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Comment

World ends tomorrow ?

by Dr. G.R. Bridge,
Anglican Chaplain

Do you suffer from "apocalyptic fever"? Are you very curious or mildly obsessed with the end of the world? Are you overly fascinated by predictions and visions of Armageddon? Do you suffer "apocalyptic nightmares" about World War III?

If you make a positive response to any of these questions, then perhaps you are another victim of "apocalyptic fever," which is produced by sensationalist cinema, science fiction thrillers, or exaggerated, hysterical religion.

Many of these popular and theologically unsophisticated forms of apocalypse represent distortions of a basically Christian apocalyptic tradition. What is this basic tradition?

Both Judaism and Christianity have produced impressive apocalyptic literature, notably the Old Testament Book of Daniel and the New Testament Book of Revelation (sometimes called The Apocalypse), though there are several apocalyptic passages elsewhere in Scripture and there are numerous non-Scriptural apocalypses.

These apocalyptic writings generally conform to a definite literary pattern, which has such secondary characteristics as pseudonymity, and vivid, symbolic imagery, sometimes of a strange and bizarre nature.

The primary theme of apocalypse is revelation. The word apocalypse in its original Greek form means "to uncover." Within its strict literary and religious tradition, apocalypse reveals some forthcoming cosmic cataclysm in which the ruling powers of evil are destroyed by God, and the righteous are raised to better life in a messianic kingdom. This dualistic struggle between God and evil reflects the Persian origins of apocalyptic writing. The emphasis on the establishment of a better kingdom reflects the fact that apocalyptic literature is generally produced in times of persecution or unrest, when men long for a better world.

Since apocalyptic literature generally looks to the future and to the dramatic end of the world as we know it, apocalypse is obviously linked with eschatology, the study of

the last things, the end of the present world and life in another, eternal world. Whereas apocalypse has certain affinities with prophecy and with the visionary, mystical tradition, it is unquestionably linked with the eschatological tradition.

Christian apocalypse therefore reflects or embraces a Christian eschatology, that is to say it assumes the basic Christian belief in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, who will come again in judgment and who will establish his kingdom. The hymnody and the great liturgical creeds of Christendom affirm this fundamental faith.

Not for a moment would I want to suggest that Christian teachings about judgment and the Second Coming are optional, unnecessary doctrines for the Christian. To suggest this would be to present Christianity as a weak, permissive religion, all "sweetness and light," without judgment, without reality, without any challenge. Surely the Christian expects to give an account of himself, and surely the Christian has a vocation, a Gospel mandate, to be prepared, to be watchful. However, these teachings can be distorted; they can be exaggerated out of all proportion.

Because orthodox Christianity has often been lax in teaching the faith, a void has been created, a void which is too readily filled by sensationalist theatre and by eccentric religious groups. Generally they distort and bastardize the tradition.

Lack of a theological tradition also leads to the almost comical production of such exotic teachings as "spiritual arithmetic" and millenarianism. Many would predict the exact time and nature of the end of all things; many specialize in cataloguing the signs of the end in each successive generation. Many "doomsdays" have been predicted and survived, and yet gullible men are still attracted by such false teaching and false prophecy. Scripture clearly states Christ's teaching on this matter. He told his disciples that the exact time of the Second Coming is unpredictable, and that no man, not even angels, but only God, knew the day and the hour. (Matthew 23:36)

A lopsided, frenzied ap-

proach to apocalyptic themes can render one a hopeless pessimist. If one focuses too much on the cosmic cataclysm to come, then he can easily slip into the role of the gloomy, morbid religionist who can only see the end as sheer disaster, as total dissolution, thereby missing the essential point of the apocalyptic tradition.

Such narrowness of vision breeds much fear and terror; it can dissolve all hope. One's theology loses perspective; one can so easily lose sight of the great doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Providence. One can so readily forget that history is, for the Christian at least, going somewhere, proceeding toward the universal rule of God, toward ultimate transformation by his love.

Christian believers really have nothing to fear about the Second Coming. There should be awesome reverence, but not bitter fear. Furthermore, Christians should be suspicious, I think, of any religion which makes fear and threat the basis of its appeal. Surely this kind of religion is as incomplete and as dangerous as that "wishy-washy", flexible, and romantic type of religion which fails to teach any judgment.

Joyful expectancy is the basis of the observance of Advent, a liturgical season which many Christians are presently celebrating. Advent (from the Latin verb translating "to come") is a season of preparation: preparation for the celebration of Christ's first historical coming, the Incarnation, and preparation for His Second Coming in glory. It is thus a season of watchfulness and preparation, but not a season of pessimism or fear. It is fundamentally a season of hope.

St. Paul, who lived in an apocalyptically anxious age, an age which expected a speedy Second Coming, wrote often about Christian hope. His teaching was clearly rooted in hope, not fear. To the early Christian community in Rome, St. Paul wrote: "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." (Romans 15:13). Surely this Pauline prayer is a splendid cure for someone stricken with "apocalyptic fever."



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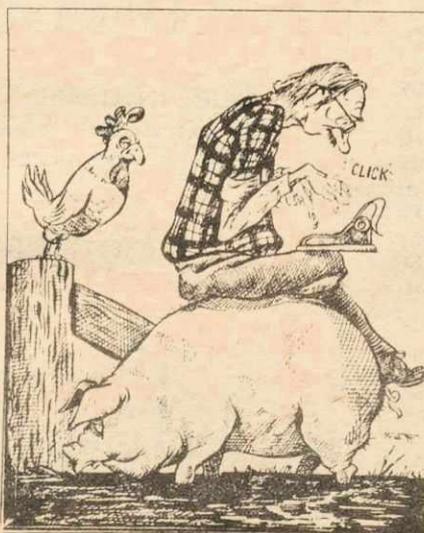
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