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3-7-2015

March 7, 2015: Watching the Left Behind Movie

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2015). March 7, 2015: Watching the Left Behind Movie. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/913>

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Title: Watching the Left Behind Movie

Date: 2015-03-07T06:23:00.001-05:00

3/7/2015—Last night I watched the highly entertaining Left Behind movie, starring Nicholas Cage, Chad Michael Murray and Cassi Thomson, and based sort of loosely on the novels by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. Let me say up front that, as Jackson Cuidon wrote in Christianity Today, this is not a Christian movie in the sense of raising any serious issues of theology about the Rapture in which believers are taken up to heaven by God before the tribulations of the end times can begin. Instead, it is, on the surface, a basic disaster movie with a plane landing with little fuel and a kind of alien movie, in which supernatural forces disrupt human life. Or maybe, as Cuidon also writes, it's basically Harry Potter. [He also points out the cruelty with which a dwarf is treated in the movie as showing its unchristian heart.] The rapture event is portrayed as entirely a matter of belief. You get taken because you believe something—presumably Christ as your savior. Other pious believers are not taken. This is symbolized by a Muslim in the movie. Undoubtedly, the producers were afraid to use a Jew in this context. This avoids the issue of the liberal Christian. In the movie, the world is binary—you are either a recognizable believer or not (or a child—all the children are taken). No instance of a rich person not taken because, although professing faith, he amassed too much money. One insincere minister is shown. One issue raised in the movie is whether a loving God would act this way. Thomson's character doubts it. Lots of people are killed, after all, when the Rapture happens. Airplane pilots are taken at a higher rate it seems than other adults. Nor is the question raised whether Mom, who is taken, should have renounced Christ to be with her daughter in her time of need. But I have more sympathy for the movie's religiosity than Cuidon does. It's very clear that the characters who are not taken are lost. A number of them are conventionally sinful—Cage is about to have an affair, for example. But some—Murray and Thomson—are not. They are good people who have not thought deeply about what human existence is about. They are brave and even loving, but they are in a kind of limbo. And because of that, they have no views on the structure of existence, human or otherwise. No critique by them of economics or anything else. Murray, the famous reporter, is asked about the tsunami he covered. He criticizes a believing woman who stayed with her child when she should have evacuated because God would protect her. But this is just the joke about God and the rowboat. ("I sent a rowboat to save you.") Revealingly, when he is asked by Thomson about the meaning of the tsunami, he has no answer. Not even, all those people could have been saved if more money had been spent on warnings. So, Left Behind is a kind of wake-up call after all. Don't drift through life. Make a decision. Not about religion, but about reality.