Cyberrapture: The Role of Risk on the You've Been Left Behind.com Website

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Dear Customer,

Thank you for subscribing to our after rapture email service. It is the stated goal of You’ve Been Left Behind to give our friends and loved ones one last chance at accepting the good news of the Gospel.

– Mark Heard, Founder of youvebeenleftbehind.com

Introduction

In March of 2008, a website titled “youvebeenleftbehind.com” (also referred to as YBLB) sprang up on the Internet. This site, created by techno-architect Mark Heard, offered services to Christians wishing to cast last-minute communications to those “left behind” in the beginning moments of the anticipated Rapture. Heard created this service as a preparatory mechanism to alleviate concerns about the uncertain fate of those who had “failed” to accept Jesus Christ as their savior and were now destined to experience the Tribulation found in Premillennialist doctrines.

Although the YBLB service appears to be a relatively novel phenomenon, in reality the interactive relationship between religion and communication technology is nothing new. Early-twentieth-century radio personalities like Samuel Parkes Cadman and Charles Edward Coughlin first championed the liturgical broadcast airwaves. In the televised world, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s crossover from radio to television prompted a new era for faith-based entertainment. Within a decade of Sheen’s show, Pat Robertson aired the 700 Club in 1961 on the Christian Broadcasting Network, and he effectively initiated the televangelist revolution. Since the modern use of this medium, interaction with techno-religious phenomena has grown tremendously. Today one can atone for one’s sins through online confessional (http://mysaintmiriam.org/online_confessions.html); journey to Mecca and experience the Hajj in Second Life (www.IslamOnline.net); join a cybersangha and partake in spiritual meditation (http://www.buddhanet.net); or even receive communion through a variety of nondenominational Web sites (www.holycommunionontheweb.com and www.eholy.com).

Even the YBLB site has had at least one innovative predecessor, albeit through the use of a less sophisticated system of communication. At the turn
of the twenty-first century, founder Scott Butcher created RaptureLetters.com, a free service that offered to send emails to individuals left behind during the anticipated Rapture. Yet, where Butcher's site merely offered to relay messages, YBLB goes several steps further and encourages the secure delivery of personal information. According to Mark Heard:

> We anticipate that you will use...your account to pass on your earthly assets to those left behind. Some of your assets are locked up into online banking accounts, atm linked accounts, and brokerage accounts that use a[n] ID, passwords and, test questions.

_Heard 2009_

The implication of statements such as these is that material possessions or the means to acquire them are considered to be an important feature of this evangelical culture. It might also suggest that survival after the Rapture may depend on one's ability to prosper financially and/or compete for capital in a class struggle. To be sure, anticipatory beliefs that value materialist notions of distributing wealth such as these deviate considerably from the non-materialist concept of disregarding everything and ascending into the company of Jesus Christ.

In this way, religious conviction may be one motivating factor for use of the YBLB service; however, a subtext of preparing oneself for futuristic uncertainties as well as the welfare of those that stand to be affected by these uncertainties, is certainly another factor that needs to be addressed. Moreover, with the incorporation of factors associated with anticipating, preventing, or even coping with risk, it is important to take into consideration what is effectively meant by attempting to change the outcome of a futuristic event.

The above-mentioned themes of preparation, anticipation, prevention and anxiety or fear in response to risk appear to align quite convincingly with what Ulrich Beck (1992) called the “Risk Society” – a society where modern social orders operate in response to a multitude of human-manufactured risks and futuristic possibilities. Computer technology generally – and the use of the Internet in particular – has become one method of negotiating one's level of anxiety and preparation in relation to such risk. In this instance, the interpretation of Rapture serves to manufacture fear and anxiety, while the youvebeenleftebehind.com website engenders an opportunity to prepare rationally for such an event through the use of virtual technologies.

Rather than anticipating the materialization of an erratic scenario where last-minute communication may fail, this website virtually mitigates the anxieties of