



CATALIN NEGRU

**HISTORY OF THE  
APOCALYPSE**

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# INTRODUCTION

If religion is the opium of the masses, then the beliefs about the end of the world are overdoses. The belief in the imminent end of the world is one of the most powerful and radical motivations of the human psyche. It is the overflow of adrenaline of the religious beliefs that combines urgent passions with deep megalomaniac tendencies. Fatalistic beliefs have the ability to generate incredible powers by setting into motion large masses of people and converting their feelings into a collective force. People caught in this kind of phenomena are capable of doing the ordinary things; they can commit the most shocking cruelties or, on the contrary, account for the most exceptional cases of human societies.

The end of the world is a never-ending subject. The obsession of watching the universal clock is a curse that haunts mankind since the dawn of time. For thousands of years the social stage has been populated by fanatics, maniacs and messiahs eager to gain fame and power by publicly proclaiming the imminent end of the world. The return of Jesus Christ, unimaginable catastrophes, Judgment Day, the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon – all these have caused thousands of so-called revelations, behavioral deviations, frenzies, crimes, suicides, economic collapses, migrations, wars and riots. No matter how accurate the calculations have been, no matter how widespread or how well-grounded the interpretations might have been, no matter how much faith was invested or how clear were the signs, the actual coming into being of this so much proclaimed end of the world proved to be a rather obstinate affair. When it comes to the attitudes related to the end of the world, history has pretty much seen it all. And yet, the phenomenon of the year 2012 proved that the image of a general end is still very prosperous.

Fatalistic beliefs usually appear after the consumption of major negative events (wars, crises of any kind or natural catastrophes), extracting their sap from the negative feelings that dominate the groups of people at a given moment: fear, despair, distrust or stress. Concurrently, the apocalyptic message is always dominated by the scenario of the *domino* effect: “bad” is automatically followed by “worse” until total destruction, and there is never any room for “better.” Catastrophes have always been followed by prophecies that announce bigger catastrophes.

The current tendencies of announcing the end of the world come from two distinct and independent sources. On the one hand, religion says that God, through his infinite power, will certainly and directly end the course of history. On the other hand, science states that our world may perish due to the mechanics of the Universe: meteorites or comets colliding with our planet, the eruption of supervolcanoes or fatal uncontrollable pandemics. Science began to examine this subject only at the end of the 19th century. Hence, the vast majority of the announcements about the end of the world are of religious essence.

We cannot deny our apocalyptic past. History was not shaped only by political and economic interests, but also by the fear or the love of God. In most cases historical context modeled the path of apocalyptic manifestations. But there have also been situations when fatalistic beliefs influenced the course of history by initiating massive social movements, wars and even great discoveries. All Abrahamic religions have the ultimate purpose to prepare the individual and mankind for the moment when God will put an end to this world. And the fear of God and the anger with which he would come at a certain point to judge the entire Creation was the most powerful motive of the Christian pre-industrial existence.

The end of the world is both a social and a religious phenomenon. Although at the moment apocalyptic manifestations are associated with insanity, fraud and manipulation, in the

past they have been serious businesses driven by the best of intentions. From heinous crimes, with crusaders who killed Jews and Muslims believing that they acted according to God's final plans, to ridiculous measures, with fanatics who built shelters and stockpiled huge amounts of food in order to survive imminent catastrophes, the vivid image of the end brought its own contribution to the shaping of the world.

Only after we rehabilitate our apocalyptic genealogy will we be able to see how many and surprising elements of the contemporary culture own their existence to an embarrassing apocalyptic project. Since the 1st century the idea of the end of the world has continuously evolved and transformed. Religious and social aspects that we see as modern have been in fact a part of a phenomenon that started as apocalyptic and, due to the mutations caused by failures, took more stable and distinct shapes. The fact that 2000 or 2012 were years that raised apocalyptic interest was not a coincidence; this apocalyptic appreciation comes from a millenary tradition which we inherited without questioning it.

Some of the readers might find this book insulting or disturbing because it denies their misconceptions and depicts an inconvenient image of the religious reality. When it comes to religion and God many of us are convinced that they possess the truth and they are ready to fight for their beliefs, no matter how absurd they are. But the religious truth cannot subsist without being supported by the historical truth. Religious aspects tend to gain a false image when they are taken out of their historical context. And only the disconnection of religion from history, combined with the ignorance of the people, can explain how most of the current religious doctrines subsist and even thrive, although they are based on lies.

The apocalyptic phenomenon is a part of the larger phenomenon of religion, which in turn is a part of the even larger phenomenon of history. In other words, religion and apocalypticism cannot be truly understood without understanding the historical context they came from. Every prophecy, prediction or messianism is the product and the precise image of the context from which it emerged. Historical context is the key to understanding the apocalyptic phenomenon because it reveals the true face of miracles: prophecies turn into lies, divine visions turn into simple fantasies of delirious minds, entire doctrines or religious systems prove to be shameless plagiarisms. The context, however, involves a multitude of factors, starting from the political situation of a given moment and ending with the scientific discoveries that revolutionized the world. Throughout the millennia the end of the world has not been announced only on religious grounds, but also on historical, mathematical, geographical, mystical, astronomical or astrological ones.

The majority of the Christian apocalyptic manifestations have taken place on two continents: Europe and North America. Accordingly, two millennia of apocalypticism cannot be analyzed without taking into account the most important events in Europe starting with the 1st century and the most important events in America starting with the 16th century. Indeed, the cases exposed in this book represent only a fraction of all apocalyptic manifestations which emerged since the 1st century AD. But no one can say their exact number and, most importantly, they are not all of the same value. The goal of this book is not to simply enumerate isolated events, but to reveal religious mechanisms, to explain the apocalyptic phenomenon as a whole and to offer a new and accurate perspective on religion in general.

# **PART I. THE FOUNDATIONS OF APOCALYPTICISM**

# **Chapter I. THE FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE**

## **1. THE MEANINGS OF THE EXPRESSION “END OF THE WORLD”**

The idea of the end of the world transcends the temporal, spatial, cultural and religious barriers. It is a concept incessantly discussed. Now, in the age of information, we have probably read about it in books or on the Internet, we heard about it at church or on the radio, or we have seen it in various forms on TV. A lot of people debate about the end of the world. But what does this end of the world actually mean?

The expression “end of the world” may refer to a multitude of things, depending on the meaning of its two terms. The first term, “end,” may signify: disappearance, extinction, destruction, (radical) transformation, migration, extermination or death. In turn, the term “world” can be used with the meaning of: humanity, mankind, civilization, the Universe, Earth (planet) or a group of people. Hence, the expression “end of the world” may refer to any combination between the possible meanings of its two terms, as it follows: the transformation of humanity, the extinction of the human race, the destruction of Earth, the transformation of the Universe, the fall of civilization, a significant change in the environmental conditions and so on.

The meanings of the expression “end of the world” vary according to time, place and especially religion, which has often been an essential part of a group’s culture. For example, during the Middle Ages Christians believed that the end of the world would come when the Christian religion would be destroyed by a Muslim or a Jewish invasion. By contrast, the contemporary Christian doctrine depicts the end of the world as a total destruction or renovation of mankind.

The idea of the end of the world, generally speaking, may arise from two independent roots: empirical observation and divine revelation.

## **2. THE ROOTS OF FATALISTIC BELIEFS**

### **2.1. EMPIRICAL OBSERVATION AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOT**

Will the world ever end? The environment signals us that nothing lasts forever: plants, insects, animals, humans, rivers, mountains, planets, stars and even the Universe itself – everything seems to be governed by the law of succession between existence and inexistence. Hence, it is easy to believe that our species will cease to exist at a certain moment. In reaction to the environment, human beings are biologically programmed to do whatever it is necessary to ensure the survival of our species. We work, learn, invent, built, expand, breed, help each other, we are ready to give up our lives for our children, some people are even expressly preparing for the end of the world – all to ultimately avoid our greatest fear: the failure of the species. The prospect of losing our multimillenary achievements or to disappear as a species makes the end of the world our worst nightmare; even worse than our individual death.

Our constant instinctual struggle to ensure the survival of our species causes various psychological reactions. First of all, the end of the world is a mystery, and mysteries exert an irresistible attraction upon the human psyche. Many of us believe that the end of the world is inevitable, but no one knows exactly *how* and *when* it will happen. These gaps of information make the image of the end very appealing because they can be filled according to our own needs.

Second, the idea of the end of the world offers a very exact place inside a linear and coherent history that explains the world in an adequate way where other means of explanation

failed to do it. The unshakable belief that the world will end at a certain point in the future gives people the feeling that they can control their own destiny up to that moment.

Third, the idea of an imminent end removes the feeling of pointlessness. Like magic or fairy tales, the prospect of the end helps man forget his worries; it pulls him out of the monotony of the present time and it transposes him, at least for a short period of time, in an out of the ordinary spatial and temporal context. The general end makes the individual feel special, giving him the impression that by assisting at an event of such grandeur his destiny is not trivial. It is an unconscious refuge through which the individual gives value to his own existence and voices his own frustrations. Most fatalistic messages speak about the present time or the near future, placing the transmitter and the receiver in a possible material context. Current events, which can influence current subjects, always gain crucial importance. Every generation of people believes that its problems are the most important ever. Thus, as history flows without interruption and the fatalistic scenarios fail, the following generations concentrate on their own contemporary events, ignoring the past. In this way people always see “signs” in their times and the end of the world is a constantly fresh subject.

And fourth, the issue of the end of the world focuses on the connection between the evolution of the individual man and the evolution of mankind. It is about the relation and the synchronization of the microcosm with the macrocosm. Although mankind is the sum of the individuals that are part of the same species, it has always been seen as a singular personified entity. All the features, the processes and the experiences of the human individual have been transposed in humanity. So, humanity is expected to suffer a human-like evolution: it was born, has grown and developed, it gets old, it learns, suffers, it is hurt, makes mistakes, decays and it finally dies.

Because death is preceded by the decline of the body, the approaching end of the world is most often sustained through the identification of a so-called generalized decadence: “the world is decaying,” “everything is going from bad to worse,” “it is not as good as before,” or “people have become worse.” The image of the general decadence is well engraved in the human psyche, being very active even today in religious circles. For example, a naive interpretation of the primordial state (Genesis 2-3) and the Parable of the Children (Mathew 19:14) may lead to the conclusion that human beings experience the closest state to perfection at the moment of birth. Through birth man becomes a part of the material universe and he starts to experience a process of physical and spiritual alteration until death. The same pattern is applied to mankind, which from a moral and religious point of view is believed to have a degrading evolution headed toward a fatal point. In the 7th-century crypt of abbot Mellebaudis, near Poitiers, France, the following inscription was found: “Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. All things are getting worse as days pass, because the end is approaching.”[1]

The preconception of a physical and moral decay of the world is very old, being part of many legends, myths and ancient religious beliefs regarding the evolution of mankind. In Zoroastrianism, Zarathustra laments the continuously decaying times; in Hinduism the current world is in *Kali Yuga*, the fourth degenerated era; in the Bible, Noah was saved by an arch from an all-purifying flood sent by God as a punishment for the decadence of mankind. And yet, common sense and historical progress categorically contradict the concept of the world’s decadence. All religions relate evil with immorality and disorder, and good with morality and order. If the world has indeed become worse in terms of spirituality, this would be reflected in the material plan through an increasing disorder. It is true that mankind has suffered ups and downs, but in general it becomes increasingly organized. This means that, even if some people

assume the worst, the decline of the world has nothing to do with an actual decadence of times, but with the decay of the one that emanates this judgment. This usually comes from older persons, whose future can bring them nothing else than more weakness and suffering. And because in pre-industrial society the elders represented the supreme authority of the family, the conception of the general decadence easily spread. Thus, any future change can only be a change for the worse, because only the days of their youth were promising. A golden age is placed in the past, the decadent present is condemned and the future is imagined even darker – an idea very well expressed by the historian Edward Gibbon: “There exists in human nature a strong propensity to depreciate the advantages, and to magnify the evils, of the present times.”[2] Currently, the decadence of the world is a cliché repeated by people who have no idea about history or an instrument of religious propaganda meant to put in a positive light certain groups or doctrines.

The general decadence is also similar to the belief that everything which is new is wrong and only what is old is good. The age, or the test of time, is too often seen as an irrefutable proof of legitimacy. In this way silly traditions and absurd beliefs are still practiced without being questioned for the simple reason that they have the support of hundreds or thousands of years.

## **2.2. DIVINE REVELATION AS A THEOLOGICAL ROOT**

The divinity, which holds the absolute control over the world, reveals – more or less – to people its plans for the human species. Some religions speak about total extinction; others refuse to mention anything about an end, while others prefer a middle way. In this last case the end is depicted as a dramatic transformation of the world under the watchful eye of the divinity. The end of the world event does not simply happen, out of nowhere, totally unexpected. It has a meaning, being a phase of mankind’s evolution.

The concept of the end of the world can be found in the cultures that contained a myth of universal creation. The myth of the world’s birth and the myth of the world’s death are antagonistic, being built on the ancient pattern of the battle between order and chaos, good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. The two myths, when they are put together, express the idea of temporality, universal duality and ultimately the divine will. Concurrently, they were instruments through which human societies attempted to create a frame for understanding the passing of time.

In Northern European mythology everything came from chaos, including the gods, which in turn created mankind. But, due to the decadence of the world and the expansion of evil, a final battle between good and evil would bring the beginning of a new cycle of human existence. In Chinese mythology, which contains several myths of creation, the world was created through the ordering of the chaos by the primordial gods; but one day the dragons that pull the Sun in a cart would get drunk and, not being able to pull it anymore, time would stop. In Hindu mythology the supreme god floats on the cosmic ocean and his skin emanates a huge number of universes, after which they are inhaled back, and the cycle starts again endlessly. Persian mythology says that the world was created from the battle between the good gods and the evil gods, and at the end of time the world would be purified through a final battle between the two sides. Noah’s Flood, which is also an end of the world, can be found as a myth in Sumerian-Akkadian civilizations and in the myth of Gilgamesh.[3] The ancient Romans were obsessed with prodigies, omens and signs, believing that civilization started with them and would also end with them. The Romans believed that 12 magical vultures sent by the gods revealed to Romulus, who killed his brother Remus, the place where to found the city of Rome. The Roman calendar had as starting point the

foundation of Rome, the year 1 *Ab urbe condita* (which means “from the founding of the city”), correspondent to the year 753 BC in the modern calendar. But these vultures also symbolized the 12 *saecula* of existence of the city, after which it was going to be destroyed by the gods. The word *saecula* was taken by the Romans from the Etruscans and it had a vague meaning; it was understood as “generation” or as a period of time necessary for the renewal of the population. Hence, the interpretation of the 12 *saecula* varied between 120 and 1,200 years (12 centuries).[4]

The disappearance of civilizations and religions led to a subsequent disappearance of the doomsday scenarios. And since the 7th century the idea of a world’s end has been disseminated mainly by the Abrahamic religions.