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Rapture's returns

What end-timers can teach the rest of us

By Nathan Schneider Sunday, May 15, 2011

About a decade ago, during a period of late-adolescent, almost apocalyptic urgency, with a sudden conversion to Roman Catholicism only a short time away, I discovered an unusual way to relax. At home, in my basement bedroom, I'd play Quake, a violent computer game. It was fairly typical teenage-boy stuff. But instead of listening to some kind of death metal while I played, I turned to an unlikely soundtrack: the Bible call-in show "Open Forum" — specifically, the soupy baritone of Harold Camping, the octogenarian radio evangelist.

At the time, I had no idea why this combination worked so well. But thinking back on it now, the shoot-'em-up video game actually dramatized the condition of total depravity at the center of Camping's theology. He kept reminding me that we're really, really bad — just like the demons (or whatever they were) I was battling on the screen — and only saved by God's supercharging grace. I could sense that a change was just around the corner, and maybe this odd activity helped free me from my old world and shepherd me into a new one.

It has been years since I last played Quake, but Camping is still on the air, and these days he's giving voice to more apocalyptic urgency than usual. The civil engineer-turned-self-taught Bible scholar has told his followers that the Rapture will come on May 21, which he says is 7,000 years to the day after Noah's flood. Some choice passages from the King James Bible, plus some creative numerology, indicate to Camping beyond all doubt that the saved will fly up to heaven next Saturday, while everyone else is left to wait around another five months until the end of the world. He actually made a similar prediction in 1994; needless to say, it turned out to be a dud.

Camping's listeners have contributed millions of dollars for billboards and T-shirts, and they have sent teams of true believers to spread the news far and wide. His prediction is getting coverage from the big news networks. I started seeing May 21 pamphlets in the New York City subway a few years ago, and just last week a Jamaican man spent an afternoon carrying a sign announcing Judgment Day up and down my Brooklyn street.

Camping has competition right now, and he knows it. The ancient Mayan long-count calendar ends in 2012, which has made next year a popular date for apocalyptically-minded New Agers. Hollywood has already made a doomsday movie about it. On a lot of the official May 21 propaganda, there is a red circle with a line through it crossing out "2012."

Some of my encounters with the 2012 crowd, however, have actually made me more tolerant of apocalyptic date-setting. While reporting on colonies of American expatriates in Costa Rica, I met 2012 adherents who dared to live quite impressive lives off the grid, growing their own food and pioneering new kinds of sustainable living. The prospect of an impending end can paradoxically motivate people to work toward a better future.

Christianity itself grew from a sect of apocalyptic end-timers into, at its best, a lasting mouthpiece for universal love. And then there's Leon Festinger's classic study of a small UFO cult in the 1950s. The group went from expecting disaster to deciding that their prayers had prevented it — deluded, perhaps, but sort of a happy ending. I'm reminded of the story of Eve in the Bible; right after her Edenic world ends in the Fall, plaguing her with the pain of childbirth, the first thing she does is praise God for giving her a child. The end can be a new beginning.

I haven't seen evidence of much good coming out of the buildup to May 21, but there may be something. At the very least, I suspect it will leave the finances of Camping's radio network, Family Radio, in good shape on May 22. (The organization is already valued at more than \$121 million.) When asked about the financial benefits of predicting the apocalypse, Camping insists that he won't be around to enjoy them. But others might. Ted Cox, my colleague at the online magazine *Killing the Buddha*, visited Family Radio headquarters recently and saw that, according to a memo on the wall of their offices, at least someone there is still planning to celebrate Christmas this year.

Around the time of Camping's 1994 prediction, Larry King asked him about the many other date-setters, past and present. What Camping said strikes me as being very true, in spite of himself: "It is an indicator that in the heart of man there is a sense of an end, an apocalypse."

Sometimes we need the image of an apocalypse in order to prevent one we might otherwise cause: nuclear war, genocide or climate change, to name a few. People can use the thought of the Rapture as a way of working through old age or international relations. Apocalypse makes complicated problems immediately clear. There is, "in the heart of man," a strange comfort with living inside a doomsday video game.

Nathan Schneider is editor of [Killing the Buddha](#), an online literary magazine about religion.

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