



edited by
STEFAN SKRIMSHIRE

Offprint of the Foreword
by Alastair McIntosh, pp. vii-xi
London: Continuum, 2010, £19.99

FUTURE CLIMATE CHANGE AND
APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION
ETHICS

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FOREWORD

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

By placing a notion like ‘apocalypse’ back on the table, anthropogenic global warming exposes a very old fault line in scholarship. Ever since Aristotle, academe has evolved mostly in a departmentalized, disciplinary direction. But the earliest philosophers had a penchant not just for the rational, but also for the mythopoetic. They were able to be more at ease employing meta-constructs to make sense of their observations.

For example, both Plato’s *Critias* and *The Laws* interweave accounts of prehistoric Greek climate change or natural disasters with a mythology that sets them in a socially instructive context. Put briefly, Plato’s message was that hubris in human affairs eventually meets its nemesis in ecocide. But modern academia runs more in the footsteps of Aristotle than as footnotes to Plato. We are more hamstrung, because our disciplinary specialization furnishes fruitful attention to detail, but often at the expense of the wider grounding necessary to develop a generalist overview. Our strengths are many, but their downside is to be tripped up by a limited capacity to discern ‘meaning’ and to translate this into policy that shapes how we collectively live.

Because climate change is such a multi-faceted and far-reaching phenomenon this shortcoming is becoming more and more apparent. The science both derives from and has implications for the human condition. Potentially these are very severe. The otherwise quaintly melodramatic term, ‘apocalypse’, has therefore pushed its way back into informed discourse. For example, a researcher whose normal comfort zone is, say, atmospheric modelling, or the latitude of an electorate to countenance social change, may suddenly find their work casts them into the perceived or actual role of a latter-day apocalyptic prophet. Having been trained to pursue tightly defined constructs,

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they now have to field balls of a meta-constructual nature with implications that may overstep their reach – especially when spun by the media.

The position that climate change places scholars in can therefore be likened to a group of specialized doctors investigating a sickness that permeates the patient's body. One tests the liver. Another wires up the heart. A third probes this or that structure in the brain and, on finding nothing obvious, wonders if the whole hoo-hah might just be a delusion. But the actual cause of the problem is bigger than any of these parts. It runs in the blood. It underpins the functioning of everything else because it is the very 'oil' that lubricates and energizes the engine of our society.

But nobody really wants to look at that. Everybody knows that the haematologist, notwithstanding his sweet-talk of a painless green new deal transition, is an old-fashioned blood-letter. The body of the rich world has got used to running on a full eight pints of blood. The blood-letter's remedy would have that reduced to just one pint; or perhaps two if the patient is well blessed with fossil fuel alternatives.

Quite apart from the question of electoral will, we also have to ask whether cuts in greenhouse gas emissions of 80 percent or 90 percent for the rich world are even do-able. We have only become a planet of nearly seven billion people, half of us urban, because oil or other fossil fuels lubricate a globalized trading system that interlocks rich and poor alike. Oil helps to produce, transport and process increasingly vast quantities of 'stuff' from distant hinterlands. The system only stacks up thanks to the competitive economics of comparative advantage that degrades biodiversity and mines natural capital. But to cut away radically at this would entail questioning the very basis by which social cohesion at such a high population level is sustained. Many of us have, of course, been advocating precisely such questioning for years, and exploring alternative patterns and examples in our own lives. But now that the carbon crunch is hitting mainstream consciousness, those politicians who seek re-election know that they must be very careful about how to act upon the urgency with which scientific advice indicates cold turkey.

The global financial crisis of 2008 has raised awareness that only so much sudden braking of the economic system can be

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sustained without apocalyptically compounding injury. Had bankers' lines of credit frozen up, as they very nearly did, our globally interlinked just-in-time food supply system would have gridlocked. Panic buying would have completed the chaos. Social unrest and resultant national emergency are only days away because we've lost the resilience that local sourcing of much of our food and energy gave us until the post-World War II years.

The political fear of throwing our growth-predicated world economy into reverse must partly account for the failure of the United Nations Climate Change Conference of December 2009 in Copenhagen. The question is how to accept a modicum of pain today . . . not even for jam tomorrow . . . but so that future generations might simply live in decency. As this book's introductory chapter surmises: 'How do we create the means to empathise with people we may never meet, in a future we may never inhabit?' The rich have never before done this for the poor. So why should they act for the far away and the mostly as-yet unborn, unless the water's already lapping at their own castle walls? In which case tipping point scenarios suggest it would be too late. What the 'rich' have to understand is that, this time, we're all in it together. Addictive consumerism is the cutting edge driver of climate change and we can run from such reality, but never run away – because we've only got one planet. As The Eagles put it in 'Hotel California', that iconic rock ballad from 1976 in which west coast America becomes a metaphor for the wider world, "'Relax' said the night man, 'We are programmed to receive' / 'You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.'"

And so, assuming that the consensus science is broadly right, the slow apocalypse of the world rolls on. This is what today draws 'apocalypse' from out of its Biblical backwater and gives this volume such pertinence. But as several of the contributors here point out, apocalypse is more than just the doom and gloom of millenarian end times. Etymologically the Greek *apokalyptein* has its roots in *apo-* 'from', and *kalyptein*, 'to cover or conceal'. Apocalypse is therefore an uncovering, a *revelation*. The word has a technical usage that implies a transformation, perhaps in consciousness, by which an existing corrupt socio-ecological order is turned upside down by the astonishing irruption of new hope.

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The classical articulation of this and one that has historically shaped imagination in the West is the Biblical Apocalypse, or Revelation, of St John of Patmos. Here 'Babylon' stands metaphorically for the violent imperial order of Rome, which is overthrown by the transformative meekness (which is not the same as weakness) of the 'lamb' of God. Another example is with Mary near the start of Luke's gospel. This celebrates the divine upheaval of worldly powers in her 'magnificat' or song: 'He has brought down the mighty from their thrones / And lifted up the lowly. / He has filled the hungry with good things, / And sent the rich away with empty hands.'

Irrespective of whether we see such cultural resonances as an enhancement or an encumbrance to modern understanding, apocalyptic scenarios of climate change present us with a choice. We can either do nothing; and risk sliding into barbarism from our lack of preparedness and resilience. For example, the rich world might act as if it can simply pull up the drawbridge as the suffering kicks in. Alternatively, we can look for revelation in the signs of the times. We might do all we can to mitigate the causes of global warming, but also view what is happening as an incredible opportunity to evolve culturally in what it means to be human beings, growing in decency and dignity to help one another and other species to adapt better to come-what-may in the come-to-pass.

One way chooses death; the other, life. And that is the challenge of our times, because the political, economic and technological responses to climate change will not be enough on their own. We also need a change of heart: a shift from seeking fulfilment primarily from the things of outer quantitative consumption, and a move to the more qualitative realms of empathy in relationships, elemental connections to nature, depth of community, sensitivity to beauty and a deepening of the inner life.

Like a persistent wind, climate change tugs at how we think about the world, how we relate to it and how we can envisage the future. That is why the 'apocalyptic imagination' of this book's subtitle has become so powerfully activated in popular consciousness. At such a juncture we are taken beyond the realm of cognition. The unconscious also wells up . . . filling out our movie screens and the nightmares of our children who are locked

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in a destiny not of their own election . . . calling us to nothing less than the further reaches of human nature.

This is a book that, at last, begins to face the ecological crisis at the scholarly depth that intimations of apocalypse command. Yes, for some it may upset the epistemic innards. But for too long the mainstream Academy has wallowed in philosophical torpor. Now is the time for scholarship to realign itself; to bridge the epistemological divide between detail and context, the sciences and the humanities, Aristotle and Plato, so as to recover a richness we have neglected.

Perhaps, too, we might ask ourselves a touchstone question: does our work ultimately serve the poor or the broken in nature?; because this is about values, and how to act on them. Climate change is our wake-up call to get real.

