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The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Fundamentalist Mindset

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This article explores the psychological meanings of the apocalyptic imagination in what I call a fundamentalist mindset. That mindset has its own long history but is newly relevant in the nuclear age. We no longer need God to bring about ultimate destruction. There are many facets of the fundamentalist mindset (for example, its intense literalism), but the focus in the article is on two: its kairotic sense of time and its rampant paranoia. These two facets interact synergistically around violence that is experienced by those who revel in it as moral in a totalistic sense. Killing becomes healing. The evil other, indeed evil itself, must be totally eradicated. If that can happen as a kind of final solution, the result is ultimate salvation in an apocalyptic remaking of the world. We must understand these dynamics that are all too human but newly significant with the means of such destruction in human hands.

“Apocalypsis” is a transliteration of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, meaning “to uncover or disclose.” Within the Judeo-Christian tradition it means the specific ways in which God reveals himself or herself to humans. For nonliteral Christians, such “revelation” of the ultimate can come close to what is called “insight” in psychoanalysis, or that profound understanding that connects thoughts and feelings at their deepest levels. Prophecy is the form of our access to that apocalypse, though some scholars have distinguished the prophetic from the apocalyptic traditions. In prophetism, it is argued, we are called to a change of heart, to repentance in the present, and to a new way of living. It is a call to efficacy and a challenge to change so that we can avoid catastrophe. In the apocalyptic, or the already-determined future, hope is deferred, which is why it is so often associated with the poor, the broken-hearted, the oppressed—and why it is so often associated with violence.

Endism, as I called it in 1994, is the location of self in some future narrative.¹ I use that idea as a psychological construct but recognize the endist narrative is also not one thing but has itself evolved historically from 11,500 years ago to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in the thirteenth century BCE, with its exotic ideas of the second and final, ultimate death; to the early Zoroastrians some six centuries later, with their simpler and more focused ideas that have so influenced the Judeo-Christian traditions; to the later biblical prophets in the Hebrew Bible, including Daniel (ca. 200 BCE); to John of Patmos in 95 CE, who created in Revelation the Ur text of apocalypse for all the Abrahamic faiths and most others as well, a vast image of God’s destruction that makes him, in the words of James W. Jones, a “divine terrorist”²

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and remarkably stirs apocalyptic energies in distant realms;³ to Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) in the Middle Ages; but in no way more important than in our recent historical discovery of the ultimate power of the destruction with nuclear weapons and increasingly with biological agents and even the potential for the end of life with the most radical possibilities as a result of climate change.⁴

Nuclear weapons and the endist narrative are at the heart of things. We attribute to the Divine the power to create and destroy, that is, of beginnings and endings, but we are most anxious about death (and Christianity the most anxious of the world's religions). We all die, and the extension of that foreknowledge—which is what most decisively distinguishes us from the higher primates—to the potential end of human life itself was originally a creative force in the making of culture many millennia ago. The human reached out to the Divine. Over time and with traditions of ritualization, culture assigned the task of imagining the end to three important but relatively marginal groups: priests and mystics, artists such as Hieronymus Bosch, and psychotics (which is why they were often revered in premodern societies). The apocalyptic remained at the edge of culture, but such intellectual and spiritual themes were neither static nor predictable. The sense of collective endings ebbed and flowed with historical change. During and after times of great crisis, such as the plague in Europe between 1348 and 1351 when more than a third of the European population was wiped out, apocalyptic thinking more forcibly entered the mainstream as self-flagellating cults proliferated and hundreds of thousands of women were burned as witches in the next two hundred years. During times of relative peace, as in the eighteenth century, it then receded back to the margins of imagination.

Splitting the atom and the destruction that event releases alters the dynamics of our sense of divine power. It takes away from God the power to end life on earth. The apocalyptic now resides in human hands. Nuclear weapons—and increasingly other means of destruction—shift the agency. We do not need God in the same way, an idea that is deeply confusing. The apocalyptic narrative has always been simultaneously one of violence and redemption, of endings that are new beginnings, of vast death that cleanses the world of sin and leads to new life. There is hope, as exemplified in the role of the Messiah, whether he, or she, comes or comes again. But in a nuclear end there is only death. It is an entirely “pointless” apocalypse, bringing only ultimate death and not renewal, as Robert Jay Lifton put it in 1979 in *The Broken Connection*.⁵ All of this suggests to me that we therefore live in the present in our imagination as survivors of future apocalypse. The shadow of the future casts doubt on our capacity to inhabit it.

These reflections that grew out of my field work in New York fundamentalist churches in the early 1990s and resulted in *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America*, along with my experience of 9/11 (and my extensive interviews with survivors and witnesses for *Until the Fires Stopped Burning*⁶), along with the new meanings of terrorism in the world, led me in the last decade to think more deeply about what I would call a “fundamentalist mindset” and a book with that title that I conceived and published in 2010 along with some colleagues. Because of our new relationship to these ultimate issues, it is not surprising we live in world awash in apocalyptic themes and new forms of fundamentalism have sprouted like a disease of epidemic proportions. There is, I think, a fundamentalist mindset, rooted in the past but newly energized that transcends its particularity in contemporary religious movements. Islamists, for example, have fueled the global jihad, evangelicals have pushed Christianity to the right in this country, and the settlers in Israel have evoked a new millennialism about Jewish land not seen in centuries. They overlap in curious ways. The haredi rabbis and Islamist imans wear the same beards.⁷ Christian preachers in

Alabama ranting about women or homosexuals can sound strangely like jihadi fanatics. And so it goes.

Such religious fundamentalist movements can be quite noisy and seem to define the phenomenon. But the mindset of fundamentalism is something more deeply ingrained in the self that finds expression in a variety of human institutions, including religion but no means restricted to it, and has a history that gives it protean meanings over many centuries. Norman Cohn, for example, has described cultic groups at the fringes of society in the Middle Ages.⁸ The “Terror” of the French Revolution realized the paranoid and destructive potentials of a revolution that otherwise expanded human freedom. Nazism was undoubtedly the most important fundamentalist, millennial movement in the twentieth century, if not in human history. The current Tea Party movement in the United States merges populist and racist ideas in a millennial movement aimed at renewal of politics; its violent potential was evident in the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. The individual and the collective, that is, psychology and history, work synergistically to create, diminish, aggravate, and heal the many forms of fundamentalism in religion, politics, and culture.

There are many aspects of the fundamentalist mindset that could be discussed and that are relevant for its full understanding. Its most noisy dimension is its tendency toward literalism and dualistic thinking, but it is also true that those who inhabit that psychological space are susceptible to charismatic leaders and usually experience some kind of totalistic conversion that marks their full entry into their defined communities.⁹ Each of these dimensions of the fundamentalist mindset deserves extensive discussion and its own article (at least). What I focus on here, however, as it is perhaps less obvious and infrequently noted in its psychological depth, is the relation of the apocalyptic to time and paranoia in the fundamentalist mindset.

First, time. Phillip Rieff in his wonderful 1962 study *Freud: The Mind of a Moralist* characterizes Freud’s ideas in terms of kairotic time.¹⁰ Cartesian time, the basis for the creation of the modern, is chromatic, evenly spaced, regular, and entirely predictable, able to be measured with amazing degrees of accuracy. We would not have cars or bridges, even cities, without Cartesian time. Kairotic time, in contrast, as in Einstein’s general theory of relativity, comes in many shapes and is irregular and uneven. Freud located key transformative moments in childhood around which crystalizes all that matters then, or later, and that he named the Oedipus Complex. His theories of drive and development that he felt grew out of the Oedipus Complex are highly questionable a century later, but he was prescient about identifying moments in childhood (and later) that are profound and transformative in their meanings and that we would now call traumatic. Freud’s philosophical approach to time has shaped the central focus now in psychoanalysis on trauma. For in trauma, a black hole of misery collapses time and space.

The idea of a black hole is central to understanding apocalyptic time, which is deeply kairotic. Such time is not linear or homogeneous but is weighted by value and experienced in unevenly and discordantly. Like trauma experienced by an individual, such experience of time is psychologically and spiritually different from history as we know it. In the apocalyptic the only meaningful future event is the transformative end of the world, followed by salvation. Apocalyptic believers are not living within time but rather escape history by destroying time, thereby freeing themselves of responsibility for the world. Kairotic time is always running out, and urgent expectation of the end frames believers’ logical, spiritual, and ethical deliberation.

What is troubling in this narrative is that the transformative moment at the end of time in the apocalyptic imagination is always one of great violence. It is a death-drenched story. The book of Revelation, for example, with its three waves of destruction unfolding in patterns of sevens, with

seven digressions of great significance folded into the text, depicts rivers of blood that run up to the bridles of horses, Satan unloosed from the depths, and an angry Messiah riding a white horse with a suggestive phallic sword coming out of his mouth. But out of such violence comes redemption. Death is regenerative, as the new heaven and a shining Jerusalem with twelve gates and foundations “garnished with all manner of precious stones” welcomes the reborn. Sinners, in contrast, forever swim in the lake of fire, an image of brutal revenge for the despised other.

The narrative fits the more extreme dualistic fantasies of paranoia that feed on the desire to destroy the evil persecutor. Such fantasies lurk in the heart of troubled individuals but also have a place in the collective, that is, in history, in terms that my colleague David Terman has called a “paranoid gestalt.”¹¹ Again, such ideas have grounding in the hopeful. Among religious fundamentalist believers there is nothing more basic to their belief system than hope for the coming, or return, of the Messiah. For secular millennial movements, such as the Nazis and their vague notions of the thousand-year Reich, the redemptive goals are elusive but equally central to their aspirations. But in the apocalyptic narrative there can be ultimate salvation only with the absolute destruction of the world and its evils. That evil can be constructed as counterrevolutionary forces for Robespierre, Jews, and other “life unworthy of life” for the Nazis, and echoes of such ideas among the more radical right-wing elements in contemporary U.S. politics. The end of evil through collective death, however, overcomes death itself in a remaking of the world that brings with it powerful hope. This transcendent process totalizes the other, requiring radical dualisms and evokes evil in paranoid ways. This remarkable link between paranoia and the apocalyptic gives us insight into the violent potentials in the fundamentalist mindset.

Certain things are clear about paranoia. Someone in its grip lives in a world of heated exaggerations, in which empathy has been leached out and where humor, creativity, and wisdom are absent. The paranoid lives in a world of shame and humiliation, of suspiciousness, aggression, and dualisms that separate out all good from pure evil. The paranoid is grandiose and megalomaniacal, self-centered to a fault, and lives within the apocalyptic. Many of those in the grip of paranoia are very smart, and I have long felt it may be the pathology of choice for the gifted. There is no question that paranoia focuses all of one’s cognitive abilities in ways that can make one’s schemes intellectually daunting.

In paranoia everything is intense and of the moment, and time is forever running out. The paranoid’s understanding of history is truly diseased. Great forces are arrayed against the paranoid; virtually the workings of the cosmos itself are aligned to punish and persecute the victim who, it can be said, suffers from history. One is helpless and beaten down, but this keen sense of victimization and negative grandiosity (“No one has suffered as much as I have in the face of this persecution”) readily turns positive in its most malignant form (“I am actually greater than my tormentor”; “I am the creator”; “I am Napoleon”; “I am Jesus”). That is the source of the secret joy one often sees in the depressed eyes of the paranoid. The conspiracies that abound in the mind of the paranoid, furthermore, are not just isolated events that affect him or her but are the very motive force of history. There is nothing of consequence to understand in the world except how these large conspiracies work, which explains why paranoia is so totally self-absorbing.

Violence lurks in this nexus of paranoia and the apocalyptic. The other becomes the embodiment of evil. As such, that malignant other deserves not simply to be punished but can be, and in more extreme historical situations of crisis (or, as Lifton has put it, “atrocities producing situations”) must be, dispensed with.¹² It is not simply an allowance to kill. Killing becomes an obligation and to act against the perceived tormentor in the name of self-protection is to become a savior. Violence heals and redeems. Because one acts on behalf of absolute righteousness, a sense

that history itself is being cured, killing becomes healing and is therefore an ethical obligation. People commit personal violence for all kinds of idiosyncratic reasons. They murder loved ones, rape, plunder, rob, and steal for selfish, mean, and sometimes psychotic reasons. But people commit genocide out of a moral purpose to cleanse the world of evil. You cannot kill on that scale without a sense of higher purpose, though one that is tragically perverse.

In its deeper and totalized meanings, paranoia thus becomes apocalyptic. I have mentioned the dramatic historical examples of the French Revolution when, between September 1793 and July 1794, tens of thousands died and over sixteen thousand heads literally rolled off the guillotine in Paris in a frenzy of revolutionary fervor, and the Holocaust, in which millions died and were incinerated in those dreadful crematoria. But with nuclear and other ultimate weapons in the world, we live now with the apocalyptic more firmly planted in our minds because of our new relationship with death. It lurks just below the surface, often in confusing ways.

Take, for example, the way 9/11 took shape. On that day in what I have described as “zones of sadness,” survivors and witnesses reacted in horror to the death that rained around them in lower Manhattan.¹³ Many were deeply traumatized in ways that endured. But there was a striking dimension of that trauma: part of its meaning was the way it evoked nuclear threat. Miranda, on the sixty-seventh floor of the south tower, a professional woman who had worked in the World Trade Center during the 1993 bombing, rushed to the door to leave when the first plane hit the north tower. The scene in the stairwells was already scary, but when the second plane rammed into her building, the stairwell filled with smoke and she dissociated, got confused, and had trouble figuring which floor she should exit from. Finally, she found a door that opened onto the plaza on the south side and thought a butcher shop had exploded because of all the body parts on the ground, an image out of the book of Revelation that was obliterated in the collapse of the towers.

When the south tower collapsed she headed south to Battery Park and was enveloped in the cloud of dust. She assumed a nuclear bomb had gone off. She grabbed her driver’s license for future identification and jumped or fell into a nearby bush, where she passed out and remained so for several hours.

Others I talked with saw a mushroom cloud from the plume of the collapsing towers, when they were cone-shaped, and were certain nuclear bombs had been dropped; an EMT, a strong Roman Catholic, was sure it was the end of the world caused by nuclear weapons as she wandered around ground zero in the eerie silence that followed the collapse of both towers. She started crying that she had not said goodbye to her daughter.

In such stories, one sees how the template of a nuclear end lurks just below consciousness, ready to be evoked in moments of catastrophe. 9/11 was not apocalyptic. It was an awful event in which many people died and the nation was traumatized. Many survivors will never fully recover and families who lost loved ones will always live with that sadness. But, while ground zero is mostly rebuilt and a grandiose memorial and museum has opened, that is, life has gone on, our experience of the disaster was as an apocalyptic event, in no small measure because of our image of ultimate destruction. It is there in the self, ready to march across our dreamscapes and poised to occupy our minds in moments of trauma. There are many ways such exterminatory images affect us in the nuclear age, but however complex, we can be sure they are not benign.

On 9/11, for example, it happened that the United States experienced the disaster as apocalyptic at the moment we had a Christian fundamentalist president who loosely talked of a crusade in response. He then stood on the burning and belching pile that Friday, September 14, speaking through a bullhorn with his arm around a fireman and promised revenge. By December 2001, his approval rating was 91 percent as a traumatized nation flocked to his message of violent

retribution. What was unleashed were two wars in the Middle East, one utterly stupid and tragic, and vast death and dislocation, not to mention the squandering of well over two trillion dollars. I don't believe we are stronger for having survived 9/11. Something broke in us and it will take a long time to heal.

There is hope. I have been thinking about this stuff now for decades and have grown very close to those who embrace the apocalyptic—in my interviews with Christian fundamentalists in the 1990s when I spent five years going to their churches in New York; with survivors and witnesses of 9/11; with many of my traumatized patients after 9/11 (my office is in Greenwich Village); with my students in the early years after the disaster, many of whom were traumatized firemen and police who had been there and later worked on the pile and took all my courses on terrorism to try to understand what had happened; with my relatives in Georgia (my mother-in-law doesn't have my books on her coffee table); and in the hugely perplexing experience of having my youngest son join the army and fight in Iraq. Sometimes it all touches my soul in confounding ways, haunting me with images of violence that leave me shaking. But to understand contemporary life, one must grapple with these issues. They are at the heart of what it means to live an examined life. At the same time, do not yearn for destruction to remake the world. The only thing that matters is a human future, and our most important ethical obligation is to hand off the world and life itself to future generations.

Notes

¹ Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

² James W. Jones, "Eternal Warfare: Violence on the Mind of American Apocalyptic Christianity," in *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History*, ed. Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones, 140–163 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ My colleague at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York Samuel Heilman, an authority on Jewish fundamentalism (with whom I have taught PhD courses on the subject of fundamentalism several times), did field work on Menachem Mendel Schneerson and the Lubavitcher Jews in Crown Heights in Brooklyn in the early 1990s before Schneerson died. At the time this charismatic figure was widely seen as the potential Messiah. He had several strokes and was virtually inert, but if he twitched his eyebrow word went out to the community throughout New York by "Mosciach beepers" (this was before cell phones) and thousands came rushing back to 770 Eastern Parkway and stood below his window, sometimes chanting (in Yiddish), "We want Messiah now." Heilman was convinced (something we talked about at length in our courses in the 1990s) this newly energized apocalyptic energy among the Lubavitcher was basically caused by the dominant Christian culture's intense millennial energies around the approaching year 2000.

⁴ These forms of an absolute end to life could overlap, for example, if rising seas brought a hugely destructive cyclone to Bangladesh and killed people by the scores of millions. Such destruction could create political chaos, unleash terrorism and wars in an area armed to the teeth with loosely guarded nuclear weapons. Note, for example, Charles B. Strozier with Kelly Berkell, "The Curious Politics of Global Warming and Nuclear Power," *Huffington Post*, November 30, 2015, and idem, "Climate Change and Political Violence: Trauma and the Dilemmas of the Survivor," *Diplomatie*, December 11, 2015.

⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

⁶ Charles B. Strozier, *Until the Fires Stopped Burning: 9/11 and New York City in the Words and Experiences of Witnesses and Survivors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁷ I am indebted to Samuel Heilman in a personal communication for this cogent observation.

⁸ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁹ There are important points of convergence, for example, between the psychological experience of being "born again" among fundamentalist Christians (that I describe in great detail in *Apocalypse*) and the findings of a scholar, Scott Atran, who has conducted field work among those drawn to jihad. Note Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco, 2010).

¹⁰ Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹¹ David M. Terman, "The Paranoid Gestalt," in Strozier, Terman, and Jones, eds., *Fundamentalist Mindset*, 72–96.

¹² Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

¹³ Strozier, *Until the Fires Stopped Burning*.