

# *Facing Apocalypse*

Climate, Democracy,  
and Other Last Chances

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## *PreScroll*

Hamlet: *What news?*

Rosencrantz: *None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.*

Hamlet: *Then is doomsday near.*

—*William Shakespeare*

It isn't as if we don't know better. It isn't as though we can't do better. Millennia ago, even after the growth of global empires, there were communities practicing an ethos of care for each other, for strangers, for aliens, for the whole creation. There were teachers on record denouncing systems of oppression, announcing the renewal of the earth. So are there now. Not all of us, maybe not most of us, live out of sync with our biology, which, according to recent science, favors cooperation over competition. Why the endless triumph of greed and power? One of those ancient teachers denounced the global economics and politics of his time in language that sounds eerily relevant to ours. He wrote a long scroll of a letter warning that the news would get worse, much worse, before it gets—better? Why are we still acting out the dark dreams of John's *Apocalypse*?

That book, also known as *Revelation*, the final text of the Christian Bible, takes the form of a letter written to several young communities of Asia Minor, part of the Roman Empire at the end of the first century. The author John (often confused with the author

of the Gospel of John) wrote from exile, voluntary or otherwise, on the Greek island of Patmos, off the west coast of Asia. He penned his scroll in a carefully coded language profoundly critical of the empire that had colonized what for him counted as the known world. Many theologians from the beginning, later including Luther, expressed ambivalence about this letter's authoritative status. Nonetheless, with its barely veiled politics, its metaphoric munificence, and its dramatic clues to collective trauma and hope, the Apocalypse retained, indeed retains, its climactic position within the Christian canon.

That climax has read out differently, in religious or in secular terms, from one age to the next. Now our age is threatening its own distinctively "apocalyptic" climax: climate havoc. Yet for decades the rhetoric of The End of the World could be left largely to fundamentalist or sci-fi fantasy. Except for some last-century nuclear alarms, any Apocalypses Now not marked "fiction" could be dismissed as hysterical. But in our present tense, altogether credible sources declare "the Insect Armageddon," "the Uninhabitable Earth," "Climate Doom"—and of course the "Anthropocene Apocalypse." Visiting friends out west a year ago, I was startled by the headline of a local newspaper: "Earth's future is being written in rapidly melting Greenland ice." The article quotes a respected air and ocean scientist inferring from that meltdown "the end of the planet."<sup>1</sup> Though lacking Hamlet's tragic irony, such ecological announcements seem now all too tragically honest—scientifically, publicly. But for several decades a broad public was able to snigger at such "apocalyptic" warnings.

The snigger however is twisting into a frown. As it happened—in a past millennium—it was fear of nuclear holocaust that first

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1. "He is referring to geography more than the future," the newspaper reassures us. See Seth Borenstein, "Earth's Future Is Being Written in Fast-Melting Greenland," *The Associated Press* (August 20, 2019).

pushed me into a serious engagement with the Christian End-of-the-World tradition. My suspicion was *not* that the *Book of Revelation*, a.k.a. *Apocalypse of John*, was finally going to be proven right. No, I was realizing that the long Western imagination of The End was serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy: its blood-soaked narrative had worked for centuries to justify righteous waves of Christian and then secular violence. And both together. So we had through the 1980s a president who was buddy-buddy with the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. These guys smugly concurred that thermonuclear exchange would bring on the Endtimes in their lifetimes. One of them had a finger on the nuclear button. Since it seemed that in the United States liberal/progressive theologians were ignoring the apocalypse and its effects, I got to work.

Fortunately by the time *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Approach to the End of the World* was done, the nuclear threat had dissipated. And while researching I had realized that I couldn't simply write off the last book of the Bible—despite its bitter determinism, its misogynist, good/evil dualism, its forecasts of violent mass death. There was something more to its radical vision. Turns out that all the Western egalitarian or revolutionary movements, the fights for democracy, socialism, women's rights, emancipation of slaves, right on through Martin Luther King's "dream," tapped apocalyptic metaphors of great tribulation and transformation. In their struggle for a "new heaven and earth," for a just and sustainable life for all, they draw from the ancient Jewish prophetic tradition of the "new creation." Including, very prominently, John's Apocalypse and its New Jerusalem.

Yet the dangerous hope for a final, one-off destruction and salvation persists—largely but not exclusively on the right. It feeds the presumption that history and nature move down linear tracks to the Last Stop. Because it exercises great cultural force, that presumption of The End needs to be repeatedly deconstructed.

And the deconstruction requires the *theological* alternatives on offer from fresh visions of the world. Those evolving narratives, mindful of sex, race, class, ecology, etc.—oh that edgy etc.—let me become and remain a theologian. They include theologies of deep pluralism, engaged in interreligious interchange and multiple secular practices. Denouncing injustice and announcing ecosocial healing, these legacies of prophetic discourse persist. As does their spirited timeliness. Whatever ends, of whatever times, we must confront.

Something however has changed, and, eerily, in this young millennium. The End can no longer be mocked as simple delusion, as religious dope-hope, or as the by-product of some analogous, secular use-it-all-up progress. The “now and then” of my 1996 title is a bit off. We are living through a singularity. While much social, political, and ecological degradation can still be stopped, something irreversible has after all kicked in. Something measurable in a creepy couple of degrees of global warming. A process with effects beyond measure. Is it a viable candidate for The End of the World? No. But possibly of the human world. Then Covid-19 galloped in—not dooming our species but exposing the interlinked precarity of U.S. democracy, global economics, and planetary health. The coronavirus was not caused by global warming, but the fever of its victims and the fever of the planet seem together to pose a dire collective warning. That would be the biblical sense of *apokalypsis*, “revelation.” Humans have come out of all balance with each other and with the nonhuman. Has the pandemic pause helped us *face* this apocalypse? To heed its warning somewhere between the overstated and the unspeakable?



In the early nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard, that most ironic of theologians, had no more of a concept of climate change

than did Shakespeare. Still, his parable, set on a different stage, rings prophetic: “It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning. They shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amidst the general applause from all the wits who believe that it is a joke.”<sup>2</sup> Environmentalists have often felt like that clown.

As the smoke bellows into the theater of present history, the laughter is fading. The heat is rising. The political forces that might rein in an economy driven by carbon emissions, that might foster green new deals and needed strategies for extracting excess carbon from the atmosphere, have instead deferred or downright denied responsibility for climate change. (The science denialism runs deep and deadly, as pandemically demonstrated in a president’s disregard of epidemiological advice.) In the meantime the nobler social forces must contend with the lurching systemic immensity of racial, social, economic injustice. To focus on the nonhuman environment can seem *inhuman*. Yet to sideline ecology means, now, to leave those human populations who contribute the least to global warming to suffer its worst effects.

Should we now press the alarm button—Greta Thunberg’s “time to panic”—in hopes of cutting through the white noise of climate denialism? Or, to the contrary, should we keep a more positive tone in order to avoid doomsday nihilism?<sup>3</sup> Or neither? Or both? With each new round of “unprecedented” fire or flood, melting or mass migration, we will stretch for language and find the apocalypse—right there where we hope to avoid it. Conscious

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2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 30.

3. Michael Shellenberger, *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All* (New York: Harper, 2020).

or subliminal, ironic or menacing, the rhetoric of apocalypse will be amping up for the “foreseeable future.” Whatever we can and cannot foresee about our planetary future, echoes of the ancient Apocalypse will henceforth reverberate not just across wide varieties of religion but in responsible forms of secular discourse. For this reason I hope that you—you of *whatever* or of *no* religious persuasion—will stay with the present meditation.

If apocalypticism cannot be erased, it must be *minded*: used *mindfully*, that is not for mindless fright or melodrama, not for supernatural or sci-fi flight. To attend to its actual meaning becomes key to redirecting its present energies. And make no mistake: the energies conducted by the antique figuration of the Apocalypse remain relentless, contradictory, effectual. For good and for ill. The feedback loop between archaic prophecy and future history swirls through the present. The text refuses to stop and become simply literal, fixed in one particular final realization.

Despite garish religious outbreaks, the metaphors of apocalypse circulate mostly below the surface. So surfacing its effects, making and keeping them conscious, will be necessary to the work of ecological and social response for—that foreseeable future. Mindfulness of the apocalypse can keep us from acting it out in private despair or collective inevitability, playing it out subliminally in our economic habits, democratic disarray, and ecological suicide. We have a chance of pausing the self-fulfilling prophecy of doom. And that interruption, prolonged, might prove truer to the original Apocalypse than mere annihilation.

The eery synchronicity of the ancient imaginary with contemporary history does sometimes give one pause. As it has throughout history. For example, the pale green horse of John’s vision carries the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse, releasing the inhuman force of “pestilence.” Plagues have frequently and with terrifying effect galloped across the world. In John’s vision the

green horse is soon followed—after a dramatic pause in heaven—by the opening of the seventh seal, which as we will see in the present book’s second chapter, warns of the destruction of forests, oceans, and fresh waters. To *mind* such metaphors is to recognize that John is *not predicting future facts*. But he may be *revealing fatal patterns*. We read the images for meditation and for confrontation. Might facing the Apocalypse in its ancient intensity help us face apocalypse in our own time? Such “facing” would not mean mere recognition, submission, acquiescence. It means to confront the forces of destruction: to crack open, to disclose, a space where late chances, last chances, remain nonetheless real chances.



The metaphor of apocalypse—really, metaphor is too weak a notion, why not call it *metaforce*—has been playing itself out for a couple of millennia. It has affected religious as well as political, reactionary as well as revolutionary movements. It presents overtly and covertly. It refracts in a hallucinatory multiplicity of modes. Sometimes aggressively preached, often unconsciously transmitted, its forcefield is not immutable or predetermined. Neither is it fading. Given the historical power and the future inevitability of its metaforce, I am gambling that a curation of some of its past stories in their contexts, ancient and recent, will help alter current consciousness.

John’s Apocalypse remains always the text of an ancient context. The first-century BCE text of Revelation was written with no concept of a “Bible,” let alone of its own coming canonization within one. Its visions were apparently recorded for inclusion in a letter to be read aloud in different early Christian communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. John addresses each specifically, in praise and critique. The text’s dramatic mode of anti-imperial witness belongs to the movement of Jewish apocalypticism, which



was not some marginal bit of extremism but a late metamorphosis of Hebrew prophecy. Apocalypticism, as a leading German biblical scholar put it, “was the mother of all Christian theology.”<sup>4</sup>

The reverberation between the ancient letter’s context and our own pervades the present text—a work not of biblical history but of meditation on the present. We do not read the old scroll for its own sake. Rather, we let its old imaginary, directed at its own context, release surprising relevancies for ours. And we read them not because the ancient visions *predict* present realities. Forgive me, this needed repetition: *prophecy* is not *prediction*. If in some surreal sense their author does prophesy it is not because he was seeing the future. Only what already exists can be seen. And the future is what does not yet exist. But deep patterns do exist in the present. And they may long persist. A prophet reads a potent pattern of human civilization—a pattern that may still, in some strange and tragic ways, replicate itself today. Or so we may meaningfully read it.

With or without religious beliefs, therefore, with or without curiosity about John’s Apocalypse, you are invited into this reading of a reading. Of something like a dream state in urgent need of interpretation, one with a darkly collective space and time. You may find that engaging some of its eerily animated figures will help you face your own, *our* own, nightmares—of, for instance, a climate-forced collapse of civilization within not many years, escalating mass migration and starvation, white supremacism, degrees of fascism, elite escapes, population decimation, and possibly worse. . . .

Prophecy then or now *dreamreads* a collective context. Within the patterns of what has already become, it attends to what might

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4. Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM, 1969), 102.

yet be. Possibilities, chances, good and ill. Unrealized possibility has a dreamlike quality—it shadows the real. The Apocalypse as text is itself full of dreamreadings. Reading them, we in turn will dreamread the apocalypse. Crowded, clouded, with prophetic metaphors, the ancient text serves here as a pre-text of our current context. As we read a few scraps of the old scroll we may find—in defiance of the doomsday stereotype—that its critical message carries not just high levels of inevitable catastrophe but far better possibilities.

*Facing Apocalypse* suggests first of all that there will be in our time no *honest* escape from the notion of apocalypse, and therefore from the question of its meaning. For whatever happens socially, politically, pandemically, and economically, global warming is sure to keep the metaforce charged. Not (she repeats) because predictions of an ancient text are finally “coming true.” Nor because the Bible or any of its books is “true at all times in all places for all people.” Truth is not something fixed in advance. Truth does not banish uncertainty. Truth invites questioning. It does not transcend its context of tangled relations, but it may transform their meaning. If truth has something to do with honesty. With facing.

Holding our collective twenty-first-century context in relation to the ancient one, the present book is to be read as a way of ecopolitical practice. Like much contemplative practice, it aims through meditation, imagination, and conversation at actualization. Of what is—actually—possible.



Since it will be henceforth impossible to avoid the charged language of apocalypse—to ignore it as cliché or archaicism, to dismiss it for its vengeful and patriarchal violence—why not take some time to understand it? Might it help us to read this “time” that we are running out of? Might we be helped to give ourselves,

to give each other, time? Each other: others not merely of human-kind—but mineral, vegetable, animal kinds? All the kinds with which we form our world? For a “world” exists as the timely context of its inhabitants. Worlds, in that sense, have ended over and over—in conquest and in enslavement, in human genocide, in nonhuman extinctions, but also in radical change.

If something else is happening now, it is what this dreamreading practice will keep surfacing: the one earth of all those diverse “worlds” is in recoil. Its capacity to hold us, to host us, through innumerable endings, new beginnings, emergencies, emergences, to give our species always another opportunity to get it right—this, for so long, we could presume. Humans could commit all manner of atrocities in the name of their own world, land, folk, *Volk*. But we could at least take for granted the humanly habitable planet. That grant seems to be running out. Impending climate disaster has brought us—no, not to the Endtimes—but to a time of manifold last chances. So apocalyptic urgency pulses in a new way through the spectrum of human struggles: thus one Black Lives Matter group marched under the banner “Last Chance for Change.”<sup>5</sup>

Hamlet’s irony doubles back upon us. Will the world grow honest enough to change course—only when it is too late? Will what wakes us up be what takes us out?

Nonetheless, and no matter what doomsdays we face: the Greek term used in the New Testament, *apokalypsis*, does not signify “the end of the world.” Not time’s up, lights out. Close down the creation. On the contrary, it means not to close but to *dis/close*. To *open* what is otherwise shut. Originally the word signified the sexually charged moment of an ancient bride’s unveiling. That erotic metaforce infuses John’s feminized and final sign, the joy-

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5. Chris Libonati, “Last Chance for Change Marchers Attract a Sudden Following; Where Will It Lead?” *Syracuse* (June 7, 2020).

ous utopia of “New Jerusalem.” To uncover apocalypse—now and then—is to open multiple registers of affect. Registers traumatic and mournful, furious, festive, hopeful. And ironic.

We will read the phantasmagoric imagery of the Apocalypse like a vast dream. We may even observe global nightmare twist toward weirdly attractive possibility. I’m not claiming that any dreamreading of a shadowy book of ancient visions will magically heal our society’s collective sickness, our species’ *environmental* illness. Amidst its tensions and its traumas, its past futures and failed hopes, the old scroll may finally dissolve into its archaic context. But in the process its very antiquity can help us scroll down deeper into a shared present tense, the tense present of our planetary public.