

THE END OF THE WORLD AS THEY KNOW IT

Will the year 2000 bring pestilence or pleasure? Religious leaders around the world are taking sides on whether the turn of the millennium will summon apocalypse or just a really bad hangover. By James Reston, Jr.



In the decades after the first millennium of Christ, the great proponent of what came to be known as the End Time was a quirky French monk named Raoul Glaber. He was a Cluniac when the Abbey of Cluny, in central France, was at the height of its influence, the most powerful force for church reform in Europe. Glaber's *Histories*, written in the 1030s, report on meteors, famines, and plagues that allegedly devastated the world around the year 1000. These events were interpreted as heavenly signs that the biblical prophecy of the apocalypse was near fulfillment. Yet the End Time was supposed to happen in 1000, a thousand years after the birth of Christ. Glaber was writing a thousand years after Christ's death, and he reported dire happenings occurring in that year as well, especially a terrible famine that was sweeping Europe. Men feared, the monk wrote, "that mankind would end."

But hold on—in another passage about the years following 1000, Glaber portrays a relieved populace giving thanks for its deliverance, building churches like mad, joyful and optimistic about the future.

Glaber, it seemed, couldn't make up his mind. Which would it be—disaster or deliverance? Suffering or joy? Would the apocalypse come on the anniversary of Christ's birth or death? For believers, it's not an insignificant question. If somehow we've erred by a digit and the apocalypse is to come 2,000 years after Christ's death, we get another 35 years of life. Then again, our number might be up in a year and a half.

No wonder the coming millennium has sparked a bewildering cacophony of prediction among the various Christian leaders. Like Glaber, they seem to be torn between gloom and joy. And sometimes denial.

Seventeen years ago, not long after the Reverend Jim Jones took New Year's Eve 1999 could be a hot time: A detail from Rogier van der Weyden's 1434 painting "Altar of the Last Judgment," which shows the damned plunging into Hell.

nearly a thousand followers to their death in the steamy jungles of Guyana, and just after Ronald Reagan moved into the White House, I interviewed the Reverend Billy Graham for a magazine article. In somber tones, the evangelist proclaimed that at that very moment he perceived 22 signs of the End Time. He invoked a standard citation from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 13, verses 7 and 8, about wars and rumors of war (i.e., the Middle East), nation pitted against nation, earthquakes and famines. Graham warned of cultural wickedness, such as the film *The Exorcist*, and mysterious happenings, such as the sightings of UFOs. All these signs were converging "for the first time in history," Graham said soberly.

But since then, very good things have happened, and for fundamentalist Christian sects this good news is something of a problem. The Evil Empire has collapsed, and just like that the vessel for all the Devil's handiwork has vanished. Gone too is the terror of imminent nuclear incineration, that perfect modern incarnation of the biblical holocaust.

It has fallen to the religious right in America to fill in the blanks. Early in 1989, the Reverend Jerry Falwell cast the new threat as a conspiracy from within: Western society was being dragged down by the Devil's trinity of communists, feminists, and homosexuals. But in 1991, Pat Robertson seized the torch with his book *The New World Order*, followed in 1995 by a novel on Armageddon, *The End of the Age*. In it, Robertson wrote of California in the year 2000, ravaged by a simmering heat wave and about to be devastated by a meteor. The president is the Antichrist, and the leader of the Christian resistance is a pastor who is an expert on the Book of Revelation. The secretary of energy (yes, the secretary of energy) is a Shiite Muslim and former member of Hezbollah.

Robertson also described an evil framework that long predated Lenin and Marx. For more than 200 years, Robertson proclaimed, there had been a "tightly knit cabal whose goal is nothing less than a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer and his followers." This conspiracy be-

gan with the Order of the Illuminati, which had its twisted roots in the Spanish Inquisition. This sinister, secret society consisted largely of Jews, Freemasons, and international bankers.

The Roman Catholic Church has taken a different tack: It has decided to embrace the good tidings of the past decade. Representing more than a billion faithful around the world, the Church has largely chosen to ignore the Book of Revelation, as if the Bible's last book was an embarrassment. "Christ is the Lord of time," reads the 1994 papal letter known as *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. "All time belongs to him."

Instead, the Vatican emphasizes the Great Jubilee, the time two years from now when Rome will brace itself for the arrival of 30 million pilgrims. For the Vatican, making provisions for the millennium seems to have more to do with booking hotel rooms than with preparing for deliverance.

no matter what physical ailment may beset him, Pope John Paul II seems determined to survive beyond the Jubilee Year. Though he would never speak of it, the Holy Father knows that his reputation will last longer if he does live into the third millennium. His name will be remembered along with that of the brilliant Sylvester II, the towering figure from the end of the first millennium who reinvigorated European Christianity after two centuries of Viking, Moor, and Magyar depredations. John Paul II, for his part, unquestionably played an important role in the collapse of godless communism in Eastern Europe.

In choosing to downplay the concept of apocalypse and the Book of Revelation, the Catholic Church is steering away from some of its most powerful imagery. The Bible depicts the Second

Coming as the Lord descending heralded by a joyous messenger, or arriving stealthily like a thief in the night. We may know that the kingdom of God is nigh when we see the number 666 and the beast appears...with seven heads and ten horns and upon each head the name of blasphemy and upon each horn a crown.

Then there are the Seven Seals—whose opening will signify the End Time—and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Had it not been for the mystery of the Seven Seals in Revelation 6, the U.S. might not have suffered through one of the great tragedies of the 1990s. David Koresh, that self-styled prophet from Waco, Texas, had asked the authorities for a little more time, "a little season" more to complete his interpretation of the Seven Seals. During the federal siege of his compound, he believed he was living the prophecy of the fifth seal, which depicts the "souls of those who had been slain for the word of God." Here was a messianic figure crazy with a vision of his own End Time, focused on a biblical mystery about vengeance, who had already been attacked and was now surrounded and threatened. Koresh's followers must have been convinced that he was right—the end was near. But because Attorney General Janet Reno did not understand Koresh, she handed him the perfect excuse for his own fiery martyrdom.

As premillennial anxiety rises during the next two years, there is no telling what shape the trigger may take for another premillennialist cult. Just as Glaber saw the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 993 as a sign, we have Mount Pinatubo and Mount St. Helens. Just as Glaber saw a meteor in 1000 that glowed as the brightest star in the sky for three months and then disappeared, we have Shoemaker-Levy 9 and Hale-Bopp. Just as the monk spoke of a plague called St. Anthony's fire, we have AIDS. Maybe the alignment of the planets in 2000 really does mean something.

On the other hand, Billy Graham said in 1981 that all the dire signs were converging for the first time in history, just before the signs all changed. Maybe December 31, 1999, will be just another New Year's Eve. ☐

Devotees of technological disasters fall into two clashing schools: the managers and the moralists. Managers argue that accidents offer long-term benefits to human health, longevity, and well-being. Painful though disasters are, managers insist, we learn from them and we progress. The injuries occasionally caused by first-generation automotive air bags led to even better crash protection, for example.

But moralists aren't so sure. The engineer and historian Henry Petroski once pointed out that when a new generation of professionals begin to explore the possibilities of a new technology, they start to forget the lessons of the last disaster or create entirely new kinds of misfortune: People who feel safer behind an air bag may take greater risks on the road. The historian William H. McNeill coined a phrase to describe a new disaster that stems from the very features designed to prevent repetition of an old one: the conservation of catastrophe.

We consumers act like managers. We balance risks and rewards and put our confidence in hospital administrators, pilots, air-traffic controllers, ships' captains, even our fellow motorists. But we also worry like moralists. What if our children's vaccination for one disease gives them another? What if next winter's flu turns into a killer epidemic like the one that devastated the world in 1918?

The *Titanic* sparked one of the most vigorous debates between managers and moralists. For the managers, the *Titanic* tragedy in 1912 showed a positive side of catastrophe: the implementation of safety measures such as international iceberg patrols, 24-hour radio operators, and sufficient numbers of lifeboats. But for the moralists, every safety measure is a potential source of danger. And their most moving evidence is a tragedy half forgotten even in its own surroundings: the capsizing of the excursion steamship *Eastland* in the Chicago River on July 24, 1915.

Eight hundred and forty-one passengers perished when the *Eastland* flipped, but Hollywood found no glamour to evoke, no myths to transform into celluloid visions. The victims were employees of the Western Electric Company in suburban Chicago, mostly blue-collar workers and their families—they would have been steerage passengers on the *Titanic*—looking for-

ward to a day-trip to Michigan City, Indiana. But as the *Eastland* was leaving its moorings in water no more than 20 feet deep, it slid over onto its side, still tied to the dock between Clark and La Salle streets. In the ensuing panic, terrified passengers were trapped belowdecks, where hundreds drowned or were trampled just yards from horrified onlookers at the river's edge. Their tight-knit community was devastated; the passengers' descendants still recall

boats and six rafts, weighing between eight and 15 tons, dangerously boosted the weight of the ship, as did the 317 new passengers and their baggage, which added up to 24 tons. The tragic cruise would have been the first at the *Eastland's* new capacity.

One lesson of the *Titanic* had been that ships must carry lifeboats for all their passengers. The *Eastland* disaster showed that lifeboats themselves could contribute to calamity. Safety depends

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that their relatives described a full week of funerals. Paradoxically, the fact that the tragedy befell such a small community limited the impact of the event, and especially its memory, among other Chicagoans and the outside world.

For a while, experts blamed the capsizing of the *Eastland* on the passengers themselves, who supposedly shifted to one side to see a passing launch and tipped the vessel. But George W. Hilton, an economist skilled in both the managerial and the moralistic side of disaster studies, has shown in his recent book, *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*, that the problem lay elsewhere.

The immediate technical cause was almost certainly the captain's procedures for loading passengers onto the ship, according to Hilton. Yet the underlying source of the *Eastland* calamity was deeper. As originally designed in 1903, the ship was stable. Yet, in that same year, it was modified for greater speed and comfort. Though it still rode well on the open lakes, it became "tender" (to use Hilton's expression) during loading and unloading. Once, in 1904, it nearly capsized. Even so, more changes followed. When wood in the dining room rotted, it was replaced with concrete—cheaper but heavier. To adhere to the La Follette Seamen's Act of 1915, a piece of Progressive legislation intended to boost nautical safety, the owners added equipment that would qualify the *Eastland* to carry 2,500 passengers, up from the 2,183 previously allowed on board. Hilton calculates that the three additional

not just on single safeguards but on the entire design and management of a technology, and the *Eastland* had a history of pushing the limits of its design.

If the *Titanic* inspired life-threatening as well as life-saving technological change, today's libertarians and conservatives might expect the same of well-meaning safety legislation now. Consumer advocates, on the other hand, might argue that technology requires regulation. But legislation can contribute to a false sense of well-being. In a global economy, for instance, strict laws in one country have a way of exposing a nation's citizens to unexpected risks: To skirt tough laws, ships may be registered where rules are looser, or produce may be imported from countries more tolerant of pesticides and herbicides.

The lessons of the *Eastland* still apply. At the moment, cruise ships are growing ever bigger and more elaborate. Entrepreneurs are dreaming of floating resorts too large for any harbor, seaborne clusters of condominiums beyond the reach of tax collectors and flying the flag of the most accommodating nation. Of course, there will be lifeboats for all, perhaps even evacuation helicopters. Confident that *their* ship could never capsize or hit an iceberg, residents will be thrilled by high-definition television screenings of disaster films such as *The Towering Inferno* and *Titanic*. And the crew will be so highly trained that disasters will no longer be possible—at least, the disasters they know. It's the disasters they may invent that they should really worry about. **E**

Were there too many lifeboats on board?

In 1915, the *Eastland* (top left) capsized at its dock. Added safety measures may inadvertently have caused the disaster.

Workers (far left) pull a victim from the flooded ship—one of more than 800 people to perish (left).