

## CHAPTER 4

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# AVERTIVE APOCALYPTICISM

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APOCALYPTIC and millennial worldviews generally assert that earthly destruction and worldly renewal are foreordained and determined by superhuman forces beyond human control. Whether worldly catastrophe and collective salvation are brought about by otherworldly beings or human beings acting in accordance with divine or superhuman mandates, the idea of an inevitable and unalterable plan is central to much apocalyptic and millennial thought. However, in some instances, apocalyptic and millennial beliefs and discourses may include ideas about averting or postponing impending apocalyptic scenarios. The concept of *avertive apocalypticism* describes a wide range of beliefs that predict imminent worldly destruction, but also maintain that apocalypse may be averted or forestalled if believers engage in specific spiritual or ritual actions. Such practices are not only believed to prevent worldly catastrophe, but often are regarded as redemptive actions that will create collective or worldly salvation. When such ideas have both averting and redemptive aspects, they may be considered an expression of *avertive millennialism*.<sup>1</sup>

Some averting apocalyptic beliefs share features with progressive millennialism in the assertion that collective salvation and a golden age will be brought about gradually by human beings acting in cooperation with a divine authority or superhuman plan that will transform the world (Wessinger 1997, 50; Wessinger 2000a, 16–17; chapter 3 by W. Michael Ashcraft, this volume). Averting apocalyptic ideas also often express catastrophic millennial ideas about the imminence of worldly destruction and may similarly reflect a corresponding pessimistic view of humanity as evil and corrupt (Wessinger 1997, 48–50; Wessinger 2000a, 16–18; chapter 2 by Eugene V. Gallagher, this volume). Yet unlike in catastrophic millennialism, in averting apocalyptic thought the destruction of the current world is not entirely predetermined, nor is the world viewed as fatally flawed and

unredeemable by human effort. Instead, worldly cataclysm is regarded as conditional and preventable by the efforts of human beings, whether they are acting in accordance with divine mandates, obeying the decrees of prophets, fulfilling a supernatural plan, or embracing a diversity of beliefs to prevent cataclysms or “heal the earth” through collective spiritual endeavors. Although this chapter focuses on selected contemporary expressions of spiritual avertive beliefs and practices, such ideas have been expressed historically and cross-culturally, and recent secular strategies for preventing worldly destruction are relevant as well, such as those within the environmentalist movement (see chapter 32 by Robin Globus and Bron Taylor, this volume).

Varying expressions of avertive beliefs have been associated with apocalyptic apparitions of the Virgin Mary, new religious movements such as the Church Universal and Triumphant, various UFO religions, some Native American prophecies and indigenous earth-healing practices, and specific New Age and Wiccan beliefs, among others. The vernacular practice of avertive apocalypticism as lived religion is expressed in diverse ways: prayers or decrees, collective repentance, affirmations of true faith, rejection of sin and evil, a nativistic return to previous traditions, healing and energy ceremonies at sacred sites, the use of magical or apotropaic practices and objects, ritualistic cleansing and sometimes violent acts of purification, penance and sacrifice, and other forms of devotion and spiritual action. The methods for avoiding impending apocalyptic destruction are usually communicated by prophets, visionaries, channelers, or charismatic leaders who serve as intermediaries between humanity and otherworldly beings or forces. In some instances, however, no prophet is required, as in the case of nonhierarchical healing circles and New Age groups that believe egalitarian collective prayer may prevent or mitigate environmental destruction, the use of nuclear weapons, and other potential catastrophes.

Although most avertive prophecies and practices are intentionally “pre-apocalyptic” and performed to prevent imminent catastrophes or diminish the extent of the impending destruction, avertive ideas also have been embraced when specific prophecies fail, as after-the-fact explanations for a non-apocalypse. In these instances, prophets and members of millennial groups sometimes have attributed the failure of apocalyptic prophecies (see chapter 8 by Lorne L. Dawson, this volume) to the avertive and redemptive powers of the spiritual activities and faith of group members or leaders. Failed apocalyptic predictions, avertive explanations, and millennial yearnings for a perfect world may result in a shift in emphasis among believers over time between catastrophic, avertive, and progressive millennial beliefs, or varying combinations of such ideas, as exemplified by the Church Universal and Triumphant. Avertive apocalypticism, as a recently proposed exploratory category, offers insights into the dynamics of apocalyptic thought and prophecy traditions; the features of fatalistic and avertist belief systems; ideas about divine determinism, human agency, and free will; and current fears, hopes, and visions for the future.

## FATALISM AND AVERTIVE APOCALYPTICISM

Before analyzing the attributes and variability of avertive apocalyptic beliefs, it is useful to describe the features of the more pervasive non-avertive beliefs about an imminent worldly catastrophe that cannot be prevented. Non-avertive apocalypticism, also referred to as unconditional apocalypticism (Wojcik 1997, 209–10), is characterized by an inherent fatalism, the belief that certain events and experiences are inevitable, unalterable, and determined by external forces beyond human control. The term *fatalism* is not used here in a pejorative sense, but considered to be an enduring and widespread means of interpreting experiences and understanding the world. The word *apocalypse* (from the Greek, *apokalypsis*) means “revelation” or “unveiling,” and this sense of a revealed and underlying design for history has traditionally characterized apocalyptic thought and resembles ancient notions of fate as an absolute force in the universe that determines all things. As historian Bernard McGinn observes, apocalyptic ideas from various religious traditions and historical periods exhibit “a sense of the unity and structure of history conceived as a divinely predetermined totality” (1979, 10). In addition to the idea that history is predetermined, non-avertive apocalyptic thinking maintains that the world is irredeemable by human effort and its cataclysmic destruction is necessary for earthly redemption and collective salvation.

By proclaiming that history and worldly renewal are part of a preordained plan, such apocalyptic narratives and beliefs affirm that the cosmos is ordered, evil and suffering ultimately will be destroyed, human existence is meaningful, and a millennial realm of peace and justice will be created. These deterministic apocalyptic traditions present the story of human existence as coherent and deliberately designed from beginning to end, punctuated by dramatic, preordained events and characterized by an ongoing battle between good and evil. Apocalypticism, as a fatalistic mode of thought, offers privileged explanations that unveil the otherwise obscure meanings behind events and experiences, reassuring believers that current crises and social evils are part of an Endtime scenario that is moral and orchestrated by God or superhuman forces. Faith and fatalism are thus interwoven into the fabric of apocalyptic thought: a profound fatalism regarding a world believed to be inevitably doomed is entwined with the faith in a predestined, perfect age of harmony and human fulfillment for the elect.

Today, non-avertive beliefs concerning inevitable apocalypse and millennial salvation are integral to the worldviews of many evangelical Christians, such as members of the Southern Baptist Convention and various Pentecostal and charismatic denominations, including the Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, and thousands of independent evangelical “Bible churches.” The most popular form of prophecy among evangelical Christians, premillennial Dispensationalism, exemplifies non-avertive catastrophic millennial thinking (see chapter 25 by Jon R. Stone and chapter 26 by Glenn W. Shuck, both in this volume). Dispensationalists hold that human beings are incapable of preventing cataclysmic worldly destruction.

Attempts to prevent worldly destruction through social action or the promotion of peace in the Middle East are not only considered to be hopeless but often interpreted as heresy—a direct refutation and denial of God’s plan for humanity (Halsell 1986, 16). A comparable sense of fatefulness is expressed in the prophecies and non-avertive beliefs about inevitable worldly cataclysm embraced by numerous other catastrophic millennial groups and movements, including the Millerites, Heaven’s Gate, Aum Shinrikyō, Native American Ghost Dance movements, and some radical environmentalists who proclaim that societal destruction is necessary and inevitable, part of an unalterable design for the renewal of the world.

Avertive apocalyptic ideas might appear to be clearly distinguishable from non-avertive apocalyptic and millennial belief systems and characterized by an overt emphasis on human agency, free will, and a nonfatalistic view of an apocalypse that can be avoided through human action. However, avertive apocalyptic beliefs frequently contend that impending worldly destruction may be prevented only if human beings behave in ways prescribed by a superhuman power. Such beliefs assert that humanity cannot prevent imminent worldly destruction entirely through its own efforts but that human beings may avoid or forestall worldly catastrophes if they act in accordance with divine will, prophetic pronouncements, or a cosmic plan. This view is illustrated, for example, by certain beliefs about Marian apparitions, messages from extraterrestrial beings, prophecies delivered by leaders of new religious movements, and some Native American prophecies that foretell of a period of chastisement and warn that the end of the world is near. But these messages and prophecies declare that human beings may postpone or avert the day of doom if they change their behavior, heed the warnings, and act in accordance with a divine plan or spiritual principles. In these scenarios, human beings may prevent worldly destruction only when they follow God’s decrees or those of a superhuman authority, and apocalyptic destruction will occur only as a consequence of humanity’s destructive or evil behavior that violates divine or cosmic laws.

There also are other, less deterministic expressions of avertive apocalypticism that do not depend on divine mandates or rely on the all-powerful guidance and cosmic plan of deities or supernatural agencies. Instead, human beings, in response to perceived imminent catastrophes, attempt to avert apocalypse through their own collective efforts. Sometimes these efforts are inspired by spiritual principles, sometimes individuals combine spiritual and scientific knowledge in attempts to prevent the end of the world, and in other instances spirituality is left out of the equation completely in secular efforts to save the planet. Such beliefs are not overtly fatalistic if the future is not believed to be determined and the warnings of imminent catastrophes do not reveal a divine plan or supernatural mandate for salvation. For example, in the book *The Fate of the Earth* (1982), Jonathan Schell speculates about the devastating effects of large-scale nuclear war, an event that he argues would end civilization. But Schell states that human action may lead to nuclear disarmament and thus prevent a nuclear apocalypse. The predictions of potential disasters described in books such as *Silent Spring* (Carson 2002/1962), *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich 1968), *Overshoot* (Catton 1982), *The End of Nature* (McKibben 1989), and

the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore 2006) similarly forewarn of worldly cataclysms, yet these possible catastrophes are not regarded as inevitable or unalterable, but presented with the hope of alerting and motivating people to activist attempts to avert disasters.

## AVERTIVE APOCALYPTICISM AND SUPERHUMAN GUIDANCE

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### Apparitions of the Virgin Mary

Avertive apocalyptic ideas pervade popular beliefs and prophecies associated with Catholic visions of the Virgin Mary that foretell of imminent worldly chastisement as part of a divine plan unfolding in the last days. In her role as intercessor, the Virgin Mary intervenes through these apparitions to save humanity from approaching cataclysms. Avertive messages have been delivered at numerous Marian apparition sites, including Fatima, Portugal; Garabandal, Spain; San Damiano, Italy; Akita, Japan; Kibeho, Rwanda; Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Conyers, Georgia; Oliveto Citra, Italy; and Bayside, New York, among others. These prophecies and associated beliefs are expressions of Catholic folk tradition, originating apart from the approval of the institutional Roman Catholic Church. In these apparitions, the Virgin Mary warns of disasters to be unleashed because people are so sinful and have rejected God, but offers the hope that these catastrophes may be forestalled if human beings behave in ways ordained by God.

This form of avertive belief is exemplified by the Marian apparitions associated with Veronica Lueken (1923–95) and the Bayside movement (*Our Lady of the Roses*) in Queens, New York City (see also chapter 2 by Eugene V. Gallagher, this volume). For more than twenty years, until her death, Lueken communicated Endtime prophecies from the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and numerous saints. The Bayside apparitions address a litany of subjects, but the most prominent topics are the evils of contemporary society, corruption within the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican itself, the urgent need for worldwide atonement, and especially the approach of an apocalyptic scenario. The apparitions assert that “a worldwide Warning, Miracle, and fiery Chastisement in the form of a ‘Ball of Redemption’—a comet which will strike the earth, and along with World War III and other disasters, will remove three-quarters of mankind—are very near at hand” (*Our Lady of the Roses* n.d., i). The coming worldwide cataclysm, or what Baysiders refer to as the “Great Chastisement,” may be averted through personal penance, prayer (especially praying the rosary), and a return to traditional Catholic faith. The Bayside apparitions thus manifest certain aspects of catastrophic millennialism while expressing avertive apocalyptic beliefs as well.

The imminence of worldly annihilation is a predominant theme in the Bayside messages, but other disasters are emphasized as well, such as earthquakes, drought, famine, starvation, epidemics, hurricanes, and terrorist attacks, all of which are regarded as punishments from God because of the increasing evil in the world. While the Bayside apparitions have certain idiosyncratic elements, they also have clear antecedents in previous Marian prophecies, particularly the apparitions at Fatima in 1917 and the ecclesiastically unsanctioned visions at Necedah, Wisconsin (during the 1950s), San Sebastian de Garabandal, Spain (1960–65), and San Damiano, Italy (1964–81). The Bayside apparitions epitomize the apocalyptic and conspiratorial aspects of this modern Marian folk belief system, with Mary appearing in the roles of intercessor and nurturing mother, intervening on behalf of her children to rescue them from the apocalyptic punishments of an angry God (Cuneo 1997, 152–77; Wojcik 1997, 60–96). According to the Bayside apparitions, as humanity becomes increasingly sinful and violent, God will repay human violence with apocalyptic violence unless people change their behavior.

The Bayside prophecies express the view that human history is unfolding according to a divine Endtime plan, but the messages also proclaim that human beings may prevent the day of doom if they act in accordance with God's will and if God permits that the world not be destroyed. Although apocalyptic destruction is imminent, it may be forestalled if human beings behave in ways prescribed by God. In this scenario, human will is effectual in averting worldly destruction only when it corresponds to God's decrees. Popular Catholic prophecy belief, because of the emphasis on the personal relationship between the saints in heaven and the faithful on Earth (the doctrine of the communion of saints), appears less overtly fatalistic than those forms of apocalypticism which assert that history is predetermined and apocalypse is inevitable and unalterable by human effort. In comparison, Protestant premillennial Dispensationalists interpret the signs of the Endtime as noncausal markers on a foreordained timetable of irreversible doom; the messages of Lueken and other Catholic visionaries contend that apocalyptic destruction is imminent but that the divine timetable may be postponed if people repent and return to God's ways. The apocalypse predicted by Lueken will occur at a specific historical moment, not because it is preordained to occur at that time, but because of God's anger at humanity's increasing sinfulness. In this view, the Virgin Mary can petition God and intercede on behalf of the faithful, and Baysiders, like many other Catholics, believe that through Mary the destiny of the world may be altered. But the Bayside prophecies reiterate that if worldly sin reaches a specific anti-Christian critical mass, Mary's merciful pleas will be powerless to hold back the punishing hand of God.

In contrast to the apocalyptic anger of God in these apparitions, the tone of the Virgin Mary is that of concern and love for humanity gone astray, and the hope that destruction can be averted and humanity redeemed. Lueken's prophecies fluctuate between visions of devastation, with Mary depicted as a warrior deity who will lead the battle against Satan and ultimately crush him beneath her heel, and Mary as compassionate mother, pleading with her children to prevent the prophesied catastrophes through repentance, prayer, and conversion. Ultimately her avertive



protection is contingent upon human beings' following divine mandates and returning to pre-Vatican II Catholic doctrines and specific ritual actions.

## UFO Religions

The variable nature of avertive apocalypticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is exemplified by UFO religious movements, which are a synthesis of earlier mythologies, religious traditions, occult teachings, scientific discourse, and ideas inspired by science fiction literature and popular films. For more than fifty years, beliefs about UFOs have been characterized by expectations of imminent worldly destruction and the belief that extraterrestrial beings will rescue human beings from catastrophe or help humanity transform the world and usher in a new age of peace and enlightenment (see also chapter 30 by Robert Pearson Flaherty, this volume). These UFO beliefs have concerns in common with both catastrophic and progressive millennial traditions and express similar yearnings for collective salvation and earthly transformation by otherworldly beings. A recurring belief is that human beings are flawed and that the world is in a state of crisis and in need of extraterrestrial guidance in the face of impending cataclysms. Although some UFO groups have embraced a theology of inevitable apocalypse and planetary escape (e.g., Heaven's Gate), a number of other groups warn that worldly catastrophe is imminent, but emphasize that complete annihilation may be prevented if people follow the directives of space entities. Like the apocalyptic warnings delivered by the Virgin Mary at various apparition sites, the avertive beliefs associated with UFOs maintain that if people change their behavior as prescribed by otherworldly beings—put an end to violence, save the environment, become spiritually attuned, or work for the transformation of planetary consciousness—the world may be saved.

This view is expressed by the Aetherius Society, one of the best-known and longest-lived UFO contactee groups, which has asserted since 1955 that imminent disasters may be averted through prayer and other spiritual practices. Based in Los Angeles, the society was founded by George King (1919–97), originally from England, who stated that he was selected as the primary channel for extraterrestrial messages transmitted from a space being named Aetherius. King said that in 1954 he was contacted telepathically by numerous Cosmic Intelligences orbiting Earth and given messages concerning the salvation of the world. According to King, imminent worldly destruction may be avoided if the dangers of atomic weapons are acknowledged and humans resort to prayer and the promotion of the metaphysical teachings of the Cosmic Masters (including Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Krishna, and Mars Sector 6).

Members of the Aetherius Society use Spiritual Energy Batteries that harness and amplify their prayers for world salvation; this Prayer Power, a form of psychic healing energy, is then discharged periodically to avert potential planetary catastrophes, such as the outbreak of war, hurricanes and other natural disasters, and a dangerous warp in the Earth's magnetic field produced by atomic experiments (Curran 1985, 63; Smith 2003, 93–99). The various prayers, rituals, and spiritual

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Operations performed by the Aetherians are intended to promote planetary healing, alleviate human suffering, and prevent the destruction of humanity. Like the Baysiders, the Aetherians believe in the power of prayer and ritual to forestall or avert disaster, and the Aetherians claim that their prayers, amplified by the spiritual technology provided by the Cosmic Masters, are responsible for the end of the Cold War and for preventing various disasters such as a predicted earthquake that would have submerged California in the Pacific Ocean (Curran 1985, 63–69).

In addition to the threat of earthly cataclysms, King declared that a constant threat of invasion by evil space beings exists and that the Aetherians and Cosmic Masters have fended off these nefarious invaders on various occasions (Saliba 1995, 36). In other messages, the Masters have promised that the Aetherians will be warned if the apocalypse is about to occur, so they may gather at certain sacred, spiritually charged mountains to await rescue from above. The goal of the society, however, is to prevent worldly annihilation, save every soul on the planet, and transform planetary consciousness. In this respect, the members of the Aetherius Society manifest avertive, catastrophic, and progressive millennial ideas to varying degrees in their belief system.

Often within UFO religious movements, avertive apocalyptic strategies are presented, yet the tone of such messages expresses little hope that humanity will make the changes necessary to save the planet. If apocalyptic destruction does occur, believers are promised that a select few of the chosen ones will escape the destruction by means of planetary evacuation. One of the better-known groups that embraces this view is the Guardian Action International organization, which is centered around the channeled messages of Ashtar, who is said to be the commander of thousands of space ships referred to as the Ashtar Command that will descend prior to worldly catastrophe. Beaming his messages to contactees from a colossal starship, Commander Ashtar predicts enormous natural disasters, shifting land plates, nuclear cataclysm, and numerous other crises in the near future and warns that “such an event cannot be postponed much longer. Your planet’s vibrations are very, very negative” (Beckley 1980, 27). Although warning of imminent destruction, Ashtar and his cosmic colleagues hold out the hope that human beings will change their ways:

There is a chance this can all be averted, but with each passing day, the chance gets less and less. If mankind could change the way it lives, if mankind were to put down its arms, then it could be averted. However, there is no sign that this will happen. . . . We will do what we can. Tell those who believe, tell those who are righteous, that we are here, that we are watching over them, that we are praying for their safety. (Beckley 1980, 29)

While this and other communications from the Ashtar Command call for worldly transformation, the messages repeatedly imply that humanity mostly likely will not heed the warnings and thus will have to pay the “karmic consequences” for its destructive behavior. Even though catastrophe is imminent, believers are reassured that benevolent beings are watching over them and will rescue the chosen ones.

Like the apocalyptic predictions of seers of the Virgin Mary and previous prophets, the avertive beliefs communicated by George King and the Ashtar Command and various other UFO visionaries express the view that humanity teeters on destruction, but through the guidance of otherworldly beings, collective salvation is possible. In these avertive systems of belief, doomsday may be prevented, but only if human beings act in ways prescribed by superhuman entities. As noted, the degree of belief and confidence in the fulfillment of avertive strategies is variable, and avertive, catastrophic, and progressive millennial ideas are embraced by such groups to varying degrees. While some UFO groups seem to hold out real hope for avoiding apocalyptic destruction and may engage in ritual and spiritual actions to prevent catastrophes, other groups are much less optimistic about the ability of human beings and societal institutions to change their destructive ways and avert the End.

### The New Age Movement and Earth-Healing Beliefs

Like UFO religions, the avertive and millennial ideas associated with the New Age movement demonstrate the ways that eschatological beliefs exist as an eclectic form of alternative spirituality apart from institutional religions (see also chapter 29 by Phillip Charles Lucas, this volume). New Age notions about averting catastrophes and transforming the world range from beliefs about cataclysmic Earth changes to ideas concerning a gradual shift in global consciousness and spirituality that will lead to a golden age. New Age beliefs usually offer a kinder and gentler approach to apocalypse and tend to emphasize shifts in global consciousness rather than inevitable cataclysmic destruction. Such beliefs often promote a progressive millennial view that involves the gradual evolution into a new age of harmony and peace brought about by human effort and new forms of spirituality. Although catastrophic millennial beliefs do exist in some New Age communities and among those who identify with the New Age movement, a more prevalent attitude is that human beings can prevent worldly cataclysm and create a better world through spiritual action.

The mixture of avertive and millennial New Age beliefs is epitomized by the Harmonic Convergence, which was organized around a cross-cultural mélange of prophecy traditions, the cycles of the Aztec and Mayan Calendars, and the configuration of the planets in the solar system. Promoted by author José Argüelles (b. 1939), tens of thousands of people participated in the event throughout the world on 16–17 August 1987, dates interpreted as a critical juncture in the history of humanity, a liminal period of dangerous transition that would determine the future destruction or salvation of the planet (Argüelles 1987). According to Argüelles, the ancient Mayans were cosmic visionaries who left a “galactic calling card” in the form of coded messages in the Mayan calendar that reveal how human beings may transform themselves and join the Galactic Federation in the year 2012.

The Harmonic Convergence was organized to avert humanity’s descent into a “negative cycle” of worldly destruction, which could be prevented only if 144,000 people or more gathered at sacred places across the planet to restore Earth’s solar

and cosmic resonance. Over the weekend of 16–17 August 1987 individuals gathered at sacred sites such as Stonehenge, the Great Pyramid, Machu Picchu, and Mount Shasta, where they chanted, meditated, and engaged in various ceremonies to avert catastrophe, spiritually transform the planet, and create a trusting relationship with extraterrestrial and cosmic powers. Through such spiritual actions, it was believed that the efforts of human beings not only prevented apocalyptic destruction but also activated the return of the spirit of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl and all of the gods and goddesses and heroes and heroines that have ever existed in the human imagination (Argüelles 1987, 170). The archetypal divine energy of these beings was to be reborn in the hearts of all people on 16–17 August 1987, instilling a new global consciousness, resulting in a world in which human beings live in harmony with each other and the environment. Organizers and participants of the Harmonic Convergence emphasized that their spiritual efforts during the two-day event not only saved the world from destruction but also allowed humanity to pursue its evolutionary cosmic destiny in establishing a New Age. Avertive and progressive millennial ideas were completely connected in the beliefs and practices associated with the Harmonic Convergence, with human beings not only preventing worldly catastrophe but also ushering in a new era as they acted in harmony with a cosmic plan for salvation.

In this and other New Age progressive millennial traditions, it is asserted that all of humanity, not just a select few, may achieve a terrestrial paradise. In contrast to catastrophic millennial worldviews, characterized by a pessimistic and tragic view of the world as irredeemably evil, New Age millennialism often regards evil as conquerable by humans with help from spiritual beings or through the enactment of spiritual teachings. Although New Age ideas may have decreased in recent years, many people still believe that a perfect age is attainable through the incremental improvement of the world, an idea that has its secular equivalent in the notion of a utopia achieved through progress and human effort. Unlike apocalyptic belief systems that emphasize salvation for the righteous and the destruction of the evil “others,” avertist and millennial beliefs within the New Age movement tend to be less dualistic and more accepting of humanity in an inclusive millennial embrace.

In some instances, those who are involved in New Age communities may reject the idea of apocalyptic destruction completely: even though they may feel worldly catastrophes are imminent, they may avoid discussing the idea of apocalypse, expressing the belief that by thinking about it, one “gives energy to the thought of apocalypse” that might then produce or manifest catastrophic destruction in the material world (Amick-Elder 2009). Instead, some individuals consciously attempt to embrace only positive and world-affirming beliefs, with no apocalyptic thoughts permitted. Such ideas might not seem to be explicitly avertive, yet they resemble traditional avoidance beliefs and taboos that prohibit mention of dangerous and forbidden things, deities, people, or acts. In this regard, the avoidance of thoughts about apocalyptic destruction and the attempt to manifest the “power of positive thinking” to create a better world is an implicit form of preventive magic and avertive apotropaic belief.

By contrast, other individuals may attempt to prevent apocalyptic events by participating in healing circles involving prayers, meditation, and rituals in the belief that their spiritual energies may be directed to avert potential disasters, heal the Earth, or preserve life on the planet; these healing groups may meet in person, or in virtual reality, with people participating in Internet chat rooms and sending their prayers and energies while online. For example, in 2008, with the activation of Large Hadron Collider (the world's most powerful energy particle accelerator), there were concerns that the machine would initiate a worldly cataclysm, and there were spiritual attempts to prevent a potential disaster. Some individuals feared the device would create micro-black holes or release hypothetical strange matter "killer particles" known as strangelets that would bring about planetary destruction, and there were urgent requests online for avertive prayers and ceremonies to protect Mother Earth (Worldwide Interfaith Healing Circles 2008).

Comparable avertive beliefs and practices are expressed by those involved in the contemporary Wiccan community, known for the nature-based orientation of their beliefs, as well as a diversity of feminist, animistic, pantheistic, and polytheistic ideas. However, some Wiccans also express specific apocalyptic concerns, believing that human actions such as environmental destruction, pollution, war, and greed have disrupted the ecological balance and that current natural disasters and predicted cataclysms are attempts by the Earth (a living entity, a deity, or the Goddess Gaia) to cleanse and rebalance itself (Arthur 2008, 202). Although these disasters may be viewed either as natural processes of Earth purification or as a form of angry Earth retaliation in punishment for the transgressions of human beings, some Wiccans assert that future apocalyptic catastrophes may be averted through spiritual practices and activist efforts. As Shawn Arthur notes in his research on Wiccan apocalypticism, many practitioners express the view that the "apocalypse could be averted, or at least its worst parts could be mitigated, if enough people focused their energies on healing the Earth and preventing further damage" (2008, 214). These avertive practices take the form of healing rituals, eco-magic, environmental activism, and various attempts at social change, motivated by the desire to heal the Earth and prevent approaching worldly catastrophes. Specific spiritual actions sometimes are considered more powerful and efficacious than social activism: some individuals believe that their avertive and healing efforts have actually forestalled catastrophe, temporarily saved the Earth, and increased environmental awareness and an understanding of the sacredness of the natural world.

A representative example of this avertive and salvific ethos is presented in the book *Beyond Prophecies and Predictions: Everyone's Guide to the Coming Changes* by Moira Timms (1994), which surveys various apocalyptic prophecies that are considered to be wakeup calls to humanity to prevent or diminish impending disasters. Like ideas associated with the Harmonic Convergence or the "quickenings" theory promoted by radio broadcaster Art Bell (1997) and others, events and crises in the current era are said to be inexorably accelerating toward a momentous climax in 2012, culminating in worldly destruction or transformation, with the years leading up to that pivotal moment regarded as a "window of opportunity": "How we

respond to this challenge will determine the fate of humanity, and of the world itself. . . . [T]he call is to *action*. It is the Earth who calls. We ignore Her at our own peril” (Timms 1994, xii–xiii). The various prophecies in Timms’s book are presented as warnings, with assorted avertive solutions provided, such as protecting the environment, returning to a harmonious relationship with nature, eliminating war and nuclear weapons, embracing non-Western spiritualities, cleansing “negative planetary karma,” and specific individual actions that have the potential to alter the future: “Positive changes in the mass consciousness and constructive actions can modify our planetary karma and avert catastrophe” (1994, back cover, 307–32).

Numerous other publications, websites, and events associated with the New Age movement present cross-cultural apocalyptic prophecies that warn of imminent doom but also offer the hope that worldly destruction can be prevented or diminished by human spiritual actions to save the Earth. For instance, *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (Nelson 2008) is a collection of talks presented over a sixteen-year period at Bioneers conferences, which are annual gatherings of leaders of indigenous communities and ecologically concerned “visionaries” who hope to prevent global environmental catastrophe through ancient and traditional cultural wisdom that is “reemerging at the eleventh hour to help avert global ecological and social collapse” (Nelson 2008, back cover, xvii, xxi). The avertive apocalyptic messages in the book caution that human beings are in the final days of prophecy—having violated natural laws, poisoned the Earth, and neglected the ancient “original instructions” from different cultures—but if people take social action and honor traditional ecological and spiritual values, they may divert the approaching destruction and heal the planet (2008, 8–9).

Similar avertive ideas are expressed in another particularly influential publication related to the Bioneers conferences, entitled *Grandmothers Counsel the World* (Schaefer 2006), in which elderly indigenous “wise women” (healers, shamans, and prophets) from various cultures express their views about impending worldly disasters and share their sacred knowledge with their oppressors in an effort to guide and save humanity (Schaefer 2006, 1–2). The Grandmothers agree that “the circle of life” was broken five hundred years ago, when white people came to the Americas, but that the resulting apocalypse that now approaches may be avoided and the Earth healed if people embrace indigenous knowledge, female energies and principles, the sacredness of all life, and eco-spirituality, among other things (Schaefer 2006, 115–16). The destruction of indigenous peoples and their cultures are viewed as integrally connected to the future of the planet: as indigenous peoples suffer genocide, are displaced from sacred lands, and lose their traditions, so too does all of humanity face destruction and loss.

Apocalyptic and avertive prophecies, as presented in these books and Earth-healing beliefs, are regarded as unfolding over time and not revealed all at once, but shared “in bits and pieces” among different people like a puzzle, with the explicit purpose of guiding and instructing humanity to change for the better; however, these apocalyptic and “dire prophecies are fulfilled when humanity refuses to change” (Schaefer 2006, 116–17). Like related avertive apocalyptic beliefs, such

prophecies are viewed as conditional and as calls to human action, in contrast with the majority of apocalyptic and millennial traditions, which regard worldly destruction, renewal, and collective salvation as predetermined, inevitable, and unalterable by human action. The traditions of Christian apocalyptic prophecy are largely rejected in this context and in many other New Age prophecy publications and communities, which tend to view them as deterministic, repressive, and Earth-destroying doctrines. Indigenous prophecies are embraced instead as life-affirming warnings and solutions to imminent planetary destruction, as spiritual means of preventing possible apocalyptic destruction brought about by human ignorance, and Euro-American and Christian worldviews are condemned for having destroyed and oppressed indigenous cultures.

## Native American Prophecies

A diversity of Native American millennial traditions and prophecy beliefs express avertive apocalyptic ideas, some of which have been incorporated into New Age eschatologies in recent years. Earlier Native American apocalyptic prophecies, related to the arrival of Europeans and the destruction and displacement of Native cultures, were often catastrophically millennial, exemplified by the Ghost Dance movements of the 1870s and 1890s. As a response to cultural oppression, colonization, and radical cultural change, Ghost Dance movements stressed the nativist revival of traditional ways of life, the divine destruction of white settlers, the arrival of ancestor spirits, the return of the buffalo, and a millenarian revival of a previous world before the white man arrived and ruined nearly everything (Linton 1943; Pesantubbee 2000; chapter 5 by Jean E. Rosenfeld and chapter 23 by Michelene E. Pesantubbee, both in this volume). After the violent suppression of the Ghost Dance and the massacre of more than 150 Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890, there was an eighty-year period of relative silence and privacy in Native American communities about prophecy traditions. In the 1970s a resurgence in prophecy beliefs occurred, as some individuals began to make their predictions public, linked in part to the popularity and promotion of such beliefs within the New Age movement in the United States. Although these recent predictions may be influenced by popular culture, broader American prophecy traditions, and activist movements, they are largely situated in the Native American prophetic idiom and tradition (Johnson 1996, 576, 584; chapter 23 by Michelene E. Pesantubbee, this volume).

This second wave of prophecies exhibits continuities with previous Native millennial traditions, but often differs in that the catastrophic predictions are not addressed exclusively to Native Americans but are now frequently directed to Euro-Americans. While some of these prophecies predict worldly catastrophe, purification, and renewal, many of them have avertive aspects, warning of imminent cataclysms but offering spiritual instructions to both Native Americans and Euro-Americans for preventing apocalypse. In both catastrophic millennial and avertive prophecies, the coming destruction is frequently attributed to the actions of

Euro-Americans, caused specifically by their destructive treatment of the Native American people, the degradation of the land, greediness, other immoral behaviors, and the rejection of spiritual principles. For example, Mathew King, a Lakota, foresees cataclysmic natural disasters as punishment for Euro-American cruelty and exploitation of Native Americans, but he does not regard worldly annihilation as completely inevitable, asserting that the destruction may be mitigated if Native people are compensated for past losses, if their lands are restored to them, and if Euro-Americans acknowledge previous transgressions: “*You killed our people. You killed our chiefs. You stole our land. But God gave us this land. You can’t take it away. . . . Maybe you can change, maybe you can stop what’s coming. There’s not much time*” (Wall and Arden 1990, 34–35).

Belief in imminent apocalyptic destruction, along with hope for averting it, are also expressed by Manitonquat, a member of the Assonet Band of the Wampanoag Nation, who envisions two distinct directions for the future of humanity, with one path leading to worldly catastrophe and the other to renewal and an age of harmony (Manitonquat 1991, 38–39). According to Manitonquat, humanity’s current path will lead to increased violence, plagues, natural disasters, starvation, and mass death, but if human beings return to sacred traditions and change their ways, this suffering and destruction may be diminished or prevented, and people “would still be able, if they understood in time, to retrace their steps and return to the way of Creation. Those who returned to Creation would raise their children in the right way. These children would begin a whole new world, a world in harmony with all Creation” (38–39). Like various other recent Native American prophecies, Manitonquat’s message is inclusive, inviting non-Native peoples to embrace Native American values and spirituality in the effort to avert future disasters and renew the world.

Because much of Native American spirituality is based on relationships to the land and local ecology, many Native prophecies regard the destruction of the environment, the displacement of Native peoples from their traditional lands, and the exploitation of the Earth by Euro-Americans as catalysts that will lead to worldly annihilation. These themes are expressed in the prophecies of Thomas Banyacya, who became a spokesman for the Hopi Traditionalist Movement. Although Banyacya’s traditional status within Hopi society has been disputed, as have some of his prophecies, he has had a significant influence within some Native American communities and among non-Native audiences and members of the New Age movement (Geertz 1994, 261–78, 329). Banyacya spent thirty years lecturing, traveling, and promoting the prophecies and a Hopi message of peace, warning of an impending apocalyptic “purification” but saying that the destruction could be averted if people changed their selfish and materialistic ways and protected the environment. He was especially concerned about the displacement of Native people from their lands and the desecration of sacred lands by non-Indians:

If you don’t stop what you are doing, Nature will intervene. . . . Our prophecies tell us in the last stages the White Man will steal our lands. It’s all happening now. We pray and meditate and ask the Great Spirit to keep the world together a while longer. But it’s coming. The Purifiers are coming. (Wall and Arden 1990, 95–96)

Banyacya argued that the mining of uranium on sacred lands to create nuclear weapons was particularly sacrilegious and disruptive of the natural balance, and he stated that Hopi prophecies predicted the invention of an apocalyptic “gourd of ashes” (the atomic bomb) that will destroy the world in a fiery cataclysm unless people change their behavior (Banyacya 1992).

In December 1992 Banyacya delivered his avertive apocalyptic message to the United Nations, conveying his interpretation of a petroglyph called Prophecy Rock, which he said depicted the two paths that now stretch before humanity. The upper path, with its highly developed technology, is separated from spiritual and natural laws and will lead to chaos, while the lower path, in balance with nature and Hopi values, will lead to a golden age: “If we return to spiritual harmony and live from our hearts, we can experience a paradise in this world. If we continue only on this upper path, we will come to destruction” (Banyacya 1992). Like other recent Native prophecies, Banyacya’s messages promise that apocalyptic destruction may be averted if traditional lands are returned to Native people, and humanity unites in peace, reforms its ways, and renews its spiritual respect for the Earth.

The environmentalist themes in Hopi and other Native American prophecies, and the emphasis on the redemptive power of a nature-based American Indian spirituality, have made such ideas especially popular among some members of the environmentalist movement and among various subcultural groups (i.e., the Rainbow Family of Living Light). Although catastrophic millennial beliefs about the necessary and inevitable apocalyptic purification of the Earth exist in some circles—such as the prophecies of Sun Bear (Chippewa, 1929–92)—the avertive aspects of selected prophecies have been widely promoted and embraced, with their nonfatalistic emphasis on preventing or alleviating environmental crises and other approaching catastrophes through activism, spirituality, and changes in people’s behavior. Native American prophecies and related beliefs, whether traditional expressions, recent innovations, or fictive reinventions, are a significant and influential source of cultural critique, eco-spirituality, and avertive apocalypticism, not only among Native Americans but now among many non-Native people as well.

## THE SHIFTING NATURE OF MILLENNIALIST BELIEFS: THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND TRIUMPHANT

The prophetic beliefs and spiritual practices of the Church Universal and Triumphant provide particular insights into the dynamics of avertive apocalypticism (see also chapter 8 by Lorne L. Dawson and chapter 29 by Phillip Charles Lucas, both in this volume). As Catherine Wessinger observes, the beliefs and doctrines of the Church reflect a “cautious millennial optimism,” with members

preparing for “the possibility of imminent catastrophe but utilizing spiritual techniques to avert the mayhem” (Wessinger 1997, 56). Founded as the Summit Lighthouse in 1958 by Mark L. Prophet (1918–73), the Church represents a syncretism of religious traditions, including Christianity, Eastern religions, Theosophy, Ascended Master beliefs, mysticism and occultic ideas, and aspects of the “I AM” Religious Activity founded by Guy Ballard (1878–1939) and Edna Ballard (1886–1971) in the 1930s, as well as patriotic, anticommunist, and conspiratorial views. After Mark Prophet’s death, his wife Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939–2009) became the leader of the group, and as the Anointed Messenger of the Great White Brotherhood she claimed to have received numerous messages from Ascended Masters, who include Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Archangel Raphael, the eighteenth-century French nobleman Saint Germain, Ray-O-Light, K-17, and Masters familiar to the Theosophical Society: El Morya, Lord Maitreya, and Sanat Kumara. In the Church Universal and Triumphant these Ascended Masters are believed to guide the world and help humanity fulfill the “cosmic destiny of the millions of souls evolving on the planet earth” (Prophet 1987, i).

In the early 1980s the Church, which had its headquarters near Malibu, California, purchased thousands of acres of land several miles north of Yellowstone National Park in Montana. The group’s members were told to gather their belongings and move to the Royal Teton Ranch in order to prepare for possible apocalyptic destruction and escape the spiritual darkness of the east and west coasts of the United States (Whitsel 2003, 80). Several communities were established in Paradise Valley, Montana, and families joined together to build fallout shelters. Ms. Prophet announced that the shelters were being built in preparation for the descent of twenty-five thousand years of negative karma, which in all likelihood would be made manifest on Earth in the form of cataclysmic disasters, including a Soviet Union nuclear-armed missile attack against the United States. To counter the effects of this negative karma, Church members practice a spiritual technique called “decreeing” (a form of mind-over-matter chanting, prayer, or command), which is believed to combat evil, avert danger, and “attune the planet to the power of light (God) in the universe” (Whitsel 2003, 36, 80; Wessinger 1997, 57). Prophet and her staff viewed the Royal Teton Ranch in part as a spiritual retreat where members could focus their decreeing and collective spiritual energies in an effort to avert worldly cataclysm and cleanse society of destructive forces (Whitsel 2003, 80; Dowbenko 2009b). While the group’s literature and beliefs express progressive millennial ideas of gradual human perfection and the attainment of a golden era, throughout the 1980s the group increasingly emphasized the alternative scenario of approaching worldly catastrophe. As Brad Whitsel notes, “Although prayers, decrees, and other spiritual exercises were used to avert worldly catastrophe, the specter of an apocalyptic event preoccupied the members of the church” (2003, 84).

In anticipation of possible nuclear apocalypse, the Church began extensive survivalist preparations with the hope of not only enduring the cataclysm but also passing on its spiritual beliefs to future generations of “lightbearers” and establishing a New Age in the post-apocalyptic world. The survivalist ethos was framed in

terms of the biblical story of Noah and the ark: food, water, and all of the items necessary for a post-apocalyptic scenario were assembled. Although some writers and the media often stated that Prophet absolutely predicted a nuclear attack to occur on 15 March 1990, according to Phillip Lucas (2006), Prophet actually specified a range of dates for potential nuclear cataclysm, with 15 March 1990 as one serious possibility. During this period, members intensified their preparations, transported hundreds of tons of food into the shelters, and participated in practice drills; many spent nights in the shelters prior to the expected attack. Throughout this tense time, members continued to decree to mitigate the catastrophic effects of negative karma and perhaps prevent the apocalyptic event. When 15 March arrived, Church members descended into shelters and some prayed and decreed throughout the night, while others apparently considered the event a “test run.” After 15 March passed uneventfully, Prophet told her congregation that the next predicted date for the catastrophic arrival of thousands of years of negative karma would occur on 23 April 1990, and if that date passed without a crisis, the danger of worldly destruction would decrease (Lucas 2006). After the intense emotion leading up to the 15 March and 23 April 1990 dates, at least half of the three to four thousand members who had moved to Montana left the area, some in disillusionment, others because they believed the threat of nuclear holocaust had passed, and others for economic reasons and the lack of jobs in the region (Lucas 2006; Whitsel 2003, 115).

In the fall of 1991 Prophet responded to the perceived failure of her predictions by informing her Church that “its prayers and preparedness during the last year had been the reason for the prevention of nuclear war.” In a type of “test of faith” explanation, she said that “the group’s very act of preparing the shelters had forestalled a calamity” and that the apocalypse had been avoided because of the faith of the members (Whitsel 2003, 121). As Valerie Dowbenko, a member of the Church at the time, recalls:

Clare Prophet said that the reason there was not a nuclear war was because we had all followed the orders of the Ascended Masters and gone through the entire Shelter Cycle. Because everyone was obedient, because we all prayed through the entire situation, our prayers had prevented the End. More importantly however, the collective actions of the group—committing so fully to building the bomb shelters and doing the “drills”—it was enough to prove there are faithful and obedient people in the world, and the apocalypse was averted. (Dowbenko 2009b)

In this way the “failure” of the prophecy was transformed into an *ex post facto* confirmation of faithfulness, emphasizing the spiritual power and devotion of Church members, reassuring them of the efficacy of their actions, and bolstering the faith of those who continued to live together in the community. Furthermore, the intense Shelter Cycle preparations and experiences ultimately may have reinforced commitment to the group and functioned as a rite of passage for some members.<sup>2</sup>

Prophet also said the media had misconstrued and exaggerated the “failure” of her 15 March 1990 prophecy, since it was not a definite and irrefutable prediction; she stated that the construction of the shelters was an “insurance policy” against potential nuclear disaster (Whitsel 2003, 118). Prophet had previously asserted on a

number of occasions that through preparation, decreeing, and keeping faith with the Ascended Masters (for instance, by following the instructions to build the fall-out shelters), Church members could prevent apocalypse from occurring (Lucas 2006). Like Old Testament prophets who warned the wayward in attempts to prevent their destruction, Prophet explained that her prophecies were avertive forewarnings and not declarations of inevitable and unchangeable future events. This avertive view of prophecy is reflected in Prophet's subsequent book, *Saint Germain's Prophecy for the New Millennium* (Prophet, Spadaro, and Steinman 1999), in which she states that the function of prophecy is to alert humanity and offer predictions that motivate changes in behavior to prevent disaster. As an example, she recounts the Old Testament story of Jonah, whose apocalyptic prophecy, delivered to the Ninevites, motivates them to repent and thus saves them from annihilation. Prophet's presentation of this particular story is revealing, reiterating the belief that prophecies are not "set in stone," and when they fail they actually may have successfully fulfilled their avertive function by preventing apocalyptic destruction; however, sometimes overly righteous prophets and their followers egotistically and cruelly desire the fulfillment of cataclysmic prophecies, even if this is against the will of God (Prophet, Spadaro, and Steinman 1999, 5–13).

In the years following Prophet's retirement from its leadership in 1999, the Church has deemphasized predictions of worldly cataclysm, in some cases even redefining the battle of Armageddon in a seemingly amillennialist and individualistic manner, as a personal battle of the soul with the forces of light and dark fighting for the individual (Prophet and Prophet 2005, 202–5). Worldly catastrophe is still considered a possibility, but the Church apparently does not regard physical destruction as a necessary event for the coming of the millennial age, claiming that it may be attained in a progressive, noncatastrophic manner. According to Dowbenko, the more recent and younger members of the Church, who did not participate in the apocalypse-driven era, tend to support an optimistic and progressive millennial view, focusing on the potential golden age and viewing themselves as instruments for initiating its arrival (Dowbenko 2009a; 2009b). Ultimately, the dynamic and variable beliefs associated with the Church Universal and Triumphant not only demonstrate the ways that apocalyptic movements may emphasize catastrophic, avertive, progressive, or amillennialist beliefs over time, but also show how such ideas may be interconnected or coexist and how they are transformed in response to changing cultural, situational, or individual contexts.<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As this survey of avertive apocalypticism indicates, ideas about preventing or forestalling worldly destruction are diverse, widespread, and malleable. Unlike strictly catastrophic millennial views, which regard the annihilation of world as inevitable,

necessary, and part of a divine plan, avertive apocalyptic beliefs express the notion that the world is not irredeemably evil or absolutely doomed. Like progressive millennial ideas, human agency is emphasized, as the actions of human beings not only may save the world from destruction, but in some cases may bring about a perfect age. However, these avertive beliefs and prophecy traditions that stress human effort and choice are characterized by a conditional attitude about the possibility of preventing apocalypse, as the avoidance of apocalypse is never guaranteed but always contingent upon human action, superhuman dispensation, grace, intervention, or forgiveness. The majority of avertive beliefs discussed here are expressions of *avertive millennialism*, as these ideas about preventing the End are frequently coupled with the promise of a coming millennial paradise and collective salvation.

Although human agency and free will are emphasized in avertive beliefs and practices, in most instances these preventive actions must follow the mandates of divine beings, prophets, or a superhuman plan, and apocalyptic destruction can only be prevented if people act in accordance with the divine will or superhuman decrees. While God or otherworldly forces may respond to human decisions and actions and intervene to save the world from destruction, human beings must adhere to the will of a transcendent source, and human agency is ultimately subordinate to a master plan, reflecting the inherently deterministic tendencies that characterize millennial beliefs in general. Nonetheless, unlike non-avertive beliefs that deny the efficacy of human action, avertive apocalyptic ideas maintain that an interactive or reciprocal relationship with divine or superhuman forces exists: human beings may respond to such forces, which are responsive to human efforts; and human action is crucial for worldly salvation.

Similar to progressive millennial ideas, avertive beliefs may compel people to confront genuine apocalyptic threats and may inspire attempts to alleviate suffering and injustice, which may result in efforts at social reform or societal transformation. Avertive ideas and prophecies also may be used to coerce and manipulate people and on some occasions may result in violent actions, particularly when such beliefs express radically dualistic ideas that condemn others who must be destroyed to avert worldly catastrophe or societal decay. For example, avertive apocalyptic ideas may have influenced revolutionary millennial movements that have attempted to “cleanse” the world of perceived evil and corruption and thereby accelerate through violent actions the arrival of a millennial *Reich* or ideal state, such as Hitler’s National Socialism in Germany (see chapter 27 by David Redles, this volume). Further research is needed on the ways that avertive beliefs might motivate violent acts, or social reformist efforts, in both religious and secular contexts.

A number of other topics relating to avertive apocalypticism deserve additional inquiry. Of particular interest is the relationship between failed prophecies and apparently after-the-fact avertive rationalizations, which may be understood emically as an apocalypse prevented due to the exceptional faith and avertive efforts of believers. An awareness of the prominence and acceptance of avertive ideas by members of religious groups seems especially important when considering the various factors that influence the persistence of faith and commitment when a predicted

catastrophe does not occur. Among the many other topics worthy of scholarship are the significance of avertive ideas within secular views of imminent apocalypse; the role of avertive ideas in the environmentalist movement; issues of gender and belief in the avertive power of female principles and deities; avertive prophecies and covenant relationships with deities; avertive apocalyptic themes in contemporary film and popular culture; and avertive views, prophets, and charisma.

Avertive apocalypticism constitutes an ancient and ongoing expression of belief that exists cross-culturally. Further comparative studies and theoretical analyses of the centrality and variety of avertive belief are needed, with particular attention given to the variable and shifting nature of such beliefs. The avertive apocalyptic ideas of people reflect specific cultural and social circumstances, often expressing current fears, hopes, and issues of ultimate concern. The continued analysis of the dynamics of such ideas is crucial for an expanded understanding of the complexity and enduring appeal of apocalyptic and millennial thought and practice.

## NOTES

1. Although *avertive apocalypticism* is a newly proposed term, such beliefs have been previously described as *conditional apocalypticism* (Wojcik 1997, 187–89; 209–11); the term *avertive apocalypticism* has been suggested by Catherine Wessinger to encompass such ideas, while Richard Landes refers to such beliefs as “Ninevite apocalyptic” or “prophetic” (Frontline 1999). The avertive aspects of some prophecies in biblical tradition that may motivate people to repent and change their ways in order to prevent destruction have been referred to as “conditional prophecies,” because they “express God’s intention to act in a certain way if a particular course of action obtains or if people behave in a certain way. . . . Their fulfillment depends—or is conditional—upon the way their recipients respond to them” (Rice 1985, 79).

Some beliefs and ritual actions have less explicitly conditional and avertive functions, and instead of warning of worldly destruction and calling for repentance, they are performed to preserve and regenerate human existence. For example, the ritual performances of Dreamtime stories by some Australian Aboriginal groups not only convey ancestral wisdom and tribal mythology but are enacted in part to sustain and renew the world. Among the Warlpiri people, ancient sacred songs and ceremonies are believed to be unalterable and eternal, and if they are not performed correctly, they will endanger or end existence (Manley 1998, 11). In this regard, these sacred ceremonies are implicitly avertive, as their cyclic enactment ensures the continuation of life and sacred mythic realms, and perhaps the survival of divine beings as well. Similarly, widespread winter solstice ceremonies that have been performed historically and cross-culturally to reverse the increasing darkness of winter or prevent the “death” of the sun seem to have an implicitly avertive purpose. Sacred bonfires, ritual dances, and battles between the forces of life and death, or darkness and light, not only reenact the return of the sun but in some cases are believed to cause its rebirth or return. Analogous practices involving the “magical control of sun” and the renewal or rekindling of its energies of light and heat appear to be both regenerative of life and avertive of apocalypse, in those instances in which it is believed that

death, darkness, or destruction will occur if such practices are not performed (see Frazer 1976, 90–92, 745–53).

2. Comparable after-the-fact avertive explanations have been given in instances of seemingly failed prophecies; a well-known example is presented in the study *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). After Dorothy Martin's predictions of a catastrophic flood and the salvation of the chosen by flying saucers did not transpire, she revealed that God prevented the destruction and that the world had been saved because of the intense faith of believers (169–70).

3. A relevant example of the changing nature of beliefs about the immediacy of apocalypse is illustrated by the history of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. As Seventh-day Adventism expanded and its interactions with government and broader civil society increased, emphasis shifted to a less imminent view of the End, and the timing of Christ's expected return was recalculated and extended further into the future. Some Seventh-day Adventists believe they can forestall the apocalypse and "prolong the future of America" in avertive efforts that will allow them more time to spread the Adventist message through missionary work, by trying to postpone certain events predicted to occur prior to Christ's Second Coming (such as the passage of a law mandating worship on Sunday). They have attempted "to delay the end in order to have greater opportunity to preach that it was at hand" (Lawson 1995, 355).

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