

# Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

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## Triangulation of Apocalyptic Markers

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The method of triangulating apocalyptic markers that I propose in this paper is an experimental model. It consists of triangulating three or more threshold events converging in a particular time frame that can cause cultural paradigm shifts. It is a thought experiment which is useful for the investigation of cultural beginnings and endings, apocalypticism.

Millennial phenomena have influenced cultures from the dawnings of historical civilizations through the present, and yet, so far, the crossing of any number of these apocalyptic thresholds has not meant reaching the literal "end." However, movement through these transition points has often indicated a significant change in multidimensional culturally pervading assumptions. That is, the crossing of millennial boundaries is often accompanied by paradigm shifts within a self-identifiable group, whether a sect or society.

Therefore to gain some understanding of what is an apocalyptic event we need to consider several factors. First of all, we need to recognize that events, unlike new movie releases about the end, don't come already labeled as "momentous." Someone has to decide their significance *ex post facto*. By decide I don't mean that it is an entirely a conscious or deliberate decision. Simply, some events make an impact that causes a change in behavior and identity.

Some events, however, are only important to an individual—they affect an individual's context in a significant way, but even those closely related to the one effected may not be affected in the same degree. I suppose that any of us could think of a childhood family event that held some significance for us. However, if we were to ask our siblings or other close relatives concerning their understanding and remembrance of the event, they may not even remember it—or if they do, they remember it **WRONGLY!** I can think of several that fall into that category. I can look back and realize their significance for me in my development, but these "epiphanies" had little impact outside of my own consciousness.

Yet there are certainly other events that do have group significance and become part of a group's growing identity. One that comes to mind was related to me as I arrived at a new congregation for the beginning of our ministry together. As they informally told me of the story of their congregation in the first few weeks after my arrival I realized that there was a very recent event that impacted almost everyone who spoke to me. A part of the story of their congregation was the "Great Flood of '85." In some re-tellings this flood seemed as extraordinary as Noah's, but outside of the regional context of the group it was nearly meaningless.

These examples serve to illustrate the often local nature of the apocalyptic. Local not limited to the geographical sense, but local in that it is located within an identifiable group which

incorporates it into their tradition. These groups can be small or global, and defined religiously, sociologically, or by other labels. For example here are some larger context "apocalyptic" events, and we can readily imagine the groups that hold them to be so: JFK assassination, WWII, the moon landing, the Vietnam War, Chernobyl, the campaign of Ghandi, watching the Wizard of Oz, the Holocaust....

So, we need to qualify what is an apocalyptic event by recognizing the local nature of apocalyptic. We need also to note that nothing becomes apocalyptic unless those who experience it incorporate it into their identity, or tradition.

A second problem with apocalyptic events is that too often we look for them at turning points in a calendar? The problem with calendars is -- which one? As we know, calendar time is not fully supported by either nature or history. We also need to recognize the parochial nature of our particular calendars. Calendars are artificial instruments to measure the passage of time. Our modern calendars may seem more precise than those employed in other ages, but still we need to recognize that they do not truly measure cosmic time. They are merely a means of plotting intervals of time (chronos), not kairos. And, of course, they have an arbitrary starting point--both in terms of the start of the year and the beginning of an era.

Every calendar picks a significant apocalyptic event as its starting point: the birth or death of a religious leader, the day of creation, the founding of an empire, etc. In the case of our western Christian calendar the supposed date of birth of Jesus was chosen. Calendars begin at what is considered an apocalyptic moment. However, who decides the length of a year? Why the solar year and not the lunar? Why varying length months and not lunar cycles? Why a solar day and not sidereal? Why 1 C.E. and not 7 B.C. E.? Calendars are full of approximations and at times arbitrary decisions that determine how they measure time. How could these devices measure kairotic/cosmic/apocalyptic time? What is so special about 2000 C.E. as compared to the 695th Olympiad, or the era of Alexandria 7493, or Kouki 2660, or AUC MMDCCLI, 5760, 1420, etc.? They all refer to the same year/chronos. But do they all refer to the same point in time/kairos? There appears to be a limitation in relying solely on a particular calendar to measure apocalyptic times.

There is also a problem in using so-called historical events. The problem with historical markers is that they can't be precise. At best, a range of candidates for the end of an era can be identified, not simply one date. C.S. Lewis reminds the historian that any attempt to mark periods or capture the "spirit" or meaning of a particular age (i.e. the Age of Reason) must be qualified with humility, as Lewis states: "for no one stands outside the historical process; and, of course, no one is so completely enslaved to it as those who take our own age to be not one more period but a final and permanent platform from which we can see all other ages objectively." (Reflections on the Psalms)

There is also the need to take into account the realization that events from a previous age may actually be defined as having meaning in the new age as well. That is both ages may claim the event as part of the matrix of events that give them meaning. In some sense that is what occurred when the Christian Church appropriated the Hebrew Scriptures. The history of the "old" is a part of the "new." When did the "new" in this case begin? When Abraham believed? During Jeremiah's prophesy? During the Exile when Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah) prophesied? Christmas? Easter? Pentecost? Second century? Fourth century?

The problem with dating may be that it is a pre-modern and modern project to set dates for the ends of eras, not a postmodern need or preoccupation. Linear time may perhaps be thought of as an invention of the modern period. Preceding ages may have thought of time as

cyclical, only in the modern period is this developed as a linear progression away from a beginning, unrepentive, evolving. This linearity may even be conceived of in helical terms so that things bear a correspondence to previous times without being truly cyclical in a closed sense. Yet always this helical time spirals toward some future point. Postmodernism perhaps does not see the need for linear time. Time becomes Einsteinian, localized in a quantum sense to the individual observer. Connectiveness or isolation from previous existences is on the basis of cognition of past conditions and their continued impact on the present not simply historical precedence. Who lived in the house before one takes occupancy doesn't matter except as their activity may have changed the floor plans or impacted the living conditions and therefore limited present possibilities. Who cares if they ate a breakfast of eggs and toast at 6:30 AM, one need not be bound by their custom and the boundary of the age is not marked by the changing of breakfast to croissants at 10. Therefore we can only try and set a date for the end of modernity, not the beginning of postmodernity!

### **MILLENNIAL MARKER METHODOLOGY**

Historians often use key dates and decisive historic events as markers of distinctive periods in a larger history. These markers bracket a somewhat arbitrary period of time, for purpose of in-depth study, interpretation and characterization (e.g. the Medieval Vision, the Age of Reason, the Modern Mind, the Postmodern temper). It may be possible to study apocalyptic time, read the signs of the time, identify clusters or conjunctions of apocalyptic signs and shifts in the culture, nominate appropriate candidates as possible end dates of eras, and then select key dates on the calendar as apocalyptic moments or millennial markers in time. This method proposes to map out a matrix for identifying and triangulating apocalyptic markers. These in turn would allow one to illustrate points where paradigm shifts occur in history. Five categories are proposed in this matrix: Key date of millennial expectation, historical milestone, revolutionary idea or theological concept, major scientific/technical insight or innovation, and universal cosmic sign or supernatural wonder (phenomenon). Any of these categories in an of themselves might engender some degree of millennial expectation, but this method presumes that to truly be an apocalyptic threshold, more than one category must be involved in describing a single event. This bold method I am calling the Millennial Marker Method ("MMM" or "3M"). Here's how it works:

- A. Although there is nothing sacred or in nature keyed to decades, centuries and millennia in calendar dating, the cultural historians and sociologists may note that increased apocalyptic behavior occurs at the ends of decades, centuries and millennia. Therefore, we can focus on those time frames in the study of apocalyptic time. These become the key dates for millennial expectation.
- B. Many apocalyptic signs (possible turning points and paradigm shifts) have both local and global significance (e.g the Rise of Hitler, the "discovery" of the "New World"-historical milestones) and influence social movements, political action and intellectual ideas (revolutionary idea or theological concept). Often these turning points are created, enhanced or made possible by some scientific/technical insight or innovation.
- C. However, when three or more apocalyptic signs converge around a particular date or limited range of dates, an apocalyptic moment in apocalyptic time might be identified and selected as a key date. These key dates or turning points become candidates for selection as a millennial marker of an end of an age. The case must then be made for each competing candidate

considered to be age ending.

D. A method or device called "triangulation" (in its trigonometric sense) can be used to help make the case for a particular key date in apocalyptic time and thus mark the end/beginning of an era. "Triangulation" is the convergence of three or more categories of apocalyptic signs, interpreted as an apocalyptic moment, which in retrospect can be identified as a key date, paradigm shift or turning point in calendar time. Again, examples of apocalyptic signs include:

1. Significant, surprising or decisive historical event (e.g. the Fall of the Bastille in France in 1789 and the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) [Thomas Oden makes the case that the Modern World began with the Fall of the Bastille and the French Revolution in 1789, and collapsed with the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November, 1989-exactly 200 years after it began. (See Thomas Oden, On Two Worlds)]
2. Scientific paradigm shift or technological innovation or "breakthrough" that challenges conventional thinking (e.g. invention of the movable type printing press that helped spark the Protestant Reformation in 1521 and the invention of the microprocessor and world wide web that may yet spark a Postmodern Reformation).
3. Revolutionary idea or new religious concept that sparks a movement (e.g. rise of Marxist thought in late 19th century Europe).
4. Unusual cosmic sign or phenomenological wonder (e.g. solar eclipse during the crucifixion of Jesus, lunar eclipse in Rome in December, 999, Halley's comet during the Battle of Hastings in 1066, planetary conjunctions in 7BC, Halley's comet 1986 (Chernobyl), Comet Hale-Bopp (Heaven's Gate)).

E. After studying successive apocalyptic crises and resolutions in world history, it may be said, that the End of the World comes (now and then) in predictable cycles of apocalyptic moments, identified by the millennial marker method of triangulation. This new method takes into account apocalyptic data from the disciplines of cultural history, sociology, psychology and theology, and represents itself within the multidisciplinary field of apocalyptic eschatology.

That's the method in its abbreviated form.

**APPLICATION: For Whom and WHEN DID THE WORLD LAST END? April, 1986-the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union.**

"The Chernobyl Apocalypse," Dr. Christensen's 1997 Ph.D. dissertation, makes the case for April, 1986 as end of the world known as the modern era. His argument is based on the characterization of the late modern age as one of confidence in technology and the peaceful use of the atom. "When the sad history of nuclear power is written," he quotes a nuclear expert, "April 26, 1986 will be recorded as the day the dream died." (Christensen, "The Chernobyl Apocalypse" p.250). The triangulation he identifies and uses as a Millennial Marker includes the following apocalyptic signs:

- a) An unusual historic event occurred at 1:23 AM on 26 April 1986 which is regarded as the world's worst nuclear accident. A local apocalypse had a

- global impact.
- b) The event was interpreted widely in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia as an apocalyptic technological crisis representing either the end of the world, the end of the Soviet era or the end of a generation of exposed children.
  - c) Astronomically, according to J. Adams' Astro-apocalyptic website, Halley's Comet visited planet Earth during the Spring of 1986, and was interpreted by some as the Chernobyl star of Rev. 8:11. There was a total eclipse of the moon in conjunction with the planet Pluto the previous night (April 24). Interestingly, the Germanic term "Pluto" (the root of pluto/niium) is said to represent explosive events. (J. Adams, "Kremlin Astrology" September 26, 1996.)

I hope that demonstrates the intent of the methodology. Thank you.