

We Might Be Living in the "End Times"

Dialogue with Josh M. Beach

Josh: Patrick, first of all I agree with all of your critiques of the “end-times” movement within evangelical circles. I remember as a kid growing up in a fundamentalist Christian church that our pastor would every year around Christmas give his “end-times-prophecy” update. It really captured my imagination and my father was really gung-ho about it. His library was filled with people just like Hocking. I know we have both read some great articles on this phenomenon and that we share similar concerns. However, you stated, “I still cannot see how this could advance the cause of love for God and one another” in relation to the presentation of Hocking. As I have mentioned before, you seem to have an idealized interpretation of Christianity based on “love,” which while admirable (and a interpretation that I largely agree with ethically) I don’t think that it is representative of mainstream Christianity nor does it mesh with the social and political attitudes and opinions of most Americans. Given the overwhelming popularity in America of Hocking’s simplistic, arrogant, and morally ambiguous at best “end-times” racket (espoused by many different voices and in many different mediums – movies, novels, essays, speeches), how would you evaluate mainline Christianity’s obsessions with this topic? Do you think it’s more prevalent in fundamentalist and/or evangelical circles? And if you do not consider yourself sympathetic to this ideological position, how do you deal with it,

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criticize it, and work to counter its – to my mind – morally bankrupt and potentially dangerous implications, especially within the Christian community that you operate within?

Patrick: Excellent questions Josh. There is no question that the focus on the end-times is more prevalent in fundamentalist and evangelical Christian circles. I am sympathetic to following God's will and believing that Christ will come again; I am unsympathetic to those who think they can accurately correlate current events with the arrival of God's judgment. To me, the danger is in becoming sidetracked from the real suffering and pain in the world so as to fixate upon some futurist fantasy expectation of the end-times. To an extent, such a focus is harmless and can even be motivating – such as, in a similar way, a powerful story like Tolkien's Lord of the Rings can be the source of individual motivation. Moreover, the Christian can draw hope from the expected return of God who will bring healing and peace to this troubled world. However, if such a focus pulls a person unhealthily away from the day-to-day concerns of life, then there is a problem. If one forgoes attending to work and the needs of one's family because he/she is obsessed with the end-times, then an unhealthy escapism has resulted. Also, I'm leery of political decisions being based upon abstruse texts of scripture. For example, blindly supporting Israel at all costs because of religious convictions is a mistake: support for Israel should be based upon justice and need, not preconceived religious affinity grounded upon unclear texts for support.

When faced with the end-times, I want people to think more complexly about it. I want them to see that just because they might think that certain current events correlate with scripture, this does not mean that the end is upon us. Humility, as in some many areas of life, is required. Evangelicals should see that there is a multiplicity of perspectives on the end and the coming judgment of God.

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Josh: My question for you is “how?” How would you, or do you, as an individual who professes evangelical Christianity, but who also professes a critical rationality and who has a good understanding of history, how would you direct the attention of fellow Christians to “think more complexly about” the end times narrative, the idea of judgment, and the exclusive tendencies that these issues bring about?

Patrick: Excellent questions. I would (and do) try to get Christians to see that what is here, now, and present is more important than wondering specifically how the end-times will unfold for three reasons: the greatest commandments are to love God and others; we really have no idea as to when the end will come so it’s useless to speculate; correlating current political events with end times prophecies is questionable at best. To focus on the end-times is problematic because it diverts us from loving God and each other in the present unless it is connected to God’s bringing a just conclusion to the pain and suffering in this world. So, my aim is to get Christians to love God and each other now while realizing that basing speculative beliefs on what may happen is a diversion from what God actually calls them to do.

God calls us through Jesus to love our neighbors and God most of all. On the importance of loving each other, Brennan Manning writes beautifully (p.136 in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*):
The way we are with each other is the truest test of our faith. How I treat a brother or sister from day to day, how I react to the sin-scarred wino on the street, how I respond to interruptions from people I dislike, how I deal with normal people in their normal confusion on a normal day may be a better indication of my reverence for life than the anti-abortion sticker on the bumper of my car. We are not pro-life simply because we are warding off death. We are pro-life to the extent that we are men and women for others, all others; to the extent that no human flesh is a stranger

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to us; to the extent that we can touch the hand of another in love; to the extent that for us there are no “others.” Thus for the Christian, loving God and loving others goes hand in hand.

If we spend our time focusing on how the end will unfold and when, we are distracted from love, our primary mission and duty. As a result of catastrophic events (Holocaust, WWII, Black Plagues), people have been expecting the end-times for 2000 years; as such, it’s foolish to put a lot of energy into anticipating “when” and “how” it will occur. Scripture indicates the day of Christ’s return will occur unexpectedly (*Luke 12:40, Mark 13:33*), and I see nothing indicative to the contrary. To attempt to specifically connect current political events to the end-times is a waste of time. Instead, one should focus on trusting God to take care of the future while working to follow God’s will for today by loving Him and others.

Josh: You mention an end-times “obsession” and state that, “we must realize in all humility that God’s timing is not our timing.” This seems to imply that while you do not go looking for Jesus’ return under every stone as it were, you do believe that historical events will at some point come to produce the end of the world and herald Jesus’ return. You stated, “I believe Christ will come to judge and radically transform the world, but we have no idea when that will be or exactly what form it will take so we’d best be about the business of loving God and one another until He comes.” Now while this position focuses on an admirable worldly attitude of “loving your neighbor” it also seems to reflect an ostrich with its head in the ground, trying to hide from stark social and political realities and denying the frightfully negative implications of the evangelical belief in an end of the world scenario. I don’t see you really addressing in a critical spirit the morally ambiguous at best “revelation” surrounding the end of the world and that disturbs me. Specially, it seems to me that you believe that I’m going to be judged by a vengeful God when the world ends (or when I die), and that most likely I’ll burn in Hell for

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eternity – baring, as my parents never forget to tell me, my later return to the Christian fold once I realize my apostasy and reject my hateful atheism, which I always tell them will never happen. Personally I think you're crazy and delusional (for while I can concede the existence of "God," this end-times business is too much) and I'm concerned about how your delusions might effect both your commitment to rational criticism and ethical living. Please comment.

Patrick: I don't find anything frightening about a belief in the second coming of Christ and final judgment of God; such occurrences are not up to me, so all I must do is follow God's will as best as I can determine it. If I am loving both God and my neighbor then I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I have no plans to hide or avoid the concrete, practical events of life in today's world.

Thanks again for this dialogue Josh. I really admire your honesty and your willingness to carry on in conversation with me like this. As you know, when I first read your charge of me being "crazy and delusional," I took it personally, and felt disrespected. However, after your thoughtful email response in which you explained you didn't mean disrespect but were only being honest, I feel much better. It really is an amazing thing, this honest dialogue between us. You're right – some knees may get skinned in the process, but better we be honest.

Plus, reading your shock and dismay at my end times belief reminded me of the time (before I was a Christian) when History Professor Gary Ferngren told me he believed in the inerrancy of scripture; I had taken a big drink of water, and I almost spit it up all over him, I was so amazed, probably not unlike you are with my end times beliefs. So, it's with a smile that I can accept your assessment that I'm "crazy and delusional."

Josh: Good. I'm glad I did not offend you. I was only trying to be honest and some positions really tax my credulity. And let me remind you that its my personal opinion that we all, myself

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included, operate on a daily basis under the influence of illusionary ideological schemas, but it is my own opinion that it is dangerous to take ones' illusions too seriously, which can lead to a state of delusion where illusion is mistaken for reality. With that said, I don't feel that you have fully addressed the central concerns that I've raised in this and the last chapter, so let me restate them: 1) can you appreciate how the apocalyptic vision in "Revelation" *can be* disconcerting and ethically questionable from my perspective? 2) Can you appreciate my concerns about how certain ethically questionable themes in "Revelation" *can be* potentially dangerous if read literally or read by a deranged mind? 3) Can you tell me how your personal belief and faith in "God's love" can ethically challenge and disarm the exclusivist and intolerant Christian position that "one must accept Christ or burn in hell for eternity?" 4) The last question is the most important to me at this stage and I ask that you take it seriously and answer me directly: based upon your understanding of Christianity and the *Bible* and based upon your own convictions, do you believe that as an atheist that I will be condemned to hell (your answer could have two parts if your own convictions differ somewhat from mainline Christian dogma)?

Patrick: Josh, I really value you and the honesty of our dialogue. I'm glad you're willing to slug it out with me and keep doing this despite the difficulty of these issues. Such dialogue is meaningful and powerful, even in disagreement. Thanks for bringing me back on point here.

Regarding question #1 above: yes, I can see how the vision in Revelation "can be disconcerting and ethically questionable" to you. I used to find it so myself.

Regarding #2: yes, I can see how Revelation might be dangerous if "read literally or read by a deranged mind."

Regarding #3: Separation from God is hell. If one is without a close relationship with Christ, one is missing what is most central. That said, it's not up to me or any Christian to decide

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who will be saved or damned eternally. The Christian is to love, first God and then all others.

Loving God and loving others is inextricably bound together. This can be accomplished whatever one believes about the eternal destiny of a person. So, faith in God and belief that God will save some for heaven and damn others to hell does not contradict the command to love others. God's business is the business of saving and damning; our job as Christians is to love.

Question #4 asks: Will you, Josh, be "condemned to hell" when you die because you're an atheist? My answer: I don't know. Your salvation is God's business and yours, not mine. Hell is separation from God; if you continue to reject Him, I'm not sure how He can view that as anything but rejection. However, God's ways are not mine. He is beyond our understanding, and I believe when He judges you, He'll take into consideration every aspect of your life. Those things will be weighed as will the state of your heart; how He does that, I cannot comprehend, but it will be just.

You are a bright man, Josh, and you care about others' intellectual and material needs. I believe God values that in you. You know, I would love to see you become a Christian because your gritty focus on real suffering and need would shake up complacent Christians in good ways. However, right now, your systematic interpretation of reality through an empirical, psychological, and rational lens while barring anything supernatural limits your growth and shuts out the God who seeks to know you intimately and redeem you from all your hurts and longings and sufferings and fractures, physical and emotional.

My advice is that you open yourself to truth, all truth. If you do that, God will draw you to Himself and transform you and your life; he'll heal you and give you new purpose. C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity* (p. 65): "But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are [non-Christians]. We do know that no man can be saved except

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through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”

Salvation is not something humans can claim to fully understand. While you appear to me to be out of right relationship with God both now (and as a result) after death, my prayer is that God will draw you to Himself. In the end, whether you are saved or damned lies with him and none other.

You raise my “idealized” treatment of Christianity and love; in doing so, you’re onto something important. I’ve been arguing for the ideal Christian and the ideal Christianity. However, I must be clear that in reality, Christians and Christianity are often anything but ideal (to include myself). While many Christians are great people, many are selfish and judgmental; most are some mixture of the good and the bad. The world is indeed fallen. Sin, pain, and suffering exist everywhere.

The Christians who are so judgmental in your experience – those who are arrogantly sure who is going to hell or heaven, or claim they know exactly what God’s will is for a given situation while displaying no humility – they embody a distortion of the true, most real Christianity that I’ve been arguing for. True Christians acknowledge their errors and mistakes, seeking to be humble before God and others. Nobody does it perfectly; we all fail, but some of us try our best to die to our selfish selves while living for God and others. We are all works in progress; God isn’t done with us yet.

Someone close to me recently left, with much hurt and pain, a church that has been “home” for several years. I was told that more hurt had been caused by Christians in this person’s life than non-Christians. For me, as a Christian, this grieves my heart. It’s sad and pathetic that those who claim to follow Jesus could be such bad representatives of Him and His love. It’s no wonder that you and others would react so negatively to Christians and Christianity.

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My hope is that you and others will experience a love and an authenticity through myself and others who, flawed though we are, still seek to demonstrate the blessings of His Kingdom.