

Apocalyptic Anxiety: Religion, Science, and America's Obsession with the End of the World

Anthony Aveni

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Anthony Aveni's Apocalyptic Anxiety is an astute and engaging guide to the many themes and variations of apocalyptic thinking in American history.

Whether the end is envisioned as a religious second coming or the realization of a utopian Age of Aquarius, the roots of apocalyptic thinking run deep in the American character, as Anthony Aveni shows in *Apocalyptic Anxiety*.

Aveni's review of American history comes through the lens of an ever-expected apocalypse, and is engrossing and entertaining. A professor of astronomy, anthropology, and Native American studies at Colgate University, Aveni shows a masterful command of this material.

He begins with a detailed account of the Millerites, the nineteenth-century religious sect of Pastor William Miller, who used complex biblical calculations to predict the second advent of Jesus on October 22, 1844. A series of extraordinary astronomical events and terrestrial disasters fueled the Millerite movement, and Miller gained tens of thousands of followers. Even with the failed prediction, many believers adjusted their calculations or eventually shifted their beliefs to focus on a spiritual rather than a literal, physical transformation. Examining Miller and his followers in a broader historical, economic, and cultural context, Aveni argues that rather than being a fringe element, they reflect an emphasis on millennial thinking that has been a persistent and central theme throughout United States history.

He notes two major strains in apocalyptic thinkers: those who envision a catastrophic end to life as we know it, leading to a new age for believers; and those who envision an evolutionary transition to a utopia on Earth. Both strains are strong in the United States, evident from the doomsday prophecies of the colonial preacher Cotton Mather, to nineteenth-century utopian experiments, to the New Age philosophies of the late twentieth century. One way or another, Americans consistently want to believe that a "New World" will usher in better circumstances.

Anthony Aveni's *Apocalyptic Anxiety* is an astute and engaging guide to the many themes and variations of apocalyptic thinking in American history, and he effectively outlines the basic beliefs at the core of most of these movements. The lessons and parallels he draws are instructive and provide a unique perspective on the hopes and challenges of our day.

KRISTEN RABE (Fall 2016)

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