Disputed Question

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, and then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. While traditionally the dispute was settled by a master, here we will allow readers to form their own decision.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Isidore Rice, O.P. & Anthony VanBerkum, O.P.

The Question

> "The heavens existed of old and earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God; through these the world that then existed was destroyed, deluged with water. The present heavens and earth have been reserved by the same word for fire, kept for the day of judgment."
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> (2 Pt 3:5–7)

St. Peter reminds us of two important facts about this world: that it will come to an end, and that the end will be by the word of God. In popular culture today there is not lack of speculation, imagination, and fear about the first of these points, but there is much confusion about the second. People fear for the end of the habitable world or the end of the human race, by climate change, overpopulation, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), or nuclear winter. In the realm of fiction, entertainers meticulously create worlds that have reached an end, whether it be in the zombie apocalypse or an asteroid strike.

In the following conversation, Br. Anthony VanBerkum and Br. Isidore Rice guide us through an examination of this modern-day apocalyptic imagination, and the opportunities and challenges it presents to our efforts toward the evangelization of the world.

Br. Anthony VanBerkum (AVB): In every age, our shared human experience of the world has led us to think about its end. This is seen most dramatically in our stories of the apocalypse, whether the ancient tale of a world-ending Flood or more modern fears of a nuclear-powered world war. Of course, we know that each one of us will die, and without a perception of the immortality of the soul or the general resurrection, this appears to be a kind of world-ending moment. But this is just personal, and we've always known that others will outlive us, or at least that the stars will outlast us. Nonetheless, cultures around the world and in all times have developed stories of the apocalypse. Why is this?

We observe that everything in the world is either coming to be or passing away. We can see that trees grow, die, and decay; that animals are born, hunt or are hunted, and die either way; that even rocks form over time before crumbling into dust. It's certainly possible that all of this would just go on forever, but it might seem more natural to conclude that the world itself came to be and is

passing away. This is the perspective adopted by many cultures, including our own.

In light of Christian revelation, we know that this is indeed the case. The frequency with which the apocalypse appears in the world's traditions suggests that God teaches us this truth—the world is passing away—also through the natural world itself. And this is a good thing. It's helpful for us to realize that the world is temporary, for it points us, at least at a subconscious level, to the truth that the world that we can see, smell, hear, touch, and taste is not worth our full attention. "The world and its enticement are passing away," so they ought not engage us fully (1 Jn 2:17). We ought to have energy left over for something else, for something higher.

Br. Isidore Rice (IR): It is certainly true that an awareness of the temporary nature of our world can be quite spiritually beneficial. By increasing our awareness of the limits of our mortal human nature, mindfulness of the end can drive us to seek an end beyond the things of this world and can quicken a spirit of repentance from our all-too-worldly ways. Often in the history of the Church, an increased awareness of the four last things has done just this, for example in the preaching of St. Vincent Ferrer.

Yet it seems that our response to the apocalypse is highly dependent on our beliefs. In a Christian context, someone like St. Vincent Ferrer was able to convert many from lukewarmness and moral laxity by his apocalyptic preaching. However, false beliefs lead to less beneficial responses.

The main fruit of the 2012 apocalypse hype was interest and involvement in the pagan superstition of the Mayan calendar (and that misinterpreted, as historians pointed out). In the cultural trope of the zombie apocalypse, you may be asked what your plans are (weapon and hiding place of choice): there is an assumption that it could be overcome by human cunning and

might. Frequently, discredited fears of overpopulation are used to justify intrinsic evils such as abortion and contraception. Even Christian apocalyptic awareness has been tainted by fringe protestant preachers who frequently predict the exact date of the end, ignoring the clear words of our Lord: "but of that day and hour no one knows" (Mt 24:26). In another way, some promote the incorrect view popularized by Left Behind series that there will be a "rapture" in which Christians will be taken up into heaven before the end-times tribulations really get going.

To a world steeped in errors like materialism, hedonism, consequentialism, and nihilism the idea of an the end of the world is likely to give rise to utter despair, hasty bucket-list fulfilling, ends-justify-the-means rationalizing, and proud attempts to overcome even the apocalypse.

AVB: Yes, it's true that our beliefs will filter how we view the world. For modern man, obsessed with the power of technology, there is a tendency to believe that even the end of all things can be overcome by the power of science. This has been a driving idea behind space exploration, for instance, the plan being for the human race to survive all catastrophes by bouncing from one planet to another. This idea was somewhat humorously taken on by Marvel's recent *Thor: Ragnarok*, in which Ragnarok, the end of the world, can't be prevented but isn't a big deal, since everyone can just get on a spaceship and fly somewhere else.

Our beliefs filter anything we might observe in the world, though, so it's helpful to consider the sorts of truths that tend to filter through any worldview. Some of these include the bare fact of some kind of end of the world, the notion that it will not be pleasant, and the corresponding idea that we ought to prepare for it. This is all present in Christian teaching, as vividly presented by the Book of Revelation, for example. These ideas can be seen in various modern apocalypses as well. Take, for example, the outcry over GMOs,

Artificial Intelligence, overpopulation, and the like. Each of them suggests a coming end of the world, or at least an end to human rule over the world. The concern is that they will cause disease, or starvation, or slavery to machines—all unpleasant prospects. And so, the conclusion goes, we ought to prepare for them, whether by building survival bunkers or by trying to eradicate these causes of disaster.

There's a striking difference between these modern fears and the apocalypses of myth, however. While the mythical Ragnarok is inevitable and unstoppable, the response is not fear but a kind of hopeless courage—this is the sort of heroic attitude borrowed by J.R.R. Tolkien for the heroes of Middle-Earth. The proposed modern world-ending fears, on the other hand, are rather tame. One can question whether they're even capable of ending the human race, let alone the whole world.

All of this suggests a couple things about our modern peers. First, we're still interested in the world, and we care about where history is going. Second, we've lost contact to a large extent with the world—some of our "end of the world" scenarios don't see everything going up in fire and ash but merely the extinction of mankind. Both of these are, I think, open to the Christian message. It is through the preaching of the Gospel that we learn where history is going, and also that we ourselves, each individual person, are meant to go along with history to a glorious end. Similarly, the instinct to understand ourselves as stewards of creation, as taught by Genesis, is still with us, as seen by our intuition that the end of the human race might just bring about the end of the rest of creation as well.

IR: Reflecting on the end of the world, the good created universe, and our stewardship thereof can be fruitful, but we should also consider how we relate to "the world" taken in the sense of that all-too-fallen human way of thinking. One can distinguish two tendencies in the Christian tradition for how to approach the world

in this sense. One would be to find common ground that could serve as a starting point for proclaiming the Gospel. This finds scriptural basis in Paul's preaching in the Areopagus of Athens, where he refers the Athenian's altar to an unknown god and one of their poets' sayings to Christ (Acts 17:16–32). No one can be entirely without truth nor act without striving towards some at least apparent good. Thus Christ can be proclaimed as the fullness of truths only glimpsed before and the true good which we all seek. In this approach, just like the Israelites despoiled the Egyptians of their treasures (Ex 12:36), we can claim whatever is true and noble in our contemporary culture for the service of God.

The other approach stresses the radical difference between the Gospel and the world. Think of the simple preaching of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). Likewise, from its first line the Didache, one of the earliest Christian writings, teaches that "there are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways." It seems apocalyptic preaching would usually fall in this category. While it is possible to sift through philosophies, religions, and cultures to find seeds of the Gospel in greater or lesser degrees, the four last things show that in the end there are only two options: death brings a judgement either to heaven or to hell. From this perspective, seeds of the Gospel mean little if they have not sprouted. To him who has Jesus, more will be given; to him without Jesus, even what he has will be taken away (see Mt 13:12, 25:29). Rather than the despoiling of the Egyptians, this is reminiscent of the commands to take nothing from and suffer no mixing with the Canaanites (Ex 34:11–16).

We really need to preserve both of these perspectives. Emphasizing the former without the latter can devolve into a bland religious relativism—everyone has their path to the top of the hill. The latter without the former leaves little room for natural reason, which

Guiseppe Sanmartino — St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. (The Angel of the Apocalypse)

along with faith is one of the wings with which our minds ascend to contemplate God (*Fides et Ratio*, prologue).

In relation to the end times, we can find many truths in contemporary ideas, as you have mentioned. But the sinful actions inspired by falsehoods admixed with these truths can make the proximity to the truth more of a hindrance than a help, practically speaking. For example, both a Christian perspective and a typically modern one may agree on the truth that a good death is a desirable

thing. Yet whereas the Christian rightly understands this to be a death foreseen and prepared for by receiving the sacraments, many people today would think of a good death primarily as a painless one—dying in one's sleep. In the most extreme case, the ill effects of this partial truth are manifested in "death with dignity" movements, promoting and carrying out assisted suicides. In the dim light of half-truths this seems desirable, but in the light of the fullness of the truth, especially the truth of the four last things, it is a terrifying prospect. Likewise, while the desire to preserve the life of the species may be laudable in itself, if it leads to immoral tinkering with human life, for example embryonic stem cell research or messing with our human DNA, it becomes something quite terrible from an eternal perspective.

AVB: You make a good point, that we need to be careful when borrowing from the wisdom of the world in pursuit of preaching the Gospel. But I think we both agree that it ought to be possible to use modern apocalyptic fears as a way to introduce people to the Lord. What do you think are some practical aspects to consider in this regard?

For my part, I think a good first step might be to try to help people figure out what exactly it is that they fear from an apocalyptic scenario. For example, someone who is a strict materialist seemingly shouldn't be too concerned: all individual material things will end at some point no matter what, so why does it matter if everything ends? If such a person is worried about the end times anyway, then perhaps that's an opening to discuss how our experience of the world is not actually entirely materialistic. (Of course, if our hypothetical interlocutor is consistent and doesn't actually fear the apocalypse, we would need to take a different tack.)

Or perhaps someone is deeply concerned for the environment, and so considers human abuse of natural resources to be a potential cause of the end of the world. As Christians, we certainly agree

that it is important to care for creation, so this provides a common ground from which to start a discussion.

In any case, though, it would be necessary to be very careful that the language we're using is understood properly by both parties. This could help strike the balance you describe, as we're meeting the world where it is without simply adopting its perspective as our own.

IR: Looking at what is feared in an apocalypse does seem potentially fruitful. Perhaps for someone whose world revolves around material possessions or worldly status—getting the latest cellphone, remodelling the house again to get it just right, getting that promotion at work—the end may inspire fear of losing all they have striven for. Dickens's classic *A Christmas Carol* wonderfully illustrates this kind of fear and the conversion it can inspire. Yet, for Christians, the second coming of Christ is not something only to be feared, but even to be longed for: "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus" (Rv 22:20).

Environmental concerns also strike me as an interesting topic to consider, especially because they are real concerns, much more threatening than fanciful AI and zombie apocalypses. I think they also bring up one of the greatest fears associated with the end: the need for and difficulty of conversion.

Following the distinction you made earlier, something like climate change at first seems more like a potentially avoidable apocalypse than the complete and inevitable end, yet it does present an inevitability: if we continue to burn so much fossil fuel, the greenhouse effect will continue to heat the world up, drastically changing climates and the way people live around the globe; if we stop, we will have to radically change our habits of consumption. Either way, a change in our ways will be necessary.

I am no expert on climate science, but it certainly seems like an area where a stubborn will can cloud the intellect. This dynamic of conscience formation and the erring conscience can appear here just as much as it can in an area like Catholic sexual teaching. Someone who is cohabitating will be disinclined to believe that premarital sex can lead to hell. Analogously, someone who is accustomed to make an hour long commute daily in a Hummer will be rather disinclined to believe that burning fossil fuels leads to global warming. Both will have their justifications, but do these really come from reason simply seeking the truth? Converting our habits is difficult; justifying them to ourselves by believing a lie is easy.

It also highlights the need for a positive vision of conversion. When climate change seems to mainly demand a long list of moralizing changes to my behavior, there is little joy offered in accepting it. All too often environmentalism can fall into a dreary misanthropy: the world was great until humans ruined it (parodying John the Baptist, the antinatalist could say that the environment will not increase until we decrease). Perhaps presenting a positive vision of living sustainably, using and benefiting from our earth responsibly, would be more attractive. Likewise, if we conceive of Christianity mostly in terms of what we must turn away from, rather than the One we need to be turned towards, we will not have the strength to carry it out. But with Jesus before our eyes, drawing us to himself and from our sins by his grace, we will long to be ever more converted to him until he comes again.

AVB: It can be difficult to make the jump from a vague sort of fear, whether of climate change, AI, or zombies, to a more specific conversion of life. As you argue, this is obvious for the Christian, but I don't think it's absent among our contemporaries. I find it interesting that even in secular or pagan contexts, an apocalyptic worldview tends to influence action, or at least to suggest a desired action.

Many Norse myths, for example, praise the courage of the hero who goes out to defend his people, even though eventually the whole world will be destroyed anyway. For them, it seems that an apocalyptic worldview tends to highlight the good things that society does have.

Today's apocalypses are more directly oriented to action, as we've been discussing. Caring for the environment is something that we can take concrete steps to achieve. Depopulation—a real society-endangering problem in many places—is a course of action that society can chose, and also one that we can choose to end. Even the more fanciful case of the zombie apocalypse gives the ordinary man a chance to imagine how he could be a mythical hero, that is, how an apocalypse could really change how he acts.

Perhaps this sort of broader worldview is what we're looking for. I think we all know the challenge that you speak of—the conflict of conscience and act where intellect and will are misaligned—and likewise we all experience this as a kind of suffering. Even in non-world-ending matters, like losing weight or being more productive at work, we are constantly frustrated by our inability to really do the good that we know. It seems that really taking to heart an apocalyptic worldview can help us to understand the things of this world in their proper order, and in so doing we find ourselves better able to act. If I'm a father and a horde of zombies is attacking my house, I'm not going to sit on the couch eating chips, but I'm going to grab some kind of weapon and try to fend them off long enough for my family to escape. The proximity of the threat, its realness, helps spur us to action.

IR: The point you bring up about how something like the zombie apocalypse invites us to consider how we would react to an apocalyptic event is interesting. Many apocalyptic stories examine how different characters fare under extreme conditions, when their true character emerges. Think of the humble heroism of Sam

Gamgee in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, contrasted with Dr. Mann's willingness to lie and murder to avoid death in *Interstellar*. Tolkien uses the Hobbits in a particular way to invite readers into the narrative; like the reader, the Hobbits are accustomed to comfort, but they are thrust into a dangerous and heroic world.

There are positives and negatives to the way we can imagine ourselves in apocalyptic situations. On the one hand, these forms of literature can inspire us to strive after the heroic virtues exemplified by the characters. On the other hand, by running through how we would react to situations we've never faced, it's easy to gain a baseless inflation of our own self-image, kind of like the fan on the sidelines who is sure that he would have caught that pass. There can be a kind of presumption of virtue in a pinch.

I suspect this is part of what is behind our Lord's instruction, "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mk 13:11). We ought to be prepared for martyrdom, and being inspired by the stories of the ancient martyrs as well as persecuted Christians today can be helpful towards this, but imagining the great virtues we would demonstrate and the eloquent speeches we would give under the ultimate test is apt to lead us astray.

AVB: I agree that we have to be careful about using apocalyptic fears to inspire virtue. Besides the issue of presumption which you point out, there's the opposite problem of a paralysing fear that prevents action. It's also necessary that the end of the world feel real enough to inspire our will to action. With respect to the first, I think your point about focusing on good things to be achieved over evils to be avoided helps to ward off paralysing fear. Fear is directed against some perceived evil, which in the case of the end of the world, as you say, is often the loss of a good thing that we value. We can therefore encourage our contemporaries to focus

on the good things of the world, while simultaneously trying to distinguish between passing goods and those that last, or those that are worth dying for. In an age clouded by many, many different goods, having an apocalyptic worldview can help us remember what's really important.

Second, as I've been arguing, I think that our experiences of life naturally incline us to recognize the passing nature of the world. Admittedly, it's easy to have this instinct buried under the barrage of pleasures that modern society offers us, but I think the multiplicity of modern apocalyptic fears indicates that this hasn't happened, at least not entirely.

Of course, this isn't to say that we can move directly from an apocalyptic sense to faith in Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate Good that our knowledge of the end of the world ought to help us love, but we can only know and love him by grace. Nonetheless, I think that being sensitive to the passing nature of things and the eventual end of the world can help make us more sensitive to the movements of grace in our lives.

IR: Indeed, in apocalyptic fears we see the great value we rightly and naturally place in preserving our passing earthly lives, but also how even this great good pales in comparison to the eternal life we are offered in Christ. Ultimately, the Christian way of preparing for the end is radically different from a zombie apocalypse plan, which aims only to preserve natural life. It does not consist in a procedure for escaping a coming persecution from the far-left or the far-right, from ISIS or old age—for who knows how our final test will come about—but rather of clinging ever more to Christ, for only his grace and his gift of final perseverance can see us through. It is comforting that we have the prayers of his mother "now," when we can begin to act well and form our character in the virtues, "and at the hour of our death" when we will most need the grace of final perseverance to remain steadfastly united to him.

AVB: We might say that the New Testament is the greatest piece of apocalyptic literature. Not only does it vividly describe the end times, but it tells us how to prepare for them. What's more, it insists that the end is imminent, that we're living in the final age of the world. Its advice is somewhat counterintuitive, but so is its image of the end: there's the fire and chaos, but what results is not dust or void but a brilliant new creation. One gets the sense that the world we can see is transient and unstable, not because of human carelessness or uncontrollable chaos, but because the kingdom of God is breaking into our everyday reality. It's this apocalyptic closeness of God that challenges us to give the fading things of this world their proper importance and no more, which requires conversion of hearts and actions. This is an apocalypse which we cannot stop, and for which we ought to have a healthy, loving fear—but we can simultaneously look forward to it with hope, a hope rooted in the divine Master of the apocalypse, Jesus Christ.

Br. Isidore Rice entered the Order of Preachers in 2015. He is a graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, where he studied materials science and engineering.

Br. Anthony VanBerkum entered the Order of Preachers in 2013. He is a graduate of Stanford University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in physics.