

To Survive, We Must Go Extinct - Apocalyptic Terrorism and Transhumanism - h+ Media

authors Phil Torres



I believe that the present century is the most precarious in which humanity has ever lived. On the one hand, certain emerging technologies are placing an ever-greater amount of power in the hands of smaller groups, and even single individuals, at the extreme. On the other hand, a growing percentage of humanity is adhering to normative worldview based not on evidence but faith and revelation. According to [a recent Pew poll](#), more than 6 out of every 10 people alive in 2050 will be either Christian or Muslim. In other words, *superstition is on the rise*, despite trends toward secularism in Western Europe and North America.

Projected Change in Global Population



Size and Projected Growth of Major Religious Groups

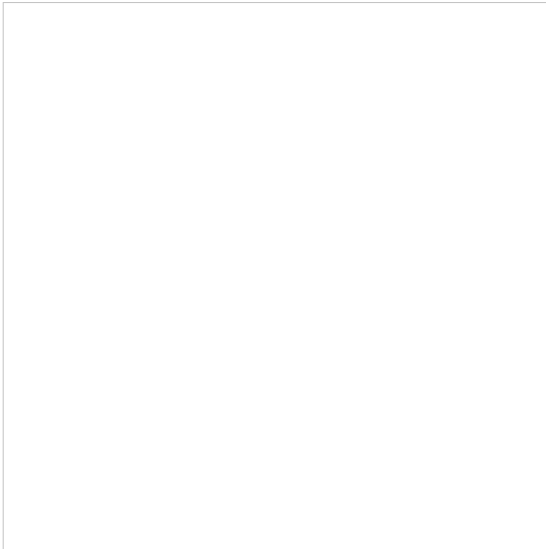
This isn't a trivial prognostication with respect to humanity's future. The two trends above are on a collision course, and the results could very well be catastrophic. Consider the fact that the fields of history are overflowing with religious groups that not only believed the world would soon end, but believed it was their divine duty to either initiate Armageddon or foment the circumstances necessary for the Last Days to commence.



Contemporary examples include the Islamic State, the Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq, and the Eastern Lightening in China. Even some [US politicians hoping to be the next POTUS](#) have fostered close ties with Christian leaders who believe the Rapture is imminent, and that the US must join Israel *now* in a nuclear first strike against Iran. Similarly, many leaders in Iran believe the re-emergence of the [Twelfth Imam](#), the Mahdi, is imminent, and that the 2003 preemptive invasion of Iraq was an unambiguous fulfillment of prophetic scripture.

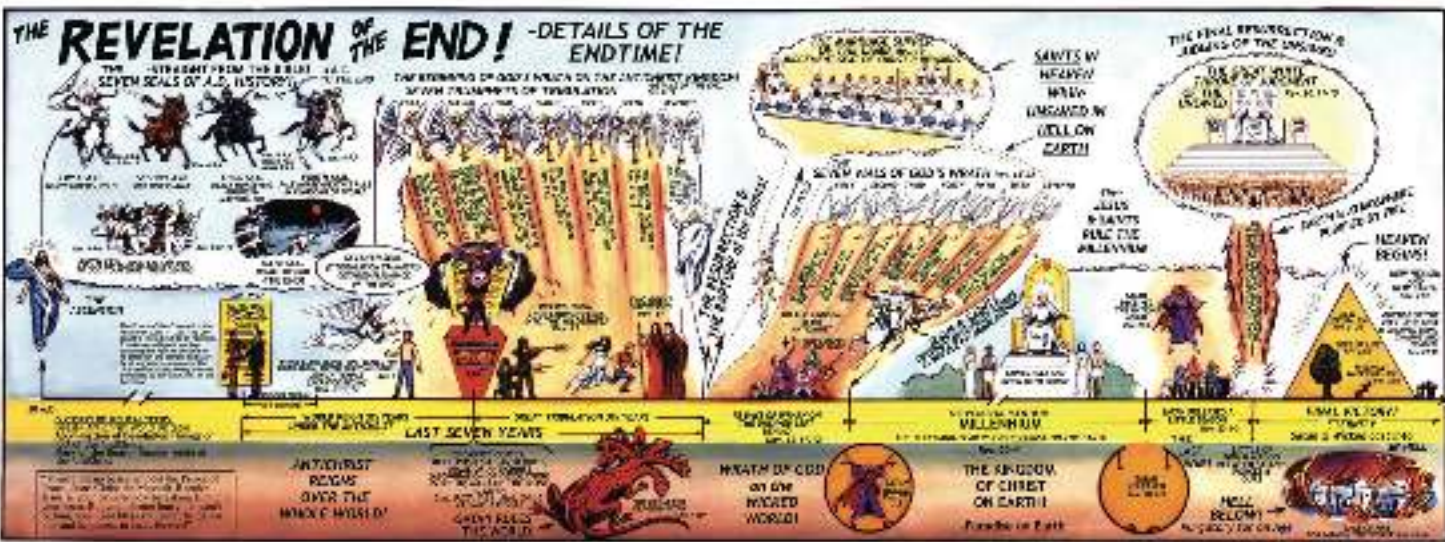


To be clear, most people who believe in the end-times narratives of their ancient holy texts are passive spectators of the apocalypse. But at the statistical margins are what we might call *eschatological activists* intent on fulfilling prophecy themselves. Such individuals are the exception, not the rule, but this fact will become *increasingly irrelevant* in the world anticipated by existential riskologists.

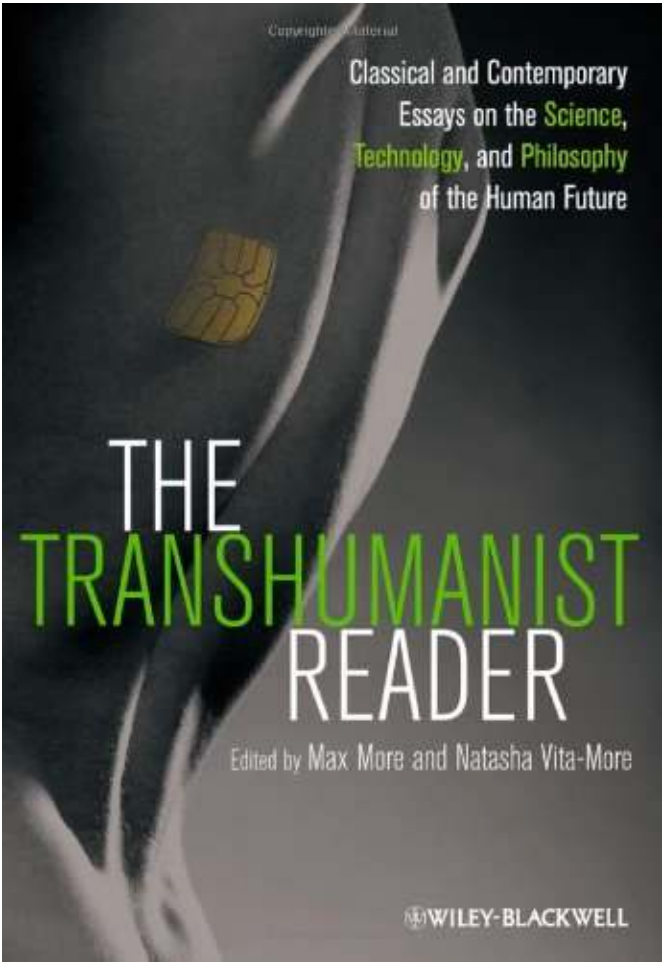


Why? Because the democratization of science and the consequent empowerment of small groups will create an environment in which it will take only a *single* apocalyptic cult to wreak unprecedented havoc on society. And the likelihood of an apocalyptic group arising in the future will inevitably grow as religious belief worldwide increases, as the Pew poll above projects. Consider the claim that there will be 2.76 billion Muslims by 2050. Now, 1% of this number equals 27.6 *million* people, roughly 26.2 million more than the number of military personnel on active duty in the US today. It follows that if even 1% of *this figure* were to hold “active apocalyptic” views, humanity could be in for a catastrophe like nothing we’ve ever experienced before.

Such considerations make it tempting to think that our situation is hopeless, and that humanity is doomed. Human beings have, since recorded history began, evinced a persistent psychological weakness for certain sorts of delusional thinking. While some of these delusions are more or less harmless, others lead “good people to do bad things,” as the Nobel laureate [Steven Weinberg](#) once put it. Moving forward, if humanity’s long-time love affair with faith over facts continues, if we continue to privilege revelation over observation, religion over science, then we may find ourselves severely ill-equipped to survive in the new technological milieu that we’re creating. What chance do we really have of surviving past the year [2100](#)?



This is where transhumanism enters the picture. Transhumanism is a political and philosophical movement that sees technology as a kind of Savior for humanity — and they might not be wrong. My own considered view is that *Homo sapiens* (the self-described “wise ape”) simply isn’t responsible enough as a species to be trusted with nuclear weapon arsenals, advanced biotechnology, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence.



So, perhaps it’s time to make some modifications to our form. Perhaps it’s time to figure out ways to redesign our cognitive architectures so that people are less likely to adopt faith-based, delusional thinking about how the world *ought to be*. We’ve had more or less the same mental machinery for tens of thousands of years, and it served us well in the grassy savanna of East Africa. But our old patterns of reasoning about the world could be lethal in an environment cluttered with doomsday mechanisms. As I argue in [my forthcoming book](#) on existential risks and religious eschatology, perhaps it’s the case that *to survive we must go extinct*.

This isn’t a contradiction, although at first glance it certainly looks like one. There are two types of extinction in the biological world. First, a lineage could terminate like the tip of a tree branch, as

happened with the dodo and the dinosaurs. Second, a lineage could bifurcate through a speciation event, or it could undergo cumulative changes over time to the point that it no longer resembles its ancestor population (a process called *anagenesis*).

Transhumanism actively works for the latter option: it *wants* humanity to go extinct, but not by dying out. Rather, transhumanists argue that we should use advanced technology to *replace* our current population with an intellectually and morally superior species, call it *Homo posthumanus*.

While this is clearly easier said than done, it may be our only hope for avoiding a world in which apocalyptic groups driven by prophetic scripture coexist next to dual-use artifacts powerful enough to obliterate civilization. If the rationality of our ends fail to match the rationality of our means, the fate of our species may be the first type of extinction mentioned above: annihilation.



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This article draws from ideas on the “Big Questions” page of the X-Risks Institute’s website. Visit the X-Risks Institute at www.risksandreligion.org and sign up for its biweekly newsletter on existential risks, emerging technologies, religion, and terrorism.

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