

APOCALYPTIC ANXIETY

Religion, Science, and America's Obsession
with the End of the World

ANTHONY AVENI



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INTRODUCTION

December 21, 2012—It Didn't Happen

And the Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

—*Matthew 24:14*

December 21, 2012—game over! The end of the world as we know it—the big blowup! The sun's magnetic field will suddenly reverse, emitting damaging electromagnetic particles that will short-circuit the Earth in a matter of minutes, destroying every piece of electronic equipment and wiping out all the knowledge stored in our computers. Massive solar flares will shoot out of the sun, each capable of generating the energy of a hundred billion nuclear bombs. The Earth's magnetic field will also abruptly reverse. Volcanoes will erupt and earthquakes will increase a hundred-fold as the Earth's crust experiences a sudden shift. Whatever architecture is left standing on the globe will be leveled and the oil released from damaged storage facilities will be carried over every sea and ocean by huge tides, contaminating every watery surface. Demolished nuclear plants will release hazardous materials into the environment and the world will be thrust into a sudden ice age, leaving few places habitable.

One 2012 prophet of doom pictured this alarming scenario: there's a black hole at the center of our Milky Way Galaxy; it protects us (like the ozone layer)

by sucking up matter and energy. But when blocked for the first time in 26,000 years, on December 21, 2012 (at 11:11 p.m. Universal Time), our bodies and our world will be thrown out of kilter—just as the ancient Maya had predicted.¹

Other head-turning 2012 prognostications proclaimed an end to the world caused by sunspots, a planetary lineup, the passage of our planet through an energetically hostile region of our Galaxy, a chain of simultaneous volcanic eruptions, collision with a giant asteroid, and suction of the entire terrestrial globe into a passing black hole. The sun will reach its extreme migratory point from the plane of the Milky Way, producing a tide in the galactic disk that will release millions of comets from outside the solar system to rain down on us. The cometary swarm will destroy the Earth, or what's left of it. Some visionaries of Armageddon blamed it all on God. He's the one pitching those swarms of comets earthward as punishment for the evil deeds of humanity. And that's only the short list.

Regardless of how the 2012 Doomsday clock was set, there were plenty of people—especially young people—deeply concerned about it. Responding to the public embrace of world's end (more than two-thirds of all Americans believe it will happen during their lifetime), the scientific community set up guides for classroom use, such as "Astronomy Answers, 21 Dec 2012" and Astronomical Society of the Pacific astronomer Andrew Fraknoi's "Resources for Responding to Doomsday 2012." Over 5,000 messages, many of them from teens, appeared on NASA's website Ask an Astrobiologist in response to the 2012 phenomenon, among them:

- "Last winter, I got extremely depressed because of my fears of December 21, 2012."
- "Every day would be filled with fear. Every little noise I heard I thought something was happening. I wouldn't watch the news for fear of seeing something bad or scary. I am seventeen years old, and I actually did contemplate suicide because of all the rumors."
- "I'm fifteen, and I'm terrified of all these rumors, and I don't know how to get over it. I keep hearing about the fifth sun and how it affects the North and South Poles."
- "If you could honestly tell me there is no danger, whatsoever to Earth on December 21, 2012, that would make me feel a lot better, because sometimes I think suicide would help."

- “I’m a twelve-year-old boy. The Moon hasn’t been rising this past week and the Sun was rising and setting in different places each night. I’m freaked and my parents don’t believe me. I can’t even focus on my schoolwork. Please tell me the truth about the end.”²

My initial motivation for writing *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012* grew out of e-mail correspondence with a concerned Canadian high school student. I dedicated that book to him.

Apocalypse means revelation or the unveiling of an underlying plan or design. It posits that fate rules and that there is unity in the predetermined structure of history. We usually associate apocalypse with worldwide cataclysm, but historians of religion differentiate between the end of the world by total destruction (catastrophic millennialism) and avertive apocalypticism, the belief that we can avoid catastrophe by, for example, conducting religious rites or engaging in practical activity.³ Both forms of apocalypticism were present in 2012.

In addition to the doomsayers were just as many prophets who foresaw a blissful 2012 outcome. Instead of a planetary holocaust, they sensed a transcendental breakthrough. According to one prediction, resonances between the grand “eschaton time wave,” about which the cycle of the lunar year, the sunspot cycle, and the *I Ching* divination system peak, pointed to the winter solstice of 2012 as the time when reality would be transformed instantaneously via the joining together of matter and mind in a higher dimension. But the collective rebirth of planetary consciousness would be experienced only by those who assembled at the acupuncture points of Mother Earth—places like Machu Picchu, Mt. Shasta, Maya Chichén Itzá, and the Egyptian pyramids—where they would be most likely to get beamed by the cosmic vibes. Speaking in scientific-sounding language, one prophet wrote that we shall attain new revelations, for only in that moment will we reconnect with “a major evolutionary upgrading of the light-life radiogenetic-process,” a wave harmonic that constitutes an “exquisitely proportioned fractal of the galactic evolutionary process” that will “connect us to the heliotropic octaves in the solar activated magnetic field.”⁴ The cosmic lineup with the galactic center will open a different sort of entryway—a doorway of opportunity for a “conscious relationship with each other and a creative participation with the Earth process that gives birth to our higher selves.”⁵ Wrote another: we will reclaim the “grand

galactic cosmovision” once experienced in ancient times.⁶ We’ll recover the long-lost philosophy whose demise has left modern consciousness a prisoner of the “values of self-serving egoism.”⁷

Some biblically oriented prophets combined both doom and bliss scenarios. Long ago they foretold that December 21, 2012, would be the beginning of the Great Tribulation. On that day the sixth seal in the book of Revelation will be opened.⁸ This will be the day of the Lord’s Wrath: when the great earthquake will occur, when the sun will become black and the moon bathed in blood. The aftermath of 2012 will see God’s rapture. Only he can save from eternal hell those who repent.

December 21, 2012: blow up, bliss out; planet Earth torn apart, human consciousness transformed; Jesus descended—none of it happened. Nor had it happened on May 21, 2011, the foreordained date of the taking up into heaven of God’s elect people, according to an eighty-nine-year-old self-styled evangelical preacher from California. Nor on March 23, 2003, May 15, 2003, January 25, 2006, or any of the more than 100 dates since the beginning of the third millennium pegged by some prophet or another who had set the clock for the end of time. There were ten warnings in 2008 alone; fifteen were broadcast in 2006. Among the latter were the “Big One” targeting Los Angeles, a 650-foot tsunami caused by a wayward asteroid diving into the ocean, striking and wiping out the Atlantic Coast; Israel being erased from the map; a nuclear bomb destroying the United Nations building; a nuclear war—starting either in Iraq or North Korea—and the Second Coming of Jesus in Puerto Rico.

Thanks to the legitimizing effect of the Internet, the commerce-hungry media, and a spiritually starved society cringing in perpetual fear over one calamitous world event after another, predicting time’s end has become big business—especially in America. After a breather following Y2K, the frequency of predictions has been on the rise. End of the world novels, computer games, TV programs, and films have become all the rage. The number of apocalyptic-themed feature-length films produced since the turn of the millennium has topped totals over the four decades ending in 2000.⁹ Projected totals for 2011–2020 are expected to at least double the count for 2001–2010. The secular framework of these works and the sadistic violence exhibited in most of them have been characterized as a kind of “sanctified Darwinism” based on the “survival of the most weaponized.”¹⁰

Millennialism—strictly speaking, the belief in a transition to salvation in which well-being will replace the unpleasant limitations of the human condition—is not unique to Y2K and Y12.¹¹ There were ominous end of time forecasts spread about the last century, too: 1914, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975, and 1994 were banner years for the Second Coming based on biblical mathematics; for example, according to one account, 1975 was the 6,000th anniversary of the creation of Adam, which happened in 4026 BCE (provided you adopt the definition of a generation given in Psalms 90:10). And we mustn't leave out 1910, when the world was scheduled to be poisoned by noxious gases as our home planet passed through the tail of the returning Halley's Comet.

Among the most noteworthy of the 1970s Doomsdays were the predicted collision of Earth with Comet Kohoutek in 1973 and death by killer bees in 1977. In the 1960s the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. and the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, in which Jerusalem was reclaimed by the state of Israel, prompted a host of dire world-ending predictions.

The Cold War 1950s were rife with UFO sightings. Equally prevalent were predictions of time's end generated by UFO observations. The case of Marian Keech, a Chicago housewife, became the subject of a social psychological study of cognitive dissonance.¹² Basically, we think up explanations that shape reality to fit what we believe. This is how we resolve the problem of living with conflicting ideas—or so goes the theory. Messages received by Keech via automatic writing from inhabitants of the planet Clarion revealed that the world would end in a great flood on December 21, 1954. She and a small band of followers were so convinced of the impending disaster that they quit their jobs and gave away their life savings in order to devote time to prepare for an anticipated terrestrial departure via the flying saucer the Clarionites promised to send down to transport them. The alien saviors never appeared. According to Keech, on the day of their anticipated arrival, Earth redeemers decided to withhold the flood and preserve the world. Marian Keech explained that it was because her group had behaved heroically in trying to get the word out.

Backing up further, the nineteenth century also had its share of endgamers. Adepts from the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor calculated that a Great Solar Period, over which each of the seven angels would rule the universe twelve times, was due to end in 1881, or alternatively 1879, 1880, and 1882, depending on whose math you followed.

If you were around in the 1840s you certainly would have been aware of the big end of the world scare sweeping across middle America. The well-publicized Second Coming of Christ, slated for October 22, 1844, according to country preacher William Miller, was part of a long anticipated pre-millennial event that people had begun talking about as early as the 1830s in the charged religious atmosphere of upstate New York and western New England. Toward the end of the decade, by which time the idea had spread to Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, and then on to the frontier cities of Cleveland, Cincinnati and even Montreal, “Advent near” preaching had won more than 50,000 solid believers and an estimated 1 million skeptical, but nonetheless watchful, followers—a hefty number in a US population that bordered on 17 million.

I found remarkable parallels between the phenomena of 1844 and 2012; this is why I decided to choose the Millerite movement as a way of exploring past and present attitudes about American versions of apocalypse. In *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012*, I suggested that the end of the world craze that closed the twelfth year of the new millennium had a peculiarly American ring to it. Likewise, no time was more fevered and no place more inflamed with anticipation about the end of the world than the mid-nineteenth-century American hinterland. Frontier America became a safe haven for diverse religious groups to act out their own versions of the Second Coming writ in the New Testament book of Revelation. Apocalyptic prophesying and the building of utopian communities were an integral part of what religious historians regard as peak in a series of social awakenings that make up American history.

I begin part I, “Episode 1, October 22, 1844,” in chapter 1 by telling the story of the Millerite movement in some detail. I show how Pastor William Miller arrived at his prophetic Doomsday clock setting by performing biblical arithmetic, which has a long history of its own. Understanding Millerism necessitates at least a brief encounter with the roots of Western apocalyptic thinking, which I trace back to Middle East antiquity in chapter 2. It began in the fourteenth century BCE, when the prophet Zoroaster outlined the apocalyptic battle fought in heaven between Mazda, god of light, and Ahriman, god of darkness. These dual deities would become the precursors of the forms of good and evil that grew up in early Christianity and took on various aspects throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the

Reformation. God's promised end of time and the schedule of dispensations, or events that would lead up to it, was thought to be secreted in the Old and New Testaments, awaiting close readings by those capable of deciphering the message.

Part II, "American Apocalypse," is made up of three chapters. There I provide further background and begin to forge a link to present-day apocalypticism in America. chapter 3, "From Columbus to the Great Awakenings," follows the germination and growth on American soil of the seed heralding the imminent end of the world planted by Columbus and nurtured by the English Puritans. Both imagined the pristine New World as the setting for God's kingdom come.

Chapter 4 deals with how Christian millennialism went mainstream toward the end of the nineteenth century, when it acquired a strong secular component. Historians call it the "New Thought" movement, the predecessor of the "New Age" of the 1960s. In this sort of progressive millennialism you could perfect yourself in preparation for whatever the transcendent powers might have in store for you by using the power of your will—aided by the products of modern science.

In chapter 5 I explore the curious love-hate relationship between science and religion that grew out of the American theosophical or spiritualist movement. Here was a tension quite different from the conventional clash—what I call the irreconcilable dialog—that characterizes contemporary ways of arriving at truth. I focus especially on the influential Helena Blavatsky's esoteric writings, which embraced even as they contorted scientific concepts. She posited a history dispensed via a series of rounds of existence characterized by rest periods punctuated by action episodes in which life's energy is redistributed. For the so-called theosophist, revealed deep truth, whether scientific or religious—or both—lay in the "monomyth," or divine wisdom related to a single, shared past that we are capable of recovering in the present life by studying the myths of the ancients.

The four chapters comprising part III, "New Age Religion and Science," have to do with the concatenation of rational and wishful ideologies and practices that grew out of New Thought and nineteenth-century spiritualism, which developed alongside traditional Christian millennialism. I begin with the anticipation of the astrologically timed "Age of Aquarius" in chapter 6, followed by additional signs in the sky, in the form (following Jung)

of what I call the “Techno-Angels of the Alien Advent” (chapter 7). These space age secular replacements for the descending Christ were sent here as part of the divine cosmic plan to help the world avoid the catastrophic mess we’ve made of our planetary home. Alongside this avertive form of millennialism, Christian dispensationalism continued to thrive, as I relate in chapter 8, where I explore the end of time articulated in the popular media. Chapter 9, on “world age” theories surfacing in the 1960s, breathes new life into the astronomically based version of the monomyth, the notion that cyclic world history is fixed in the stars and dispensed in large temporal doses marked by transitions in the shifting of the world’s axis due to the precession of the equinoxes.

This sets the stage for part VI, “Episode 2, December 21, 2012.” Having laid down the basis for the New Age version of an astronomically derived apocalypse, in chapter 10 I discuss the most influential early 2012-related prophecies about the end of the world as we know it. These include the nativist writings of Frank Waters in the 1960s, the LSD-induced trance revelations of the McKenna brothers in the 1970s, and José Argüelles’s “Harmonic Convergence” of 1987—all focused on seeking spiritual refuge in the lost knowledge of a once unified indigenous American past.

In the 1970s and 1980s the ancient Maya of Central America enter the picture, having attracted popular attention owing to advances in the decipherment of their ancient texts, new knowledge of their exceptional astronomical achievements, increased archaeological excavations of their cities, and the promotion of sacred tourism. Chapter 11 deals specifically with Mayanism, which anthropologist John Hoopes identifies as an eclectic collection of New Age, Western-derived beliefs projected on the Maya civilization. Among the most notable is the theory that the ancient Maya had timed the end of their 5,125-year-long count cycle to end on December 21, 2012, and that they predicted that the world as we know it would then come to an end—either in catastrophe or via the escalation of humanity to a higher level of consciousness.

Chapter 12 closes the Maya 2012 narrative with a summation of the “perennial philosophy,” which envelops most monomythical 2012 time’s-end predictions. This is the notion that all humanity—*Homo religiosus*—shares in a longing to return to a more perfect past, a primordial condition superior to the corrupted present-day world and, most important, that this condition

can be achieved here and now. Anthropologists and historians of religion contrast this *sui generis* theory of the origin of religion with the more gradualist-based hypothesis that religion arose out of a need for societies, rather than individuals, to understand who they were, such as to make sense of transcendent forces by developing an ideology that accounted for their condition.

Finally, in the closing, comparative conclusion, I look back at the 1844 Millerite episode, which emerges as a seemingly less complex inquiry into the drama of the end of human existence, drawn largely from biblical text, placed alongside 2012 Mayanism, a largely secular, highly individualistic episode. The media are different and so are the social settings out of which each apocalyptic movement grew, but the fervent need to peer around time's corner is shared over the 168-year span that separates 1844 and 2012.

A 2002 Time/CNN poll revealed that 59 percent of Americans believed the world would soon come to an end—about the same proportion (62 percent) as those who expressed this belief in a 1983 Gallup poll and a 1994 US News and World Report poll (60 percent).¹³ The story of where beliefs about the impending end of the world come from is worth tracing through history not only because such a large segment of the contemporary population thinks we are living out our last days, but also because such an exercise helps us understand the sources of the unsated nature of the American appetite for world endings. We need to know: what is it about *us* that fuels our never-ending hunger for time's end?