptions. It has no common ground with those who believe in the principles of scientific or historical method, or in the provisionality of literary response. And its primary mechanism is that of identification with the process of spiritual conversion on the part of its central characters – Rayford Steele, Buck Williams, Chloe Steele, Bruce Barnes – as they repeat the figural archetype of Christ and the biblical pattern of the redemption of sin.

V

One reason why the abstruse theology of dispensational premillenarianism matters to those of us beyond this interpretive community is that – because of the central role played in such eschatological narratives by Israel and its chosen people – the typological account of the shape and direction of contemporary history has had real effects on US foreign policy. At a dinner speech given to Californian legislators in 1971, Ronald Reagan was explicit about his commitment to an eschatological view of history:

*Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia. What other powerful*
nation is to the north of Israel? None. But it didn’t seem to make sense before the Russian revolution, when Russia was a Christian country. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly... For the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ.\(^46\)

Many years later, in a kind of deranged parody of political commentary, Mark Hitchcock wrote of the 2006 Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections:

> These recent events seem to confirm there will be no lasting peace in the Middle East until the Antichrist arrives on the world scene. According to Daniel 9:27, the seven-year tribulation will begin when the final world rulers make some kind of treaty with Israel that guarantees her security and access to the temple mount in Jerusalem. This peaceful condition for Israel is further described in Ezekiel 38:8 and 11... While world leaders should continue to do whatever they can to limit violence and bloodshed in the Middle East, I don’t believe any lasting results will be achieved until the Antichrist arrives on the scene.\(^47\)

This discourse is embedded in institutions which are culturally mainstream, including much of the American political establishment. The novel *Left Behind* is one small component of a complex apparatus made up of movies, graphic novels, digital games, sermons, prayer meetings, study groups, television and radio stations, websites, parts of the music industry, bible colleges and seminaries, Christian bookshops, political pressure groups – all working to shape
the persons of the faithful as the bearers of a particular view of the world, a particular kind of worldly force: to position them as the freely self-positioning subjects of its discourse. The immense power that this assemblage, this *dispositif*, wields in the United States threatens the notion on which this Enlightenment state was founded, that there should be separate spheres of responsibility and truth for religion and politics; the prospect half-glimpsed before us is of the fusion (or ‘de-differentiation’) again of those relatively distinct spheres and the end of a secular order based in principles – however inadequately they may operate in practice – of consensual rationality. Although the role of religion in US politics is largely restricted to the relatively peripheral areas of the control of fertility and sexuality and a single field of foreign policy, the Middle East, the guidance of American evangelical thought by eschatological principles is entirely ominous. Islamist and Hindutva ideals of theocratic governance are shared – *mutatis mutandis* – by the American religious right, whose goal is a fully Christian state promoting Christian ethical and cultural norms, and whose ‘wilfully mad rhetoric ... is a political act, a constant dissent, disruption, and critique of modern thought, specifically of the modern theories of history that shape prevailing knowledge about world events, past and present, in America’.48

VI

Apocalypse is the event of transcendental violence that marks and effects the end of sacred time, or rather the end of the temporal dimension of the sacred; it announces and effects the advent (to use a necessary paradox) of eternity, the pleroma in which time ceases to exist. In the fundamentalist vision enunciated in the *Left Behind* texts this event is above all a spectacle: the witnessing by those who are saved of the torment of the sinful masses. The certainty that one will
partake of this joyous spectacle is guaranteed in advance by the sure knowledge that the elect have of their salvation: ‘If you have already trusted Christ for your salvation, you have the mark of the seal of God on your forehead, visible only to other believers... this decision, mark, seal is also irrevocable, so you need never fear losing your standing with him.’ The decision and the mark are equivalent: to trust Christ is to be marked as one of the elect, to choose is to be chosen – and conversely, it is those who are not chosen who will choose to be marked with the mark of the Beast. The spectacle of torment is one of the signs by which the chosen ones will recognise their election to grace.

Violence is at the heart of this version of the sacred, just as, in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’, it is at the heart of the law, taking the form of the originary act of violence that founds any juridical system (the ‘lawmaking’ [rechtsetzend] moment) and of the ongoing violence that preserves it (the rechtserhaltend moment). If the sacred is ‘what one cannot approach without dying’ (Caillois), it is, for Benjamin, above all in ‘the exercise of violence over life and death’ – that is, in capital punishment – that the law is most fully affirmed. Conversely, ‘When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay’. The violence of the law corresponds to what Benjamin calls mythic lawmaking, whose end is power; it is, in its archetypal form, ‘a mere manifestation of the gods’, being governed by fate, or pure contingency. It is contrasted with divine violence, whose end is justice and whose action is law-destroying.

How are we to understand this divine violence? In Benjamin’s later writings, oriented equally to Marxism and to the Kabbalah, it takes the form of the messianic event which ruptures the continuity of homogeneous empty time.
That event is at once the transcendental Revolution which overturns all previously existing structures and the advent of the Messiah, who ‘comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist’. Revolutionary violence, as ‘pure immediate violence’, is ‘the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man’. It corresponds to that absolute event which in Sorel, taking the form of the general strike, has ‘a character of infinity, because it puts on one side all discussion of definite reforms and confronts men with a catastrophe’, and in Badiou is the ruptural initiation of truth.

On the theological ground that Benjamin shares with Carl Schmitt, then, the transcendental critique of violence is resolved by appeal to the Sorelian mysticism of a pure and apocalyptic violence which is its own end. Here, just as in the Girardian understanding of violence as a mimetic contagion which affects language and representation, violence is conceived as a unitary category with a constant relation to law and the sacred. Let me conclude this paper by briefly opening up a directly contrary line of argument. I posit that, just as the discourse of figural history must be understood, in both its actions and its effects, in terms of the dispositif – the heterogeneous assemblage of texts, institutions, doctrines, polemics, money, and actions – through which it exercises its persuasive power, so too the category of violence must be disassembled into its constitutive parts, the particular historical arrangements (including specific sets of laws and legal systems and the particular workings of capitalism) within which it takes on a differential form and is distributed between unequally empowered social protagonists. Neither in Rapture nor in Revolution will there be an end to the complexity of mundane politics, or to the complexity of the structural violence of neoliberal capitalism and of whatever will succeed it.
Abstract

The paper reads the fundamentalist Christian *Left Behind* novels as examples of the figural interpretation of history developed in the patristic period; their apocalyptic vision of history recapitulates the centrality of violence to the sacred in general, and has particular consequences for the American polity, where such doctrines have become embedded in mainstream political discourse. The paper draws a parallel between this apocalyptic vision and other forms of political thought predicated on an absolute and ruptural event.

Biographical Note


3 Ibid., pp. 68-9.


9 Ibid., p. 15.

10 Ibid., p. 21.

11 Ibid., p. 50.

12 Ibid., p. 51.

13 Ibid., p. 53.

14 Ibid., p. 58.


16 Ibid., p. 59.


21 Ibid.


24 Ibid., p. 21.


27 I am writing here about Christian fundamentalism, but similar modes of thought of course operate in Jewish and Islamic fundamentalisms.


29 Ibid.


36 LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 484.


41 LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 316.

42 Ibid., p. 116.

43 Ibid., p. 472.

44 Ibid., p. 219.


51 Ibid., p. 244.

52 Ibid., p. 248.


54 Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, p. 252.
