



## HOW THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS VIEW APOCALYPTICISM

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More than 2,500 years ago, the Persian holy man Zoroaster taught his followers that someday, the world as humans know it will end badly. As humans succumb to temptation and become increasingly lawless and deceitful, society will break down, with families splitting up in hatred and the slaves brazenly defying nobles. Nature itself will begin to shut down, with the sun becoming smaller and clouds increasingly darkening the sky and pelting the land with foul-smelling rain. Crops and trees will wither away. Finally, an army of long-haired demons who are “powerful and most skilled in smiting,” will invade from the east. But that menacing horde will be met by another army, one composed of holy warriors, who will engage in one last epic battle to defend goodness and purify the holy places that the demons have desecrated.

Zoroaster wasn't the only one to make such a dramatic prophecy. Since ancient times, many religions have harbored a belief that God has already written the last chapter of history, and that it will end in a cataclysmic confrontation between good and evil. Such end-of-the-world beliefs are known as apocalypticism.

*Here are some of the apocalyptic beliefs of various faiths:*

Christianity: Some Christians believe that the New Testament's book of Revelation, isn't just metaphorical, but a literal description of a final battle on Earth between God and the forces of Satan. Before that happens, there is a series of horrific events—including an earthquake, lightning, and a fiery hailstorm that burns up a third of the trees on Earth and turns part of the sea to blood. Eventually, Jesus returns, descending from the heavens on horseback, accompanied by an army of horsemen clad in white linen, to confront an evil army led by a fearsome beast who is a minion of Satan. In the end, the evil forces are defeated, and the beast is cast into a lake of fire. An angel also grabs hold of Satan himself and throws him into a bottomless pit, where he is imprisoned in chains.



*The four horsemen of the apocalypse*

Good people who have died are revived, and live with Jesus in a new Jerusalem for 1,000 years, while the deceased who were evil are judged and sent to the fiery lake. Some Christians also believe that the end times will be preceded by the Rapture, an idea proposed by 19th Century protestant clergyman John Nelson Darby. The idea is that when Christ returns, all true Christian believers, living and dead, will be lifted up to meet Him in the air, and thus be spared the horrific events that the end times will bring.

**Islam:** As Princeton University Muslim chaplain Sohaib N. Sultan detailed in a Huffington Post article, the Hadith—the saying of the Prophet Muhammad—describes the events that lead to the end of the world. Natural disasters increase, and society undergoes a moral decline that leads to a surge in violence, bloodshed, anarchy, and sexual immorality. A false prophet called Dajjal appears, and fools people into following and worshiping him. As in the Christian end-time story, Jesus—a prophet in the Muslim faith—returns to slay Dajjal and rescue humanity from him. According to the Encyclopedia of Islam, those events eventually are followed by a day of reckoning, in which the dead are reunited with their bodies and handed a book containing one’s accumulated deeds. Those who led good lives will be admitted to heaven, while those who were sinful are sent to the fires of hell.

**Hinduism:** Hindus’ apocalyptic beliefs are different from other religions, because they believe that the universe goes through endless cycles of creation and destruction. In that cycle, three gods—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—all play a role. Brahma is the creator of the universe, while Vishnu preserves it during its existence. Shiva’s job is destroying the universe, so that it can be recreated. But before that moment comes, humankind begins a long slide toward materialism and evil. When the situation becomes sufficiently bad, Lord Kalki—the avatar, or manifestation, of Vishnu appears. Kalki is on horseback and armed with a sword, and he punishes the worst wrongdoers before the world ends.



*Lord Kalki, the manifestation of Vishnu*

**Buddhism:** Like the Hindus, Buddhists believe that the universe is endlessly recreated at the end of cycles called kalpas, which last from 10 to 15 billion years. Each kalpa begins with a golden age in which a Buddha, or enlightened teacher, is living, and humans tend to be spiritually enlightened. But that state of enlightenment gradually decreases, until ultimately the world is destroyed in fire at the end of the kalpa. According to a 5th Century AD Buddhist text, seven suns appear and gradually heat up the Earth, until finally, the planet becomes “one mass of flame,” so consuming that it leaves behind no ashes.



*A Buddha is an enlightened teacher*

**Native American:** Indigenous American peoples have varying beliefs about the world’s end, according to an article on the Indian Country website. The Hopi people believe that a spirit called the Spider Woman will appear and weave her web across the landscape, signifying that the end is at hand. A 19th Century Seneca prophet, Handsome Luke, predicted that the world would be destroyed by fire in the year 2100, after it is ravaged by environmental destruction, famines and war.

One common thread in all these different stories is that they tell people how the story of human history will conclude. Scientists say that our minds are wired to crave certainty and worry about the future. So believing that we know how everything will end—even if it’s a vision of a planet enveloped in fire—may give us more comfort than not knowing what will happen.

**Assignment:** Answer the following questions.

1. According to the majority of these stories, what specific event(s) precipitate, or cause, the apocalypse to begin?
2. According to the majority of these stories, what is the result of the apocalypse for humankind?