

Appendix 6 - The Book of Revelation

Embracing Doomsday: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Nuclear Age
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NOTE: This article has been shortened from its original length.

Beliefs and narratives about the end of the world have fascinated people throughout history. In nearly every culture, sacred narratives are told about worldly cataclysm, the regeneration of the earth, and the creation of a terrestrial paradise (Talman 1968:349-351; Thrupp 1970:11-15). Until recently, the end of the world has been interpreted as a meaningful and supernatural event, involving the annihilation and renewal of the earth by deities or divine forces. During the last half of the twentieth century, however, widespread beliefs about a meaningless apocalypse have emerged and now compete with traditional religious apocalyptic worldviews.

The creation and proliferation of nuclear weapons, in particular, have fundamentally altered contemporary apocalyptic speculation, fueling fears of global annihilation and evoking widespread fatalism about the future of humanity. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 initiated an era of nuclear apocalypticism that has flourished in American religious culture, folklore, and popular culture; the most widespread and persistent belief that emerges from both religious and secular speculation about nuclear weapons is that they will be used to bring about the end of the world (see Wojcik 1997).

Since the mid-1940s, folk beliefs and assorted religious traditions have reflected the view that the invention of nuclear weapons is a fulfillment of divine prophecies. The prospect of nuclear annihilation has been readily incorporated into various apocalyptic belief systems and mythologized as a meaningful event that is an inevitable part of a preordained plan for the redemption of the world. The extent to which visions of nuclear catastrophe are found to be compatible with prophecy beliefs about a fiery conflagration at the end of time is indicated by a Yankelovich poll taken in 1984, in which 39 percent of a sample population agreed with the statement "When the Bible predicts that the earth will be destroyed by fire, it's telling us that a nuclear war is inevitable" (Jones 1985:67). If this sampling of the populace is representative, then as many as eighty-five million Americans may believe that nuclear apocalypse is foreordained (Halsell 1986:10).

Despite the end of the Cold War, beliefs about the inevitability of nuclear apocalypse persist today, stemming from the magnitude and seeming uncontrollability of nuclear weapons and the likelihood that they will be developed and used by hostile nations or extremist organizations in the future. Although other disastrous scenarios involving environmental destruction, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, and deadly viruses have become increasingly emphasized in current endtimes thought, prophecy beliefs about nuclear Armageddon continue to thrive in assorted apocalyptic traditions as the year 2000 approaches.

This essay initially discusses apocalyptic beliefs as a folk religious phenomenon and then examines premillennial dispensationalism, the most pervasive form of apocalyptic prophecy belief in the United States today. Focusing on the ways that dispensationalist beliefs have been adapted to reflect the concerns of the nuclear age, I explore how the concept of fatalism—commonly understood as the belief that certain events and experiences are inevitable,

unalterable, and determined by external forces beyond human control-is central to the dispensationalist tradition. The term fatalism is not used here in a pejorative sense; fatalistic thought is an enduring and widespread means of understanding the world. The idea of fate embodies the sense of inevitability that is inherent not only to dispensationalism but to other contemporary apocalyptic traditions as well. From the dawn of the atomic age, the belief that nuclear annihilation is foreordained and unavoidable has been a feature of dispensationalism and remains an important part of this prophecy tradition in the post-Cold War era.

Apocalyptic Traditions and Folk Religion

Although most mainstream churches in the United States today deemphasize prophecy and reject outright the practice of predicting events relating to the end of the world, numerous surveys indicate that apocalyptic speculation flourishes at a popular level, with millions of Americans of all backgrounds currently embracing beliefs which assert that worldly destruction is imminent and part of a divinely preordained plan for collective salvation (see D. Wilson 1977:12; Boyer 1992:15).

Although such surveys do not reveal the degree to which these beliefs are integral to people's lives, they do suggest that interest in endtimes prophecies is much more pervasive than scholars have recognized. According to a 1994 survey conducted for U.S. News & World Report, 53 percent of those polled believe that some world events in the twentieth century fulfill biblical prophecy, with a significant percentage also believing that the Bible should be taken literally when it speaks of a final Judgment Day (60%), a Battle of Armageddon (44%), the Antichrist (49%), and the Rapture of the church (44%) (U.S. News & World Report, December 19, 1994, 64). The ubiquitous nature of apocalyptic beliefs was revealed in 1991, when many Americans interpreted the war in the Persian Gulf as the beginning of an endtimes scenario that would culminate in a nuclear conflagration. A Gallup poll conducted during the Gulf War found that 15 percent of respondents thought the war fulfilled prophecy and that Armageddon was at hand (Bezilla 1996:26). The grassroots character of prophecy beliefs is further indicated by the fact that even though most Christian prophecy interpreters are reluctant to predict a specific date for Christ's return, surveys show that many Christians believe that Jesus will arrive around the year 2000. For example, in a Time/CNN poll conducted by Yankelovich Partners on April 28-29, 1993, 20 percent of the respondents answered yes to the question, "Do you think that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur sometime around the year 2000?"; 31 percent were not sure; and 49 percent answered no. Twenty percent is a significant number, but the 31 percent who believe that Christ might possibly return around the year 2000 perhaps reveals even more about the pervasiveness of millennial speculation.

This popular interest in apocalyptic prophecy may be usefully thought of as an expression of folk religion, defined by Don Yoder as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (1974:14). Historically, apocalyptic beliefs often have originated apart from the official sanction of religious institutions and have been founded in personal experiences rather than prescribed by ecclesiastical doctrines. The revolutionary millenarian movements that occurred in Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, for instance, were forms of apocalypticism that existed outside and in opposition to dominant ecclesiastical structures. In characterizing the popular appeal of these medieval movements, Norman Cohn notes that "the importance of the apocalyptic tradition should not be underestimated; even though official

doctrine no longer had any place for it, it persisted in the obscure underworld of popular religion" (1970:30). The leaders of such movements-self-proclaimed messiahs, visionaries, heretics, and mystical anarchists-gained their authority apart from the institutional church and attracted disciples through personal charisma and promises of an apocalyptic end to current suffering and the establishment of a world free from pain, evil, and sin (Cohn 1970:1&17).

British and American apocalypticism in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century also developed apart from formal religious institutions, according to J. F. C. Harrison, who notes that "omens and auguries, dreams and divinations, magic, witchcraft and demons...the popular literature of chapbooks and almanacs lies close to the world of millenarian manifestations. Folk culture provided the matrix in which millenarian yearnings could be nourished" (1979:39). Apocalyptic traditions of belief frequently have rejected institutional religious dogma and expressed a desire for salvation outside established institutions, which are considered to be corrupt or evil and which therefore must be destroyed before a new social order may be established (8. Wilson 1973:19).

Today, many of the leading proponents of apocalyptic beliefs are not formally trained theologians associated with mainstream religious denominations or national organizations but visionaries or prophecy interpreters who derive their apocalyptic authority from their charisma, predictive abilities, or divinely inspired revelations attained outside the formal sanction of dominant religious institutions. Filling the void left by the general aversion to detailed apocalyptic speculation within mainstream institutional religion, interpreters of apocalyptic prophecies usually do not lead formal pastorates; their ideas are promoted at a grassroots level rather than through affiliation with a particular denomination or a formally organized religious body (Boyer 1992:305). Contemporary apocalyptic belief in the United States is characterized by this "unofficial" and sub-cultural quality, existing at an informal level and learned and transmitted outside the channels of official religious instruction.

Current apocalyptic beliefs are expressed through oral traditions and customary lore and are also communicated through photocopied fliers, religious tracts, videos, audiocassettes, paperback books, radio, cable television, and computer newsgroups. Print and electronic technologies have enabled individuals and groups to convey apocalyptic ideas to millions of people, spanning religious denominations as well as secular and religious distinctions. Although apocalyptic ideas are now often transmitted through the technology of mass communications, most of these ideas reflect commonly held worldviews and local folk beliefs. Certainly, some promoters of apocalyptic beliefs are savvy and exploitative entrepreneurs, but the majority of people who disseminate such ideas are sincere in their faith and have simply used new technologies to sustain and promote widespread popular traditions. Their publications and audio and video cassettes are replete with testimonials and expressions of belief that reflect the real experiences and faith of believers.

The popular origin and often ephemeral nature of many of these printed and electronic documents bear some resemblance to the chapbooks and broadsides of previous times. Like these earlier forms associated with ordinary people and existing outside the intellectual mainstream of society, they represent what Richard Dorson referred to as "sub-literary forms" of expression that stay close to popular traditions, reflect the beliefs of specific social groups, and ignore and scorn literary refinements (1977:208). Print and electronic media are especially valuable sources of information about the sub-literary expression of apocalyptic beliefs, revealing much about the

spiritual culture of popular apocalypticism, illuminating the common themes and recurring ideas in apocalyptic traditions, and providing insights into the concerns and hopes of people who anticipate the end of the world.

The inspiration for most contemporary Christian prophecy evolved from specific apocalyptic passages in the Bible, particularly the books of Revelation, Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel, which are generally considered to be the most complete of the biblical apocalyptic writings. Due to the cryptic imagery, symbolic language, and ambiguous allusions in these ancient biblical passages, understandings of endtime prophecies have varied considerably in different historical periods and inspired multiple and often conflicting interpretations depending on cultural, social, and individual contexts.

The ways that apocalyptic belief systems have been modified and updated to reflect contemporary contexts illustrate the dynamic nature of apocalyptic traditions. Believers and interpreters of apocalyptic prophecy are masterful bricoleurs, skillfully recasting elements and themes within the constraints of their respective traditions and reconfiguring them to formulate new, meaningful endtimes scenarios. Although the basic themes and formal elements of Christian apocalyptic traditions have remained fairly stable through time, they have been imbued with the culturally relevant flavor of particular historical epochs. Believers at different historical moments, for example, have described the breaking of the seven seals and the pouring of the seven vials referred to in the Book of Revelation in terms of potential catastrophes that threatened humanity at the time. The varying beliefs about the rise to power of the Antichrist illustrate this updating of tradition, with the actual identity of the Antichrist having been repeatedly revised to reflect perceived enemies of Christianity (e.g., Nero, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein).

The adaptability of apocalyptic belief systems is epitomized by the ways that nuclear weapons and visions of nuclear annihilation have been assimilated into these traditions, with ancient prophecies about fiery cataclysms recast in terms of Cold War fears and the real threats that confront humanity in the nuclear age. Before the invention of nuclear weapons, biblical references to fiery catastrophes at the end of time were interpreted in terms of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, comets, and volcanic eruptions. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many interpreters of prophecy searched the Bible for possible allusions to nuclear conflagration, and found persuasive evidence that the Scriptures had predicted the invention of atomic weapons and foretold of their apocalyptic use (Boyer 1992:115). References to fiery destruction in the Book of Revelation, for example, suggested atomic warfare—the "hail and fire mixed with blood" which burns a third of the land and trees and "all green grass" sounded like nuclear war (Rev. 8:7); an allusion to scorching heat and malignant sores might describe the aftermath of atomic radiation (Rev. 16:2-8). For some believers, Zechariah's (14:12) account of human flesh being consumed as people stand on their feet appeared to resemble the effects of a nuclear firestorm, as do the predictions of a coming day that shall burn like an oven and set people on fire (Malachi 3:19) and flames burning the pastures and all the trees of the field (Joel 1:19). The compatibility of ancient prophecies about "fire from the heavens" and visions of nuclear cataclysm is illustrated by the often cited passage of a melting earth from 2 Peter ("a good description of a nuclear blast" according to one prophecy interpreter [Van Impe 1987:131]): "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be disintegrated with intense heat; the earth also, and all its works, shall be burned up" (3:10). Convinced that nuclear weapons were the means by which ancient prophecies of "fire and brimstone" raining down from

the heavens would be realized, prophecy believers from various traditions embraced the development of nuclear weapons as a portent indicating that humanity had accelerated its progression toward an apocalypse that was inevitable (see Figure 1).

Dispensationalist Prophecy Beliefs

Of the various prophecy traditions that have incorporated beliefs about a divinely ordained nuclear catastrophe, dispensationalism is the most widespread and is espoused by the majority of televangelists and popular prophecy interpreters, many of whom have stated, at one time or another, that nuclear annihilation is foreordained. The influence of such beliefs is suggested by a Nielsen survey of television viewers conducted in October 1985, which found that approximately "61 million Americans (40 percent of all viewers) regularly listen to preachers who tell them nothing can be done to prevent a nuclear war in our lifetime" (Halsell 1986:11).

Not all dispensationalists consider a global nuclear war to be a predetermined part of God's plan, but public opinion surveys and interviews indicate that beliefs about inevitable nuclear Armageddon are widely held and generally accepted within the dispensationalist subculture (see Boyer 1992:116-151; Halsell 1986; Mojtabai 1986).

Dispensationalism is a form of Christian fundamentalism, often associated with Pentecostalism, and characterized by its emphasis on biblical literalism, supernaturalism, support for conservative political causes, and its condemnation of communism, secularism, science, and ecumenicism. Like other forms of millenarianism, dispensationalism expresses the belief in imminent, terrestrial, collective salvation that will be brought about by superhuman forces through a worldly catastrophe which will destroy evil and establish an ideal age free from suffering (cf. Cohn 1970:15; Talman 1968:349; Wessinger 1995:2). Similar to other apocalyptic traditions, dispensationalism expresses a pessimistic view of humanity and maintains that the world is fatally flawed and unredeemable by human effort.

Holding that a divinely ordained cataclysm and the Second Coming of Christ are the only means of rectifying the world's problems, dispensationalists believe that a thousand-year reign of peace on earth will be established after Christ returns.

Although dispensationalists may debate the specific details of the endtimes scenario, they agree that prior to the Second Coming, humanity will become increasingly evil (a state that is generally thought to be occurring during the believers' own lifetimes) and that the Antichrist will rise to power, persecute Christians, and wreak havoc upon the world during a seven year period of cataclysmic tribulation. Depending on the interpretation, at some point before, during, or after the tribulation period the Christian faithful will be "raptured," or physically removed from the earth (see Figure 2). At the end of the Tribulation, the Antichrist will be destroyed at the Battle of Armageddon by Christ and his legions and a thousand-year millennial realm will be created (Weber 1987:10-11).

Contemporary dispensationalism is derived from a belief system that developed in England in the 1820s and that quickly became a major expression of apocalyptic ideas in the United States. Early American dispensationalism was initially promoted by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a member of the Plymouth Brethren. Influenced by Darby's system and relying on Cyrus I. Scofield's Reference Bible (1909), dispensationalists divide history into seven epochs

and maintain that humanity has been predestined to pass through each of these dispensational periods, during which God tests and communicates with humankind in differing ways, with humanity destined to fail each of these tests (Sandeem 1970:62-71).

Dispensationalism gained increasing popularity after the Niagara Bible Conferences that began in 1875 and had become the most widespread form of American millenarianism by the early twentieth century. As a response in part to the Protestant liberalism of the time, dispensationalism ultimately converged with the fundamentalist movement, insisting on the absolute authority of the Bible as a divine document. Regarding the Scriptures as literally true and inerrant, dispensationalists use the Bible not only as a sacred guidebook for individual behavior but as a means of determining God's plan for humanity, with perceived evils and current crises interpreted as portents that reveal the prophetic timetable in the last days.

The most influential interpreter and popularizer of dispensationalist prophecy since the early 1970s is Hal Lindsey, who is often referred to as "the father of the modern prophecy movement" within the dispensationalist subculture. The apocalyptic scenario that he presents in his writings, familiar to most dispensationalists today, illustrates the fatalistic aspects of the dispensationalist tradition. Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1973 [1970]) sold 7.5 million copies during the 1970s, making it the largest-selling American nonfiction book of that decade (*New York Times Book Review*, April 6, 1980, 27). By 1991, the volume had sold more than 28 million copies, making Lindsey the most widely read interpreter of prophecy in history (*Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1991, F16; S. Graham 1989:249; Weber 1987:211). Lindsey's subsequent books have been extremely successful as well, with sales in the millions.

Like most dispensationalist expositors, Lindsey asserts that the establishment of a Jewish nation in the land of Palestine in 1948 and Israel's taking possession of Old Jerusalem in 1967 are crucial fulfillments of prophecy that indicate that the end of the world is at hand. Once these incidents occurred, the doomsday clock was accelerated: "This has now set the stage for the other predicted signs to develop in history. It is like the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle being found and then having the many adjacent pieces rapidly fall into place" (Lindsey 1973:47). According to Lindsey and many other dispensationalists, recent prophetic events also include the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons; the prominence of a Russian confederation as the powerful "nation of the North"; the rise of China as the "nation in the East"; the appearance of a new "Roman Empire" in the form of the European Common Market or the European Community; disasters (earthquakes, famine, strange diseases, unusual weather changes); increased crime, drug abuse, and violence; interest in the occult, "new religions," and the appearance of false prophets, all identified as manifestations of the Babylonian Mystery Religion predicted in the Book of Revelation (see Lindsey 1973, 1981, 1984, 1994, 1995; Hindson 1996; Hunt 1990; Jeffrey 1994; Kirban 1973; LeHaye 1972; Van Impe 1987).

The following scenario, which Lindsey maintains is foretold in the Bible, embodies many of the basic elements of dispensationalist end-times belief. Prior to Armageddon, the "Roman Empire" will be revived through an alliance of ten European Common Market nations and this world power eventually will be controlled by a great charismatic leader who will protect Israel, resolve disputes in the Middle East, and bring peace to the world. This global leader, who will have miraculously recovered from a fatal head wound, is the Antichrist, and he will be worshipped as the world's savior in the form of a one-world religion consisting of secular humanism, "faithless Christianity" and "occult practices" such as astrology, witchcraft, and drug-

induced mind expansion (Lindsey 1973:103123). The Antichrist, who will dominate the world through the European Common Market, will be symbolized by some representation of the number "666" (the "Mark of the Beast"), which will be required of all individuals for buying and selling (see Figure 3). To control people economically, the Antichrist will demand that the number be imprinted or tattooed on the hand or forehead (Lindsey 1973:100-102). The Antichrist's rise to power will initiate the seven-year tribulation period of Christian and Jewish persecution, disasters, and worldly suffering that "will make the regimes of Hitler, Mao, and Stalin look like Girl Scouts weaving a daisy chain by comparison" (Lindsey 1973:99).

During his rule, the Muslim Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem will be destroyed, and the ancient Jewish Temple of Solomon rebuilt on its original site. (Jewish terrorists actually have been convicted of plotting to destroy the Dome of the Rock and allegedly have received financial support from Christian Zionist organizations intent on expediting Christ's return [Halsell 1986:9].)

According to Lindsey, once the Temple is rebuilt, the end of the world is imminent. At this point, a Russian confederacy and its Arab and African allies will invade Israel and take Jerusalem. Lindsey states that the European forces, led by the Antichrist, will then obliterate the Russian army in Israel as well as the Russian confederacy, most likely in a nuclear attack. Soon afterward, an army of 200 million "Red Chinese" will mobilize and challenge the Antichrist's world domination, attacking his forces at the Mount of Megiddo and the plain of Jezreel (Lindsey 1973:135-157). In the ensuing battle, all the major cities in the world will be destroyed, presumably in a global nuclear war. Just as the carnage escalates to its climax, Christ will return to defeat the evil forces, judge the faithless, and protect the faithful. After Armageddon, an earthly paradise, established out of "atomic materials," will exist for one thousand years. At the end of that time, this millennial paradise will be threatened by a rebellion of unbelievers led by Satan, which Christ will suppress, after which a new heaven and new earth will be created and the faithful will become immortal (Lindsey 1973:158-168).

In each of his books, Lindsey details the ways that nuclear war and its aftermath are important parts of the divine script, methodically interpreting Scripture that refers to mass destruction or fiery cataclysm in terms of nuclear annihilation. A passage from Revelation (6:14) about the atmosphere being torn and pushed apart like a scroll rolled together, for example, is regarded as a "perfect picture of an all-out nuclear exchange" which will shake every mountain and island from its present position (Lindsey 1984:98). The fourth seal judgment in Revelation (6:7-8) about the arrival of a "pale horse" of death is viewed as a prediction indicating that between one-fourth and one-half of humanity will be killed in a global nuclear war (Lindsey 1984:88); the catastrophic trembling of the earth that is part of the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12) leads Lindsey to believe "that the Apostle John is describing an earthquake set off by many nuclear explosions"; the prophesied darkening of the sun and the moon (Rev. 6:12) resembles the radioactive contamination of "dirty" cobalt bombs and an ensuing "nuclear winter" scenario (Lindsey 1984:9698).

Lindsey declares that the ancient biblical prophets could not adequately describe the sophisticated technologies of nuclear destruction conveyed in their revelations and thus referred to ICBMs and nuclear firestorms, for example, in terms of "hail and fire mixed with blood" (Lindsey asks, "How could God transmit the thought of a nuclear catastrophe to someone living in the year A.D. 90!" [1984:12;

117]). The invention of nuclear weapons suddenly has made these unfathomable prophecies comprehensible. Zechariah 14:12 predicts that "their flesh will be consumed from their bones, their eyes burned out of their sockets, and their tongues consumed out of their mouths while they stand on their feet." For hundreds of years students of Bible prophecy have wondered what kind of plague could produce such instant ravaging of humans while still on their feet. Until the advent of the atomic bomb such a thing was not humanly possible. But now everything Zechariah predicted could come true instantly in a thermonuclear exchange! (Lindsey 1984:210-211).

Lindsey also provides descriptions of the effects of nuclear cataclysms in terms of the biblical seven trumpet judgments and the seven bowls of wrath, each of which involves a preordained scenario of suffering that will be unleashed on humanity and that will ravage the earth. The devastation and slaughter will be unparalleled: "Imagine, cities like London, Paris, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago-obliterated! John [in the Book of Revelation] says that the Eastern force alone will wipe out a third of the earth's population (Revelation 9:15-18). He also predicts that entire islands and mountains would be blown off the map. It seems to indicate an all-out attack of ballistic missiles upon the great metropolitan areas of the world" (1973:155).

Although Lindsey and other dispensationalists believe that nuclear catastrophes are a part of God's plan, they also assert that they will not have to endure the horror of nuclear war because they will be saved in the Rapture prior to doomsday. Mainstream theologians generally interpret the biblical passage that serves as the basis for Rapture beliefs as a reference to the Second Coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17); many dispensationalists, however, declare that there will be two Second Comings, and that a secret Rapture will actually occur prior to Christ's final return. This secret Rapture will involve the divine rescue of the faithful who will be physically "lifted up" to meet Christ in the air prior to worldly cataclysm and exist with Christ in the heavens until the final Second Coming, at which time they will return to earth with glorified bodies.

Beliefs about the Rapture are quite pervasive, with surveys indicating that between 30 percent and 44 percent of Americans embrace such ideas. Rapture beliefs are characterized by the idea of "blessed assurance" — the promise of planetary escape for the faithful prior to a nuclear cataclysm and other catastrophes that will befall the rest of humanity. In her study of attitudes about nuclear war among dispensationalists in Amarillo, Texas, A. G. Mojtabai concludes that "For millions of Christians in the United States today, the Rapture is seen as the final solution for all our human ills" (1986:xi). Jerry Falwell, who has asserted that the faithful will be raptured prior to nuclear Armageddon, describes the Rapture as follows: You'll be riding along in an automobile. You'll be the driver perhaps. You're a Christian.

There'll be several people in the automobile with you, maybe someone who is not a Christian. When the trumpet sounds you and the other believers in that automobile will be instantly caught away—you will disappear, leaving behind only your clothes and physical things that cannot inherit eternal life. That unsaved person or persons in the automobile will suddenly be startled to find the car is moving along without a driver, and the car suddenly somewhere crashes. (cited in Lukacs 1986:7).

The Rapture is referred to by Lindsey in his characteristically colloquial style as "The Ultimate Trip" and the "Big Snatch," and he describes in detail Jesus' lifting up the believers to be reunited with Him in heaven: "He is coming to meet all true believers in the air. Without

benefit of science, space suits, or interplanetary rockets, there will be those who will be transported into a glorious place more beautiful, more awesome, than we can possibly comprehend" (1973:126). Like other dispensationalist prophecy interpreters, Lindsey also offers descriptions of the startled reactions of the nonraptured when the true believers suddenly disappear, as well as the ensuing disasters and worldwide panic that will occur immediately after the Rapture (1973:124-125).

The promise that the faithful will be delivered in the Rapture from the terrors of nuclear apocalypse and the horrors of the tribulation period has an obvious psychological appeal, reflecting both escapist and fatalistic notions. As a defense mechanism, beliefs about the Rapture not only may reduce individual fears but also responsibility concerning nuclear war and other imminent threats by transforming anxiety about catastrophes into the passive acceptance of these as foreordained events.¹⁰ Promising planetary escape from the suffering and bloodshed to come, Rapture beliefs offer a captivating scenario by which fears of inevitable doom are transformed into expectations of personal salvation.

The Nuclear Bomb in Post-Cold War Prophecy

During the Cold War, visions of nuclear conflagration became the primary endtimes motif not only in dispensationalist narratives, but in various other apocalyptic traditions. With the end of the Cold War and the decreased threat of global nuclear war, dispensationalist traditions are currently being transformed, as prophecy interpreters and believers update their belief systems to incorporate current crises and perceived threats. Ecological disasters, deadly viruses, Islamic fundamentalism, global unification, and new technologies increasingly have been identified as signs of imminent doom. In this regard, apocalyptic traditions are both ancient and emergent, continually being reformulated and made relevant in response to changing historical circumstances.

Despite the end of the Cold War, predictions of nuclear annihilation remain a central feature in apocalyptic prophecy traditions even as new cataclysmic endtimes scenarios have emerged. Many dispensationalists still regard nuclear weapons as a fulfillment of prophecy and predict their use in the near future, emphasizing that existing nuclear arsenals have the capability to destroy the world and that nuclear weapons eventually will be used by hostile nations, terrorist groups, or a "mad-man" military dictator in the future. Furthermore, visions of nuclear conflagration remain compatible with biblical prophecies about the destruction of the world by fire. As Hal Lindsey put it in 1994: "In this nuclear age, it makes sense to us that the mass annihilation we read about [in the Bible] might well be the result of a nuclear exchange. Because the Bible talks about mass destruction by fire and brimstone (melted earth), this scenario seems to make sense" (1994:197).

In contrast to diminishing secular fears about nuclear war, many dispensationalists declare that the end of the Cold War has brought the possibility of nuclear Armageddon even closer. Lindsey, for instance, in discussing the arms buildup in Arabic nations, asserts that "Planet Earth is more unstable today than it has been at any time in human history. We must never put our faith in false prophets preaching about false peace" (1994:62). He remains "thoroughly persuaded" that the world will soon experience international nuclear war and devotes a chapter in *Planet Earth-2000 A.D.* to a discussion of this inevitability (1994:255-265). Although acknowledging the end of the Cold War, Lindsey continues to emphasize the Russian

nuclear threat: "The Soviet Union is gone. The Cold War is over. But the Bible tells us Russia is going to play a critical role in the final moments of history.

And the world stage is clearly being set for the drama. Russia still poses a real danger to the United States, with its modernized nuclear force which took decades to build aimed at our nation like a gun to our head" (1994:188). A change in leadership or a coup, Lindsey states, might put communist hard-liners back in power and quickly reverse recent political transformations.

Other prophecy writers also remind their readers that Russia still has the nuclear capacity to destroy the United States and the entire world. Ed Hindson, Minister of Biblical Studies at Atlanta's nine-thousand-member Rehoboth Baptist Church, cites recent estimates from the Center for Defense Information to confirm the continuing nuclear apocalyptic threat: the hundred megaton H-bombs in the former Soviet Union have the capacity to create all-consuming firestorms 170 miles in diameter; twenty could destroy three-quarters of the U.S. population in less than an hour; and a retaliatory U.S. nuclear force could kill 400 million people in the countries formerly in the Soviet Union and in China within half an hour (1996:8687).

A number of dispensationalist prophecy interpreters declare that the Russian nuclear arsenal has not diminished but is, in fact, being enlarged. The "devastating truth," according to prophecy interpreter Grant Jeffrey, is that Russia and its allies are developing new weapons to complete "the most overwhelming military build-up in history to place themselves in a position to put a gun to the head of the West" (1994:186). Lindsey agrees, writing that although some nuclear weapons, such as MIRV ICBMs, are being eliminated under the terms of START I and START II treaties, the Russian nuclear arsenal is also being modernized to have greater accuracy and more destructive power, hence an improved ability to annihilate the United States in a first strike (1994:197-198). Along with assertions about Russia's stockpiling of arms, some dispensationalists predict that Russia will eventually attack the weakened armed forces in the West and that the United States will answer with a nuclear attack, which will provoke a second Russian attack annihilating most of the American population and that of the Western world (see Jeffrey 1994:186).

Post-Cold War dispensationalist prophecy also focuses on developments in the Middle East and discusses the endtimes role of Islamic nations. Lindsey, for example, devotes several chapters of *The Final Battle* (1995) to the "Islamic threat," discussing Muslim anti-Semitism and Muslim hatred of Christianity. He details how wealthy Islamic nations are developing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, and relative to Muslim fanaticism and terrorism, asks, "imagine what this kind of zealotry means in the nuclear age-in the age where nuclear weapons can fit into a suitcase" (1995:8).

Regardless of the imagined scenario, predictions of inevitable nuclear annihilation have not declined significantly in dispensationalist prophecy as the third millennium draws near, revealing how deeply embedded such beliefs are in the dispensationalist tradition. Even though nuclear destruction appears less imminent, it is still regarded as a divinely ordained event to occur after a period of false peace, while in the meantime beliefs about environmental destruction, deadly viruses, evil conspiracies, and rising Antichrists intensify. Fears and feelings about the bomb have fueled eschatological thought since the dawn of the nuclear age, and in light of the continued existence of large nuclear arsenals, the possibility of nuclear terrorism, and the covert attempts by some nations to develop nuclear weapons, predictions of nuclear

Armageddon are unlikely to fade from dispensationalist speculation. As a permanent fixture in the American cultural and religious landscape, the bomb will remain an ominous endtimes sign until the day nuclear war is no longer a possibility.

In an era plagued by the threat of nuclear cataclysm, ecological disaster, AIDS, famine, and other possible forms of extinction, dispensationalist traditions directly address fears of collective death. Steeped in images of catastrophe that reflect an awareness of our own endings and the widespread feeling that the world itself may be dying, dispensationalist beliefs allay fears of human extinction, provide the hope of continuity and renewal, and give expression to the desire for a meaningful narrative underlying history and individual existence.

Some observers have speculated that dispensationalism and other forms of Christian prophecy belief may collapse by the year 2002 if no redeeming supernatural event has occurred by then (see Chandler 1993:284). This prediction appears to be doomed to fail, considering the endurance of apocalyptic thinking, the adaptability of apocalyptic traditions, and the important religious and psychological needs that such beliefs fulfill. In a world believed by many to be increasingly evil and out of control, with even greater threats appearing on the horizon, apocalyptic beliefs explain current crises and suffering as a purposeful part of God's endtimes script. As long as perceptions of overwhelming societal crises and uncontrollable evil exist, apocalyptic worldviews will be meaningful. The fact that Christian apocalyptic traditions have flourished at a grassroots level for two millennia demonstrates their enduring relevance and explanatory power, and portends their continued appeal well into the third millennium. Prophecy enthusiasts have reformulated and updated their beliefs throughout history and will continue to transform endtimes traditions creatively in the years ahead. Given the dynamic nature of apocalyptic belief systems and the diversity of eschatological ideas that have emerged at the end of the twentieth century, one need not be a prophet to predict that at this moment a multitude of rough beasts, saviors, and doomsday scenarios are slouching toward Bethlehem to be born.