

Apocalyptic Movements: Year In Review 2012



In the wake of a terrorist attack on March 20, 1995, in which members of the Japanese doomsday ...

Kyodo/Landov

With the approach of Dec. 21, 2012, a date that was the purported conclusion of the ancient Mayan calendar, both eager anticipation and dread spread across the world as apocalypse adherents contended that the end of the world was therefore imminent. This belief persisted even as archaeologists and the descendants of the Maya themselves dispelled this notion. News reports continued to appear in newspapers, on television and radio, and especially across the Internet about apocalyptic movements—groups of people anxiously awaiting December. Some of these groups foresaw a beneficial transformation or elevation of humanity, while others warned of destruction, yet both sides agreed that a change was forthcoming.

The word *apocalypse* literally means “revelation.” Its origin is religious, and it refers to biblical texts foretelling the “unveiling” of God’s plan for the world. These biblical texts are usually seen as the ultimate source of apocalyptic literature even if an older eastern religion—e.g., the Iranian religion

Zoroastrianism—also mentioned divine plans that

entail a glorious consummation of history and the coming of a new, blissful age for mankind. Prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah warned about the destruction of the world and its restoration at God’s will. The Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible is an excellent example of the apocalyptic genre. The visions purportedly revealed to the pious Daniel announce the final judgment, which is symbolized in the slaying of beasts, the punishment of the wicked, and the reward of the just, as well as the arrival of one everlasting, final kingdom on Earth. The last book of the New Testament, known as the Revelation to John (or, more popularly, the Book of Revelation), follows a similar script. Its purported author, John of Patmos, a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, received visions as did the biblical Daniel. These visions unveiled the ordeal that would soon erupt upon the world: the combat between good and evil, symbolized respectively by Christ’s Second Coming and the Antichrist, which would result in the triumph of Christ. Characterized as a warrior who defeats the demonic powers, Christ will rule for 1,000 years (known as the millennium) prior to the final obliteration of Satan, the Last Judgment, and the emergence of the “new Earth,” in which there “shall be an end to death, and to mourning, and crying and pain.” In the apocalyptic worldview—also known as “millennialist” or “millenarian” regarding this hope in the millennium—the “old order” will pass away, and a new world will be born.



At her home in Jacksonville, Fla., in February 1999, Vikki Crosby crouches amid supplies she has ...

Stuart Tannehill—Florida Times-Union/AP

Crucially, with the passage of time, both “apocalyptic” and “millennial” developed a broader meaning. Apocalyptic no longer signifies simply a literary genre but also identifies a doctrine that advocates that the End is not only near but also imminent. It is closely associated with eschatology, the study of last things. At the same time, millennialism, or millenarianism, is understood narrowly not as a faith in a coming thousand-year period but rather as a doctrine that seeks salvation for humankind and the regeneration of the world here on Earth. The discourse and imagery of the apocalypse are about battles, ends, and judgments, while the

millennium is characterized by new beginnings. Fear and hope are thus intertwined. In order to understand apocalyptic movements, one needs to consider this dual dimension. Moreover, the variety of such movements should be emphasized. There is not a uniform apocalyptic mode of thought. The roots of apocalyptic movements may be religious, and many apocalyptic groups and communities have a religious interpretation of the world and their role in it. Since the early 20th century, however, there have been a plethora of secular movements that have displayed both apocalyptic dynamics and millenarian expectations as well, even if they claim independence from any supernatural intervention.

The variety of the apocalyptic phenomenon has been in full view in contemporary times. Its manifestations can be seen both on the fringe and within mainstream society, and apocalyptic movements can express themselves through violent or peaceful means. The passage of the 20th to the 21st century has witnessed the emergence of violent apocalyptic groups that not only braced themselves for the End but also perceived themselves as major actors in the final battle between good and evil. In the 1990s the Branch Davidians led by David Koresh interpreted Revelation not figuratively but literally, providing a powerful example of a group that saw itself as divinely “elected” and guided by a “messiah” in the struggle against demonic powers at the end of time—in this case against the U.S. government, which investigated the Branch Davidians under allegations of child abuse and firearms violations. The government raid of the movement’s Waco, Texas, compound in February 1993 and the following two-month standoff with federal agents resulted in the deaths of about 80 people, including Koresh, who subsequently were

viewed by surviving Davidians as martyrs. Another example of an apocalyptic movement that prepared for a violent Endtime emerged in Japan. AUM Shinrikyo ("religion of supreme truth"; renamed Aleph in 2000), led by another "messiah," Asahara Shoko, stockpiled arms and biological weapons in order to fight the battle of Armageddon and anticipate the millennium. In the 1995 Tokyo subway attack, followers of Asahara released the nerve gas sarin into the city's subway system, killing 13 and injuring more than 5,000. Asahara was later convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

The violence of these episodes should not blind anyone to the fact that there are other communities whose members believe themselves to be living in the Endtime but prepare themselves spiritually without resorting to extremist or violent means in order to fulfill their expectations. They may decide to spend the Last Days warning society at large about the coming End. Such was the case with the prophecies of Harold Camping and the group of people who believed in them. Promoting Rapture theology, the doctrine that says that true Christians will be taken away from the planet while the world is destroyed, this Californian radio evangelist believed that he had deciphered the signs of the impending End. He first proclaimed it in 1994, and in 2011 he announced the coming Rapture for May 21, and then for October 21, without success. Eager followers spread the message throughout Camping's false starts, many quitting their jobs and selling their homes, donating proceeds to Camping's radio ministry, and even preaching Doomsday worldwide. The Internet has only accelerated the diffusion of Endtime prophecies. The evangelist Ronald Weinland delivers many of his sermons online and has prophesied the end of the world several times already, but without the impact that Camping managed to achieve.

Still, Weinland and even Camping represented what were fundamentally fringe movements. The success of the *Left Behind* series of fictional books, a creation of evangelicals Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, serves as evidence of apocalyptic discourse successfully entering the public sphere. *Left Behind* and its sequels chronicle what happens after the Rapture: the reign of the Antichrist, the trials that the forces of good undergo against evil, the casting away of unbelievers, and the ultimate creation of a new Earth. The series has sold more than 63 million copies, published its 16th title in 2007, and added a "Kids Series" for readers between the ages of 10 and 14. There has also been a film adaptation of the series starring the evangelical movie star Kirk Cameron. Although evangelicals compose its core audience, this Endtime thriller series owes its popularity as much to its entertainment value as it does to the message that it delivers.

The apocalyptic radar captures and processes tell-tale signs of the end of the world. It comes as no surprise that the fear of a global computer breakdown with the advent of the year 2000 because some computer systems would be unable to distinguish the year 2000 from 1900 (known as the millennium computer bug and also as Y2K) was viewed in some Christian quarters (mostly conservative evangelicals) as an Endtime sign. Mainstream evangelists, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, saw this as a cataclysmic event that would create chaos and ultimately lead to the Second Coming. Accordingly, many preachers urged their followers to prepare for such a scenario and acquire all the necessary tools for survival. In fact, survivalism, which can be a way of living for religious and secular alike, has been adopted by individuals and by families across the U.S. and beyond. There has been a rise in survivalist behaviour since the end of the 20th century and increasingly since the economic and political turmoil of the beginning of the 3rd millennium. The belief that society is collapsing and that there is a need to prepare for the turmoil is what fuels the survivalist mind-set: self-isolation, self-sufficiency, and anticipation of *Teotwawki* (The End of the World as We Know It). A must-read book for contemporary survivalists is William R. Forstchen's *One Second After* (2009), which describes such a societal breakdown and a resultant struggle to survive.

Beyond Judeo-Christian traditions, Muslim apocalyptic expectations can be found in contemporary jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda. Often the U.S., the West, or Israel is identified with *Dajjal*, the Islamic equivalent of the Antichrist, and the fighters, the remnant few and the true believers, must prove their loyalty to God by combating the subversive and corrupt forces before them in an apocalyptic war until God finally intervenes. Their loyalty tested, their righteousness consecrated, the true believers win paradise.

Regardless of its many forms and shapes, apocalypticism is a vibrant component of popular culture. The alleged 2012 prophecy, based on a particular reading (or, according to many scholars, misreading) of the Mayan cyclical astronomical calendar, about the end of the world at the close of 2012 was met with wide interest by the media and the entertainment industry (including a box-office hit called *2012*), to the exasperation of many anthropologists (and some film critics). Meanwhile, climate change provided an endless source of catastrophic predictions about the future of Earth and also a profusion of disaster movies about an impending "Climate Apocalypse." Even the popularity (in the opening decades of the 3rd millennium) of books, movies, and video games about a "Zombie Apocalypse" triggered by the appearance of the walking dead demonstrates that although the proliferation of apocalyptic visions may not unveil much of the Almighty's plans for mankind, it does continue to testify to the unlimited range, scope, and social and cultural impact of the human imagination.

"Apocalyptic Movements: Year In Review 2012". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. Web. 31 mar. 2016
<<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Apocalyptic-Movements-1891921>>.