What are we Waiting For? Climate Change and the Narrative of Apocalypse

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Abstract

Climate change discourse draws deeply on metaphors of irretrievable and in some way inevitable loss: of humanity’s time running out; of the earth catching a morbid fever; of Gaia taking her revenge. Less metaphorically we talk of passing tipping points and points of no return in the earth system. How then do we resist the temptations of climate despair? Clearly, the mode in which we anticipate future crises is bound up in the values and meanings we place on types of action in the present. And it is now clear that secular discourses (whether scientific or journalistic) no longer hold monopoly on which of those values and meanings are dominant in society. Stories of the end and ends of life can have as much power and influence on the moral imagination as the facts of climate science. There has thus never been a more important time to appreciate the role of religious narrative in communicating crises of the future, and in particular the contemporary fascination with the possibility of human extinction through climate change. An exploration of the category of apocalypse in particular, from its Judaeo-Christian roots through to its secular incarnations, is capable of expressing the complexity of such belief, engaging as it does the (sometimes contradictory) elements of creation, destruction and hope in new beginnings.

Introduction

“Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings”. Ben Okri

“I perceive our ability to survive climate change as the enactment of an evolutionary narrative”. David Haley, ecological artist, Manchester Metropolitan University

A Guardian article written in 2005 argued that, unlike reaction to fears about nuclear Armageddon twenty years ago, fears about climate change have not yet sparked a significant creative literary response. The lack of an “imaginative repertoire”, argued Robert McFarlane, “reduces the ability of people to envision possible futures and consequently make better decisions today”. The diagnosis could be rephrased as

1 Quoted in Jensen, 5.
2 Mcfarlane, 1.
saying that we have yet to find a way to creatively and usefully tell the story of climate change. But he also suggested that the reason for this dearth of imagination was that “climate change is not - not yet - apocalyptic in its consequences. Apocalypse comes swiftly and charismatically...[b]y contrast, climate change occurs discreetly and incrementally, and as such, it presents the literary imagination with a series of difficulties: how to dramatise aggregating detail, how to plot slow change”.

How should we view this judgment today, almost four years on? Uses of the word “apocalypse” in reference to climatic tipping points are increasingly common and normally accompanied with images of natural and social disaster. The four horsemen of conquest, war, famine and death appear no longer to be the preserve of millennialist scaremongers. McFarlane’s point, presumably, is that even today climate Armageddon is still not the same as nuclear Armageddon. The complexities and scientific uncertainties of the former do not allow it the imaginative purchase that was achieved by someone having the obliteration of human life only the pull of a trigger away. Nevertheless I wish in the course of this chapter to raise a question mark over his two assumptions: 1) that climate change is slow and incremental; and 2) that apocalypse comes swiftly and charismatically. For whilst there may be some truth to these interpretations, both rely on a simplistic and potentially misleading understanding of the experience of crisis through time. To the first point, therefore, I wish to respond in this chapter that whilst it may be true that climate change does not generate the same sort of fear as the nuclear threat of Mutually Assured Destruction, this distinction may simply reflect the perspective of the privileged. Those in the affluent Northern Hemisphere still able to cope with mild changes in the weather are unlikely to rave about millennial end-times until the weather itself becomes apocalyptic, as exactly happened with religious commentators on Hurricane Katrina in 2005. We may live, as Frederick Buell has put it, in a culture of “hyperexuberance” that not only endures climate change but flourishes in it. But this is for reasons of the cultural normalisation of a certain type of crisis, not the nature of climate change itself or how serious to our survival it is. To the second point, I wish to make it clear that if we are to categorise environmental catastrophe as “apocalyptic”, it is high time we refined our understandings of where that notion comes from, and not only for reasons of etymological pedantry. For a brief examination of the functions, effects, and beliefs associated with apocalypse as a mode of revealing something divine previously hidden to earthly beings, also suggests some missed opportunities in telling the story of climate change. In short, I wish to argue that we wait at our peril for a “swift and charismatic” climate apocalypse to be able to define a definitive narrative of climate catastrophe by which human actors might position themselves. Typically, this is generated today by defining a point at which the crisis is so severe that humans have failed; are doomed; or, in another terminology, have eschewed (environmental) salvation. Instead, by taking heed of some dramatic aspects of the telling of apocalypse stories, we learn that its essential feature is the radical openness of the future, and its invitation to see in the days to come an imperative for resistance even beyond the tipping point of climate salvation.

The task outlined above will explicitly attempt to bridge a gap too little attended to between theological interpretations of apocalyptic in the Judeo Christian tradition and contemporary cultural appropriations of that word. Is there some connection that

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3 McFarlane, 1.
4 Buell, 143.
understandings of the former can teach the latter? I should be clear, however, that my intention is not to draw parallels in the sphere of religious belief between audiences of apocalyptic texts in the first century Palestine and those interpreting climate change (such as Christian millennialist responses to Katrina, for instance) in the twenty first century, though such work is valuable and needed. This study is concerned only with the connections that might be made between the original function of apocalypse (if indeed we can make such a claim) and its secular incarnation in the imaginary of climate disaster. For undoubtedly there is something retained in the cultural imagination that relates to religious perceptions of impending crisis. But precisely what our relationship is with this crisis is in question. How is it lived, understood and responded to? Or, to put it another way, what are we waiting for? The paradox facing activists and campaigners confronting climate change lies in how we interpret multiple crises whose effects are both incremental, gradual and imperceptible to the majority (such as melting of glaciers over decades), and also apocalyptic in the populist sense: both the visible appearance of natural disasters and social breakdown, and the passing of tipping points of global warming. More than a metaphor for how bad the outlook is, then, apocalypse tells us perhaps something much more revealing of our predicament and how we might respond to it. For at the root of these visions of end-times is this blurring of the boundaries of that which must come to pass, and that which must be resisted. More than a simplistic dualist perspective in which the righteous are saved and the unrighteous are punished, apocalypse can be seen as an essentially dramatic rendering of the processes of an originally good creation: in which corruption is purged and balance is restored to a world that has become unstable and unhinged.

In the context of climate, ecology, and the life of the earth, we have been indebted for centuries to the ability to tell stories of birth, death, and renewal. From oral to textual traditions, moreover, it is frequently the ritual enactment of such stories that give them life-giving and sense-making qualities. The active, “making” element derived from the concept of mythic truth or “mythropoesis” is present in creation myths far beyond the western traditions, but is also an element of the Jewish contribution of the apocalypse myth. It certainly suggests a way of telling the climate story with more depth than McFarlane’s call for instilling fear into its audience. This is not just because fear tends to paralyse rather than engage, though this is certainly true. It is because fear is not an experience that captures the complexity of even the severest accounts of dangerous climate change. It is easy to point out to McFarlane that climate change was anything but slow or incremental for the residents of New Orleans who stood in the path of Katrina exactly one month before his article was written. But this highlighting of a singular event – for those in New Orleans – raises precisely the problem. The cultural understanding of climate change is diffuse. It doesn’t threaten everybody simultaneously in time and equally across space, as may have been the case during nuclear standoffs of Mutually Assured Destruction. We are reminded time and again, that the poor will suffer first and hardest - a point that Michael Northcott illustrates convincingly in this volume - , and we begin to become wary of exactly which members of the human race the proposed techno-fixes will save. We might say that climate change is still a story told internally, within boundaries, classes and traditions, but not outwardly, uniting values, ideas, and humanity itself. Our approach to story telling will therefore demand a new approach to crisis rhetoric itself. We must

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5 McIntosh, 110.
make sense of the end that has come already for some (the evacuees of Tuvalu, for example); is feared and anticipated for others, and is denied by the rest. These accounts of the end must somehow cohere and give us meaning. But even more: they must be able to give us bases and foundations for meaningful action. How are our disparate experiences of the feared end shared across experiential boundaries, across time and cultures? What leads some to retreat to a state of isolation, others to build movements of resilience in communities, others to hasten the end in the style of millennialists and chiliasts?

Narrating apocalypse: the ambivalence of endings

“We have wrongly expected the end of the world would provide the high drama we believe commensurate with our raging passions, our bold aspirations, and our central importance to the universe – we are worthy of a big bang, not merely a whimper. And let me be blunt: by holding out for that noisy demise, we can pretend we haven’t been expiring by inches for decades.” Andrew McMurray

The language of apocalypse in the media appears to capture something quintessential about climate reporting that has obviously surfaced since McFarlane wrote his article. Some newspaper headlines serve as an example: “Countdown to the Apocalypse: Scientists Change Doomsday Clock” (Fox News); “Apocalypse Now: How Mankind is Sleepwalking to the End of the Earth” (The Independent). If we are searching for that element of apocalyptic discourse that might allow us more creatively to tell the story of climate change, it is necessary first to understand in what sense we might understand it as story, or narrative, in the first place. According to Paul Ricoeur, narrative implies symbolic invention. Its essence, like other semantic devices, is innovation: bringing new meaning to experience otherwise, we might say, hidden from view in ordinary perception or discourse. With the insertion of plot, “goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action.”

We tell stories in order to allow the future to make sense of our present. This can be appreciated as much for the happy ending of the fairy tale as for the sense of loss experienced in tragedy: in either case the experience of the present is given fuller meaning by reference to a future. But the reason that this principle is so pertinent to apocalypse is its emphasis on the uncovering of the new. As revelation or disclosure, apocalypsis means exactly this: “the new thing – the as yet unsaid, the unwritten”. It reveals by mixing temporalities – the untimely incursion of the future into the experience of the present; the bringing of a crisis from heaven to earth. Out of the collection of apocalypses drawn from intertestamentary (3rd Century BCE – 2nd Century CE) Palestine and the Near East, this aspect remains fundamental to the genre: apocalypses are visions granted to privileged human recipients of heavenly truths.

In the book of Daniel those truths appear in the form of a series of dreams; in 1 Enoch as a series of Dream Visions, and in the book of Revelation as visions granted to John through an angel emissary. Apocalypses, in both an etymological sense and in its new cultural appropriation, are thus experiments in disclosure. Where

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6 McMurray, 1.
8 Ricoeur (1984), ix.
9 Ricoeur (1984), ix.
10 Collins (1984), 4.
they depart from the prophetic tradition in Judaism is in heightening the crisis wrought by the corruption of the present. Both spatially and temporally, the present world is, in texts such as Revelation, so far removed from the world that redeeming it with the heavenly vision of the world as it should be is to completely (and violently) overturn the reality of the present world.

The apocalypse texts developed this theme of the disclosure of truth precisely through the very act of narrating: of inserting plot imaginatively into the minds of its audience. It has been argued, for instance, that the book of Revelation dramatically enacts a theodicy of sorts by its enactment of a series of punishments on the unjust of the earth. Through a period of tribulation the forces of light overcome those of darkness and the efforts and suffering of those who held to the cause of light are vindicated.\(^{11}\) In this process the disclosure of truth is twofold. The revelation to John itself represents the privileged access of human beings (however cryptically encoded) to ultimate or superior truth, or aletheia. And the characters that are vindicated in the narrative are those who cling to truth, who resist the mesmerising allure of the “beast”.\(^{12}\) Its apparent function through both aspects would appear to be not only a dualistic separation of the cosmos into good and evil but more essentially a call to discernment of truth from falsity, an opening of one’s senses, and in particular the power of seeing, of this revelation being in some sense an awakening from blindness into sight. Michael Northcott’s chapter proposes precisely one aspect of this healing visionary aspect of apocalypse, through the symbolism of trees in the Christian tradition (and in the book of Revelation itself) as truth-tellers. That is, both the truth of our own self-imposed destruction, and the hope in continued life.

It is with this emphasis on clear vision that we should approach the most obvious parallel sought after in apocalypse for interpreting climate change. What, we should want to know, is it to teach us about the end of this particular planetary or cosmic story? Revelation’s culmination in the temporal details of the end times – in particular the inauguration of the millennium as penultimate end-period for humanity – leads most interpreters to look to apocalypse as the sign of impending finality. The end is specifically near: not just at some point in the future, but near, close at hand, and its signs should be interpreted and acted upon with a sense of urgency. But what we learn from apocalypse more generally is that the importance of ending need not have a clear sense of temporal finality: the apocalypse genre shows no consensus on eschatological intent. Where reference is made either to the resurrection of the dead (Daniel and Revelation) or the inauguration of a new age, “future expectation” has been taken by some scholars to mean the transformation of the present hopes of the earthly community. The dominant feature of Jewish apocalypse is thus a transcendence of death to a “heavenly form of life” as opposed to its reduction to a temporal sequence of events.\(^{13}\) Such a view does not go undisputed, and certainly the most vivid accounts of future catastrophe visited upon the world that survive into contemporary culture are the very features of Revelation that speak of the physical and planetary transformations that can be expected and envisaged: the burning of the earth; sea turning to blood; locusts torturing humans; the decimation of human populations.\(^{14}\) Are these signs transformations to be feared and anticipated or

\(^{11}\) O’Leary, 63.
\(^{13}\) Collins, 84
\(^{14}\) Revelation 8:6 – 9:4
identified with the corruption of the present? Here indeed lies the agonistic ambiguity to the apocalypse genre as narrative, as both tragic and comic unfolding of the human drama: the promise of destruction for the wicked and salvation for the righteous. But the ambiguity is a temporal one, too. For apocalypse discloses a future that is both to come, and which transforms the present through its revelation of divine truth. Through dramatic envisioning of the events that are to come, the seer, John, enacts the very reality of those events one is to expect: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more".15 Such a sentiment presages the more developed messianic eschatology in the Christian tradition. The message to the first Christian community was one of the kingdom having been established, of the old powers having been crushed, and yet also of the kingdom awaited, yet to come. In St Paul’s eschatology, it was charged with interpreting this confusing mixing of temporalities as the meaning of the fullness of time, the nature of its “fulfilment” or “supersession”.16 Apocalypse represents this contraction of time, its reconfiguration according to a new reality, the incursion of the future into the present. But this provides an interesting angle on the diverse ways in which temporality is played with in our own discourses of the end, whether through film, media rhetoric, or common speech. For to envisage the end in graphic and visionary terms is not simply to predict calamity but to taste it now. It means to recognise its very anticipation as transformative of the present.

Just as there is ambiguity as to the eschatological content of apocalypse – whether and how it refers to a divinely ordained future - there is also ambiguity over whether it refers to end as terminus or simply to its irrevocable degeneration. Within the apocalypse genre this is a feature of the transformations in literary appropriation since the latter half of the twentieth century. Apocalyptic novels from this period normally envisage a radically altered state of creation or civilisation after the event of calamity.17 This gives rise to the phenomenon of post-apocalypse, from works like Walter M. Miller’s Canticle of Leibowitz, or more recently Cormac McCarthy’s The Road. But more generally we can see that modernity’s originally apocalyptic love affair with teleological progress – what is becoming and where we are all headed - has been subtly perverted through the obsession with what continues in perpetuity. What this means is that our recently rediscovered love of apocalyptic metaphors through climate reporting occurs against a backdrop of this sense of the permanence of crisis. Jean Baudrillard is the traditional spokesman of this revelation. Throughout the eighties and nineties he reminded us just how far we have digressed from the triumphalist idea of progress’ crowning achievement in the end of history. In its place we have, through a culture of consumption, a society possessed by its experience of the present, devoid of future projection. The meaning of apocalypse changes in this postmodern context to a crisis of the never ending: “Our Apocalypse is not real, it is virtual. And it is not in the future, it is here and now.”18 Baudrillard’s critique of the “hyperreality” of meaning in mass media society is important for our understanding of climate reporting, since it suggests that what is revealed to us about impending crisis is something both out of reach (untouchable, never arriving) and bound to the realm of aesthetics as opposed to ethics. We all know about the seriousness of climate change - its reality is in some sense ubiquitous - and yet feel powerless to do anything

15 Revelation 21: 1-2
16 See Agamben, 62.
17 Berger, xiii.
18 Baudrillard, 119.
about it. Mediatised apocalypse is, as Andrew McMurray has put it, “Armageddon by surplus meaning, a drowning in honey”.  

What could possibly be revived from this cynical backdrop to help us understand our climatic apocalypses? We should want to affirm, for one, that despite a general cultural block on imagining the future, apocalypse has a life of its own. This is certainly true from the historic inability for failed predictions of the end of the world to dent its credibility. As Ricoeur has said, this shows a qualitative transformation of the apocalyptic model. For in place of the insistence of temporal prediction – that some thing will take place by a certain time – multiple failures of such a literalist approach (with famous examples in the history of Seventh Day Adventism and the “Great Disappointment” in 19th century America) generated a switch to its interpretation as a sort of state of permanent expectation of catastrophe:

from imminent to immanent. The Apocalypse, therefore, shifts its imagery from the last days, the days of terror, of decadence, of renovation, to become a myth of crisis.

Applying this to climate reporting we notice a similar transformation, and may need to decide how to best direct it. For the problem with reporting climate apocalypse in predictive (or, more precisely, projective) terms of the last days is not with its appeal to the seriousness of the reality before us. The problem, rather, will be with how to maintain its credibility beyond the prescription of certain definitive tipping points, as a threat yet to be averted. The problem is demonstrated well in a recent campaign called “100 months”: entering the website reveals a live clock audibly counting down the seconds. Above the clock are the words: “we have 100 months to save the planet. When the clock stops ticking we could be beyond the earth’s tipping point, the point of no return”. Notwithstanding its use of the “could be” clause, the rhetoric appears to suggest that beyond a given, singular point – a concept at odds with many scientific understandings of tipping points, as I shall argue – redemption is out of our hands. What then? What narrative means do we have to extend the ethical import of global crisis beyond the tipping point? What resistance can there be when our sense of loss is irretrievable, past a point of no return?

The alternative is to understand that, as with much great tragedy, “crisis replaces the end, where crisis becomes a symptom of the invalidation of the paradigm itself”. The function of apocalypse in this sense is to paint crisis not as a period of passive judgment but as a period of disclosure to ordinary people of “things hidden since the foundation of the world”. Apocalypse, then, might be viewed more generally as the emergence of secrets, the overturning of old ways of seeing and perceiving the world. Through the drama of apocalypse the world is really changed, turned upside down, and this occurs through being given a new sight, traditionally through the intermediary of an angel, as in the case of the New Testament apocalypse: “he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John”. It opposes a linear reading of history: to see apocalyptically is to affirm the strangeness and otherness of the world.

19 McMurray, p.8.
20 Ricoeur (1985), 23.
23 Matthew 13:35
24 Revelation 1:1
The point has not been lost on philosophies of discourse itself: In the philosophy of deconstruction we find the principle of rupture appear as this same celebration of strangeness, the same rejection of synchronicity and chronos time. Thus Jacques Derrida’s counterpart to St Paul’s “the time has grown short” can be seen in the use of Hamlet’s expression, “the time is out of joint, hors de ses jonds” (off its hinges). The aim is to show the impossibility of thinking or rather of conceiving of the contemporary, of synchrony”.25 What is the act of announcement, he asks:

what effect do these noble, gentile [gentils] prophets or eloquent visionaries want to produce? With a view to what immediate or postponed [ajourné] benefit? What do they do, what do we do in saying this? For whom do we seduce or subjugate, intimidate or cause to enjoy, to come?26

The questions could be placed in all seriousness to ourselves, the self-appointed messengers of a new global crisis. But for Derrida there is something primal to western thought itself in John’s act as the messenger, this role of being the favoured dispatcher of revelation and denouncing the false ones, the “impostor apostles”.27 And Derrida’s concern is of course to show how a deconstructive reading affirms the possibility of visionary predictions of a completely different global – or ecological - order. To announce “the new” is to flood the production of cultural imagination, or in other words to break out of its ideological boundaries and imagine new possibilities, ruptures, and breaks with the past. It takes full advantage of the post-modern fragmentation and diversifications of discourses and truths against the homogenous voice of authority and tradition:

by its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres, and the breakdown [le détraquement] of destinations, apocalyptic discourse can also dismantle the dominant contract or concordat. It is a challenge to the established admissibility of messages and to the enforcement or the maintenance of order [la police] of the destination, in short to the postal regulations [la police postal] or to the monopoly of the posts”.28

We need not disappear too far into deconstruction to appreciate its major recommendation: that we crack open the dramatic story telling power of apocalypse. The language of climate catastrophe can also fall for the hegemony of one vision, one sense, one meaning: we are on this path, and when it reaches a certain point, we are all finished, end of story. But as I have already asserted, climate crisis means a great many different things to a great many people, as does the sense of hope in the future - what kind of future do we want to preserve? And in any case, it is, perhaps, for some people, already finished: those for whom, like the residents of the disappearing small islands of the world, a point of no return has already been reached. To assume a singular point of failure in the fight against catastrophic climate change betrays a fundamental impulse to find reasons to resist in the most despairing of situations for goals that will differ for different people. As such it falls into the very trap that deconstruction warns against: the division of the world into binary opposites. It has long been thought that the tendency to divide the world into black/white, good/bad,
rational/irrational is virtually universal to human cultures. Moreover it is this
division that has defined our ability to separate, control, and have power over. It also
defines our division of time, history, and the sense of inevitability we inherit, seeing
history as either won or lost; epochs as passing from one to the other. This rejection of
binary opposites actually opens up a way to communicate crisis more creatively and
effectively. In apocalypse we have the future in the present, but in more than a
figurative sense. In ancient biblical apocalypse the old law is not just brought back to
complete the story, reaffirming genesis as origins through apocalypse as destiny, but
in order to break with the old order and inaugurate a “new heaven and a new earth”.
Non-canonical apocalypses such as the “animal apocalypse” of 1 Enoch (written
between 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE) have made this concept of superseding old
divisions and laws of separation (such as food laws) explicit through its visions of the
new breaking of taboos, the mixing of originally distinct elements. My own interest,
however, is the way in which apocalypse presents the opportunity for seeing the
certainties of the present as disrupted by the incursions of the future. In this sense the
opposition of binaries matches with Derrida’s opposition of “synchronicity” and the
strict view of historic epochs, of a historic fatalism and certain knowledge of the way
the future will lead us.

Apocalypse purposefully confounds the *temporal* orientation towards the future that
its listeners will be accustomed to. The gripping reality by which the visions occur to
John of Patmos are not simplistic predictions of the future. And revelation is
fundamentally not passive communication: it draws the hearers into identifying their
own part in the secret unfolding destiny of the universe. The secret to the text is in its
dramatic performance. Aristotle’s theory of tragedy explained the process of the
cathartic journey of its listeners through the narrative exploration of their despair in
order to allow them expression. Whilst Revelation also contained tragic elements and
so arguably a cathartic rendering of the punishment for Babylon (Roman Empire), it
also contained comic elements in the resolution of crisis for the righteous by the end.
Those who are faithful to “the book” can identify with the saved of that dramatic
narrative. Its violence, in other words, is not arbitrary, but engaging: it offers its
spectators a “role in the cosmic drama”.

Clearly, apocalyptic texts are not to be sought for analogies to our reading of the
truthfulness of climate catastrophe. The tragic unfolding of climate related disasters
affects the lives and wellbeing of many millions of people in the present, and is only
compared to the religious myths of ecological destruction (starting with the flood and
ending with the apocalypse) in symbolic terms. But the understanding of crises yet to
come – how they constitute us, push us into new forms of living and believing in the
future - depends entirely on how we communicate it to ourselves and others, and
therefore really cannot avoid a discussion about our most ancient of crisis narratives.
Apocalypse constitutes the western psyche not only for its religious longevity in
millennial movements, but for its power to draw listeners into a dramatic engagement
with the reality of total upheaval. As Oliver Smith has put it, such an emphasis
requires the tradition of *pathos* as opposed to *ethos* in the emotive engagement with

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29 Bull, 56.
30 Bull, 72.
31 This insight is drawn predominantly from Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*
32 O’Leary, 87.
such a text – one that fully involves the whole person of the listener.\textsuperscript{33} The telling of the meaning of the future – its revelation – also means enacting the vision we wish to be part of. Prediction of radical change becomes synonymous, or at least conceptually entangled, with the enactment of change. As O’Leary puts it: “apocalyptic succeeds or fails with its audiences to the degree that it persuades them of their situation within the particular historical pattern of temporal fulfilment represented in its mythic imagery.”\textsuperscript{34}

The Climate Abyss: can we look \textit{beyond} the tipping point?

“A friend and fellow activist said, “What will it take for you to finally call it an apocalypse? The death of the salmon? Global warming? The ozone hole? The reduction of krill populations off Antarctica by 90 percent, the turning of the sea off San Diego into a dead zone, the same for Antarctica? How about the end of the great coral reefs? The extirpation of two hundred species per day? Four hundred? Six hundred? Give me a specific threshold, Derrick, a specific point at which you’ll finally use that word.” – Derek Jensen.\textsuperscript{35}

In what ways does climate change discourse share some of the paradoxes and questions of ancient apocalypse, and can it learn anything from that relation? An obvious point of interest is the way in which violent and shocking images are used to shake people out of some presumed complacency with regard to climate change, just as the heightened portrayal of a world divided by the unrighteous and the righteous might have bee thought to do for Christian and Jewish populations battling Roman imperialism. There are many reports now emerging that contest the efficacy of such a strategy today, citing the fact that people more often find the magnitude of the problem too big an obstacle to viewing themselves as any sort of agents of social or ecological change.\textsuperscript{36} But it is to a more complex point of comparison that I want to turn, and that is very notion of temporal ambiguity I have discussed above and the way in which it relates to climatic “tipping points” or “tipping elements”. British climatologist Timothy Lenton defines tipping elements as those “subsystems of the Earth system that are at least sub continental in scale and can be switched – under certain circumstances – into a qualitatively different state by small perturbations.”\textsuperscript{37}

A number of these can produce predictions of points at which attempts to stem global warming will become impossible: numerous positive feedback loops will produce unstoppable momentum in the earth system – a point of no return for the escalation of global warming, drought, and rising sea levels.

It is to this scenario of irreversible global warming that the rhetoric of human extinction normally refers. The term has predictably become a key reference to the politically sensitive notions of transforming mitigation to adaptation in policy language: if it is too late to halt runaway global warming, by what reasons might we endorse cutting carbon emissions – might it be simply too late to make meaningful change? What is the rhetorical function of the language of extinction? Is it a strictly philosophical interest resurrected from environmental ethics that we are to consider

\textsuperscript{33} Smith.
\textsuperscript{34} O’Leary, 13.
\textsuperscript{35} Jensen, 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Mcfarlane, 1.
\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Moser.
\textsuperscript{32} Lenton, 1.
the import of the destruction of our own species? Are we to imagine that the total elimination of human life is a scenario so morally repugnant it will force massive cultural change, and if so does this leave a scenario of vastly diminished human activity a bearable evil? Consider, for example, the angry reaction of campaigners to the words of a chief scientific advisor to the UK government, who recommended that it prepare for 4 degrees extra warming above pre-industrial levels, despite its own commitment not to exceed 2 degrees. Such an admission amounted to, in the words of one commentator “in the immortal words that Chief Seattle probably never spoke, ‘the end of living and the beginning of survival’ for humankind. Or perhaps the beginning of our extinction”. In other words, government ministers themselves are describing a scenario of process rather than event (and recall the lack of such a distinction by McFarlane’s article at the beginning) that may be equated with finality – the point at which all is lost. Some climatologists have already put dates on such inevitability, with one famously stating in 2005 that humanity faced extinction before the end of the century. But the ethical significance of a prospect of an end to the human species is not as black and white as ethicists would like to be able to discuss. In relation to climatic tipping points in particular, we are aware that the sense of finality approaching human life is much on a par with the never ending apocalypses of postmodern fiction. It is not the end of human life we fear, but its irretrievable transformation into something we would not associate “meaningful life” with. In 2006 the scientist James Lovelock stated that we have already passed the crucial tipping points in the earth system that decree unstoppable warming: “Before this century is over, billions of us will die, and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable.” In Mark Lynas’ hugely popular thought experiment Six Degrees, he also concludes that even in the most extreme of warming scenarios, a wipe-out of all humans is unlikely:

Unlike the Permian terrestrial animals, we can stockpile enough food in preserved form to last for many years. We can create artificial atmospheres to isolate ourselves from what is going on outside. We could one day even set up colonies on other planets. And yet…

Whilst not portraying a literal end to the human, such scenarios do in any case conjure a situation that many would want to associate as an end in perhaps an originally apocalyptic sense: a world so transformed it bears little relation to the one we are so concerned to preserve in the present.

Such a portrayal of climate change introduces a complex environment of approaching and passing timescales for what, depending on one’s view, is (for example) achievable, utopian, impossible, worth striving for, etc. in the context of mitigation. A host of culturally sensitive questions also impose themselves in this regard: to whom is the notion of a “no return” relevant? To the human species as a whole, or to a notion of “civilisation” we deem worthy of survival? And what of the value of non-human life beyond the passing of the human – does this feature in our calculations of

38 Tickell, 1.
39 Garman, 1.
40 DC Indymedia 1.
41 Quoted in McCarthy, 1.
42 Lynas, 257.
the passing of meaningful tipping elements? But underlying this cluster of questions proper to moral philosophy is a concern, not unlike the discussions surrounding the function of apocalypse, with the perception of crisis as it is both anticipated and suffered in the present. In either case, we want to know: how does a narrative of crisis transform our current ways of thinking and acting in the world, and how dependent are we on a voice (of authority, credibility, etc.) that tells us which crisis events are certain to pass, and which are unavoidable? An immediate response might claim that the answer is simple: avoidable crises give us reason to strive like never before; whilst unavoidable crises give us new imperatives to adapt to new and difficult situations. But on closer inspection the responses would seem not to conform as easily as this. Consider, for example, the premise behind The Age of Stupid, a documentary-style film released in the UK in January 2009. The film has one subtly unique methodology that marks it out from other climate change documentaries: it narrates the story of global warming from a state of retrospective failure. An archivist from the future, played by the actor Pete Postlethwaite, looks at footage from the past (our present) that signalled the urgency of global warming. He adds, with a note of incredulity: “Amazing. What state of mind were we in, to face extinction, and simply shrug it off?” From interviews with the directors, we learn that the narration of failure is a rhetorical shock tactic – a means of shaking viewers out of collective apathy. But is it only this? Or is there a more controversial cathartic emphasis here on the act of mourning? Perhaps ambivalence amongst activists to the uncertainty of what exactly is lost reflects the propositional and ambivalent nature of hope itself. Indeed it may be possible to express both a suspicion that in some sense we are doomed, or our best efforts to contain runaway climate change come too late, and also the feeling that we can stop “it”, whatever that task ahead of us is. As Arran Stibbe notes, populist climate science reporting increasingly reports from within this troubled zone of both citing evidence for how curbing adequate carbon emissions is still possible, and being fully aware that what this demands of society is so extreme as to be virtually inconceivable. The rhetoric, he argues, increasingly resembles that of cancer patients “who are so obsessed with the fight that they cannot plan for the possibility of anything other than recovery.”

Environmental groups have long predicted the eventual collapse of ecosystems and its social consequences: groups such as Earth First! are often labelled as secular apocalypticists for, in the early days, putting a date on the collapse of ecologies supporting human civilisation. But the novelty represented by The Age of Stupid actually draws upon the more nuanced understanding of apocalypse that I have outlined above: its ambivalent status as both here and not here, now and not now. This may in fact be a feature of our everyday ability to maintain true contradictions as simultaneous beliefs: we both hope for what is possible to achieve, and mourn its failure to arrive. Similarly, we must look for ways in which climate change discourse communicates simultaneously that a threshold has already been reached (some amount of warming is already unstoppable) and that a crucial threshold (a point of no

\[^{43}\] For a more in-depth analysis of the ethical questions underlying the wide adoption of the tipping point concept in contemporary culture, see Skrimshire, S “Points of No Return: Climate Change and the Ethics of Uncertainty”. Environmental Philosophy 2009.


\[^{45}\] Stibbe, 2.

\[^{46}\] Lee.
return) is still to be resisted. There are straightforward scientific reasons for this: some tipping points are believed to have passed, others not. But the ethical import of the mode of communication is vastly underestimated. It is the rhetoric that steers a course between “too late”, “almost too late” and “too late within this political time frame for action” that will dictate the ability for people to do anything about climate change.

The language of tipping points raises the complex interconnection between these temporal states of anticipation because of its own inherent sphere of uncertainty. It is known, for instance, that up to now humans have contributed around only 0.8 degree planetary warming rise. But it is also estimated that there is a time lag of around 40 to 50 years between carbon emissions and global warming, leading some to conclude that the warming to which we are committed already pushes us over the point of no return in global warming.47 But given the uncertainty over whether or not such a singular point has arrived, what is the most appropriate ethical response? To assume that our life on the planet is going to be severely curtailed, or to act as if it is not? If there is uncertainty, shouldn’t we always act as if the time had not run out, in order to maximise our chances of survival? As NASA scientist Gavin Schmitt puts it, “Much of the discussion about tipping points, like the discussion about “dangerous interference” with climate often implicitly assumes that there is just “a” point at which things tip and become “dangerous”. This can lead to two seemingly opposite, and erroneous, conclusions - that nothing will happen until we reach the “point” and conversely, that once we’ve reached it, there will be nothing that can be done about it. i.e. it promotes both a cavalier and fatalistic outlook.”48 This, however, lies at odds with the sense of moral urgency required by many environmental activists. Plane Stupid activist Leo Murray writes, for example, that despite the inherent uncertainty in latent warming effect,

These are extraordinary times. Preventing runaway global warming is the single most important task in all of human history – and it has fallen to us to do it. If we don’t, then everything else we work to achieve in our lives will be destroyed, or become meaningless. Those who came before us didn’t know about this problem, and those who come after will be powerless to do anything about it. But for us, there’s still time!49

But this huge responsibility appears to ignore another tacit agreement amongst environmentalists, which is that the world is already in some sense irrevocably changed. A sense of mourning and loss is therefore not misplaced: the World Health Organisation estimates that over 160,000 people already die each year because of climate change. We are also currently in such a rapid state of species extinctions that some call it one of only six “mass extinction” events known to history.50 The same principle goes with the common association of final human loss not with literal extinction, but with the wipe-out of human civilisation: Hear Leo Murray again:

‘Humanity’ may survive this. But what will ‘humanity’ mean in a world where countries which remain habitable – like Britain – use most of our remaining

47 Murray.
48 Schmitt, 3.
49 Murray.
50 Glavin.
resources fighting to keep out the starving millions who can no longer live in their own countries because of what we have done? 51

A good question indeed, but one which should also acknowledge what humanity and civilisations means today, in the light of the irreversible losses already incurred by anthropogenic climate change.

How might the dilemmas above find any clarification in our previous analysis of apocalypse? The point of intersection appears to be the point within climate change discourse in which agency – the possibility of change, the ability to act - becomes swallowed up in some larger meta-narrative beyond people’s control. Arguably, we are witnessing such a temptation through the popularity of what Lynas calls “geological fatalism”. There is a perceived shift in public discourse from environmental action to an acceptance of the inevitable death of humanity, earth, and life itself, within a wider cosmological picture. It is arguably present in the recent explosion of thought experiments on the survival of life on earth after humans have (for whatever reason) disappeared: thought experiments such as Alan Weisman’s The World Without Us; the National Geographic’s Aftermath: Population Zero and the History Channel’s Life After People. Each documents a desire to see beyond the point of no return, to know what continues in spite of our absence. What might be the social function of such a perspective? One view is that it may reorient the moral priority afforded the lifespan of humanity in the interests of a wider intrinsic value of the biosphere, and beyond, from which our life is generated. As Heather Eaton has put it, lessons from truly understanding the scope of evolution of life on earth, including its cycles of mass extinctions, necessitates a shift from anthropocentrism to “geocentrism” whose scope would be “kin to but more extreme than the Copernican revolution”. 52 In Process Theology as Political Theology John B. Cobb famously described the rejection of anthropocentrism by process thought by expressing what seemed on the face of it a standard deep time perspective:

We are a very special part with peculiar capacities and value. But we came into being at a late point in the evolutionary process and we will some day be gone. That will not be the end of the world, only of humanity. 53

But in order to claim at the same time that “viewing our species from the point of view of the total natural process does not mean adopting an attitude of calm detachment” what Cobb was clear about was the mistaken (Kantian) premise upon which most anthropocentric views of liberation have been founded. But is the role of religion then simply to be bearers of the new message of a narrative that stretches far beyond the human story, to contextualise human value within this broader story of life itself? Eaton argues that the evolutionary perspective will change attitudes, and thus she argues for a revolution in aesthetic as well as ethical stance towards conservation: “When we experience the Earth in its awesome immensities and ingenuity, we are moved to resist its demise”. 54

51 Murray.
52 Eaton.
53 Cobb, 5
54 Eaton.
Yet it would be naive to imagine that deep time thinking alone deepens or radicalises an ethical engagement with climate change. The responses to deep time thinking produce a range of responses, and not always the ones we would wish. For instance, Stephen Clark notes that we must decide whether or not we think our future will be short and tragic or long and glorious. But people also opt for the “presentist” stance – a way of contextualising our fleeting finitude by giving it infinite existential meaning, as in Blake’s “infinity in the palm of your hand, eternity in an hour” or even Paul Tillich’s “eternal now”. And it is a paradox of recent origin that whereas religion once taught us of the brief frailty of our lives in comparison with God’s eternity, these days “the religious are eager to believe that the only available Infinite is alongside and in us”. When that present experience is tainted by the ubiquitous threat of tipping points, however, what sense can be made of an existentialist deepening of the present? And how could religions deepen their own commitment to the goodness of creation when the present moment, seen politically, is one of wilful blindness and self-deception? Even Clark, who rejects the all too personalistic and commonsensical presentism, expresses like Eaton the value of deep time as the imagination of “immensity” which “awakens in us a recognition of that Infinite which surrounds and confronts us.” But contemplating immensity doesn’t really help us consider the richness of the challenge described throughout this chapter – one of considering a possible end, and yet affirming our resistance of that end. It would seem that the deep time arguments frequently offered move too smoothly from politics to paleobiology, and the relief with which they do so is palpable. Read, for example, the inimitable pessimism of John Gray:

It is only in human terms that climate change can be viewed as apocalyptic, however. In the life of the planet, it is normal…Much biodiversity will be lost, but the earth will renew itself. Life will continue and will thrive - whether or not humans are around to see it.

It is indeed a feature of apocalyptic to make crises appear not as natural cycles but the catastrophic irruption of disorder into the otherwise goodness of creation appear outrageous: to summon up images of that which strikes us as unnatural and corrupt, to heighten the discord between what is and what is desired. The lesson from apocalyptic narrative, nevertheless, is paradoxically to maintain both a sense of deep time (affirming the ultimate “geocentric” truth of the continuing goodness of creation) and resisting its conclusions: of hoping in a better world in which an Edenic balance is somehow restored. Apocalypse would thus seem to echo a sentiment I hinted at in reference to the ambiguous passing of multiple tipping elements: affirming resistance and mourning simultaneously. It would allow the imaginative performance of the cataclysmic end time revelation to purify, transform, and prepare (for impending catastrophe), without taking away any ethical meaning to the present. The intrinsically dualist approach of apocalyptic strategy will of course strike many people as morally abhorrent, dividing the world into forces of dark and light / saved and unsaved. And yet we should remember that what makes the principle of apocalyptic imagination a “comic” drama is the goodness of creation itself, and through the agonistic process of crisis, a redemption of that which remains to be good through creation justifies a hope in a new heaven and importantly a new earth. For with a doctrine of the ultimately

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55 Clark, 179.
56 Clark, 193.
57 Gray.
good creation the hearers of apocalyptic narrative are encouraged not only to anticipate that goodness but to build it, or to welcome its establishment in their midst.

Conclusions

Let me be clear: it is not my concern to promote an apocalyptic sensibility, in the way that those texts have traditionally inspired political action. Millennialist cultures show no signs of waning and will always represent the temptation to justify violence, bigotry, and catastrophism in the name of imitating Revelation’s purifying fury in anticipation of the new millennium. But by associating apocalypticism only with this crudely militaristic eschatology we ignore its powerful dramatic description of a state of “in between times” that is very close to our own. That is, an encouragement of our own pathetic engagement with the story. As one of looking beyond the terrible tragedy and beyond death; as an inspiration not to let the tragedy simply unfold but to allow it to really transform our agency in the present, here and now, and to resist inevitability. The narrative not only of calamity but of the resurrection of the dead, as well as the living (present in both Daniel and Revelation) introduces a mixing of the apocalyptic and postapocalyptic genres as they are commonly perceived in contemporary culture. For the heightened crisis experienced by the listener is not only of an event of catastrophe, but of the scenario of loss, such as might be experienced by those contemplating the passing of points of no return. And just as we saw Jewish apocalypse as ambiguously eschatological, so the dramatic effects of apocalypse might also be both an ambiguous hope in what salvation might lay ahead, and a need to transform “infinitely” the experience of the present: to make it worth our total commitment.

I am also aware that to overplay the analogy with biblical apocalypse is to stress the latter’s reliance on the agent of apocalypse – God, broadly speaking – and to pass judgment on the ultimate benevolence of such an agent, and that I have not left space enough to develop this more purely theological question. But by way of suggesting a future opening of such theological – cultural discourse, I can point to a recent suggestion by Celia-Deane Drummond of the uses of a dramatic rendering of apocalyptic for climate discourse. Deane-Drummond suggests that a dramatic engagement with the fear of what persists through and after apocalyptic crises is not only true to common experience (we do in fact explore this imaginary through all manner of post-apocalyptic film and literary examples). It also harks back to some original theological explorations of the idea that God, through the person of Christ, descends into that experience itself and offers a light of hope within it. Echoing Hans Urs von Balthasar’s dramatic depiction of Easter Saturday, in which

Christ entered into not just Sheol, or the place of the dead, but in a mythical way Christ may be envisaged as entering Hell, and as one who confronted the chaos that is beyond the devastation of creation, epitomised as absolute evil in the world.58

Once again, without being able to explore the contemporary resonances with this doctrinal sense of agency (who is Christ, and in what sense might his entering hell be thought of as a liberation for those also caught up in hell and with little hope for its

58 Deane-Drummond, 5.
relenting?), we can at least appreciate the pertinence of traditions that are able to imaginatively engage not only with a sense of resisting impending danger – points of no return not yet reached, perhaps - but with a redeeming imperative to hope in the transformation of the present that appears in our eyes to be already lost.

The illumination afforded by apocalypse for climate change discourse is surely that crisis is all in the telling and enacting. How do we enact a drama that both calls upon the righteous to stay faithful to their selves, and learns to accept a world that is falling away, that embraces the new? The unfolding climate story should not represent a grand meta-narrative either of certain failure (Lovelock’s metaphor of Gaia purging herself inexorably of her ill-fated parasite) or of certain salvation through some utopian feat of geo-engineering or other technological hubris. In a very real sense the multiple experiences and perceptions of climate change are marked by continual losses, from the extinction of species, to the loss of individual human lives, to those of languages and cultures. As Anne Primavesi’s chapter on Gaian relationality suggests, this experience of loss is one that should reveal our interdependence on the rest of the earth system, not our isolation from it. But it is also marked by attempts at mitigation, reasons for hope and motivations for a striving for a world one is not allowed the guarantee of succeeding. Without this paradoxical tension we are in danger of allowing people to have a burst of frantic activity to save something (in the next 100 months) and then fall into a state of acceptance and mesmeric inevitability – resigned to the kickback of positive feedback mechanisms. Only a discourse as complex and self-contradictory as apocalyptic can promote both – a hope in the world to come as well as an acceptance of certain change including death. Or, to put it another way, to maintain both a raging against the dying of the light, and a mourning of inevitable passing. Both, I would argue, are deeply religious virtues.

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**Biography**

Stefan Skrimshire is Postdoctoral Research Associate in Religion and Politics at The University of Manchester, UK. He teaches and researches concepts of the end in philosophy, religion, and culture, particularly in the context of climate change and tipping points.

He is author of *Politics of Fear, Practice of Hope* (London: Continuum, 2008); *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic* (London: Continuum, 2010) and numerous journal articles on political theology, environmental ethics, and philosophy of religion.

When he is not thinking about the end of the world, he makes the most of the present through environmental activism, Triathlon, and playing Double Bass and Cello in the Single Cell music collective, Manchester.