
Introduction

According to the Mayan calendar, the world as we know it will end sometime around December 21, 2012.

Or maybe it won't.

Of course, if the world doesn't end then, that won't mean we'll be safe from destruction. According to biblical prophecy, Jesus Christ could return at any moment to destroy the armies of the Antichrist and reestablish his throne in Jerusalem, thereby ushering in a thousand years of peace. However, if that doesn't occur, there's always the chance that the Mahdi will arise to institute a kingdom of justice and, alongside the returned Isa Al-Maseeh (Jesus), fight against the Dajjal, the Antichrist of Islam. Then, of course, there's always the chance that—at least according to the Hopi Indians—a blue star will suddenly appear in the sky to signal the start of a great atomic war that will destroy the white man and other ancient races.

However, it's not just religious end-times prophecies we need to worry about. Doomsday prophecies also come in secular and even scientific packages as well, as evidenced by an ever-growing influx of climatologists, futurists, scientists, and environmentalists all jumping onto the doomsday bandwagon to warn us about their own catastrophic scenarios: global warming will wipe out entire species and obliterate ancient ecosystems; unlimited population growth will lead to social unrest and political chaos, resulting in the collapse of whole

civilizations; the next great pandemic will leave millions—if not billions—dead, possibly spelling the extinction of the human race; a thermonuclear war will turn the planet into a glowing, uninhabitable radioactive cinder; an asteroid, comet, giant meteor, burst of cosmic radiation, massive volcanic eruption—you name it—will snuff out life on the planet. It seems that the list of things that are going to destroy us is growing longer and more gruesome each day.

If these were merely the beliefs of small fringe groups or environmental extremists, they probably wouldn't constitute that much of a problem. However, doomsday beliefs are becoming mainstream—their influence being seen not only on bookstore shelves and in the pseudoscientific docudramas that seem to permeate the cable channels, but even finding their way into government legislation designed to prevent us from being fried, pulverized, irradiated, or otherwise obliterated. Even credentialed scientists are getting in on the act, recounting the various doomsday scenarios available to us in frightening detail, complete with computer models and state-of-the-art computer animation.

Whether one calls it the Second Coming, Judgment Day, or the Battle of Armageddon, or whether one believes the end times will come in the guise of impending environmental disaster, global political collapse, or through some sort of nuclear doomsday, end-times prophecy remains a big part of our social identity and one that is only likely to become even bigger as we move further into the new millennium. Furthermore, in light of the apparent “funk” the planet seems to be going through nowadays, such beliefs are growing in popularity and show no signs of abating anytime soon, leading me to assume that they will probably remain a part of our fear-based culture for decades to come.

So where do these ideas come from and, more importantly, why do we continue to embrace them even today in our supposedly less superstitious and more scientific age? Why does it appear that, instead of such ideas diminishing in the harsh glare of reason, doomsday predictions are actually increasing and becoming an even more prevalent

aspect of our modern culture? What drives them and gives them the fuel required to infuse our airwaves, bookshelves, and imaginations? More importantly, what does this preoccupation with our own demise say about us as a people?

It's hard to pinpoint the reason we seem so preoccupied with doomsday, but after five decades of life I think I am beginning to understand why countless millions embrace such ideas, and it is these observations I hope to explore with you in this work. I do this in the hope that we might gain a better understanding of human nature and, even more importantly, so we might be able to protect ourselves better from the damage such beliefs can produce. Doomsday predictions can leave one living beneath a cloud of pessimism that can color everything a gloomy shade of gray. That alone should be more than enough to entice us to look into the issue in some detail if only so we might disarm some of the more odious ideas before they can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

This book is also written for those who—inundated by doomsday scenarios from religious leaders, paranormal writers, New Age gurus, and politically motivated environmentalists—would just like to bring some balance to the debate. To accomplish that, we will examine the many failed prophecies humanity has believed in the past and consider how they not only influenced their cultures but also how they continue to affect their perspective on the future today in both subtle and obvious ways. And, finally, we will hold those self-proclaimed prophets of the apocalypse—both living and dead—accountable for their predictions, for it is only by taking a critical look at these people and understanding why we embrace their ideas so readily that we can come to appreciate the power they hold over us.

I hope the reader will come to recognize through all this that I am, at heart, an optimist. I don't believe for a moment that the future is as bleak and hopeless as many assume, nor do I consider hope and faith to be foolish ideals. I believe in tomorrow—however naïve that may sound—and I hope that this work in some small way will help others find the confidence and assurance that humanity, for all its

many flaws, is not on the verge of its own destruction but may, in fact, be standing at the threshold of a bright and remarkable future. If this book can play even a small part in demonstrating that possibility, I will consider it to have been a worthwhile endeavor.

J. Allan Danelek
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