

The End of the World Is Coming [published as “What will follow still hangs in the balance”]

I belong to a religious faith tradition whose first adherents apparently believed in the imminent end of the world. I am not convinced that the founding figure of this religion, Jesus of Nazareth, himself believed that the world was about to come to an end. However, the evidence suggests that Jesus was expecting something profound if not dramatic in the way of change and transformation -- in effect, the end of the world *as we know it*. Indications are that Jesus was expecting God’s rule, or kingdom, to become more fully manifest *on earth* in the not-too-distant future. The apostle Paul, perhaps the greatest early proponent of the movement that came to be called Christianity, seems to have expected a decisive and radical end to the present world that would have exceeded anything that could be regarded as merely an earthly transformation.

To be sure, both Jesus and Paul were right about one thing: the end of the world *as they knew it* was coming. It did not come in quite the manner that they seem to have expected, and it certainly did not come as quickly or finally as Paul must have anticipated. The end of the world has yet to come in any radically decisive way. This marvelous blue-green planet, this Spaceship Earth, still sustains most of its inhabitants as it spins and hurtles through the heavens.

There are, however, many scenarios these days that imagine the final end of this world. Some are quite fantastic, though not necessarily impossible – an alien invasion, e.g., or a major hit from an asteroid. Others are ominously realistic – nuclear winter or global climate change leading to ecological collapse.

To be sure, sooner or later this world will end. Some people live as if there’s no tomorrow. They practice a vulgar Epicureanism: “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Most others, I suspect, routinely repress this knowledge of the finitude of our existence and try to go on living as if they and their projects will never die. Surely it is hard to face the fact that whatever you’ve done, or ever will do, in this world will some day come to nothing.

I believe we live in extraordinarily perilous times. The world *as we know it* will likely end sooner rather than later. What will follow still hangs in the balance. I cannot yet say that I feel fine.

Copyright 2007 by Byron C. Bangert