

# Evolution of Conventional Apocalyptic Concepts in Contemporary Contexts

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## Abstract

This joint contribution from two Ukrainian scholars, Prof. Vitaliy Dokash and Prof. Liudmyla Fylypovych, draws on Prof. Dokash's extensive expertise in eschatological studies within Christianity and Prof. Fylypovych's sociological analysis of contemporary religiosity. The article addresses the enduring scholarly interest in classical religious themes, particularly those related to the concept of Judgment Day. Additionally, it examines the relevance of this topic in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, considering the profound implications for humanity's survival after a global catastrophe. As the authors explore the potential consequences of the pandemic, framing COVID-19 as a multifaceted apocalypse—social, economic, political, and informational—they question whether religion can maintain its role as a social regulator in the post-apocalyptic era. The analysis delves into the Bible, specifically the book of Revelation, adapting its insights to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The article also investigates whether modern religious teachings offer novel perspectives and interpretations of existing apocalyptic scenarios in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic.

## Keywords

eschatology, judgment day, Christianity, apocalypse, pandemic

## Introduction

People always wanted to foresee their futures and it is even more vigorous during game-changing periods of history. In the periods as such, people come up with incredible ideas framed by various religious teachings and sources. In the periods as such, people come up with incredible ideas framed by various religious teachings and sources. In the tradition of Abrahamic religions, it is about foresight, prediction, and prophecies relate not only to the believers but also entire humanity. It is symptomatic that in times of aggravation of social, environmental, spiritual crises and other upheavals, there are more and more of various predictions about the fate of the world and the near-collapse. Characteristically, these eschatological motives accompany history at all times and are always justified dogmatically by prophetic signs. The actualization or strengthening of eschatological modes occurs when beliefs become abstract for people and the system of values corresponding to the epoch stops serving equally as the spiritual space is over-secularized.

As of today, the foundation of predominantly religious literature, esoteric content is already established. It is supplemented continuously by modern interpretations of sources or fantasies, works of art, movies, "scientific" predictions about the apocalypse and the Last Judgment. By referring to natural (earthquakes, floods, droughts, bad ecology) and social (hunger, diseases, epidemics, violence, terrorism, wars) cataclysms, old and new prophets foreshadow the near end of the civilization, which should be replaced by another divine one which will return humanity to paradise. Different messianic and eschatological theories and concepts (the doctrine of the end of the earthly existence of humanity and man) emerge undulatingly.

Some of the prophecies are incredibly skittish, disturbing but some are full of hope for a rebirth of a new life and the expectation of not only a better but a blissful future. As it turned out, religious movements, remaining optimistic in contrast to rational and pragmatic secular people, publish information with two trends:

1. Exaltation of the original purity, blissful fullness of existence that preceded history which preceded and should be returned to.
2. On the other hand, new opportunities are put forth that will appear in the coming, "updated" history after the end of this civilization by the principles of linear development.

It is worth recalling that theological dogmas in any Christian religion are closely related to the expectation of eschatological events, the end of the world and the second coming of Christ, which should open the ideal dimension of existence for humankind. The traditional Christian consciousness is apocalyptic and brightly eschatological. The aforementioned might explain the relatively peaceful attitude of Christians, consciously neglecting emergencies, current pandemic as well, as they believe that apocalypse is inevitable and they know what kind of apocalypse it will be.

At the same time, Christians are cheerful generally and optimistic, because they believe in the Kingdom of God, that they would be saved after their physical death. However, there are no more than a third convinced Christians as such. Polls conducted by Ukrainian and foreign sociologists, explain a certain indifference of Christians to the future of the world. They do not want to think about it either because they do not know the Bible, or because they fear prophecies, therefore they ignore the information. They consciously or unconsciously oppose the end regularly read in the Bible, and not only in the Revelation of John. Religious environment develops specifically for those type of people the doctrines that either postpone this end or present eschatology in an engaging fashion. These include, first of all, various Millennial theories (the Millennial Kingdom). This also includes a large number of theological doctrines, which even in the XX century attempted to explain eschatology and prove that it was fulfilled by the first coming of Jesus Christ (Dokash, 2007).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly thriving in the context of modernizing the mythological eschatological subjects of the Bible and making them more attractive by means of modernized language. As representatives of the present eschatological current in Christianity, they uniformly communicate eschatology as a teaching about the end of the world. Modern interpreters of the Apocalypse attempt to eliminate archaic apocalyptic layers from biblical texts and introduce ideas of moral and social optimism.

Jehovah's Witnesses' perspective about the end of the world is the most tricky in understanding the modernization of biblical prophecies. A large number of their pamphlets about the Last Day or the coming of Jesus Christ include explicit questions such as "What are the events awaiting us? How will our King protect us before and during Armageddon? How do we prepare for future events?" Jehovah's Witnesses are certain that those events will take place soon, thus various natural and social disasters are not unusual for them (*Kinec svitu*, n.d.). They are convinced that everything is already defined in the Bible, one should read between the lines to understand those prophecies. Before the beginning of the all-embracing disaster, they believe, peace and security will be declared — which is done by various international organizations, in particular by the UN. This will be the first manifest sign of the subsequent inescapable events, among which is an assault against the true religion, that Witnesses consider themselves to be part of (*New American Bible*, 2002, Revelations 17:16). For this reason, they are so resilient to the persecution that they are experiencing, for example, in Russia. The heavenly phenomena will notify of Armageddon (*New American Bible*, 2002, Matthew 24:29), which can be observed already today. The expected trial over sheep and goats (*New American Bible*, 2002, Matthew 25: 31-33), the attack of Gog from the land of Magog (*New American Bible*, 2002, Ezekiel 38: 2.11, 15) will precede the gathering of the remains of the anointed (*New American Bible*, 2002, Matthew 24:31), that is, Jehovah's Witnesses. At the end of the great struggle, Jehovah will send his King to protect all his faithful pastors (*New American Bible*, 2002, Ezekiel 38:18). This biblical scenario unfolds before the eyes of the modern generation, but not all people are able to read and understand it. Jehovah's Witnesses became more vigorous in their preaching activities to warn people of the coming events.

## Methods

This research employs a multidisciplinary approach to explore contemporary eschatological perspectives within Christian communities, focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on religious literature, survey data, and sociological analysis, the study investigates how different Christian denominations interpret and respond to apocalyptic themes. The data collection involves a thorough examination of religious texts, including interpretations from the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. Additionally, surveys conducted by Ukrainian and foreign sociologists are analyzed to gauge believers' attitudes towards the end of the world. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the impact of the pandemic on contemporary religious perspectives concerning the end of the world.

## Results and Discussion

The enduring anticipation of apocalyptic events is not a recent phenomenon. The concept of the world's end has been ingrained in various religions, undergoing a complex evolutionary journey expressed in diverse forms across historical periods. Christianity, in

particular, has strategically engaged with these themes to attract new followers. Whether advocating for radical transformation through the complete dismantling of the existing order or endorsing an evolutionary approach via societal moralization, Christianity has sustained its historical significance. Eschatological teachings have adapted to address the challenges of different eras, yet their fundamental tenets persist, serving to perpetuate the apocalyptic fervor among believers. Modern confessional eschatology seeks arguments to justify apocalypse and protect basic doctrinal principles, but it does not succeed entirely, because the ideas of the end of the world, despite the objective factors of the environmental, social or political crisis, are not very popular among Christians. This is evidenced by opinion surveys, which, although did not directly pose the question "Do you believe in the end of the world?", had some components of traditional eschatological ideas. In particular, Ukrainian sociologists asked if Ukrainians believe in life after death, in paradise without going into details of Christian eschatology. A devoted Christian must believe in the end of the world, in the second coming of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Christians know little about the end of the world, which indicates their level of belief and knowledge of Christian faith.

Thus, according to the data cited by the Ukrainian sociologist of religion M. Parashchevin (2008), 31% of Christian respondents denied the existence of life after death, 29% do not believe in the existence of paradise, 30% – hell, 25% – reject religious miracles. So, only a third of Christians surveyed believe or have an idea of the end of the world that binds to Armageddon. The most consistent and religious here were Greek Catholics. Exactly half of them declared faith in these elements of Christian doctrine and only 2% do not believe in any of them. But among the Orthodox, 29% declared the corresponding faith, with 18% of those who do not believe in any of these things. Thus, 62% of Greek Catholics and 41% of Orthodox believe in the afterlife, 76% of Greek Catholics and 42% of Orthodox believe in the existence of paradise, 73% of Greek Catholics and 41% of Orthodox Christians believe in the existence of paradise, 48% of Orthodox Christians and 48% of Orthodox. Greek Catholics are, so to speak, more canonical than Orthodox. The latter are more prone to shallow understanding, and therefore the free interpretation of the basics of the faith (Parashchevin, 2008).

Recent interest in apocalyptic events was stirred up by the event that was expected in 2012: the end of the Mayan calendar. It turned out that almost 15% of the inhabitants of our planet believe that the end of the world will happen in their lifetime, 10% believe that it could have happened in 2012 (Ipsos Global Public Affairs, 2012).

Mass surveys were conducted on this issue in 2012. For example, Ipsos Global Public Affairs (2012) specifically surveyed 16,262 people from 20 countries. The percentage of those who believe in the imminent end of the world varies greatly, from 6% in France to 22% in Turkey and the US, in South Africa and Argentina the percentage is slightly less. Only 7% of Belgians and 8% of British fear that the end of the world will come during their lifetime. One in ten people in the world stated that they were alarmed about the possibility of doomsday in 2012. The largest number of such people were in Russia and Poland and the least in the UK. Interestingly, uneducated and people with low income as well as those under 35 are more likely to believe in the apocalypse (Belous, 2012).

Surveys were conducted in Ukrainian as well, 86.9% of Ukrainians did not believe in the end of the world on December 21, 2012 (Centr "Socialnyj monitoring," 2012). The end of the world did matter more to the residents of the North and the East of the country; most of the residents of those regions believed in one way or another that December 21 was a landmark event. Also, a high percentage of those who are positive about the doomsdays are residents of Kyiv. Residents of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea differ from other regions, they struggled with an answer. The older were the respondents, the more likely they were to believe in the end of the world. For example, 4.6 % of young people responded

positively and 10.5 % of people over 60 years old. Furthermore, women (9.7%) believe more in the onset of the “last day” than men (4.4%).

Among non-believers, 6% have at least some belief that there will be the end of the world. The survey shows that among those who are determined about their spiritual choice and religious denomination 7% believe in the end of the world. Accordingly, statistically, there is no much difference between the two categories. Describing their attitude to the information about the apocalypse on December 21, 2012, the vast majority of respondents were very skeptical about the reality of such a threat: 78% of respondents agreed that it was “empty talk” and “senseless gossip”; 77.2% agree that rumors spread to make people buy different goods and prepare for a “black day”. 77.9% relate the active dissemination of information about the end of the world with an attempt to divert attention from really important things and social problems, to switch attention (Centr “Socialnyj monitoring,” 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced many areas of human endeavor (Hiscott et al., 2020; see also De Amorim & De Andrade Guerra, 2020; Krishnamurthy, 2020; Nabity-Grover et al., 2020; Sarkis et al., 2020; Zenker & Köck, 2020). It objectively modernized traditional apocalyptic. The thought of the end of the world as one of the central themes in the Bible is similarly discussed in Orthodoxy. The priest Vasily Fazan states: “Yes, we know that there will be an end of the world from the Holy Scriptures and the Tradition of the Orthodox Church, and it will come during the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. Then all people will appear before God to answer for their lives. The righteous will enter a blissful eternity with God, sinners will go to eternal torment. The earth and everything on it will be on fire, and there will be a new sky and a new earth” (Pruglo, 2012).

Unlike Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Orthodox do not associate the end of the world with natural causes, including astronomical or epidemiological phenomena. According to them, the end of the world will come as a result of the degradation of mankind, committing the worst sins, lawlessness, spiritual and moral impoverishment. That is why they are skeptical about guidance on how to survive the end of the world as it will come to all and everything. But “No one knows about the day and hour, only My Father,” said Jesus Christ. The Orthodox think that those who live with God shall not fear natural disasters, epidemics, evil deeds of people, nor death itself and the end of the world: “If God is with me, who is against me?”

Modern man is intrigued to find out what is hidden behind the concepts of “end of the world,” “last judgment,” “apocalypse,” “Armageddon” to get prepared for it. It turned out that the consciousness of the modern Christian, not to mention the non-believer has lost the original understanding of the end of the world. Very few people see it in religious attire; common representations are technologicalized, visualized by various fantastic series, lopsided, gloomy (Dokash, 2013; Bardin, 2017). General pessimism as such has never been inherent to Christianity. Modern interpretations of the end of the world are surprisingly rationalized and even pragmatic. The traditional meaning of the apocalypse is lost, the biblical notions of the end of the world are desacralized. The apocalypse is declared to be exclusively man-made, it changes the original meaning: the end of the world is retribution for the sinfulness of man, for the neglect of God, for the failure to fulfill his commandments.

Therefore, the world is waiting for new eschatological predictions, which logically fit into traditional Christian doctrines, not changing their essence, but only renewing traditional forms. The analysis of the Bible books, shows that the traditional Christian consciousness is through apocalyptic, brightly eschatological, because it is oriented towards the otherworld and life after death. In general, Christians are relatively calm about the dangers of the virus, because they, unlike non-believers who have no extensive religious knowledge of the end of the world, optimistically believe in the Kingdom of God and in their salvation.



Among all Christians, only representatives the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses literally perceive the end of the world. As representatives of the actual eschatological current in Christianity, they constantly remind their followers of eschatology as a teaching about the end of the world. Today, they are actively using the circumstances to prove that their beliefs are right. Modern interpreters of the Apocalypse attempt to eliminate archaic apocalyptic layers from biblical texts and introduce ideas of moral and social optimism. They modernize the mythological eschatological subjects of the Bible and making them more attractive by means of modernized language, technology, visualization.

## **Conclusion**

Modern confessional eschatology seeks arguments to justify apocalyptic ideas and protect basic doctrinal principles. But it does not fully succeed, because the ideas of the end of the world are not very popular even among Christians. According to opinion polls, just over half of Christians profess some components of traditional eschatological ideas. Even less are burdened by fears about the end of the world. The vast majority of people—up to 70% are skeptical of these prophecies, and the rest change the traditional understanding of the end of the world, which is gradually desacralized. But this does not mean that Christianity will lose its role as the social regulator of society, as it has experienced many pandemics and catastrophes while maintaining itself as a religious system that is able to set the meanings of human existence in any conditions. The current COVID-19 pandemic renewed eschatological fears and expectations of humanity and it should be investigated further with a focus on the condition of modern religiosity in terms of people's beliefs in the end of the world.

This research illuminates a nuanced landscape of contemporary eschatological beliefs within Christian communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The opinion surveys reveal a diverse range of perspectives, with a substantial portion of Christians displaying skepticism towards traditional apocalyptic notions. While some denominations, notably the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, actively reinforce eschatological teachings, the majority of Christians exhibit a pragmatic and rationalized outlook on the end of the world. The modernization of apocalyptic themes through technological mediums emerges as a notable trend, challenging traditional interpretations. Despite varied individual beliefs, Christianity continues to playing a major role, adapting its meanings to navigate the uncertainties of pandemics and catastrophes. This article underscores the resilience of religious systems in shaping human perspectives on existence, even in the face of unprecedented global challenges. Further exploration of these evolving dynamics is essential for a comprehensive understanding of contemporary religiosity.

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