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## **Rapture or Risk: Signs of the End or Symptoms of World Risk Society?**

### **Abstract**

*In this article I argue that elements of contemporary fundamentalist Christian apocalyptic discourse are not only influenced by, but are a product of the rhetoric and fascination with the notion of risk. The world risk society thesis developed by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck will be utilised as a conceptual framework to measure one example of an online discourse centred on a Christian dispensationalist understanding of the rapture: Rapture Index. This popular website utilises a statistical probability index system based on 45 different categories that relate to global socio-political events; the higher the aggregate total the nearer the rapture. The Rapture Index is indebted to the impact of risk in contemporary society and it is a tool that exemplifies non-knowing: a product of the world risk society.*

Keywords: Beck, world risk society, apocalypse, fundamentalism, dispensationalism, digital media.

### **Introduction**

Threats to human existence and the associated insecurities, fears and anxieties that accompany such threats have cast a long shadow over humanity. In the not too distant past to take a risk often equated to challenging the gods or God. Thus, knowledge of anticipated events was usually the domain of oracles or soothsayers (Bernstein 1998: 1). However, with the advancement of new and emerging technologies and the insatiable progress of science, the boundary between superstition and rational assessment of potential risks has *seemingly* been crossed. The rapid developments characteristic of late modern western society has led to Anthony Giddens (1999: 2) arguing that we live on the barbaric outer edge of modern technology. Indeed, as Robert Wuthnow (2010: 1) writes: ‘For more than six decades,

humankind has lived with the knowledge that it could be the agent of its own annihilation.’ As a result, the impact of the accession of new technology means that we are both pre-occupied with the future *and* with negating risk produced through such rapid modernisation.

It also reveals our lack of knowledge: that which we do not know. In other words, we do not know the side effects of advancement in science and technology. The invention of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) is a good example. Extensively used within the refrigeration industry (post World War Two) and hailed as a breakthrough chemical for this market, the side effects of its extensive use were not revealed until the 1970s: depletion of the ozone layer. As a result heavy regulation now polices the use of it.<sup>1</sup> Lack of clear knowledge of such outcomes in the midst of technological and scientific progress is disturbingly prevalent in contemporary society. There are of course positives that assist in anticipating such side effects. Developments in computer technology enable huge data sets to be analysed and probability statistics generated in ways not previously conceived that calculate the likelihood of risks becoming catastrophes (Lupton 2013: 16; Blastland and Spiegelhalter 2013).

The emergence of risk has led to the increase of ontological instability and existential angst, due mainly to its connotation with negative outcomes (Lupton 2013: 9). This is ironic given that an intensification of the quest to quash existential insecurity has been a prominent feature of modernity (Bauman, 1991). Consequently, the pervasiveness of risk in late modernity has provided fertile ground for the growth of new religion-making characteristics in contemporary society (van Harskamp 2008: 1; Lyon 1999, 2000; Carrette and King 2004). An unintended consequence of the wider sociological impact of risk in late modernity has been the significant growth of fundamentalisms, religious or otherwise, particularly post-World War Two (Marty and Appleby 1991; Bauman 1998). After examining the notion of risk, primarily through the work of Ulrich Beck, the focus will turn to one example of Christian fundamentalism: the Christian dispensationalist eschatology that is presented on the

webpage *Rapture Index*.<sup>2</sup> In what follows the case will be made that this specific eschatological doctrine has been significantly influenced by the sociological ramifications of risk to the point that it is a mutation of what is regarded as traditional dispensationalism.

### **Late Modernity is World Risk Society**

The last 50 years has witnessed increasing scholarly attention on the study of risk with a number of critical theories being developed that attempt to articulate reasons for the proliferation of the language and concept of risk in contemporary society (e.g., Beck 1992, 2009; Giddens 1991, 2002; Douglas 1970; Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). But why should this be the case when, in western society, life expectancy has risen, cures have been found for disease, infant mortality is down and wealth is more prevalent (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983: 2)? Some scholars have argued that contemporary risk is not unlike that of previous eras and that there is little empirical evidence for the claim that risk is any different now than it has been previously (Elliott 2002; Turner 1994). Others suggest that the debates about risk have exaggerated anxieties in societies (Furedi 2006); whilst some argue that risks offer opportunities rather than threats (Luhmann 1993) and are part and parcel of the forces of successful economics and innovation (Giddens 1998).

Such differences contribute to the notion of risk being regarded as a notoriously slippery term (Mythen 2004: 54). The approach of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck is to define risk by differentiating it with the notion of catastrophe; the two are not synonymous. Rather, 'risk means the *anticipation* of the catastrophe. Risk concerns the possibility of future occurrences and developments' (Beck 2009: 9) and highlights what might be possible. When the possibilities become reality they are catastrophes.

Taking a critical realist approach, Beck (Beck 2009: 7) argues that risk is not an anthropological constant as others such as Mary Douglas have argued. For instance, he contends that contemporary risks are not the same as that of a pre-industrial period which were geographically and temporally contained; rather, present-day risks are not limited to time, space, or particular societies.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary risk is qualitatively different from pre-industrial risk.<sup>4</sup> Pre-industrial risks and hazards ‘assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses, while the risks of civilisation today typically *escape perception...*’ (Beck 1992: 21). Understood as low probability but with high consequences, there is a radical unknowability to these risks which are now global in nature (Beck 1992, 1995, 2009; Giddens 1991, 2002; Douglas 1992).

Beck posits that the present epoch—late (or second) modernity—is more accurately termed world risk society (2009).<sup>5</sup> The expectations of society are in some form determined by the vulnerability toward risk which is translated through political force. Zygmunt Bauman’s (2011: 53) suggestion that the foundations of political power are found in human uncertainty and vulnerability ring ominously true here. World risk society has spawned three principle logics of risk that Beck (Beck 2009: 13) outlines: ecological risk, global financial risk and terrorist threats. Further risks reside in the ‘biographical risks closely connected with the dynamics of individualization’ (2009: 13). This fourth dimension plays a pivotal role in the development and perception of the other three and is also central to what Beck terms the theory of reflexive modernization.

Beck (1992: 21) writes, ‘The concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernisation. *Risk* may be defined as a *systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself.*’ Reflexive modernisation refers to the process whereby institutions and individuals confront and evaluate decisions in the light of manufactured risks and alterations to social structures and accordingly try to

avoid potential catastrophe (side effects/unintended consequences). Along with the concept of risk reflexive modernisation is also intrinsically bound to theories of globalisation and individualisation. Dealing primarily with the latter, contemporary western societies have witnessed a change in social and political forms that have traditionally acted as structures that support lives shaped within nation-states. This re-shaping, and often withdrawal, of structures and services has increasingly led to, what Beck argues as, radical individualisation. Beck (1994: 13) states, 'Individualization... means, first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, ones in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves.'

Social processes and cultural values influence the extent to which anxiety and fear contribute to existential angst. The notion of individualisation in a world risk society forces people to make their own choices in a period that is undergoing rapid social change: a world that is in the midst of technology-induced globalisation (Castells 2010). This, in turn, engenders an intensified anxiety. As Frank Furedi (2006: 28) notes, 'The perception of being at risk expresses a pervasive mood in society; one that influences action in general.'

This view is not without its critics. Furlong and Cartmel argue that this represents an epistemological fallacy, as they understand it to be an exaggeration of the 'over-estimation of the extent to which individuals are able to construct their identities' (2007: 143). They reject the claim that traditional social divisions are less powerful now than they once were in determining life chances; however, they accept Beck's argument that as a result of the processes of late modernity collective social identities are considerably weakened (2007: 143). Fear is a driver in the search for existential answers to our interrogations which do no more than, in turn, perpetuate those same fears in a society that is over-shadowed by risk. The throwing back of these social processes onto the individual is a contributing factor to the

proliferation of communities of resistance (Castells 2010: 8). A consequence of this is the growth of fundamentalisms (Bauman 1998; Lyon 1999, 2000).

### **The growth of fundamentalism**

John Thompson (1996: 89) writes, ‘One of the most powerful legacies of classical social thought is the idea that, with the development of modern societies, tradition gradually declines in significance and eventually ceases to play a meaningful role in the lives of individuals.’ This is true up to a point. Tradition was subject to severe criticism throughout the period of the Enlightenment, and understood as a thing of the past that stood in the way of modernity’s incessant rational march forward; but despite this tradition did not go away (Giddens 2002: 44). Instead, tradition has come to be understood and utilised differently. Moreover, the Enlightenment assault on tradition can itself be regarded as a tradition (Adam 1996). The loss of the influence of tradition and the so-called process of detraditionalisation is due, in part, to the contemporary world being increasingly reliant upon patterns of contingency. Contingency by definition does not offer certainty; rather, so-called certainties are replaced by the shifting reflexivity of societies having to deal with the unintended consequences of progress (Beck 2009). Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000: 164) remarks that ‘one need only observe, sociologically speaking, our late twentieth-century generation, the first post-traditional generation, is the first to find itself in a situation of structural uncertainty symptomized by the mobility, reversibility and transferability of all markers.’ Although this statement exaggerates the current climate in terms of just how *post* traditional society is, Hervieu-Léger is correct in recognising the uncertainty of our times. This has led not only to crises of identity that in an age of globalisation leads to national resurgence (Castells 2010:

30) but to the re-affirming of communities, including religious ones who robustly defend tradition, as well as the birth of new religiosities.

One of the outcomes of the accelerated processes of globalisation and the retreat of tradition has been the growth of fundamentalism (Marsden 1991; Riesebrodt 1993). The label fundamentalism is contentious and controversial (Marty and Appleby 1991: viii; Davie 2013; Partridge 2002; Bruce 2007) partly due to its protean nature which has led Martin Marty to speak about fundamentalisms in the Wittgensteinian sense of ‘family resemblances’ (1991: ix).<sup>6</sup> That is, there are sufficient resonances and commonalities to describe groups as fundamentalist without falling into a rigid definition that becomes too simplistic (Strozier and Terman 2010: 1).

Laurence Kaplin’s (1992: 5) definition is that ‘fundamentalism can be described as a world view that highlights specific essential “truths” of traditional faiths and applies them with earnestness and fervor to twentieth-century realities.’ The reference to essential truths is key. In a world that is seemingly distracted by the uncertainties of modern life and the associated anxiety that accompanies it, essential truths are under threat. As such they must be defended in a world risk society where contingency and doubt pervade the cultural ferment. Fundamentalism can be understood as a heuristic cure to the effects of rapid modernisation (Mitszel and Shupe 1992: 5). Manuel Castells (2010: 68) writes that key features among the cultural communes of fundamentalists, or communities of resistance, are that ‘they appear as a reaction to prevailing social trends, which are resisted on behalf of autonomous sources of meaning. They are, at the onset, defensive identities that function as refuge and solidarity, to protect against a hostile, outside world.’ The *Rapture Index*, a probability scale designed by a Christian fundamentalist to predict the immanence of the rapture of believers in Christ,<sup>7</sup> not only exemplifies some of the characteristics described by Castells, but also betrays the influence of the rhetoric of risk and particularly the notion of world risk society.

## **The *Rapture Index*: history and background**

With the emergence of the Internet as an indispensable multi-media platform numerous websites have emerged which focus almost entirely on eschatology and related aspects of the end times. Reputably one of the most popular end time prophecy websites,<sup>8</sup> the *Rapture Index* was the original name for the website now known as *Rapture Ready*. The site was founded in 1989 by Todd Strandberg, an employee of the US Air Force from Nebraska with no formal theological training. In an autobiographical piece on *Rapture Ready*, Strandberg regales that it was his fascination with international current affairs from an early age coupled with his interest in bible prophecy that led to the creation of the *Rapture Index*. In Strandberg's words,

I started the index when I noticed how wide-ranging different prophecy commentators' observations were regarding the sign of the times. The Index was designed to standardize the most watched prophetic signs and to determine whether end-time trends were occurring.<sup>9</sup>

In 1995, *Rapture Index* became part of *Rapture Ready* because, according Strandberg, 'the word index fails to show up on most internet word searches.'<sup>10</sup> In the 18 years since its inception, the host site *Rapture Ready* has grown exponentially. The home page alone has over 180 links which are regularly updated that pertain to end time related themes<sup>11</sup> and include the following: advice on bible prophecy interpretation: a bulletin board; a tribulation survival guide; articles on how geo-political events relate to eschatology; an apologetics section and a who's who of bible prophecy experts. Indications of commercial growth are also evident with the presence of a *Rapture Ready* radio and TV station as well as adverts for rapture wallpaper, new related publications, an iPhone rapture app as well as a donations link. The email contacts of the two *Rapture Ready* elites are listed on the site home page:

Strandberg, who is described as the ‘fearless leader and founder of RR’, and Terry James: ‘The general editor and cat lover. As a gifted speaker, Terry does most of the site’s media interviews.’<sup>12</sup> Both have numerous bible prophecy articles listed on the web site. James is a prolific author in his own right, and has published in excess of 35 books on bible prophecy. Included in this list is a volume co-authored with Strandberg entitled *Are You Rapture Ready? Signs, Prophecies, Warnings, and Suspicions that the Endtime is Now* (2003). Interestingly, the forward for this is written by Tim LaHaye, co-author of the enormously successful *Left Behind* series. Having this endorsement is significant given the power and influence LaHaye has wielded socially and politically within the American evangelical right over the last 40 years.<sup>13</sup>

The core doctrinal position of the web site is best described broadly as dispensational. Dispensationalism is part of a group of beliefs that can be categorised as millennialist, which is, in the words of Catherine Wessinger (2011: 3), ‘the audacious human hope that in the imminent future there will be a transition—either catastrophic or progressive—to a collective salvation.’ John Nelson Derby (1800-1882)<sup>14</sup> is generally regarded as one of the most influential figures in formulating the classical<sup>15</sup> version of dispensationalism which has the following central tenets: God deals with humankind through a number of dispensations or administrations (seven); each has a different means of salvation, but each one ends in human failure and the advent of a new dispensation; the teaching of a secret rapture—Christ returning to take up believers with him,<sup>16</sup> which can happen at any moment prior to a tribulation period (and prior to the actual second coming of Christ). It is significant to note that Derby never equated contemporary events with biblical prophecy. As Ernest Sandeen (1978: 64) notes, ‘Derby avoided the pitfalls both of attempting to predict a time for Christ’s second advent and of trying to make sense out of the contemporary alarms of European politics with the Revelation as his guidebook.’ The dispensationalist theology presented on

*Rapture Ready* falls into the trap that Derby avoided: it correlates contemporary politics with bible prophecy.

### **The *Rapture Index*: content**

Although the website ceased to exist as the *Rapture Index* in 1995, the index has continued to play an important part in the popularity of the site, and much of the publicity that the site generates can be put down to interest in the index. In 2002 Nancy Gibbs included it in the *Time* magazine cover story ‘Apocalypse Now’; and Matt Taibbi endorsed it in his blog in *Rolling Stone* magazine (Aug 2011).

The index was designed to provide what Strandberg believed to be a way of consistently correlating a variety of events into an organised indicator of end time signs. Thus, as a result of a fascination with geo-political events and biblical prophecy the 45 categories listed below were drawn up to form the *Rapture Index*:

- |                      |                        |                          |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. False Christs     | 18. Ecumenism          | 35. Date Settings        |
| 2. Occult            | 19. Globalism          | 36. Volcanoes            |
| 3. Satanism          | 20. Tribulation Temple | 37. Earthquakes          |
| 4. Unemployment      | 21. Anti-Semitism      | 38. Wild Weather         |
| 5. Inflation         | 22. Israel             | 39. Civil Rights         |
| 6. Interest Rates    | 23. Gog (Russia)       | 40. Famine               |
| 7. The Economy       | 24. Persia (Iran)      | 41. Drought              |
| 8. Oil Supply/Price  | 25. False Prophet      | 42. Plagues              |
| 9. Debt & Trade      | 26. Nuclear Nations    | 43. Climate              |
| 10. Financial unrest | 27. Global Turmoil     | 44. Food Supply          |
| 11. Leadership       | 28. Arms Proliferation | 45. Floods <sup>17</sup> |
| 12. Drug abuse       | 29. Liberalism         |                          |
| 13. Apostasy         | 30. Peace Process      |                          |
| 14. Supernatural     | 31. Kings of the East  |                          |
| 15. Moral Standards  | 32. Mark of the Beast  |                          |
| 16. Anti-Christian   | 33. Beast Government   |                          |
| 17. Crime Rate       | 34. The Antichrist     |                          |

Each category has a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 being low and 5 high. Updated weekly, the category ratings are aggregated with the total providing an indicator as to how near the rapture could be. Below are the numerical bands by which so-called prophetic activity is measured:

Rapture Index of 100 and below — slow prophetic activity

Rapture Index of 100 to 130 — moderate prophetic activity

Rapture Index of 130 to 160 — heavy prophetic activity

Rapture Index above 160 — fasten your seat belts<sup>18</sup>

The influence of (late) modernity is readily evident. The form the index takes is a statistical hypothesis test: a test which attempts to establish the likelihood of a rapture occurring depending on specific global circumstances. This method of testing was established in the mid-twentieth century and is commonly used in assessing contemporary risks.<sup>19</sup>

The 45 categories that comprise the index can be split into two types: those associated with biblical imagery and language; second, those influenced by contemporary socio-economic and political terms that have emerged through the process of modernity. Categories in the former include: ‘mark of the beast’; ‘kings of the east’; ‘Gog’; ‘false prophets’ and ‘the anti-Christ’. Surprisingly, given that the site promotes the supremacy of an inerrant bible these categories are in the minority.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the majority of the 45 categories comprise the second type and include: ‘unemployment’; ‘inflation’; ‘interest rates’; ‘the economy’; ‘oil supply/price’; ‘crime rate’; ‘nuclear nations’; ‘arms proliferation’; ‘global turmoil’; ‘civil rights’ and ‘financial unrest’. Indeed, they might be regarded as symbols that are brought to us through the intensity and immediacy of media (Silverstone 2007: 27). Despite the influence of J N Derby being prevalent in some of the dispensationalist theology recognised

in much of the teaching on *Rapture Ready* the adoption of such categories and the premise behind the *Rapture Index* is incongruent with Derby's theology.

A rationale is also provided for what are deemed the 'active categories' on the index.<sup>21</sup> This includes categories that are considered to have diminished in terms of importance as well as those that are reckoned to be live and making global headlines. At the time of writing<sup>22</sup> an example of the former would be category 24—Iran (Persia). The explanation reads the 'The lack of activity has downgraded this category.'<sup>23</sup> In terms of the more active, category 23—Gog (Russia) indicates the seriousness of the matter. The explanation reads, 'Putin's invasion of Ukraine has maxed this category out.'<sup>24</sup> Other typical explanations given for activity include category 8—oil supply/price states: 'Cold weather is driving up fuel prices'<sup>25</sup>; and category 10—financial unrest states: 'Financial markets remain oddly stable in the face of numerous warning signs.'<sup>26</sup> The ambiguity of these descriptors suggests a tension between, on the one hand, providing too accurate a rationale that might easily be dismissed as false prophecy: thus, allowing for flexibility and fluidity in the interpretation of such data. On the other hand, this abstruseness aids in facilitating the proclivity to correlate such signs with the end times.

This individualistic and subjective approach to the construction, categorisation and handling of such data on the index point toward traces of the individualism suggested by Beck and others that are prevalent in a world risk society. To be more precise in terms of Beck's typologies of risk it represents the fourth outlined above: the outworking of biographical risks associated with radical individualism (Beck 2009: 13). As globalisation disrupts the terrain of everyday life and dissolves boundaries individualisation emerges, with the corollary of this being that there is a reaction to re-enforce boundaries (including religious ones). It is a catalyst for individualisation that can become 'a quest for fundamental certainties, authoritarian truths, [and] absolute sovereignties' (Comaroff 2010: 24), which in

the case of the Rapture Index (and *Rapture Ready* as a whole) is evident. The need to specifically class signs of the rapture reveals the grappling with the socio-political issues of the day and in doing so attempt to re-enforce ontological security; an ontological security that can only materialise through promulgating the certainty of Christ's imminent return. Fuelled by the almost boundless connectivity and accessibility to the latest breaking events locally and globally that new media facilitates, it is an example of the influence and impact that late modernity (world risk society) has on society. What is presented is the unease of an outlook that reflects and indicates an awareness of risk and reacts in an alarmist fashion to it.

Such uncertainty, induced by individualisation encourages the emergence of lay experts who come to the fore as trust in institutions is eroded. The cobbling together of new biographies brought about by the enforced self-regulatory environment of late modernity encourages the cultivation of lay experts (Anderson 2003: 45). Strandberg, with no formal theological qualifications, epitomises this shift toward the individualisation of religion in the twenty-first century. With a bible in one hand and his laptop in the other, undertaking searches of current socio-political affairs, he exemplifies individualisation in the global village. Selecting what he regards as indicators that are relevant to a dispensationalist worldview he positions himself as a guardian of that tradition.

Further, the products and processes of globalisation play a critical role in the existence of the *Rapture Index*: indeed, it is dependent on them. There are two basic reasons for this. First, one of the drivers of globalisation, namely digital media technology, has been extremely well utilised by many fundamentalist groups. Without the oxygen of globalisation and the concurrent rise of new technologies, many fundamentalist groups would not exist (Mendelsohn 1992; Giddens 2000). Hoover and Kaneva (2009: 3) go as far as to argue that 'fundamentalisms cannot be fully understood without reference to the media. They are all movements of what we might call "the media age."' Neither would this mode of foretelling

the proximity of the rapture be possible, both in terms of scope and in the rapid and instantaneous ability to interpret events as they break nationally and internationally, without this technology. Globalisation shrinks the world in which we live and digital technology facilitates the speed upon which we can respond politically, economically, physically, emotionally, and even faithfully to such developments. Such informationalisation through networks expedites the productive capacity of knowledge (Castells 2010: 72) and enables swift dissemination of information.

Second, it is not just that the *Rapture Index* would not exist without such technology but most of the actual content—the classifications—are a direct consequence of the processes of globalisation without which it would be impossible to populate in such a manner. The categories cited above are all contingent upon globalisation, and are codes for the flows of capital, goods, technology and services in a globalised world (Castells 2010: 303).

What is also apparent is an internal conflict that often occurs within fundamentalist groups when utilising and engaging with modern technology and the productions and processes of modernisation more generally. On the one hand there is collaboration with the products of a globalised modernity; on the other hand, there is also either a reticence to accept it, and/or modification of such productions (Campbell, 2010). Here, one might usefully employ Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's expression of 'cultured technology' when attempting to extrapolate the uses of such technology within fundamentalist groups (2005). It is manipulated and modified to serve the good of the tradition: it is a means to an end.

What is significant is the paradoxical position of both embracing and rejecting elements or derivative terms associated with globalisation. These contradictory dynamics are exemplified in, for example, the two categories, 'globalism'<sup>27</sup> and 'global turmoil' found on

the index. Apart from being ambiguous classifications, both expose the reliance upon and rejection of globalisation. 'Globalism' and the closely linked 'global turmoil' are regarded as key indicators for the nearness of the rapture. This is due in part to a belief that globalism will ultimately force global political systems to form a One World Government (Robertson 1991; Barkun 2006: 39-64). It is also understood in negative terms as are all the classifications: the greater the global turmoil and the increasingly complex hegemonic tendency of globalisation (particularly with the emergence of Eastern economic powers), the nearer Christ's return. From this dispensationalist perspective societal crises are often understood within a fatalistic framework: especially those that are deemed as uncontrollable (Wojcik 1997). Of course, the paradox is that the products and processes of globalisation are essential for this worldview in disseminating the message and pointing toward the rapture. Globalisation has to happen. One might argue it is part of the divine plan. As Daniel Wojcik (1997: 136) observes, 'religious apocalypticists attribute these current calamities to liberalism, and the evils of the modern world, but ultimately regard these crises as a meaningful part of God's end times scenario.'

Globalisation, individualisation and the concept of risk are three elements that comprise reflexive modernisation which, in turn, constitutes world risk society. The effects of reflexive modernisation are clearly manifest in the *Rapture Index*. They are exemplified in the weekly grading of the classifications the majority of which are either indirectly or directly manifestations of the typologies of risk outlined by Beck. The index represents a form of popular-dispensationalism that reacts to global events which are regarded and interpreted as possible catastrophes in the making. This is exacerbated by the dynamics of world risk society.

To underline the explicit influence of world risk society on this expression of eschatology, it is worth recalling the pitfalls Derby wanted to avoid. In classical dispensationalist teaching the church age (sixth dispensation) is known as 'The Great

Parenthesis’; this means that the current time period in which believers in Christ find themselves is a time where biblical prophecy is suspended. It is pointless undertaking any millennial arithmetic (Weber 2004: 47); moreover, and significantly, it is futile to equate biblical prophecy to events currently taking place in the world. As Mark Sweetnam (2006: 180) rightly notes, ‘This insistence on a period in which no prophecy would be fulfilled is essential to dispensationalism ...’ The prophetic clock has stopped ticking. Although the rapture has to occur, until it does, no amount of pseudo-intellectual gymnastics can possibly determine what will happen and when. Most importantly, the classical dispensationalist position did not react to the trends, fashions and fads of society, nor did Derby and those affiliated with this teaching attempt to sensationalise prophecy interpretation by aligning it directly with contemporary events. The linking of biblical prophecy with global events is a clear departure from classical dispensational teaching. The *Rapture Index* and the wider teaching on the host site *Rapture Ready* represent a development in dispensational theology that has not been able to resist the external pressures of late modernity. It is not the first example to succumb to this. Although there are many examples of dispensationalists who have been seduced by the technological advances of late modernity<sup>28</sup> Hal Lindsey is probably the most notable. His best-selling, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1973), according to Glen Shuck (2011: 522), ‘reads as a trendy prophecy manual’ which relentlessly links prophecy to current affairs. In Lindsey’s own words (1973: 306), ‘To the sceptic who says that Christ is not coming soon, I would ask him [sic] to put the book of Revelation in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other, and then sincerely ask God to show him where we are on his prophetic time-clock.’

### **The *Rapture Index* as Gnostic Non-Knowing in Risk Society**

This particular example of dispensationalism is indebted to the processes of late modernity and specifically to the idea of world risk society. There is also a further link to Beck's world risk society thesis that re-affirms this argument. The categories which form the index, centred on the interpretation of global-political events, are based on a lack of knowledge: of non-knowing. In world risk society non-knowing has arisen as a result of the progress of science and technology. For example, scientists might be able to determine certain risks with regard the use of microwave ovens or mobile phones or how much red wine can be drunk per week through statistical probability calculation. However, they fail to accurately diagnose long term affects because of a lack of evidence, and any advice is often overruled by further contradictory expert advice or research. Advances in science do not necessarily equate to less risk. This is demonstrated through regular changes in prognosis: it is a result of non-knowing. Non-knowing rules in the risk society (Beck 2009: 115).

With this particular pseudo-scientific approach to interpreting bible prophecy in the form of the *Rapture Index*, events are graded according to the intensity of their global ramifications. On the basis of this, approximations are offered in the form of a figure of probability as to how close the rapture may be. In effect what is happening is that their understanding of biblical prophecy serves as a subservient part of a larger interpretive framework that is dominated by the signs, symbols and technologies of world risk society. It is through this framework that Strandberg sees the world and determines the magnitude (normally in terms of severity, hardship, death and destruction) of global events and catastrophes. Despite claiming an inerrant bible as the basis from which to judge the signs of the times, the pressure the external influences of risk place upon interpretation is clear. Moreover, the certainties that the signs of the end times are near are constantly delayed in the continuing non-appearance of Christ. This is a form of what Beck would describe as unintentional or unconscious non-knowing (2009: 126).

This is not an example of cognitive dissonance because no actual date-setting is proffered. Rather, as suggested above, there is a degree of flexibility within the eschatological framework which allows for what Howard calls narrative plasticity (2006) which demonstrates ‘the limited horizon of a form of knowledge that does not reflect on its own limits. One does not know what one does not know’ (Beck 2009: 126). This is a symptom of world risk society. The *Rapture Index* is a chronological narrative of non-knowing. Perhaps even gnostic non-knowing. Gnostic in this context does not refer to a particular system of beliefs that can be grouped under the term Gnosticism dating back to the second and third centuries; rather, it refers to claims of truth that comes through inner experience or even revelation (Hanegraaf 1996: 519).<sup>29</sup> The guardians of beleaguered tradition who have the authority to interpret the signs of the times assume an almost gnostic status in terms of their interpretation of texts and events. It is the calling and remit of only a select few guardians of the tradition, or elites. The non-knowing is evidenced in the repeated fluctuations of the *Rapture Index* that rises with reported global turmoil and unrest, and the greater the potential catastrophe that might point the way to the rapture, the greater the non-knowing is exposed as the rapture fails to materialise. To repeat Beck’s (2009: 115) phrase with regard world risk society: ‘non-knowledge rules.’ The greater the catastrophe, the greater the tendency to ramp up the tension and as a consequence the index; however, the greater the catastrophe the greater the non-knowing. This typifies Beck and Wehling’s (2012: 38) summary of the unawareness of non-knowing: ‘It...remains unknown *that* one does not know something and *what* one does not know.’

There is something else going on here in terms of knowledge that is similar to what Scott Lash refers to as disinformation society. For Lash there are two types of information. The first is associated with the discursive and rational, and is about the shift to a knowledge-

intensive society (Lash 2002: 141). It is gained through training that demands ‘distant reflection and chronic problematization’ (2002: 141) and a Cartesian mind-set. The second type of information is more to do with information culture and is very different to the former but could not exist without it. This type of information found in information culture—an unintended consequence of information society—is ‘the out-of-control anarchy of information diffusion’, the result of which is ‘an informational aesthetics of the monstrous’ (Lash 2002: 146). The crucial point regarding the development of the *Rapture Index* is it is the product of an information culture that has spiralled out of control in the face of the intensification of media saturation, and is an example of the misappropriation of information that is a consequence of the world risk society. It is the decontextualisation and then recontextualisation of information in an apocalyptic framework that, imbued with a fatalistic worldview, is aided and abetted by the impregnation of risk into the psyche of western culture.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, I have suggested that the *Rapture Index* is representative of a distorted mutation of the traditional theological position of classical dispensationalism. Due to the existential angst prevalent in contemporary world risk society, popular dispensationalists have conflated the important theological difference between Christ’s appearance in the rapture and the actual second coming. Erroneously linking current global-political and economic events with biblical prophecy has produced a caricatured and sensationalist version of dispensationalism. Reminding ourselves of Beck’s three logics of contemporary risk society: ecological, financial and terrorist, it is clear that these actually take centre stage in the *Rapture Index*.

This is a reflection of the anxiety that is prevalent in western society through the lens of a fundamentalist website.

The point is that the *Rapture Index* has been set up in order to demonstrate, not only to regular users of the site and rapture believers but a potential global audience, how world issues relate to bible prophecy; and, in this instance, the rapture of the Church and the end of the world as we know it. It is an example of an attempt to ‘immanentize the eschaton’, to borrow Eric Voegelin’s phrase.<sup>30</sup> In a globalising world that asks for reasons for why things happen, this form of fundamentalism attempts to provide ontological certainty in an uncertain and turbulent risk society but in the end it is ultimately a product of it.

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<sup>1</sup> See Solomon, S. (1999). Stratospheric Ozone Depletion: A Review of Concepts and History, in *Review of Geophysics* 37: 3, pp. 275-316.

<sup>2</sup> The *Rapture Index* is one part of the website [www.raptureready.com](http://www.raptureready.com).

<sup>3</sup> A case in point is the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which geographically affected thousands of square miles, well beyond the borders of what was the former USSR. Furthermore, the risks of radiation from the nuclear plant are likely to remain for hundreds of years meaning there will be 'future' casualties of this catastrophe.

<sup>4</sup> Other risks, for example, would include damage to the ozone layer and nuclear power.

<sup>5</sup> Beck favours second modernity over late modernity as a descriptor.

<sup>6</sup> See L. Wittgenstein 2001. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell for the concept of 'family resemblances', §64-71.

<sup>7</sup> The *Rapture Index* is by no means unique. There are a number of very similar 'tools' on the Internet including *The Rapture Dashboard* and *Rapture Meter*.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with *Christianity Today* in 2003 Strandberg claimed the site had 250,000 visitors per month. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/marchweb-only/3-24-43.0.html> accessed 07.05.2013.

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However, on 25.11.13 *Rapture Ready* reported that the website had been visited by over 11 million visitors: a record for this website. <http://www.raptureready.com/nm/485.html> accessed 30.05.14.

<sup>9</sup> Biographical information found on *Rapture Ready*'s "Who's this Joker?" link

<http://raptureready.com/rap33.html> accessed 28.05.14.

<sup>10</sup> <http://raptureready.com/rap33.html> accessed 28.05.14.

<sup>11</sup> There are over 33,000 files of content. <http://www.raptureready.com/nm/485.html> accessed 30.05.14.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.raptureready.com/> accessed 29.04.14.

<sup>13</sup> Tim LaHaye has been a leading activist within American conservative politics for more than 40 years and was a founder board member of the Moral Majority. In 2005 he was named as one of the 25 most evangelicals in *Time* magazine (Feb 2005). The *Left Behind* series, co-authored with Jerry B. Jenkins has sold more than 65 million copies. Having LaHaye's support for their volume gives credibility to their project within conservative evangelical circles.

<sup>14</sup> C. I. Schofield (1843-1921) and J. Dwight Pentecost (1915-2014) are also attributed as being influential in forming the classical position.

<sup>15</sup> There are many different shades of dispensationalism. However, I use the prefix 'classical' to refer to the principal teaching of Derby.

<sup>16</sup> The reference point for this is taken from I Thess 4:16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from <http://raptureready.com/rap2.html> accessed 04.06.14.

<sup>18</sup> At the time of writing (02.06.14) the index was 187.

<sup>19</sup> Relative risk ratio is a form of statistical hypothesis testing used to demonstrate the likelihood of an event occurring, given the exposure to something or a set of conditions.

<sup>20</sup> Rapture Ready promotes biblical inerrancy. See the Rapture Ready Bulletin Board for details <http://rr-bb.com/showthread.php?9-Doctrinal-Beliefs-Statement>

<sup>21</sup> The active categories are those which Strandberg deems as current developments and therefore likely to increase or decrease on the index.

<sup>22</sup> May 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Despite the apparent downgrading the actual reading was not reduced, remaining at 4.

<http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html> accessed 01.06.14.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html> accessed 1.06.14.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html> accessed 29.05.14.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html> accessed 30.05.14.

<sup>27</sup> The terms globalisation and globalism are often mistakenly used synonymously which I think is the case here. It is difficult from the index to ascertain exactly what is meant by globalism. The brief explanation for the term, in the context of its rating in the index, states: "Economic hardship in Europe has hurt the globalist agenda." Globalism, at its most basic, actually refers to the interconnections and networks between states/continents, whilst globalisation refers to the increase or decline of globalism.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Whisenant 1988; LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995-2007; Hunt, 1990; Walvoord, 1973, 199; Dyer, 1991),

<sup>29</sup> My understanding and use of Gnosticism is partly indebted to the philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). Voegelin employed the term Gnosticism in a polemical sense to refer to the culture of modernity. I utilise the term in a more general and non-pejorative sense that captures some of what Voegelin understood as being gnostic but confined only to religious groups and not secular ideologies.

<sup>30</sup> See E. Voegelin. 1952. *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.