

TRIBULATION:  
Living Through the End Times  
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A few weeks ago I stumbled across a news flash that the final installment of the “Left Behind” novel series was about to be published and had already sold 2 million copies prior to its release date.

For those of you unfamiliar with the “Left Behind” phenomenon, it’s a techno-thriller series based upon the New Testament book of Revelation. The series outlines in vivid detail a particular Christian view of the end times (one that is not shared by many Christians, by the way).

The books take the fantastic, mythological imagery in the book of Revelation and translate it into concrete terms and imagery from our time, with heavy doses of technology, conspiracy theory, and right-leaning politics.

Just to give a sense of the gist of the series: The 12-book series kicks off with the Rapture, in which true believers in Jesus disappear into thin air because they have been, in a sense, supernaturally airlifted from earth in anticipation of the great Tribulation to come.

Those left behind (hence the name of the series) must face seven years of global chaos before Jesus returns for the cosmic battle of Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil, and the final judgment of all souls.

In the seven years of tribulation that the books cover, the world is ravaged by war, disaster, and plague, and is tyrannized by the rising Antichrist, who dominates the world from the position of Secretary-General of the United Nations. The UN is transformed into “the Global Community Regime.”

The Antichrist operates from Iraq, wields a global force of storm troopers, called “peacekeepers,” and is aided by a false prophet, a high-ranking Catholic cleric. Much of the action takes place in Israel and the Middle East. Revered rabbis evangelize for Christ and call for Israel to repent its national sin of rejecting the messiahship of Jesus. In the final installment, “The Glorious Appearing,” Jesus indeed returns, destroys all the evil beings, human and otherwise, damns the unbelievers, and ushers in the 1,000-year reign of peace and righteousness for all the good people.

Now, I must say I got the jitters when I read that one out of eight Americans has read all or part of this series, that 62 million copies have been sold, and that following 9-11-2001 sales of the ninth installment, “Desecration,” surged to make it the best-selling novel of that year. If this also strikes you as scary, perhaps it will help to know that the Harry Potter series has sold 195 million copies worldwide.

Nevertheless, the “Left Behind” series is capturing and feeding a real phenomenon in our society. An undercurrent of profound insecurity finds its voice, its home, and its validation in the belief that we are living in the end times.

While evangelical and fundamentalist Christians gravitate toward the book of Revelation and look for the return of Christ, New Age seekers anticipate catastrophic earth changes that will precede an age of peace. As the planet makes a shift to higher consciousness—so the plot goes—the old patterns of the past and the new emerging patterns of the future begin to polarize and pull apart; the old structures are breaking down, creating a period of chaos.

While some anticipate being lifted up and saved from the turmoil in the Rapture, others anticipate being lifted up in UFOs. Tune into the late-night AM talk-radio show “Coast to Coast” with George Noory, and you’ll learn how Jesus was in fact an extraterrestrial, and that the Rapture will be a massive UFO rescue described long ago in an ancient Mayan prophesy (I’m making that up, but it’s a good guess).

The point is, you throw some religion, science, science fiction, paranormal speculation and conspiracy theory into a blender and you get an apocalypse smoothie being collectively created and ingested by millions of listeners across North America.

This may all seem like the lunatic fringe, yet even the more cohesive and legitimate traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism teach that we are currently in an astrological epoch of severe degeneration that will inevitably come to ruin. Both of these traditions see time in terms of vast cycles of many thousands of years.

According to ancient Hindu texts, for example, we are now in the culmination of the Kali Yuga, an age of decay and destruction, which will eventually give rise to a new cycle of creation. The old will be the matrix of the new.

Now, it could be that I’m just a flake, because I pick up on all these things and believe them as connected and significant. Call me crazy, but I do see a collective mind-set and emotional tone emerging from many sectors simultaneously, what could be called a rise in millenarianism.

I think it deserves attention for at least a couple of reasons. The first reason is because of the potential impact this can have on the course that our society takes, even upon public and foreign policy.

For example, if our president is an evangelical Christian who believes, at some level, that the return of Jesus and the end times are soon coming, what effect might that have on his views on the state of Israel, his orientation toward the environment, his sense of the importance of a sustainable future for many future generations.

I also wonder if “end-times” thinking in the culture around us doesn’t affect us emotionally at some level even if we don’t subscribe to such beliefs. They create an atmosphere, an undertow; they infuse our dreams, affect our ability to envision a positive future created by steady perseverance.

What are the components of millenarian belief, or apocalyptic thinking?

First of all, such belief emerges out of a matrix of anxiety. It surfaces in times of collective crisis, tension, danger, and distress, moments when the general disorder of the world seems to call desperately for resolution, even catastrophic resolution.

I’m reminded of a cartoon I once saw. In the cartoon frame there is a kitchen blender. It’s filled with water and there are two sorry-looking goldfish with bulging eyes anxiously treading water in it. One blurts out to the other: “THE TENSION IS KILLING ME!”

Apocalyptic thinking means longing for an end. Even if the only end that can be imagined is cataclysmic, even if it means forcing the hand of history through reckless, violent or suicidal action, the end must come because living in the tension is unbearable.

As one who grew up within the tension of nuclear proliferation, I can remember as a child having dreams that the end of the world was finally happening. And although there was a grim darkness and fear in these dreams, there was also a strange sense of relief and freedom. The waiting was over. All superficiality fell away. The need for my family and the imperative of survival made things very simple and clear.

Millennialism is basically any religious movement that prophesies the forthcoming destruction of the present order and the establishment of a new order, in accordance with cosmic purposes.

It usually envisions a reversal of positions between the oppressed and the oppressor. In the age to come, those who have suffered, those who have been persecuted, or who have been marginalized and powerless, will be lifted up and granted a favored status, while the oppressors will receive their comeuppance. Those who believed in the prophecy will be vindicated, and those who did not believe—and did not change accordingly—will be shamed or abandoned to destruction.

But there are some other elements. Apocalyptic thinking is highly polarized in its understanding of good vs. evil. There is an either/or sense of morality. One must identify with the good, and purge oneself and one’s world of the perceived evil once and for all, demanding undivided unity before the enemy. “You’re either with us or you’re against us.”

There is a conviction of being victimized by the evil force, which is or has the potential to be diabolically overpowering. The conflict requires a cataclysmic showdown. Even if there is enormous collateral damage—perhaps even the end of the world as we know it—

the good, with the help of some transcendent power, will ultimately prevail and reign in the age to come. Disaster attains meaning.

Of course, in reality, in real history, in the ambiguities of human life, the desired outcome of the pure community of the righteous can never be achieved. And so, that unbearable suspension continues, leading to recklessness on the one hand or passive longing for a savior on the other.

Having spent a bit of time exploring the characteristics of apocalyptic belief, I want to bring us back to some of the antidotes that the liberal religious orientation offers.

We could disdainfully dismiss such Apocalyptic notions, but that deepens the separation we may already experience between ourselves and others, between our religious and social values and those of others. This is a time, whether cosmically ordained or not, of deep polarization.

One of the gifts of Unitarian Universalism, and liberalism, is an actual willingness to live in tension, an understanding that the tension between apparent opposites gives rise to creativity in a way that clinging to one pole or another does not.

We are to see things in shades of color rather than in black and white, and to seek the deeper levels of understanding and relationship beneath the shouts of slogans. We are to see ourselves and recognize our own humanity in those we disagree with, and, if possible, strive to meet them in that common humanity.

Another gift of our religious tradition is a belief in gradual grounded progress. At times in American religious history there has been a great deal of apocalyptic fever, a fervent anticipation of the end times and hope for divine intervention.

But religious liberals have consistently staked their claim with humanity and in an earth-affirming hope. Historically, Unitarians and Universalists invested less and less in the hope of a rescuing savior, and trusted that God's good intentions for this world were already at work in human intelligence, reason, goodness, creativity, progress, science, relationship and self-development.

Their unshakable confidence in goodness and progress can seem naïve today, but it is a foundation worth retaining, because it is essentially a faith in humanity.

Annie Dillard speaks to our call as mere flawed human beings to face the sacred work of living in this world with love and commitment:

“...Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children

busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.”

While others may feel the ground shaking, and we ourselves may feel it, we are to steady ourselves and strengthen ourselves for the very long haul, grounding ourselves in the tasks that are before us, the work of preserving and healing this beautiful, magnificent, tragic, fragile world for countless generations to come.