This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30056008

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2013, Arena Publications
On Eschatology and the ‘Return to Religion’

Matthew Sharpe

Introduction: On the ‘Return to Religion’

First, two vignettes

We begin with Tony Blair’s July 2009 Australian visit. Mr Blair converted publicly to Catholicism in 2008. In Australia that year, he argued that the West was facing an internal crisis of confidence, as well as external threats. Blair warned in particular against what he called ‘aggressive secularism’ and the Western tendency to ‘see people of religious faith as people to be pushed to one side’. The Australian’s ‘editor at large’, Paul Kelly, responded enthusiastically. Blair’s position represented ‘the best argument against the rise of secular intolerance and its distorting of history in the education system by seeking to downgrade or eliminate religion in the West’s story’. This stood in contrast to the Australian Labour Party’s ‘disastrous’ distancing from the Christian tradition. Kelly styled Blair as opposing ‘the fashionable Western idea that religion can be suppressed or confined to the private realm’ as ‘a delusion and dangerous’. The Australian’s position is not surprising, given the newspaper’s long-standing, US-influenced neoconservative position.

In the 1990s, Irving Kristol, the self-styled godfather of the neo-conservatives’ ‘culture wars’, was instrumental in brokering a politically necessary alliance of the neo-conservatives with the evangelical Right. In order to do so, Kristol recurrent to the old, functionalist argument that religion is necessary for social cohesion — a fact that he, like his teacher Leo Strauss, argues all great premodern thinkers had recognized. Although most neo-conservatives were secular, Kristol reassured readers, many were becoming observant in their public lives.\(^2\)

Calls for a ‘return to religion’ of some kind are, however, not restricted to the neo-conservative Right, as Tony Blair’s Catholic response attests. In the academic world, the Radical Orthodoxy movement — denominationally, a peculiar species of high Anglicanism — is predicated on an acceptance of the postmodern criticisms of modern political rationality, universality and institutions. If postmodernism tells us that there is no truth or lasting normative value, so even the natural sciences are one more narrative used to legitimize certain power interests (‘just as fictional as all other human topographies’).\(^3\) John Milbank, for example, directly argues that this relativism re-legitimizes the Christian story as one more mythos in the marketplace of ideas.\(^4\) In the light of real anxieties about the social cohesion and lasting goals of later modern, liberal-capitalist societies and the failure of the secular, progressive vision, the Christian promotion of the substantive values of love, hope, charity and humility can seem the only remaining source powerful enough to resist the reduction of all elements of social life to economics. Here then we see the coin-


\(^4\) The locus classicus here is John Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason. For Milbank, science is just a particular form of narrative practice that has ‘theorised internally its peculiar specificity, simply by concentrating on experimental knowledge … [but] one can very often give different theoretical accounts of the same successful or unsuccessful experiment’ (p. 270). ‘We simply cannot assume’, says Milbank who here echoes Montaigne, Nietzsche and Lyotard, ‘that different cultural discourses are approximations to the same external (even if not independently specifiable) reality …’ (p. 343). Rather, there is a plurality of competing discourses, and theology must have the metadiscursive right to ‘position, qualify, or criticise other discourses’. Otherwise, as Milbank warns in his opening salvos, ‘these discourses will position theology: for the need for an ultimate organising logic … cannot be wished away’ (p. 1). The good news of epistemological and cultural relativism is that a revitalized public theology need not feel that the alleged advances of modern knowledge are any obstacle to the credibility of its metaphysical claims: for these claims are no less or more narratival than would-be ‘secular’ accounts. Compare also J. Milbank, G. Ward and C. Pickstock’s ‘Introduction: Suspending the Material: the Turn of Radical Orthodoxy’, in J. Milbank, G. Ward and C. Pickstock (eds), Radical Orthodoxy, London, Routledge, 1999.
cence of contemporary ideological opposites, around the motif of a ‘return to religion’, which the culture wars serve to conceal. The Radical Orthodoxasts’ promotion of revealed religion as a repository of non-commodifiable human values today feeds directly into the ‘return to religion’ on the post-Marxist theoretical Left. Variants of this position (which position religion as source and preserve of longed-for normative direction) have over the last three decades been gravitated towards by many of the thinkers who the corporate media would demonize as the relativistic sources of the West’s loss of faith: people like Slavoj Zizek, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and before them Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Francois Lyotard.5

The second vignette begins 11 September 2001. The flipside of the emerging post-political consensus on a return to religion in the liberal West is the positioning of the West’s enemy as fanatical adherents to extreme Wahhabist forms of Islamic religion. These enemies are wholly hostile to the modern Western way of life as led by the United States, which is styled in their propaganda as ‘the great Satan’. They are devoted less to any finite political goals than to the messianic conquest of a global Caliphate. In response to the 11 September attacks, on the other side, the United States, under George W. Bush, set about invading Afghanistan and then Iraq. Bush’s motivation for the latter military strikes — which cost over 7000 civilian lives and led to continuing instability in the country leading to over 109,000 civilian deaths6 — appears to have been related to his born-again evangelical faith. In infamous minutes from a June 2003 meeting with the Palestinian Prime Minister published by the Israeli daily Ha’aretz, Bush indeed claimed to Abbas that ‘God told me to strike Al-Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem of the middle East’.7 Arab anger that the United States’ campaign had its own religious motivations were famously piqued when the Bush administration named its Afghan campaign ‘Infinite

---

5 This ‘return to religion’ in theory has been well documented, sometimes under the heading of a ‘post-secular turn’. For a recent survey, including of Slavoj Zizek, Terry Eagleton and Theodor Adorno, see R. Boer, Criticism of Heaven; On Marxism and Theology Volume 1 (of 5), Brill, United Kingdom, 2007.


Justice’, a possibility all monotheisms typically reserve for God. Yet Bush’s unilateral ‘hard power’ approach gained unanimous support from US Christian evangelicals, many of whom (notably including Christian Zionists) read today’s events in the Middle East as signs of the end times; support Israel in the hope that once all Jews return to that nation Jesus Christ’s second coming will be activated; read the conflict in Iraq as fulfilling the prophecy of Revelation 9:14-15 concerning ‘four angels which are bound in the great river Euphrates’; and believe that ongoing Western hostility to the Arab peoples finds absolute license in Yahweh’s curse on Abraham’s illegitimate son Ishmael (‘He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers’ [Genesis 16:12]). Since many Islamic nations prohibit missionary activity, evangelical groups such as the Window International Network, Samaritan’s Purse and the Centre for Ministry to Muslims saw the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq as unique opportunities to evangelize. In ways which sometimes angered US military and CIA operatives, and drew strong criticism from other Christian denominations, the United States’ 2003 campaign saw missionaries armed with Bibles and proselytizing videos closely following the tanks and special ops into Babylon.

These two vignettes set out some of the peculiarities attending the newly emerging post-political consensus that we in the West need a ‘return’ to ‘religion’. Let me make three points on this, which will lead into the particular focus of this article, eschatological religion and its profoundly ambivalent political and ethical nature.

First, it is usually left tellingly unclear by proponents what exactly such a ‘return’ might mean. Statistical data continues to indicate that a ‘return’ may be something of a misnomer, except in a small number of Western European nations — for example, a 2005 Eurobarometer poll found 52 per cent of Europeans still identify as theists, with 27 per cent attesting belief in a spirit or life-force. Over 80 per cent of Americans declared themselves

---

8 On this topic, see, for example, the essays collected in E. Qureshi, The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.
10 Kaplan, God on Their Side, pp. 13–15.
religious (with over 76 per cent of these identifying as Christian) as of 2009; just under 70 per cent of Australians declaring themselves religious (63 per cent Christian);\textsuperscript{13} and 71 per cent of UK citizens identifying as Christian in 2001;\textsuperscript{14} although decline in church attendance seems to indicate a secular trend, in both senses of the term. As these statistics suggest, liberal nations — unlike secular closed societies — preserve freedom of conscience as a right. One is left to conclude, in line with Paul Kelly’s remarkable labelling of the separation of religion from public political discourse in \textit{The Australian} as ‘a fashionable Western idea’, that the ‘return’ here means a return to religion in political life — with a usually unspecified challenge to the separation of church and state in mind. For, of course, Kelly’s ‘fashion’ here dates from the British revolution in the seventeenth century: a fashion surely stable enough for older conservatives to claim as a ‘tradition’. It is arguably a foundation stone of the modern nation-state. More importantly, it draws its justification from the need to peaceably accommodate advocates of different revealed faiths, a social exigency Tony Blair rightly observed is becoming more, not less, inevitable in the globalized world.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, the call for a return to ‘religion’ is also as necessarily vague as the term ‘religion’ itself, including in the work of its most virulent attackers, who often lump all creeds, faiths, traditions and practices under one heading in order to designate the whole set as ‘poisoning everything’, to cite Christopher Hitchens — and before him Chairman Mao. Any minimally observant sociological, philosophical, theological, psychological or other study of ‘religion’ reveals an almost limitless variety of phenomena: a reality that animates work today in ‘critical religion’. To take Max Weber’s magnificent sociology of religion in \textit{Economy and Society} as one example, he divides the world’s religions according to geography; class and status-group; different (or absent) conceptions of god or gods and world order; different (or absent) conceptions of salvation; different practical conceptions of ways to achieve salvation; different forms of organization; different manners of proselytizing; different sociotypical ‘carriers’ of the religions; different attitudes


\textsuperscript{15} Cited in Kelly, ‘Blair Sees the Real Power of Faith’.
towards intellectualism, war, wealth, outsiders and the necessary compromises of political life — the list goes on. There are worlds of difference between Confucianism — a ‘religion’ which is neither theistic nor salvific, promotes a serene indifference towards the creeds of others, originates as an ethical code for the great Imperial Chinese bureaucracies, and was so greatly admired by the great anti-‘religionist’ Voltaire that he took it as indubitable proof of the superiority of Chinese civilization — and contemporary dispensationalist, pre-millennialist Christian evangelicism, to which I will return in a moment.

The third preliminary point here is a subset of this basic observation concerning the vast differences between kinds of religion. It concerns the supposition of the neoconservative type of claim that religion is necessarily an aid to social cohesion, economic functionality and ethical bildung. Most religions, most of the time, have promoted foundational civilizing virtues such as ‘relationships within the family, truthfulness, reliability, and respect for another person’s life and property, including wives’. However, as Weber and many other students of religion have noted, it is not possible to say that religion by ‘nature’ or per se is necessarily conducive to promoting strong communities and ethical citizenship, rather than forms of sectarianism which denounce worldly life, or the religious convictions and communities of others, as nihilistic, decadent, godless, irredeemable, even worthy of violent destruction. We must remember that particularly Judaeo-Christian religion was born out of a felt need for consolation against the mundane world, rather than from the need of governing classes to legitimize their political ascendancy — as against warrior religions and religions of caste. Weber in particular strongly distinguishes between forms of prophetic, charismatic religion, which tendentially promote isolationism or outright hostility to secular economic and political life, and more priestly, institutional, political or congregational forms of religion. The truth in Weber’s observations concerning charismatic religion’s anti-social, unethical potentialities

is of course borne out for us today in the post-2001 clash of fundamentalisms, to be distinguished from Huntington’s famous ‘clash of civilizations’.

In the light of these observations, I want to focus now on the phenomenon of eschatological millenarianism within Christianity in particular. The focus here has several justifications. The first of these is that, while Anglican and Catholic numbers in Australia (as in the United States) have stagnated, Baptist, Assemblies of God, Christian City Churches, Christian Revivalist, Church of the Nazarene and Churches of Christ denominations have grown strongly since the mid-1990s. While theologians, scholars and politicians debate or long for a return to religion, this is the type of religion that has been growing. The next section presents the overwhelming, interdisciplinary consensus about the deeply intellectually and culturally regressive (and politically aggressive) nature of the founding eschatological commitments of these new forms of radical Protestantism. In the third section I will then make three points (a theological point, an historical point and then a sociopolitical one) that caution against complacent dismissal of these religions as wholly barbaric in the way the new Atheists shrilly decry, on top of the observation just made, that these are the forms of Christianity that are growing today in nations like Australia. The fourth section closes the article with a series of brief inferences from the analysis.

Contemporary Eschatology, Contemporary Perspectives

The events of 11 September 2001 have precipitated masses of literature concerning religious fundamentalism. Yet the continuing rise and transformations of fundamentalist Protestant churches in the United States has attracted a larger, much more longstanding set of responses from scholars across a range of disciplines. One defining feature of these non-denominational, Pentecostal, evangelical denominations (including most Baptist churches and the Assemblies of God, Australia’s third largest church) is their

---

21 For figures, see <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/17164.htm>, accessed September 2011. The author is also not qualified to speak concerning Islamic fundamentalism, on which, in any event, a wealth of studies presently exist.

adherence to some form of apocalyptic eschatology. Eschatology is a broad term that simply means belief about final or last things, and can include deliberations about the individual soul and its fate after death. Apocalyptic eschatology, which interests us here in its Christian forms, is the belief that human history as a whole has a linear course, from a beginning (creation) to a final end. This end (or at least its millennial beginning) is usually held to be imminent. Sometimes, a date is set. So we are today living in the end times. When the end or apocalypse (Greek for revelation or discovery) comes, it will involve a great period of tribulation, which will last seven years (Matthew 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24; and Revelation 7:14). Humankind will suffer greatly, and more will die than survive (Revelation 14:1-13; 7:9). At some point, either at the beginning, during or after the Tribulation, the pious elect will be raptured up to heaven (the verb here is ἁρπαγήσομεθα, at 1 Thessalonians 4:17), Jesus Christ will return (Matthew 24:29-31), and the ‘Marriage of the Lamb’ — or of Jesus and his faithful — will occur (Revelation 19:8-10). Meanwhile, the antichrist will have appeared (cf. I John 2:18) to unite his forces on earth in a sinister global government, perhaps claiming to be Jesus but certainly profiting in deceit. He will take Jerusalem, and perform the ‘abomination of desolation’, by desecrating the Temple (Daniel 11:31; 12:11; Matthew 24:15). The majority of the Christian fundamentalist churches are pre-millennialists. This means they maintain that Armagedon, the final Holy War between Christ and the Devil on the fields of Meggido in Israel, will take place at the end of the Tribulation. It will see Satan cast into Hell for 1000 years, heralding a millennial period of Christ’s earthly dominion (Revelation 20:1-6), alongside the living faithful and the resurrected Saints, a number of exactly 144,000 according to the Jehovah’s witnesses. During this period of peace the natural order of the world will be fundamentally changed. Poverty, wickedness, corruption, hunger and sickness will be cured in ways previously only imagined. Nevertheless, at the end of the millennium, Satan will be allowed to return, to go out to deceive the nations from all corners of the earth (Revelation 20:7). For a second time, then, Christ will wage war with and defeat Satan, casting him for a second time, forever into a lake of fire and brimstone. At this time, a second resurrection will occur, of all those not resurrected after the Tribulation. The last judgement follows, with all those found not written into the Book of Life being cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11, 13-15). Jesus
then finally cedes world governance to God, who establishes a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21-22), governing the righteous who have avoided the first and second deaths (the Tribulation and Last Judgement) from a New Jerusalem, replete with the Tree of Life and no more death (Revelation 22: 1-9).

The basis for these eschatological beliefs lies in a particular way of reading the Apocalypse of John, together with the ‘olivet prophecy’ in the synoptic gospels of Matthew (24:6-28), Luke (ch. 21) and Mark (ch. 13); Paul’s Letters (for example, I Thessalonians 4:17; 5:2-6; II Thessalonians 2:1-12; I Timothy 4:1-2; II Timothy 3:1-13; 4:2-4)23 and the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:9-11); together with the Book of Daniel from the Old Testament (Daniel 7-12) and select passages from earlier prophets (Isaiah 24-27; 33; II Isaiah 53; Haggai 2; Zechariah 1-8). Fundamentalism is usually identified with a literalist conviction that the Bible expresses in direct language the words of God. This is the basis, for instance, of ‘young earth’ beliefs that the earth (or the universe) is less than 10,000 years old and was created by God in six twenty-four hour days, in the opening verses of Genesis. In one sense, you can see that fundamentalist readings of Revelation or Daniel refuse any allegorical reading of the apparently deeply metaphorical, symbolic or perhaps coded language of these books. The sometimes supernatural talk of angels, beasts, horns, the second coming, whores, seals, trumpets and swords emerging from the saviour’s mouth to smite his foes are not taken to refer, however obliquely, to inner or spiritual realities. They refer to future, historical events. In this way, the premillennialist Christians’ apocalypticism is considered deeply heretical by the Catholic Church, and most Protestant denominations. Fundamentalist readings of these Biblical texts as historical prophecies of still-future events (‘futurism’ as opposed to a-millennialism, or, after the counter-reformation, ‘preterism’), it must be stressed, found as little support in the medieval Catholic Church as it does in the age of modern biblical hermeneutics. Nevertheless, the term ‘literalism’ does not capture the way that, in fundamentalist denominations — as well as in popular fundamentalist books on Revelation like Hal Lindsay’s The Late Great Planet Earth (which has sold over forty million copies) or the

like wise multi-million selling Tim La Haye series *Left Behind* — the biblical apocalypse is positioned as a kind of hermeneutic guide map to interpret events contemporary to the reader.24

Several particularly decisive events are looked to by pre-millennialists in the post-World War era, as signalling that the end is nigh.25 The first is the advent of nuclear warfare, the prospect of which seems to answer to the Bible’s terrifying visions of the destruction of the world by fire and brimstone falling from the sky (compare, for example, Genesis 19:24; Psalms 11:6; Ezekiel 38:22; Luke 17:29). The second is the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel, then its remarkable victory in the 1967 six day war — since, as mentioned, it is held that all Jews must be ‘gathered’ into Israel before Christ can return. With these ‘signs’ at hand, preachers and bloggers compete in aligning different figures and episodes, as described ‘literally’ by John’s Revelation, with historical events: so Russia is the ‘Northern Kingdom’ of Joel, Ezekiel and Daniel;26 China must be the great army that will emerge from beyond the Euphrates to wipe out a third of the world’s population (Revelation 9:16);27 the European common market, the EU or the United Nations must be the ten-nation confederacy in Daniel and Revelation, or perhaps the revived ‘Roman Empire’ whose leader will be the Anti-Christ; the World Council of Churches, perhaps the Roman Church, and for some, even the United States’ own federal government, must be the ‘second beast’ who will proselytize for the anti-Christ;28 the GFC must mean that we are soon to have a single world currency and world government, as per Revelation 13:16-18; and so on.

It would be very easy to dismiss this religious outlook as the most barbarous and ‘patently infantile’29 of religious fantasies were it not the conviction of over 40 per cent of the US population (58 per cent of white evangelicals),30 and well over 100,000 Australians. In the

24 Nor does it capture the extraordinary, peculiar attention paid in particular to numbers in the text, all of which are charged with heightened significance. But that is not our concern here.
26 Northcott, *Angel Directs Storm*, p. 64.
twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence wrote perhaps the most vitriolic of responses to John’s Revelation, and the nonconformist churches it has inspired. Lawrence’s claim is that Nietzsche’s analysis of the slavish, ressentiment-fuelled origins of Judaeo-Christian religion applies to this book, although not to Christianity or Judaism per se. In what turned out to be his last published writing, Lawrence describes John’s Apocalypse as ‘an orgy of mystification’, as aesthetically ugly as it is luridly fascinated with bloodshed and destruction, and deeply alien to Christ’s noble ethical message.

For Revelation, let it be said once and for all, is the revelation of the undying will-to-power in man, and its sanctification, its final triumph. If you have to suffer martyrdom, and if all the universe has to be destroyed in the process, still, still, still, O Christian, you shall reign as king and set your foot on the necks of the old bosses! This is the message of Revelation.

Certainly, the consensus of modern scholarship concurs with Catholic theology from Augustine that this form of eschatological belief in the imminent, historical second coming is deeply problematic. Philosophically speaking, it scarcely bears saying that Biblical literalism stands in increasing opposition to modern cosmological understandings developed since Galileo first spied the moons of Jupiter, if not since Copernicus. Thinkers as different (but equally open to religious perspectives) as Albert Camus, Karl Lowith, Karl Jaspers, and Eric Voegelin have all noted the ‘elemental’ epistemological problem associated with assigning meaning to the whole of human history, since we find ourselves within it. ‘The course of history as a whole is no object of experience’, Voegelin observes: ‘history has no eidos [shape, idea, or purpose], because the course of history extends into an unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion ...’ Lowith rejoins: ‘for the critical mind, neither a providential design nor a natural law of progressive development is discernible in the tragic human comedy of all times ... all this is

---

32 Lawrence, Apocalypse, pp. 9–10.
33 Lawrence, Apocalypse, p. 13.
34 Lawrence, Apocalypse, p. 14–15.
now past and has conscience against it’.³⁷ To the extent that pre-
millennialists have made falsifiable predictions about the second
coming, our presence here today proves that they have been wrong
and wrong again. Most famously in modern times, the Millerites
predicted that Christ would return between 21 March 1843 and 21
March 1844, then, that failing, boldly revised the prediction to 22
October 1844, precipitating what is called the Great Disappoint-
ment.³⁸ In our times, Edgard Whisenant predicted 1988, and then
2012 Hal Camping set 21 May for the apocalypse, and was then
forced to move the date back to 21 October — incidentally at 6 pm,
adjusted for time-zone. The overwhelming consensus in Biblical
scholarship of the last two centuries is that the apocalypses of Daniel
and of John were attempts to come to terms with the Jews’, then the
Christians’, persecution at the hand of the Romans: the so-called
historicist or preterist position. The apocalyptic prophecies attributed
to Christ in the gospels looked forward to the destruction of the
second temple after the Jewish revolt in 70 CE, or else describe the
spiritual transformation wrought by Christ’s own ministry. Again,
the Catholic ‘a-millennialist’ position established since Augustine
in the fourth century CE deems all attempts at anticipating the
historical eschaton heretical. According to Augustine’s City of God,
redemptive grace had been bestowed in Christ and his resurrection,
in the past: ‘the Church is already the Kingdom of Christ and the
Kingdom of Heaven’.³⁹ The millennium of the biblical texts is a
symbolic description of the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church,
and the internal ‘destiny of the soul’;⁴⁰ and while Augustine preserves
a view of the seven 1000-year ages of the world since creation, the
end of history is indefinitely postponed.⁴¹ Secular history (the
saeculum of all, passing time this side of the heavenly kingdom) and
the civitas terrenne or diaboli as such is devalued by Augustine.⁴² It
is a realm in which true Christians are as peregrini, in contrast to the

5–6, where Lowith argues along Voegelin’s lines that to assign a meaning to History as a whole
is to assign it a purpose, which would have to be outside of history.
³⁸ See J. M. Court, Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millennerianism,
³⁹ Augustine, Civitas Dei cited in J. Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, Stanford, Stanford University
⁴⁰ Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, p. 80.
⁴¹ Lowith, Meaning in History, p. 171.
⁴² On the meaning of secular as the passing age, this side of the new age of the rule of God, see
21–2.
inner drama of the soul’s fate in the world to come. Secular government is of significance only in relation to the Church’s salvational calling, as a means to keep the peace so the gospel may be spread.43

Lawrence’s neo-Nietzschean diagnosis of the barely sublimated resentment and aggression in apocalyptic books like Revelation is confirmed in the now voluminous psychological literature on apocalypticism in fundamentalist groups, as well as in politics more widely. In his confrontation with paranoid psychotics like Judge Schreber, Freud noted the invariable, messianic and eschatological features of paranoid delusions. In these delusions — alongside beliefs about omniscient, malign surveillance and persecution by a, usually sexually, aberrant other — the subject suffers from the harrowing sense that the world is either about to end or somehow already has ended.44 The subject herself then is, if not the messiah somehow charged by a higher, benign power with repopulating the devastated world, then one of the elect whose progeny will rebuild this broken cosmos. The isomorphism between this clinical structure and apocalyptic literature is evident. It is central to Richard Hofstaedter’s influential study The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays.45 The consensus among psychological studies of apocalyptic thought is that these visions represent externalizations ‘of internal mood onto external landscape’.46 The externalization here is deeply regressive in kind. Principally, it involves the over simplifying, Manichean splitting of the entire world into good and evil,47 with a correlative dehumanization of the other ‘as a perfect model of malice’ whose final extermination attracts divine sanction.48 The vision is characterized by ‘heated exaggerations ... in which empathy has

been leached out’. A correlative is the infantile, personalistic idealization of all-good, charismatic leaders to whom supernatural powers and insight are often attributed. The whole reflects the kind of siege mentality evident in televangelist Pat Robertson’s extraordinary comparison of the evangelicals’ situation in the United States to that of the Jews living under Hitler. Studies also note the rigid inability to accommodate the possibility of error, coupled with the as-remarkable ability (noted by Festinger, Riecken and Schachter) to simply foreclose textual and historical realities unrelated or contradictory to the ‘totalistic’, Manichean vision.

Then there is the manifest megalomania of assuming oneself a chosen elect of the creator of the universe, which has struck rationalist critics like Celsus since ancient times. The whole complex is suggestive, in Robert Jay Lifton’s terms, of ‘weak identity formation’, to which it appeals by providing an all-explaining, self-justifying schema. Psychoanalyst Mortimer Ostow posits an ‘apocalyptic syndrome’ wherein apocalyptic prognostications are seen to reflect a wider inability ‘to control rage, particularly if it is

51 Pat Robertson, in a 1988 interview with a journalist, claimed that: ‘Just like what Nazi Germany did to the Jews, so liberal America is now doing to the evangelical Christians … It is the Democratic Congress, the liberal-controlled media, and the homosexuals who want to destroy the Christians’. According to the Reverend, Christians were suffering persecution ‘[m]ore terrible than anything suffered by any minority in our history’. In 1990 Robertson, responding to the Miami Herald’s criticism of his role in the Florida governor’s race, asked the newspaper: ‘Do you also have a ghetto chosen to herd the pro-life Catholics and evangelicals into? Have you designed the appropriate yellow patch that Christians should wear…?’ B. Wilson, ‘Christians Rewrite the Holocaust’, in Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture, 1 February 2010, <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/116292/>, accessed September 2011.
53 The most obvious case, cited by preterists, is Matthew 16:28: ‘Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom’, which of course speaks against any ‘futurist’ reading which would date the end times for instance at the beginning of the twenty-first century. See Voegelin, New Science, pp. 138–40; Strozier and Boyd, ‘Psychology of Apocalypticism’, p. 286.
54 See Celsus’ remarks reported in Origin, Contra Celsus VI 78. Translation is from volume 4 of The Ante-Nicene Fathers published 1867–1872 and in the public domain at <http://www.bluffton.edu/~humanities/1/celsus.htm>: ‘Celsus next makes certain observations of the following nature: “Again, if God, like Jupiter in the comedy, should, on awaking from a lengthened slumber, desire to rescue the human race from evil, why did He send this Spirit of which you speak into one corner (of the earth)? He ought to have breathed it alike into many bodies, and have sent them out into all the world. Now the comic poet, to cause laughter in the theatre, wrote that Jupiter, after awakening, despatched Mercury to the Athenians and Lacedaemonians; but do not you think that you have made the Son of God more ridiculous in sending Him to the Jews? ...”’
amplified by feelings of humiliation’ and as expressing vengeful fantasies that target perceived oppressors.56

It need hardly be said that such a psychological profile or *esprit* is hardly the kind that most of us would want our church or legislators to engender, whether we ‘return to religion’ or not. As mentioned above, Max Weber in *Economy and Society* already noted the profoundly ambivalent relationship between charismatic, salvationist sects and the mundane societies in which they emerged. Norman Cohn’s classic study *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* documents at great historical lengths the political and social troubles caused throughout the medieval period by emerging lay preachers, prophets and messiahs (like Tanchem of Antwerp or Sabbatai Zevi) animated by a holy sense of living in the end times. These figures’ certainty of their eschatological mission encouraged them to openly flout the rules of church, Hallakhah, morality and political society (with them often maintaining themselves by stealing from Church and laypeople).57 They could do this safe in the conviction that the time of these unredeemed institutions had in any event passed, or would soon do so. As Landes has observed, subjects who believe that ‘the future will be radically discontinuous with the present’ will rationally enough experience a tendentially antinomian ‘liberation from ... earthly inhibitions’. This is because ‘no fear of future consequences (except from a judging deity) restrains the conscience of apocalyptic actors’.58 To be sure, writers on the recent political turn of American pre-millennial fundamentalists have posited a ‘paradox’ between their conviction in the strict dispensational predetermination of all events (which seems to recommend quietistic withdrawal) and the active engagement of the Moral Majority in US politics. While such extremely anti-secular positions can and have led to isolationism, the paradox seems overstated. It has long been observed that fatalism is consistent with the most heightened worldly activity. This is the heart of the historical connection between Calvinism and modern

capitalism, so famously made by Max Weber.\(^5^9\) In principle, any action that succeeds must *ipso facto* have been ‘willed’ by God for such a mindset, whether this action is religious (for example, converting or baptising a new Christian) or political (for example, advocating to have creationism taught in schools, or more military support for Israel).\(^6^0\) Evangelical preachers are clear enough in their strident denunciation of Western liberalism and secular humanism, which, it has been noted, very closely mirror denunciations of the West by Qutb and other Islamic fundamentalists. Having turned its back on the absolute authority of the Bible, the modern West is accused of rushing headlong into hedonism and nihilism (the amoral view that ‘if it feels good, do it’, as Robertson puts it). This ‘leads increasingly to ... chaos in society’, if it does not bespeak Satanic conquest over America.\(^6^1\) On the basis of these premises it is no wonder at all that, from the early 1980s, Christian evangelicals began to feel a holy calling to enter politics with an urgent, radical agenda.\(^6^2\) Just as Robertson created a storm on 13 September 2001 by arguing that the United States deserved to suffer the attacks, because of its godless liberalism, Francis A. Schaeffer’s 1982 *Christian Manifesto* already openly justified civil disobedience to the ‘tyrannical’ secular order. ‘At a certain point’, Schaeffer reasoned, ‘there is not only the right, but the duty to disobey the state ... since tyranny is satanic ... to resist tyranny is to honour God’.\(^6^3\)

**Considerations in Defence of Millennialism**

I want now to temper or qualify these critical perspectives of pre-millennial Christian apocalypticism, and put three arguments against any too-complacent, new-atheist style denunciation of

---


60 Differently, Daniels, Jensen and Lichtenstein propose that political activism to restore biblical Law in America is seen as necessary for evangelization — since as per Paul’s ‘Letter to the Romans’, the sense of one’s sinfulness which animates repentance requires consciousness of such Law, in ‘Resolving the Paradox’, esp. pp. 260–4.


62 Members of eschatological groups, moved by their longing for the new heaven and earth their prophecy imagines, must — in the absence of strong countervailing authority — also be tempted to ‘press for the end’, to use Gershom Scholem’s term, used in the context of Jewish messianism. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 14–15.

evangelical Christian eschatology. The first of these arguments is theological, the second historical and the third ethical or political.

The Theological Argument

Any fair discussion of evangelical Christianity, and its wider significance in terms of the role of religion in politics, has to begin by underscoring that the Catholic and other mainstream Churches reject prophetic teachings about the rapture, and, differently, that figures on the Left like Ernst Bloch, and liberation theologians, have embraced forms of eschatology. Augustine, as we have commented, aimed to distance official Church dogma from the chiliasm, millennialism or messianism that was an undoubtable characteristic of the earliest Christian communities. Nevertheless, with that said, due weight does need to be given to the phenomena Norman Cohn documents in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, and which are confirmed in histories of apocalypticism by John Court, Martha Himmelfarb, Frederic Baumgartner and others.64 These are that the history of the Church has seen a recurrent need to oppose millenialist heresies, false prophets and messiahs: the ‘Christ’ of Bourges in 591, Aldebert of Soissons in the 740s, Eudes d’Etoille of Breton in the eleventh century; Henry of Breton, Tanchelm of Antwerp and the pseudo-Baldwin in the twelfth.65 There was also the repeated need to tame the kind of populist, eschatological enthusiasms manifest in the *flagelanti* and the people’s crusade.66 In Weberian terms, the Nicaean council, stabilization of canonical texts, and adoption of Augustinian readings of apocalyptic texts represent the transformation of Christianity from an originally prophetic, charismatic, antinomian religion to a priestly, congregational and institutional religion more consistent with the needs of maintaining and legitimizing political authority.67

Contemporary eschatological fundamentalism in the United States of course grows from deep roots in that country’s settler culture,

---

65 Cohn, *Pursuit of Millennium*, pp. 41–51.
66 On the flagelanti, see Cohn, *Pursuit of Millennium*, pp. 131–2; on the people’s crusade see Cohn, *Pursuit of Millennium*, pp. 61–8.
beginning with the Puritans’ lively conviction that their exodus from old Europe positioned them as God’s new chosen people, conquering a new promised land. New England’s Divine John Edwards described America as the New Jerusalem, daring to hope that God had chosen the new world prophesied in scripture to begin there. John Quincy Adams famously depicted the American war of independence as ‘the fulfilment of the prophecies, announced directly from heaven at the birth of the saviour and predicted by the greatest Hebrew prophets six hundred years before’. American divines were soon to justify America’s first imperial conquests in the Philippines under the Monroe doctrine by recourse to the notion of a God-bequeathed Manifest Destiny.

More deeply, we must recognize that the notion of history as involving a linear course, with a single discernible meaning, is deeply set into the West’s Jewish, Islamic and Christian heritage. The fundamentalists undoubtedly read Jewish prophecy, and the New Testament, in ways which are deeply ahistorical, unscholarly, tendentious and motivated. It remains, however, as scholars as different as Taubes, Camus, Lowith, Niebuhr, Jaspers and Weber each note, that the idea of history as having a single meaning, organized around the salvation of an elect group, is foundational to Western monotheism. The last twelve books of Civitas Dei are devoted to articulating a theology of history based on the six creation days. Such a notion was foreign to Hellenistic and Roman spirituality and philosophy. These held to a circular notion of time as involving, equally, ascent and descent, growth and decay, rooted in the supposition that the natural world was uncreated, so could equally have no end. Scholars now agree in tracing the lineage of the linear Judaeo-Christian conception of history back to Persia, and the encounter between the exilic Jewish community and Zoroastrianism. Whatever the origins of this theological and

69 Northcott, Angel Directs the Storm, pp. 14, 16, 24.
philosophical conception of history, scholars also agree that for the first four centuries of the Christian era — as some fundamentalists have noted — millennial expectation of the immanent second coming of Christ, with attendant transformation of human nature and the natural world, was normative among early Christians. It was expressed not simply in charismatic splinter groups like the Montanists.  

Apocalyptic millennialism in different forms was maintained by leading church fathers such as Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Ambrose of Milan. Hans Blumenberg’s claim about the Church’s post-Augustinian stamping out of Gnosticism — that it represents as much a reinvention of Christianity, as its purification — thus applies equally to millennialism. We need not go as far as Lawrence’s almost apocalyptic claim that the Revelation of John had to be included at the end of the New Testament, a necessary, almost obscene or superegoic ‘hidden side of Christianity’ comparable to Judas’ betrayal of the saviour, since Jesus’ ethical message could never hope to motivate the wretched of the earth. As the book of Daniel, from which John draws many of his images, shows — and now we are also familiar with the apocalypses of Nag-Hammadi and those from the Qumran scrolls.

73 Compare Court, Approaching the Apocalypse, pp. 51–6.
74 In the Dialogue with Trypho, 7 and 8, J. Martyr (d. 165) explains: ‘I and every other completely orthodox Christian feel certain that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, followed by a thousand years in the rebuilt, embellished, and enlarged city of Jerusalem, as was announced by the Prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah and the others’ (emphasis added). Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200) in Adversus haereses, gives evidence of his belief in a Tribulation which would precede Christ’s millennial reign (V, 28, 3), as follows: ‘For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded ... For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years ... When this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who are following him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day’. Clement (I Clement, XXIII) at the end of the second century exhorts the Corinthians: ‘Take a vine: first it drops its leaves; then a shoot comes, then a leaf, then a flower, after that the sour fruit, then the fully ripe grapes. You see that in a short time the fruit of the tree reaches maturity. In truth his will shall be fulfilled quickly and suddenly ... He shall come quickly and not linger, and the Lord will come suddenly to his temple ...’ See D. R. Anderson, ‘The Soteriological Impact of Augustine’s Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism Part One’, Faith Alone, 2002, p. 26, n. 2, <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2002i/anderson.pdf>, accessed September 2011. As late as the end of the fourth century, Julius Quintus-Hilarianus in De Mundi Duratione calculated that the world had but 101 years remaining, cited in A. Camus, Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism, p. 47. See, for example, Court, Approaching the Apocalypse, pp. 56–60; Baumgartner, Longing for the End, pp. 31–46.
76 Lawrence, Apocalypse, p. 17.
77 Lawrence, Apocalypse, pp. 15–16.
78 Codex 5 of the Nag-Hammadi texts contains Apocalypses attributed to Paul and Adam, and two by James. See esp. Himmelfarb, Approaching the Apocalypse, pp. 50–3.
— the apocalyptic genre and the human needs to which it appealed are present from Christianity’s inception.

**Historical Reason: Modern Secularizations of Eschatology**

So, while the new atheists may laugh loudest at contemporary fundamentalism, the roots of the kind of eschatological thinking they develop lie close to the very bases of the West’s Judaeo Christianity. We should be less complacent when we acknowledge that many of the most powerful criticisms of the role of eschatology in Western history written in the last century primarily targeted modern political regimes. Karl Lowith’s *Meaning in History*, written in 1949, is book-ended by telling considerations concerning the advent of ‘modern Joachism’ in the Nazi doctrine of a millennial Reich, and Hegelian philosophy.79 Lowith’s recounting of the intellectual history going back to the Bible, of Western dogmata positing a single, theological or philosophical point to history, begins with modern authors: Marx, Hegel, Burckhardt, Comte and Voltaire. Famously, Lowith claims that the modern notion of technological and social progress, inaugurated by Voltaire, is a ‘secularization’ of the Christian theology of history — which collapses what Augustine had divided: the hopes invested in Christianity in transcendent or sacred history, and the secular history of nations and peoples. Like Jacob Taubes, whom he cites, and Eric Voegelin, according to Lowith modern apocalyptic is in fact first expressed by Joachim of Fiore in the mid-thirteenth century, positing three ages of the world culminating in an immanent age of the Holy Spirit.80 At nearly the same time as Lowith, Albert Camus’ *L’Homme Révolté* was making the same type of claim, tying totalitarian regimes’ sanctioning of preemptive war and mass murder to a secularized eschatology, positioning the Party as the agent of History charged with bringing about the promised, millennial or ‘post-historical’ kingdom.81 Whatever their flaws, the resonance of these arguments, repackaged recently by John Gray in *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* in the present debates about a ‘return to religion’ is very important. The Radical Orthodox

and consonant thinkers appeal to the ‘political theological’ claim that modern institutions and notions ‘secularize’ religious conceptions, to justify the inference that we should now, in some way, openly reinstitute Christian institutions. But in Voegelin, Camus and Lowith, with the memory of totalitarian illiberalism fresher in the West’s mind, the secularization case was first used to justify the opposing inference. Their claim is that it is the ‘secularization’ of religious eschatology that explains the worst excesses of totalitarian regimes. This points, explicitly in Camus (Voegelin is a more complex case), to the wisdom of maintaining religious liberty, multi-party regimes and a separation of state from church.

**Socio-political Argument**

The fallacy of attributing a single meaning to history appears ‘elemental’, Voegelin observes. Its persistence hence calls for some kind of explanation of the deep human needs or ‘drives’ expressed in eschatology. Voegelin begins by noting that eschatology answers to the inalienable human need for ‘cognitive mapping’: what Weber terms ‘the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position towards it’. In this light, Voegelin comments that ‘the fallacious construction [of eschatology] ... achieves a certainty about the meaning of history and [its believers’] place in it, which otherwise they would not have’. Yet this account is, I think, manifoldly, insufficient. On the one hand, comparative reflection on different religious traditions shows that eschatology does not emerge outside of a culture which posits a God who is transcendent, all-powerful and ethically oriented, and which is then faced by the problem of explaining how such a God could create such a manifestly imperfect world in which the good do not always prosper. Put programatically, apocalypse or eschatology is one response to theodicy, alongside

---

82 And his hostility to ‘modernity’ much deeper and more sweeping than is Camus’.
86 Although we cannot pursue it here, Voegelin shares a near-vocational overestimation of the power of ideas in making history with several other ‘philosophers of history’.
dualism and the transmigration of souls.\textsuperscript{88} Here the problem and its solution are historized. The unrequited, manifest sufferings of the present time are either the justified response of the God to past sins, inherited original sin, or breaches of covenant. In all events, justice will be divinely restored at the end time, when the wicked will be justly punished and the good inherit a transformed nature.\textsuperscript{89} These tropes are absent from many non-Western religions.

On the other hand, any social intellectualist explanation of the continuing appeal of apocalyptic eschatology will clearly be insufficient, given the socio-political and psychological constituents of human motivation. To take the, for us, foundational case of Jewish messianism: different scholars have noted the direct connection between this world conception and the Hebrews’ ancient status in the post-exilic period as a politically disempowered nation, successively colonised by the ‘four beasts’ of surrounding, more powerful empires. Yet the hope for a \textit{mashiah}, anointed King, was for a long period not given a cosmological, supernaturalist framing. Still, for a philosophical rabbi like Maimonides, messianism — for instance in the Song of Solomon (Solomon, 17.37-8) — expresses disappointed political hopes and a longing for vengeance against the occupying powers, and looks to future political and military solutions. The supernatural component to Jewish messianism was developed only after the Maccabean revolt, with the Book of Daniel (c. 165 BCE) arguably still a political tract — necessarily coded in order to avoid censorship — and aimed at consoling the Hassidim (righteous ones) who had been subject to persecution at the hands of Antiochus IV.\textsuperscript{90} Gershom Scholem, probably the foremost scholar of Jewish mysticism and apocalypticism, posits a direct correlation between political disempowerment and apocalyptic supernaturalism:

\begin{quote}
The stronger the loss of historical reality in Judaism during the turmoil surrounding the destruction of the second temple and of the ancient world, the more intense became consciousness of the cryptic character and mystery of the Messianic message ... Jewish messianism is in its origins and
\end{quote}


by its nature — this cannot be sufficiently emphasised — a
theory of catastrophe.91

Herein then lies my social or political criticism of any too blithe
laughing-off-stage at contemporary apocalyptic. It is all very well
for Lawrence and Nietzsche to attack the *ressentiment* or ‘slavish’
mentality expressed in apocalyptic literature, as if people might
choose their *ethos* in a social, political or cultural vacuum. It remains
for us, in contrast to this, to ask what else can we expect people
who feel completely dispossessed or alienated from the present
political dispensation to feel except resentment, anger and a desire
for vengeance against those they see as the perpetrators and
profiteers of this dispensation?92 Secondly, how (or where) else can
we expect these all-too-human feelings and wishes to be expressed
except in other-worldly, imagined settings? Finally, how else can
we expect people who feel so completely disempowered to
envision their longed-for-release as occurring except through the
intervention of transcendent, unforeseeable powers, wholly alien to
present political realities, who will come as a thief in the night (1
Thessalonians 5:2)? Of course, we are approaching here the
defences of religion to be found in Marxian authors such as Ernst
Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer.93 We are also,
arguably, approaching the rationale (complete political defeat)
which explains the messianic turn in theorists such as Agamben, or
in Badiou’s notion of an indiscernible ‘truth event’ that will wholly
rupture existing epistemological and political expectations.

Pointing out the logical, rhetorical, fantasmatic and ethical problems
with apocalypticism will not only serve to consolidate believers’
sense of world alienation. It also forecloses consideration of the
this-worldly conditions that historical and sociological research has
repeatedly attested as underlying apocalypticism. This consideration

---

92 A reviewer of this article also pointed to the metaphysical consequences of modern science’s
overcoming of revealed accounts of creation, the origins of man, and natural-providential
teleology. This is a point well made, and made powerfully by Nietzsche among many others,
although it raises large philosophical issues we cannot address here. The modern scientific
worldview, when viewed against the background of theistic assumptions, can only look
‘meaningless’, a sense of ‘nihilism’ which can, has and will continue to provoke anxiety, and
the argument that only a theistic culture and worldview can restore meaning or direction to
the West. The claim of the modern West’s nihilism is of course a key dimension of many
radical right-wing evangelicals, as we have seen.
93 Compare, for example, Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*; R. Guess (ed.), *The Early Frankfurt School and
Theological in the Marxism of Adorno and Horkheimer’, *Crosscurrents*, vol. 53, no. 4, Winter
2004.
suggests that apocalypticism and messianism is not simply, or even primarily, a religious position characteristic solely of the lowest socioeconomic classes — as in the United States today. It is, however, a species of religious belief whose appeal grows as people of different classes feel rapidly destabilized and incapable of comprehending or arresting the forces that are changing their ways of life. To cite Cohn’s *Pursuit of the Millennium*:

In the eschatological fantasies which they had inherited from the distant past, the forgotten world of early Christianity, these people found a social myth most perfectly adapted to their needs ... In each case it occurred under similar circumstances — when population was increasing, industrialisation was getting under way, traditional social bonds were being weakened or shattered and the gap between rich and poor was becoming a chasm. Then in each of these areas in turn a collective sense of impotence and anxiety and envy suddenly discharged itself in a frantic urge to smite the ungodly — and by doing so to bring into being, out of suffering inflicted and suffering endured, that final Kingdom where the Saints, clustered around the great sheltering figure of their Messiah, were to enjoy ease and riches, security and power for all eternity.

**Final Remarks, on The End**

In this article I have considered apocalyptic eschatology in the light of contemporary calls from different political and social perspectives to ‘return to religion’. A range of contemporary psychological and twentieth-century philosophical literature in particular has been surveyed, to make the case that a return to apocalypticism will not serve to promote civic virtue. This form of religious other-worldliness tendentially pits believers against the existing status quo, often seeing it as a nest of iniquities. It is characterized by regressive, over-simplifying Manichean thinking, and charged with a powerful sense of anger and outrage. Nevertheless, I have made three arguments as to why it is theoretically one-sided and ethically ambiguous to simply dismiss apocalyptic religion as ‘mad’ or ‘crazy’

---

95 Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 60.
— on top of the evidence that this form of religion is today growing in Australia, the United States and, we add now, also in South America. The force of the theological and historical arguments was to suggest that any attempt to wholly ‘other’ this way of thinking must reconcile itself to the centrality of eschatological, linear conceptions of history, not simply in our monotheistic heritage, but also carried forward in modern forms of political utopianism. Finally, I recalled the well-attested sociological identification of eschatological conviction and social movements with peoples’ sense of social dislocation, disorientation and disempowerment, as argued by Scholem, Cohn, Weber and others. Apocalypticism, in all its otherworldly extremes, reflects a lived sense of extreme this-worldly political and economic alienation. Its present growth globally must hence be read as a symptom, and perhaps an indictment, of a world in which global and intranational indices of inequality are generally increasing, and the pace of technological and economic change is celebrated almost as an end in itself. While it is surely impossible to argue rationally against true believers in apocalyptic ideology, it is equally surely an ethical and political goal to try within the bounds of possibility to prevent and redress the social and economic conditions that promote these forms of religious extremism and intolerance. To do this, we need not posit in a utopian manner a world in which people will not suffer unjustly, and perceive themselves to be excluded, disempowered and devoid of hope, nor one in which those with powerful vested interests will not oppose the reallocation of resources such reforms will require, and denounce all such reform as eschatological, crazy and so forth. There are a series of passages in the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations that well express the other, non-eschatological, Greek conception of history we inherit. If you look backwards to the times of Augustus, Croesus or Pericles, Aurelius observes:

You will see all these things: people marrying, bringing up children, sick, dying, warring, feasting, trafficking, cultivating the ground, flattering, obstinately arrogant, suspecting, plotting, wishing for some to die, grumbling about the present, loving, heapings up treasure, desiring consulship, kingly power. Well then, that life of these people no longer exists at all. 96

96 Aurelius, Meditations, IV.32; compare Lowith, Meaning in History, pp. 6–10.
Such a perspective seems to me to be the only one that sensibly allows us to prophecy anything concerning the future, particularly if — as present conditions certainly suggest — political and economic life looks set to become less rather than more stable in the coming period. In a hundred years, or as long as there are human beings, it says, there will be people warring, loving, hating, having children, grieving, heaping up wealth, desiring status and power — and, let us add, there will also be people who believe that the world is soon to end.