

The Divine Threat

The Role Religion Plays in the End of Humanity

Most people are not fighting against the end of humanity. They wait for it with open arms, bent knees and quiet prayer. To them, the end of the world is inevitable, as certain as the setting sun. Toby Ord's book, *The Precipice*, urges humanity to save itself from extinction without seeming to take into consideration the six billion individuals who believe the future is not theirs to control. These people think fate is governed by gods, mystic forces or divine laws. If we wish to see humanity saved, we must learn to reach, inform and unite a religiously diverse world.

While Ord covers a vast range of scientific and moral theories in his book, his arguments always operate under a simple assumption; there are only two agents of change at work in the universe. The first agent is nature. From evolutionary beginnings to an unimaginable future, nature seems to encapsulate all that can or will be known about our universe and the scientific laws that govern it. The second agent of change is humanity. According to Ord, we are possibly the only living "moral agents." Our struggle for wisdom and goodness bear a cosmic significance, and our choices could determine the future of all life to come (53, 55).

Toby Ord has a humanistic worldview. Framing humanity and nature as the only agents of change limits his reach with a worldwide audience, fundamentally alienating the three out of

four people who believe there is something more guiding and directing the future of humanity.¹ This third agent of change, *the divine*, is commonly ignored in scientific reviews because it relies on personal belief rather than objective facts. Yet, Ord's book does not have the luxury of ignoring this basic, human belief. He is quite clear that he means for his book to be more than a scientific review. Instead, he wishes to reach the masses, cutting out scientific jargon and analysis in order to resonate with the common man (8).

The World Population Review's 2020 summary makes it quite clear that the *common man* is religious. Over five billion people adhere to the top three world religions: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Another one billion people follow other various religions, including Buddhism, Judaism, Folk Religions and others. It is the remaining population, characterized as "Unaffiliated" ("Religion by Country") that Ord's humanistic ideologies are most likely to resonate with. Yet, they are currently the world's minority.

Daniel Wojcik studied religion's effect on people's perceptions of nuclear catastrophe in an essay released in 1996. In this study, he says, "Since the mid 1940's, folk beliefs and assorted religious traditions reflected the view that the invention of nuclear weapons is a fulfillment of divine prophecy" (297). He goes on to state that a study conducted in 1984 showed that as many as eighty-five million Americans may agree with the statement, "When the Bible predicts that the earth will be destroyed by fire, it's telling us that nuclear war is inevitable" (qtd. 298). This is a

¹ This number is found by adding the populations of each religious group listed in "Religion by Country" and creating a fractional equation where that total is placed at the top of the fraction (6.48 billion) and the total world population published in "Earth" (7.75 billion) is placed on the bottom. After rounding to the nearest whole number and simplifying the equation, we get 3/4. However, this ratio errs on the small side.

very small taste of the fatalism Ord has failed to address in his book by ignoring his audience's belief in the divine.

What is worse for Ord's argument is that most major religions have legends or doctrine relating to the end of this world, time or humanity. Christians believe in an apocalyptic judgment as described in the book of Revelation. Muslims wait for The Hour, and Hindus anticipate the "last cycle of time" with the wrath of Kulki burning against forces of evil ("End of the World"). While this may be a simplistic overview of end-time doctrines, the deeper point remains. People are conditioned to believe that all things will end. Our personal experiences seem to dictate this is reality, and our religions reinforce the belief.

These conclusions leave religious followers with a very real set of questions. Is it worthwhile to fight against the inevitable? And is it immoral to seek to obstruct or stall divine prophecies of doom? Before we can truly address these questions, it is important to recognize the psychological effect belief in the divine may have on the devout.

People who adhere to theistic ideologies could struggle with what psychologists call "locus of control," surrendering choice in their personal lives and in safeguarding the future of this world. Originally developed and studied by Julian Rotter, locus of control is defined as, "The degree to which a person expects... an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons believe that the... outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control or power of others, or is simply unpredictable (489)."

Simply put, who or what do you believe is in charge of your life? Do your actions determine your future or does something else? In the case of humanity's ultimate fate, it is easy

for individuals to deemphasize the effects their choices will make when pitted against the backdrop of an eternal prophecy or divine will. In the end, a belief in the divine often causes inaction, not because it is believed that god will come and save us, but because a large section of humanity believes he has already allotted our future destruction.

More research and understanding will be needed before we can confidently say we have reached a solution to this problem. However, if we have the courage to open this conversation, it is quite likely solutions will present themselves. Rather than attempting to change people's belief in the inevitable extinction of humanity, it will be beneficial to show them that the end need not arise because of their actions. Within each religion, we will find core doctrines that may enable us to show the devout that safeguarding our future is an essential extension of their most cherished beliefs.

For example, Christian scriptures emphasize humanity's role as guardians of creation (*New King James*, Gen. 1:26). Islam teaches its followers to show compassion to those who are less fortunate, unable to care for themselves (Qur'an 2.177), and the basic Hindu ideas of dharma and karma inspire a pursuit of goodness in believers. Within these doctrines, or others, may lie the seeds of our future's salvation.

Reason forces us to draw connections between these religious beliefs and the moral philosophy already present in Ord's book. However, it is not enough to assume these connections will be obvious to all religious readers. We must be intentional as we seek to meaningfully engage with a more diverse audience.

Religion seems to be a uniquely human trait. It is more ancient than our newfound power of self destruction and has been a part of human life since ancient times. Now, we must ask what

role it will play in humanity's future. Will it aid us, bringing ancient wisdom to modern struggles, calling us to unite to save what we love? Or will our belief lead us to a day when ancient prophecy is fulfilled, the end comes, and both humanity and our religion are forgotten?

Works Cited

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