

**BUDDHA AT THE
APOCALYPSE**

**AWAKENING FROM A
CULTURE OF DESTRUCTION**

KURT SPELLMEYER

FOREWORD BY ROBERT A.F. THURMAN

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*A single meditation cushion, and one is completely protected,
Earth may crumble, heaven collapse—but here one is at peace.*

—Xinggang,
in *Daughters of Emptiness:
Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns*

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Foreword by Robert A.F. Thurman	IX
Preface	XI
Introduction: Welcome to the Apocalypse	1
PART I: WORLD DESPISING	
Chapter 1: In the Beginning of History	19
Chapter 2: World Despising and the Origins of the Modern World	33
PART II: WORLD EMBRACING	
Chapter 3: An End to History, an End to Suffering	51
Chapter 4: One Body—The Hidden Ground of Liberation	69
Chapter 5: From Revolutionary Thinking to an Ecology of Mind	87
Chapter 6: Images of Order in a Complex World	105
Chapter 7: On and Off the Road of History	123
Conclusion: Buddha at the Apocalypse	139
Notes	151
Index	167
About the Author	179



FOREWORD

In a critical scene in James Cameron's blockbuster movie *Avatar*, a human character warns the aliens of the planet Pandora of the danger his people represent to all Pandoran life. "There's no green there," he says of his own home world. "They've killed their planet, their mother." And, he says, they'll do that to Pandora as well. It's a powerful artistic evocation of a future we recklessly race to bring about.

But why is this so? Why do both the masses and our dominant elite insist on self-destruction in the name of "progress"? Why do we rush lemming-like toward the precipice of ecocide, genocide, and suicide?

In this truly apocalyptic era, Kurt Spellmeyer has combined his broad and deep understanding of Western religious and philosophical literatures with his Zen learning and meditational practice to illuminate part of the answer of how we got here. He has produced an insightful analysis of what he identifies as an "apocalyptic orientation" toward time itself that has built a "mental architecture that continues to shape modern life."

Buddha at the Apocalypse is easy going, well written, and solidly reasoned—and lively in the way it interweaves Biblical analysis, Zen literature, and Western philosophy and sociology with popular culture and deep wisdom. I am delighted to greet this important and meaningful work and wish its author and many readers a fruitful walk in its garden of perceptive insights and heartfelt advice.

Robert A.F. Thurman



PREFACE

Only now, after several hundred years, is the destructiveness of our way of life starting to become apparent. Global climate change, environmental degradation, economic instability—these are just the top items on the list. But perhaps the most striking thing about it all is that our awareness of this truth has been so long in coming. Why were so few people listening? And why are so few responding even now?

One of the reasons would have to be culture. Our cultural heritage has taught us to believe that the “Forward March of Progress” is unstoppable and unequivocally good—if we just keep going straight ahead, a better life is guaranteed. A common enough sentiment, but this idea rests on another one whose significance is often overlooked.

All societies have their founding myths, and in the West ours has been the myth of what I call “Apocalyptic history.” We’ve been taught to see our existence as a road, a journey through the ages that will lead to the transcendence of time itself. This view has its roots in many places, among them the Bible, which promises that someday “time shall be no more.” The journey begins with the Creation and it ends with the Apocalypse.

Like all great myths, this one has enjoyed two lives. First, it once served as a literal truth—an account of reality. And second, it has helped to build a mental architecture that continues to shape modern life unconsciously. Even those of us who no longer believe in Adam and Eve or the return of Jesus might still assume implicitly that time is like a road moving forward to a day when everything will at last be revealed. Many secular progressives, entrepreneurs, and even scientists appear to think this way. But “progress”

as such, and especially as an unequivocal good, is really an article of faith, and not at all an empirical fact.

That faith still has its fundamentalists too. As we can see from the truly massive resurgence of Apocalyptic thinking in our time, what some of us regard simply as a myth is far from dead as a literal truth. For people living in an era so complex that it threatens to tip into utter incoherence, the old notion of an underlying plan has an existential power we can't dismiss as the craziness of a few radicals. No, belief in the End Times is truly alive and well in our culture. And yet the paradigm of time as a road might prove fatal in a universe governed by complexity rather than by Providence.

In this book I argue that the culture of the West begins with a refusal of complexity, or at least a deep ambivalence about it. This refusal has made the universe a battlefield, not just between good and evil but between the apparent chaos of life on earth and God's order up in heaven. Whether we are comfortable admitting it or not, the God of the Bible sometimes uses violence to maintain a master plan in the midst of a chaotic universe.

The history of religion in the West is quite complex in its own right. As someone who was raised in the Christian faith, I still owe more than I can ever repay to the ethics of love and forgiveness that I learned from the scriptures and from the communities where my family was made welcome. And yet, as a society we'll never understand how things have gone so remarkably wrong unless we have the courage to address what is dark and dangerous in our tradition. And that understanding can be greatly helped by finding another vantage point—a new place to look back at ourselves. Buddhism, in my view, is just such a place. Buddhism might flourish in the West, or it might disappear as quickly as it came, but while it's here it can offer us another way to think about our lives in time.

This book is part of a larger multi-volume project to which a number of friends and colleagues have contributed very generously. That, of course, doesn't mean they always agreed with me. Foremost among those would be Jacky Sach, whose confidence in the basic argument encouraged me at many stages. Others who took the time to read and discuss portions of the project were Kritee, Imtiaz Rangwalla, John McClure, Richard Miller,

Dawn Skorczewski, and Raymond Baldino. I learned a great deal from every one of them. I would also like to thank Josh Bartok, my editor at Wisdom, for his advice, good humor, and, yes, real wisdom. Many thanks to you all.

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE APOCALYPSE

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the United States seemed to turn a page on a period of cynicism and decline. Sixty-three million Americans cast votes for the man who had written *The Audacity of Hope*, and many of them saw the election as a referendum on a brighter future. But America's vision of the future has always been a complicated affair—a tapestry woven from many different strands.

Just two years before *The Audacity of Hope*, the publishing industry marveled at a very different phenomenon. The *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins quickly joined the ranks of the all-time bestsellers. Told through the eyes of characters who could be your neighbors or friends—a journalist, an airline pilot, a financier, a Stanford undergrad—the series retraced the Biblical events leading up to the end of the world. As each of the volumes went to press, with sales pushing toward *eighty million*, many readers feared that Armageddon might arrive before LaHaye and Jenkins finished all twelve books.

According to a Time/CNN poll in 2002, 59% of Americans accept the literal truth of the Book of Revelation.¹ It's not surprising, then, that its teachings might shape how they behave as well as how they think. *Left Behind* author Tim LaHaye has played a key role in the religious right.² Through the Committee to Restore American Values, he has funneled many millions of dollars to conservative activists. His Apocalyptic "End Times" theology led him to push for war against Saddam Hussein, whom he regarded as a forerunner of the Anti-Christ.³

Another key purveyor of Apocalyptic thinking is John Hagee, pastor of

a church in San Antonio with 19,000 members, and the founder of Christians United for Israel. CUI members are convinced that by rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, they can initiate a chain of events that will bring about the Second Coming of Christ.⁴ End Times theology has also taken hold of the U.S. military. Indeed, the Army's current Chief of Chaplains has declared that the war in Iraq was the first of the disasters that will lead to Armageddon.⁵

Apocalyptic thinking has influenced another area of our lives as well. In a famous speech deriding efforts to curb global warming, the Evangelist Jerry Falwell had this to say: "How long will the earth remain? It will remain until the new heavens and the new earth come.... The earth will go up in dissolution from severe heat. The environmentalists will be really shook up then, because God is going to blow it all away."⁶

Ever since Falwell delivered his remarks, a growing number of evangelicals have distanced themselves from his view. But virtually all of them would agree that this earth is neither our true home nor our ultimate destination. If ideas play any role in human affairs, these ideas must exert a powerful influence. These kinds of ideas matter.

They matter because their reach extends far beyond the millions of fundamentalists who cheered and wept at Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. A growing number of secular thinkers—noted scientists and social critics—have begun to speak about an approaching cataclysm. Jared Diamond, a geographer and physiologist by training, made headlines with *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Among the failed societies he explores, Diamond seems especially intrigued by the Maya of Central America, and he suggests that an implosion like the one they faced might be on the way for us. Other observers, such as Michael T. Klare in *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, foresee a nightmarish struggle over access to water, land, and raw materials. Just this morning an Amazon search turned up the following books among dozens of others: *The Collapse of Globalism*, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, *The Coming Economic Collapse*, *The Collapse of the Common Good*, *The Coming Collapse of China*, *The Collapse of America: A Ruined State*. In the tapestry of Western culture, the audacity of hope is often interwoven with premonitions of total catastrophe.

There are, of course, good reasons to be concerned. A slight shift in the earth's mean temperature could disrupt food production on every continent. Not long ago a Pentagon study foresaw a worst-case scenario in which the lives of 400 million people would be placed at risk by climate change.⁷ Combined with a global economic collapse, instability on this scale would surely lead to wars—at a moment when thermonuclear weapons have become more widely available than ever.

Meanwhile, the natural environment is approaching some kind of tipping point. The next hundred years will probably see the greatest mass extinction since the dinosaurs. If current trends continue, the polar bear, elephant, rhinoceros, and tiger will all be gone from the wild. Children born fifty years from now may doubt that such animals ever roamed the earth. The long-term consequences of the species loss are anybody's guess.

No one can dismiss the problems we now face—too many outcomes would be truly horrible. And the popularity of Apocalyptic thinking could prove to be just as dangerous as our real-world threats. If we expect collapse, then collapse may come. If we're convinced that God has preordained the End, why try to set things right?

Rejecting the End Times—mentality would seem to mean embracing its complete opposite—the belief that a brighter day lies ahead if we only dare to hope. The audacity of hope might be a beautiful idea, yet the truth is that our hopes helped to create the problems we're trying to correct. Our grandparents had high hopes for automobiles. No one imagined that car exhaust would change the composition of the atmosphere. We bombed Hiroshima hoping for an end to a long and brutal war, perhaps an end to war altogether. No one understood what it would mean to kill eighty thousand non-combatants in a few seconds. Plastics were a modern miracle. No one knew the estrogens in plastic had the power to depress sperm counts and elevate levels of obesity and cancer.

To hope for a better world is still to believe the future holds the key to our ultimate well-being. But what if the destructiveness of our way of life, unequalled in all of human history, follows directly from our worship of the future? Some of us may dream of a utopia and some may be waiting for the trumpets of doom—but throughout this book I invite you to

consider that both these illusions might do violence to the world as it is here and now.

APOCALYPTIC HISTORY

Our basic way of thinking is *historical*, but perhaps not in the way we often use that word. As Westerners we've been subtly conditioned to view history in Apocalyptic terms. In Greek, the root of word *apocalypse* means "a lifting of the veil." We've been raised to think of time itself in such a way—as a process of continuous revelation that will only end when the grand design behind all of time is fulfilled.

People in other cultures gathered information about the lives of their ancestors. They grasped the logic of cause and effect, and organized their stories with beginnings, middles, and ends. Like us, they wrote historical chronicles, yet they didn't think of time as leading to a moment of complete transcendence. To them and sometimes still to us, "history" was a synonym for "the past." But the most important form of "history" in the West is all about the future. To believe in Apocalyptic history is to see events as moving forward in a preordained way, from a distinct beginning to an all-encompassing end.

Among the ancient peoples of the West, there was one group who broke decisively with the older, backward-looking notion of history. The people in question were the Jews. Their fate put them at the center of a collision of cultures, languages, and gods. The Bible depicts them as dissenters who turned their backs on one of the first experiments in urban living, the city of ancient Ur, when they followed Abraham into the desert hoping to regain the simplicity they'd lost. The simplicity, however, eluded them. Attacked over and over, enslaved and driven into exile only to return to their homeland again, the Jews embarked on an odyssey that continues to this day. How they survived when so many others disappeared is one of the Bible's most important lessons. According to the authors of the Bible, the tribes of Israel persevered by learning to embrace change.

The Jews were perhaps the first to imagine change as leading somewhere totally new. We might say that they invented "the future," at least for the

Western world. Their stroke of genius was to convince themselves that in spite of the disasters they endured, events would eventually lead them to the better place promised by their tribal god, Yahweh. That place was not just the land of Israel, however. It was also a time to come when the Jews would be as numerous as the sands of the sea. No one can say that the ancient Jews were modern, yet they took the first step toward the modern world. Through their rituals and sacred texts, they looked backward to the days of Abraham and Moses, but through prophets like Isaiah and Daniel they looked far into the future.

Christianity began as a branch of Judaism but it profoundly reconceived the Jews' invention of future thinking. The ancient Jewish vision of history stops with the restoration of Israel under the Messiah's leadership. Then, in the prophet Isaiah's words, "The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."⁸ This vision of history culminates in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham—a time of peace on earth.

But the Christian idea of history culminates in the end of time itself. The earth as we know it will be totally destroyed. Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, who will rise from their graves as though from a sleep. A new earth will be made where the redeemed will live in ageless bodies for eternity under the dominion of Christ the King. We might say, on the one hand, that Christianity preserved the Jewish vision of temporal life as a series of revelations that would guide God's chosen people to a better day. On the other hand, the Christians added something new: the future was leading beyond history and, with it, this flawed and fallen world.

The Christian Apocalypse is ambiguous. From one vantage point, it might be understood as a teaching of indestructible hope. Even if the worst outcome of all should take place—the total destruction of everything—the whole of creation will be made anew. Yet Christ himself is the one in Revelation who orchestrates the destruction. He destroys the world to save it from sin, sacrificing things as we know them now for the sake of what they shall someday be.

In this view, salvation and destruction are the same.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH A COMPLEX UNIVERSE

For two millennia people in the West have been able to explain all events by relying on Apocalyptic history. Everything was seen as moving toward an escape from the conditions of earthly life. Even with the rise of science, this idea only grew in power and potency. It's true that early scientists challenged all kinds of dogmas and folk beliefs, but most of them still held firmly to the view that history was following God's master plan. Indeed, they thought of science as uncovering the methods God employed to accomplish his goals.

For them, the universe was totally predictable, and each unique event was no less predetermined than the ones that the scriptures had foretold. Thanks to these assumptions, early scientists could study with precision a ball in flight and the force of water moving through a pipe. But what made the thinking of such men Apocalyptic wasn't just their faith in the total regularity of the material universe. The larger program of science was also aimed at a certain kind of Apocalypse. The goal was to transcend the physical world and lift humans to a higher spiritual plane.

Today, the universe no longer seems so precisely predictable. Instead of unfolding in one straight line, we are starting to see complex events as places where different vectors of causality intersect in ways that make it harder to predict what is going to happen next. In fact, no single outcome can ever be guaranteed.

How, for example, do we calculate the shifting of a pile of sand? To predict what the whole pile will do when its mass shifts under pressure of some kind, we can't simply calculate the motion of one grain and multiply by millions. The same dilemma arises when we try to calculate the nonlinear motion of a lightning bolt, involving as it does many different combustions going off in a series that unfolds at an irregular pace. A heap of sand, a bolt of lightning, the turbulent motion of water as it moves down the bed of a rocky stream—these are everyday examples of complex, multivariant interactions that require new analytical tools. Such new tools are necessary because probabilities have replaced certainties. The one-in-a-million chance can change everything. Far from waiting for us in a preordained form, the future has become open-ended—in a word, complex.

Over the last twenty years “complexity” has been used to define a special branch of science that deals with systems of such sophistication they defy the view of time as a simple, linear story.⁹ Instead of involving a single link between one cause and one effect, such systems bring together multiple events interacting with each other to produce “emergent properties.” Complex systems may do things, in other words, that no one could predict just by watching them at the start of their interaction.

For people raised with Apocalyptic history, all of this might appear troubling. Apocalyptic history teaches us that nothing can ever happen unpredictably, as a product of sheer chance. Everything is preordained, if not divinely then by nature’s laws or, perhaps, by the market’s hidden hand. To start with total randomness but then to end with order looks like an outrageous contradiction. When we observe the coherence we see everywhere—from the activity of a colony of ants to the operation of the human brain—it seems impossible that such fine-tuning could have come about by accident.

Anthills and human brains in particular are good illustrations of complexity. Within complex systems, individual parts—whether they are ants or neural cells—demonstrate what is known as “self-organization.” There’s no Central Office issuing directives. Instead, the parts coordinate themselves, interacting with a collective intelligence even when the single units aren’t very smart—or even sentient. Each ant’s brain, for example, contains only several hundred thousand cells compared to our 100 billion. Yet a group of ants acting together can do what creatures with far larger brains need a lot of thought to accomplish. They build nurseries for their young, storage chambers for their food, and cemeteries for their dead.

Homo sapiens have assets ants completely lack (of course)—ego consciousness and language in particular—but our own mental lives would also appear to result from self-organizing processes. In much the same way as anthills grow, neural connections get forged by repetition without our prior planning or choice. No one willingly decides to have an itch, or to find a sound annoying or experience pleasure from the smell of a rose. Even the most accomplished meditators can’t stop thoughts voluntarily. Our consciousness allows us to think about thinking, but consciousness itself takes form unconsciously through a process of self-organization.

Because consciousness is a complex system, it follows that the societies we've made by using it must be complex systems too. For most of human history, our cities have arisen and evolved in much the same random way as ant colonies. And just as no single intelligence planned out London, Paris, or Los Angeles, so no single mind devised our laws, our traditions of art, our cuisines, or our religions.

And now some of us have become acutely aware of complexity itself. The importance of this development can hardly be overemphasized. Indeed, our awareness of complexity may have arrived in the nick of time because our survival could depend on it.

Our encounter with complexity could produce a less destructive form of life that is also more intelligent and happier. But when we factor in our culture's legacy of Apocalyptic thinking, the odds may be stacked against it. Because of that legacy, many of us feel absolutely overwhelmed. In the case of religious fundamentalists, this might explain the tidal wave of new interest in Revelation.

If the Book of Revelation turns out to be right—or the *Left Behind* series anyway—the Apocalypse is indeed drawing near. Following the Rapture, those still here on earth may behold a pale horse whose rider is Death, and Hell may follow after him,¹⁰ but at least we'll finally have closure. At least we'll know how the whole story ends. After centuries of twists and turns, one event will prove for all of time who was right and who was wrong. Apocalyptic history will be vindicated.

Like any first-rate story, the Book of Revelation is a dense, complicated network of plots and counterplots, metaphors and symbols that keep teasing us to make a last judgment about what it all must mean. But last judgments are just a fantasy. We can wander around in this labyrinth of words from now until the end of time. Perhaps that's what Revelation was meant to teach, but it doesn't seem to be a lesson learned by most believing readers. They're really waiting for the end to come.

But even the most secular among us aren't immune to the powerful allure of Apocalyptic thinking. Many progressives still believe that continued economic growth is the road out of global poverty. Or they're still convinced that new technology holds the key to our welfare and happiness,

once and forever after. Even as the missteps and disasters mount up, their faith in the future remains as strong as ever.

Somehow, solutions will always appear, or so the thinking goes—and history will never give us problems we can't solve.

LEARNING TO LIVE IN A COMPLEX UNIVERSE: THE ZEN OF UNCERTAINTY

Problems like the ones we face today—climate change, environmental decline, political and economic instability—aren't as vexing as they seem to be simply because they pose a mortal threat. No, the Black Death, Genghis Khan, and Hernan Cortes destroyed entire civilizations. There's nothing so new about that. What makes our problems now unique is their relation to awareness itself. All of them are, in a sense, artificial. They've all been produced by the way we think. And only a change in the way we think can prevent disaster.

If our problems start with the mind itself, then the mind could lead us back from the brink. Perhaps for this reason we shouldn't be surprised that just as people in the West have started to feel utterly overwhelmed by an endless string of complicated problems, a small but growing number of them have become intrigued by traditions like Zen. Zen might be one thing our culture urgently needs.

Zen is actually all about retraining the mind to deal with life in a complex universe. Consider the ways that the worldview of Zen differs from the one created by the tradition of Apocalyptic history:

The Worldview of Apocalyptic History

the future and the past
single cause/single effect
predictability
divine predestination
personal independence
destruction/creation
ends justify means

The Worldview of Zen

the present
complex interactions
possibility
open-endedness
interdependence
connection
means are the ends

Complexity is hard to get our minds around because we keep thinking in a linear way. We reason that either something is the case, or it simply isn't. Either something will be, or it just won't. Beginning with our present circumstances, we extrapolate by imagining them as the initial point of a single line stretching out predictably forever. But this habit of extrapolation is unreliable and flawed.

With personal matters like the state of our health, or big issues like the environment, our tendency to extrapolate sets us up for all kinds of unpleasant shocks. And when it comes to profound unhappiness, waiting for the future to make our dreams come true is one of the few sure bets. In a universe where possibility rules, no one can control how events will shake out; no one can even say with certainty where they will be six months from now. And the reason is worth attending to. It's not because the future can be seen from the spot we occupy today. It's because a single future doesn't yet exist, only many possible trajectories.

Once we begin to think this way, Zen makes a great deal of sense. Rather than evading the openness of things, Zen meditation could be understood as a way of embracing it. There's a famous story about exactly that:

Priest Kyogen said, "Zen is like a monk hanging on the branch of a tree by his teeth while perched over a steep precipice. He cannot use his hands to grasp another branch, and there's no limb to rest his feet on. Then suddenly below him another man appears and asks with the greatest urgency, "What's the use in my continuing to live?" If the monk doesn't answer the man might kill himself—and then the monk would have broken his Great Vow to help other humans in need. But if he opens his mouth to speak, he will break another vow by taking a life—in this case, his own. Now tell me, what should he do?"¹¹

Unlike the Great Story that has guided the West, the one that ends with the Apocalypse, this vignette doesn't have a clear-cut resolution. No trumpets on high, no angels, no purifying fire, and no happily (or unhappily) ever after. This story concludes, well, *inconclusively*.

After hearing such a tale we might just walk away, shaking our heads about this strange thing called Zen, which responds to our uncertainty by adding even more. But on the other hand, if we sit calmly for a while, the story might begin to resonate. The whole scenario seems ridiculous. After all, how often have we found ourselves hanging from our teeth over a chasm? And yet, we've all felt something like this helplessness. Swamped by debts but stuck in a job we dream of quitting. Made so sick by chemotherapy we wish we could die, but still desperate to hold on to the threads of precious life. Disgusted by the orgy of consumer greed, yet frightened that a smaller salary will take away our only shot at the American Dream.

It wasn't a Zen master, though it surely could have been, but F. Scott Fitzgerald who gave brilliant advice when he wrote that the test of a first-rate mind is its ability to entertain two contradictory ideas at once.¹² Fitzgerald believed the novelist could show the complexity of real life in a way unavailable to philosophers, scientists, and theologians. After all, their educations had trained them to make contradictions disappear. Showing how to live *with* contradictions—that was a far more difficult job.

The secret of Fitzgerald's writing happens to be the secret of Zen as well: when we stay with our uncertainty long enough, we stop counting on a better tomorrow. What we gain is a chance to inhabit this "now" in a profoundly different way—in a way less rigid and self-deceiving, and also more alive and compassionate.

ZEN AS AN ECOLOGY OF MIND

Zen helps us meet the moment as it is by loosening the stranglehold of our preconceptions, the habits and ideas that have kept us from dealing with things as they really are. And when we meet the moment in this way, we find it's inescapably open to chance, inescapably complex.

The open-endedness of the real world requires open-mindedness from us. The term "open-mindedness" may sound trivial, and we might assume that all it takes is a little furrowing (or unfurrowing) of our brows. But observation quickly shows that open-mindedness comes to human beings with the

greatest difficulty. Apocalyptic history has such enormous power because it gives the reassurance everybody craves—even when it's based on utter self-deceit. In a world where chance plays an enormous role, we try to create a collective dream of total predictability. And it's a dream that often *seems* to work. In fact, we can often make it work far too well. Most adults have a finely honed ability to screen out anything that even hints of chance. Yet if history teaches nothing else, it teaches that the past never does repeat itself. The next calamity we have to face will always be the one we couldn't foresee because it didn't fit our expectations.

The Zen response to this dilemma is to tap into the part of our minds that exists outside the collective dream we mistake for real. The Western term for that part of the mind is "the unconscious." Regrettably, thinkers in the West have often discounted the unconscious because they perceived it as a haven for illusions, dreams, and even insanity. By contrast, consciousness is regarded as an undistorted mirror of the world.

Yet the unconscious mind is the origin of much that humans value the most. You might be able to give reasons for falling in love, but most people don't reason themselves into it. Love springs up from some deeper place. The same holds true for happiness, sympathy, excitement, amusement, and the perception of beauty. These expressions of our basic human nature often assume different forms in different cultures. But their underlying universality shows that human nature is natural at its core, and also primarily unconscious. As humans we share an unconscious legacy that goes deeper than our customs and beliefs. It was there before our civilizations. It may even have been there in the course of evolution before we were fully human. For these reasons Zen uses the nature in ourselves to break free from the illusions and fears that keep us from dealing creatively with change.

Apocalyptic history teaches us that our best response to the unknown is to count on the future to behave predictably. The smart strategy is holding tight to our beliefs while pushing anomalies away. Instead of asking how new evidence fits in, this kind of thinking tries to screen it out.

When we look for examples of such thinking we can find them everywhere: in our talk shows, our politics, and our business culture. If we want

to find examples of the opposite—of thinking and living in a complex way—Zen and the traditions of East Asia have a great deal to offer. But the West on its own has managed to produce at least one great example of truly complex thinking: the discipline of ecology.

Ecologists teach us to think inclusively about the systems that emerge from complex interactions. For this reason they picture time as a tree with branching limbs of increasing variation, rather than a single “is or isn’t” line. Apocalyptic history chronicles events until they come to one conclusion. But ecology shows that life never stops—it never stops changing and branching off and interweaving once again.

We could say that Zen is like ecology, but that wouldn’t go quite far enough. In fact, Zen *is* an ecology, but an ecology of a special kind. To the Western version of ecology Zen adds on one additional ingredient. Zen regards the mind as part of the world, and it regards the world as part of mind. Zen is an “ecology of mind,” to borrow Gregory Bateson’s famous phrase.¹³

Mind is world, or world is mind—whichever we way we choose to go, the truth is the same. The point was made quite effectively by a twentieth-century Zen master named Soko Morinaga, who received his first lesson in complexity many years before he eventually became the abbot of Myoshinji temple in Japan.

During the first phase of his monastic life, Morinaga had been a conventional *unsui*, a “cloud and water person,” an apprentice monk. And like all *unsui* he’d been assigned the mundane, unglamorous task of cleaning up. But as chance would have it, Morinaga had to do his cleaning beneath the critical eye of the master himself, the old Zuigan.

One day Morinaga had gone out with Master Zuigan to work in the temple garden, and his first thought was to make a good impression by zealously sweeping up the fallen maple leaves. “Where should I throw this trash?” the boy asked the old man, innocently enough.

“There is no such thing as trash,” his teacher bellowed.

Zuigan then told Morinaga to fetch a sack, and after sifting all the leaves free from the small stones and random twigs, he stuffed them inside and trampled them down into tinder for the temple bath later on. But then to

Morinaga's amazement, Zuigan picked up the individual pebbles and instructed the novice to add them to the ones in the trenches made to catch the rain falling off the roof. Finally the old man took whatever remained—scraps of moss, bark, and twigs—and used it to fill uneven places on the garden floor.¹⁴

At times, anyone who's gone through Zen training has probably found the whole experience absurd—maddening if not slightly mad as well. In a world with real problems to address, who really cares if someone overlooks a few pebbles or leaves here and there? No one will ever notice anyway, except perhaps some grouchy, antiquated monk. But then, an odd change can come over you when you're fussing with the scraps of moss or the twigs. More and more the world around you starts to seem strangely, unexpectedly intimate. It's not just that you begin to care about the work: you find yourself feeling uncannily attached, as though it were your job somehow to protect these things that only hours earlier had seemed lifeless and irrelevant.

On this occasion, Zuigan taught his unsui a lesson in much more than gardening. Like most people in the modern world, whether they live in Japan or the U.S., the young Morinaga still implicitly believed that he lived in a linear universe. The way to deal with chips and pebbles that he didn't want was to assume a future he could foresee. If it's OK now, it will be OK later on—that's the beauty of extrapolation. This is the same mode of thinking we employ when we dump our raw sewage into the sea or store our nuclear waste away in steel barrels even though plutonium is toxic for 24,000 years. The whole idea of "disposability" rests on this linear habit of mind: we assume there's no chance the details that we neglect will come back to bite us later on.

Powerful forces continue to promote the mind-set of disposability. Free market economics, technology gone wild, and religious fundamentalism—all three keep our eyes fixed hypnotically on the future as we imagine it. But this habit could prove to be our fatal flaw. Counting on the future reassures because it lets us disconnect from a world of change that will always be unpredictable. Yet disconnection makes us less safe in the long run, blinding us to dangers we most need to see—dangers that a different awareness might reveal.

One purpose of Zen is to let us reconnect with events in spite of their contingency. As generations of Buddhists have learned, Zen can help us come to terms with everything our fears tell us. Once our awareness has become large enough—large enough, for instance, to take in the moss and twigs—the feelings of connection and care can outweigh the fear that makes security more important than seeing things as they are.

To understand what Zen practice really means, we have to be willing to think differently about both this world and our place in it. And when we do, we may see that it's just possible we've gotten many, many things terribly wrong. It took centuries of confusion to produce human beings who prefer narcissism to community, shopping malls to forests, and a virtual existence to the life off the screen.

So it's going to take us a little time to understand exactly how we got where we are now.

I think the best way to start will be with our culture's fear of complexity. I'm starting there because I've become convinced that the West's relationship with complexity is a deeply troubled one, so troubled that it needs some outside help. And the "help" part will be covered in Part II, where the subject will be Zen and its strategies for life in a complex universe.

But the troubled relationship will have to come first.



PART I
WORLD DESPISING

CHAPTER 1: IN THE BEGINNING OF HISTORY

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND THE BIRTH OF AN APOCALYPTIC GOD

Consider the opening of what might be the most important document in Western civilization—the Book of Genesis:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good.¹⁵

Most people know the broad outlines of the story. But probably they never stop to reflect that the most "obvious" details shouldn't be. For example, Buddhist sutras never start with the phrase "In the beginning." Nor does the Bhagavad Gita or the Qu'ran. What makes Genesis and the Bible unique is precisely their concern with time, and time begins with God himself. In fact, time and God are so closely linked we might even say that they're one and the same.

Unlike many other holy books, the Bible presents itself as a work of history—a history that claims to map the whole of time. The linkage of God with time is so obvious that almost no one ever notices, and that's a sign of its phenomenal success as fundamental "paradigm," an idea so basic to the way we think that it gives shape to thought itself. The Bible is filled with

such paradigms, and together they create a mental architecture our culture has come to use automatically to make sense of events. Consider the stories of Adam and Eve, the Apple and the Tree, the Serpent, the Temptation, and the Fall. Like our conceptual DNA, these paradigms have followed us across millennia. And even though they structure our experience, they do much of their work in a subliminal way.

If Genesis is the West's most important story, its most important paradigm is this: God, who is time, also *creates*. The authors of Genesis could have envisioned God as something other than the Creator. They might have described him as the Great Immovable, but then he would have represented timelessness instead of the unfolding of time. He could have been a sky god like the Canaanite Ba'al or a sun god like the Egyptian Ra. But neither of these gods created their own domains, whereas the God of Genesis is unique because he, like time itself, brings into being absolutely everything.

The Bible teaches us that the world arose from God's creative activity. And once he got started he then called on his own creations to assist him:

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.¹⁶

The injunction, "Be fruitful, and multiply," means that the fish and birds are ordered to help in their way by reproducing sexually. But God issues this command to one being other than the fish and birds. That being is Adam, the first man, who was made in God's "own image."

What the Bible means by "image" is never explained, but one possible interpretation is that man resembles God in his ability to contribute to the master plan. After all, God gives Adam an additional command beyond the one instructing him to reproduce. He says, "replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."¹⁷

The appearance of Adam, however, is followed by a fateful complication. Genesis 2:18 begins with God's discovery of Adam's loneliness. After God makes this discovery, he summons all the animals for Adam to name. Then, abruptly, God causes him to fall asleep and removes a rib in order to create the first woman, Eve.¹⁸

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that Eve's creation sets into play a ruinous sequence of events. God tells Adam and Eve that they can eat from the fruit of all the trees in the Garden of Eden except for one, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Although he warns that consuming this fruit will kill both of them, Eve disobeys after meeting with the serpent. The serpent tells her that God has lied, and that eating the forbidden fruit won't kill her and Adam, but instead will make the two of them like gods in their own right. So she eats, and when she beckons Adam to join her, he does. Once God discovers their disobedience, he drives Man and Woman weeping through the gates of Paradise. This, of course, is the Fall.¹⁹

COMPLEXITY AND A DESTRUCTIVE GOD

The Fall is another paradigmatic event, and it marks a turning point for God as well as Adam and Eve. Through their disobedience, God comes face to face with the first thing in the world about which he *cannot* say, "Behold, it is good." The success of his masterpiece is suddenly in doubt.

After their expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve have a child, their son Cain, who will later kill his younger brother Abel. Just as God has expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, so does he drive Cain away from his parents and into the "land of Nod," where Cain lives as "a fugitive and wanderer [on] the earth" as a punishment for the murder.²⁰ As Genesis painfully illustrates, God's Creation rapidly goes downhill. Starting with disobedience and deceit, humanity descends into murder and other heinous crimes. Adam and Eve have additional children, and Cain has children as well. As the generations unfold, the situation keeps growing worse until the day arrives when God surveys his handiwork with revulsion and regret:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.²¹

Here God appears for the first time in a different light—no longer an embodiment of time's creative side but a disappointed Destroyer. He declares, "I will destroy man whom I have created." Only six chapters into Genesis, God floods the world and returns it to the state in which he left it on the second day. But as we know, he doesn't destroy everything. Deciding that his some of his work can be saved, God spares Noah and his family along with mating pairs of all the animals. Then God rebuilds, preserving what is good while continuing to destroy the bad.²²

When we read Genesis carefully, the implications may be surprising. As I've said, the most important paradigms are that God is time and that he is defined by his creative activity. But if men have been made in God's image and need to follow his example, what sort of creative activity should they emulate?

God at first creates freely and expresses satisfaction, but then the plan he sets in motion starts to unfold in an unexpected way. We might say it acquires complexity. Until the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the outcome of time and God's activity could never have been in any doubt at all. But their disobedience appears to bring real openness into the scheme of things, so that many different futures become possible. To this complexity God's response is violence.

Throughout the pages of the Bible we can see creation and destruction going hand in hand. And given the importance of the Bible to the West, it's bound to have had a powerful effect on the ways we think about almost everything, even if we've never read a word of Genesis.

The Bible teaches that violence must be used whenever events deviate from God's plan, and because they deviate so often, God is depicted in var-

ious scenes as angry, disappointed, jealous, and hungry for revenge. And yet, in his effort to set things right, he's never altogether deserted by loyal men and women. After the Great Flood God eventually finds assistants he can trust to help him with his work: Abraham and his descendents, with whom God makes a special "covenant," naming them his chosen people. Because Abraham served the Lord so faithfully, God promises to protect the Jews, rescuing them from disasters and crushing their enemies in the nick of time. But the Jews' enemies are everywhere, and as we move deeper into Genesis and then into Exodus and Deuteronomy, we see less of God the benign Creator and more of an angry, destructive deity.

One example of this change appears in Exodus. In order to liberate Moses and the Jews from their Egyptian bondage, this God kills "all the first-born [children] in the land of Egypt," and later he drowns the Egyptian cavalry in its pursuit of the Jews through the Red Sea, which Moses parts miraculously in order to escape.²³

Beginning with St. Augustine, many theologians over the centuries have argued that God's violence here is fully justified.²⁴ Hadn't the Egyptians enslaved the Jews, ruining their lives and thwarting God's plan? Even so, it's far from obvious that a truly loving God would have killed the first-born of *all* Egyptians, or that God was obliged to exterminate the whole Egyptian cavalry. A God capable of parting the Red Sea could certainly have stopped the cavalry some other way.

But this is not the worldview of Exodus. Following the Jew's escape from their Egyptian bondage, Moses sings ecstatically, "[Our] Lord is a man of war."²⁵ Nor does the violence come to a stop with the killing of the Egyptians. In fact, it just begins with that event. As Moses boasts in his song, the other enemies of Abraham's people have good reason to be afraid—the Philistines, the Edomites, the peoples of Moab and Canaan, who were already living in the area prior to the Jews' arrival. "Terror and dread will fall upon them," Moses sings, "[Because of] the power of your arm... O Lord."²⁶

COMPETING VISIONS OF TIME

Just as the Bible presents us with two competing visions of God—a creative and destructive one—it offers two competing views of time as well. On some occasions the authors of the Bible seem to think that when events depart from God's plan, they threaten to destabilize the whole of creation.

But elsewhere the Bible represents the disorder as illusory, not real. Behind the apparent randomness, events are actually contributing to an endgame God knows about all along. True, the direction of these events is seldom clear to the cast of characters, but God's plan is always leading mankind back to the paradise it lost. Looking far into the distance, the prophet Isaiah foresees the coming of a messiah, who will inaugurate "new heavens and a new earth," a phrase later to be taken up by the apostle Peter in the New Testament.²⁷ In this marvelous time to come, the righteous will "be glad and rejoice forever." To Jerusalem, which will be the capitol of a global utopia, God will "extend peace...like a river" and glory like a "flowing stream."²⁸

When the Bible hints that time might be open-ended, it always fears the ruin of God's plan or it predicts an ultimate victory ending with stasis and closure. But the Bible never offers the view that events could be open-ended in a positive way. Worse yet, it makes violence indispensable to the fulfillment of God's design, as we see when prophet Isaiah warns that heaven's wrath will fall on everyone who stands in the way:

For behold, the Lord will come with fire,
And with His chariots like a whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury,
And His rebuke with flames of fire.
For by fire and by His sword,
The Lord will judge all flesh;
And [those] slain [by] the Lord shall be many.²⁹

This intermingling of hopefulness and malevolence, utopia and apocalypse, has become so much a part of the Western mind that it might seem to us completely fair. Today we might suppose it makes perfect sense that

the wicked should be punished: they *deserve* to be consumed by fire and cut down by the sword. Nor might we see a contradiction in a God who creates life on the one hand, and then—despite the first commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”—urges the righteous on to murder.

Some of the Bible’s many authors clearly recognized this contradiction. Isaiah’s vision of divine revenge is sharply at odds with other moments in scripture such as the story of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of Luke.³⁰

According to this story, a man has two sons, and the younger of the two asks his father to give him his inheritance early, before the old man dies. In response, the father gives each son his bequest, and while the older son stays at home and continues to work on the farm, the younger one leaves and falls into a loose life that soon exhausts all his wealth. When a famine strikes and the second son is reduced to starvation, he hires himself out as a laborer in charge of feeding pigs, earning barely enough to cover the cost of the coarsest food.

One day while the second son is feeding the pigs, it suddenly occurs to him that he eats less well than the animals he cares for. “How many hired servants of my father’s have bread . . . to spare,” he reflects, “and I perish with hunger!”³¹ And with that, he sets off to his father’s farm, where he’ll ask to be treated no better than he deserves—not as a son but simply as a lowly servant.

After traveling a great distance, the second son at last can see the landmarks of his childhood home, but even before he has reached the main house, his old father happens to notice him, and races out to embrace and shower him with kisses. The repentant son falls to his knees and confesses, “I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”³² But the father tells his servants to fetch his best robe. Not only do they place the finest robe on the young man, but they also put shoes on his feet and a ring on his hand. Then the father orders the slaughter of their fattest calf as the main course for a celebration dinner.

Watching these events, the older son grows deeply troubled by what he perceives to be a total lack of fairness. After all, why should the one who had squandered his wealth be treated as though he had never left? Why was the second son treated, in fact, even better than the loyal son who had

sweated, sown, and reaped in the father's fields all these years? Finally the older son becomes so angry that he can't bring himself to go to the feast, and when his father comes looking for him, the older son tells him how he feels: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, [and never] transgressed at any time thy commandment.... But as soon as this thy son was come, [who] hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."³³ To this his father answers, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. [But it is fitting] that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."³⁴

The story of the Prodigal Son expresses a morality far surpassing the vision of Isaiah. Instead of responding to the son's misdeeds with anger and revengefulness, the father completely forgives him. Even before the son has had the chance to demonstrate his change of heart, the father was already rushing to greet him with open arms. Although the son is in fact contrite, the story plainly shows that the father's response didn't depend on the son's transformation. The father would have embraced an unrepentant son just as readily as he does the son who has changed.

In the context of the Bible as a whole, this aspect of the story is remarkable. When the Prodigal Son finds a welcoming home, so too does complexity. Unlike God himself, the father doesn't choose between opposing outcomes or try to enforce a single sequence of events. Instead, he embraces whatever occurs with compassion and deep joy. If he had been the God of Genesis, Adam and Eve could have stayed in Paradise even after their mistake. With his embrace of openness, the father embodies a mentality more appropriate to life in a complex universe.

RIGHTEOUS ANGER ONCE AGAIN

Based on stories like the Prodigal Son, Christian theologians for centuries have claimed that the New Testament makes a decisive break with the morality of the Old Testament, that is, the Jewish Bible. However, the Jewish Bible doesn't present one simple moral vision. Instead, it offers two divergent images of God, confusingly woven together: one a universal cre-

ator, the other a tribal god of war. We might say that liberal Christians and liberal Jews take their cue from the moments in scripture that seem welcoming to complexity, whereas conservatives in both faiths tend to believe in a God who expects obedience and delivers punishment.

Contradictions like the ones in the Jewish Bible appear in the New Testament as well. While it is certainly the case that the Prodigal Son departs radically from the vengefulness of Isaiah, the break is far from complete. For instance, in Matthew 26:52, Jesus warns Peter against violence. "All who draw the sword will die by the sword," he declares. Yet in Matthew 10:34, Jesus says, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."³⁵

The gospels sometimes depict Jesus in a way reminiscent of the wrathful God of Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah, especially when Jesus encounters injustice—the bullying of the weak by the strong or the fleecing of the poor by the rich and powerful. According to the Gospel of John, when Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem on the advent of Passover, he was shocked to see the building filled with money changers as well as dealers in the oxen, sheep, and doves that people needed to make sacrifices, a crucial part of Jewish ritual at the time. Then, as the Gospel goes on to say, "when he had made a scourge of small cords, [Jesus] drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; and [Jesus] said unto them that sold doves, take these things hence; make not my Father's house [a] house of merchandise."³⁶

Elsewhere, too, gospel accounts of Jesus's teaching deviate rather sharply from the embrace of complexity in the story of the Prodigal Son. In Matthew, for example, Jesus presents his well-known parable of the weeds of the field. First Jesus tells the story of two men, one of whom sows a field with "good seeds." But another man, intending to do harm, comes along later and sows the field with seeds of inedible wild plants. After telling this story Jesus then provides an interpretation for his audience:

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man [Jesus].
The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of
the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the

enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.³⁷

The Jesus depicted here is an Apocalyptic judge who will bring justice at the end of history, raising up the good and casting evildoers into the flames of hell. This account of Jesus contrasts dramatically with other passages where he urges his followers to turn the other cheek and to love their neighbor, but the image of the burning weeds has left a deep impression over the centuries.

When we set the paradigm of the burning weeds beside the story of Prodigal Son, we can see that the New Testament repeats the same contradiction at the heart of the Jewish Bible—between a God of love and a God of violence, and between a tolerance for complexity and the insistence on one great plan.

Many Christians view the Crucifixion as the moment in time when this contradiction gets resolved decisively in favor of God's love. As John 3:16 declares, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."³⁸ Yet the sacrifice of Jesus in payment for man's sins also reinstates the logic of divine revenge. Even though God offered up his blameless son as atonement for the sins of others, we should keep in mind that God himself is supposed to have the power to rewrite the rulebook for the universe. Being God, he could simply have forgiven mankind, like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. But he continues to demand retribution. Indeed, he requires a blood sacrifice.³⁹ Sadly, even this sacrifice fails to restore balance to the scales of heaven. That is why the Apocalypse must occur.

The Bible's ultimate inability to come to terms with a complex universe is not just a problem for believers.

It might also be the single greatest tragedy of our species' time on this planet.

UNVEILING DESTRUCTION

For better or for worse, destruction as a part of God's activity reverberates throughout the New Testament right to its close with the Book of Revelation. In fact, Revelation might even be interpreted as Genesis in reverse—Jesus's destruction of the world first fashioned by the Creator.

Ever since the Christian Bible was compiled in the first four centuries C.E., scholars have argued about the identity of Revelation's author, who is supposed to be one "John of Patmos." Christian tradition holds that John of Patmos was also the Apostle John, author of the Gospel of John, although most experts now doubt this is the case. Whoever he was, he describes a vision supposedly shown to him by the Jesus Christ who rose to heaven after his crucifixion.

As the Protestant reformer Martin Luther observed in the sixteenth century, the feverish, visionary language of Revelation is quite unlike the style of the other books of the New Testament, which present themselves as historical accounts.⁴⁰ The story told by John of Patmos is more like a dream or hallucination—or, perhaps, a nightmare. According to Revelation, John heard a voice coming out of the sky, and when he looked up to see where the voice was coming from, he saw seven golden candlesticks:

And in the midst of the seven candlesticks [I saw] one like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.⁴¹

When John sees the risen Christ, he falls down unconscious in shock

and awe. Jesus brings John back to consciousness and instructs him to record everything he sees. John is also ordered to send an account of his vision to the persecuted Christian communities in Asia Minor.

Some time after this, John is shown a mysterious scroll and, as though in a dream, he suddenly feels an urgent need to read it. The scroll remains closed to him, however, sealed with seven of the wax seals used in ancient times to secure important documents. Seeing the scroll closed but still wanting to read it, John begins to cry in frustration. Then a lamb—who is Jesus in an altered form—appears and breaks the first seal. The book opens to reveal something like a movie. Before him John beholds the terrible events that make up the Apocalypse.

What follows after the first seal breaks is a feverish pageant of destruction. This destruction begins with the appearance of four riders on different colored horses. The fourth of these, Death, rides on “a pale horse,” followed by Hell, apparently in human form. As John watches, Death and Hell destroy a quarter of the earth with the “sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”⁴² As other seals open, more destruction takes place: “the sun became black as sackcloth... and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth.”⁴³

As we’ve seen, the root of the word *apocalypse* refers to an “unveiling.” Fittingly, what Revelation “unveils” is the whole of sweep of historical time, which it shows to be one massive war between order and disorder, and the good and the depraved. And even though the Bible tells the story of time, it concludes with the end of temporality itself. When we look back at the Bible’s whole narrative, the logic of this culmination will be clear. To say, “In the beginning” would appear to imply that some sort of ending has to follow. Starting with the first words of Genesis, every word that follows seems to anticipate the complete realization of God’s grand design. As Jesus announces in Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” referring to the first and final letters of the Greek alphabet.⁴⁴

With the arrival of the Apocalypse, the whole of history comes to a close. And this is perhaps the most important paradigm of the entire Bible—that the universe is historical and that history is Apocalyptic, beginning at a certain point and ending at a certain point as well.

There can be little doubt that the Apocalypse continues to shape the thinking of Americans, both consciously and unconsciously. On television in 2003, the evangelist Pat Robertson foresaw that events leading to the End Times would soon begin. As he told the audience of his 700 *Club* TV program:

The year 586 B.C. was the time that Nebuchadnezzar [a non-Jew] took over Jerusalem, and that condition lasted, ladies and gentlemen, until the Six Day War that took place not too long ago. When did it happen? 1967. So it's almost 2,500 years we're looking at. [In 1967 the] Jews took over Jerusalem for the first time since Nebuchadnezzar took it. Now what is the significance of all this? [In the Bible] a generation is 40 years, and [so] a clock began to tick that said there's 40 years from 1967.⁴⁵

According to Robertson, the countdown to the Apocalypse was ordained by God to begin forty years after 1967—that is, in 2007. Since then, of course, the world remains intact, but as each new event unfolds, evangelicals have joined Robertson in combing through the pages of Revelation to find clues and parallels.

Regrettably, evangelicals aren't the only ones who do this kind of thinking. On July 24, 2006, the subject for discussion on CNN's *Paula Zahn Now* was the resilience of Hezbollah, the Shi'a militia in Lebanon. Though less numerous and far less well-equipped than the Israelis, Hezbollah surprised everyone by fighting the Israeli army to a standstill. At the start of the discussion, Zahn recapped the clash in standard TV news language:

As we speak, Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters are locked in a fierce battle for southern Lebanon. Hezbollah admits, it's being pushed back. But even though Israeli troops have taken a guerrilla stronghold, they're complaining of difficult terrain and constant ambushes. Hezbollah rockets keep slamming into Israeli cities and towns, meanwhile—at least 90 hit today. The pace of rocket attacks isn't slowing down, despite 13 days of Israeli airstrikes.

After this news, the first round of discussions went along predictably, with experts offering their insights on politics and military concerns. Then, about halfway through the program, Zahn took the broadcast in a different direction:

Now, is the crisis in the Middle East predicted by the Bible? [What] does the Book of Revelation tell us about what's happening right now in the Middle East? Are we really approaching the end of the world...

Take a look at the Rapture Index on the World Wide Web. It assigns numerical values to wars, earthquakes and disasters. And tonight, it's at 156, which is in the "fasten your seat belt" category. So are we really at the end of the world?⁴⁶

The most remarkable thing about Revelation is not that true believers like Robertson continue to take it literally, but that its influence reaches into the minds of those who imagine themselves to be more or less secular. Zahn's referencing of the Rapture Index might simply have been an effort to reach out to a wider broadcast demographic. But she also encouraged her viewers to treat John's vision as more than a symbol. Zahn herself seemed to think of the Apocalypse as an event that will take place someday. This blurring of myth and history only goes to show how potent this myth remains.

Secular historians and philosophers have typically assumed that the modern world marked a break with the superstitions of the past. Leaving behind revelation and faith, the modern world turned to reason and science. But perhaps these thinkers were profoundly mistaken. Could it be the very thing that makes us see ourselves as "modern"—our confidence in progress and a better tomorrow—has always been deeply interwoven with the legacy of Revelation? Could it be that our own creativity has been fatally flawed by destructiveness?