

Apocalypse now? Threats to survival: Threats to survival

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For those trapped in the Twin Towers or the Pentagon, that fiery hell must have seemed apocalyptic. In the fleeting moments before they leaped from windows or were crushed under melting I-beams, what passed through their minds? For those who watched in horror, on the streets or on television in their homes and offices, it must have looked as if a mini end-of-the-world Apocalypse had descended.

Or did it? In some respects, yes, it was an apocalypse. The word means “unveiling”—specifically, the unveiling of things to come. What was unveiled for us was the prospect of endless acts of terrorism perpetrated by invisible enemies against mostly innocent civilians. In an apocalyptic moment, as it is generally conceived, the future seems to be closed, inevitable and inescapable. Since the future can’t be averted, apocalyptic can only call people to personal repentance, so that after the catastrophe they might survive to enjoy heaven or a transfigured earth.

Eschatology, by contrast, regards the future as open, undetermined and capable of being changed if people alter their behavior in time. The urgency of the great prophets of the Old Testament came from their conviction that catastrophe need not happen, that even a small deviation from the course toward doom might avert it.

Eschatology is concerned about the goal of humanity and the world; apocalyptic is consumed with the actual end of the planet earth as it is presently constituted. Prophetic eschatology is ruthlessly realistic, yet incurably hopeful. Apocalyptic has abandoned hope, and looks for divine, miraculous intervention.

Apocalyptic has a foreshortened sense of time. It anticipates a final war between the powers of Good and Evil. By appealing to these absolutes, President Bush has attempted to endow his cause with a kind of ultimacy, in which “those who are not for us are against us.” There is no time left; every person, every nation must choose sides.

If that were the whole story about apocalyptic, many of us would want nothing to do with it. That is not the whole story, however. There is a positive role for apocalyptic as well as its better-known negative. The positive power of apocalyptic lies in its capacity to force humanity to face threats of unimaginable proportions in order to galvanize efforts at self and social transcendence. Only such Herculean responses can actually rescue people from the threat and make possible the continuation of humanity on the other side. Paradoxically, the apocalyptic warning is intended to remove the apocalyptic threat by acts of apocalyptic transcendence.

As the philosopher Gunther Anders put it, we move into an apocalyptic mode when we no longer find ourselves asking “How shall we live?” and ask instead, “Will we live?” The normal eschatological situation, which gives life urgency by facing us with the inevitability of our own death, the hunger for meaning, and the fear of suffering and loss, becomes apocalyptic when it appears that there is no longer time for normal urgency. Time collapses. The Time of the End becomes the End of Time. Those who are “not yet nonexistent” must do everything in their power to make the End Time endless. “Since we believe in the possibility of the ‘End of Time,’ we are Apocalyptics,” Anders wrote in the midst of the nuclear terror in 1962, “but since we fight against the man-made Apocalypse, we are—and this had never existed before—‘Anti-Apocalyptics.’”

The apocalyptic situation dwarfs our human capacity and reduces us to powerlessness. The negative response is passivity and despair; the positive is a superhuman effort and assault on the impossible. The negative version of apocalyptic leaves us feeling that we are smaller than ourselves, incapable of the required response. Positive apocalyptic, by contrast, calls on our every power to avert what seems inevitable. “Nothing can save us that is possible,” the poet W. H. Auden intoned over the madness of the nuclear crisis; “we who must die demand a miracle.” And the miracle we got came about because people like the physician Helen Caldicott refused to accept nuclear annihilation. But she did it by forcing her hearers to visualize the consequences of their inaction.

Imagination, says Anders, is the sole organ capable of conveying a truth so overwhelming that we cannot take it in. Hence the bizarre imagery that always accompanies apocalyptic. Optimists want to believe that reason will save us. They want to prevent us from becoming really afraid. The anti-apocalyptist, on the contrary, insists that it is our capacity to fear which is too small and which does not correspond to the magnitude of the present danger. Therefore, says Anders, the

anti-apocalyptic attempts to increase our capacity to fear. “Don’t fear fear, have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others too. Frighten thy neighbor as thyself.” This is no ordinary fear, however; it is a fearless fear, since it dares at last to face the real magnitude of the danger. And it is a loving fear, since it embraces fear in order to save the generations to come. That is why everything the anti-apocalyptic says is said in order not to become true.

If we do not stubbornly keep in mind how probable the disaster is and if we do not act accordingly, we will not be able to prevent the warnings from becoming true. There is nothing more frightening than to be right. And if some amongst you, paralyzed by the gloomy likelihood of the catastrophe, should already have lost their courage, they, too, still have the chance to prove their love of man by heeding the cynical maxim: “Let’s go on working as though we had the right to hope. Our despair is none of our business.”

Anders’s insight is fundamental, because it suggests that some of the biblical apocalypses were really anti-apocalypses too. They said what they said in order that it not become true. Jonah understood this, and for that reason fled his task. He knew God was sending him to preach doom so that it would not happen, thus making him appear a liar. A positive outcome might be conceivable, if the human race rises to its capacities and meets the future faithfully; but if it does not, then the apocalyptic nightmare may indeed descend upon us. Luke warns, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

It is not difficult to see in that warning perils that threaten the very viability of life on earth today. Global warming, the ozone hole, overpopulation, starvation and malnutrition, war, unemployment, the destruction of species and the rain forests, pollution of water and air, pesticide and herbicide poisoning, errors in genetic engineering, erosion of topsoil, overfishing, anarchy and crime, the possibility of a nuclear mishap, chemical warfare or all-out nuclear war: together, or in some cases singly, these dangers threaten to “catch us unexpectedly, like a trap.” Our inability thus far to measure ourselves against these threats is an ominous portent that apocalypse has already rendered us powerless.

Terrible as it was, the destruction of the World Trade Center was not an apocalypse. That horror will slowly recede. Other acts of infamy may take place. But we can anticipate a time when terrorism will decline. Nor are we helpless. We have the means to stop at least many, perhaps even most, of the terrorist attacks hurled at us. But we can see the other side of this catastrophe, when life feels normal again.

The threats to our very survival that I listed above, however, will not go away. They could well spell the end of humanity, and even of most sentient life. This is the awful truth that we have yet to recognize: We are living in an apocalyptic time disguised as normal, and that is why we have not responded appropriately. If we are in the midst of the sixth great extinction, as scientists tell us we are, our response has in no way been commensurate with the danger. We Homo sapiens are witnessing the greatest annihilation of species in the last 65 million years, and our children may live to witness ecocide with their own eyes. So while we are understandably preoccupied with terrorism, and must do everything necessary to stamp it out, we must at the same time wake up to these more serious threats that could effectively end life on this planet.

But the verdict is not yet in. It is late, but a positive response to the real apocalypse of our time is still possible. Consider South Africa. When I was there in the 1980s, it appeared that armed revolution was inevitable. Blacks were becoming more desperate by the day. Teenage boys were confronting the police and army without concern for their safety. Chaos was beginning to overtake the townships, as children, outraged by the timorousness of their parents, seized the initiative themselves. Whites were taking an increasingly hard line. It was a recipe for disaster. The whole scene reeked of an apocalypse of the negative sort.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. The white government chose, under intense internal and international pressure, to relinquish power, and negotiated with its former black enemies a process that led to the election of a black president, a model constitution, and relatively low casualties, considering the alternatives. No one to my knowledge anticipated this turn of events. What had appeared as an inevitable (negative) apocalyptic bloodbath turned out to have been a (positive) apocalyptic situation instead, thanks to the “anti-apocalyptists” who rose to the occasion.

Rather than two opposed scenarios, then, negative and positive apocalyptic seem to represent two alternatives. If the current evil course is adhered to, despite the

warnings of the prophets (and South Africa was blessed with an abundance of these), the outcome will be negative apocalypse. If the warnings of the anti-apocalyptists are heeded, the outcome can be a miracle (see Jer. 18:7-11). Perhaps, then, we might read Revelation 18-20 as the dire negative apocalyptic prospect for those societies that refuse to do justice, and Revelation 21-22 as the propitious positive apocalyptic prospect for those societies that repent and do what is right.

Eschatology is a line stretching out to the distant, possibly infinite, future. That is the horizon of hope, possibility and becoming. Apocalyptic, on the other hand, is a detour, caused by an immediate crisis threatening whole societies. Negative apocalyptic paralyzes us into inaction; positive apocalyptic challenges us to transcend ourselves, opening to the unexpected possibilities thrust upon us. Usually, when the crisis passes, normal eschatology is reinstated. But in our day, the apocalyptic crisis may not pass.