

Theologies of Climate Apocalypse

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Who shall we be as an old world dies and a new one is born? Who can we be? When we tell apocalyptic stories, we map a landscape of possibility in our individual and collective lives: trajectories of human experience into which we can project ourselves or against which we can contrast ourselves. We are story-choosers and story-tellers. The choice of which apocalypse to preach and how to tell it isn't innocuous or incidental; it is world-shaping. "Do the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story?" asks Thomas King:

"What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? Someone who, in the process of creation, found herself lost from time to time and in need of advice, someone who was willing to accept a little help with the more difficult decisions?...

What if Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness?

I love you, God could have said, but I'm not happy with your behavior. Let's talk this over. Try to do better next time.

What kind of a world could we have created with that kind of a story?"

The global literature of apocalypse (in the sense of the end of the world) presents us with imaginative possibilities for different kinds of future that could accompany climate crisis. Despite the way some Christian traditions read the Book of Revelation as prediction, for us, these stories are powerful not

as pre-apocalypse future-histories or post-apocalypse description, but as invitations to imagine what our orientation to a *peri*-apocalyptic life: to which story will we belong as the world is ending around us?

Below, we examine narratives of the apocalyptic from Aztec, Buddhist, Norse, and Christian traditions. In each, we'll consider questions of “we” are in the story, and of agency: what degree of freedom to choose and power to act do we have inside the narrative? “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” writes King. Who, then, shall we be?

Aztec Tradition

In Aztec belief, this world in which we live is the fifth iteration of humanity. The sun overhead is the fifth sun. The gods created and destroyed each of the four previous worlds. But the survival of our fifth-sun earth is never guaranteed: this sun, too, will perish without the nourishing energy of sacrifice we humans provide.

Out of the void before all things, the first God created himself and gave birth to four children who were the four directions. “When yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shown and no dawn had broken... the gods gathered themselves there at [the city of] Teotihuacan [*tay-uh-tee-waa-KAAN*]. They spoke... “who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?”

To become the sun, they chose Tezcatlipoca [*tes-kaht-li-POH-kah*], god of the North: god of wind and beauty, of conflict and rulership. But he is the god of night whose sign is obsidian; he gave only half the light a sun should. So his brother Quetzalcoatl [*ket-sahl-koh-AHT-I*]—god of the West: of wind and dawn, of crafts and knowledge—knocked him from the sky. In the darkness, jaguars ate everyone still alive.

Quetzalcoatl became the second sun, and the gods created humans a second time. But because humanity did not give proper respect to their creators, Tezcatlipoca—who is god of judgement as well as night and conflict—turned humanity into monkeys as punishment. Quetzalcoatl swept the monkeys off the earth with a great wind and stepped down from the sky.

He created a new people, and the rain god Tlaloc [*tlah-LOHK*] became the new sun. But when Tezcatlipoca slept with Tlaloc's wife, Tlaloc's grief captured him. Despondent, passive, drought dried the world. At last, the incessant human prayers for rain turned Tlaloc's melancholy into rage, and he rained fire over all the world until it was ash.

The gods made a fourth earth from the remains and Tlaloc's new wife, Chalchiuitlicue [*tchal-chee-oo-TLEE-koo-ey*] became the fourth sun. She was kind and affectionate to the new humanity until Tezcatlipoca said her compassion was performative: an act to cover an uncaring heart. For 52 years Chalchiuitlicue cried tears of blood, drowning all of humanity, and at last she stepped down from the sky.

The gods gathered and many sacrificed themselves so that Huitzilopochtli [*wee-tzi-loh-POSH-tee*]—god of the South, god of war who carried the fire-serpent club—could become the sun. Quetzalcoatl stole the bones of humanity from the underworld, bathed them in his own blood to bring them alive, and repopulated the earth.

But history hasn't ended: the moon goddess and the stars, jealous of the bright day, war against the fifth sun. Humanity sustains Huitzilopochtli through the sacrifice of the sacred energy of our blood. To fail in that sacrificial responsibility means the fifth sun will be defeated and in the darkness which follows, earthquakes will destroy the earth.

The apocalypse here is an unveiling of the past: by revealing the hidden shape of history, we discover what we need to do differently this time. We don't live on the first earth, and the first sun doesn't shine overhead. For the Aztecs, "the cosmic setting was a dynamic, unstable, destructive one distinguished by sharp alterations between order and disorder, cosmic life, and cosmic death." In the perpetual war of day and night, we are both powerless and powerful.

At the scale of the gods, depression and resentment destroy the world in flood; in the divine realm, when grief turns to anger, its form is an earth-annihilating firestorm. In the Aztec account, humans live in a world where divine destruction isn't punishment; the end of the world isn't motivated by anything humans do or don't do. Humanity has repeatedly and effortlessly been destroyed as a side effect of rivalries that have nothing to do with us, and against which we are entirely unable to defend ourselves. There is no meaningful conflict between humanity and gods: the gods are totally, entirely in control: "a crowded and hungry pantheon of divine entities."

In sustaining the fifth sun, our responsibility is to provide fuel for the gods—humanity is a machine of divine support. We prevent apocalypse number five by each doing our small part to collectively sustain forces vastly more powerful than any of us. Through human sacrifice and blood sacrifice, we support the gods who make the conditions of life possible.

We don't have the power to directly affect change, but neither are we powerless. This is not a story of the heroism of any individual: there is no one person who can do it, only all, together. Each of us is individually responsible for our own sacrificial effort which becomes sufficient only when done collectively. It may be that the forces of creation and destruction as they take embodied form are wholly beyond us, nonetheless, we can choose (or be compelled) to support the cosmic struggle and it is our collective action that keeps the end away. Individually, none of us can hold back the night, but collectively we can.

On the other hand, that reading of the story, which feels hopeful on its face, keeps us from asking a sharper question: is this much blood worth it to merely maintain the status quo? The gift to the gods of the divine, animating energy of still-beating human hearts, the smaller-scale self-bloodletting from tens of thousands—all of this effort merely preserves the world as it is. There was no amount of sacrifice that prevents the need for more; we run as fast as we can merely so that we don't fall behind.

Buddhist Tradition

In the oldest collection of the Buddha's teachings, he speaks of the ending of civilization and its rebirth. This account isn't about the destruction of the world around us, but the collapse of human society and order. In contrast with the Aztec cosmology—which reveals clues to the future through the past conflict of gods—the Buddha presents the rise, destruction, and reemergence of a social order only as the consequence of human choices and actions.

Real power, the Buddha taught, comes from understanding the relationship between self and the world. Living virtuously and carrying out spiritual practice steadily produces that insight—in turn, that insight allows virtuous living. So central is this message that it shouldn't be a surprise that the Buddha starts his teaching on the decline of humanity with an encouragement to steadfast meditation. He goes on to say:

Long ago, a *wheel-turning king* ruled over humanity in a Utopia. He possessed a perfect wheel with one thousand spokes (a traditional South Asian symbol of knowledge, insight, and the sort of wisdom which understands and gives voice to truth). When that monarch retired from rule, the new king, his son, was dismayed that the wheel

vanished. But the old ruler explained the wheel arises out of action: not until the new king embodied virtuous conduct would it appear. He does and it does.

The cycle repeats itself through seven virtuous wheel-turning kings until the eighth ignores the wisdom of his predecessors and does as he pleases. By the time he realizes his error and tries to do right, it's too late. Poverty gives rise to theft so widespread that no amount of royal generosity to the poor can stop it. When the king then turns to punishment, ordering execution for all thieves, the state-sanctioned violence breeds more violence, which in turn gives rise to hate, anger, greed, and misuse of sex.

At each step of this moral descent, human lifespans grown shorter, until at last, driven by hate and desire, we are born, mature, grow old, and die all in only ten years. At its worst, when there is no longer a word in human language for morality, a "sword-interval" of seven days comes, in which people are unable to see each other as human, and kill their neighbors "just as the hunter feels hatred for the beast he stalks..." while others hide from the violence in deepest jungles and highest mountains.

At the end of seven days, the survivors emerge, saying: "It is only because we became addicted to our evil ways that we suffered the loss of our kindred. So let us now do good. What good things can we do?"

Bit by incremental bit, they rediscover morality: first they renounce killing, then refraining from theft, lying, harsh speech, and so on. Their lifespan grows, disease vanishes. Virtuous conduct spreads outward from individual to society and at last, a new wheel-turning monarch emerges to rule over 84,000 flourishing cities and towns so close to each other they are just one chicken-flight away from the next. Only then

does the next Buddha awaken and begin teaching: the Buddha Maitreya, Buddha of the future.

Later stories of Maitreya give him a different, more active, messianic role—he is cause rather than effect of humanity’s moral revival. But I appreciate this version in the Pāli canon specifically because like the climate crisis, it is human agency, not supernatural, which is cause of and solution to the problem.

In this apocalypse, the potential for societal failure and societal recovery exist simultaneously within humanity. Through seven generations of just kings, the seeds of destruction wait within humanity ready to sprout. But even in the seven sword-days of violence, seeds of right action and right society are also within. We are not irredeemable, nor will salvation arrive externally. We have within us the tools to change our world for the better—but we won’t necessarily use them until the situation gets horrifically bad, nor will all of us be able to act on them.

The Buddha’s telling serves as a warning: you and I can fall away from right action, ignore the wisdom of generations, and correct our mistakes too late with cures worse than the cause. Any day could potentially begin a sword-interval in our own lives where we become unable to distinguish each other as real, as human, and destroy each other without even understanding it as moral violation.

The social collapse and destruction is not external judgement: we do this to ourselves, decline is the mere consequence of our action. Nor in this story is destruction a necessary part of a larger design to fix humanity: seven kings did just fine following moral precepts; presumably that could have continued. Nor is this revelation the end of history, the world continues eternally impermanent: neither the righteous ruler nor Maitreya’s arrival are an ending to cycles of history.

In this apocalypse, our work is to live with right thought and right action, trusting it will influence far beyond us. None of us can individually save the world by living that way, but all of us together can

and will. Edward Everett Hale put that sentiment like this: “I am only one, but still, I am one. I cannot do everything, but still, I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Norse Tradition

In Scandinavian mythology, three years of continuous, sunless winter heralds the Doom of the Gods: Ragnarök. A poet-seer prophesies that in the three years of war which follow:

Brothers will struggle and slaughter each other,
and sisters' sons spoil kinship's bonds...
axe-age, blade-age, shields are split;
wind-age, wolf-age, before the world crumbles:
no one shall spare another.

The world-tree Yggdrasil [*EEG-drass-ill*] which grows through and unites the whole of the cosmos shudders and groans. The world-serpent Jörmungandr [*YOUR-moon-GAHN-dr*] who circles the edges of the earth, writhes, sending tidal waves across every land while he blows a poisonous venom through all the air and water.

Evil creatures converge: an army of ice giants; Fenris-Wolf whose lower jaw is on the earth and upper jaw against the sky; the ship Naglfar, made from the fingernails of the dead, crewed by monsters. And not until this horde is almost upon them do the gods at last convene in council, organize themselves, and ride out to fight.

In heroic and doomed battle, they die one by one: Odin swallowed whole by the great wolf Fenris; Thor defeats the world-serpent, but poisoned by it, he walks only nine

steps away from his victory before dying. With a flaming sword, the giant Surtr slays Freyr, god of peace and harvest, of sunshine and prosperity. The wolves Sköll and Hati who have eternally pursued the sun and moon at last devour them:

The sun turns black, land sinks into sea;
the bright stars scattered from the sky.
Flames flicker up against the world-tree;
fire flies high against heaven itself.

The old world is gone, the old gods are dead. The few surviving gods watch a new world rise from the water. The last two humans, Líf [*Leaf*] and Lífþrasir [*LEAF-thrass-ear*], hidden within a secret grove, become the first two humans under the light of a new sun.

In this story gods and humans are powerless to stop an inevitable ending. As in Aztec tradition, this apocalypse is wholly a function of non-human forces: while the long winter and the wars which follow devastate humanity, there is no causal relationship between humanity's actions and the demise of the earth and the gods. Human conflict echoes but does not cause divine conflict. Likewise, no human agency brings the rebirth of humanity— not through appeasement or sacrifice or personal righteousness do Líf and Lífþrasir survive to repopulate the world. As Yeats writes in his poem *The Second Coming*—whether informed by Ragnarök or Revelation—“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” we are adrift, the wolf-age is inevitable.

But if we identify with the gods in this account rather than the humans, the story changes. While the world dies in war and snow, while the sea rises over the land and poisons fill the air, while an army of evil approaches, the gods are oblivious. Safe in their own hall, they take no action until catastrophe is on their doorstep. Only then do they go forth, knowing it means their own death,

knowing that in their sacrifice, they create the conditions for a rebirth of humanity. They may not live to see it; nonetheless, it is worth spending their lives on. Like them, we did not act, and now climate catastrophe is an army of monsters gathering outside the safe hall where we slept. It may be too late for us to live in a world remade; it is not too late to give our lives toward remaking it for a future humanity, or, at the least, creating the conditions for the possibility of a future.

Christian Tradition

In the Christian tradition, the Book of Revelation opens with typical epistolary admonishments and encouragements for various Christian communities before recounting a vision of things to come:

Before the throne of God, surrounded by angels, animals, wise rulers, and odd-looking creatures, a scroll with seven seals is opened and as each seal breaks, a fresh tribulation comes to the earth. The first four reveal horsemen who bring war, destruction, famine, and chaos. Breaking the fifth seal shows the souls of the martyred dead crying for vengeance on their killers but are told to wait because worse is still to come. The sixth seal brings earthquakes, a shower of falling stars, and every mountain and island moves. The survivors, hiding in caves, pray for death.

The seventh seal breaking fills heaven with silence until an angel throws a censer of fire to earth causing further destruction. Seven angels blow seven trumpets. With each, some new horror emerges: a star fallen from heaven opens the bottomless pit whose smoke darkens the sky and from which a plague of locusts with human faces and iron armor spread across the earth to harm anyone not marked with the seal of God.

A dragon with seven heads throws a third of the stars in the sky down to earth; a beast emerges from the sea, ruling the world and waging war on the faithful. A second beast

emerges from the earth, marking its followers and directing them to venerate the beast from the sea. Seven angels pour new plagues onto the earth; the sea turns to blood and everything in it dies; the sun burns the earth until a total darkness descends.

But then, a turning: the New Babylon ruled by the Beast is destroyed, though all the world mourns its destruction. The Beast is cast into a lake of fire, the dragon imprisoned in a bottomless pit, and all the faithful dead martyrs of this destruction are resurrected to live with Christ for 1,000 years.

After this interval the loose ends are tied up and a new world made. The dragon emerges, is defeated and cast into the lake of fire. God judges all of humanity, evil ones are sent to a second death in the lake of fire. A new heaven and a new earth replace ours: it is a world without suffering or death where God dwells among humanity, sin is ended, and a River of Life and a Tree of Life bring healing to all.

What are we to make of this? Keller summarizes in a single sentence the message she takes from reading Revelation:

“Clouds of dark uncertainty keep rolling in, bearing a double-edged disclosure of both the planetary destructiveness of our civilization and the chance—if we grieve, struggle, and rage out creatively for justice, for transformation social, economic, and ecological—of a festive renewal of our common earth-life.”

In a similar vein she cites John B. Cobb Jr. as describing the message we ought to take:

“If collectively we are to free ourselves from our insane course of action and respond appropriately to the global crisis even at a huge cost, then we must have a passionate concern for the earth as a whole and all of its people.”

But these are calls to *action*. They seem, on their face, appropriate to a Buddhist or perhaps an Aztec context, but it's not immediately obvious the Christian apocalypse requires any particular action from humanity. The gap between text as descriptive determinism and text as prophetic prompt to action suggests two different hermeneutics with which to approach it.

Descriptive Determinist Revelation: Eucatastrophe at Best

Perhaps apocalyptic literature flourishes when prophetic literature fails: as reformation appears increasingly impossible, wholesale remaking of the world grows more plausible.

On a determinist reading, Revelation is a description of the future—the definitive symbolic account of inevitable events we are powerless to influence. Destruction and salvation merely happen to us. In this hermeneutic, our task is to discover how our lives fit within the preordained narrative. We might live privately “moral” lives while we map Babylon onto nation-states, search for the Antichrist among contemporary politicians, and watch technological developments looking for the mark of the beast. But reading Revelation into current events risks sacralizing and elevating whatever struggle “we” happen to be is a proof-text for already-planned crusades.

On the other hand, theologian Jürgen Moltmann distinguishes between reading Revelation through the lens he calls “apocalyptic Christianity”—where the most important aspects of the text are judging, punishing, and closing up shop—or through the lens of “eschatological Christianity” where what really matters is the risen and reborn world at the end. He reads Revelation in conversation with a Gospel which makes Christ's resurrection, not his suffering and death, the central event, suggesting Revelation's hope is not for the death of this world but the birth of the future. Or, as N.T. Wright suggests: “That final redemption will be the moment when heaven and earth are joined together at last, in a burst of God's creative energy for which [the resurrection] is the prototype and source.” The whole world will die but the relevant point is global resurrection.

Moltmann and Wright might suggest that the point of John's apocalypse is not in catastrophe for our enemies but *eucatastrophe* for our friends. J.R.R. Tolkien coined *eucatastrophe* to refer to a sudden and unexpected good turn in a fairy tale, but it might equally apply to Revelation:

“The *eucatastrophic* [refers to] the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy... is not essentially ‘escapist’, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur.

It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

With Moltmann, Tolkien might suggest that a deterministic reading of Revelation need not automatically make the text a diagram of and justification for our present struggles. But whether pessimistic or optimistic—*dyscatastrophe* or *eucatastrophe*—we remain powerless. As Brian K. Blount says, “John believes that *Christ* is coming soon to make utopian hopes... real.” The work is His; our effort is irrelevant.

But this reading seems like trivial optimism, not substantive hope, which, as Rebecca Solnit suggests, involves

“an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, and alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting.”

Among the different lenses through which Keller suggests we can read Revelation the relevant question is whether or not we are a people with agency in the midst of catastrophe. Is Revelation a descriptor of events we are powerless to change or a destination to build toward and warning of what to avoid?

Prophetic and Prescriptive Revelation: You-Catastrophe

I appreciate Moltmann's approach to reading Revelation in conversation with the Gospels rather than as stand-alone text—the context for the Christian apocalypse must take the ministry of Jesus seriously. The character and virtues of Jesus in the Gospel suggest a commitment to this-world transformation apparently absent from Revelation. On this reading, the life of Jesus rather than the resurrection of the Christ is the measuring-stick for the meaning of Revelation. As Clarence Skinner observes, “for sixteen hundred years the theologians have continued to wage battle over the *person* of Christ, and the world has consequently been blinded to his *program*.” For Skinner, as for Keller, the New Jerusalem and the era of peace which concludes Revelation is the continuation of Jesus' program; apocalypse “reveals the acute contrast between the actual and the possible.”

The work of the social gospel and its descendants has been to fill in the missing step which John omits:

1. Despair
2. Destruction
3. ???
4. The Kingdom of God on Earth

Clarence Skinner opens *The Social Implications of Universalism* asking, “How to transform this old earth into the Kingdom of Heaven—that's the primal question.” Felix Adler echoes that intent in his

text for the hymn *Hail the Glorious Golden City*. After imagining a metaphorical city of justice populated by the wise and righteous, he encourages: “We are builders of that city. All our joys and all our groans/help to rear its shining ramparts; all our lives are building-stones.”

This approach assumes that we have power to act and what we do makes a difference. Solnit writes that hope “is the belief that what we do matters, even though how and when it matters, who and what it may impact are not things we can know beforehand.” While the immediate impact may be small, our influence can be unpredictably large. It is an agnostic hope, a stochastic hope. We don’t know our impact, but we don’t need to know it before we can trust that what we do makes a difference. For pastor Robin Meyers, this faith is a fundamental part of Christianity from its inception. Drawing on the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, he writes:

“The Beloved Community was born in resistance to the established order of death and indignity. It was concealed like leaven in the imperial loaf, germinating as a secret and subversive ‘colony of heaven,’ a body of noncompliance with the principalities and powers.”

On this reading of Revelation, our project is to claim our agency to build the world we dream of, rooted in an Alpha which is the ministry of Jesus and an Omega which is the indwelling of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusions

Apocalypse (*apokálupsis*) means revelation or disclosure: a vision not of an ending but of what lies beyond the horizon of time where our imagination fails. What is it we see? What then becomes visible? What answer will we give to a nihilism which says that on the far side of that event horizon there is

nothing to find? The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observes, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”

Our prophetic witness begins by articulating the story we are a part of. The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri writes that,

“In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.”

We live in a broken and breaking world. At this moment, half of all algae and half the coral reefs in the world are dead. Half of all animals on the land and half of all living things in the ocean are gone. The theology-making task is not to assign a singular extrinsic meaning to collapse, but in this collapsing world, to expand the space of possibility for which stories we belong to, and to take care in choosing which story to tell and how to tell it.

Rebecca Parker speaks of our responsibility, in the ruins of empire and the destruction of the earth, for “choosing our guides.” We choose which apocalypse to disclose: individually powerless or individually empowered; collectively effective or collectively irrelevant; redemption from without or from within; a future alone or together.

What is the doom of climate catastrophe that we preach to our congregations? Do we send them home to pray or work pre-apocalypse for deliverance from inevitable destruction? Do we give them sackcloth, ashes, and a to-do list for the post-apocalyptic world we now inhabit? Or do we unveil a peri-apocalyptic world where in the same way they are the creators, sustainers, and beneficiaries of

systemic injustice, so too they can be the creators, sustainers, and beneficiaries of systemic justice which is both wholly beyond our individual effort and wholly human-made.

Each apocalypse story—each different reading of the same story—speaks to dimensions of the spiritual or emotional experience of climate crisis. With the Aztecs, we feel at times wholly powerless with world-destruction entirely out of our control; we see that our little bit of effort makes a difference combined with the whole; we despair at sustaining an unjust status quo. Like the Buddhists, we watch our leaders' failure of moral nerve engender planetary collapse; we name honestly that any of us could lose our way—and that any of us can emerge from the grieving-caves of our soul to see each other as human once again and make a great turning.

Like the Norse, we live in a world whose destruction seems embodied in forces meaninglessly larger than our individual lives; we despair the long night, we hope for a human future even if none of this generation makes it through. Like the Christians, we are called to start where we are, to use what we have, and to do what we can with faith that the seeds we plant matter, even if we can't know how, even in the face of planetary destruction. The pastor's prophetic theology-making task is choosing which to proclaim and knowing why.