

reviewing a guard of honour in Berlin and one of an unidentified British Liberal candidate campaigning, both taken in 1935, allow Bernard to contrast opposing political ideologies (pages 342–43); images of the first UFO sighting and the explosion of the first hydrogen bomb, both made in 1952, touch upon deeply felt anxieties over the fragility of human existence during the cold war period (pages 532–33) while, in a pair of images that are deliberately polemical, Don McCullin's image of a starving Biafran girl and Irving Penn's "Nubile Young Beauty of Diamoré, Cameroon," both taken in 1969, Bernard underlines the persistence of contradictory Western attitudes towards the

post-colonial world (pages 738–39). Such provocative juxtapositions invest historical events and societal values with an inherent richness and complexity.

Century squats massively on one's desk, a dark, obdurate presence. In the sheer number of images, it is staggering and overwhelming; in the accumulated record of violence and sorrow and the seemingly unresolvable conflicts, it is tireless and without remorse. As a commentary on the legacy of the twentieth century, this book stands as a painful yet fascinating memorial and ironic monument, and reads as a Pandora's box of misery and anguish.

Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*

PAUL NATHANSON

Wojcik, Daniel. *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 281 pp., 43 illus., cloth \$50, ISBN 0-8147-9283-9.

In *The End of the World as We Know It*, Daniel Wojcik explores one very "timely" aspect of American popular religion: apocalyptic traditions as they are interpreted at the turn of the second millennium. Most (but not all) of these predict global catastrophe in the immediate future. This "apocalypse" is to be followed in most (but not all) cases by some form of redemption or renewal (at least for initiates). Although some scenarios involve natural catastrophes, such as comets or meteors, the ones of most interest to readers of this journal involve technological catastrophes such as ecological degradation and nuclear war. Wojcik shows how myths of technology have become deeply embedded in both traditional religion (new versions not only of Protestant millenarianism but also of Catholic pietism) and "secular religion" (new communities based on myths about either benevolent or malevolent use of technology by extraterrestrial beings).

The book consists of eight chapters. The first two, "Approaching Doomsday" and "The American Apocalyptic Legacy," discuss the relation between traditional and modern forms of speculation about the "endtimes." Traditional

speculation has usually focussed attention on an era of rampant evil, a cataclysm of cosmic proportions, Christ's return (or Rapture), and the ultimate salvation or damnation of human beings. Contemporary speculation often adds additional features. A common one is the conspiracy of international bankers, multinational corporations, prototypes of world government, united churches, and so on; this is said to have been made possible by those who control the Internet and other advanced forms of communication.

In the third and fourth chapters, Wojcik discusses two case studies drawn from traditional religion. The first is an offshoot of Protestant fundamentalism. In "The American Apocalyptic Legacy," Wojcik discusses Hal Lindsey, author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. His prediction of approaching doom for all but the chosen few, an event completely beyond human control or even influence, features technological disasters such as Chernobyl and the continuing likelihood of nuclear war. The book has been attacked repeatedly by liberal Christians, among others, for fostering passivity in the face of major environmental and other problems. Nevertheless, he and his followers have never been stronger. One reason for that is their ability to interpret news events, especially those involving the Middle East and Russia, in the light of ancient prophecy. The second case study is an offshoot of Catholic

pietism. Our Lady of the Roses, Mary Help of Mothers, is a community that originated in apparitions of the Virgin Mary to a Brooklyn housewife named Veronica Lueken. Through Lueken, the Virgin sent messages about the coming end of the world and what followers could do to save themselves. An interesting feature of this community is its central act of worship. Initiates gather to take photographs of the sky and its cloud formations, which are then interpreted communally in the light of traditional prophecy or iconography. These movements, ironically, rely heavily on modern technology. Both movements have used it to spread the word. Leuken's, moreover, has used it to mediate the word in a more direct sense.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters discuss various aspects of the apocalyptic mentality, notably fatalism and, as a result in some cases, reliance on otherworldly beings or forces for salvation. In "Secular Apocalyptic Themes in the Nuclear Era," Wojcik shows how the Bomb has had a decisive influence on the way people think about their world and its future—one that continues even after the Cold War. (He says hardly anything about that other technological wonder known in its representative form as Auschwitz. For some reason, that form of mass death—far more sinister in purely moral terms—is not considered dramatic enough to qualify as an apocalypse or even as the sign of the coming one.)

In Chapter 8, "Emergent Apocalyptic Beliefs about UFOs and Extraterrestrial Beings," Wojcik notes that the earliest myths focussed on benign aliens who come to help humanity move another rung up the ladder of evolution (by mating with humans, say, or providing advanced technologies) and, therefore, to save them from some approaching doom (whether due to human technology or interstellar forces). Later, these myths took on much darker overtones; the aliens were evil beings whose intention was to repopulate our world with their own kind. Even worse, according to some myths, these aliens relied on human collaborators in high places. At the moment, says Wojcik, some myths have once again become hopeful. But the general mood of those involved in these movements remains very fatalistic. Even those who take steps to find salvation, for instance, sometimes do so by means of collective suicide.

This book, though somewhat repetitive, is very well written. Moreover, it is well illustrated with black-and-white illustrations from newspapers, comic books, paintings, pamphlets,

advertisements, and so on. I can think of no major flaw in the author's thesis; even though his field is literature and folklore rather than religious studies, he clearly understands the basic currents of American religion—including popular religion, which is often ignored by scholars in the field. And, perhaps surprisingly, he is not unsympathetic to the people he is studying, a hallmark of good phenomenology. Whatever Wojcik thinks of the solutions offered by apocalyptic communities, he makes it clear that they are faced with real problems—the kind of problems, in fact, that are faced by all people in our time: the apparent meaninglessness of a society based on hedonism, lack of control over technological developments, despair over the cynicism of public life, and so forth.

To all of this, I would add only two things. Both place the current wave of apocalyptic speculation in its larger historical and cultural contexts. First, the preoccupation with collective doom was probably far more pervasive in the 1990s than it was in the 1990s. A thousand years ago, most people were not even aware of the date, let alone of what theological significance it might have had. In our time, due to much higher rates of literacy and technologically advanced forms of communication, almost everyone is aware of these things. And the Internet has made it possible for people to exchange ideas about the "endtimes" and build real or virtual communities based on apocalyptic notions. On the other hand, the same kind of preoccupation was probably even *more* pervasive in Europe as a response to the Black Death. This was most severe during the fourteenth century but was revived during the seventeenth, partly because of Christian speculation on the Kabbalah. And Christians were not the only ones involved. Due to their own speculations, and due to widespread misery and persecution, Jews produced the most successful messianic movement since biblical times. Millions of European Jews believed Shabbetai Tsvi, the messianic claimant, who predicted a speedy end to the world of suffering (until he tried to repeat his success in the Turkish Empire but ended up converting to Islam).

Speculation about the end is by no means confined, moreover, to the West. The world comes to an end according to Hinduism, too, for example. And not once but many times. The fact is that all or most cultures see the world of everyday life in finite terms. The

notion of sacred time, properly called eternity, could well be universal in one form or another. It is based precisely on the notion that profane time, properly called history, has at least one beginning and end. And the end, like the beginning in many cases, is a cataclysmic event. The Hindu cycles are extremely long by Jewish and Christian standards (though not by scientific ones). But those of some other cultures are (or once were) extremely short, beginning annually on New Year's Day.

Second, readers might get the mistaken impression that technology has become problematic only in the past few decades. But that phenomenon is hardly new. It was not new in 1945, when the first atomic bombs were dropped (and Auschwitz was liberated). Or in 1914, when people got their first glimpse of mechanized and industrialized warfare. Or in 1912, when the technologically advanced *Titanic* foundered on its maiden voyage. Or even in the early nineteenth century, when philosophers despaired over the "satanic mills" and Luddites smashed the machinery inside. The truth is technological change has *always* presented problems, always made people uneasy, and often provoked significant religious responses. That is because technological change involves both advantages and disadvantages. At the very least, it has always involved abandoning the old ways and adapting to the new. Sometimes, it involves much more than that.

Consider the technological revolution that began with horticulture. After many generations, the wooden hoe was replaced by the wooden plough and then the iron plough. Agriculture provided a more reliable source of food than hunting and gathering, and, eventually, the population grew. But agriculture meant being tied to the land, having to defend it against invaders, and being ready to invade other communities for more and better land. (And remember that when ancient societies were conquered, it often meant total destruction—the functional equivalent, for those threatened, of the Bomb.) Agriculture itself required a high level of organization (designing and building irrigation projects, storage facilities, distribution networks, roads, and so on). So did warfare (the production of maps and

weapons, strategic planning, espionage, diplomacy) and the administration of early states (written records, delegation of authority). The result was a need for specialized classes. And that, in turn, meant the institutionalization of hierarchies and some degree of tyranny. All of these developments were accompanied by the rise of complex new religions. Apart from anything else, these provided ethical frameworks for the use of power and symbolic valorization of new technologies, usually in the form of deities associated with agriculture. The process of adaptation took centuries, not decades. But the ancients were probably just as frightened of new technologies as their modern counterparts are. In fact, their hostility is recorded in the Old Testament as the protracted struggle between nomadic life as pastoralists in the wilderness (associated by the prophets with purity, holiness, and virtue) and settled life in agrarian Canaan (associated with impurity, pollution, and vice).

In view of all this, it is worth noting at least two well-known movies from the period *before* Hiroshima. Technology is associated with doom, in both cases, or at least the chaos of revolution or war. One is the silent classic from Germany, *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926). It speculates on the profound social divisions that are likely to be generated by modern technology. Members of a technocratic caste live in idle splendor above ground. Meanwhile, members of a slave cast, those whose physical labour keeps the machines working, live in Dickensian squalor below ground. Until they are inspired to rebel by a beautiful but satanic robot named Maria! The other movie, from Britain, is *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936). Based on a novel by H. G. Wells and made on the eve of the Second World War, it speculates on the physical and cultural destruction likely to be brought about by an apocalyptic world war. Both movies end with a new beginning.

But Wojcik's aim is to tell the specific story of American millennial speculation since 1945. And he does so extremely well. This book is *highly* recommended for students of technology, religion, popular culture, and American culture.