

Evangelical literary tradition and moral foundations theory

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INTRODUCTION

Evangelical literature has long used Biblical stories and genres as inspiration for contemporary fictions—think of C. S. Lewis refreshing the gospel story in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and revising the Eden myth in his science fiction novel *Perelandra*. Yet Biblical literature, as an anthology of sacred writing by scores of authors (and editors) across perhaps a thousand years in wildly different cultural and historical contexts, is a vast tradition that articulates a range of ethical values, all expressed in an array of genres with varied but specific conventions. This article examines two evangelical bestsellers from the last 20 years, William Paul Young's *The Shack* (2007) and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Glorious Appearing* (2004), the final novel in the Left Behind series, arguing that evangelicals draw on different Biblical genres for literary inspiration and religious faith. Their sales and movie adaptations attest to their continued power to move audiences. *The Shack* has sold over 20 million copies and was adapted in 2017 in a successful Hollywood movie starring Octavia Spencer and Sam Worthington, grossing \$96 million in sales worldwide.¹ The Left Behind series, meanwhile, written between 1995 and 2004 (with the prequels and sequel penned 2005–2007), has sold 80 million copies and continues to drive evangelical cultural production in films and video games. The series has been adapted to film six times: Most recently in 2023, starring and directed by Kevin Sorbo, in 2014, starring Nicholas Cage, and in 2000, 2002, 2005, with Kirk Cameron. The 2014 and 2023 reboots are in what we might call the same Left Behind Cinematic Universe (LBCU), with Cage's film ending with him as protagonist Rayford Steele landing the plane many passengers have been raptured from, and Sorbo as Rayford continuing in the months after the

Rapture as he and others become born again Christians and discover the Antichrist's identity. The sixth film was a 2017 spinoff of the 40 volume adolescent series Left Behind: The Kids, written between 1998 and 2005, featuring young people becoming Christians and facing the Tribulation. *The Shack* and the Left Behind series have enjoyed vibrant afterlives since publication, indicating their enduring power to move evangelical audiences over the last 20 years.

I argue in this article that we can measure the continued cultural appeal of these evangelical bestsellers by examining their animating moral values. To do so, I follow the lead of Bible scholar Carol Newsom, who uses the prism of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to map the values of the book of Proverbs. MFT posits that trans-cultural human moral concerns are shaped by the values of care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, which various cultures shape differently. Jonathan Haidt, the primary developer of MFT, has argued that liberals stress the aspects of care and fairness, while conservatives give roughly equal weight to all five values (2013). Here, I use MFT to map the concerns of two very different evangelical retellings of Biblical stories—building on previous research on how *The Shack* reimagines the theodicy of the Biblical book of Job and the way *Glorious Appearing* exemplifies the contemporary resonance of the Biblical genre of apocalypse, retelling the book of Revelation's final events. Young's novel and LaHaye and Jenkins's series are deeply indebted to Biblical literary tradition and genres, but their choice of source material reflects different moral priorities. Evangelicals exist along moral and political spectrums, and while there is certainly a shared audience for the novel and the series, with many readers enjoying and being moved by both, MFT shows how *The Shack* stresses the values of care and fairness

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while *Left Behind* depends on values of loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

Summarizing Newsom's "test case for a conversation between MFT and biblical literature" focused on Proverbs allows me to outline MFT and its value when analyzing "historical texts concerned with moral issues" which can "also be used to illumine the moral foundations of cultures" (2015, 122, 121). Examining Proverbs' repeated concern about "the wicked" (2015, 124) Newsom finds that Proverbs is concerned with fairness and authority more than care, loyalty, or sanctity. Of the care/harm dichotomy, she notes that "most [proverbs denouncing violence] do not feature the emotional component of harm to the vulnerable," mentioning harm to "the poor, the wretched, and the orphan" in only a "small" number of sayings (2015, 126). Intriguingly, she finds that though there are a few sayings about cheating in weights and measures, the question of justice underlies much Biblical Wisdom literature (as well as the Deuteronomistic History and the prophets): Fairness is the "basis for the notion of retributive justice" (2015, 126). As such, "The act-consequence relationship, which is foundational to the thought world of wisdom, is, at its root, a concern about fairness" (2015, 126). The theme of loyalty versus betrayal "is not strongly represented in Proverbs" because "group identity is not a major feature of the moral profile of Proverbs" (2015, 127). But because the opening of "Proverbs 1-9 is largely structured by means of addresses urging a submissive, responsive disposition on the part of the son, who stands in for every reader," the book takes the authority/subversion dynamic seriously (2015, 128). Lastly, Newsom finds that, in terms of sanctity/degradation, concern for moral or sexual purity is not emphasized in Proverbs: when "talking about sexuality, the concern is not the purity of the individual but care for the social fabric of community (Proverbs 5-7)" (2015, 128).

Newsom concludes her test case by suggesting that MFT does not adequately grasp the range of moral concerns of Proverbs and recommends "honesty/deception" as "a separate moral foundation" (not subsumed by fairness/cheating) addressed in "over fifty sayings" (2015, 130). She further suggests that a "harmony/dissension" moral foundation animates over 30 sayings about strife, especially between brothers (2015, 130). She recommends these additions based on Haidt's criteria for "moral foundations": normativity to third parties, a quick emotional reaction, culturally widespread, evidence of inateness (as in children or animals), and explicable in terms of evolutionary adaptive change (Newsom, 2015, 120). Haidt and others, meanwhile, have introduced a sixth moral foundation, liberty/oppression, for reasons I discuss below.² While the set is open-ended, MFT's argument is that while different cultures configure these "moral taste receptors" in different ways, the foundations themselves are transcultural and universal (2015, 120). As Newsom concludes her article, "MFT also offers biblical studies a useful tool for better discerning

how different moral configurations existed side by side in Judean society" (2015, 132).

THE SHACK'S MORAL FOUNDATIONS

Newsom's use of MFT to map how different literary texts exemplify synchronous, distinct moral values in a nuanced, non-monolithic culture is a good method for getting at the complexity of early 21st century American evangelicalism, which similarly produces literary and cinematic texts that have quite different "moral configurations." *The Shack* attempts to grapple with the kidnapping, abuse, and murder of a child in a universe with a good and omnipotent God. Young is primarily concerned with how harm reduction and fairness resolve the traumatic stories of both the murdered daughter and the bereaved father, himself a victim of childhood abuse. While camping with his family, the protagonist Mack is distracted when two of his children capsized their canoe; coming to their rescue, he momentarily leaves his daughter Missy, who is abducted by a serial murderer, taken to a remote shack in the Oregon woods, assaulted and then murdered, her body not found. Mack's wife finds solace in her Christian faith, but Mack in grief and doubt abandons his. When a mysterious note invites him back to the shack where Missy was murdered, he finds not the murderer he hoped to confront, but a racially and gender-diverse Trinity in which the Father appears as an African American woman (and later a Native American man), the Son as a Middle Eastern man, and the Holy Spirit as an Asian American woman. Over the course of the weekend, Mack cooks with the Father, gardens with the Spirit, hikes with the Son, and shares meals with them as they help him heal and return to faith through lots of theological discussion.

As I have argued elsewhere, *The Shack* is a modern-day retelling of the book of Job: A father's anguished questioning about his murdered child(ren), accompanied by a defensive theodicy structured through rounds of dialogue, favoring theological exploration at the expense of plot, and featuring the theophany of God himself appearing to answer his interlocutor (Douglas, 2020, 509). *The Shack* also relies on part of the Job poet's resolution, emphasizing Mack's lack of knowledge and power. But because it would disturb the friendship and trust Mack develops with the Trinity, *The Shack* tries to improve Job by giving the most unsatisfying parts of this answer to a fourth divine being in the novel, Wisdom. Readers of Job who are unsatisfied with how God answers Job's questions about His justice with an occasionally sarcastic speech about His power and knowledge will neither be satisfied with Wisdom's also occasionally sarcastic speech about Mack's ignorance and inability to judge fairly (Young, 2007, 160). One of the strange ways *The Shack* echoes Job is its proliferation of divine beings. Just as "the accuser" figure in Job helps displace responsibility away from God for Job's woes ("you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason,"

God complains [2.3]), the four (or five, considering God's appearance as a man later) divine beings deflect and distribute responsibility for Mack's (and Missy's) suffering. In this way, *The Shack* "inadvertently rediscovered the ancient Israelite polytheism of three thousand years ago, for the simple reason that justifying the gods' ways to humans is an easier task than justifying God's ways to humans" (Douglas, 2020, 517). Young's accidental rediscovery occurred for two reasons, I argued. The historical reason is that ancient Israelite religious imagery about a head god and a younger storm warrior god shaped the language and theology of the first two persons in the Trinity. The logical reason is that proliferating divine beings changes the shape of theodicy, distributing divine responsibility across several agents (Douglas, 2020, 531).

Building on this analysis, MFT categories illuminate *The Shack's* "moral profile" (to adopt Newsom's phrase). Most obviously, *The Shack* turns on the axes of care and fairness, which were violated in Missy's abduction, abuse, and murder. As with Job (and all theodicies), the novel's question is whether there is a moral order in the universe. As Newsom notes in the quotation above, fairness underlies the Biblical sense of retributive justice, that suffering is deserved punishment from God for sin. This view is represented by some of Job's friends, who assume that Job's 10 murdered children must have sinned against God (e.g., 4.7–9, 8.4–6), but it is undercut by the book's premise and God's concluding speech, where he condemns the friends for having "not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42.7). No one voices this view in *The Shack*, but Missy's fate still prompts the novel's key question of the unfairness of her murder, as well as the unfairness of what her loss does to her family. How is it, the novel asks, that God is benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent if he allowed this harm to occur?

Much of the dialogue between Mack and the divine beings centers on fairness, making it the novel's primary moral foundation. The four sort-of-gods continually enlarge the frame of Mack's questions about fairness, expanding the scope beyond Missy and her family to consider the larger operation of fairness for other actors and all of humanity. First, God says, they respect the free will of human individuals, some of whom choose a "relationship" with God, while others go their own way to commit evil (Young, 2007, 125). In this classic free will defense, God's fairness to the serial killer effectively trumps the fairness to Missy not to be abused and murdered. That this system itself might not be fair is a question the novel does not raise. The second higher principle of fairness the novel deploys is that suffering and evil in the world are consequences of original sin, of Adam and Eve choosing to go their own way. The novel invokes Adam and Eve several times, not just in a metaphorical or symbolic way (2007, 101, 150). Young appears to think they were actual individuals whose actions cursed all their descendants. Thus, the existence of suffering and evil is fair insofar as it is consequence of human action, not something God intended for the world. Whether this consequence is proportional—that billions of us should

be punished for thousands of years due to the actions of two remote ancestors—is likewise a question the novel avoids. The novel's traditional Christian theodicy on these grounds of free will and original sin will be acceptable to some readers and not to others, of course, probably based on prior theological views.

But the novel also has a resource unavailable to the Job author: an afterlife of reward. Mack is permitted by Wisdom to see Missy in heaven, playing with Jesus (Young, 2007, 168). Ending her life was unfair but is compensated by an eternal life of flourishing and fullness. Fairness for Missy in the afterlife is achieved by the non-reciprocal gift central to Christian doctrine, of the suffering and innocent Jesus dying on the cross to atone for human sin and reconcile us to Him. The principle of fairness is also drawn upon as Wisdom reveals the backstory of the serial killer to Mack, showing how he was also abused as a child (2007, 163). Unfair childhood suffering malformed him, with the consequence of him inflicting unfairness on other children. Human life is saturated with cascading unfair consequences of people choosing evil instead of relationship with God, all our lives marked by a lack of reciprocal fairness as justice. Nonetheless, the novel's concern for justice is exemplified when the Father leads Mack to Missy's hidden body, which later enables Mack to lead the police to the body, who, based on clues found there, find, and arrest the killer (2007, 248). Mack's conversations with God also reveal that he was physically but not sexually abused by his father, leading him eventually, the reader learns in surprise, to poison him (2007, 10, 217). Mack has also committed murder, although one perhaps sanctioned on grounds of retributive justice. Lastly, the question of fairness is developed by the sense that Mack, like Job, deserves answers from God for the undeserved suffering he and Missy have experienced. Here, God seeks out a person full of pain to heal damage that cannot be undone. These elements of fairness are heightened when we realize that Young in an interview has spoken about his own sexual abuse as a child at the hands of older boys at a Christian boarding school while his parents were missionaries in New Guinea (Binder, 2015). Young experienced part of what Missy experienced, and Mack's anguish at what happens to his daughter in the novel is also the author's anguished questioning of the unfairness that happened to him. *The Shack's* theological explorations and drama center around the moral foundation of fairness, against the cheating of lives and childhood.

Care/harm is an equally important moral foundation of the novel. Missy's entrance into heaven and Mack's renewed relationship with God are forms of care, reconciliation, and reparation. While the initial harm cannot be prevented or undone because of traditional theological rules like free will (which God seems not to have chosen), the compensation and renewal that Missy and her family receive may go a long way for readers to justify the ways of God to humans. Jesus even suggests to Mack that the Spirit "wrapped herself around" Missy to give her Jesus's "peace" before she was abused and murdered

(Young, 2007, 175), perhaps softening the cruel experience. The kindness the Trinity extends to Mack includes a beautiful funeral for Missy, her recovered body in an exquisite casket hand-carved by carpenter Jesus and laden with hundreds of flowers from the Spirit's "fractal" garden (2007, 131). God also informs Mack that his older daughter, who accidentally tipped the canoe on the day of Missy's disappearance, blames herself for the tragedy, and that Mack must reassure her on her blamelessness, extending the harm reduction to Missy's family (2007, 238). In helping him grieve and in drawing him into deeper relation with them, the divine beings' words and actions turn on the value of harm reduction after the event, to alleviate human pain and suffering.

Other moral foundations are present in *The Shack* in less salient ways. God's authority is affirmed in the novel, but unlike Job's God, they don't consider Mack's questions about their justice and goodness to be impertinent. Mack becomes pals with the Trinity, noting he feels particularly comfortable around "his newfound friend" (Young, 2007, 116) Jesus. In gendering the Father as female, Young undercuts the male authority so crucial to evangelical hierarchies (Du Mez, 2020), drawing the ire of some conservative critics (Douglas, 2020, 510n6). The principle of sanctity versus degradation is present in our revulsion at the killer's implied pedophilia, a known disgust response trigger (Haidt, 2012, 121). The sense of group loyalty in the novel is very low, however. In multiculturalizing the Trinity, Young was explicitly renouncing the racial resentments of white Christian nationalism that would come to define the Obama and Trump eras (Butler, 2021; Onishi, 2023). The harmony/dissension foundation Newsom finds in Proverbs does not really animate *The Shack*, despite its dependence on Biblical wisdom literature. Meanwhile, Newsom's proposed honesty/deception foundation threatens to destabilize some of the theological answers when Wisdom tricks Mack through a parlor game of putting him an oversized chair and requiring him to choose which of his remaining children will go to heaven and which to hell. This is deceptive because the novel seems to imply universal salvation (see, e.g., 194, 227) and no notion of hell, as some evangelical critics complained (Beal, 2010; Douglas, 2020, 513). Such deception may go unnoticed, especially if readers are motivated by Christian apologetics to overlook it. Most readers will be left instead with the overriding moral concerns of care and fairness that animate the novel's theological exploration and resolve its plot.

LEFT BEHIND'S MORAL FOUNDATIONS

If *The Shack's* moral foundations prize care and fairness over all others, we find a quite different emphasis in the Left Behind series that concludes with *Glorious Appearing* and its climactic Armageddon wherein the warrior Jesus returns to wreak violent vengeance on the Antichrist and his supporters, restore the proper authority of God and the

sanctity of the "City of God" (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2004, 293), and reward the loyalty of his Christian followers. Indeed, MFT clarifies why the series continues to so compel evangelical audiences even though the End it depicts keeps on not coming. The series is consistent in its moral topography, beginning with the Rapture in volume one and concluding with Christ's violent return in volume 12. It opens with the disappearance of true Christians who have a relationship with Jesus, leaving behind airline pilot Rayford and his college student daughter Chloe, alone now that their faithful wife/mother and son/brother have been raptured. They are joined by other characters, including a hard-nosed journalist and a previously false pastor; these and other characters in the series come to true faith, partly prompted by books and DVDs left behind by actual Christians, and form a Tribulation Force to counter the Antichrist's rise as Secretary General of the United Nations and the 7 years of Tribulation that follow as he establishes a "one world religion and eventually one world government" (LaHaye & Jenkins, 1995, 418), persecuting Christians everywhere. As Jennie Chapman argues, "Left Behind works to reconceive agency by locating it in acts of [Biblical] reading, understanding, and interpretation" (2013, 22), making its characters into active participants while predetermined events play out. Insofar as they learn to read Scripture like their premillennial dispensationalist authors do, they come to understand how God foils the Antichrist's plans. This fundamentalist decoding approach to Scripture written by different authors in different cultural and political circumstances helps account for Left Behind's continued success in the last 30 years, including its most recent reboot. The 2023 adaptation updates the cultural references that underline the sense of besieged community, with references to "fake news," "all souls matter," vaccine skepticism and "canceled" shows collapsing the post-Rapture future under the Antichrist with the pre-Rapture now of conservative Christian cultural resentment. Film viewers are "gonna think that they're watching something that is happening right now," Mike Huckabee told Sorbo when interviewing him on his show, to which Sorbo responded that they are "gonna feel like the Rapture's gotta be pretty close" (Huckabee's Jukebox, 2023).

In a previous article, I analyzed Left Behind's genre of apocalypse as the worldview that animates much Christian Right literature and politics. For a hundred pages in *Glorious Appearing*, Jesus rides through the air making speeches that cause mass slaughter of his enemies, its authors clearly enthusiastic for the just destruction of annihilated bodies (Douglas, 2022, 2). If Job is an individual theodicy, apocalypse is a communal theodicy, and Biblical scholarship helps us see its development in response to Judean oppression under Seleucid empire and then Jesus followers' response to persecution under Roman empire. That the genre has now returned as the most successful evangelical fiction 2200 years later attests to its radical (mis)appropriation by a politically powerful American demographic that nonetheless has been compelled to share political and cultural power in the last

half-century, a softening of privilege it has experienced as persecution, “conflating future oppression under the Antichrist with contemporary policies that decenter or deprive them. Antichrist abolishing Christianity tomorrow is anticipated by secularists making them bake a cake for gay husbands today” (Douglas, 2022, 12). Like *The Shack*, and in the same service of theodicy, the *Left Behind* series proliferates divine beings as a way of managing believers' concerns about God's responsibility for their suffering.

MFT's care/harm is not a foundation of the series. The Rapture is a mass catastrophe with planes without their Christian pilots falling out of the sky and vehicles without their Christian drivers killing passengers and pedestrians. The series revels in violence and death, its care ethos confined to the group who opposes the Antichrist's plots and wiles as martyrs are guillotined, poisoned, and burned (for a plot summary of the series, see Chapman, 2013, 183–208). When Jesus bodily returns to slay the Antichrist's army, producing a “river of blood several miles wide and now some five feet deep” (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2004, 258), he is completing the work begun by the “200 million demonic horsemen” which had already invaded earth and “wiped out a third of the remaining population” (2004, 177). The series' concern, then, is not so much harm as *unjustified* harm: That is, the value of harm reduction is subsumed to group loyalty, to the in-group of born-again Christians fighting the Antichrist, some of whom are unjustly murdered in opposition to his tyranny. Haidt clarifies, “conservative caring is somewhat different – it is aimed not at animals or at people in other countries but at those who've sacrificed for the group. It is not universalist; it is more local, and blended with loyalty” (Haidt, 2012, 158).

At first glance, abortion is one site where care/harm might be seen as animating the series. “Unborn” babies are raptured along with children in the first novel, putting abortion providers “out of business” (LaHaye & Jenkins, 1995, 93, 271). The providers want women to be able to get pregnant again so that they will have more abortions, and Rayford is appalled when his ironic comparison of them to “Sort of like doctors wanting people to be sick or injured so they have something to do?” is answered affirmatively (1995, 272). At the same time, however, when the not yet recognized Antichrist refers to raptured babies as “fetal material that vanished” (1995, 259), the language connotes a disregard for sanctity, not care, likening the unborn child to a blood clot or a cancerous growth expelled from the body. As Haidt explains sanctity, “some people see the world as being made exclusively of matter (low sanctity), others see it as full of non-material essences and properties (high sanctity)” (2013, 291). Like Rayford appalled by the business of abortion provision, the Antichrist Carpathia's clinical language suggests that disgust is the primary triggered moral foundation.

Indeed, Haidt notes the sanctity foundation's potency for the “religious right” and discusses abortion in its terms, not care/harm (2012, 176–77). That distinction

between moral foundations is likewise suggested by the fact that roughly four decades into political debate about abortion, conservative white Christians have never promoted or passed policies that would encourage women to keep their unborn children through free health care for mothers and children, or free long-acting reversible contraception that would reduce the demand for abortion (Peipert et al., 2012). That abortion triggers a sanctity sensibility rather than a harm sensibility seems confirmed by the series' skittishness about sex: Rayford commits the sin of adultery in his heart without actual messy sexual adultery (LaHaye & Jenkins, 1995, 146) and Chloe gets drunk at college but does not have any sex (1995, 163). The series' heroes are redeemed sinners who nonetheless have hewn closely to the moral foundation of sexual sanctity. Overall, the series' echo of the Hebrew Bible's book of Daniel suggests sanctity's important role in apocalypse: One of the oppressions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes seems to have been that he placed a statue of Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple, which Daniel calls an “abomination that desolates” (Dan 9.27, 12.11), as well as the horror of forcing Judeans to consume pork (Portier-Young, 2011, 210). This violation of sanctity is reprised in *Left Behind*'s ninth volume when the Antichrist rides into the Jerusalem Temple on a pig, which he then slaughters (Chapman, 2013, 194).

Left Behind's continued power turns on the upending of proper authority, with the Antichrist's rule on earth challenging the will of God, but also the proper role that God's chosen people—conservative white Christians in this supersessionist³ series—once did and still should be playing. LaHaye had been part of a larger fundamentalist effort to rewrite American history as the story of a Christian nation, complaining that “the evangelical Protestants who founded this nation” need to be recovered because “history was deliberately raped by left-wing scholars for hire” (Douglas, 2016, 137–48; LaHaye, 1987, 1, 6). The Antichrist's usurpation of national government through the United Nations likewise plays on old fundamentalist tropes of upended national authority (Du Mez, 2020, 13). Haidt notes that the authority foundation is about authority “perceived to be legitimate” (2012, 168), and the importance of Carpathia's authority in the series is that while the world sees him as a legitimate ruler, he is not. Carpathia's rise to power in Romania and then the United Nations “are enabled by democratic votes (pp. 276, 417), but democracy does not confer legitimacy on Carpathia in the eyes of the Christian characters, authors, or readers, who understand the larger supernatural forces behind democratic processes, and how the demonic manipulates the democratic” (Douglas, 2022, 11). The *Left Behind* series expresses the authors' view that all kinds of institutions—the press, academia, government, business, and entertainment—have been improperly usurped by those who are not conservative Christians. This extends to our knowledge of the Bible itself, with the series developing a kind of Christian Postmodernism—“the epistemological

practice of levelling the field of expert knowledge by cultivating networks and institutions of a counter-expertise that provides more theologically amenable answers” (Douglas, 2019, 31)—for decoding the Bible’s many “prophecies” about the End Times. MFT clarifies how these many disparate details likely trigger the authority “taste bud” for many readers, allowing us to see that proper authority is a core ethos for *Left Behind*. The genre of apocalypse it works in expresses the experience of disorder as God’s cosmic authority is challenged by the worldly servants of His enemy.

The loyalty/betrayal dichotomy is closely linked to this question of authority and is probably the second most important moral foundation: “Communal ties within the in-group of the church are strong, but such kinship does not extend to the larger society” (Chapman, 2013, 33). As Haidt suggests above, conservative care is “blended” with loyalty, and this can also be said for authority and fairness. The Tribulation Force around which loyalty forms is porous, constantly allowing for new converts in a way closely tied to the series’ foundation of fairness. Its loyalty–fairness intersection lies in its evangelical Christian notion of Pauline universalism, wherein equality for all—“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) – comes at the cost, Daniel Boyarin has argued, of being “inimical to Jewish difference, indeed to all difference as such” (1994, 156). A local pastor is African American, 144,000 Jews become born again Christians during the tribulation, and *Glorious Appearing* features new converts such as “Abdullah” and “Ming Toy” appreciatively witnessing Jesus’s destruction of his enemies. Anyone can become a new member of the in-group anchoring loyalty, ethnic differences dissolved in Christian universalism, as long as they recognize the authority of God and his representatives on earth, conservative white Christian men (Chapman, 2013, 93–95). Indeed, in a heroic act of betrayal, a converted Jewish character assassinates the Antichrist, assuming proper loyalty to proper authority.

Like care, fairness is subsumed to group loyalty. The ambiguity of fairness in *Left Behind* illuminates a problem that eventually led MFT’s theorizers to expand its foundations from five to six. As with *The Shack*’s theodicy, *Left Behind*’s theodicy tightly connects care to the moral foundation of fairness. Indeed, *Left Behind* raises an important question for MFT: fairness for whom, according to whom? As Neema Parvini notes in his study of MFT and Shakespeare, “Fairness concerns itself with proportionality, not equality. It is a question of reciprocity – ‘just desserts’, what one deserves – rather than egalitarian distribution” (2017, 246). Thus, *Glorious Appearing*’s remaining Christian characters call Jesus’s bloody vengeance “the greatest show on earth” (2004, 146) as “Nonbelievers are reduced to abject bodies onto which God’s promises to the faithful are inscribed [...] no longer humans, people deserving of compassion and empathy” (Chapman, 2013, 76). By its conclusion, only Christians remain, everyone

else condemned to burn eternally in fire, harm reduction subsumed to loyalty and authority—a configuration of moral foundations that is opposite to *The Shack*’s denial of hell and its musings on universal salvation. In *Left Behind*, fairness entails consequence, not equality: post-Rapture people get the notional chance to come to God, even if that choice must happen in a hurry if they are in a plunging aircraft.

Indeed, Haidt notes that early MFT experiments premised fairness questions on an ethos of “equality and equal rights” and “had done a poor job of capturing conservative notions of fairness, which focused on proportionality, not equality” (2012, 196). MFT theorists went on to “split apart these two kinds of fairness” (2012, 197), reserving fairness for what Newsom calls “retributive justice” (2015, 126) and developing a sixth foundation, liberty/oppression, to try to capture the ethos of equality, human rights, and egalitarianism (Haidt, 2012, 201). Thus, for instance, fairness does play a dominant role in the *Left Behind* series, but not to promote an ethos of gender equality because “women’s submissiveness is not simply evident at the scene of conversion; it is the mode of their lives” (Hungerford, 2010, 125). Even with this clarification, however, *Left Behind* strains notions of proportionality and justice. What kind of MFT violations would merit the commensurability of “everlasting destruction” (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2004, 289)—torture—as a proportional or reciprocal form of justice? Heaven and hell had been part of apocalypse’s package of theological innovations attempting to answer questions of divine fairness as Judeans suffered and died under empires, but Jesus probably believed that the souls of sinners were to be annihilated, “exterminated out of existence,” not “tormented” in hell forever (Ehrman, 2020, 160). Eternal torture was a secondary improvement by early church thinkers, as with the second century CE *Apocalypse of Peter*, the Dante-inspired fourth century CE *Apocalypse of Paul* and other parabiblical texts (1–5, 262–65). The *Left Behind* authors accordingly believe that everyone has a chance to come to God, and those who don’t “are sentenced to eternity in the lake of fire” by Jesus (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2004, 307) to be tortured eternally. As in, forever. This sense of fairness as just punishment is not proportional to the violations, suggesting the authors share a misanthropic sadism probably not imagined by the historical Jesus.

Mapping the moral foundations of the *Left Behind* series strongly suggests that its continued power for evangelical audiences rests on the four foundations of loyalty, authority, sanctity, and fairness-as-reciprocal-justice. Care and fairness-as-equality, or liberty, are present but subordinated to group loyalty. I suggest that the ongoing salience of the series, as demonstrated in the repeated film adaptations that have occurred as recently as 2023, is that it provides a *frisson* of violated authority and loyalty foundations, energizing as much as reflecting feelings of disorder and violation about our mundane present among many evangelical readers and viewers, with the promise of retributive justice to come.

EVANGELICAL MORAL FOUNDATIONS

What can MFT tell us about the topography of evangelical ethics as displayed in its bestselling fiction of the last 20 years? In many ways, there is nothing surprising in these findings. As Haidt himself suggests, the five primary foundations discernably track onto political orientations, with conservatives balancing all five criteria but liberals prioritizing care and fairness (as equality): “it’s not just members of traditional societies who draw on all five foundations; even within Western societies, we consistently find an ideological effect in which religious and cultural conservatives value and rely upon all five foundations, whereas liberals value and rely upon the harm and fairness foundations primarily” (Haidt, 2007, 1001). Or, in updated form: “Liberals have a three-foundation morality, whereas conservatives use all six” (Haidt, 2012, 214). *The Shack* seems to aptly confirm this insight, prioritizing care, fairness-as-justice, and egalitarianism at the expense of loyalty, authority, and purity. These values reflect the author’s liberal sensibilities that were suggested when Young tweeted criticism of Donald Trump after the Access Hollywood tapes were released (Douglas, 2020, 508n3). LaHaye’s conservative credentials, meanwhile, are well known—early partner to Jerry Falwell in the formation of the Moral Majority, fundraiser for the Institute for Creation Research, and so on—and the *Left Behind* series suggests a mix of moral foundations that does not so much find a balance among all six foundations (as Haidt discovered seems to be true of “Very Conservatives”) as express a sort of Extremely Conservative sensibility. *The Shack* and the *Left Behind* series reflect the considerable range of white evangelical politics, but also reflect the fact that white evangelicals tilt heavily conservative, forming the most important demographic of the Republican base, voting for Donald Trump by 77 and 84% in 2016 and 2020, respectively (Igielnik et al., 2021).

But Moral Foundations Theory itself has come under criticism in the last decade for trying to (re)habilitate conservative tendencies as being ethical after all. MFT in some sense attempts to “both-sides” moral psychology by arguing that both liberals and conservatives are moral, but in different ways. Haidt’s metaphor of “taste buds” does some work here: We would not say some taste buds are more important or better than other taste buds; so too, he believes, with his five or six tastes (2012, 131–33). However, Matthew Kugler, John T. Jost, and Sharareh Noorbaloohi argue that the three tastes that MFT renovates—loyalty, purity, and authority—are empirically associated with authoritarian and social dominance orientations. They conclude, “Given that no prior studies have linked ingroup, authority, or purity concerns to judgments or behaviors that can be considered virtuous on normative grounds (as opposed to merely perceived as morally relevant by a subset of respondents), it seems unwise to treat them as on par with more philosophically established ethics of justice

and care” (Kugler et al., 2014, 428). Earlier, they suggest that “authoritarianism, social dominance, and conservative moral intuitions share key psychological antecedents, such as perceptions of a dangerous world” (2014, 417). Another study “builds on previous work suggesting MFT is simply rediscovering the well-known ideological constructs of SDO [social dominance orientation] and RWA [Right Wing Authoritarianism],” and provides “evidence reinterpreting the Harm and Fairness scales as reflecting a universalizing motive and evidence suggesting Authority, Ingroup, and Purity scales reflect an authoritarian motive” (Sinn & Hayes, 2017, 1058). A more recent 2020 paper notes that “researchers inspired by moral foundations theory have provided no evidence bearing on the actual moral standing of conservative preferences for ingroup loyalty, deference to authority, and the enforcement of purity sanctions”—moral foundations that seem empirically linked to “system justification” and the desire to reduce existential threat and epistemic uncertainty (Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020, 4, 15).

Indeed, a simple thought experiment suggests the obviousness of this problem: MFT might regard Nazis as very good people, scoring high on authority, loyalty, and purity scales—just very good in ways different from, but not worse than, their victims. (As President Trump said of the 2017 Charlottesville violence involving white supremacists and neo-Nazis, there were “were very fine people on both sides.” (Holan, 2019)) we might push this conclusion further by noting that authority, loyalty, and purity are not really matters of ethics at all but rather of aesthetic or phenomenological preferences. They have to do with the experience of and desire for order, hierarchy, and clarity. While these are important for humans, they are not ethical in the sense that they always turn on questions of human suffering and flourishing, as do care and liberty. While at first Haidt’s chart in [Figure 1](#) might seem to show that conservatives do a better job at treating all five moral foundations equally, it in fact shows that liberals may have an easier time properly subordinating the three human aesthetic preferences to the two (or three) true moral foundations.

If *The Shack* manages that ethical subordination in a way that *Left Behind* does not, their movie afterlives and strong book sales nonetheless attest to their continued appeal for evangelical audiences in the last couple of decades. While both are examples of what Ken Paradis calls (referring to *The Shack*) the “evangelical homiletic [that] has used this power of popular narrative for homiletic ends: to edify and mobilize readers in their faith” (2011, 114) and are probably enjoyed across the evangelical political spectrum, conservative readers may be more attuned to the moral foundations of loyalty, authority, sanctity, and fairness as (retributive) justice that they share with the conservative *Left Behind* authors, while liberal readers may sympathize more with the ethos of care, fairness as (proportional) justice and liberty as egalitarianism that they find in *The Shack*. As with Biblical texts, an MFT approach, despite its blind spots, can help us map the moral, aesthetic, and political

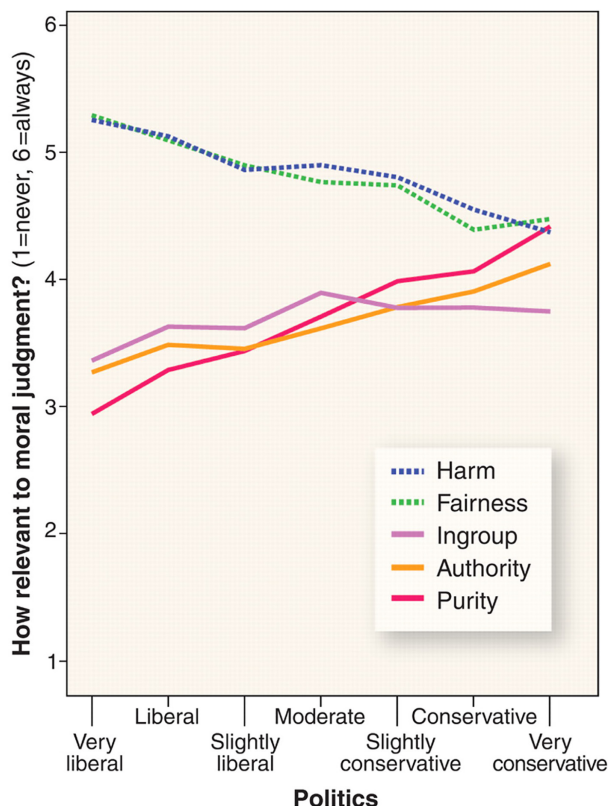



FIGURE 1 Politics from Haidt (2007). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

appeals of evangelical literary and cultural production. Indeed, *The Shack*'s publication was followed by Young's waning doctrinal commitments and his attention to the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. *Glorious Appearing* concluded a series that articulated the importance of Christian Right struggle amid declining demographics and challenges to its political power, encouraging the threat perception of the Christian Right, their continued sense of persecution by liberal secular elites. MFT illuminates Left Behind's continued cultural power in its dramatization of a disordered world where loyalty, sanctity, and authority are upended. Its mode of apocalypse is not so much the imminent but always deferred End but rather an extreme moral dualism wherein the besieged community's political foes are imagined as the enemies of God who must be opposed until God's Kingdom arrives to restore order and deliver retributive justice.

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ENDNOTES

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shack_\(2017_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shack_(2017_film)).

² In 2023, Haidt and other MFT theorists proposed two other provisional "candidates" for foundations: honor, in which "a man is expected to protect his kin and family, and under some circumstances, be ready to violently retaliate against anyone who insults his family's reputation,"

and ownership, the "respect for property" that "is an evolutionarily stable strategy" and "is ubiquitous in human societies." See <https://moralfoundations.org/>. Accessed 11 November 2023. These additions do not meaningfully impact the present analysis. While *The Shack* features the sexual assault and murder of the protagonist's daughter, it treats those crimes in terms of injustice and harm, as I show here, not as matters of dishonor or property violation.

³ Supersessionism is a Christian doctrine that holds that the Christian church replaced the Jews as God's chosen people in a covenantal relationship.

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