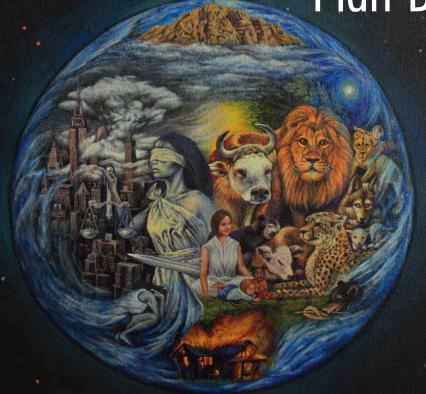# The End of the World, Plan B

A Guide for the Future

Charles Shirō Inouye

Mormonism needs Inouye's voice. We need, in general, voices that are a bit less Ayn Rand and a bit more Siddhartha Gautama. Inouye reminds us that justice is not enough and that obedience is not the currency of salvation. He urges us to recognize the limits of the law, to see that, severed from a willingness to compassionately suffer *with* the world's imperfection and evanescence, our righteous hunger for balancing life's books will destroy us all.

— Adam S. Miller, author of *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* and *Letters to a Young Mormon*

Drawing on Christian, Buddhist, Daoist, and other modes of thought, Charles Inouye shows how an attitude of hope can arise from a narrative of doom. *The End of the World, Plan B* is not simply a rethinking of the end of our world, but is a meditation on the possibility of compassionate self-transformation. In a world that looks to the just punishment of the wicked, Inouye shows how sorrow, which comes from the demands of justice, can create peace, forgiveness, and love.

— Michael D.K. Ing, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University

For years I've hoped to see a book that related Mormonism to the great spiritual traditions beyond Christianity and Judaism. Charles Inouye has done this in one of the best Mormon devotional books I've ever read. His Mormon reading of the fourfold path of the Bodhisattva offers a beautiful eschatology of the end/purpose of the world as the revelation of compassion. I hope the book is read widely.

— James M. McLachlan, co-editor of *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities.*

Charles Shirō Inouye is Professor of Japanese at Tufts University and recipient of the Lillian and Joseph Leibner Award for Distinguished Teaching and Advising. He is also winner of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for his translations of Izumi Kyōka. He is married to Rei Okamoto, and has three children: Mie, Leif, and Kan.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Where does the story of our planet's demise come from? How are we to understand the end of the world? I will trace this idea to its sources in a few of the world's better known spiritual traditions—Mormonism, Mahayana Buddhism, Judaism, traditional Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism. I will present a three-fold argument: first, the idea of decline is presented similarly and for a similar purpose by these traditions; second, this purpose is often misunderstood, especially because of a modern secular emphasis on justice; and third, gaining a compassionate and hopeful perspective with regard to the future of our planet is not only possible but is the very reason—the inspiring reason—this sobering narrative exists in the first place.

These are turbulent times. Life as we know it might come to a dramatic end someday—perhaps soon. If this happens, it will not be because of the so-called problem of evil, where we lose our moral compass and become tragically lost. The world will not end because of global warming, war, or disease. Rather, our destruction will come because of an often positive human sentiment, one so ordinary and commonly understood as reasonable and necessary that it informs all the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis.

If violence rushes at us now, it is because we grasp only half of an ancient paradigm that suggests but does not demand the punishment of the wicked. Today, many anticipate the apocalypse in only a negative way, as a cataclysmic day of judgment more than an enlightening revealing of all truth. This happens because we do not grasp an important point: the purpose of our existence

is to become awakened to the possibility of becoming one, and the end-of-the-world narratives that sharpen our sense of doom are also the ones that should be deepening our sense of hope.

Then, as now, the traditions that have so profoundly shaped our values present us with a test of our ability to be *both* trusting and questioning, *both* just and compassionate. The question of whether we can see the whole picture rather than just half of it, whether we subscribe to Plan A or to Plan B, is the one I will pose for your consideration. Plan A, our present default mode, has the world ending in death and flames. The Plan B message tells us that this inevitable calamity can, and should, transfigure us so that we see the end, our end, differently.

In forming the admittedly controversial arguments expressed here, I wish to thank my students, both from Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, who have contributed to the discussions that ultimately led to this book. They are Daniel Ayat, Joanne Duara, Mie Inouye, Samuel James, Paul Reachi, Angela Robins, Kathleen Rutecki, Amanda Ruud, Valerie Schenkman, Martin Villanueva, Chase Webber, Noriko Aizawa, Philipp Andriopoulos, Corey Banks, Peter Browne, Alyce Currier, Max Geisinger, Michael Nance, Loan Nguyen, Erika O'Conor, Nathan Paine, John Petruzzi, Douglas Petrey, William Ramsdell, Ivette Salom, Phillip Ventura, Whitney Walker-Giles, Ellen Watkiss, Zachary Witlin, Jonathan Zindman, Fred Ata, Eunice Choi, Benjamin Cohen, Paul Endres, Heidi Hogdon, Christopher Nolop, Elizabeth Petillo, Jamal Sheats, Jacob Vlahakis, Joanie Wong, Joseph Watt, Bretton Cadigan, Ezra Dunkle-Polier, Gustavo Florez, Timothy Hayes, Kerry Herlihy, Rebeccah Marrero, Brittany Neff, Samuel Plasmati, Katherine Quackenbush, Clarissa Sosin, Maya Sussman, William Varteresian, Erik Wiedenmann, Angelina Zhou, Katherine Applegate, SeoYuen Choi, Michael Cook, Michael Grant, Amelia Greenwald, Sun Yong Hwang, Daniel Katz-Zeiger, Sawool Kim, Izel Maras, Ian McConnell, Veronica Ota, Elaine Sun, Dylan Dempsey, Lisa Fukushima, Nina Goldman, JiEun Jang, Eun Gyu Lee, Ameya Lele, Philippe

Maman, Da Young Moon, Hannah Perrigo, Eric Stefanski, Zoey Turek, and Erika Vasquez. It is comforting to know that these young men and women are now spread throughout the world, trying to be more thoughtful and compassionate.

I also thank my colleagues in the Department of German, Russian, and Asian Languages and Literatures who have also contributed to this project. No doubt, it was the breadth of our multi-lingual, multi-cultural department that encouraged me to engage in a study as wide-ranging as this. In particular, for facilitating my study of Jewish and Muslim texts and culture, I would like to thank Joel Rosenberg and Mohammed Alwan. There were others, outside my department, who also helped: Mohammed Afsar (Electrical Engineering) who gave me my first Qur'an, Naila Baloch (Tufts Chaplaincy), and Gary Goldstein (Physics). I also thank George Scarlet (Child Study and Human Development) for visiting the International Literary and Visual Studies colloquium and helping me to see the developmental nature of the Plan B paradigm.

This study has limitations. My department is not yet committed to the languages and cultures of South Asia, which may be one reason why a discussion of Kali Yuga is absent here. While I admit that my pedagogical attraction to brevity and my scholarly commitment to comprehensiveness are difficult partners, my not discussing Hinduism is inexcusable, as is my ignorance of the many other traditions that no doubt could have figured prominently in this book but are simply beyond my awareness. Perhaps those more knowledgeable than I will expand the small garden that gets planted here.

The manuscript for this book was shaped by a number of readers. I thank Paul Dredge, Michael Ing, Mie Inouye, Melissa Inouye, Elizabeth Petillo, Scott Lambert, and Elizabeth Wheatley Lambert. For her illustrations, I thank Angela Robins. For the painting, "The End of the World, Plan B," reproduced on the cover of this book, I thank Sawool Kim, a graduate student at the School for the Museum of Fine Art. My thanks also to Greg

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the members of my family for providing the inspiration for this study. Needless to say, my wife Rei and my children Mie, Leif, and Kan are four good reasons to try to prevent a disastrous end of the world. I dedicate this book to them and to their bright future. Of course, beyond those closest to us, there are many people and things to be concerned about: our neighbors and friends as well as those we do not know well, to say nothing of the air and the water, the rocks and soil, the plants and animals that sustain our life, often at the price of their death.

Chapter One, Endings

A Sense of the End

Are things bad and getting worse? The ice caps at the North and South Poles are melting at an alarming rate. Resulting changes in the jet stream seem to be making weather patterns increasingly unpredictable and severe weather events more common.[1] As our ability to produce food is hampered by increasing incidents of flood and drought, the natural world continues to lose its ability to replenish itself. Ocean fish populations are declining.[2] Die offs continue at an increased rate.[3] As if building to a perfect storm, these developments come at a time when the world's population continues to grow.[4] As Thomas Robert Malthus argued so

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1. Ramez Naam, "Arctic Sea Ice: What, Why, and What Next?" *Scientific American*, September 21, 2012. At this moment, the best readable explication of global warming is probably David Archer, *Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

2. Ransom A. Myers and Boris Worm, "Rapid worldwide depletion of worldwide fish communities," *Nature* (15 May 2003): 280–83.

3. For a catalogue of species that have vanished or are about to vanish in North America, see Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). For a study of possible human contributions to mass extinction see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2014).

4. The present world population is approximately seven billion people. "Food production . . . will need to jump 70 percent in two generations to feed the planet by 2050, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization says." United Press International, "7 billion people is a 'serious challenge.'" October 31, 2011, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/10/31/7-billion-people-is-a-serious-challenge/UPI-73301320046200/, accessed January 29, 2015.

long ago, insufficient resources for the earth's population create social and political instability. Making matters worse, the destructive capacity of our weapons is almost beyond our ability to imagine. The famous Doomsday Clock of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* is set at three minutes to midnight.[5]

In part, this book is about the possibility of catastrophe and the end of life as we know it. As much as "the end" might come because of events such as those just mentioned, here I will focus on our *attitudes* about such events rather than on the events themselves. How do we feel about ecological disaster, economic instability, and political conflict? Whether we instinctively embrace or reject the possibility of the end of the world, "the end" is an idea that many people consider with growing interest, if only because so many others believe that our planet is, in fact, approaching a final disaster. Where does this idea come from—that life on this planet is working its way toward a final collapse?

Thinking widely about this question, we can easily imagine how a sense of the end might come from sources untied to specific political and environmental factors. We know, for example, that destruction is entertaining. The destruction of cities and the

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5. When I began this manuscript, the Doomsday Clock was set at six minutes to midnight. As I finish it, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* announces they have reset the clock at three minutes. "In 2015, unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernizations, and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity, and world leaders have failed to act with the speed or on the scale required to protect citizens from potential catastrophe. These failures of political leadership endanger every person on Earth." Lynn Eden, Robert Rosner, Rod Ewing, Sivan Kartha, Edward "Rocky" Kolb, Lawrence M. Krauss, Leon Lederman, Raymond T. Pierrehumbert, M. V. Ramana, Jennifer Sims, Richard C. J. Somerville, Sharon Squassoni, Elizabeth J. Wilson, David Titley, and Ramamurti Rajaraman, "Three minutes and counting," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 19, 2015, http://thebulletin.org/, accessed January 28, 2015. For an explanation of what the particulars of nuclear holocaust might be like, see Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982).

deaths of thousands, and often hundreds of thousands, has become a standard trope of summer blockbuster movies. The stories we like to tell each other are often filled with horror, death, and mayhem. While some might argue that violent films, novels, and video games can be inoculations against the day when something terrible actually happens—that moment when a real invader or a real natural disaster strikes—perhaps this taste for violence is helping us cultivate a tolerance (if not an actual predilection) for destructive behavior. Are we becoming avatar-manipulating, drone-flying participants of a final fantasy that might actually lead to the end of the world as we know it?

Of course, narrative violence has been a part of the human experience for a very long time. The Bible is filled with war and murder. The Qur'an similarly speaks of harsh judgment and destruction. The Book of Mormon is about, among other things, unstoppable genocide. Setting the issue of theme aside, the structure of these and other narratives point us to a deeper cause for our long-held appreciation of conflict and closure. Perhaps we believe in the end of the world simply because we find the completion of *anything* satisfying: the final moments of a soccer game, the conclusion of a project or trip, the end of a life. Could we live meaningfully without shaping our lives into stories, ones that move us toward conclusions—a career playing itself out, an adventure leading to discovery, a chance meeting that ends in love and "happily ever after?"

The truth is that you and I are addicted to stories. We dwell narratively. In scope and significance, the story business is one of the big three: it is right up there with the food business and the shelter business. Everyone needs something to eat and drink, and a place to protect them from the elements. Just as urgently, we also need stories. We see in our own lives a beginning, middle, and end.[6] We appreciate development and resolution. Narrated

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6. In his *Poetics,* Aristotle argued that plot is the "first principle" of effective tragedy. But this aesthetic sense of closure—where effects follow logically from causes—varies from culture to culture. Japanese expressive forms tend to be more open ended, for example. For a general study of literary closure as it relates to apocalyptic thought,

events yield meaning, and we like things to be meaningful even if that requires exposing ourselves to disappointment. As chains of causally linked events, stories make us think about what comes next. Is my future going to be about fulfillment and accomplishment, or disappointment and loss?

Maybe it's still simpler and more basic than this. Maybe our deepest sense of the end of the world comes not from a will to narrate, but from what we observe on a daily basis. Plants flourish and decline. So do animals. Things wear out. Wood rots and burns. Metals rust and decay. People die. Nothing lasts forever. Nothing even remains the same from day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute. Yes, we notice renewal—babies and children teach us about birth and growth, as do the plants and animals around us. At the same time, we also see that youth leads to maturity, and maturity to death. Maybe our day-to-day observations of seasons and life cycles are another possible source of a deeply embedded, and even tragic, belief that the earth, too, has its larger seasons and will someday pass away or at least cycle into a wintry period of decline.

Epochs have come and gone. The geographical record tells us that the earth was once a very different place. Today, mountains stand where huge oceans once were. Huge canyons were once plains. Such changes have occurred over millions of years. Others happen in seconds or milliseconds, such as the chemical reaction that absorbs oxygen into the blood, or the crying of birds outside our window. Our lives exist in time: seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, decades, centuries, millennia.

We understand evanescence and the passing of time more deeply as we age. We experience introductions, developments, and conclusions. Our sense of process is inherent to our humanity. Why is it that we are capable of speaking in the past tense? "She *was* a good person." What makes us capable of speaking about the future? "I *will visit* Alaska someday." Is our future pre-

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see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: With a New Epilogue* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

dictable as a projection of the past and present? Or do we only want to think that this is true because our desire for meaning is even more compelling than our awareness of endings, even the ending that is called death?

Death brings closure, and closure brings meaning. But some of us wonder if even death is actually the end. Could dying be a part of a larger cycle that takes us beyond what we know now to things we are yet to discover? Many believe so. For one thing, the dead influence us. All of my grandparents, both of my parents, one brother, and one sister have passed on. Years after their deaths, I am still aware of them. They still influence the decisions I make. Does this mean that they still exist? Or is this simply magical thinking? Although I have this wish to be with them again someday, is the idea of a future reunion delusional? Is it only the lasting qualities of memory coupled with our creative projections of desire that allow us to think of something called "the future"?

These days, our ability to pose such questions has us looking for evidence and proof. Yet, things are not so simple. How dependable is the logical requirement? How valid is the empirical assumption that we see things (including the evidence of this and that) as they are? Surely, a truly skeptical person would never accept the assumptions of empiricism uncritically. And, in the end, a true doubter would certainly see how easy (and necessary) it is to be doubtful about doubt. Because of my life-long study of both Mormonism and Buddhism, I find the possibility of life after death no harder to imagine than the fact that I am alive now. How did I get here? Why do I have the life I do when someone else's life seems so different than mine? We want to think that events have knowable causes, but if this is so, why must our sciences be so consistently reductive in their attempt to understand a complicated reality? Certainly, doubt about critical methods can be as potentially misleading as belief. On the other hand, doubt can also be as useful to us as believing.

Is the world going to end? There are different ways to think about this question. On one extreme, we are not beyond denying all possibilities. The daily news tells us we are quite capable

of glorifying death, rushing into extinction because we have too little hope and also because we have too much. By contrast, some of us are afraid to die and will do anything within our power to stay alive. Perhaps this stubborn resistance to the inevitable is one reason why some look forward to an end of the world that is survivable—an end that is not the end, so to speak, at least not for everyone. Could there be a more dangerous, threatening notion than the inevitable destruction of *some* of us?

Religious Views

As already suggested, the idea that the world is in decline has been taken up by the world's major religious traditions. They are a source of end-of-the-world thinking. Mahayana Buddhists, for example, believe in the concept of "the end of the law" (*mappō*). Since the demise of the historical Buddha, the world has become increasingly evil. Over time, conditions have become so bad that human beings are no longer able to work for and achieve salvation on their own. Salvation is still possible. But if it is to come, it has to come by way of the power of another (*tariki*) rather than by one's own efforts (*jiriki*). So it is that a savior figure, such as Amida, intercedes on our behalf. Motivated by compassion, Buddhist deities help those who would otherwise be caught in an ever-declining state.

Buddhism is not a monotheistic religion, but with regard to the end of the world it is not so unlike the great spiritual narratives that originated in the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These faith traditions also embrace the idea that the world is becoming increasingly evil. If anything, they hold to the notion of the end of the world more insistently than most of the schools of Buddhism, probably because they are so focused on the supremacy of one god.

For instance, many believing Jews look forward to the coming of a savior, a Messiah, who will redeem his chosen people at

the end of time.[7] Of course, as with other religions, there exists a wide range of opinion about even the most fundamental tenets of this worldview: the nature of God, how human and divine beings interact, the purpose of existence, and so on. Today, while ultra-conservative Haredim might be looking forward to the end (and to the full restoration of God's people in both a political and spiritual sense), the socialist founders of the nominally modern and secular state of Israel would downplay the possibility of a final showdown at Armageddon.

For Jews, both gathered and scattered, both believing and skeptical, the meteoric rise and fall of a messianic figure such as Sabbatai Zevi (1626–76) remains a cautionary tale. Zevi was a manic-depressive zealot who came to believe that he was the long-awaited King of the Jews. In a matter of years, he was able to gain a massive following as the Messiah, only to be forced to convert to Islam by Ottoman rulers. Needless to say, his conversion contributed to a crisis of faith among his many followers throughout Europe and the Middle East. Even so, among believing Jews today, and especially among the Hassidic mystics, the notion persists of a savior who will come at the end of time to recognize and bless his people.

Christians, too, believe in a Messiah. They hold that he has already come once, was rejected, and will appear again in a form that *everyone* will recognize. Jesus of Nazareth, descended from King David, was sacrificed to atone for the failings of others. According to traditional Christian belief, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven with the promise of returning. His second coming will mark the end of the world as we know it. Prior to that event, the earth will be cleansed with fire as a prelude to all things being revealed, which revelation is the basic meaning of the term "apocalypse." Accompanying these events will be the widespread destruction of the wicked.

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7. Gershom G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994).

For Muslims, faith in God (Allah) and belief in the last day are inseparable.[8] Someday, everyone who has ever lived on earth will be held accountable for what they have done and believed. The exact hour of the end is unknown; but the faithful carefully take note of the signs of the times, such as widespread promiscuity, the consumption of alcohol, and the construction of tall buildings. Other, more unusual signs will also appear: the sun will rise in the west, there will be three blasts of the trumpet, and so on. Then the end will come as a prologue to that day when we will all be judged according to what we have thought and done.

According to Islamic doctrine, our eternal fate is decided by Allah. Since no one has lived a perfect, sinless life, were it not for Allah's great mercy, which is given to all, everyone would suffer infinitely. Being perfect, Allah's love compels him to pray for the salvation of everyone. Thus the initial truth that "Allah is Gracious and Compassionate" (Qur'an 1:1) begins every chapter of the Qur'an except one.[9] Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad were all his prophets. He is the sacred One who makes it possible for all people to have hope, to learn how to love others, and, yes, to fare well on the coming day of judgment.

Here we come to a problem. Common to these three Middle Eastern religions are two powerful notions. First, the world is in need of saving. Second, God will save His people. If it were not for the idea that there is only one god, the meaning of "His people" might not be so concerning. Unfortunately, this appeal for "one" is as often exclusive as it is inclusive. Many modern-minded believers embrace the notion that their particular faith is correct to the exclusion of others. This chauvinism, along with the sectarian response it often stimulates, makes the possibility of conflict and catastrophe all the more likely since it pits one faith, or one sect of the same tradition, against another.

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8. Jane I. Smith, "Eschatology" in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 44–53.

9. This anomaly, found in chapter 9, Tauba (Repentance), or Bar āat (Immunity), might occur simply because a longer chapter was divided at some point.

I ronically, we find ourselves in a situation where our hope for a better life makes our world hopeless. For this reason alone, many refuse to accept anything like a well-organized system of religious doctrines, beliefs, and symbols. Without getting too deeply into the various forms that secularization has actually taken, I would simply like to make the observation that, despite the skeptical force of modern consciousness, many people still believe in the end of the world. This being the case, we are faced with a *practical* issue of great consequence.

Although many of us might not have theoretical interest in a spiritual meaning of the end of the world, the unsustainability of our economic and political systems force us to consider a similar day of reckoning in a most practical manner.[10] Beyond this, whether we believe or not in a religious aspect of social decline, there still are many who do. As a practical matter, if belief in a violent end to the world is prevalent, what will prevent such a catastrophe from actually happening? What will stop the bombs, bullets, and judgments of the faithful if their faith is not in our future happiness but in our inevitable decline and destruction?

Let me put the problem that faces us today even more concretely. If many of our planet's inhabitants believe in the *justified* destruction of the wicked, does this acceptance of judgment make us earth dwellers more or less likely to push back against war, famine, and contagion? In his seminal study, *Apocalypse in Islam*, Jean-Pierre Filiu argues that Christian and Jewish visions of the Final Judgment have stimulated alarmist reactions in Islamic lands, both historically and presently. While the use of an "immense fund of symbolic capital" to instigate war has actually been used sparingly until now, "one day a larger and more resourceful group, eager (like Abu Musab al-Suri) to tap the energy of the 'masses' as way of achieving superiority over

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10. Thomas Picketty presents data to show that capitalism, for instance, naturally leads to a concentration of wealth that has negative consequences for sustained economic development. Thomas Picketty, Arthur Goldhammer, trans., *Capitalism in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

rival formations, may be strongly tempted to resort to the messianic gambit. An appeal to the imminence of apocalypse would provide it with an instrument of recruitment, a framework for interpreting future developments, and a way of refashioning and consolidating its own identity. In combination, these things could have far-reaching and deadly consequences."[11]

Do we care less about war, pollution, or even declining civility if we think that, inevitably, all our earthly trials and difficulties will thankfully be over at some point in the near future? After all, it is hard to deny that we all have destructive tendencies. Realizing this, do we not simply accept the inevitability of evil and the need to let the ordained conflict of good against bad play itself out, as if it were a viral infection that must run its course?

Would We Be Better Off Without Religion?

For some, this is a sensible question. For others, it is arrogant and unspeakable. Wherever you might stand on this issue, I raise the possibility of "no more religion" because it helps us understand the many attitudes that presently exist regarding the end of the world. I have suggested that, for many, the end is a matter of belief and not simply a consequence of our capacity to be destructive. If this is true, then we should expect that a critique of such beliefs also forms, and that an attempt to avoid end-of-the-world thinking should appear. To put it bluntly, if the religious traditions I've just mentioned do indeed present this danger, then wouldn't it be smart of us to think of alternative ways to narrate our experience of the world? Certainly, one obvious solution to the problem of our imminent demise would be to have people stop believing in certain dangerous ideas, such as a horrific day of judgment or a cataclysmic apocalypse.

As difficult as this solution might seem, a turning away from religion actually was, and still is, put forward as a reasonable solu-

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11. Jean-Pierre Filiu, M.B. DeVoise, trans., *Apocalypse in Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 198.

tion to our problems. As a matter of fact, the endeavor to progress beyond religion is one of the prevailing features of modern life as we know it, wherever and whenever modernity is encountered. To put it simply, one defining feature of the consciousness that we call "new-and-improved" is, in fact, how it attempts to translate religious thought into secular terms: consciousness rather than soul, conscience rather than spirit, and so forth. Seeking something better, the leaders of the European Enlightenment, often under threat of the religious institutions that dominated in their day, encouraged Christians and Jews to "progress" beyond the sectarian violence that had plagued that part of the world for centuries. The new thinking of Descartes, Spinoza, Machiavelli, Locke, and others eventually led to a separation of church and state, and eventually to the creation of societies that defined the good in ways that were intended to be more inclusive and tolerant than the various religious societies in Europe had proven themselves to be *to that point in time*. Plutocracies tied to religious organizations were condemned. Pluralism and democracy were held up as ideals, with the result that much of the world became less rigidly tied to religious thought and sentiment.[12]

Unfortunately, this critique of religious thought came as an ironic precondition of modernity. I say it was ironic because modern consciousness seems to have inherited the structure of monotheism (rather than of polytheism) even as it criticized religious life so sharply. In other words, God might have been unceremoniously knocked from his throne, but the throne itself was carefully preserved for future occupancy. As a result, various forms of secular ideology became similarly hierarchical, aggressive, and intolerant—with the consequence that the end of the world became no less of a possibility than before. Indeed, rather than peace, modern progress has brought war and destruction on a scale never before experienced on this planet. If modern

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12. For a wide-ranging study of what it means to be secular, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). There is much that is useful here, though I find Taylor's understanding of the role and nature of "immanence" to be mistaken.

people progressed, they moved on from destroying villages to learning how to level cities and decimate nations.

Modern life has caused old sentiments to assume new forms, including numerous secular versions of what Anna Glazova and Paul North call the "messianic remainder."[13] Consider how, for instance, Japanese nationalists around the turn of the twentieth century created the paradoxical institution of State Shintō, a form of animistic worship that was decidedly no longer local. By generalizing the simple sense of awe that a person has for his or her immediate natural environment, Meiji-period (1868–1912) ideologues transformed this primitive impulse into a symbolic superstructure for an entire nation and empire, where the worship of the emperor as the paramount symbol of Japanese civilization became mandatory.[14] Of course, modern Japanese were not alone in trying to make the world better by making it more organized: all modern societies generalize from particulars in order to establish various ideals. Consider how, in America, a sense of Christian superiority influenced the early eugenics movement in its drive to engineer biological perfection.[15] Or consider how fascism *perfects* society by establishing hegemonic systems that mercilessly marginalize and eliminate those considered to be polluted, decadent, and otherwise impure.[16]

Today, similar attempts to use monotheistic structures for secular purposes continue. Some political groups that are just now experiencing their modern phase frequently reference Islam

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13. Anna Glazova and Paul North, eds., *Messianic Thought Outside Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

14. For an example of this modern impulse to couch politics in religious symbolism, see Helen Hardacre, *Shintō and the State: 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

15. Leila Zenderland, "Biblical Biology: American Protestant Social Reformers and the Early Eugenics Movement," in *Science in Context* 11 (1998): 511–25.

16. For an insightful analysis of Nazi aesthetics, see Peter Cohen, dir., *The Architecture of Doom* (*Undergangens arkitektur*) (1989).

in order to bolster their various positions.[17] Whether we call this spiritual fervor "patriotism," "fascism," or "jihad," we can easily see how religious devotion is used to support mass movements, even when they are violent and at odds with a message of peace.[18] Surely, the well-established desire to believe in this or that universal ideal remains all too useful to modern societies as they search for metanarratives and unifying concepts that might keep "the people" bound to a single, powerful identity. Bolstered by this and that unifying notion—nation, empire, race, truth, and so on—modern nations, which are socially massive by nature, learn how to kill with greater and greater efficiency. Mobilized to fight other nations with higher technological efficiency than ever before, modern nations wage a type of war that is more deadly than even ancient and medieval slaughter. The sword has been replaced with guns, guns with bombs, and bombs with poisonous gas and thermonuclear weapons.

Modern warfare almost brought the world to an end in the 1930s and '40s. During the event that we call World War II, fifty to seventy million people lost their lives. In this conflict, a number of modernizing nations were pitted against other modernizing nations—including Japan, the United States, Germany, France, England, Italy, and Russia. The result was "total war," a term that describes the deployment of massive destructive power as it is used to destroy enemy populations, not just to defeat an enemy's military force. My point here is simply that the millions of modern people who fought these wars were whole-heartedly

17. I'm assuming that some cultures are still approaching this modern phase while others are beyond it. Japan and the United States, for instance, have largely moved on. Other cultures are still not yet modern. Still others are presently in their modern period: Syria, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, among them. One characteristic of modern cultures is a propensity for massive violence.

18. I thank Naila Ali Baloch of the Tufts Chaplaincy for pointing out to me and to my students that jihad is meant to be a personal, spiritual striving, not the fanatical political movement that it is often seen to be.

committed to such devastation. Their patriotism enlivened them. It made them genocidal.

To give just one specific example of modern secularism gone awry, we might look to Mao Zedong and China's Cultural Revolution. The Chinese Communists claimed to be freeing people from the unenlightened ways of feudal practice. But most scholars now agree that the Party simply replaced old symbols and practices, such as Confucian-inspired filial piety, with new ideals, such as the invincibility of the modern Chinese state and the virtues of the Communist Party. In other words, the deification of Mao met the lingering "spiritual" needs of modernization. The same can be said for the apotheosis of George Washington, Joseph Stalin, Kim Il-Sung, Hugo Chavez, and so on.

With or without God and His helpers to blame, we face a sobering use of human ingenuity. Consider the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904–1967), one of the creators of the atomic bomb. In the beginning, Oppenheimer expressed opposition to creating such a weapon. Later, once his research team designed and exploded the first prototype in New Mexico, most members of his team became reluctant to drop such a horrifying device on Japanese cities as originally planned. Could they not make the point by deploying it elsewhere?

Ironically, it was Oppenheimer who insisted on going ahead with the experiment as originally planned. In his mind, there was a way to do science, and that was properly. Since, from the start, the atomic bomb had been designed for use on a live target, that was how it ought to be tested. How tragic that this man who once thought that nuclear weapons were too horrible to create became the one to insist that the two prototypes be deployed as planned: the gun-triggered device dropped on the people of Hiroshima and the implosive device dropped on Nagasaki.[19] One

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19. For an account of Oppenheimer's involvement, see Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 290–309.

reason why the end of the world for Hiroshima was not enough is that two bombs had been built, and both required testing.

These two cities were chosen because they happened to be the right size. Tokyo was too big (and already spoiled by carpet bombing). Other towns were too small. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though, were appropriate for the weapons that had been designed and required testing. For this reason, these cities had been spared the B-29 fire bombings that had already burned 90% of Japan's cities to the ground. On August 6 and 9, 1945, the two bombs were deployed successfully. The resulting deaths of an estimated 180,000 to 250,0000 people could not be more relevant to our present thinking about the end of the world, especially since today's nuclear warheads are twenty to eighty times more powerful than those primitive bombs.[20]

The destruction of all life on this planet has gained an increasingly practical tenor. The end is no longer a frightening metaphor. It is not simply a story, nor a dramatic (some would say sublime) aesthetic. The end of civilization can, and probably will, happen. That is, unless we find a way to think and behave differently. As Sigmund Freud once put it, we now live with the possibility of "exterminating one another to the last man."[21] If the destruction of our planet does not come quickly—as a series of tactical flashes that bring on the cold darkness of constant night—then it might come slowly, as rising sea levels and mass migrations, as ever-more violent storms and a disruption of food production, as the spread of superbacterial and viral infections, as political instability, and the abandonment of hope leading to a further breakdown of social order. This decline is upon us.

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20. Typically, today's warheads are about .25 to 1 Megaton, or 250 to 1000 kilotons. However, in the 1950s, the USSR tested a bomb of about 50 Megatons. I thank my colleague Gary Goldstein for help on matters of physics and nuclear disarmament.

21. Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, reprinted in James Strachey, et al, eds., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. X (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 15.