



Apocalypse Is for Everyone

An Anglican pastor explains how he is still an adventist who proclaims an apocalyptic faith from his pulpit.

by Jeffrey Smith

WHEN CHRIST DID NOT APPEAR IN 1844, most of the participants no doubt lost faith in the prophet, William Miller—and some, we may surmise, in prophecy itself. A few—only a *very* few of the large mass that Miller had gathered—simply transferred their faith to new prophets. Only a few overcame the cognitive dissonance left by that eventless day of October 22, 1844. It is in that dissonance and the heroic attempt to overcome it that we find the origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A century and a half later, we find many who have grown up in that church still feeling the effects of the dissonance left in Miller's wake, many still laboring valiantly to surmount it.

I leave you to judge whether my own effort

Jeffrey Smith, rector of All Saints Anglican Church in Aiken, South Carolina, was raised in an Adventist home and graduated from Newbury Park Adventist Academy. He received his B.A. in history from Pitzer College, Claremont, California, and an M.A. in history from Loma Linda University. Later, Smith earned a Bachelor of Sacred Theology from Saint Joseph of Arimathea Anglican Theological College, Berkeley, California.

has been a valiant one. I will state at the outset that it has left me still an adventist, though no longer an Adventist. Nowadays, I ply my adventism from an Anglican pulpit. I can say, with tongue out of cheek, that I left the Adventist Church with my faith in the Second Advent fully intact.

I hope never to join an apocalyptic movement such as Miller led (unless it happens to be the last), yet I am thoroughly convinced that Christianity itself is an apocalyptic faith, with or without its Millerite spin. For that reason, I make it a point to deliver as many sermons on the second advent of Christ from my non-Adventist pulpit as I would had I become an Adventist minister. My parishioners may regard the frequency with which I preach on the topic as peculiar, but it is not a peculiarity that elicits complaints, because all my parishioners recognize the second advent of Christ to be an official doctrine of the Christian church.

Our church even has a special season of the year, Advent, in which one is instructed to

prepare for the advent of Christ both as a commemorated event (his nativity as a man) and as a future event (his return in glory). Since a yearly reminder of our Lord's second coming in the month before Christmas is part of the Anglican Church's liturgical tradition, my sermons on the subject mark me as a traditionalist in the eyes of my parishioners. The fact that I grew up in the Adventist Church is a mere curiosity to them. Most of them, having lived their entire lives in the eastern half of the country and associated with mostly their own kind, have never known a Seventh-day Adventist. Yet, as far as I know, all of them also believe that Christ will make a visible return at some time in the future. We have never seen fit to debate the issue.

And I do not see how in a church that takes its Christianity seriously it could be otherwise; for Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, is an apocalyptic faith. It was born in the apocalyptic expectations of Roman Judaism, and even though in one sense it asserts that the apocalypse has already occurred (at the Resurrection and Pentecost), it also maintains that the apocalypse must happen again in order for history really to end. Even if the Revelation of St. John (the best-known literary apocalypse) had been excluded from the biblical canon, as it almost was, Christianity would still be apocalyptic. Apocalyptic, after all, is the matrix of the gospel itself. Christ came announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. He left the earth with the angels telling the disciples he would come again.

The Apocalyptic Tradition

It is time now to make some distinctions. William Miller led an *apocalyptic movement*. So did David Koresh, albeit in a much less dignified manner. Both men appealed to members of an *apocalyptic faith*, Christianity. And Christianity itself began in an already

existent *apocalyptic tradition*. The doctrine of apocalypse, i.e., that history will end in divine judgment and a deliverance of the saints, is held by not only Christians but also by orthodox Jews and Muslims. It is today an integral part of each of the Abrahamic faiths—and for good reason: The idea of apocalypse developed from a logic that all three religions share.¹

Most biblical scholars now think that the apocalyptic tradition began with a particular apocalyptic movement of Judaism, the one engendered by the Maccabean crisis of the second century, B.C. If the scholars are right, then belief in a cataclysmic end to history appears rather late in Jewish history, more than a full millennium after Abraham. But whether the tradition began then or earlier, the development was natural enough and—one might even argue—inevitable. For it stands to reason that any religion that views history, rather than nature, as the principal theater of God's operation must eventually begin to ask the question of where history is leading. What is its *telos*?

And if there is going to be an End, then should it not be dramatic; the denouement of a final conflict between good and evil, with the appearance of a savior to deliver those who have been chosen and have chosen rightly? We could hardly expect history simply to quit one day after everyone agreed to be nice to one another. Anyone who finds meaning in history must object to such a bland prospect at least on aesthetic grounds, even if he or she cannot accept the clear teaching of Scripture itself.

Certainly, belief in an apocalypse is integral to each of the three religions that see God's hand in the history of Abraham's descendants. Orthodox Jews await the Messiah, whose everlasting reign will begin with the resurrection of the dead and last judgment. Christians and Muslims await the return of the Messiah, whom they believe to be Jesus of Nazareth.

The scholars also say that the apocalypticism of the Maccabean crisis (expectation of the end) solidified into a tradition because it left a particular document. The Book of Daniel preserved the visions of the apocalypse for future generations, and by so doing created a new literary genre.

The actual crisis gave birth to a literature of crisis. The Seleucid tyrant, Antiochus Epiphanes, determined to gain the loyalty of his foreign subjects by forcing them to adopt the state religion. A pig was sacrificed to Zeus in the Holy of Holies. Those who clung to the faith of their fathers were severely persecuted. Then God sent deliverers, Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, who rallied the faithful to drive out the hideous beast. The Book of Daniel places those events in the context of a cosmic conflict to end all conflicts and thus gives us a symbolic pattern that may be applied to other crises in which the people of God come under attack. Since the time of the Maccabees (or earlier, if one accepts the traditional sixth-century date of the book), the apocalyptic genre has been around, lying dormant most of the time, but available to anyone who would make use of it in his or her own time of crisis.

But what is far more important than the creation of a new body of literature, from which future prophets could draw their inspiration, is the permanent mark that the initial visions of the apocalypse left on the Jewish faith. Through the persistence of the Pharisees, the doctrines of the last judgment, the deliverance of the saints from a final crisis, and the resurrection of the dead became the offi-

cial teaching of later Judaism.

The Christian evangel began with the preaching of the Baptist that the end had come, and when the end did come at Calvary a second apocalyptic faith was born. Mohammed later created a third. The vast majority of adherents to those three religions have practiced an apocalyptic faith—believing that the end will come—without experiencing the intense fervor of the apocalyptic movements that gave rise to such faith.

It is true that with the passing of time the members of an apocalyptic faith tend to forget

that their world will end—or at least it is not something they think about often. The coming of the Messiah becomes merely an article of the church's creed, something learned in catechism and ritually recited, a topic touched upon in the liturgical year. After two millennia (slightly longer for Jews and not quite as long for Muslims), one

can hardly expect people to live from day to day with the imminent expectation—at least not under normal circumstances. Yet there must be some way to renew apocalyptic faith without going to the extent of manufacturing a crisis (David Koresh's technique) in order to experience apocalyptic fervor. I would rather do it through teaching and liturgy. If the genuine faith is in place, the fervor will arise naturally when the real crisis is upon us.

What about William Miller? Were he and his followers putting apocalyptic to good use when they needed help through a crisis? Or did they merely create a crisis for themselves by misreading prophecy? I don't think any historian has yet answered the question satisfactorily.² Certainly, the Millerites did not face

All my parishioners believe that Christ will make a visible return at some time in the future. Christianity is an apocalyptic faith. After all, apocalyptic is the matrix of the gospel itself.

persecution on the order of that suffered by the Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes. But I suspect that most who believed in Miller's calculations felt their way of life was being threatened. Their main concentration was in areas that were undergoing rapid industrialization (along the Erie Canal in western New York and in the Connecticut Valley). We have not yet been told the story of the personal crises experienced by those who felt the attractions of Miller's preaching. Perhaps the story is now irretrievable. I hope not, because I cannot believe that it was the lucidity of the calculations themselves that accounted for such a huge following. Most apocalyptic movements in the history of the Abrahamic faiths have risen in the wake of some kind of upheaval, if not as a result of overt persecution.

The next crisis we face will probably not be our last, although some or another preacher may try to persuade you that it is. But in some crisis yet to occur we really will be facing the End. Such a conviction is an essential component of the teleological view of history that underlies each of the three Abrahamic faiths.³ The conviction that history will end in judgment may not be attended by much apocalyptic fervor in the absence of a crisis, but the conviction itself is nonetheless an integral part of everyday faith if one is a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim. The Passover seder leaves one seat vacant for Elijah, the Messiah's herald. The Christian Passover meal or Eucharist not only recalls the sacrifice of the Lamb but also anticipates his coming again. St. Paul states that the Lord's death will continue to be exhibited through a regular obser-

vance of the Eucharist "till he come."⁴ The anticipation is thus woven into the fabric of all Christian liturgy—from the papal masses at St. Peter's to the services conducted in rude chapels at missionary outposts.

Open-ended Adventism

If I have the consent of my Adventist readers thus far in my broad sketch of apocalyptic faith, they will no doubt wish to press me now for some details. I shall not leave them disappointed.

From my understanding of Scripture and the mainstream of Christian tradition, I hold the following items to be necessary components of Christian eschatology: (1) that history will end with the return of Christ in judgment; (2) that at such time not only will wickedness be condemned but also God's kingdom will be revealed in all its glory (literally, the apocalypse); (3) that this event will also serve to deliver the saints from a final crisis in history in which a diabolical power, the Antichrist, will severely test the faith of God's people; (4) that all who live through this crisis will be

Depiction of Revelation 4:1: "I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open," with 24 elders in white surrounding the throne of God. Adapted from *The Norman Apocalypse*, an illustrated manuscript, ca. 1320.



asked to make a decision whom they will serve, the Antichrist or the real Christ; and (5) that those who hold fast and endure the test will, together with all who have died in Christ, enjoy God forever in the new heaven and new earth. Those seem to me to be the obvious and least-contested components of the New Testament's apocalyptic teaching, each of them appearing in more than one passage.

If anyone now wishes to press me further, I will take refuge in the latitudinarian tradition of the Anglican Church. Even though I have read the Revelation of St. John many times and several commentaries on it, I still cannot tell whether the millennium will occur before or after the Second Coming, or whether it is purely symbolic. And I do not care to speculate on who or what institutions will play the part of the two beasts and Scarlet Whore.

I figure that if I leave the matter open, I shall be less likely to be taken unawares by any particular unfolding of events if I am alive when the crisis comes. That is why I now call myself an adventist and not an Adventist. After his disappointment, William Miller him-

self became less particular in his interpretations.

I do not discount the possibility that the Antichrist will arise in the Roman Catholic Church. Many a pious monk has believed that. Not a few Roman traditionalists today identify the popes since the Second Vatican Council with the Antichrist. Protestant bigots have no monopoly on reading Rome into the apocalyptic passages of Scripture, and it is quite evident that the seer of Patmos had Rome in mind as the persecuting beast of his own day. How far Rome extends, literally or figuratively, is the relevant exegetical question.

The seventh-day Sabbath as the final test of loyalty? I shall be very surprised if that is the case. But if, when the crisis comes, it appears that the Sabbath is an issue, then I suppose I shall begin observing it again.

But let it be known to all my Adventist friends that if it ever happens—and I have to cease using Saturday as the day for writing my sermons—I will still celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday mornings. Surely you wouldn't begrudge me that!

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In the Islamic apocalypse, Christ will also reveal that he is not God; for Mohammed taught that the only incarnation of the Logos is the Koran. The Word became a book.

2. Whitney Cross probably came the closest to doing so in his study, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965 [reprint]). It is a book that everyone interested in Adventist history should read—and from cover to cover, not just for its chapter on Millerism.

3. It is also a component of secular spin-offs (such as Marxism) which posit their own version of the peace-

able kingdom in the age to come. All atheistic creeds have adopted wholesale the biblical view of history as linear and teleological, substituting only some impersonal force that is immanent in history for divine providence.

Non-Abrahamic faiths do not view history as linear and teleological. Their rites do not commemorate historical events; rather, they are tied to cycles of nature. The great historian of religion Mircea Eliade has written most extensively on that theme. Cf. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, W. R. Trask, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

4. 1 Corinthians 11:26.