

We've been talking about the two Christianities. The first is the revivalism Christianity, which believes every word in the Bible is literally true, whose leaders often claim divine authority, and insist it is the only path to God. **More and more thoughtful people are rejecting those assumptions.** A tenet of that old Christianity had to do with apocalyptic theology, which asserts that God will end the world with cataclysmic violence, after rapturing the evangelical Christians to heaven.

While apocalyptic theology never caught on here at Fairfield, it probably wouldn't surprise you to learn that some Christians are absolutely enthralled with the idea of Jesus returning to earth on the clouds to usher in a new era in which the righteous (Namely, them.) are miraculously transplanted to heaven, while everyone else (Namely, us.) are left behind to suffer a thousand-year period of tribulation ruled by the anti-Christ, who is a cross between Donald Trump and the United Nations. **They might be right about the Donald Trump part.**

I first learned of this odd theology in junior high. Our school sat next to a cemetery and one of my classmates, a Baptist boy named Daryl, told me about the Christians rising from their graves on Judgment Day, which he knew for a fact was just around the corner.

According to Daryl, only the Baptists would ascend. **I didn't want to miss that and made sure I had a desk in math class overlooking the cemetery so I could see it happen.** I imagined the earth buckling, the gravestones toppling over, the wooden coffins pushing up through the soil and opening, those Baptists stepping out of their caskets, brushing the dust from their garments, and ascending to heaven. **We had story problems in math, all of them involving trains, which no one rode anymore.** I wondered why there weren't any story problems about Judgment Day. *"If 3,254 Catholics and Baptists are buried in a cemetery, and 38% ascend to heaven on Judgment Day, how many Baptists were in the cemetery?"*

**Then I learned in science class that bodies couldn't rise in the air without adequate thrust, and that the Bible was silent on the subject of propulsion, which I pointed out to Daryl, but his mind was made up on the matter and he wouldn't budge.** This was another hallmark of the old Christianity—the dogmatic certainty—*God said it! I believe it! That settles it!*

We know that apocalyptic theology is common in times of social upheaval, that it provides hope for people who fear the future. **When it**

**appears in the Bible, mostly in the books of Daniel and Revelation, the people to whom it was addressed were suffering persecution.**

**But while apocalyptic theology has generally been a staple of the marginalized and powerless, what is surprising today is its embrace by the well-off and politically powerful.** This is especially alarming when you stop to consider that some of the very people we've elected and entrusted to help us build a durable future for our children and grandchildren believe the end of the world is near. **People who believe such things tend to have an aversion to long-range planning and wise stewardship.** Some of you might remember when James Watt, the former Secretary of the Interior in charge of America's environmental policy, said, "We don't have to protect the environment, the Second Coming is at hand." (Dawkins, Richard, The God Delusion, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, 2006, p. 288)

**It is especially frightening to realize that many in the Christian Right movement, some of whom have been instrumental in helping shape America's Middle East policy, believe Jesus won't return until an epic battle is waged between Israel and the Islamic world.** They would welcome this Armageddon, believing it was the necessary trigger to ensure Christ's return, and therefore be something to celebrate. **Now that we're in the thick of a Presidential campaign, it seems appropriate to ask anyone wanting to be our President what they believe about the second coming of Jesus, and to listen very closely to what they say.**

Life can be complex and difficult. **It's tempting to believe God will dramatically intervene and fix our most intractable problems, but it isn't wise public policy to count on it.**

I was speaking this past week with a friend who cleans homes for a living. **She was telling me about her son who thinks that because she cleans other people's homes, she ought to clean his bedroom.** She refused, and told him he needed to learn to clean up after himself. My friend is not a learned theologian, but she put her finger right on the problem of us expecting Jesus to return and set everything right. **If our world is messed up, if there is war, abject poverty, global warming, and ecological devastation, the human family is mostly to blame.** It's our mess, we made it, and to expect Jesus to come and clean it up is wishful thinking at best, and irresponsible and immature at worst.

A hallmark of mature spirituality is our willingness to accept responsibility for what we have done and what we have failed to do. **When we speak of a new Christianity, at its core is the conviction that God didn't intend to keep us trapped in moral childhood,**

**unable and unwilling to do anything for ourselves.** God does not intervene and clean our bedrooms. God wants us to grow up, be responsible, and live in such a way that our future and the futures of our children aren't jeopardized.

Not too many months ago, we discussed the Quaker Queries. **Remember that the point of the Queries isn't to ask God to do something for us we ought to do for ourselves, but to remind ourselves of our spiritual and ethical duties.**

Not only does apocalyptic theology absolve us of our responsibility to live and act responsibly, it justifies violence against people who aren't like us. **Someone is always left behind, left out, exterminated, or condemned to hell.** This is seen as good news, as the just desserts for someone whose chief sin was to be born in a different religious culture. That reasoning, of course, is illogical. **The accidents of our births are not a sin, worthy of punishment and destruction.**

**But more than illogical, it's implications are dangerous, for bad thinking has a way of begetting bad actions.** It is like Voltaire said. "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." Often the pastors and preachers who believe these things claim to be moral authorities. **But once you've decided the destruction of billions of people is a glorious thing which will bring about God's Kingdom on earth, you have lost the right to hold yourself out as a moral authority.**

I became a religious progressive because this and other aspects of fundamental Christianity disturbed me. **But sometimes those of us on the open-minded side of religion, because we've been taught to broadly respect religious beliefs, are reluctant to critique other perspectives.** We have placed a criticism-free zone around religion, given religion our automatic respect, and have accepted unquestioned faith as virtuous.\* **But can our world afford our unthinking acceptance of such absurdities?**

When millions of American evangelical Christians believe an apocalyptic war in the Middle East is a desirable thing and urge our government toward policies to that end, when they long for a bloody Armageddon which will trigger Christ's glorious second coming, they are no different than the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the nineteen men who destroyed the Twin Towers. They all believe wholesale human slaughter is something to be welcomed. **Those are not simply diverse religious viewpoints, which deserve our respect.** They are the thoughts and

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\* I am indebted to the British scientist, Richard Dawkins, for this insight.

acts of madmen, the first steps toward genocide, and merit our strongest censure.

**When I was in junior high and my classmate Daryl told me about Jesus coming to save the elect and punish the damned, I thought it was odd, and even a little funny.** But now that we have seen how religious absurdities invariably lead to moral atrocities, I find that worldview no laughing matter.

**Our world is in desperate need of a new Christianity, a new Islam, a new Judaism, a new Buddhism, a new Hinduism, religions whose paradises aren't attained at the expense of others.**

If we can't do that, and if religionists continue to insist that others must have hell for them to have heaven, if true believers continue to insist God has spoken and the matter is settled, the world could be forgiven for wishing God had kept silent.