

Donald Trump, ‘The Apprentice,’ and secular rapture

By Arlie Russell Hochschild, September 5, 2016, 8:48 p.m.

NATE KITCH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

OF ALL the paradoxes of Donald Trump’s campaign for president, the most mysterious is this: Why do millions of devout evangelicals enthusiastically support the most conspicuously irreligious presidential candidate in years?

Trump says he has never asked God for forgiveness: “If I do something wrong . . . I just try and make it right. I don’t bring God into that picture.” When asked, he was unable to name his favorite book in the Bible, or his favorite Bible verse. He is not a regular churchgoer. His third and current wife modeled buttock-bearing thongs, hardly the look of a pious first lady. He has boasted about his extramarital affairs. Even Trump seems puzzled by his evangelical support. “Why do they love me?” he said to a reporter, adding “You’ll have to ask them.”

I’ve spent a great deal of time in the last five years in highly religious Southwest Louisiana. It’s a place where parents speak of children being “churched,” recall from their own childhood summers daily Bible lessons and camp revivals — and sometimes go to church twice on Sunday. Over those five years, I attended church, ate at gumbo cook-offs, played cards, and fished with white, older, married Christians. They were earnest, troubled people, and almost all of them will be voting for Trump.

One was a warmly outreaching gospel singer, Madonna Massey, the wife of the minister of a large, thriving Pentecostal church in Lake Charles, who declared herself “on the Trump train.” Over sweet tea, Madonna gave me a clue to why: what she called a “Bible lesson” about the Rapture. In her deep belief in the Rapture, Madonna is not alone. A 2010 Pew Research Center report showed that 58 percent of white evangelicals expect a Second Coming “probably” or “definitely” by 2050.

In the Rapture, the world as we know it instantly comes to an end. Believers ascend to heaven; nonbelievers face chaos and destruction on an earth turned to hell. Some imagine a biblical hell (locusts, frogs, plague), while others imagine a modern hell (falling twin towers and continual war), but either way, it’s a world in which we would dread to be — these words recur in all talk of the Rapture — left behind.

Inspired by a 1972 film, “A Thief in the Night,” and three sequels seen by an estimated 300 million people, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins wrote 16 best-selling novels, the “Left Behind” series, which have sold over 65 million copies. There have followed children’s books on the Rapture, audio books, graphic books, and more films, the latest featuring Nicolas Cage, in 2014. There is even a “Left Behind” video game.

Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., where Trump recently spoke, features a website on which 500 Rapture videos appear. In one, we see a minister, open Bible in hand, predicting that the Rapture could come next week . . . today . . . any time. In a flash, the minister and most of his congregation vanish. In another, a disbelieving mother ridicules her pious son, who is suddenly raptured up, leaving her to realize her terrible mistake. In all of these images, far less attention is devoted to the joys of life with God and friends in heaven than to the torments and humiliation of the left behind.

For those outside evangelical culture, it is easy to dismiss the Rapture as magical thinking. But we can also best understand it, I believe, as metaphorical thinking, about some very real events on earth. Just around the point when Rapture culture became popular, real wages for the American working class began a still-continuing decline. Tens of millions of believers in the Rapture are white, blue collar, or service workers who see good jobs being peeled away by automation and global offshoring. Their industrial world — of union-protected, plentiful, well-paid, secure jobs for them and their children — has come to an end. And the end can appear suddenly. A factory closes. A company downsizes. A house is foreclosed. A Supreme Court suddenly permits gay marriage.

Trump has tapped into the fear and hope underlying the Rapture, I think, by standing as a powerful judge who decides who is saved and damned. In “The Apprentice,” his wildly popular reality TV show that ran for 16 years, contestants compete to win a \$250,000-a-year management job — a secular heaven. Trump sits at a table in a corporate boardroom, in black suit and tie, lips pursed, the judge. Later, on judgment day, he tells one man who had been put in charge of two other contestants, “Sam, you’re no longer with us. You’re fired.” Then, addressing Sam’s two subordinates, Trump says, “You guys go up.” To Sam he says, “You go down.”

During his campaign, Trump promotes or condemns as well. If a news report displeases him, the reporter is banished from his campaign events; at one point, even The Washington Post was left behind. And what is building a wall on the Mexican border or banning all Muslims from entering the United States but drawing a line between the saved and left behind?

Like an Old Testament God, Trump judges. Most of all, he tacitly promises his faithful followers that he will restore their sense of being, visibility, and honor. Trump seeks it for personal reasons, they for circumstantial ones. This visibility comes, metaphorically, with the aura of that Trump Tower penthouse, with floor-to-ceiling marble, crystal chandeliers, pillars and statues of gold —not unlike the gold that abounds in many Rapture believers' descriptions of heaven.

Although Trump is nobody's model Christian, he has uncannily managed to appropriate the iconography of belief: images of a long-awaited judgment soon to come, when merciless vengeance will be wreaked on evildoers, wrongs will be righted, and untold blessings delivered to the deserving. This hidden source of his powerful appeal is nothing less than a secular version of the Rapture.