

## RELIGION

# Why America's caught in the throes of apocalyptic woes

On July 16, 1972, Jack Van ens was ordained to the Christian Presbyterian ministry. During his 30th anniversary season, he reviews changes in the American religious landscape.

The telephone rang as MAJESTY MINISTRIES put the finishing touches on a CD featuring my portrayal of Thomas Jefferson's patriotic dream, in drama amplified by soul-stirring songs of national hope. We produced and edited the CD from our mountain studios in Beaver Creek, certainly the home of Colorado's majestic



peaks.

"Let's go hiking above Vail Pass," he said. This trekker has conquered every mountain worth climbing, both in Colorado and throughout the world. "You talk much about God's majesty. Now let's experience it."

Our conversation on the trail to the summit took on Jeffersonian grandeur. Jefferson didn't have confidence in religious zealots who prophesied datelines when the world would come crashing down at Christ's Second Coming. Jefferson believed such religious quackery thrived in uncertain times. When people get mentally unhinged, they assume the world is taking on the same posture. Then they become gullible. They are charmed by apocalyptic End Time predictions.

My hiking partner is an expert on explosives, working over a half century at Los Alamos as a Fellow at the atomic research center. He kick-started the apocalyptic conversation by asking me why so few signs of life are apparent in our Solar System. I mumbled something about other planets lacking sufficient water and oxygen.

He said that Earth has been fortunate because of the unusually long time that our planet has not been bombarded with asteroids. Life thrives when asteroid attacks are knocked off course, sometimes by the gravitational pull exerted by Jupiter. Someday, my friend observed, an asteroid will have Earth in its path. He has devoted his life's work at Los Alamos to helping us build up a nuclear arsenal so strong that we can send a bomb aloft to strike the asteroid, knocking it off kilter so that it veers from hitting the earth. I thought it ironic; if not apocalyptic, that nuclear muscle might save the world, not destroy it.

As we climbed through magnificent groves of trees and started our ascent to the summit, amid a meadow radiant with wild flowers, my partner spoke of his personal apocalyptic adventure. He skirted death. His pals observe both Martin Luther King Day along with his "death and resurrection" day. Jesus, the Great Physician, came a second, third and fourth time, as healing hands to fortify his ailing body. He's strong again, so that his legs act like giant pistons that churn relentlessly up rocky slopes.

Then he asked if I had read the July 1st Time Magazine cover story, "The Bible and the Apocalypse: Why More Americans Are Reading and Talking About the End of the World." He read each volume of the enormously popular "Left Behind Series," and has the newest release on order. My partner doesn't believe all this religious drivell about Christ's return being right around the corner. But he likes to know why so many do believe and what reading absorbs them.

Annually, when my ministry involved preaching in The Chapel at Beaver Creek, I met Tim LaHaye who worshipped there. He liked the Bible-believing Baptists more than the erudite Presbyterians, but that didn't stop him from appearing in my face after Presbyterian worship.

Knowing of my very conservative Dutch Reformed upbringing, LaHaye always asked me the same question. He wanted to know why Presbyterians and my native people had virtually nothing definite to say about the End Times.

I answered that neither Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Roman Catholicism, and educated mainline Christianity bought into his schemes, formulas and roadmaps of what is going to happen before Jesus returns. That Christ will return at the end of the ages, I am certain. The details are left behind for Christians who respect apocalyptic literature.

LaHaye makes millions and large errors at the same time. He confuses prophetic biblical literature with a far more slippery genre, apocalyptic writing. Biblical prophets predicted the "Day of the Lord" when evil would beat a hasty retreat. But evil seemingly won. So, apocalyptic writers excelled, especially in the era between the Old and New Testaments. They kicked prophecy upstairs, so the speak. Instead of God's good winning over evil in datable history, they pictured a huge fight above history. A cosmic war laces the universe, pitting good against evil, order against mayhem, God against Satan. The writing reads like a biblical Star Wars plot for pilgrims. "Beloved, I greet you as pilgrims," says the Good Book (1 Peter 2:11). A pilgrim treks on, never knowing an exact way.

"Apocalypse" is derived from the Greek, meaning "revelation" or "the lifting of the veil." It does not revel in datable events and timelines that predict the end. Apocalyptic literature paints outlandish pictures that defy explanation. What LaHaye does is take these impressionistic pictures out of the clouds, treats them as still photographs and concludes, "Aha! Jesus' return is near because we can see images of these heavenly photos in the events of Jerusalem that our newspaper headlines hawk. He distorts apocalyptic literature, treating it as prophetic predictions of what's happening. Fearful people suck this up. It sounds credible, biblical and gibes with Israeli-Arab massacres.

We reached the summit, overlooking the Vail Valley. What majesty! Jefferson would have loved it, especially in the harrowing year of 1783. His dear wife Martha had died. Sixty-five-year-old Mrs. Hopkinson, a tutor to his oldest daughter, got jumpy because an earthquake erupted, a portent of the End. "I hope you will have good sense enough to disregard those foolish predictions that the world is to be at an end soon," wrote Jefferson. I felt in his presence with my Jeffersonian fellow mountain trekker, a Christian pilgrim.

