

“NO ONE LEFT BEHIND”
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Call to Gather: from John Murray

Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell but hope and courage; preach the kindness and the everlasting love of God.¹

from Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Universalism is the most beautiful word in the English language.²

Reading: from “Salut Au Monde!” in *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman

You, whoever you are!
You daughter or son of England!
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires! you
Russ in Russia!
[...]
You Norwegian! Swede! Dane! Icelander! you
Prussian!
You Spaniard of Spain! you Portuguese!
You Frenchwoman and Frenchman of France!
You Belge! you liberty-lover of the Netherlands!
You sturdy Austrian! you Lombard! Hun! Bohemian!
farmer of Styria!
You neighbor of the Danube!
You working-man of the Rhine, the Elbe, or the
Weser! you working-woman too!
[...]
You citizen of Prague! you Roman! Neapolitan!
Greek!
You lithe matador in the arena at Seville!
You mountaineer living lawlessly on the Taurus or
Caucasus!

¹ Reading #704 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

² Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 222.

[...]
You beautiful-bodied Persian, at full speed in the
saddle, shooting arrows to the mark!
You Chinaman and Chinawoman of China! you
Tartar of Tartary!
You women of the earth subordinated at your tasks!
You Jew journeying in your old age through every
risk, to stand once on Syrian ground!
You other Jews waiting in all lands for your Messiah!
You thoughtful Armenian, pondering by some stream
of the Euphrates! you peering amid the ruins of
Nineveh! you ascending Mount Ararat!
You foot-worn pilgrim welcoming the far-away sparkle
of the minarets of Mecca!
You sheiks along the stretch from Suez to Babel-
mandel, ruling your families and tribes!
You olive-grower tending your fruit on fields of Naz-
areth, Damascus, or Lake Tiberias!
You Thibet trader on the wide inland, or bargaining
in the shops of Lassa!
All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Aus-
tralia, indifferent of place!
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes
of the sea!
And you of centuries hence, when you listen to me!
And you, each and everywhere, whom I specify not,
but include just the same!
Health to you! Good will to you all -- from me and
America sent,
For we acknowledge you all and each.

Each of us inevitable,
Each of us limitless -- each of us with his or her
right upon the earth,
Each of us allowed the eternal purport of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.³

Sermon

Tim LaHaye's and Jerry B. Jenkins' wildly popular sixteen book *Left Behind* series has sold some sixty-five million copies. It has had a huge cultural and religious impact. The late Jerry Falwell thought the series so significant that he established the Tim LaHaye School of Prophecy at Liberty University. This program offers a one-year degree in

³ <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/wwhitman/bl-ww-salut.htm>.

biblical prophecy. And Falwell is reported to have said that the series has had a larger impact on Christianity in modern times than any book other than the Bible.⁴

The *Left Behind* series is a fictionalized narrative of the authors' understanding of Biblical predictions regarding earth's last days. The storyline is that the Rapture has just happened: all true-believing adult Christians, all infants and many children have suddenly and mysteriously been lifted up to Jesus' side in heaven. The rest of us are left behind on earth. And yes, I do mean "us": presumably I am included in those "left behind"—and of all of you, too. Sorry!

In the books those left behind are scratching their heads about why all these people suddenly disappeared; they have no idea where they went. The world quickly is beset by horrible trials and tribulations. Soon rivers of human blood are flowing. Those left behind are confronted with the stark choice between good (embracing Christ) and evil (rejecting Christ). It's a black and white choice that faces those left behind: either they embrace Christ and convert, or they are evil. There is no neutrality.

In the series, evil is embodied in the Antichrist, also known as Nicholae Carpathia, the former President of Romania. Carpathia is a charismatic figure who has been included in *People* magazine's "Sexiest Man Alive" issue. His message of world government and peace attracts hordes of followers. A spiritual and physical battle to the death erupts between Carpathia's United Nations-like Global Community Peacekeepers and the Tribulation Force. The Global Community Peacekeepers are the bad guys; the Tribulation Force are the good guys who have seen the light about Jesus—a little too late to have been raptured up to heaven, but not too late to tend to the business of battling the Antichrist and his evil minions.

A video game based on the series came out about a year ago—just in time for last year's Christmas shopping season. It briefly became a lightning rod for all the controversy that the book series has generated. Some critics like *Newsweek* writer Jeff Ness have compared the video game's violence to the Adult-rated *Grand Theft Auto*.⁵ But the *Left Behind* video game is actually considerably less violent than the *Grand Theft Auto*—or the *Left Behind* book series for that matter. This is because the creators of the game wanted a Teen rating. If they were true to the books, it would not have been nearly tame enough to earn a "T" rating. So when you mow down your enemies with a machine gun in the game, no blood and spewing guts appears on the screen. Instead, the victims just fade off the screen. The game also strives to make the violence committed by the Tribulation Force only defensive in nature. The rules particularly penalize players for unprovoked violence. A *Left Behind* book is included with the game, though, so the gamer doesn't have to search far to find the blood and guts. There are plenty of things that I find troubling about the game. For example, the Tribulation Force includes good people like gospel singers, missionaries, and medical workers. The bad people on the Global Community Peacekeepers include rock stars and folks with Muslim-sounding names.⁶

⁴ <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2001/6/27/204456.shtml>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind.

⁵ <http://www.msnbc.com/id/11567350/site/newsweek/>.

⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6178055.stm>; <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/12/12/MNG8TMU1KQ1.DTL>; <http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/leftbehind.asp>;
<http://www.leftbehindgames.com/>.

Where did this *Left Behind* theology come from? Certainly there are a few verses in the Bible that could be read to support it (though as I'll discuss in a minute, there's plenty more in the Bible to dispute it). But more significant roots of *Left Behind* theology can be found in a nineteenth century approach to the Bible called dispensationalism. This approach divides history into seven periods, or dispensations. According to this approach, we are at the end of the sixth dispensation, about to enter into the final one which will see the earth as we know it end. True believers will be raptured up to Jesus' side and great calamity will befall those left behind. This time of tribulation will end with a thousand year rule of Christ.

Many (but not all) fundamentalist Christians have embraced the dispensationalist approach. One of the notable signs they see of the impending rapture, tribulation and millennial rule of Jesus is the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948. According to dispensationalists, the existence of a Jewish state in Palestine is one of the signs of the coming end. This is why many fundamentalists are so supportive of Israel's existence: it is for them a tangible sign that the end of time (which they long for) is near.

The liberal Christian theologian Anthony Robinson suggests another compelling reason for the rise of *Left Behind* theology: it especially appeals to people in a fearful time. And certainly the events of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first century have inspired a lot of fear. Drowning in fear, the certainty and ultimate victory (if you're on the right side) of *Left Behind* theology can be very appealing. Robinson writes, "Mystery and faith are replaced by prediction and control, or the illusion of it. The fearful are told they and theirs will be raptured up to safety, while everyone else who is not in their group will meet a terrifying end."⁷

Now I could be wrong, but I deeply believe that *Left Behind* theology is based on a profound misreading of Jesus' message. I don't think Jesus meant "Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Unless they attack you. In that case it's okay to mow them down with a machine gun." No, Jesus' message was love everyone—including your enemies—no matter what. It is a message of universal love. It is an inclusive message. It is a pacifist message. As Anthony Robinson concludes, the Jesus depicted in the New Testament is not the kind who takes "off his cloak of compassion and mercy to reveal a holy avenger or terminator."⁸

Left Behind theology can't see the proverbial forest for the trees. It takes literally a few biblical verses about the end times and ignores the greater truth that the Bible symbolically points us to over and over again: God's universal love. It makes me think of William Coffin's wonderful metaphor: using the Bible this way is using it like a drunk uses a lamppost—more for support than illumination.⁹

Now we Unitarian Universalists have an unfortunate tendency to paint with a very broad brush when it comes to Christianity. So it's important for me to say aloud that in spite of the series' big sale numbers, most Christians would agree with my assessment of *Left Behind* as a profound misreading of Jesus' message. Many Christians—including many evangelicals—continue to speak out vehemently against the series. We would be mistaken if we assume that most Christians embrace *Left Behind* theology.

⁷ Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology got to do with it?* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), p. 206.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹ <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2004-06.html>.

And the rejection of the theology depicted so potently in *Left Behind* is nothing new within Christianity. Almost from the beginning of the religion, countless Christians have lifted up Jesus' message of universal love and rejected a worldview that divides people into the Chosen and the Damned. Some argue that even Saint Paul, in the words of one contemporary church historian, "preached a definite if often muted doctrine of universal salvation."¹⁰ For example, in his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes that "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."¹¹ Note the word "All." He does not qualify this in any way. All sin. All are saved. It's not just the believers and the Tribulation Forces who are saved according to Paul. It's everybody. And even the book of Revelation—a cornerstone of *Left Behind* theology—contains at least a hint of a universalist message in at least one verse when it says that the gates of heaven will never be closed: "On no day will its [heaven's] gates be shut, for there will be no night there."¹²

Many early Christian theologians preached a universalist message in the several centuries after Jesus—at least until Universalism was declared a heresy in 553. Among the notable proponents of universalism were Clement, Didymus, Origen, and St. Jerome, who wrote that "In the end and consummation of the Universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state."¹³ There's that "all" word again! What a different vision this is than the bloody mayhem of *Left Behind*!

Even after universalism's designation as a heresy in 553, for a thousand years many Christians continued to say that the heart of the Gospel is God's love for all people. Often they did so at a tremendous cost. Sometimes they paid for their faith in God's universal love with their lives. With the coming of the Renaissance and Reformation and relatively more freedom, an increasing number of Christians picked up the baton of universalism. These include our spiritual ancestors who founded a sect called Universalism.

My favorite story from Universalism's early days in our country is the Universalist preacher John Murray's arrival in America. Murray was born in England in 1741 and was raised there. He was raised with a *Left Behind*-like of theology that caused him much fear and consternation. Greatly influenced by the Universalist James Relly, Murray eventually found his way to Universalism. He embraced the idea of God's universal love with all his heart and soul and traveled around England preaching this good news. He paid a price for his new faith: he lost not only his social standing but also many friends. His belief in God's universal love was further tested by numerous tragedies including the deaths of his child and then his wife, and financial ruin that landed him in the squalor of debtor's prison.

Destitute and in despair, he left England 1770 and sailed to the America. The opportunity for a new beginning beckoned him. He resolved to give up everything from his old life, including his Universalist preaching. His ship ran aground off the coast of New Jersey, short of its destination of New York City. Murray went ashore in search of

¹⁰ Ann Lee Bresler, *the Universalist Movement in America 1770-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 6.

¹¹ Romans 3:23-24.

¹² Rev. 21:25.

¹³ Gulley and Mulholland, p. 213-215.

food. On shore he met a man named Thomas Potter. Incredibly, Potter had built a chapel and was waiting for God to send him a preacher with a distinctive message of universal salvation. He might have expected a long wait because there was not a single Universalist church in the American colonies at the time. But here was Murray. Naturally Potter figured that Murray was his man. But Murray was determined to leave the entirety of his old life behind—including the Universalist ministry. So he declined Potter's invitation. Potter, however, was not so easily dissuaded from his certainty that Murray was the one, so he persisted in his efforts. Finally Murray decided that he would look for a sign from God: if the wind picked up and allowed his ship to finally continue towards its destination of New York, he would know that Potter was wrong. If the wind didn't pick up, he would accept Potter's invitation.

The wind didn't pick up. So Murray preached in Potter's chapel. His despair gave way as his belief in God's universal love was rekindled. He lived with Potter for four years and from that base traveled widely through the colonies preaching the Universalist message. In 1779 he founded America's first Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts.¹⁴

My colleague the Rev. Rob Hardies calls Murray's bizarre meeting of Thomas Potter our only UU "miracle story." Hardies celebrates that Potter had a message of universal love he shared with Murray, and in so doing revived Murray's faith. Then Murray shared the message of universal love with thousands more. The message has continued to be shared right up to us. And it does not end with us.¹⁵

Unless we keep it to ourselves. This would be a tragedy. I believe our world desperately needs our Universalist message. Our world needs all of us who have a different vision than *Left Behind* to speak up—us included.

We have an important message to share. We reject the idea that the world is divided by the labels of good and evil, that the world is divided by those who will ascend to heaven and those who will be left behind to suffer. Instead we believe in universal love. We believe that everyone has inherent goodness and worth.

Everyone has inherent goodness and worth. This is the message at the heart of our Universalist faith. It's not so much today a message about the next life and everyone going to heaven. And it's not dependent on whether you believe that there is a God. (For me God and the universality of love is one and the same thing). Whether we believe in an afterlife of any sort, whether we believe in God, we Universalists believe in the universality of love. This is our message. We believe that love—and along with it peace and justice—can survive and even thrive in this world. We believe that all people deserve to live in love and peace and justice. Ours is a deeply hopeful message—and it's hopeful not just for "our people" but for all people. It is a message that still speaks.

So instead of preaching a message of billions of people left behind, we preach a message that no one is or should be left behind. No one. Not the son or daughter of England. Not Persians or Jews or Armenians or Asians or Africans or Americans. Not fundamentalist Christians or Muslims or secular humanists. We believe that not even

¹⁴ David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 296-297; Ernest Cassara, "The New World of John Murray" in *Not Hell, But Hope* Lanoka Harbor, NJ: Murray Grove Association, 1991, p. 10-11.

¹⁵ Rob Hardies, Lecture at the 2006 Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly. Notes on lecture taken by Roger Bertschausen.

Hitler or Osama bin Laden should be left behind. No one said this faith is easy, because that's not an easy thing to say. We're taking that "All" preached by Paul and St. Jerome and Jesus seriously. All means all. Our world needs this message—now more than ever.

Now I'm not saying we need to go around knocking on people's doors with this message, but through our individual and collective actions and words we need to speak up in favor of the inclusion of all. And so in John Murray's words, go out into the highways and byways to give a message of hope and courage, not hell. Go out and live this great and inspiring message.

Universalism *is* the most beautiful word in the English language.

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