

# The Clash of Eschatologies

## *The Role of End-Times Thinking in World History*

BY PHIL TORRES

THE WORLD IS GOING TO END. We know this because cosmology tells us so: in some 5 billion years, our planetary home will be sterilized and then swallowed whole by the Sun, which will expand outward into the solar system as it turns into a red giant. Long after the sun burns out, the universe itself will sink into an eternal state of maximal entropy—the terminal “heat death” of the cosmos, marked by an irreversible “big freeze”—at which point energy will be uniformly distributed throughout space. In with a bang, out with a whimper: that is the epitaph of the cosmos.

Millennia before empirical science yielded this dismal futurology, however, humans invented stories about how our weary world of sin and suffering will come to an end. The genealogy of end-times, or “eschatological” belief systems can be traced back at least to an ancient Persian named Zoroaster who founded the religion that bears his name. According to the grand narrative of this tradition, cosmic history is divided into three or four epochs, each lasting three millennia. The culmination of earthly affairs will involve a virgin-born Savior who ushers in a bodily resurrection of the dead, a Final Judgment of humanity by God, and an Armageddon-like war between Good and Evil. This narrative likely influenced subsequent eschatologies associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and it’s for this reason that Zoroaster is arguably the most influential individual in all of human history.

Beliefs in end-times stories have shaped innumerable human events—some of great historical sig-



Zoroaster prophesied that a virgin-born savior would usher in a resurrection of the dead, final judgment, and climactic battle between good and evil, followed by a state of absolute perfection.

nificance—across the vast expanses of cultural space and time, up to the present. One might argue that eschatological convictions have been a kind of hidden force throughout history, shaping the *curriculum vitae* of civilization in subtle but nontrivial ways. As historian Paul Boyer suggested about the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, there’s a “shadowy but vital way that belief in biblical prophecy is helping mold grassroots attitudes toward current U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>1</sup> The truth is that this phenomenon isn’t hidden at all, it’s simply ignored. I suspect that many scholars

find the notion of “prophetic beliefs about the future affecting human actions in the present” too undignified to waste their cognitive resources on. Yet this is precisely what must be done, if we are to understand the perennial questions of “How did civilization get here?” and “Where is it headed?”

In 1993, the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published a highly influential paper in *Foreign Affairs* on “The Clash of Civilizations,” followed by a book of the same title.<sup>2</sup> The central idea was that past epochs of human history have been marked by qualitatively different kinds of struggles. For example, the Cold War was driven by an ideological clash between communism and capitalism. With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991, some scholars declared the “end of history:” Western liberal democracy defeated the ideology of Reagan’s “Evil Empire,” and this marked an irreversible transformation of global politics. In response, Huntington argued that the terminus of ideological clashes between world superpowers has merely catapulted the world into a new

phase of clashing “civilizations,” which he defines as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.” Such identities are determined not only subjectively (through individuals’ self-identification) but also according to objective features such as language, history, customs, institutions, and religion, the latter of which Huntington described as the “most important.”

Huntington’s thesis has received much criticism over the years, in part because it ignored the complex dynamics, tension, and heterogeneity *within* civilizations. It has also been noted that the concept justifies Western hegemony and imperialism on the grounds that we’re engaged in a civilizational struggle for existence, and in this way the clash idea can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bracketing these criticisms momentarily, what I want to do here is propose a related but distinct idea—a concept that captures certain trans-historical patterns by fixating on the *core feature* of religion, namely eschatology. Let us call this idea the “clash of eschatologies.”

A clash of eschatologies results when one or more “applied eschatologies” come into direct or indirect conflict. The term “applied eschatology” is my own coinage, but the concept is not original: other terms like “active cataclysmic” and “active eschatology” have been used by scholars to define the same phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> The idea is this: when beliefs about the world’s end undergo a conceptual shift from being “passive” frameworks for understanding future affairs (which are largely out of human control) to being “practical” guides for current action, the believer becomes an agent of the apocalypse, or an *eschatological activist*. For such individuals, a new spiritual mission of unparalleled importance takes center stage—to either bring about Armageddon or to foment the conditions necessary for it to occur. Thus, eschatology becomes “applied” in the service of catalyzing the most significant event in history, namely its *closure*.

Throughout human history, a staggering number of social, political, and religious movements have been motivated by ideologies of applied eschatology. For example, most New Testament scholars in the U.S. and Europe today believe that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who expected the world to end in his lifetime (for example see Matthew 24:34). When this failed to occur, he voluntarily sacrificed himself “to force the hand of God,” as Scot McKnight puts it. Following Jesus, a long list of Christian leaders have found themselves under the

spell of apocalyptic thinking, including the Apostle Paul, Martin of Tours, Pope Sylvester II, Martin Luther, Christopher Columbus, Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Harold Camping, and the Christian Zionist John Hagee. Further, many significant events in Christian history have been driven by applied eschatological convictions, such as the First Crusade, during which 100,000 Christian fighters believed they were hastening the End of Days.<sup>4</sup>

The situation is similar within the Islamic tradition. As Allen Fromherz writes, “some scholars have suggested that Islam was, from the first revelations of Muhammad, almost entirely an apocalyptic movement. . . . Some have even supposed that Muhammad deliberately failed to designate a successor because he predicted that the final judgment would occur after his death.”<sup>5</sup> After Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, many bloody battles were waged in the name of the Mahdi, a messianic figure prophesied by hadith (traditional sayings and deeds of Muhammad apart from the Koran) to usher in the final events before the Last Hour. The very first Mahdi was identified as Muhammad’s grandson, but he was certainly not the last. Indeed, Islamic history is cluttered with Mahdi claimants, including one who, along with several hundred insurgents, seized Mecca’s Grand Mosque for two weeks in 1979, with some 100,000 hostages trapped inside. As of 2013, approximately 3,000 Mahdi claimants were locked away in Iranian prisons.

Stepping outside of mainstream religious traditions, one finds no dearth of violent cults animated by a conviction that “the world must be destroyed to be saved.” Aum Shinrikyo, for example, attempted to bring about Armageddon by releasing Sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system. And the Christian Identity movement, which has influenced groups like the Aryan Nations and the Ku Klux Klan, espouses “a deep belief in the need to cleanse and purify the world via violent upheaval.”<sup>6</sup> There’s also the Eastern Lightning in China, a million-member cult (as of 2012) that believes it’s engaged in an apocalyptic war with the communist government, as well as the earlier Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of the mid-19th century, whose millennialist rebellion against the Chinese Qing dynasty resulted in between 20 and 35 million deaths.

Even more, numerous historical movements with applied eschatology motives have been, strictly speaking, *secular* in nature. To quote Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley at length: “It was not an accident that Hitler promised a Thousand Year Reich, a millennium of perfection, similar to the thousand-year reign of goodness promised in Revelation before

the return of evil, the great battle between good and evil, and the final triumph of God over Satan. The entire imagery of his Nazi Party and regime was deeply mystical, suffused with religious, often Christian, liturgical symbolism, and it appealed to a higher law, to a mission decreed by fate and entrusted to the prophet Hitler.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Second World War was driven, in part, by an apocalyptic vision borrowed from Christian eschatology and repurposed for the particular nationalist, racist aims of the Nazi Party.

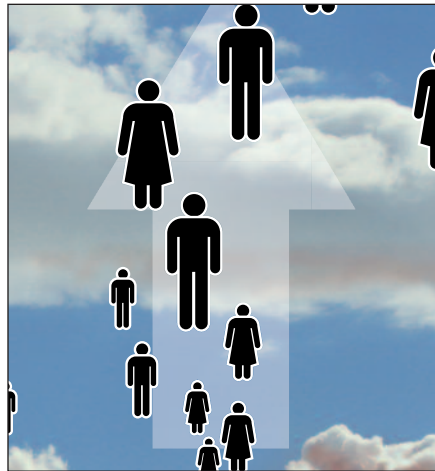
Similarly, Karl Marx appears to have plagiarized aspects of Christianity’s grand narrative in his “teleological” (or goal-directed) theory of societal evolution. As Chirot and McCauley note, “Marxist eschatology actually mimicked Christian doctrine.” According to Marx, humanity began its journey in a state of primitive communism (the Garden of Eden) marked by shared property, small societies, and proto-democratic systems. But then private property, social stratification, and exploitation (sin) began to corrupt the world. Passing through several distinct stages or “dispensations,” including the slave society, feudalism, and capitalism, a messianic figure (Marx) emerged to reveal a path back to communism. At the end of this linear progression, “a final, terrible revolution will wipe out capitalism, alienation, exploitation, and inequality,” and a special “elect” (the communists) will enter a new paradise in which laws, governments, social classes, money, and private property have all been banished.

It goes without saying that Marxism has been one of the most influential ideologies of the past two centuries. This ideology of cosmic struggle has driven revolts and revolutions, as well as global conflicts both hot and cold. At its core is an eschatological doctrine that many believers have interpreted as a practical guide for accelerating history’s inexorable march toward the *telos* of pure communism—a post-historical stage that constitutes the final epoch of social evolution. Once again, applied eschatology is hidden in plain sight.

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Today, the most conspicuous manifestation of the clash of eschatologies is found in the current epi-

center of global violence: the Middle East. Let’s begin with the roots of this conflict. In the late 19th century, the Zionist movement emerged in response to the growing specter of anti-Semitism in Europe. While this movement was largely secular, the prophetic idea of the “Promised Land” played an important role in rationalizing the occupation of Palestinian territories. As Saleh Abdel Jawad writes, the claim that Palestine was given to the Jewish people by God enabled “Zionists [to allege] that the Palestinians were usurpers in the Promised Land, and therefore their expulsion and death was justified.”



John Nelson Darby taught that Christians would be “raptured” into heaven before the Tribulation, a period culminating with the Battle of Armageddon and Jesus’ Second Coming.

From the Christian—and in particular *dispensationalist*—perspective, some leading figures saw the immigration of Jews to Palestine in the late 19th century as evidence that Biblical prophecy was coming true. The American evangelist William E. Blackstone, for example, interpreted this demographic shift as a clear “sign of the times,” and argued that “the United States [has] a special role and mission in God’s plans for humanity: that of a modern Cyrus to help restore the Jews to Zion.”

(Cyrus the Great, to whom Blackstone refers, founded the Achaemenid Empire, and after conquering the Babylonian empire freed the Jews from captivity, allowing them to resettle in Jerusalem.)

Later, in the midst of World War I, the UK became the first country to officially sanction the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. This position was codified by the Balfour Declaration, which states: “His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object.” As Sam Harris points out, the Balfour Declaration “was inspired, at least in part, by a conscious conformity to biblical prophecy.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the author whose name became attached to the declaration, the UK’s Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, was raised in a dispensationalist church and, as Donald Wagner points out, was “publicly committed to the Zionist agenda for ‘biblical’ and colonialist reasons.”

The importance of a Jewish state for dispensationalists relates to the specific end-times narrative

of this scriptural interpretation—one that was more or less invented by John Nelson Darby, a friend of William Blackstone, in the early 1800s. In brief: at some unknown day or hour, Jesus will “rapture” the Church into the clouds, after which there will be a seven-year period of unprecedented horrors called the Tribulation. During this period, God will complete his disciplining of the Jews for rejecting Jesus as their long-awaited messiah, and fulfill his various promises to them. Toward the end of the Tribulation, the Second Coming will occur and Jesus will fight the Antichrist in the great battle of Armageddon (modern-day Megiddo), after which Jesus will reign for exactly 1,000 years from Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Finally, at the end of his period, known as the Millennial Kingdom, there will be a final battle between God and Satan, followed by a resurrection of the dead and the Great White Throne Judgment. God will destroy and then recreate the universe, and heaven will be established on Earth.

The crucial point for dispensationalists is that *everything about God’s future plans for humanity depends on the creation and continuation of a Jewish state in Palestine*. This is why many Christian Zionists support Israel with dogmatic intransigence, and see its establishment three years after Hitler put a pistol to his head as the most significant eschatological event since the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70AD, thereby supposedly fulfilling the prophecy of Mark 13:1-2. The eschatological fact, according to dispensationalism, is that the Tribulation cannot commence unless there’s a Jewish state in the Palestinian territories, and eternal peace will forever elude God’s children until the Tribulation occurs. The sociologist and pastor Tony Campolo summarizes this link between religion and politics as follows: “Without understanding dispensationalism, however, it is almost impossible to understand how Christian Zionism has come to dominate American Evangelicalism and been so influential on the course of U.S. Middle East policy.”

As of 2010, some 41% of Americans believed that Jesus will either “probably” or “definitely” return by 2050. And many prominent politicians,

nearly all clustered on the political right, have aligned themselves with dispensationalist leaders who, for example, advocate that the U.S. and Israel preemptively strike Iran because of the “existential threat” that it poses to Israel. John Hagee is one such evangelical leader. He runs a megachurch in Texas and also founded perhaps the most powerful religious lobby in the country, Christians United for Israel (CUFI). As Hagee once wrote in *Charisma Magazine*, “We are standing on the brink of a nuclear Armageddon. The coming nuclear showdown with Iran is a certainty.”<sup>10</sup> It would be easy to dis-

miss such extreme rhetoric if not for Hagee’s influence within the Republican Party. For example, CUFI’s Washington Summit in July, 2015, included appearances by (then-)presidential candidates Mike Huckabee, Lindsey Graham, George Pataki, Rick Santorum, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz. While it seems unlikely that all of these figures accept Hagee’s views, there are good reasons for thinking that Lindsey Graham, Mike Huckabee, and Ted Cruz champion the eschatology of dispensationalism.



Marxists believed that history is inexorably marching toward a state of pure communism.

In fact, the father of Ted Cruz, Rafael Cruz, is a Christian preacher who believes that his son’s ascendance to the Senate has prophetic significance. In his view, God will “anoint Christian ‘kings’ to preside over an ‘end-time transfer of wealth’ from the wicked to the righteous.” Ted Cruz is, of course, just such a “Christian king.” The point of this transfer is to “relieve Christians of all financial woes, allowing true believers to ascend to a position of political and cultural power in which they can build a Christian civilization. When this Christian nation is in place (or back in place), Jesus will return.”<sup>11</sup> This position is also the centerpiece of a related theology called *dominionism*, or the view that Christians should have dominion over all aspects of society.

Other 2016 presidential candidates have also opined about the Apocalypse. For example, when Ben Carson (who’s been offered a position in a Trump administration) was asked if he believes that the “end of days” is approaching, he responded: “You could guess that we are getting closer to that.”<sup>12</sup> Carson is a member of the Seventh Day Adventist



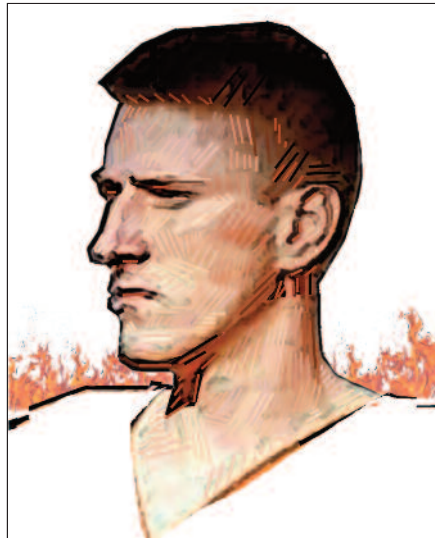
church, which emerged from a 19th century movement called Millerism. Followers of this movement, known as Millerites, believed that the world would end on October 22, 1844. Some were so convinced of this prophecy that they abandoned all of their material possessions, quit their jobs, stopped plowing their fields, and even left their families to prepare for Jesus' glorious return. When this event failed to occur, many were overwhelmed with grief, thrown into the shell-shock of cognitive dissonance. One individual even described lying "prostrate for 2 days without any pain—sick with disappointment." Indeed, this episode of eschatological embarrassment is called the Great Disappointment.

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Meanwhile, in the contemporary Islamic world, one finds an equal abundance of apocalyptic fervor among both Sunnis and Shi'ites. As a 2012 Pew poll reports, "in nine of the 23 nations where the question was asked, half or more of Muslim adults say they believe the return of Mahdi will occur in their lifetime."<sup>13</sup> While a large percentage of those polled are no doubt passive believers in an imminent apocalypse, a sizable fringe of fanatics hold applied eschatology interpretations of scripture. Consider a Reuters article from 2014, titled "Apocalyptic prophecies drive both sides to Syrian battle for end of time." In it, a Shi'ite fighter claims that he knew the Mahdi would soon reemerge after the U.S. invaded Iraq. "That was the first sign," he said, "and then everything else followed," adding that "I was waiting for the day when I will fight in Syria. Thank God he chose me to be one of the Imam's soldiers."<sup>14</sup>

According to Islamic prophecy, their apocalypse will be preceded by numerous "Byzantine" (or eastern Roman) invasions of Muslim lands. For many Muslims in the Middle East, the Byzantines represent the West, led by America. Consequently, as David Cook notes, "It is widely accepted that [the] U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 fulfilled these predictions, and both Sunni and Shiite radicals routinely play upon these popular beliefs as part of their propaganda efforts to stir-up hostility toward American forces." Even more, "Many Iraqis harbor

deep suspicions of U.S. intentions in their country, and there are frequent assertions in the apocalyptic literature produced in Iraq that state that the purpose of the U.S.-led invasion was to initiate an apocalyptic war—in this case, to find the Mahdi and to kill him."<sup>15</sup> As it happens, apocalyptic convictions are most pervasive in the two countries most affected by Western intervention, namely Afghanistan and Iraq, where 83% and 72% of respondents respectively believe that the Mahdi will return in their lifetimes.



Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh was influenced by the Christian Identity movement's call for apocalyptic violence.

It was precisely this belief that the U.S. wanted to kill the Mahdi that likely inspired a Shia militia called the Mahdi Army. Founded by the influential Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the Mahdi Army saw its mission, in Cook's words, as "either literally to defend the Mahdi from American forces or figuratively to defend the Shi'ite community." Although the group later disbanded, it spawned several other Shia militias, such as the Promised Day Brigade, which has become "one of the most prominent... Shi'ite militias operating primarily in and around Sadr City and Baghdad," a suburb and city that the Islamic State has thus far failed to capture, in large part because of Shia resistance.<sup>16</sup>

These militias, with their motivating apocalyptic ideologies, aren't going to disappear in the foreseeable future. As David Petraeus, the former Director of the CIA, has claimed, Shia militias in Iraq constitute the greatest threat to the "long-term stability and the broader regional equilibrium" of the Middle East. The reason is that entities like the Promised Day Brigade are ideologically and financially linked to Iran, a regional superpower and long-time sponsor of terrorist groups like Hezbollah and al-Qaeda. The *Washington Post*, for example, reports that the Promised Day Brigade receives "training, funding and direction from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force," an elite special forces unit that the U.S. also classifies as a terrorist organization. And Iran itself has deep roots in the soil of apocalypticism. For example, as Cook observes, its founding in 1979 is "commonly believed

[to have been] an apocalyptic occurrence, happening as it did in the year 1400 *hijri*, and Khomeini skillfully used messianic passions to mobilize ordinary Iranians against the Shah.”<sup>18</sup>

While apocalyptic fervor has fluctuated in Iran since 1979, it became most salient to the Western eye during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, (2005 to 2013). Ahmadinejad was an eschatological enthusiast who frequently mentioned the Mahdi in his public speeches, and once even claimed to be “suffused with a halo of light,” as Jean-Pierre Filiu writes, during a United Nations speech because “of the Mahdi’s support for his international message.” He also explicitly mentioned the Mahdi in a 2012 talk before the UN General Assembly, saying that the Mahdi “will come in the company of Jesus Christ and the righteous,” so “let us join hands and clear the way for his eventual arrival.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Ahmadinejad’s successor, Hassan Rouhani, is more religiously moderate and politically pragmatic, it’s very likely that many, perhaps a large majority, of Iranians harbor apocalyptic beliefs, and that these beliefs actively shape the culture and politics of Iran. As Benjamin Netanyahu recently stated, Iran is “a messianic apocalyptic cult” that wants to control atomic bombs, adding that “when the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the entire world should start worrying, and that is what is happening in Iran.”<sup>20</sup> While Netanyahu’s statement is, arguably, accurate, the irony that Israel’s support base in the U.S. consists of many “wide-eyed believers” hypnotized by “apocalyptic” expectations appears to be lost on him.

Stepping across the sectarian divide to the Sunni world, we find a mirror situation. For example, the same Reuters article mentioned above quotes a Sunni jihadist saying that, “If you think all these mujahideen came from across the world to fight [Bashar] Assad [of Syria], you’re mistaken. They are all here as promised by the Prophet. This is the war he promised—it is the Grand Battle.” The Syrian civil war has inflamed apocalyptic passions among many Sunnis. But so did, once again, the U.S.-led preemptive invasion of Iraq in 2003. As

Will McCants observes, “Prior to the U.S. invasion, the modern Sunni world was uninterested in apocalypticism. ... After 2003, sales of books about the apocalypse soared among Sunnis.”<sup>21</sup>

Consistent with this observation, the group behind 9/11—al-Qaeda—was far less apocalyptic than its spin-off organization, the Islamic State. Whereas Osama bin Laden and his cohorts most certainly believed in Islamic prophecy, they weren’t explicitly motivated by an applied eschatology worldview. In contrast, the Islamic State initially attempted to



According to Islamic eschatology, a messianic figure called the Mahdi will usher in the final events before the Last Hour, including the Antichrist’s appearance and Jesus’ descent to Earth over east Damascus.

clear the way for the Mahdi, who, of course, failed to appear when they expected him to. Attention later focused on building a strong caliphate, which a hadith claims will be recreated before the Last Hour. More specifically, the Islamic State believes that, in the near future, the “Romans” will confront them in the small Syrian town of Dabiq for a grand battle—essentially Armageddon. After this occurs, the surviving one-third of the Muslims will supernaturally defeat Constantinople (now Istanbul) by merely shouting *Al-lahu Akbar*, meaning “God is

Great.” The Antichrist will then appear to spread evil across the world, but shortly after, Jesus will return to Earth on the wings of two angels, over the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, and kill the Antichrist in the modern-day city of Lod, Israel. Once these prophetic events take place, additional “Greater Signs” will occur, leading to a final judgment by God of humanity.

While some Islamic State fighters are “opportunists” who may or may not be religious fanatics, many others, including those running the Islamic State, almost certainly *do* see themselves as active participants in an apocalyptic narrative that’s unfolding in real time. Such beliefs are why the Islamic State’s online propaganda magazine is called *Dabiq*, and its Turkish language magazine is called *Konstantiniyye* (which translates as Constantinople). The story of how the world ends has already been written; God just needs actors in the theater of world affairs who are willing to make it happen.

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At this point, it shouldn't take much squinting to see the clash of eschatologies taking shape. Eschatology is the heart of many religions—indeed, it offers the ultimate *theodicy*, or justification of evil in the world, given God's omnipotence and moral perfection—and religion remains one of the most ubiquitous and consequential social phenomena in the world today. The Pew Research Center projects that religious belief will *increase* globally in the coming decades, with more than 60 percent of humans adhering to either Christianity or Islam by 2050.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that the clash of eschatologies could become an even more significant world force moving forward.

Further buttressing that prediction is the fact that environmental degradation caused by climate change and biodiversity loss will: (1) push societies to the brink of collapse, thereby lowering the conflict thresh-

olds that keep state and nonstate actors at peace, and (2) be interpreted by many as confirming religious prophecies according to which natural disasters will accompany and herald the end of the world. Personal and societal stress can be a trigger for religious conversion, meaning that the effects of climate change could actually increase the growth of religion *beyond* what Pew expects.

In *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism*, Frances Flannery writes that the Book of Revelation has “arguably been responsible for more genocide and killing in history than any other.”<sup>23</sup> If this is true—and one is tempted to agree—then the future of human civilization on our pale blue dot may depend on how well our leaders and the voting public understand the applied eschatologies behind so many social, political, and religious movements in the world today. Knowledge about how others think the world is supposed to end could be the key to ensuring our continued survival on spaceship Earth. **S**

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