

# Dreams of Glory

The Sources of Apocalyptic Terror

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction: Contemporary Christian Mullahs and Their Apocalypticism	1
1 The Apocalyptic Vision as Bad Seed	12
2 Radical Preachers and Mullahs	27
3 Terror and the Apocalyptic Imagination	44
4 Apocalyptic Visions as Reaction to Disaster	66
5 The Apocalyptic Attack on the Self	80
6 Apocalyptic Visions as Ideology	92
7 The Test of Time	104
8 The Theater and the Courtroom	118
9 Free Association	130
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>147</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>153</i>

## INTRODUCTION

# Contemporary Christian Mullahs and Their Apocalypticism

Many are rightly concerned about the apocalyptic fervor that infects American politics in the twenty-first century. A global crusade against evil, in which victory is always imminent, strikes critics of the Republican administration as a fantasy that will come to grief on the very hard soil of Iraq and the Middle East. It is a fantasy, however, that dies hard. Apocalyptic hopes and fears have been driving American politics at least since the great Awakening of the 1700s, initiated in New England by the Northampton preacher Jonathan Edwards, who scared his flock to death with visions of hell. In the movement that followed evangelists drew tens of thousands of souls eager to be saved from damnation. As the American historian Stephen D. O'Leary describes this 'Awakening':

this was a 'moment of madness' – a revolutionary, romantic moment when an entire society seems to be up for grabs. In these moments, fundamental change appears irresistible; for a brief moment, 'all seems possible, all within reach'. Across time, people who get caught up in moments of madness imagine that their own 'radiant vision' is at hand: a workers' paradise, a grassroots democracy, fraternite-egalite-liberte, or the Second Coming of Jesus. The utopian imagination is – suddenly, powerfully, briefly – inflamed by the immediate prospect of radical change, by visions of an apocalypse now.<sup>1</sup>

Even among Protestant churches that are historically suspicious of enthusiasm, the apocalyptic vision is like a black hole that draws everything into itself. To be sure, Presbyterians, for instance, understand that they should never speculate on how or when the Kingdom of God will come. Rather, they must live like 'the One who participates already in God's eschatological Kingdom.'<sup>2</sup> That means that evil is to be confronted and revealed in everyday life, without waiting for the End or speculating on the time that remains before its final advent. Thus Christians live between a time that is not yet come and one that has already begun: a perennial, continuous, mundane, existential, and fateful way of life that intensifies the pressure of the past and the future on the present. Even so, however, orthodox belief still insists on a

different fate for those who adhere to Christianity from those who do not. Many are called, but relatively few will finally be chosen.

I am not speaking merely of the extent to which conservative Christians have been able to impose their views on the administration of health and welfare in the USA and elsewhere on such specific issues as the rights of women to information regarding abortion or the right of the gay community to have their needs publicly addressed. Certainly, the more evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have politicized articles of faith, and it is now becoming clearer how powerful and potentially ruinous are the vindictive and triumphal aspects of the Christian faith. I am speaking, and will be speaking throughout this book, about the false innocence of churches that entertain views of the end of history in which the Christian faith will dominate what is left of the world. Not only do these views bias American policy in the Middle East heavily toward Israel; they legitimate the worst fears of the Islamic world.

Like their more liberal counterparts in the Islamic world, the theologians and leaders of the more mainstream and liberal Protestant denominations have yet to say, once and for all, that the time has come to get rid of the apocalyptic beliefs that legitimate fanaticism. I do not mean simply an apology for the excesses of the Church, when it has given apocalyptic blessings to the work of inquisitors and conquistadors. More is required than an apology for threatening the faithful with the fires of hell by publicly burning heretics alive. More is required than public remorse for the genocidal excesses of conquistadors who justified mass murder in the 'new world' by imagining themselves as the agents of apocalyptic purification. Until the churches repudiate the apocalyptic beliefs that have long given mass murderers a good conscience and the blessings of the Church, they continue to legitimate the excesses of conviction.

It is too easy to denounce the radical right in the USA for keeping alive the most chauvinistic, nationalistic, violent, and apocalyptic aspects of the Christian faith. It is also far too easy for liberal theologians to propose existential or pragmatic reinterpretations of the apocalyptic literature which turn the fight with Satanic forces into a continuous, personal, and mundane process. So long as apocalyptic beliefs retain the color of orthodoxy, Pat Robertson and others will use them to foment enthusiasm for a final clean-up campaign against the enemies of God.

Like Augustine, Robertson sees the world as a contest between two historical forces or 'cities,' one serving the devil, the other God.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Augustine, he does not have to wait until the end of time to find out who has been on the side of the devil; he already knows who's who at

Armageddon. Pat Robertson views the world as a cosmic battle pitting ‘the people of the Babylonian humanistic and occultic traditions’ against ‘the people of the Abrahamic, monotheistic tradition.’<sup>4</sup> In the end, there can be no doubt that the only people left on the last day will be the few whose thoughts, words, and deeds conform to what Robertson has in mind when he speaks of the ‘Abrahamic’ tradition. Even these, like the Jews who survive Armageddon and the tribulations at the end of time, will have become Christians. Robertson’s God will be all in all.

There is no need to insist that countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt should silence their own clergy’s rhetoric of apocalyptic hatred, so long as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell preach that America, as the pre-eminent Christian nation and the leader of the civilized world, has an apocalyptic duty to perform. The Christian right believes that, to fulfill the biblical promises to Israel, the USA must engage in a world-saving battle: the sooner the better, since the faithful are getting tired of waiting for their promised satisfactions. Blasphemous as such a view may seem, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have given their blessing to the first-use of devastating, genocidal weapons. Using the biblical notion of an apocalyptic battle between good and evil to justify their desire to see such a final incineration, they have ‘hinted that use of atomic weapons was inevitable as part of the final battle of Armageddon:’ a battle that might well be fast approaching.<sup>5</sup> Now that there is an Islamic bomb, precariously controlled for the time being by an ally of the USA, the chances are vastly improved that the religious right in that country will have their wish for an atomic, indeed an apocalyptic, showdown.

Indeed, the Christian right’s sanctioning of a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the enemies of God makes it all the more likely that terrorists will use a dirty bomb to make an American city uninhabitable for generations. The longings of the religious right for a world showdown, in which the USA, with the aid of nuclear arms, will come out as the triumphant leader of the surviving nations, makes it possible for other nations to contemplate a nuclear confrontation as if the idea could be entertained by people with a claim to some measure of rationality or simple decency.

Few, if any, are reminding us that in a nuclear holocaust, nothing will stand. If the world’s arsenal of such weapons is actually used, the planet itself will become uninhabitable. That may seem an obvious point, but it took time for it to become widely recognized at the beginning of the nuclear age during the 1950s. At first, the popular imagination was stimulated by films that continued to portray an ‘atomic holocaust or plague’ in ways that suggested that it might have ‘a cleansing quality’ for the survivors; the world could be made new again.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of

the plague suggested that the dream of a saving remnant still survived, despite the reality of nuclear-age annihilation. In the 1950s and 1960s, it slowly became more apparent that there would be no survivors, no saving remnant, in a global nuclear war. Bomb shelters might enable individuals to survive the initial blast, but only long enough to die slowly from radiation sickness and the long winter night that would surely follow for years afterward. Only the apocalyptic imagination can still entertain the fantasy of redemptive survival.

It is clear from the rhetoric of televangelists like Robertson and Falwell that much of that earlier realism has been lost. The Christian right continues to harbor the illusion of a saving remnant consisting of the true Christians and of the converted survivors of Israel's Armageddon. They alone will prevail and live to see the final day of a heavenly earth ruled by the messianic people. An apocalyptic imagination, once relevant to earlier periods in which people sought to cope with devastating social change and with the prospect of further loss and dislocation, leaves a legacy of delusion about the chances of survival. In the wake of a nuclear or atomic war, however, there will not even be a collective memory in which to enshrine the dead or to honor their sacrifices.

Oddly, the fundamentalist Christians have become the last spiritual Darwinists. Holding that only the spiritually fit will survive a nuclear holocaust, they are in fact asserting that the outcome of Armageddon on the nuclear battlefield will favor the religious evolution of the planet. Many on the Christian and Islamic right remain to be convinced that there will be nothing and nobody left after a nuclear conflagration, except for the few spiritual survivalists that represent the *avant-garde* of the New Age.

Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan give voice to more orthodox Christian yearnings and fears regarding the end of time. Robertson knows how to convey a picture of world events as coming to a climax in our lifetimes, as Israel and America finally fulfill biblical prophecies of the triumph of good over evil. Buchanan knows how to convey the fear of many that something is rotten in the American republic and that it is dying from internal weakness and corruption. Together they orchestrate a chorus of apprehension and vengeful longings that cannot wait to demonstrate that the United States of America alone will stand the test of time. Extreme though they are, they nevertheless have the courage of mainstream Protestant convictions about an apocalyptic end of time.

These apocalyptic beliefs do have consequences. The re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 came as no surprise to those who monitored his evangelical support in the presidential election of 2000. Except for the Jewish community, the highest rates of turnout in 2000 were among Southern white evangelicals who attended church frequently.<sup>7</sup> (The

Southern white evangelicals who attended less often had some of the lowest turnout rates in the nation.) In these last two elections, three-quarters of Southern evangelicals who regularly attended church also voted Republican. For the Republican Party in the South, this cadre of politicized evangelicals in 2000 accounted for 41% of their vote, and outside the South these same voters racked up 21% of the Republican vote (Green 2003: 5).

If church-going evangelicals who believe in the end of time and in America's sovereign and saving role among the nations of the earth vote in such numbers, it is because the churches are telling them to do so. As in the 2004 election, so in the campaign of 2000, evangelical churches themselves not only urged their members to vote but gave them fairly precise instructions on whom to vote for as the party of God (Green 2003: 6). For their members who may be inclined to think differently or vote for Democrats, they offer disapproval that borders on intimidation.

However, until the liberal and moderate churches, both Protestant and Catholic, renounce Christianity's apocalyptic vision of a bloody and vindictive collective exorcism, they will have nothing to say about the militant and self-destructive aspects either of the Christian right or of their Islamic counterparts. There will always be a need for Osama bin Ladens so long as the Christian churches keep apocalyptic visions alive in scripture and liturgy and in prophecies and hymns about trampling out the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. Until and unless Christianity gives up its own dreams of apocalyptic glory, there will quite literally be no basis for an enduring accord with Islam. I am therefore calling for unilateral theological disarmament on the part of all the Christian churches.

The task of persuasion will not be easy. After all these centuries of conquest and even genocidal warfare, Christians still give an honored place to their apocalyptic literature. Not only do triumphalist tracts like the Revelation of John still remain in the Scriptures, but there is also an immensely popular literature of apocalyptic rebuke and speculation, such as Hal Lindsey's apocalyptic scenario, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Consider this relatively harmless excerpt from Lindsey's reminiscence of a scene at the shore:

You know, I used to come to the beach to get away from things. Just the relaxing of the waves pounding the shore. But now even the ocean is a reminder that man may be running out of time. Scientists tell us today that we are approaching a time when the ocean may not be able to sustain life anymore. The Secretary General of the UN recently told us that man has perhaps ten years to solve the problem of survival.<sup>8</sup>

The ocean, which should always be a source of nourishment for the planet, is becoming poisonous.

For Lindsey and others infected with an apocalyptic viewpoint, it is the world, and more particularly our social world, that is polluted. Families and neighborhoods, schools and even churches, certainly the world of work and politics, all suffer from the intrusion of external influences. For the fundamentalist Christian, secular humanism is ruining a traditional way of life, the state is intruding on the local community, foreign influences are polluting the nation, and agencies like the United Nations are impeding the exercise of national sovereignty. For the Islamic fundamentalist, it is American culture that is infecting the youth, foreign capital that is impoverishing the local farmer and merchant, and a secular state that is undermining the control of Islamic tradition. To some it might seem that, for such total corruption, there can only be an apocalyptic solution. Instead, I am arguing that the apocalyptic imagination itself makes the world seem to need a cosmic purification in a final exorcism of ethnic and religious cleansing. It is long past the time when the churches should have apologized for the consequences of this poisonous vision of the future, but it is not too late to prevent that vision from causing further and wholly irreversible damage.

Although Lindsey draws heavily on his updated reading of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament and the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, he is in fact drawing on ancient residues of the apocalyptic imagination that were common in the Near and Middle East. Long before the rise of Zoroastrianism or Hinduism, Indo-European myths spoke of a battle to ensure that the waters would return and renew the earth's power to nourish and support life. Standing in the way of these essential waters, however, was always a beast that must yet be destroyed. Otherwise, life would not go on, and time would indeed run out. Drawing on the imagery of the beast in the Book of Daniel, Lindsey rounds up the usual suspects: Babylon and Persia, Greece and Rome, who hold the sceptre of world rule (Lindsey 1970: 105–6). Here again we have the familiar picture of the world divided between two forces, East and West. His is a demonic image of a world order that defies the dictates of Scripture and the will of God. Against the rule of blasphemy there is only one antidote: a world dominated by the people of God. According to Lindsey (1970: 109ff.), during the time immediately before the advent of the Christian millennium, there will be 144,000 Jews with the fervor and faith of Billy Graham evangelizing the world in the name of Christ (Lindsey 1970: 111). These Jewish evangelists for Christ 'are going to make up for lost time' (Lindsey 1970: 111). Their preaching will extend outward in all directions from the



Holy Land, but they will still be faced with the overwhelming power of the one whom Lindsey calls a Roman Dictator, the Antichrist.

So long as drastic social changes and defeats in battle continue, it will seem to many of Lindsey's readers as if their world is indeed coming to an end. For this reason alone, there will always be some who find in Lindsey's popular apocalyptic vision a way to imagine that the end of suffering is near, and that they will soon enjoy their own triumph and revenge. However, this story, recently updated by the likes of Lindsey and the authors of the *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels, is as old as that in Matthew 24:41ff:

So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left behind. Two women will be grinding at the hand mill; one is taken and one is left behind. You must be on the alert then, because you do not know when your master is coming.

The world will be divided on the last day into two parts, and one will be left behind forever, to languish in obscurity and torment.

I mention these verses from Matthew 24 because they are a standard part of the lectionary of the mainstream Protestant as well as Catholic churches during the season of Advent, the weeks leading up to the holiday of Christmas. How can Episcopalians and Presbyterians sneer at the *Left Behind* series of novels, when that same vision informs their own readings from Scripture at the start of the church year?

Granted that few mainstream churches show movies to their young people in which children come home from school to find no one there, but the motor still running on the lawn mower in the back yard. Such films have frightened at least two generations of children, and I have had the privilege of meeting a few of them at the seminary where I teach. When they are being candid, they will admit that for years after seeing such a film they lived in terror of losing their mothers in the Rapture prior to the Second Coming of Christ, and of being thus left behind. To inspire such terror, or 'holy fear,' is one function of the apocalyptic vision itself. Thus, when the churches envisage a Day of Wrath, a dreadful judgment at the end of time, the marriage of innocence to sacralized destruction is consummated not in the liturgy but in a final orgy of violence, in which the innocent have the infinite satisfaction of seeing the wicked suffer unspeakable torments. It is as if the innocent are not really there, although they can witness the carnage, and it is not they who are doing it but the divine hand.

To fight terrorism with religiously inspired terror is to lose the battle before it begins. Terrorism has the capacity to make people believe that anything can happen anywhere at any time. That is why acts of

terrorism are so powerful. However, apocalyptic visions arouse the very same sense of unspeakable possibility. In fact, apocalyptic beliefs turn paranoia into an article of faith and demand a day of final reckoning. Pat Robertson, for instance, reassures his followers that it is going to be all right with God if the United States loves its enemy, Osama bin Laden, by taking him ‘out of circulation.’ That is because ‘The Bible makes it clear that God is on the side of established order.’<sup>9</sup> As for Christians, if they love their Lord, they have nothing to fear, because they are guaranteed eternal life. Muslims, on the other hand, no matter how devout they are in their worship of Allah, can never live or die with such an assurance. Those with such an eternal advantage are of course obligated not to keep it to themselves but to share it with a hungry world, and Robertson therefore assures his followers that Muslims are seeking Jesus by the millions (Robertson 2003: 273).

There is a catch. Unless Americans repent their sinful ways and ask God for help in reforming their personal and national lives, God will abandon them to their enemies. That is because Americans have allowed God to be eliminated from the schools and workplaces, from the courts and the media, of the country. Even worse, Americans have been on a binge of endorsing homosexuality, adultery, fornication, incest, various kinds of crime, and abortion: all abominations unto the Lord (Robertson 2003: 264–6). God, according to Robertson (2003: 267), will lead America to triumph over all its enemies if, and only if, Americans are good.

There is no mistaking the element of threat in this apocalyptic message. Speaking to the question, ‘Did God allow the attacks on September 11?’, Robertson (2003: 266) says, ‘I believe that the protection, the covering of God that has been on this great land of ours for so many years, had lifted on September 11, and allowed this thing to happen.’ God apparently had good reasons for exposing the USA to such destruction, given the many sins that Americans have committed ever since the Roe versus Wade court case and the Supreme Court’s decision to keep God out of the schools. In fact, American infidelity goes back to the 1920s and 1930s, to situational ethics and notions of cultural relativity, along with a flirtation with communism at the highest levels of government. The point is not just that Americans have been bad and forfeited their entitlements. It is that unless they reform themselves in a hurry, something far worse may happen to them.

There is also no mistaking the attempt to use apocalyptic imagery to terrify people into repentance and submission. Robertson (2003: 265) regards September 11 as ‘a wake-up call,’ and there will be ‘worse calamities coming if we don’t repent and turn to Him.’ Homeland security depends on piety, as defined by the Christian right. Is it fanciful

to imagine that, after the next major attack on America, Robertson and the Christian right will call for the isolation and punishment of such conspicuous sinners as those who practice abortion and homosexuality? We already know that some on the Christian right think that their faith gives them a license to kill doctors who perform abortions.

Until and unless the mainstream churches disavow themselves not only of these extreme interpretations of the Christian revelation but of apocalyptic doctrine itself, they will continue to provide an umbrella for this sort of Christian terrorism.

*Christian terrorism? Am I not being a bit extreme here? Consider Robertson (2003) again:*

It is logical to assume that any nation that has willingly slaughtered more than forty million innocent unborn babies, as we have done in the United States, would be subject to the wrath of God. Indeed, any nation that has practiced sodomy, adultery, fornication, and all manner of debauchery, as we in America have done *should live in terror* [emphasis added] not from Islamic fanatics, but *terror at what Almighty God will do when His patience is exhausted.*

This is not the raving of a lunatic preacher. It is simply a rather literal interpretation of the apocalyptic vision contained in the Bible and prayer books of mainstream Protestants and Catholics.

What could possibly convince the Christian and Islamic aficionados of the apocalypse to lay down their own dreams of triumph and revenge, so long as the churches themselves claim that the books of history will not be balanced until there is such a day of final accounting? It is hopeless to ask Islam to renounce its own apocalyptic beliefs until the Christian community has itself first abandoned its own longings for a day of triumph and revenge.

It is not enough for theologians, Muslim or Christian, to insist that the apocalypse is a continuing process, or a state of mind, or an existential metaphor, and that the Last Judgment, begun long ago, is always and everywhere impinging on each person in every moment. That may be true. If it *is* true, it is due to the secularizing impulses in Christianity and in Islam alike, in which the temporal is imbued with the eternal, and the eternal is put to the test of time. Thus the Kingdom of God is always and everywhere a way of life into which individuals may enter, but it is not identified with any particular community or nation, state or political system. Similarly, as Talal Asad points out, the Islamic *umma* is not what modern thought might consider a society, let alone a nation.<sup>10</sup> But like the Christian Kingdom of God, it is a world and a way of life that exists in its own right, on its own terms, and which

impinges on every individual. The Kingdom and the *umma* are aspects of eternity that imbue the temporal with essential life and meaning. Such a belief requires all Muslims and Christians to work out their faiths in the secular world where time passes, and where space always gives way to time. That is why Christian and Islamic apocalyptic beliefs will always tend to take secular form. No wonder, then, that secularists wish to keep religion from having too much success in secularizing itself (Asad 2003: 199–200).

There is much to be said for a continuous, this-worldly version of the apocalypse that brings suffering to light, creates an awareness of the unique and unprecedented in human history, and opens the way to a future that will not perpetuate the ills of the past but will be in fact, as well as in promise, a new age. Similarly, there is indeed much to be said for Islamic notions of ‘progress toward a fuller understanding of God ... in this world through the living of a morally upright life, so the abodes of the next are viewed by many as the arena of constant movement upward toward higher states of bliss, knowledge, and ultimate contemplation of the divine itself’ (Smith and Haddad 2002: 146). This story of progress is clearly on the agenda of the leaders who are the subject of Smith and Haddad’s review of Islamic hopes for the End, just as they are on the agenda of the moderate Presbyterians who subscribe to the notion that ‘God’s love ... is transforming us even now ... [and that] God’s purpose will indeed be brought to consummation.’<sup>11</sup>

However, unless these apocalyptic traditions can be successfully secularized into notions of societal progress and personal fulfillment, they will continue to provide a very short fuse for the explosive tensions that are accumulating within and between Christian, Jewish, and Islamic societies. Apocalyptic visions are dangerous because they are self-fulfilling. They virtually ensure that the future will tend to repeat the cataclysms of past conflicts in which wars destroyed the cities of what we now call the Near and Middle East. These cities were entire symbolic worlds, and their loss was experienced as a cosmic devastation. The current East–West conflict is thus a deeply rooted, civil war within a civilization that links Persia and Greece with Israel and Rome and with their descendants in the modern world.

Both Christianity and Islam draw their apocalyptic visions from the same sources in the world of Hellenistic, Persian, and Greco-Roman antiquity. These are sources with long memories and a merciless determination to take revenge. Unless the apocalyptic vision is eliminated, or at least radically secularized, the civil war between Islamic and Christian peoples is likely to come to an end very much in the same way that it began, that is, in a futile and suicidal attempt to eliminate outstanding differences.

## Notes

- 1 In James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American Society*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 108.
- 2 'Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things' (1978), quoted in *Between Millennia: What Presbyterians Believe About the Coming of Christ*, a publication of the Office of Theology and Worship, The Presbyterian Church (USA), 2001, p. 5.
- 3 See J. LeGoff, *History and Memory*, translated by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 155.
- 4 Pat Robertson, *The New World Order*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991, p. 258.
- 5 Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*. New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2000, pp. 325–6.
- 6 Stephen D. O'Leary, 'Popular Culture and Apocalypticism,' in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 3, *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, edited by Stephen J. Stein. New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000, p. 410.
- 7 John C. Green, 'The Undetected Tide,' *Religion in the News*, Spring 2003, Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, pp. 4–7.
- 8 Hal Lindsey, with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1970, frontal page.
- 9 Pat Robertson, *Bring It On: Tough Questions, Candid Answers*. Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group, 2003, p. 267.
- 10 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 197ff.
- 11 'Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things' (1978), quoted in *Between Millennia: What Presbyterians Believe About the Coming of Christ*, a publication of the Office of Theology and Worship, The Presbyterian Church (USA), 2001, p. 7.

# The Apocalyptic Vision as Bad Seed

From *The New York Times*, September 28, 2004, after the Chechnyan rebels had left over three hundred dead, many of them children, in a school in Beslan, Russia:

Every morning, Vova Tumayev sets the breakfast table for three – husband, wife and adored 10-year-old daughter. Nobody eats. Mr. Tumayev sits alone for a little while, then clears the table.

His wife, Zinaida, and his daughter, Madina, died in the seizure of a schoolhouse here at the beginning of September, two of the hundreds of victims of an attack linked to the war in Chechnya.

There is nothing Mr. Tumayev can do – no ritual, no act of mourning that can begin to fill the emptiness their loss has left behind.

At night, he said, he sleeps in his daughter's bed.

'They say "Aren't you scared to do that?'" said Mr. Tumayev, 44, a plumber. 'I say I'm not afraid of anything. But it's true, whenever I lie there some strange things come into my eyes.'

As the people of this little town struggle with their grief, the schoolhouse where their children died has become a place of echoes and memories as well. Hollow and filled with rubble, it is piled with wreaths and offerings, with messages of condolence scribbled like graffiti on its walls.

Mr. Tumayev is just one lonely mourner in a town where thousands of people are bereaved.

He married rather late, at the age of 34, to a kindergarten teacher, and the warmth of having a family, here in this little bachelor's apartment, continued to fill him with astonishment and joy.

'I gave her everything she asked,' he said of his daughter. 'I never said no to her.'

'My wife said, "Be strict with her so she'll obey you," but I couldn't. Sometimes my wife scolded her. I never did. When I came home from work she'd run out and hug me.'

Already, he said, friends are urging him to move on once the traditional mourning period is over, as if the past could possibly be left behind.

‘They tell me, “After 40 days, go marry again.”’ he said. ‘But even if I marry again 10 times I’ll never have a child like that. How I loved her, how I loved her.’

He picked them out immediately in the morgue, he said, although their bodies were charred and grotesque.

‘My daughter was shot in the head,’ he said. ‘One leg was off, the other was barely joined to her body. Her face was so burned you couldn’t recognize it. I just recognized her earrings, and a bit of her hair, and immediately I knew it was my daughter.’

‘People were saying, “Maybe it’s not her,”’ he said. ‘They had numbers on them, and I said, “Write that number down.” I knew them right away.’

Mr. Tumayev has set up a little shrine at home, a table piled with bananas, apples, dried fruits, biscuits, and his daughter’s favorite sweets.

His apartment is filled with pictures of her, just as the walls of the schoolhouse are pasted with photographs of missing children – each one a reminder of her absence.

He took a small album of photographs from a shelf and began turning its pages one by one, explaining each picture to a visitor as he went.

‘That’s her,’ he said, showing a picture of a smiling girl in a red dress. ‘That’s her, that’s her, that’s her at the beach; that’s also her and here she is, here she is, here, here she is; there she is in the countryside, there also, and that’s her, too.’

‘Oof, this is difficult,’ he said, but he kept turning the pages.

‘There she is in Rostov, there she is, too; there she is with her mother; there she is, she was tall, almost as tall as me; that’s her, too, and that’s her, too, and that’s her, and that’s also her, also her, also her; there she is with her friends, that little girl died, too, there she is waving.’

‘Everything in here is her,’ he said, handing the album to his visitor. ‘I don’t want to look anymore.’<sup>1</sup>

There are many kinds of moments; if this one does not represent the worst, it is close enough. Mr. Tumayev has experienced a total rupture in his life, an abrupt loss of everything that made him want to live. He knows that there is no way to recover his daughter, no matter how many times he marries, because she was unique. There will be no second chance, no repeat of the joy of being greeted by her when he comes home from work. He has lost what was and remains to him essential, and she is present only under the signs of her absence. The photographs in the album, no matter how often he points to her, cannot make her presence real, and the domestic shrine, like the places set for his wife and daughter at meal time, brings home his loss. The commentators who tell

him to 'move on,' although they are Russian, sound like Americans advising someone to get on with his life. The newspaperman's comment about the futility of the father's rituals seems gratuitous. Most readers, I believe, would sense the emptiness of these grief-filled gestures without being so instructed by the reporter. The moment that Mr. Tumayev has endured beggars commentary.

When confronted by such a moment, reporters and editors, like the scribes that tried to make sense of the many moments in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, are seldom at a loss for words. They find a precedent for the unprecedented or look forward to a later moment that will put the present in some meaningful perspective. Mr. Tumayev's friends tell him to move on and remarry; there will be better days, in the light of which this one will not seem to be so total an end of everything that makes life possible. Rather than a total break between the present and either the past or the future, this current moment will turn out to have been like a chapter in a book. Just to talk about it helps to move the catastrophe of loss into the magic kingdom of narrative. What seemed to be the end of everything will turn out to have been an incident, however horrendous, in a larger story.

Even to speak of Mr. Tumayev with expressions such as 'moments like this' tends to make his moment less tragic or even apocalyptic. Mr. Tumayev knows what it means to have everything come to an end. He cannot look any more at the pictures because that is precisely what they say: that his life is over, yet he still lives, however miserably and without hope. There is nothing to be done about it. There is no way to have prevented the end of everything; no way Mr. Tumayev could have saved his family, and no way for him now to do anything about his condition, surrounded as he is by reminders of his irreversible loss and of death itself. All that is left is the ticking of the clock: one moment after another, with no connection among the moments, no continuity or development, and nothing left to be said or done. It is what Stephen O'Leary, speaking of the apocalypse, has called 'the locus of the irreparable.'<sup>2</sup> Less grandly stated, it is hell.

In what Stephen O'Leary calls 'the tragic apocalyptic program' there is unrepeatable and irreversible loss: 'the list of ills only serves to prove that the end of history is imminent and unavoidable.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there is something apocalyptic, irreparably final, about the moment in which Mr. Tumayev lost both his family and the future. Do his well-meaning friends understand this, in their attempts to tell him that he will have other children and that it is soon time to move on? No other future can be generated to replace the one that he has lost forever. Promises of a better day have become meaningless. There will never come a day when



he will see again the one person who made every day worth living. The apocalypse is the end of time; there is no future in it.

To lose the future is to lose any way of imagining and projecting oneself; it is in this sense like death itself. Michel de Montaigne speaks of just such a moment in the life of Charles de Guise, then (circa 1572) Cardinal de Lorraine:

He was at Trent: first he heard the news of the death of his very special elder brother, the support and pride of his whole family; then came the death of his younger brother, their second hope. He bore both these blows with exemplary fortitude; yet, when a few days later one of his men happened to die, he let himself be carried away by this event; he abandoned his resolute calm and gave himself over to grief and sorrow – so much so that some argued that only this last shock had touched him to the quick. The truth is that he was already brimful of sadness, so the least extra burden broke down the barriers of his endurance.<sup>4</sup>

The Cardinal had lost the future, the two brothers who were the hope and support of the family; no wonder that he was ‘brimful of sadness.’ Such a loss makes it virtually impossible to imagine one’s own life going on, as if one were looking in a mirror without seeing any reflection at all. De Montaigne goes on to say that ‘The force of extreme sadness inevitably stuns the whole of our soul, impeding her freedom of action.’<sup>5</sup> A loss too deep for words throws the soul back on the memory of what it was like, as an infant, when you were unable to imagine how you could wait another minute for the saving presence of someone else. As an infant, you may also have felt as if you were wholly at a loss for words, unable to shout or speak in a way that would command a response to your anguish. In such a moment, as de Montaigne puts it, ‘we are enraptured, seized, paralysed in all our movements in such a way that, afterwards, when the soul lets herself go with tears and lamentations, she seems to have struggled loose, disentangled herself and become free to range about as she wishes.’<sup>6</sup> Visions of the apocalypse speak of a day when there will be no further need for such tears, and the soul will remain forever enthralled, either by horror or joy. In the apocalypse lost moments of intense anguish return, whether to bring punishment or release, but in either event, there will be no future.

Apocalyptic beliefs can have the unprecedented and unpredictable consequences that open the world to terror. As the horror of Beslan, Russia, has reminded us, there is no safe haven to protect the citizen from apocalyptic terror and terrorism. Not even the nation-state can

protect its citizens from the forces that destroy traditional communities and their ways of life. Floods of money and people, ideas and music, may invade any neighborhood and even the home, turning the generations against each other. The global economy is becoming increasingly potent and invasive. Many Americans therefore fear that 'The laws and rules that govern the global order and are instituted by the new world government will take precedence over the federal government of the United States, and Americans will be taking orders from foreigners' (Lamy 1997: 104). In such a world, people stare into the future and cannot find any sign of themselves and their ways of life; even their children will have turned their backs while singing the songs of foreigners. It is thus understandable that many are holding on to apocalyptic beliefs for guidance in a world that is no longer familiar or secure, even when those beliefs fuel terror itself.

The state, even as it expands into the lives of local communities and individuals, nonetheless fails to protect them from outside influences. Like the Roman beast in the Book of Revelation, sacrificing local communities to the goddess Roma, modern states make local communities pay taxes and tribute, while requiring human sacrifice for the sake of a global market. That is why outsourcing is a major political issue in the USA; communities are decimated when jobs go overseas. For the same reason, meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund face protesters in the streets who seek to protect local farmers in Africa and Asia from the cheaper farm goods flowing into the community from rich nations.

In one of the debates leading up to the presidential elections of 2004 in the USA, John Kerry, the Democratic candidate for president, said that American foreign policy would have to face 'a global test.' What he meant was that every effort should be made to secure international support for American initiatives, or at the very least international understanding, before embarking on initiatives to defend the nation against a variety of foreign threats. However, his opponents seized the opportunity to portray Mr. Kerry as someone who would sacrifice American sovereignty and thus expose Americans to the very threats from which the state is supposed to protect them. Neither Mr. Kerry nor his opponent, however, were willing to acknowledge that the millions being spent on national security cannot deter all terrorists, like those who left Mr. Tumayev and many others in Beslan, Russia, without a future.

In the USA there is a long tradition of hostility to outside influences. Sometimes these have been portrayed as Catholic, with immigrants polluting America with subversive and un-American loyalties; at other times the influences have been imagined as Jewish, notably international

bankers or communists who suck the life-blood from American workers and households. More recently, the Christian right has imagined secular humanists, civil libertarians, homosexuals, and feminists to be part of an international conspiracy that includes Muslims and terrorists: all seeking to thwart the sovereignty of the USA and to distract America from its providential assignment to bring the nations of the world to their democratic, and Christian, senses. For any presidential candidate to suggest that American foreign policy could be subject to international approval would therefore be seen as a peculiar mixture of heresy and treason. The values of families and local communities are being subverted by elites who in the past have sought to secularize their children's education, require them to go to school with blacks, tolerate homosexuals, undermine the authority of their parents, and allow immigrants from Central and Latin America to take away their parents' jobs.

Like conservative Christians, Islamic conservatives have also found a new world order dominated by secular humanists and foreign governments to be hostile to their own traditional beliefs and values. Not surprisingly, therefore, Islamic apocalyptic literature offers hope for a world purified of alien influence and corruption through cosmic battle and sacrifice. For instance, in Iran, prior to the Iranian revolution, oppressed groups of farmers and merchants were being overwhelmed by global social and economic changes. Understandably, they were opposed to the new world order and wished the nation to defend its citizens against the intrusion of foreign people, foreign ideas, and foreign capital. The Shah imposed his rule in ways that directly affected communal life and also offended traditional religion, and a globally oppressed class of believers longed for liberation, vindication, and revenge. A state opposed to traditional religious leaders alienated the clergy, who in their turn have become unresponsive to the needs of the people and impotent to help them. Under these conditions, religious ideology radically redefined the relationships among all contenders in the struggle for power and fostered the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>7</sup>

So long as Muslims and Christians entertain apocalyptic beliefs, the drive toward Armageddon will continue. While some are strapping bombs to their bodies, others are driving trucks filled with explosives into the places where 'the enemy' gathers or concentrates its strength and resources. Whether the target is the federal building in Oklahoma City or the World Trade Center in New York, the goal is to purify the world of alien influences and to restore control to the local community. To deprive apocalyptic beliefs of their terror is therefore the first line of defense against terrorism.

Despite the growth of apocalyptic movements hell bent on terrorizing or on achieving global supremacy, some commentators have looked on them as a bit of an anomaly in the modern world. Consider Nicholas Kristof's review of a book by Robert J. Lifton on the apocalyptic cult Aum Shinrikyo, which had tried to gas subway passengers in Tokyo in an attack that killed few but injured thousands more. Lifton had argued that the long-term effects of the cult were yet to be measured, since the cult leader had initiated a new age of terror with weapons that could slaughter literally millions. Kristof argued that:

Millenary cults have been around for millenniums, and it seems unlikely that any new guru will prove as deadly as the man in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century China who proclaimed himself the younger brother of Jesus and led the Taiping rebellion. That uprising resulted in the deaths of countless millions of people and contributed to the collapse of imperial China. And it would take quite a remarkable effort to match the biological weapons of the European settlers in America. Their introduction of smallpox—mainly by accident but also by use of deliberately infected blankets—helped wipe out much of the native population in the New World.<sup>8</sup>

Like Mr. Kristof, since September 11, 2001 and the demonstration of Osama bin Laden's effective management of mass murder, many of us have had to give the millennial question a second thought. Now we are in a situation that, for many Americans, seems not only new but unprecedented. It is a time when old scores are about to be settled on a scale that few of us have troubled to imagine since the first, frightening years after the invention of the atomic bomb. That is, after all, what an apocalypse does: it brings to light old animosities and introduces new possibilities in a time that seems, for those who suffer through it, like the beginning of the end. That is also what modernity does, whether you are living in the sixth century or the twenty-first.

There is no doubt that the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 evoked apocalyptic images in the minds of many who suffered as well as those who merely commented on the day's events. One eyewitness account by a New York City fireman does speak of the collapsing towers as making a terrifying sound reminiscent of the devil and that the fires were like those long imagined to accompany the apocalypse at the end of time. Certainly, the descriptions of bodies falling, of smoke clouds, of horrendous fire and panicked crowds running from the horror, do evoke apocalyptic images. When the firemen protested the Mayor's decision to remove all but a small crew from the scene of the disaster, it was because the site still held

the remains of many of their comrades. Since the vast majority of the firefighters were Catholic, commented one of them, their comrades could only give a church burial to those whose remains had been recovered. A part was required, if only a very small part, to signify the whole body.<sup>9</sup> The dead will come back to haunt the living so long as their memory is not honored and their spirits sent properly on their way to the life hereafter, and their untimely return is a staple of apocalyptic visions.

There is also no doubt that for many Americans the war on Iraq was a day of apocalyptic judgment. For some, even the soldiers, it was just 'pay-back time.' Certainly, many of the soldiers who were sent to the Iraqi front knew that, for all their professionalism, there was a very 'personal' score that had to be settled.<sup>10</sup> Retribution was also on the minds of all those who marked their bombs with references to September 11 and of the millions of Americans who believed that there were intimate links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. No doubt there were some terrorist training camps in Iraq, but it became clear during the 2004 presidential campaign that the Republican administration was really concerned about Iraq's connection with Hamas and other Palestinian groups opposing the Israeli occupation. That is, the invasion of Iraq served America's pro-Israel policies, regardless of any possible connection of Iraq either with Al Qaeda or 'weapons of mass destruction.' That so many Americans believed in the Iraqi threat to the United States, well in advance of any hard evidence to that effect, was due, I am arguing, to the profound sense that the time had come for retribution. Thus the war in Afghanistan had been not the beginning of the end but the beginning of the time of judgment.

Conservative Christians in the USA are not the only ones who are eager for Jesus to come back and settle old scores. Among Muslims there is what Gershom Gorenberg calls 'an old Islamic idea that at history's finale a Jewish Antichrist will rule until Jesus, as Muslim prophet, returns to defeat him.'<sup>11</sup> That idea has surfaced again in a very popular set of books by the Egyptian author Sa'id Ayyub, in which the Jewish Antichrist is not only armed with missiles but is wearing a Star of David alongside an American flag while sporting hammer and sickle: the trinity of evil. These books have received a wide readership, and for many Muslims they may be portraying the simple truth that a final showdown with Israel and America is as imminent as it is inevitable. Add to that the well-known support given by Christian evangelicals to extremists in Israel who are yearning for the day when they can destroy the Dome of the Rock and offer sacrifice in a rebuilt Temple. Like the extremists in the first century CE who plunged Israel into a disastrous

civil war and destroyed Jerusalem in an attempt to purify the Temple and the holy city of all foreign presences, these extremists are tired of waiting for God.<sup>12</sup> There is a trilateral push, then, for a day of final reckoning, despite the fact that the end, when it comes, will be a clear holocaust.

For many American Christians, the return of Israel to the land, where Jews from various parts of the world will gather under the sovereignty of the state of Israel, is merely a prelude to the final struggle in which Jews will follow a new messiah, suffer excruciating losses, be converted to Christianity, and finally be superseded forever in the advent of the Christian millennium. For Israel, that would mean Armageddon and, at best, a very costly victory over ancient enemies. For conservative Christians, that would mean the time had come for the United States to exercise its unfettered sovereignty as the new Israel and as the lead nation of the world. For us all, it would mean mutually assured destruction, one bomb, one city at a time.

In urging the state of Israel to build a Temple on the Mount, the Christian right is thus hoping to precipitate the end. That is why not only Jewish but also Muslim experts study the archaeology of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem: not only to locate the original outlines of their own shrines but also to legitimate their claims to future occupation. The future is thus clearly intended to repeat and restore past entitlements to exclusive occupancy.

However, such moves inevitably will result in a repetition of past disasters. Remember that Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount triggered the last wave of Palestinian revolt; think what might be accomplished by an attempt to unearth the remains of – or even to rebuild – the Temple itself. Certainly, the *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels foresees a peace treaty between Islam and Israel that allows the Temple to be rebuilt on the Temple Mount, followed by the obligatory desecration of the Temple by the Antichrist during the apocalyptic 'tribulations.'<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the Christian right may get its wishes for a time of devastating battles and horrendous losses. The Temple has already been desecrated on a number of previous occasions, most notably, for Christians, the destruction of Jerusalem in the civil war of 66–73 CE. Furthermore, there was talk, in the latter half of 2004, of the possibility of civil war in Israel itself if the government sought to dismantle and withdraw even a few of the settlements on the West Bank. As in the first century, when civil war erupted between Palestinian zealots and a government determined to keep peace with the international community, there is now a very real possibility that government troops will clash with religious zealots determined to hold on to the dream of a religious

nation-state entitled to the land of a still-imagined greater Israel. Talk of Armageddon seems increasingly plausible when zealots not only become tired of waiting for national dreams to materialize, but face increasing threats not only from their gentile neighbors but from their own states. If the Israeli and Christian right-wingers are to be dissuaded from their pursuit of total ownership and control, it will only be because the Christian churches as a whole discredit, once and for all, the apocalyptic beliefs on which the Christian right bases its pretensions.

War and defeat breed hatred and humiliation, but the apocalyptic imagination keeps these emotions simmering until they boil over in brutal attacks on the innocent. Just as the 1967 war mobilized Islamic radicals, the humiliating defeat of American forces in the long war in Vietnam aroused the passions of Christian fundamentalists and conservatives in the USA during the 1970s and 1980s. The USA itself had been beaten by an army of peasants fighting their own version of a holy war. That defeat was a possibility that had not been seriously entertained by the millions of citizens who believed not only in the power, but in the rightness, of every American cause. To the conservative Christian community, it was a victory for the communists and thus for those who represented the enemies of God.

### **Modernity and the Apocalyptic Imagination**

Why then are the moderate and relatively rational or pragmatic Christian churches adding a very dangerous fuel to the political fires now being fanned by the enthusiasm of the Islamic and Christian right? To understand the depth of apocalyptic fervor in the USA we need to go beyond the disasters of September 11 to the simple fact that there are millions of Americans who hold an apocalyptic world view, much but not all of it biblical. Not only is President Bush an evangelical Christian who feels that he is carrying out a divine mission against the 'axis of evil,' but there are also literally thousands of millennial groups armed with weapons or fortified with prayers and rituals that will augment their chances of surviving the end times. Some are Jewish, others are Mormon, Christian fundamentalist, or New Age enthusiasts fascinated with extraterrestrial signs and wonders.<sup>14</sup>

More important than these groups that seem to occupy the fringes of American culture or who cluster in particular urban neighborhoods are the millions of Americans who believe quite simply that their Lord and Savior will come again *during their lifetimes*. I emphasize the shortness of their time-perspective. They will live to see the day when the graves are opened, old scores are settled, the righteous triumph over the wicked

and the unfaithful are consumed in the fires and earthquakes of the last days. 'The Lord Jesus is coming back! He may be here at any moment! He may come today! . . . It is the sober statement of a fact, to arouse souls from their carelessness and indifference, and point them to the clear testimony of God's only Word that the Lord Jesus is coming again, and may be here today.'<sup>15</sup> The apocalyptic moment, however final it may be, ushers in for the faithful a timeless rapture, and if there is to be more time, it will not be like the past, the succession of *befores* and *afters*, but a millennium, in which there are no more losses, and every tear is wiped away. For the remainder, the end is quite simply torment followed by extinction.

Their expectations that the end is near may explain the high levels of recklessness that endanger the environment. Worse yet, enthusiasts for the end could use nuclear weapons in a pre-emptive strike to give the wicked a foretaste of the fires to come. In the meantime, the chosen imagine that they have some immunity from the nuclear war that is sure to come if America does not trample out the foreign vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored.

It is therefore not surprising that social movements promising a brighter future any day now, a new millennium, so often literally come to grief. As Stephen O'Leary reminds us, the Millerite movement that later came to be called the Seventh Day Adventists expected the world to come to an end first in March 1844, and when that day proved disappointing, the Second Coming was postponed to October 22 of the same year. Many of the Millerites had given away or sold all their possessions; they had no homes to return to, so ardent was their hope for the Bridegroom to return on time. When the Bridegroom tarried yet again and they were left with nothing, they were deprived of any future at all: they had neither the one they had longed for or the one they otherwise would have had, if they had not abandoned their homes and ways of life. Together they wept all night in the keenest and most heartbroken sorrow.<sup>16</sup>

The apocalyptic vision, I am arguing, not only embodies the end of time but promises compensation to the faithful for lost futures. Even the dead will have the future that they had not lived long enough to see. For those who have too long wept in disappointment over futures that never arrived, the last day offers a final moment of consummation, the fulfillment of every expectation. In the years prior to the Millerite movement, O'Leary reminds us, there had been ample reason for such grief. In the 1820s and 1830s evangelists had held revivals, attacked the ills of slavery and alcoholism, and raised hopes of a day when both these demons would be exorcized from the American body politic. O'Leary is quite clear that these hopes were disappointed not only because



alcoholism is not so easily cured but because slave owners put up strong moral as well as political resistance to attacks on the institution of slavery itself. Their reaction ‘made an optimistic faith in the progress of future reforms seem untenable.’<sup>17</sup> Great expectations came to grief.

More than the expectation of moral reformation was at stake. Americans had become optimistic that their nation would progress on a number of fronts, the economic as well as the social and political. When their economic bubble burst in 1837, it was as if a future had died: ‘some Americans were disposed to view current events in light of a pessimistic reading of Biblical prophecy.’<sup>18</sup> No wonder there were new signs everywhere of an apocalyptic day when chronic grief over a lost future would come to an end. For the faithless there will be no more future, nothing ahead for which to hope and pray, only the end of all expectation for a better day. The apocalyptic vision thus offers a compromise between hope and despair.

The apocalyptic vision trains people to expect more from the moment than life ordinarily is able to give. To believe that the Lord may come at any time, even though the day and hour of his coming are perennially uncertain, puts believers in the middle of a chronic purgatory, always on the lookout for whatever sin might delay the advent of bliss. O’Leary says as much of the effect of the apocalyptic expectations that survived the collapse of the Millerite experiment. The new wave of apocalypticism, which historians usually call ‘premillennialist,’ required life to get better before it got worse; that is, there would have to be spiritual improvements, at the very least, to make the world ready for the Second Coming, after which all hell could break out and a final Christian millennium would consummate history. This is what some called ‘the doctrine of the rapture, also known as “any-moment” coming,’ and it required of the believer a relentlessly high expectation of every moment and a purgatorial discipline of constant self-improvement:

The new premillennialism placed heavy psychological demands upon believers: enjoined to practice self-purification in anticipation of the final Judgment, they had to consistently hold their intense anticipation in check and turn their attention to organizing their everyday lives by planning for a future that most believed was unlikely at best.<sup>19</sup>

The irony is that some forms of American apocalypticism are an extension of medieval Catholic piety that insisted on self-purification through being born again. After the notion of purgatory became dogma in the late thirteenth century, purgatory soon became a this-worldly state of mind. For hundreds of years Catholic, and then Protestant,

piety has sought to develop an acute awareness of the promptings of the divine in everyday life. The believer is to purify the self of every thought and feeling that will not pass muster on the last day, an exercise that, for Catherine of Genoa and her followers, required a second birth. To turn everyday life into a purgatorial discipline directed at self-purification initiated a relentless search for self-development and perfection. Above all, the sense that time itself imposes a discipline on the believer to make the most of every moment and of every day has become an article of secular faith. America became a secular evangelical purgatory that owes as much to John Locke as it does to William Baxter, Catherine of Genoa, Dante, and Augustine.

Among Christians since Augustine there has long been a tendency to secularize the apocalypse and to intensify the significance of the moment. Some have argued that the Last Judgment is a continuing process as Jesus slowly comes into his Kingdom; Christians are already living in the end times. Others believe that the Last Judgment occurred on the cross and that the Second Coming will conclude the period of contest and trial. Because Christians are thus living between the times, every moment may – or may not – put the believer in the divine presence. There are no clear rules for right action, and no guarantees of recognition or reward, although the stakes are high, and the penalties for failure are severe and everlasting. To soften the existential crunch, some believe that even in the present they have an ecstatic connection with the divine, a ‘secret rapture,’ while others believe that they will someday be initiated into that rapture, as others remain in torment to fight their spiritual battles as best they can. As O’Leary points out, the belief in a secret rapture ‘functioned as a mechanism for ethical purification by helping believers to maintain their faith and resist temptation, . . . [and] gave believers hope that they might avoid not only the catastrophic events of the last days, but also their own personal deaths.’ The promise of the rapture makes up for the prospect of a lost future, and in the meantime it gives to each and every moment extraordinary promise and meaning.

Keeping apocalyptic fervor alive, however, requires constant preaching and prophecy. Apocalyptic oratory substitutes the rhetorical moment for the future. It is as if one could magically restore a future that had been lost by dramatizing it and acting it out. That is what O’Leary is getting at when he says of apocalyptic pronouncements that ‘the telling of it and the reception of it (whether positive or negative) are proof of it: “And this gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the earth as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:14).’<sup>20</sup> That is, when the announcement is given, it is as if

the future has already begun, so that those who do not believe it have already consigned themselves to outer darkness.

Some apocalyptic preaching tries to convince people that the future that is coming is quite different from one they may have imagined for themselves: everlasting torment instead of consummation, shame instead of honor. The only way to recover the future of which they had dreamed is to renounce their ordinary aspirations and to accept the future that is being offered to them in the fantastic and frightening images of apocalyptic proclamation itself.

Such purple prose conjures up a picture to satisfy the impatient believer; until the End materializes, its realization in discourse must suffice. William Miller's own recreation of the End completes the scene: 'See, see! the angel with the sharp sickle is about to take the field! See yonder trembling victim fall before his pestilential breath! High and low, rich and poor, trembling and falling before the appalling grave...'<sup>21</sup>

When the future you have been longing for no longer seems believable, however, it is as if you have lost your grasp on time itself. It is this experience that is then transposed to the end-time, in the rhetoric of the apocalyptic preacher who warns of a day when the 'living will be struck by the awful cry "There shall be time no longer!"'

By the magic of postponing to the end an experience that has already taken place, the apocalyptic preacher allows you to imagine that your loss of the future is not yet complete; there is still time. All you have to do is to avoid the moment that is the end of all other moments. To do that you must take seriously the possibility that for the faithful 'this dread moment' will arrive, but when it does, another possibility opens up on the darkest of battlefields: 'The clouds have burst asunder; the heavens appear; the great white throne is in sight.'<sup>22</sup> At the very moment when you are facing the end of time, and you have no future at all, the future begins from a source far beyond the stretch of your own imagination. It is as if the preaching of the apocalypse acts out the underlying magical logic of substitution: the replacement of a lost future with a new one.

To accomplish this feat, however, the preacher must simulate the very moments in which people already have experienced a great disappointment: the loss of the only future that they had ever imagined for themselves. When the Greeks were destroying the cities of the Persians in the ancient Middle East, the survivors sought out women in grottoes, the Sybilline oracles, who would tell them of a future that belonged to them. There would come a day when the cities of the enemy would be

destroyed, and not their cities only, but the countryside; indeed, not just their countryside, but their ravines. The enemies' whole world would be a smoking ruin. In these pronouncements the new future began, and in that sense these prophecies were self-fulfilling.

## Notes

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- 3 O'Leary, 1994, p. 83.
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- 5 de Montaigne, 'On Sadness,' 1987, p. 8.
- 6 *Ibid.*
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- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 178–80.
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- 14 Alex Hearn and Peter Klebnikov, 'Apocalypse Now. No. Really, Now,' *New York Times*, 'Magazine Desk,' 27 December 1998.
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- 17 O'Leary, 1994, p. 97.
- 18 O'Leary, 1994, p. 98.
- 19 O'Leary, 1994, pp. 136–7.
- 20 O'Leary, 1994, p. 88.
- 21 O'Leary, 1994, p. 114, quoting from Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 4, p. 477.
- 22 O'Leary, 1994, p. 114, quoting from William Miller, letter to Truman Hendryx, 26 March 1832, reprinted in Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, p. 102.