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The Apocalypse as an 'Unveiling': What Religion Times

For people of many faiths, and even none at all, it can feel lately like the end



By Elizabeth Dias

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Shamain Webster, who lives in the suburbs outside of Dallas, has seen the signs of a coming apocalypse for a while now, just as the Bible foretold.

Kingdom would rise against kingdom, Jesus taught his disciples in the Book of Luke. Ms. Webster sees widespread political division in this country. There will be fearful events, and great signs from heaven, he said. She sees biblical values slipping away. A government not acting in the people's best interest. And now this — a pandemic.

But Ms. Webster, 42 and an evangelical Christian, is unafraid. She has been listening online to one of her favorite preachers, who has called the coronavirus pandemic a "divine reset."

"These kinds of moments really get you to re-evaluate everything," she said. As everyone goes through a period of isolation, she added, God is using it for good, "to teach us and train us on how to live life better."

For people of many faiths, and even none at all, it can feel lately like the end of the world is near. Not only is there a plague, but hundreds of billions of locusts are swarming East Africa. Wildfires have ravaged Australia, killing an untold number of animals. A recent earthquake in Utah even shook the Salt Lake Temple to the top of its iconic spire, causing the golden trumpet to fall from the angel Moroni's right hand.

But the story of apocalypse is an old one, one of the oldest humans tell. In ancient religious traditions beyond Christianity — including Judaism, Islam and Buddhism — it is a common narrative that arises in moments of social and political crisis, as people try to process unprecedented or shocking events.

The original word in Greek — apokalypsis — means an unveiling, a revelation.

"It's not just about the end of the world," said Jacqueline Hidalgo, chair of religion at Williams College. "It helps us see something that is hidden before."

As a pandemic thrusts the United States and much of the world into a new economic and social order, those who study and practice religion see deeper truths being unveiled.

The crisis is revealing health care inequalities, class divisions and the fact that the most important workers in American society are among the least paid, said Jorge Juan Rodríguez V, a doctoral candidate in the history of religion at Union Theological Seminary.

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“What is being revealed are the fault lines in the system that always exist when the system is stressed.”

About 44 percent of likely voters in the United States see the coronavirus pandemic as a wake-up call to faith, a sign of God’s coming judgment or both, according to an evangelical group run by Joel C. Rosenberg, who writes about the end of the world, and conducted last week by McLaughlin & Associates, pollsters for President Trump and other Republicans.

David Jeremiah, a pastor who has been one of President Trump’s informal evangelical advisers, asked in a sermon recently if the coronavirus was biblical prophecy, and called the pandemic “the most apocalyptic thing that has ever happened to us.”

Among Christians, one of the most well-known apocalyptic narratives is the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which tells the story of the defeat of an evil beast, a final divine judgment and the coming of a New Jerusalem.

While many biblical scholars read the book as a story about the destruction of corrupt political systems, many evangelical Christians believe it describes the rapture, Jesus’ return to save believers from a period of tribulation.

Joshua Johnson, 46, in Keller, Texas, spends time reading the story and interpreting its symbols, written nearly 2,000 years ago, in modern terms. He looks for the rise of what the story calls the “mark of the beast,” a demonic mark all people will be forced to bear.

He wonders if Jesus will return by 2028, 10 years after Mr. Trump moved the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, which he saw as a prophetic sign. “I tell my children, I think we are that generation,” said Mr. Johnson, who attends Gateway Church, one of the country’s most prominent evangelical churches.

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In the United States, where Christianity is by far the dominant religion, about 40 percent of American adults believe that Jesus is definitely or probably going to return to earth by 2050, including one in five religiously unaffiliated people, according to the Pew Research Center.

Some evangelical Christians are finding hope in a divine promise that God has saved them for eternity, a feeling of security in the midst of so much uncertainty.

“For me personally it is just a reminder that God is sovereign,” said Mark Lovvorn, 65, who attends First Baptist Dallas and is chairman of Providence Bank of Texas. “Regardless of what happens in the world, we have that confidence.”

For centuries, religious traditions have not only offered a way for human beings to understand apocalyptic moments. Over time, these hours of crisis have also shaped religion itself.

Some of the earliest apocalyptic speculation is found in Jewish scriptures, in stories like the Book of Daniel, as the Hellenistic age gave way to the Romans around the second and first centuries B.C. and Jewish communities experienced violent persecution. Some Jews speculated again about the end of time when the Roman army destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

As the early Christians turned to an external savior and as the Romans continued to crush rebellions, Jewish leaders realized they needed to survive in the world as they knew it, explained David Kraemer, head librarian and professor of Talmud and rabbinics at Jewish Theological Seminary.

The rabbis developed a system where Jews could live anywhere, under any circumstances, connected to neighbors and to God.

“That was the Judaism that enabled Jews to live through persecution, plague, and modernity, which was in some ways the most difficult periods,” Dr. Kraemer said.

Every year the celebration of Passover, which begins next week and recoups the reminder of God’s redemption. The Passover Seder “says we have been in Egypt, but we are beyond them,” Dr. Kraemer said.

In the Islamic tradition, the Quran tells stories of plagues and of a final earthquake that will tear the earth apart, as well as stories of finding God in the created world.

In mainstream Islamic thought there is a distinction between the end of the world and the concept of apocalypse, Amir Hussain, professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University, said. Apocalypse also includes what happens when one’s eyes are opened.

“Look at the creation, look at the oceans,” Dr. Hussain said, reflecting on a favorite passage in the Quran about God’s mercy. “How much better is it to have that realization in this lifetime?”

In Buddhism, time is cyclical, not linear, making apocalypse both an end and a beginning. “Apocalypse happens and then a new order starts, a new social order, new moral order,” said Vesna Wallace, professor of Buddhism at the University of California, Santa Barbara. “The story repeats itself.”

Apocalyptic stories in Buddhist scriptures share similar themes, often including an unjust ruler, social inequality, plagues and fruits that do not ripen, she explained, referring to texts from the fifth and 11th centuries A.D. Blades of grass become like swords — and even the sense of taste disappears (like a suspected symptom of the coronavirus infection).

In Buddhist traditions, apocalypse comes as a result of collective karma — everyone’s actions toward one another and the world — which means its outcome can change, even in the present circumstance. “Now people are kinder to each other, they are spending more time with families,” Dr. Wallace said. “It’s like a warning to change the course of actions, to bring back compassion, empathy, develop social equality.”

Modern, secular American life is filled with its own apocalyptic visions. Movies and television shows depict civilization on the brink of extinction. “The Walking Dead” explores life amid the zombie apocalypse. “The Hunger Games” presents a dystopian future after conflict and ecological disasters have destroyed much of the world.

A stark, binary structure — a clear good and evil, a clear before and after — appeals when society is fractured, said Dr. Hidalgo, the religion professor from Williams.


“Apocalypse is a flexible script,” she said. “A sense of shared external evil can really bring folks together.”


It is also a reminder that across several traditions, the memory of past crises can offer hope — that human beings have survived such moments before, and that the truths being revealed can become a call to action.


“The country’s idols are being exposed,” said Ekemini Uwan, a public theologian and co-host of the podcast “Truth’s Table.” “People are advocating that we throw our grandparents to the slaughter, sacrifice them on the altar of capitalism,” she added, referring to Republican leaders who have suggested that older Americans might be willing to sacrifice themselves to save jobs.

For too long America has been on “spiritual life support,” trusting its own invincibility, she said.

“Is it the end of the world? Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” she said. “But we need to be ready. We need to learn to number our days because we really do not know when our last breath will be.”

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